

# John Gerrard Animated Scene

RHA Projects  
La Biennale di Venezia  
53. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte  
7 June to 22 November, 2009

www.johngerrard-venice.com  
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Installation photograph  
exhibition *John Gerrard: Oil Stick Work*  
Simon Preston Gallery, New York  
(January-March 2009)

## Pause and Continue

A conversation between  
Linda Norden and Jasper Sharp

Jasper Sharp: *I thought perhaps we might begin by addressing the medium with which John has chosen to work. One of the reasons that people respond so directly and immediately to drawing, or sculpture in clay or plaster, is, obviously, its great ease and facility. We've all picked up a pencil or a lump of something malleable and tried to make or create a form. Through the proliferation of digital cameras and the development of mobile phones, photography is achieving a similar status. We may not have stepped inside a dark room, but we have all taken a picture.*

Linda Norden: It's a lingua franca.

*Right. Painting, meanwhile, has always had a series of small, barely perceptible barriers it throws up to people: how to stretch or prime a canvas, how to mix paint, and so*

*on. They are simple things not many people can actually do, even if we are able to look beyond them. In the case of John's work, I have absolutely no understanding of the process by which he arrives at the final result. It is, quite literally, written in code.*

It's true. But knowing how complicated the process is, perhaps the answer is to show the work in a way in which it does have the 'facility' you're talking about – a facility we extend to projections.

People are impressed by, and increasingly comfortable with, incredible effects in animation, in photography and light. It's as if they provide a first level of access, and enable the viewer to leave behind what he does and doesn't understand about the process.

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*That's interesting. The projection allows people to enter the work more easily.*

Right, I think so.

*Is this also because John's work, when it is presented in its smaller, more sculptural form, doesn't really resemble anything that we see or deal with on a day to day basis – whereas the projected image subscribes to a cinematic tradition or format we are all used to?*

Yes, that's what I think, it's not at all coincidental.

*One thing I am curious about, the moment the works become 'cinematic' in scale, is the ratio. I was interested when I first walked in here [Simon Preston Gallery, New York] to see that they hadn't chosen the standard 16:9 format.*

Right. What is this actually?

*I don't know, but I really like it.*

It's wonderful.

*It also gives a big sky, and as you know in that part of the world the landscape is all about the sky. But the reason I bring up the issue of ratio has to do with simulation. The single note of caution that sounds when I see John's work projected is that a visitor encountering it for the first time might feel that he or she is supposed to think this is real – as if there is an intentional element of illusion, or a pulling of wool over our eyes. Like that moment you first see a Duane Hanson.*

But I do think that's what happens.

*Really? Had they used a standard format I think our minds, consciously or not, would have more readily assumed that the image they are looking at is real rather*

*than virtual – whereas with this more boxy, square ratio the assumption of illusion is somehow lessened.*

I'm not sure. I think balance is critical for John, because his work is a new medium that runs the risks one always runs when pioneering a technology in art as opposed to, say, science – that is to say, some things are hyper-sophisticated and other things are incredibly crude. And this can get in the way of what it is the artist wants to express both conceptually and in terms of reception.

*It's also extremely difficult when you work with a medium like this to have your technology and your subject matter meet at exactly the right point. If one is ahead of the other, or more foregrounded, it throws the balance and by extension the reading of the work. In this particular body of work [Animated Scene] I feel that he has managed very skillfully to resolve that.*

I think part of it has to do with how you encounter this work. For me, this installation is the first time his work, in and of itself, and on its own terms, has been viewed as art.

*And it can therefore be properly assessed.*

Exactly – and I try, as disingenuous as it sounds, to imagine myself seeing this projection cold, exactly the way it has been presented, where the first thing you see is this wall with a realistically-informed landscape. It's got sky in the right place, buildings in the right place, a field in the right place, but instantly, simultaneously, you are made conscious of the fact that there is something surreal about it.

*That's interesting. It's not unlike Magritte's Empire of Light, which for many years I would walk past each morning on my way to the office. Children understand its contradiction immediately, while adults take a little longer.*

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*I wonder if it has to do with something that you pointed out to me at the opening of this exhibition a couple of months ago – that interesting tension that exists in John's work between certain passages that are so painterly, and therefore appear 'real', and others where a slight gradation on a certain contour betrays its virtual nature.*

Give me an example.

*The rolled up awning on the side of the Grow Finish Unit is very beautifully rendered, and therefore convincing. Compare that to the line of the roof above which is sharp, and not softened at all. It still feels raw and betrays its virtuality. I think light and shadow, when they exist in nature somehow take the edge off such things. But this tension is vital, and for me a key part of the works' fascination. The moment at which one feels these two states being merged somehow.*

Right, or at least trying to meet.

*Or trying to meet. There's no competition, they're actually trying to sort of...*

Coexist or something.

*Exactly.*

One of the things that really interests me – and I haven't broken it down yet, which is why I would like to talk about it – are the details John sees in the actual landscape that inspire a work. Every artist isolates things, and decontextualises them in order to sort of posit something in some way. With John, some of that is technical and some of that is just conceptual. The tremendous role the technical plays in his work can complicate things. John's work is interesting when it makes what we are looking at hyperreal. That's more what I mean actually – not surreal, but hyperreal. I think what you are saying about the children with Magritte is so interesting because some

of that simply has to do with the fact that children have so much less information.

*They are not programmed.*

Exactly. I mean they are not only not programmed, but they have less...

*Less interference.*

Less interference, exactly. Things are more instinctive.

*It's why the Surrealists loved them, for exactly that reason.*

Because the Surrealists – you know there was this almost kid-like, hokey, attention to detail.

*They spent their lives trying to think like children.*

That whole generation did. But in the case of the Surrealists a lot of it had to do with exaggerating and isolating a certain detail a child would immediately recognise, and others might not. In John's work, of course, it's more complex than that. It still hinges on the details. And the details he is preoccupied with are both technical (seeking an equivalence between the virtual possibilities and the real experience – and then some selective application of more conventional painterly and sculptural rendering) and narrative (what he believes to be the salient details in the story he is telling). And then there's a third component he's working on, this kind of entropic history. His idiosyncratic assertion of a conspiracy theory history of the United States that is a story about nature and culture.

*That's something I would like to go deeper into. When I look at John's work I am aware that it is acknowledging a whole series of very long traditions. The tradition of landscape painting and photography, most obviously, but also portraiture – as the portrait of an age, and a manner*

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*of behaviour.*

Do you see that, as much?

*No, it is a landscape first. But actually even before landscape I am aware of the epic nature of history painting. In former salon installations the landscapes were prominent, the portraits and still lifes slightly less so – but it was the history paintings that dominated.*

I agree – and yet in answer to the question of what context can you put it in as art, or even not as art, I think I'm more inclined to see it as something super art. What first brought me into contact with John, as I was preparing the show at Marian Goodman [*Equal, That Is, To The Real Itself*] was this idea of equivalence or analogue, of artists for whom document and representation are not a métier, but something to which they are committed in making art that responds to some direct experience of the world – artists who seek to contrive an equivalent experience through whatever art they make, so that the viewer has as intense an experience of the art as the artist has of the world. It's a transitive experience, but very intense, and that can happen through technology or it can happen through, whatever, you know. If you look, for example, at experiments in film, at epic film like *Napoleon*, or at the early epic documentaries like *Nanook of the North*, there was a tremendous effort on the part of the maker to find some equivalent means of conveying to a viewer the magnitude of their experience. The magnitude not necessarily in scale, but in effect, in impact. That's what I feel John is attempting, what he's trying to get to.

*The silence is a critical part of that.*

Silence is huge, and I think the projection reinforces the silence because it doesn't have a frame. Barnett Newman wanted to round the corners of a room because one shouldn't be aware of the endpoints of a plane – I think

he wanted the walls to recede – to make the space feel open-ended. It should feel infinite. I feel as if the projection and its scale reinforce the readiness to slow down, and let this actually happen in real time. The scale reinforces the silence – or perhaps makes you conscious of it?

*It does one and then the other, I think. On a related note, I'd like to return to the idea of the sites portrayed in John's work. What seems to have caught his attention about these particular places is their relationship with the medium in which he is working – and his belief that the situations it is most adroitly positioned to document, albeit in a somewhat expanded form, are scenes that are themselves virtual. There's something completely detached about all of these places – both physically and morally – which places them close to the limit of what can be considered to be normal.*

You're talking precisely about something I'm trying to understand better. Sometimes I don't really know what 'virtual' means.

*I agree. We recognise exactly what these scenes depict – a pig farm, an oil derrick, a grain silo, and a dust storm – but we know very little about their processes and implications. Two of them – the derrick and the farm – are extremely faithful reconstructions. Another, the storm, is based on an archival photograph.*

It's a total simulation.

*A total simulation. Then you have this work [Oil Stick Work], which is somehow a composite of both: the building really exists, but for the first time in this body of work John has introduced an element – the human figure working – which is entirely of his own making, his own script.*

I agree, but I think he's telling a history in the others, too. I think Angelo is just the most concrete manifestation of

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the fact that all of these are John's stories, and they are reconstructions. It makes me think about the play Paul Chan did in New Orleans.

"Waiting for Godot"?

Yes.

*Which is extremely relevant here.*

Right, and he enacted it with the assistance of others whom he enlisted, much like John has enlisted Angelo. I don't want to make this too literal a comparison, but in a place like New Orleans, now, which is very present tense, all of the issues are urgent and real and yet as a result of the complete destruction of Katrina, there's a sort of messing with time. For me there is something of that in John's work too. He's not enlisting other people in quite the same way, but he has created a character. To my mind all of this is an effort to retell, to simulate a real history.

*And also to expose.*

Right, exactly. Pierre Huyghe does this where he enters the fissure in a history and then retells the history from the vantage point of that unaddressed gap. I also think of Robert Smithson's mirror displacements, which, according to some were intended to mimic, and were very intentionally done as a response to, say, the moonwalk. There is something of that in John's *Oil Stick Work* and *Grow Finish Unit* for me. In addressing John's work it is difficult to move beyond the virtual at the beginning – but perhaps we should begin with his urge to tell a revisionist tale, to do justice to this monumental history that is not a received history, but a history that's almost clairvoyant. The degree of connection that he's making is huge, even if he's necessarily not the first to acknowledge these things: the role of nitrogen in the soil or his description of the tidiness, the efficiency of the feeding...

*The growth and the functionality.*

Right, the incredible efficiency of it, which puts in close proximity those things we work really hard, as Foucault points out, to keep apart – the feeding and containment of the pigs and then killing, in order to feed another population: us. But John has seen how close they are together, and has found a way to portray them that looks almost like the kind of beautiful pastoral landscape we traditionally wanted to look at. And yet something about what you see from the second you walk in on it – the technology, the scale, the quality of light, the insistent silence – quickly makes you aware that you are looking at an insidious, sinister landscape. It's something between the virtual and the uncanny.

*The work with the most insidious content, the pig farm, is also the one which gives the least away. The content is completely hidden. You wouldn't know what it is.*

Right.

*The other works – the pump, the storm – it's out there, exposed. It's interesting that you talk about Beckett and Waiting for Godot. There is something incredibly theatrical about Oil Stick Work. Looking at the performer, Angelo, I'm reminded of Happy Days and the sheer futility of its characters' situation. I continue to argue with myself about what Angelo is doing, whether it is something positive or negative. It's hard to avoid a sense of judgment here – whether John likes it or not – just as it is with the dust storm. It's almost like some Biblical plague visited upon us.*

Of course. They are incredibly cautionary tales.

*Even with this building, a grain silo, theoretically a place of storage, provision, sanctity. And yet here is this guy carrying out the most absurd task...*

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... dirtying the building, in a way.

*Yes. In a process of endurance, which can be read as a Zen, meditative action, not dissimilar to the training a Japanese calligrapher receives when learning his trade, the instruction to copy a circle over and over and over again until his hand very naturally and instinctively draws a circle.*

Or the seven years it takes to learn how to make sushi.

*Exactly, there is a sense that he is reaching some kind of state, something close to the sublime. Now 'sublime' is a word that has been co-opted to mean something wonderful, which we invariably use to denote something positive, but it was actually...*

... identified with something apocalyptic.

*Exactly.*

... and scary.

*Right. So I think 'sublime' is an interesting word for this.*

You're right.

*Because at the same time I also see him, and I see the way that – if this is about his choice of medium, oil – it's obviously no coincidence, it trickles through all of John's work. We consume oil every day of our lives, but to replace just what we as individuals have taken will take many thousands of years. With Angelo, it feels as if there is some form of penance or servitude going on, an erasing of ills.*

I think that's interesting, especially for a Catholic – like copying a word over and over on a blackboard by way of punishment.

*It could also be read as a sort of slow-burning protest.*

All of those, in a way. I haven't heard John talk very

much about the decisions in this work.

*When I have discussed it with him he has often tended to fast-forward to the moment when Angelo's work is done, when the building will stand as a sort of negative anti-monument, a void in the landscape, even if it will have a degree of depth and texture to it.*

Meaning when it plays itself out.

*Right. But for me it is the passage from one form to another that is actually more interesting.*

For me too. And the thing is, what is the experience of a normal viewer here? I mean, we've been talking about these crazy overlays of time in John's work, of really unusual time. In the time it takes to actually unfold – because the work does unfold in real time – something is happening that is changing what you are looking at, as you are looking at it. So it's not a film, or a video, or a loop, but how do you know that when you are viewing it? You don't, necessarily.

*That's right. We talked earlier about that tension that exists between the different passages in John's works. For me there's another fascinating tension here, within the work's various orbits. One is geographical, as we pan around the building at a rather sedated pace. Others are temporal. This work [Oil Stick Work] has a thirty year chronology, which has been mapped out for it. It's been predefined. It will take Angelo thirty years to complete his work, after which the building will sit alone in the landscape. But it also has a second, ongoing temporal orbit of twenty-four hours. We are looking at the night sky now, as this orbit is tethered to the real time conditions of its real location. And then also a third, three hundred and sixty five day calendar orbit, also ongoing. The height of the sun in the sky at midday tomorrow will not be the same as the height of the sun in the sky at midday in a month's time.*

So these actually are real solar times.

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*Absolutely. And yet what is strange is that the grass, the grass is not...*

... changing?

*Right. It is not burnt in the midsummer, it does not become more verdant in the fall, there is no frost in the winter. And, more interestingly than that, Angelo – who will take thirty years to paint this building – doesn't age. He doesn't begin to stoop, he doesn't get grey hair, he remains a physical constant. So you have a sense that this is a frozen moment in time, like a photograph inserted into a continuous movement – and for me that is something really remarkable. I can't think of another...*

Is that intentional?

*Is it intentional? Absolutely.*

It's not that he...?

*It's not that John hasn't developed the technology to age the character, because he could if he wanted.*

He could make the entire thing change in the way that the painting of the building is changing.

*Absolutely. Angelo's entire physical appearance could alter just as it would in reality over a thirty-year period. Look at the stars flickering in the sky. There are no obvious limits to what one can or can't do with this medium, but John has deliberately chosen this simultaneity of pause and continue.*

Most of the picture is on pause and then...

*Right – you know those old tape recorders we used to have? If you hit pause and play at the same time nothing happened until you released the pause button. But here both buttons are pressed down, and yet the scene is still advancing.*

It's as if it's a section, which is possible to do digitally because it's not all one, is it?

*As if you isolate one aspect?*

As if there's a film within the film, that's moving faster. A window, I guess is what you would call it. But I come back to my sense of a kind of jagged profile – uneven development on the one hand, but then John is so far ahead of anything, there is so much that is folded into this. Artists like John are developing new ways to visualise a past-into-future epic history painting: something that unfolds in real time and extends into a future that we can't yet know, even though it's made in such a way that it assumes we do know what the future is. But we haven't experienced it yet. It will keep changing, and yet it's retelling a history, an inherited story. The question is: what's the experience that you have at any given moment, watching this unfold?

*It's looking straight forward, left and right at the same time.*

Simultaneously.

*And what's also fascinating about this piece [Oil Stick Work], what's interesting is that thirty years ago we were still in the infancy of a lot of new media. John has given this work a thirty-year timeline into the future, and we have no way of knowing how this medium going to hold up that far ahead.*

It also feels like first generation. So we are all, to a certain extent, participating in this experiment. And part of the difficulty is, as you said, that because it's so ambitious – not in a career sense, but intellectually, in terms of the technical capabilities – it takes time to conceptualise what he's doing, and then realise it. And there's no peer group.

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*Right. He's very much out on a limb here, which must be exhilarating but also rather lonely.*

It's not part of something, in the way most things are refined in our culture. Generally speaking the art that is most celebrated today is art where several high-powered people find each other and are making work that sort of pings off each other – this may be not the right example, but take artists like Seth Price, Wade Guyton and Kelly Walker, even if their art is actually quite different. The fact that they've done things together, and are in this intense dialogue, intensifies what each of them is doing. And so one has the feeling that they are part of something that is of its moment.

*A collective dynamic.*

Exactly, or what Peter Schjeldahl used to call 'gang theory'. John, on the other hand, is isolated, like the mad scientist. The way his art is delivered to you, it reminds me of Rubens, pushing what he could do with painting – except in Rubens' case he was really purposely going for all kinds of illusionistic effects in order to impress his audience. I don't know who John's trying to impress.

*I don't think there's any sense of willing deceit either in what he's trying to do.*

No, none.

*Nor illusion. But at the same time it's all about illusion.*

Well, it relies on certain kinds of illusion.

*It relies on illusion because he's trying quite simply to recreate the look of something.*

It's simulation.

*Simulation, right.*

There's no magic involved, it's very, very mechanical in its own way. But, to me, what I keep trying to get to is a way to talk about it that makes it art, before it's anything else.

*And you know what is so interesting is that there have been two reviews so far. One from Roberta Smith in The New York Times, and this one from a writer in Flash Art. I'll read it to you. "A corn silo, grey metal and freshly painted surfaces, shiny in the light of the Kansas midday. Our point of view slowly pans from left to right then back again, circling the silo as if it were an island surrounded by swampy waters. The whole scene is wrapped in an almost absolute quiet, with the brightness of the projection screen staring at us from the depths of the dark gallery space. On the floor a rectangle of pure white light delineates the visual field of the webcam..."*

Hmm.

*... "and adjusts the panning of the video" ...*

Hmm.

*... "according to our movements. It is sometimes difficult to discern the 3D environment of Oil Stick Work from the reality it depicts. John Gerrard's interest in the intersections between nature and technology – which is very true – brought into focus in the kind of landscapes and facilities that could in many ways be considered as real forms of virtuality."*

Oh. Now that's cool.

*"Every day around dawn, a small figure appears on the grounds to laboriously draw a black square on the shed surface. His name is Angelo Martinez, a quintessential everyman whose routine will end in 2038 when the whole silo is voided by his oil stick. Although bound to eventually transform the artwork, this accurately staged ritual seems*

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*to suggest the virtual meaningless of human will. As viewers we are invited to consider our position in regard to a scenario that can only be understood if considered to be perpetual progress. As in the case of the other work on display, the 3D environment Grow Finish Unit, lost in yet another expanse of flat nothing somewhere in Kansas this impressive unmanned pig breeding facility is a powerfully frightening reminder of the lengths to which our capitalist society has gone to enforce some of our most basic instincts, and integrate them into its distorted logic.”*

What are the instincts it's enforcing?

*Wait, I'm almost done. "Automatically fed with corn that's grown through hydrogenation, these pigs can be considered a product of the oil and gas employed to keep them alive. Gerrard's concerns with our environmental footprint become even more evident in this tight, impeccable show, to a hauntingly dramatic climax." A lot of writing about John's work is limited to banal description. Two thirds of this is purely descriptive, but at least he sticks his neck out, successfully I think, for the other third. Of course it's very difficult to describe John's work to people who haven't seen it – because there is a remarkable banality to the sort of things that he reconstructs. A silo on the horizon: on the face of it, that is something you couldn't imagine keeping your attention on for longer than a few minutes.*

Do you really think so? Look at the camera angles here, they're made sinister on some level simply because they loom larger than they should.

*For me the sinister aspect is the architecture. The pig farm, for example, is institutional, not unlike a concentration camp or an orphanage.*

The blank wall, the peaked roof.

*Right. There's no welcome here.*

Plus, of course, there is something insidious that goes on inside, even if you are closed off from it, and don't at first know what the sheds contain. But the *Dust Storm* for sure is dramatic, once it happens.

*It is quietly dramatic.*

It happens in a slow way, you're right.

*And it never actually envelops you.*

Right, I know. One thing that made me crazy at Marian [Goodman]'s is that it never moved forward.

*It's constantly developing and regenerating itself, but it never gets to you.*

Yes, but it stays.

*As we discussed before, it's on pause AND continue.*

Because it never moves its position. It never advances.

*It constantly threatens, but never delivers.*

You're right. There's a Sarah Morris movie I always really liked, that uses that sort of anticipatory music from drama television shows. It builds to a crescendo, but there's no climax. And all you do is, you get to a door. You don't even go into the building.

*By not actually enveloping the viewer in the storm, what does that tell us?*

That anticipation is a much higher kind of drama than experience.

*Precisely – because had the storm approached us, swallowed us up and then spat us out at the other end, that would have been a work about nothing more than its own*

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*achievement, its own technical realisation. As opposed to... Absolutely.*

... just simply the implications of that.

*The implications, or even before the implications, the rationale for creating this form in the first place. It would have been a work about its own effects.*

That's interesting. It would just have been a kind of melodrama, like a game. I agree.

*If you look at a storm there, and it's at arm's length, you ask yourself: what is that? Why is it there, and how is it formed?*

Right, how is it formed?

*Instead of saying, how on earth do I survive this?*

That's it. It takes the emphasis off survival, off simply taking care of yourself. And it makes you, it makes it a subject to ponder. It makes it something that you contemplate as natural phenomenon and as representation.

*And it maintains an eerie silence.*

It's partial, and it's selective, which is what I keep coming back to.

*You're right.*

There's a nice balance of what he develops, and what he doesn't develop. And some of it, it's hard to tell.

*Part of it is like a record that is just stuck and looping.*

Exactly. I watched this work over and over and over last summer – on some level it drives you crazy, and on another it's very kind of meditative.

It makes you start to ponder. At the risk of stating the obvious, the success of a work depends on what kind of experience it enables you, what insights it induces in you – but also what it leads you to think. And so on some level you want to feel that the artist is in control of the kinds of things he or she wants you to think about, and on another you don't want him or her to be so in control that it's just didactic. I think the selective thing in John's work happens even in the way he describes the sites. Writing about the setting for *Dust Storm*, he says [reading from the artist's notes] "Grice Farm is completely unremarkable, a remnant of a dream of farming in an unsuitable place." Which is an interesting thing – John's already interpreting. "A few cattle dotted on the landscape and old Mr and Mrs Grice living out their years on High Lonesome Lane off Highway 385 between Dalhart and Boise City. It's made up of the main old house, probably built in the '30s or '40s surrounded by farm buildings." And then he describes them, saying "All is neat and well-cared-for however. A daughter has placed a green trailer in the yard and lives there, another child a house to the far right of the main house. All these are visible in the work and have been photographed and rebuilt for the work." So there is this sense that he is almost on location.

*Like a scout for a movie.*

Yes, somehow. John's notes are such a fascinating document because they show a very contemporary type of research that leaps from website to website. So there are little, isolated pools of information from which he builds a story. I don't think it's that different to move between different websites than it is to go from stack to stack in a library. But my point is that there is a mix between the filmmaker/location scout who is looking for something that looks like what he wants to see, and somebody who is actually a documentarian or historian

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who is discovering sites and then learning about the history. And more important – there's a sense of über- or unter-story, a larger script from which he's working – the conspiratorial oil story I mentioned earlier.

*I know what you mean. On one level there is a certain moral element and he's exposing these things, but on another he has a hand in perfecting their exposure. And it's almost as if we are presented with something on television and we understand that actually it wasn't a casual interview in the street, that person was there. What they said is still perfectly valid but there was a certain... we were somehow set up a little bit.*

It's like reality TV, or Disney.

*Exactly. I look at this and I can't argue; we are being set up a bit here. Angelo has been parachuted into this environment which is ideal for what he needs to do.*

Right. But I ask myself, does it matter that he is manipulating a certain history?

*John is an outsider in the American landscape, and its history. I think that's important. He is fascinated by the country's architectural vocabulary, and the point at which it meets Judd and what he did in Texas.*

The style of it. Too out-of-left-field – you're talking about style now – or the aesthetics of composition.

*Exactly, and the panache of it. The structures in Grow Finish Unit are not so far from the Artillery Sheds in Marfa, or the concrete blocks that stand in the landscape nearby. The basic industrial form is repeated, only here it has been imbued with a function and a frightening efficiency. And it feels very much like something one is not supposed to see.*

It's overwhelming, isn't it?

*It is overwhelming for anyone, but I think it's especially overwhelming for someone from a different part of the world, with no real experience of this landscape or its culture and history. There are so many aspects of this landscape that are odd for Europeans, not least of which are the distances involved. The fact that you can drive an empty road for hours between each of these farms and settlements is something that we struggle to comprehend. The sheer sense of space that the scenes convey, the expanses of land that we look into on all sides.*

I think that goes even for a New Yorker who takes the subway. Even for the people who work in these places, they only know them locally and they can never really step out. My husband is from North Carolina and we would go there every summer. His family would stay on the Carolina beach, and if you drive from the middle of the state where the colleges and universities are, you go smack through pork country. It is barbecue heaven, and if you go a little off the road you'll find these pig farms. It's not quite as hyper-efficient in scale as the Texas meat-processing units; they are a little funkier and lower rent. For those who work there – I guess the reality is just the piece that they contribute. They know how foul it is, and they know the underbelly, they live with it every day, but they don't piece it together to see the whole, which is what the fiction writers and documentarians do. Who does see that?

*Who can? Let's go back to what we were talking about a moment ago, to the experience that John's work offers us. Suppose John took exactly the same sites – suppose the dust storms were a contemporary phenomenon, just as the feed lot and the pumps are – and suppose he hired an actor to play Angelo and actually physically paint the silo...*

Yes...

*Suppose all of these things were simply filmed. What is missing from that, that is provided by them being rendered*

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*virtually?*

This is a great question. This is exactly the right question, because then it would either have to be documentary or fiction – or some relationship between the two.

*This really interests me, this marriage of documentary and fiction. Somehow John is crafting a new genre. What troubles us, what fascinates us, and what we can't put our finger on, is arguably his greatest achievement.*

Now we're onto something – because you know when you see these things, they are doing something that you haven't yet found the terms to talk about, in a way. And I think you just found a really good point of entry.

*We could also look at it the other way. What if he were working in the same virtual medium, but documenting...I don't know...any regular building, a post office or bank, or a simple landscape with no buildings in it – what if he were documenting these sites that were not of 'virtual' interest to him because of the supposed 'virtual' existence they are part of? Suppose he was virtually rendering less interesting or morally challenging sites. What would we be missing there?*

Right. That's very good – there is this real need, this amazing confluence of subject and medium.

*If you consider either of those possibilities alone, you are missing something.*

Okay, I'm going to throw out two other examples: Pierre Huyghe and Jason Rhoades. It's funny because Huyghe is constantly preoccupied with the fact that people want to frame his work as something between fact and fiction. He says, "It's something else, they're missing it." He likes to talk of creating a possibility of a porous structure that can accommodate revision. But then I was thinking of Rhoades, an artist whose greatest works, to my mind,

were these mega-projects in which he took on major social/economic/cultural systems along the lines that I think John does. Where his subject matter isn't a building or a site or a circumstance or an act or a person, but a whole infrastructure like medicine or health. I feel that when he did *Black Pussy*, he was really devising a way to describe, to conjure the art world. And he figured out that the single most salient characteristic of the art world is its self-consciousness, its intense self-consciousness, and he found a way to use activities identified with art and the social part of art to make everybody equally and incessantly self-conscious, no matter who they were. In the case of John, I met him at this moment when this was all just forming in his head. He had just come back from that first Texas trip where he'd done all that research in Austin. I feel that was really the starting point.

*The archival images of the storms.*

The storms, right, the grainy black-and-white images he showed me. They are incredibly powerful images.

*They are arguably more powerful than what he has managed to do himself.*

Well, that's actually a really interesting question. A single image can't always fully explain or drive our imagination, so we find ourselves imagining histories. And [eventually] we have enough information to piece together something that is not full, that's not complete, but that is powerful on account of its lack of completion.

*Definitely. For me, there is a crucial word I keep coming back to in my learning about and understanding of John's work – and it very much is an ongoing understanding.*

I like that too.

*Anyway, the crucial word for me here is 'trust'. In the way that trust, when you deal with an artist like [Andreas]*

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*Gursky, is tested, because we know that his images are manipulated.*

Yes.  
*There is a moment when we no longer trust what the work is giving us.*

It becomes a story and not a document.

*Exactly. Anyway, so much has already been said about this. With John, part of it is the authenticity of the sites he's portraying, and by extension their moral discomfort. The other part is his virtual reconstruction of those sites. And both of them have great implications in terms of trust.*

Right, that's what I was talking about.

*Again it's the meeting of the documentation and the technique; it all comes back to this.*

And the narrative.

*And the narrative – somehow they meet to create a narrative.*

Yes, they do.

*It requires both of them.*

Going back to the original archival photograph of the storm – it does seem critical that there is this image. It begins with this image, a black and white image that's still and incomplete. What's not properly accounted for there is the storm, there is very little of that, so he has looked at something more current like the internet images of the storm in the Iraqi desert and conflated them. And it's not just a conflation of two techniques, it's a conflation of time.

*There is so much that is being compressed into this.*

That's where the trust for me is something I really have to work at.

*I agree. I constantly feel as if I'm on unsteady ground when I look at John's work – but only in the same way as I do when watching a film by someone like [Alejandro González] Iñárritu for the first time, with its remarkable interwoven narratives. The first time you watch those films you feel on such shaky ground, as if your trust were somehow being ruptured.*

But what made it unsteady in each of those cases. It's not really about truth each time. It's about...

...chronology?

It's about what you need, it's about being conversant, it's about What are the terms? This comes back to the very place you started, because in a sense my response to what you are saying would be, okay, if what we're worried about really is "How does this work as art?" then we could put on hold the business of trust. We have to distinguish between what we trust as an artwork and what we trust as a history, or a true account of something. And with John both are an issue, don't you think? It has to do with the fact that so many things are available. In the past, a notion of history presumed that when information was missing you would have to look for some other source, you wouldn't simply explain it with something else that existed.

*Exactly.*

Now we do. We put things together. So we can construct an image of something that accounts for it, accounts for missing information by retelling the story. Or rather, by simulating a new story.

*And this is the issue with John's work now. I feel not only is it possible that we are missing information but we also*

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*know that information is being added, like Angelo.*

Right. And I think there are more things that have been inserted though I'm not sure what they are. But I want to come back to what we were saying, what you started with. The other reason for the lack of trust has to do with not fully comprehending the return – which comes back to what you were saying about drawing versus painting. When viewers feel that they have some familiarity, or some – 'facility' is the word you used – facility with what they're looking at, then they feel they can judge it against other things like it. And they can judge it from an experience of their own, like you can judge painting against other painting.

*Absolutely – and what is our yardstick here?*

We don't have a yardstick.

*Right, we don't have one. And this is a constant struggle I have with the work. A struggle that I really enjoy.*

Me too.

*Somehow I get nervous about the implications of a work like this [Oil Stick Work] being projected on a very large scale in public. Imagine it, sort of Truman Show style.*

Ha!

*Imagine if it were projected somewhere in a city and the inhabitants of that city could watch the work develop and unfold over thirty years, as they grew up.*

Oh wow. Is that something John has ever thought about?

*I think he has definitely thought about his work making the step outside into a more public domain. But I feel this very strange urge to keep it contained while we come to terms with what its implications are. Like we are in a laboratory*

*with a vaccine or a germ and we don't know exactly what we have.*

Wow. That's a little scary!

*I know!*

I have never thought that, but it's really interesting. Although I did say earlier that one of the ways you can think about this is as an experiment, something in the laboratory. But I've never thought of it in those kind of Orwellian terms.

*I do. For me this whole body of work is riddled with menace. All of it.*

In terms of what it tries to make people believe?

*Do you know why? Because every day is a nice day. The sun shines, and it never rains. The reflections are always perfect.*

But you don't think that he means that as a kind of critique?

*Possibly, I don't know. But then he's painting the building black. He's not painting it pink, or lime green.*

Right, but he's painting it black with oil. I mean, where I lack trust – or rather, where I have questions, and I'm not sure what I want the answer to be – is in the symbolic implication of Angelo's painting, and the extent to which it is attended to. Does that spring from a desire to insert a figure into this landscape? My thinking would probably be Yes. Does it come from a desire to have a figure who will perform an action that can be programmed so that it unfolds in real time? I think that's probably a yes too. Is that figure doing something with the material – oil – that this is all about, and that is otherwise concealed? Yes. The only place where you actually see oil as oil is in the painting, right?

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*Right. I think Angelo is here for one reason, and that is to animate the scene. There's a word in French for a sort of clown or entertainer which is animateur. I think that he is very much the catalyst to permit the development of this scene over time. Because I think John's fascination extends beyond these specific sites and this specific corner of the world, to a fascination with temporality.*

That is a common denominator in his work.

*Right. They run contrary to the inchoate nature of so much contemporary art. You can't actually understand them unless you spend a lot of time with them. They are demanding. And, explicitly or not, John is passing a form of judgment here.*

Absolutely.

*And he is inviting us to pass our own forms of judgment, whether we want to line up behind him or whether we want to dismiss his judgment, and in doing so pass judgment on his passing judgment.*

Right, right.

*But at the same time we are being asked to pass judgment on something, the exact nature of which we don't fully understand. We're being asked to commit, either commit an opinion on what we are seeing, or to commit to John's work as a whole, which is extremely difficult when we actually don't understand fully what it is.*

Which is where I started. What is it? And you're correct, that becomes a really fraught question because we are asked so much, so much is asked of us in trying to figure that out.

*When I first wrote about John's work I wrote a very simplistic sentence saying that it leaned on painting, photography and sculpture, from the existing visual genres,*

*and took from them to create its own new ground.*

I think that's true.  
*I wonder where the debt is greatest?*

Oh dear.

*The works obviously couldn't exist without photography to map these situations in the first place.*

They're dependent on it.

*And yet the aesthetic I think he's after is entirely painterly.*

I think so too. It's very painterly but it's also a film. It's kind of like animated painting.

*The Flash Art review mistakenly referred to it as 'video'.*

I know, that's crazy, they got it so wrong. But the problem is, as you said, you don't know what it is. So you don't know, you look up there... that's not a film projector, it's a video projector, so what is physically in that projector that is creating the image? It's a computer, right?

Yes.

So it's a digital image? I don't think most people know the difference between video, digital – very few of us know how to negotiate that, those distinctions. I don't care how something is made, I just want the effect to be something that doesn't make me have to think about how it's made, unless that's the subject of the work. The danger is that the technology becomes a distraction or an excuse of sorts. You can get stuck on a kind of 'wow factor.' When I first met him, John made me think that he wanted to be rescued from an audience that was responding to the 'wow factor.'

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*The 'wow factor'... Maybe that's a good place for us to stop.  
Or rather, to pause, before we continue another time.  
Thank you Linda, it's been fun.*

Thank you!

Linda Norden and Jasper Sharp met on Saturday  
7 March, 2009, within the exhibition *John Gerrard:  
Oil Stick Work*, Simon Preston Gallery, New York.