

dismantle Capitalism but more an intuitive response to the alienation and anxiety that can result from its monopoly. WITH is not trying to convince you of anything necessarily but it does aim to make you think about what you take for granted. I'm also a business – albeit a small one and part of the challenge is to extend and explore what constitutes a commercial practice in order for me to survive as an artist. I've made work for individuals, business, galleries, and groups of collectors and each context presents a new challenge. WITH™ isn't a treatise on how to take down the system but it does perhaps highlight some of its fallibilities. I'm not a revolutionary in that sense.

KB: Does the concept limit your work as an artist rather than liberate it?

AS: Yes, it can restrict it and when it does I do something else. I've worked under other

pseudonyms or simply as Alasdair Hopwood. Who knows, in five years The WITH Collective may not exist in its current incarnation. Often it's a healthy thing to break down the parameters of your practice, but for now the ongoing difficulty of WITH still seems like a healthy driver – its yet to fulfill its potential – perhaps one day I'd like it to be floated on the stock market, after being franchised. We can tell ourselves many lies about how we're being radical, breaking the mould, and being provocative. To function as academics, artists or writers, we have a frame of reference, a potted history, a short biog and a list of key concerns that is perhaps akin to a type of brand mission statement and so I would argue that we're all subject to some form of authorial entrapment. WITH is both a burden and a joy and I have a lot of faith in an audience's ability to deconstruct its complexity.

Sheffield - 16/03/2011



Transmission *Provocation*

Guest: WITH™

Host: Jaspas Joseph-Lester

Interviewer: Keith Barley

*

KB: Are you a Sheffield lad, Alasdair?

AH: No, I'm from Essex originally and now live in London. I lived in Sheffield for about five years whilst I did my degree and I stayed for a while afterwards. It's close to my heart.

KB: A nice feeling to be on your old turf?

AS: Yes, I was at the old Psalter Lane campus, so it's new and strange down here. It was down and dirty up there, especially in the Wham bar... great days.

KB: How did you feel about the audience today?

AS: Good. It's always tricky when delivering a paper and getting the balance right between the presentation and audience engagement. There was a lot of dense material and I was conscious of trying to get through it all. The questions from the audience were good at the end.

KB: Your website struck me as very professional, very product-oriented like a commercial business. Then I started to look at the texts and the description of the products you were offering (which I thought were very creative, by the way). I liked the series of drop down menus from which one may select from a list of *Solutions*, with product names like *Affair™* where WITH experience a clandestine affair on behalf of a client and *Dyingforit™*, which suggests that WITH will act out a version of the client's death. Aren't these

absurd concepts? Can you really make art from these so-called products?

AH: Yes – but where the art begins and ends though is a point of interest. For me, the website is a site-specific art work, which appropriates a type of language that we're all familiar with. It is corporate language, but turned on its head and I like the fact that it doesn't necessarily *look* like art. The propositions in the site are text works in their own right and also prompts for future activity that could be ultimately sited in an exhibition or performance.

KB: I'm tempted to order a *Dyingforit*TM. What process is involved in realising such a work?

AH: It varies. We've made a number of *Dyingforit*TM Solutions for a number of imaginary clients that have been created in response to a specific context like a theme for a group exhibition.

We've also been regularly approached by 'real people' to manifest the idea for them on an individual basis. The challenge is to avoid the pitfalls of illustrative entrapment and carefully balance the weight and potential of each suggestion with its life as a series of objects or props. In WITH's most recent work the actual 'act' is never literally illustrated; it's now more about asking the audience to imagine what has or might happen.

KB: How do you start out with something like this? What mistakes do you make before you get it right?

AH: The tone of the project has to be convincing; however, it can't restrict the experimentation that bubbles beneath the surface or the evolution of the ideas. The first WITH website looked very different to the current one and the project has undergone a constant process of rebranding and modification. The minute

the current framework gets too restrictive, it has to stop existing or morph into something else. In the early days I got the ideas out into the ether by sending spam emails to lots of very important people. The WITH solutions were sent out to a huge list to art professionals, gathered from a variety of sources over the years which is probably highly illegal, of course. After sending an email to 17,000 people that claimed WITH would experience a trauma on their behalf, I had about a hundred responses telling me to fuck off and about two hundred saying how funny they thought it was – it seemed like a good enough ratio to keep going and here I am today ten years later. I think people were interested in the provocation and how it's implicitly connected to certain dynamics in the art world – I think they liked the humour and the fact that WITH was bold enough to try and say the unsaid.

KB: How did you feel about

the invitation to talk about provocation?

AH: I'm ambivalent about it. If provocation is used for the sake of provocation, it's pointless. Of course, WITH is provocative to some but I think it's slightly more cathartic and generous than that.

KB: A verbal nudge in conversation or a look can be very provoking. On your website you allude to the world of business. Can you actually interrogate this world? Is the role of business ever other than to ruthlessly make money?

AH: The appropriation of business language was more pronounced when the project started than it is now as it became a distraction. My view of business constantly fluctuates. Business is of course extremely pervasive, however the negative impact of that influence is debatable and open to question. WITHTM is not about attempting to