

Art in America

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Five Points With Bob Nickas

by Chris Chang



Installation view of "The Painter of Modern Life," 2015; at Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

The first show Bob Nickas ever curated was titled "Hunger for Words," a play on the German critic Wolfgang Iser's 1982 book *Hunger for Pictures*, a survey of contemporary German painting. "Hunger for Words" took place in 1984 at Gallery 345/Art For Social Change and included Vito Acconci, Jonathan Borofsky, Michael Corris, Terry Fox, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Les Levine, Antoni Muntadas and Nancy Spero. "At that time, I positioned myself in opposition to Neo-Expressionism, and advocated for art engaged with language, politics and public address," Nickas said. "But ultimately, a first show is done for no other reason than to start."

Since then Nickas has organized over 80 exhibitions. A few of his career highlights include solo surveys of Lee Lozano, Stephen Shore and Wolfgang Tillmans, all at New York's MoMA PS1, where Nickas was Curatorial Advisor from

2004 to 2007. A prolific writer, his book *Live Free or Die: Collected Writings 1985–1999*, was published in 2000 by les presses du réel, and a second collection of essays and interviews, *Theft Is Vision* (JRP/Ringier), followed in 2008. His current curatorial project, "The Painter of Modern Life," features 21 artists and runs through Apr. 11 at Anton Kern Gallery. Titled after a famous essay by Charles Baudelaire, the show features a 'zine in which Nickas "interviews" the 19th-century French poet.

1) Baudelaire said that all poets are critics but critics should definitely not try to be poets. How does curating fit into this equation? Do you identify with the word curator?

I would say that I'm a collector, though without adequate resources to acquire artworks as avidly as I might. Putting shows together, to my mind, has a parallel to collecting artworks. You could consider everything in an exhibition as what I want at that particular moment: this is art that I am looking at and curious about, and I am devising a situation in which these works can be seen in relation to one another. For 30 years now, I've been bringing works together for much the same reason—to understand them individually and as part of a larger puzzle to solve, and to gain an understanding of my attraction to them. Another way to gain insight into artworks and into yourself is to write about art. When organizing an exhibition rather than writing about art, you begin to see that an exhibition is a hands-on form of writing. Are there poetics to that activity? There can be.



Sadie Benning: *Highway*, 2014, medite, aqua resin, casein and acrylic, 25½ by 16¼ inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York.



Nathaniel Axel: *Fugue State*, 2015, inkjet on primed linen, 53 by 38 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery and Karma, New York.



Sadie Benning: *Highway*, 2014, medite, aqua resin, casein and acrylic, 25½ by 16¼ inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York.



Sascha Braunig: *Countess*, 2015, Acryla-gouache on paper, 20 by 14 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery and Foxy Production, New York.

2) I remember your Alan Uglow show at David Zwirner in New York two years ago—the precise minimal staging of precise minimalist works. That would be quite the collection to acquire! The Uglow show and “The Painter of Modern Life,” with its profusion of styles, seem like night and day. But are they?

The Zwirner show featured one artist. You might imagine it as a studio visit with Alan Uglow and me, a conversation between us with his works all around. “The Painter Of Modern Life” is a group show—an entirely different situation. When I stand in the middle of Anton Kern’s gallery, it’s as if all 21 artists are there. They all speak their own language, though some of the terms and the ways of expressing them are shared. A large part of the “writing” of a show involves translation.

But even if these two exhibitions are, as you say, like night and day, I have never subscribed to a linear, global theory of art. I’ve always insisted that in art, even if no longer in life, you are allowed to be promiscuous. I’m always responding to what’s around me, and not in a prescribed way. Of course I’m never running after “the next new thing,” as some people do, or “the last forgotten thing,” as has become prevalent in recent years. Too bad I can’t walk through the Anton Kern show with Alan Uglow. I’m sure his eyebrows would raise here and there, visibly wondering what I’d gotten myself into. That said, I’m sure Alan would agree that any sensibility, actively engaged, has its foundation and is at the same time continually shifting, and in that there’s continuity.

3) Did promiscuity allow you to select sculpture for your painting show?

It’s not strictly a painting show. One mistake in organizing a show comprised mainly of large painted canvases is that you create a metaphor for what so much painting—even abstraction—has come to represent today. Those works might as well be the sails of windsurfers who ride the waves of art. Artists or curators, dealers or collectors, all skim the surface when the tide is high. So not only did I decide to dial down the scale of works in my show—to human scale—I also acknowledge the larger practice of painters, with drawings, prints, posters, sculpture, painted objects and object-type painting, and paintings that incorporate drawing and photography. We all know that when artists explore various media, those divergent works inevitably inform and infect one another. As for curators, museums may be organized by departments-of painting, photography, sculpture, film, architecture and so on—but individuals, even compartmentalized individuals, are not.

4) I fantasize a companion show: “The Photographer of Modern Life.”

I already have variations of this show in mind—“The Painter Of Modern Life” realized entirely with wall paintings, or with only figurative paintings, or with graphite drawings and black-and-white photography. Remaking shows, even my own, is something I’ve done from almost the very beginning. There is no one way to stage a show, no ideal assembly of works at any given moment, no perfectly articulated text, and no reason why, in order to open things up for others, you can’t appear to contradict yourself.

5) The ephemeral can be experienced. But can it be represented?

Yes. But only in passing.