

Milly Thompson in conversation with Andrew Hunt

This interview took place at The Montague on the Gardens Hotel in Bloomsbury, London on Monday 27 April 2009.

ANDREW HUNT: To start with, I want to ask you about the scripted interview that accompanied your first solo show 'Late Entry' at Peer, which you worked on with Ingrid Swenson in London last year. In it, you show your awkwardness at being involved with a self-referential piece of writing, and you point towards what you see as 'the unlimited scope for shameless self-aggrandisement' practiced by curators and artists in such texts. Within this conversation, you refer to a separate interview that I conducted in 2006 for a free publication distributed by International Project Space, Birmingham. Can you tell me more about the aim of your constructed text?

MILLY THOMPSON: Yes, I'd been thinking about interviews between curators and artists in general, and I thought that there was something really interesting about your conversation with Mark McGowan. Your questions and his responses appear to be deliberately banal, yet he also says some quite 'extreme' things. I'm interested in the way that artists shape a context for themselves, and ask questions such as 'how do you make yourself sound more interesting?' I think that, as an artist, you should have a holistic approach to your work, to include the interpretation and critical position within which you're placed. In one respect, I didn't actually believe any of Mark's responses about himself, for instance, about him being homeless for a time. It never occurred to me that these things might be true. Then I started reading other interviews and I thought that there was something very predictable about most of them. They can range from being quite personal to very highbrow, but they always end up being banal; unless you're reading a conversation with someone like Jeff Koons of course, who always talks in ridiculous but brilliant platitudes.

AH: I suppose the thing about self-aggrandisement, is that you can self-consciously perform this within an interview, in order to comment on the role of what an artist or a curator is, or about the



Milly Thompson and Andrew Hunt in conversation for *Savoir Faire*
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possibilities of what they can be. How could we go beyond this meta-self-aggrandisement—this is, of course, another form of narcissism—and be critical of the status of the curator and the artist?

MT: There's always a bit of puffery where you have two people talking to each other knowing that the conversation is going to be transcribed. Sure, there's a performative element, but when you're involved in it—as we are now sitting in this fancy hotel—it's hard to know if that's really happening, especially when you see things written down after the fact. So with Mark's text, I didn't know if it was real, if what you were saying was 'true', or how much you were adlibbing. In my text for *Peer* I played around with these truths and lies, sampled quotes from artists and writers and adopted them. In that way I was able to make sense of my own work. I wondered whether, through this, I could ask people to be empathetic towards my project. But then, of course, the truth is that no one will ever know if what I was saying was a lie anyway. Did I answer your question? You asked me whether I was critical of the status of the curator and artist—the answer is no.

AH: Maybe it's not a direct critique, but doesn't the fact that we are discussing your last interview in this one start to become even more critically self-referential, nauseous, embarrassing and narcissistic? Is this still part of the art of your project? Through this conversation—and the ongoing self-reflection it will suggest—aren't you questioning the truth and processes that construct artistic identity through the relationships that currently exist between artists and visual arts institutions; their directors, curators, and subsequently the dialogue that's produced by those organisations in their publicity material?

MT: The question of whether an artist necessitates having a curator is important, because otherwise, what does an artist do with their work? You can place your work in someone's flat or in an alternative space, but, for me, that doesn't seem to work very well anymore. In a way, what's more interesting is to be able to second-guess a curator in a public space. For instance, when I wrote about you in my last interview [again, for *Peer*], I was very nervous. I thought you'd be a bit annoyed with me because in one respect, I was taking the piss out of you, by using you as

an example of a curator in a generic curator's pose. Anyway, when you called shortly afterwards and said that you wanted to do a show with me, I was really shocked, because, in a way, the 'truth' or 'game' I had been playing had been broken. And I guess that's what we're sitting down doing now—discussing and opening out a new set of questions that came from this original situation.

AH: Obviously this relates to one of BANK's tactics (the group that you were a member of between 1994 and 2003), which was to be very critical of people in the art world. In one respect, you realised that the people you were questioning were also somehow flattered in a very shallow way, simply because they were name-checked by the group. So, I think that's one reason why you hooked me; I was flattered in a profoundly shallow manner, because you'd been critical of my own form of self-aggrandisement, which perversely, we're now amplifying in this interview. To run with this a little, before Alastair MacKinven's exhibition at Focal Point Gallery (March/April 2009), I wrote a critical review of one of his collaborative projects, so that, by the time it came to his exhibition in Southend, there was a self-consciously antagonistic relationship between us that served to push the discourse around his work. Rather than relying on a predictably cosy back-slapping exercise, for example, where a curator says how good an artist's work is in his or her gallery's marketing material (press release, publication, interview, whatever), with this programme we want to try and perform a different 'truth'. You know; there might be some parts of an artist's or curator's work that you don't like, so it's best to talk about this. By discussing the problem it's put out in the open, and the work has the opportunity to improve. It sounds obvious, but there's such a taboo about this. It's something that you're simply not allowed to do in public, especially as a curator; providing criticism is meant to be purely the independent critic's role. Do you think curators and artists should speak their minds more? Or should we just leave it to critics to interpret an argument put forward by an exhibition after the fact?

MT: Yes, curators and artists should speak their minds, but it's fraught with problems. The situation you were in with Alastair was dangerous territory. I mean you talk about 'honesty' and 'transparency', and 'truth', but that's your reading. When a curator says the work 'improves', that's their truth, and not necessarily the

artist's truth. In terms of the relationship between an artist, gallery and curator, I do think there's a game where, as an artist, you're always second-guessing what people want from you, whilst trying to hold on to what you want for yourself. I'm a very self-conscious person, and I think, in a weird way, one of the things about BANK was that all of the members were, and still are, very self-conscious people. In fact, I'd go beyond this, and say that we were self-consciously self-conscious about being self-conscious. For me, that has continued into my solo work. In BANK we were always very aware of how we were going to upset people, and I'd still somehow like to upset people, without really upsetting them. I find this idea quite interesting.

AH: How about your interest in the sidelined minority of artists in their middle-age, as opposed to younger artists? I know that this is a relatively personal question, but you have mentioned that you're fascinated by the idea of being socially marginalised as a woman without children, the way that this relates to a kind of 'loserness', as well as other forms of social anxiety. Can you tell me about the unavoidable 'cringe' of being an artist with a burgeoning solo career in her mid-forties?

MT: Yeah well, when you're a young, fashionable artist, you're often quite good looking, and your skin is nice. It might sound trite but, when you have a hangover, when you drink too much, you can cope with it better when you're younger. You don't get such bad headaches and you can function in a less self-conscious way. So the older you get, the more physically you're unable to deal with the social needs of the art world. And the art world wants people with beautifully smooth skin; young people with their pixie trousers, or whatever they're wearing. They all look lovely, and they can stay up really late and everything. So I think there's something slightly embarrassing about my situation, knowing what I know at this point in my career. I don't think I'm quite middle-aged yet though.

AH: No, I think middle-age starts in your late-forties doesn't it?

MT: Sometimes when I walk into an established gallery I feel a little bit lumpen and inelegant. I think that, when you reach a certain age, established galleries expect you to have a degree of

grandeur, to possess extreme confidence in yourself, or to feel accepted.

AH: I was at one of those 'Nought to Sixty' events at the ICA in London last year, and a young critic said she couldn't understand why anyone over the age of thirty-five would still go to openings.

MT: Yes, people actually think like that. That particular show should have been called 'Nought to Thirty', shouldn't it? I went in for Becks Futures about three or four years ago with a completely crap proposal, but I remember bumping into someone who was accepted and won it; or at least was one of the winners. She's a bit older than me, and we were talking about this fact; there was suddenly a change the following year where the organisers put an age limit on the prize. It was something like thirty-nine. In opposition to this, it's interesting to see that The Turner Prize has just extended its age limit, because they haven't got enough young artists to keep it going. So I do think that, unless you're really successful, there's a certain pathos attached to being a middle-aged artist.

AH: What about your ideas surrounding class, aspiration and embarrassment?

MT: Well, basically I'm pretty middle-class, which I find very embarrassing. I find it embarrassing because I don't feel confident enough within the role; I've always wished that I could just float around being middle-class, being pleased with myself, with all the gifts that I've had. For example, I was taken to the Tate when I was little. Every weekend we went off and visited places like that. I never made it work for me, and the reason why we've come here is probably because this is the kind of environment I want to swish around in. [Points to the hotel interior.] I really like it, but I always feel a bit embarrassed about it. I don't think class is even the right way of thinking about it. The idea of floating around trying to fit into different lives or possibilities is something that a lot of people really struggle with, so that form of aspiration is a part of me. I think I've got a sentimental attachment to this idea; if you asked me what I wanted to be when I was ten, I would have said a serving wench in a medieval palace.

AH: Can you remember why that was?

MT: I think I thought it was glamorous.

AH: You've mentioned that *W* magazine has recently been a big influence on your work. In the November 2008 issue, there was a section on the Frieze Art Fair, and you've been collecting other stories. These include a fashion shoot made especially for the publication by John Baldessari, a photo-story featuring Marc Jacobs' art collection and his maid, and an issue devoted to Madonna and a white stallion. You've mentioned that what's interesting for you is that *W* is outside of most people's comprehension; it's a heightened lifestyle magazine that represents yachts and wealth, a loftier version of the desires connected to Posh and Becks in *Hello!* So it's a classier version of *Hello!*, or a version for people with money who buy art. In terms of the project you are planning for Southend, and the relationship of people from the contemporary art world to a local audience in a provincial town, you've mentioned that this magazine presents a fascinating parallel existence of taste and class. Can you tell me more about this?

MT: *W* is a fashion and lifestyle magazine for women, and essentially it's also for very wealthy Americans. It shows all the things that they aspire to, and somewhat pathetically, I also aspire to those things because I buy the magazine. The relationship between *Hello!* and *W* is really quite simple; the reason why I find *W* so interesting is because it delves into contemporary art in a very exact manner, whereas I think if *Hello!* talked about art, it would probably do so as a joke, or aim to ridicule it. I wonder how these tools of aspiration create elitism. Aspiration doesn't exist on its own; it exists through the media and other forms of information. Unless this existed, you wouldn't know what there was to aspire to. Maybe you could aspire to be more Godly, but even that is connected with being instructed by a Godhead figure like a preacher of some sort. I just wonder what would happen if you turned everything around, say for example, if *Hello!* magazine started talking about the arts in the same way that *W* does. The people who read *Hello!* might start thinking 'oh yeah, this is interesting.' These magazines are very much a tool for keeping people in their place. So that's what I find fascinating about the idea of *W* magazine in Southend.

I don't even think you can buy it in Essex—it's one of those magazines you don't get in many shops.

AH: Is *W* placed in strategic places?

MT: Well, up until recently, you could only get it in specialist shops, but now it's in places like Borders. You can't get it in WHSmith, so it's not widely available, which means it connects to issues of area, choice and access. You know, for example if everyone had the same brilliant state education, we'd all end up being an amazingly inspired and aspirational crowd of people; everyone would get to know the possibilities of what they're able to achieve.

AH: So are you looking at *W* magazine optimistically, as a potential for places like Southend, and also to point out the restrictions of aspiration?

MT: Yes.

AH: In your solo practice, and in terms of different social levels and hierarchies, would you say that you're more interested in the idea of levelling hierarchies, so that you can deal with any culture within the field of contemporary visual art? Or are you still connected to a position that BANK addressed, which maintained, respected and honoured the people it attacked; a stance that simultaneously flattered and disputed the elitism of art? Do you agree with this and how would you see your position from this perspective as a solo practitioner?

MT: For me that's a really complicated question. In a previous conversation with you, I mentioned that I thought that contemporary art was wrecked the moment The Turner Prize was first televised. What I meant was I think that as soon as you put something like that on TV, and everyone starts getting their oar in, art immediately becomes bland and politically correct. It's the same issue that we were talking about earlier with public art projects, such as those made by Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane; their greasy pole sculpture in Grizedale, and the pipe-smoking contest after the smoking ban. Inevitably, it all becomes connected to health and safety issues. You can almost hear people say 'please make this work more easy to understand.' Works like

Anthony Gormley's figures on a Liverpool beach are safe and friendly, they don't actually challenge anyone's brain so that their mind starts breaking under the pressure of new thought. So the way that art was televised immediately made it ridiculous; Matthew Collings made it all sound ludicrous anyway. *The Daily Mail* immediately gets onto its high horse, and suddenly before you know it, you've got every single thing being explained away. And it's as if *Relational Aesthetics* was a response to this blandification of contemporary art; it accepts that you need to explain things. I mean, even sitting here and talking about my work is part of this tendency. I'm very challenged by these different issues, and I think you were right about BANK simultaneously flattering and disputing this discourse. I don't think we were criticising everything. Maybe the word 'dispute' is better—it's more open. So popularisation has meant things have become dogmatic, more tied down. I like variation in the way art is talked about. For example, someone in your situation; I imagine you spend a lot of time pandering to the needs of the local council and the community in Southend whilst keeping one eye towards London and wanting to be seen as a curator who's doing something exciting.

AH: In terms of cultural geography, I'm starting to think that, although we are very close to London, within Southend, it's actually more interesting to look in the opposite direction, away from the UK, towards The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Poland. When you mention the bureaucratic demands that are placed on art, I think that there are always ways of working with these situations successfully. Rather than simply being a pain to funders, I think that you can work with the so-called restraints of this system to do something creative and exciting, and you can work with the community and look at critical ideas at the same time, without explaining everything away, like you mention with The Turner Prize. It comes back to what you were saying about *W* magazine. It's about imagining a situation—perhaps a parallel universe in a regional location—where tough art is part of the fabric of everyday life. Going back to your project, in terms of rigorous work, I think that this really came across in your exhibition at Peer. I remember walking in and there was an immediate visual power, yet at the same time, the work was hard to get, which is exactly how things should be. In this respect,

how will your project operate in Southend, and how are you trying to make things tougher for the audience?

MT: When I was thinking about the Peer show, I was trying to make an elaborate multi-layered narrative about self-consciousness and aspiration. I was interested in the very elaborate, over-complicated things that can happen when you weave different structures together. I hate going into an exhibition and reading a text on the wall that tells you about the work. It's like, 'OK, now I get it!'

AH: For me, one of the wonderful things about that project was receiving a free booklet. The Peer publication didn't contain a straightforward interview—you were talking to yourself about the various issues addressed in the show—it was simultaneously a work and a way into the exhibition as a whole. You had to read that booklet to truly get it.

MT: The fact that the publication was called *Opera* was also important. I was thinking about being dramatic, elaborate and over-complicated, and how, when you watch opera, you often don't understand the plot, but that doesn't matter; all you need is a sense of the drama.

AH: You've said that every time that you leave London and go to a regional place, you automatically feel depressed. Can you tell me more about this?

MT: I think it's to do with that easy access you have to culture in the capital. When you're in London, culture's there on every level, you can see it simply by looking at the way people dress walking down the street. But when you go to places like Hastings or Southend, you feel the poverty of it all. I don't mean the poverty of the place, or necessarily the people, I just mean that there isn't that much to do. You have to look a bit harder, and after a while you find that there are other ways of doing things. I find it quite interesting, because you have to try quite hard. Once you've been there for long enough you start to realise that there are all of these people with ideas. But it initially makes you think, 'God, I hate this, I want to kill myself.'

AH: One of the working titles for your exhibition was 'Sarfend Sentimental', but you've settled on 'Savoir Faire'. Can you tell me why?

MT: 'Sarfend Sentimental' was a bit too aggressive towards Southend. I asked myself, 'why do I have to take the piss out of this situation?' Or 'why do I have to ridicule having a show in a gallery that's in a library.' Which in turn, is in Essex, a county that people regularly ridicule. I was thinking that people in Southend are as open to elegance and culture as anyone else. It's just that they don't see as much of it as those people who can afford to live in central London. You know, there's a crap public school culture underpinning these attitudes, combined with a regeneration programme that's going to be decided by a board of corporate and council members who aren't necessarily thinking about the local community, they're thinking about leaving their mark, a bit like the merchants of Venice. I quite liked 'Sarfend Sentimental', and the idea of myself being middle-class and saying 'Sarfend'. It's insulting of course, but I also thought it was slightly hilarious. In the end, I was too much of a coward to actually go through with it, so 'Savoir Faire' became the title. As far as I know, it means 'know everything in a beautiful way' connected to the idea of the *bon vivant*. I was thinking about 'Savoir Faire' in relation to *W* magazine, in terms of switching aspirations. Rather than making a show that panders in any sycophantic way to a provincial community, I thought I'd ignore this fact and try and do something that's a bit fashionably 'London'. In one respect—besides the site-specific 'save the library' architectural element to the project—this means that the work could be placed anywhere.

AH: One of the most interesting things about your project is that it addresses the building within which Focal Point Gallery is housed; Southend Central Library, a classic civic Brutal Modernist structure, which was opened in 1974. You plan to try and save the building from demolition in 2013, by listing it with English Heritage and the 20th Century Society. This would, in effect, act as a humorous form of institutional critique by commenting on and deriding the politics of regeneration and the fashion for galleries to have increasingly larger premises. With Focal Point Gallery aiming to relocate in a few years time, if your plan to save the current building worked, we wouldn't get our nice new building; we'd be forced to stay in our current home. Can you tell me more about

this idea to save the library? Is it connected to a wider perspective where people are more important than buildings?

MT: I know it's a funny situation. If I managed to save the building, then it'd mean you'd be confined to stay where you are, which in one respect isn't brilliant. Having a gallery in a library, well, as we all know, there's something of a snob in every artist, and the idea of showing in this environment would make some turn their noses up. So there's a part of me that's being a bit of a bastard really. It's amusing to try and stop a gallery from moving to a fancy new space. And if I managed it, in a weird way, I'd have power over you, which is unusual, because you're the director of the gallery. Above and beyond this, I just think, 'why knock it down and build a new one?' People go there and hang out all day, and there are always loads of kids in the place. The other thing is that, when you put a library in a university building, it can undermine the community. So there's a part of me thinking 'why do you want to compete with the university for space in that building?' When you read the directives that are published by the council about this, one of the things that they're asking is 'how are we going to split up the usage?' Are they going to have time-slots for certain types of visitor? At the moment, in the current building, there are no time-slots. Anyone can use it at anytime to do what they want. What's wrong with that? I think that the way people are starting to talk about the new uses for buildings in these terms is a bit fascistic.

AH: The positive side of being in the current building is that there are statistics to say that it's one of the top five attended libraries in the country, including those in London. Through this, the gallery gets a very diverse audience, yet the new building might intimidate traditional visitors, like the local kids and pensioners. Doesn't one of the original reasons behind your *Save the library* campaign stem from the fact that your father worked on the architectural models for The Brunswick Centre?

MT: Yes. I've got a personal interest in the idea of British civic utopian Modernism. The Brunswick Centre is still predominated by council flats, but now it's got proper shops, a cinema, and the amount of people that use these facilities, together with the restaurants that are funding the building is huge. Though I'm not sure how pluralistic the audience at the Renoir is.

AH: Does your exhibition in Southend focus on a similar Modernist elegance? Is your idea to make your work look very graceful and visually seductive to draw people in?

MT: Yes. I'm making these extremely large plinths, and I'm not going to put anything onto the walls of the gallery. I was thinking about trying to make the plinths look like they're raised from the ground, so it's like the art has just floated in. This would disrupt the civic lumpiness of it all. I quite like the idea of ignoring the library, but still having these objects anchored in the space. I'm interested in how you can make art that has a light touch, that doesn't hit you over the head trying to educate you at the same time; work that has multiple readings.

AH: Can you tell me more about the plinth-sculptures and your *Anxiety Knots*? You've told me that the latter will consist of tubes made from glamorous fashion fabrics, and that some of the tall plinths will squash these knots against the ceiling; that the installation will look a little like Stonehenge.

MT: I think it will, yes. These sculptures are something that I've been thinking about for a long time. The plinths will be painted in six or seven different skin tones. I'm going to use eggshell, so they'll have a slight sheen to them, to make them 'look like skin.' They'll be standing there strongly in the space, unafraid, and defiantly naked, but due to the chipboard that they're made of, they'll be flawed too; I'm quite good at making things. Then the idea of using traditional craft to create beautiful objects is relevant, so the work deals with all of these issues connected to tying yourself up in knots to please people and get things right. So the *Anxiety Knots* have got representations of sick, poo, pus and blood on the ends of them.

AH: If your solo practice is becoming even more formal, through your concern with craft, and magazines like *W*, would it be fair to say that you are starting to veer towards work made by artists like Marc Camille Chaimowicz, who has recently appropriated *The World of Interiors* to dwell on the decorative arts and new forms of installation?

MT: I think that you can use these references for specific things, and my work has a relationship to Chaimowicz's use of this material. He always invokes a philosophical relationship between performance, the applied arts and contemporary installation, above and beyond the café society implications. There are similar floatations going on in his work, in the way that he tries to locate everything into a built-up fantasy environment in your mind. I like his high-end manufactured wallpaper, which looks like it has come from 1950s France. The way that I'm using magazine pages, by literally pulling them out and arranging them according to colour—a brightly coloured system, where everything's gone luminous perhaps, photos that are taken in black and white, or a theme like beautiful women grouped together—simply orders them in the same way according to style. Maybe it looks really simple, and maybe what I'm doing is slightly more cynical than what Marc intends, but at the same time I really love the paper that *W* is printed on; the glossy newsprint.

AH: Perhaps it goes beyond pure cynicism, in a similar way to your interest in literature and film? You mention that you've recently been reading *Frenchman's Creek* by Daphne du Maurier (a 1930s romantic narrative), and *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys (the story of a white Creole woman and the prequel to *Jane Eyre*) and that, for you, this constructs a 'feminist sea' relating to the tropics and sexuality. In one sense, both books are full of latent racism, and you're using this information to make a film that contains conflated voices, a tropical soundtrack (the sound of coconuts being thrown, for example), and sexualised imagery; taking the male gaze and throwing it back. Can you tell me about this new work?

MT: I think that's slightly pushing it. I don't know if it's about throwing the male gaze back, although in some respects, maybe it is. The other day, I was watching a man who was looking at pornographic magazines on the top shelf in a newsagent. He knew he was being watched, and you could tell that he half wanted to put them down, while the other half of him defiantly thought 'no, I'm not going to do it.' Beyond this, it looked as if he was in a porno haze-of-delight, and he simply couldn't let it go. He probably had a sort of 'soft-on' when he was standing there;

It was probably slightly deflating that he knew I was watching him. I was thinking about how you could create that effect in an art environment. And, in a way, that's what art can do. For example, when you stand in front of a Colour Field painting, and you take on the work's emotional rage, or whatever it is that's meant to happen, I was trying to think about how you could do this through the idea of travel, the sea and exotic locations imbued with a heaving, sighing romance. So this video pulls together various erotic footage; images and sounds that I want the audience to watch in order to feel. It's similar to when we yearn for exotic holidays—it's slightly pathetic, like the situation where the man was reading pornography in the newsagent.

AH: Can you tell me about the script, and the voices of the actors? As far as I'm aware, you've yet to decide if they're going to be multi-layered, come from the two books, if the voices are going to be speaking simultaneously, or if there's going to be a single narrative. You mentioned to me previously that there'll be a number of different stereotypes involved. Can you tell me about this?

MT: Yes, there's the hero stereotype, the stereotype of the sensitive narrator, and there are these stereotypical hysterical women. There's one powerful woman who's undone by a French pirate, and a hysteric who ends up being seduced by this unpleasant English lord-type. Through this, you get into colonialism and the idea of received histories of places. For instance, one of the ways the tourist industry sells foreign locations is by showing pictures of women wearing turbans, to make you feel like you're going to a place that is thoroughly different from the one that you've just come from. Of course, the truth is, when you go somewhere else, everyone's wearing the same clothes as ourselves. We do it in Britain and France. Heritage and tourism is a little bit dodgy somehow. We're all playing the same game; we all know that what's being sold is total rubbish, but at the same time we still want to enter into it, because we've got to enter into something. And there's a circularity that comes back to the question 'how do we keep ourselves special?' As individuals, are we unusual and exceptional? This is the same with countries, people, and artists. The more globalised we become, the more complicatedly our lives are intertwined.

AH: You mentioned earlier about your use of the hysterical female—this obviously relates to a reading of women as being emotionally uncontrollable, or psychologically unstable, and particularly towards female political protest; the idea of the 'loony left', feminism and so on. Can you tell me if you are interested in this?

MT: I don't feel like there's any strong critique, but at the same time I feel very strongly about feminist history. Being able to say you're a feminist is really important; as important as having the male gaze to battle against. Those two things exist together, and men will always stare at women inappropriately, because there are certain differences that make this something that will happen. It goes way beyond that into wage equality, employment law, and the way that, for instance, *Women's Hour* on Radio 4 virtually ignores women that choose to stay childless. There's a whole mythology about spinsters, which I think is much more insulting than a man looking at your tits when you walk down the street. I know it's a cliché, but when you go to Italy the male gaze is macho but affirming. And I actually like it; it's fun. It doesn't feel like the men there are going to try and rape you. It's a totally different thing. But for example, the question about whether there's anything glamorous about choosing not to have children turns into something much more problematic. I think that this connects with the real male gaze. It's when women don't fit into the male world—ultimately when women don't need men at all—that's when they can really start to hate you. I wanted to ask you something you mentioned previously about BANK. You said that you think that my work is more formal than it was while I was making work in this group. I just wanted to ask you what you meant by that?

AH: Well, I think that, as a group, BANK's work was very formal already. If you look at a lot of collaborative groups, specifically ones with a direct political agenda, it's usually fairly text heavy, or there's a strong performative element involved, but your exhibitions contained a large 'visual' or material element. For example, there was a lot of painting involved, and there was a concern for making things in a very expressionist manner. I think that since Simon, John and yourself have left BANK, you've all

become involved in very different and sophisticated types of visual practice. So, I think my response to your question would be to ask another question: 'Would you say that your work is more visually seductive in a melancholy way in comparison to the other two members of BANK?'

MT: I find it quite hard thinking about this. It just makes me realise that I'm a more melancholy person than I think I am. I think that's true, especially with regard to education; about what people have, and about what they could have. I find that very sad somehow. But I would just hate to be someone who was that negative. Again, I grew up in West Hampstead, which is quite nice, arty and middle-class, and there's always a part of me that wants to go back to that. But I actually haven't got enough money, so I can't do it. However, I think you can become very cocooned in a liberal educated existence. If you're living in that world, you don't have to spend time going to places like Hastings or Folkestone or Swindon, because you can make the choice not to. I think that I swing between these two existences really, and I feel like I haven't made myself belong to either. That's a melancholy form of existence; a feeling that you haven't really found a place to fit in. And I can't understand why I don't fit into the art world either, because I've been around it for fifteen years.

AH: But then again there's a huge art community in London. Even if you've been around it for a long time you can never know absolutely everyone, whereas if you live in somewhere like Southend, Birmingham or Norwich, which is where my experiences have been recently, you get to know everyone in about fifteen minutes.

MT: You see, I'd hate that. It's the fear that you'd suddenly have no secrets anymore. I find that quite a scary prospect, but maybe that's what I need to do to make my work happier.

AH: For the event that accompanies your exhibition, you'll be screening the Woody Allen film *Interiors* (1978)—a film about a bourgeois creative family—together with a clip from *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, the famous sketch where a father and son's roles are reversed. (The father is a successful writer, while the son aspires to become a coalminer, or move from being middle to

working class.) It's worth mentioning that you also want to put the accent on an older audience for this event by inviting pensioners along. We might even have a tea lady circulating with a trolley and a cake tray, complete with fondant fancies. How does this connect the sometimes-ridiculous intricacies of the British Class system with aspiration and age in your work?

MT: The reason why I'm interested in pensioners is because, out of everyone in society, they suffer the most. They suffer from a general belief that, as you get older, you get more set in your ways. I think that's untrue, because in reality, a lot of older people find new challenges really thrilling. They've got more time to think than people who are still working or bringing up kids, and I don't think there's enough around that's accessible to them. My mum recently came to stay with me in London, and she's seventy-one. She was walking around saying 'God, I find it really exhausting. It feels like I'm the only old person I've seen all day,' and she's a bright sparky woman. The general attitude is 'well, just sit them down, and they can play a nice game of chess and read a book.' I think my mum wants to be out there meeting new people and talking about interesting issues; I think she would like to be involved in the discussions around regenerating a place that she's lived in the whole of her life.

AH: So you really do want to get old people involved in your project?

MT: Yes, the whole thing about pensioners is the same as the *Save the library campaign*, in terms of the issue of the general community and the way that it connects to the library and the town. It's a civic question: 'Why is it that pensioners aren't invited onto the panel to think about regeneration?' If there are people that have lived their whole life in a community, why aren't they involved?

AH: It's that thing about youth again, isn't it?

MT: It is. It's like, 'oh, we must get some young people in to sort this out.' Yet think about architects; they all seem to live until they're ninety-five. They're working all their lives, every day. They're smart, excited, moving around and seeing things. It's not

all just about money, it's about opportunities. We're all dying increasingly older, but still retiring at sixty-five, we might have thirty years of hibernation before we die. It's terrible, but it's true. Why shouldn't pensioners have a bit more fun, and be invited to things? Why's that so awkward for everyone?

AH: Why do you think the two film clips are so important to show at the college?

MT: Well, as I said in my Peer interview, when I left BANK, I was lost. So when I watched the film *Interiors*, I realised that it spoke to me about the many issues that we'd discussed in the group. For me, it brought these thoughts back into a more personal arena. It's connected to this idea about class and mobility. All classes have their limitations, and aspirations are restricted to specific class contexts, so in the end it's about the restrictions that you impose upon yourself, which drive you completely mad. That film is really maudlin. For me, the female character that commits suicide becomes so curled up in herself, because everything has to be in the right place in her home; outside of this, there's no meaning. In the end it restricts her ability to have a relationship with anybody or anything else except these objects—you know, moving an empty vase from left to right—and eventually it kills her.

AH: Yes, I remember you mentioned the vases in the film before. How about the other clip?

MT: The Monty Python sketch was one I remember from being a kid. It's just hilarious. It's only two minutes long, and it's just what you mention; there's this class reversal involving a coal miner, who's actually an upper middle-class writer that's got really bad writer's wrist.

AH: So it's a type of downward social mobility, or reflects a situation where middle-class people aspire to become slightly working-class?

MT: Yeah it's to do with that upside-down aspiration. It's really funny, a good clip actually.

AH: And again, this relates to this idea of your reverse aspiration

for pensioners and people under forty. You can probably come up with all sorts of parallels. There was this potentially serendipitous moment recently that we failed to take advantage of that's worth mentioning. I remember sitting opposite Michael Palin on an overground London train a few months ago and texting you to see if you wanted me to ask him a question, but by the time your text had arrived back, he'd got off the train. Can you repeat the question that you'd have liked to ask him?

MT: I would have asked if he thinks that he's lost his sense of humour as he's got older, or whether he could ever make a funny TV program again.

AH: He seems to be one of those people that's gone off and done the things he wanted to do, like travel the world, rather than remain a comedian.

MT: Yes, he's done what I think you should do as you get older.

AH: One last question. Can you tell me how you think your work will develop in the future?

MT: Oh, that's easy isn't it? Well, I'm quite interested in Japanese graphics and their relationship to ceramics. I really like the look of calligraphy but I don't understand it. And I've been thinking about making a series of posters; I'm not sure yet, but anyway, that kind of thing.

AH: OK, thanks very much Milly; let's have a look at the recorder. One and a half hours exactly, that's wonderful timing.