



Excerpts from conversations

John Beech and Alexander Nagel

AN You have talked about encountering the unexpected and making that part of the process of making your work, but in other ways these pieces are really designed. You have to be architecturally minded when you build these things. You have to have the concept in some sense ahead of the object.

JB The work, almost without exception, goes through changes during the making that are pretty extreme. With the *Green Container*, for instance, I was originally going to give it a V-shaped interior, sloping down to the center to contain a poured painting that would pool up in the bottom. But there was a particular juncture where I knew I couldn't see losing the actual volume of the rectangular container. Then in the painting of it, I decided to do that taping-off of the seams to reveal raw plywood lines in the corners, which pushed it towards the kit idea. So there were these shifts that happened even in something like that, which looks like I had to sit down and decide how to cut all the wood and everything.

AN This is also part of everyday life. When people try to do home improvement they also deal with things going in unexpected ways and they're usually not happy about it.

JB It's about allowing for risks and mistakes. You kind of suspend disbelief. You are always telling yourself that you know what you want to do, but at the same time you know that you don't want to do what you think you want to do. That's always a good thing.

AN But you say it's good because you're making art and not trying to fix a leak. You are celebrating these contingencies or departures as productive moments. This brings up the *Rotating Paintings*. By affixing these discs to the rotating hardware of a lazy susan you have really made a new kind of painting. But it's not just that you were looking for some novel form of presenting a painting. Being able to turn them was a way of allowing you to work on them in a more versatile way.

JB Yes, the paint is runny and the surface is slick, and so by turning the painting you're constantly trying to hold gravity in check because the paint

(pages 4–5)
Studio, Greenpoint, Brooklyn. 2001

(facing page)
Projecting Painting # 2, 2000
Plexi, enamel, wood
16 7/8 x 1 1/4 x 100 inches
Installed at Stark Gallery, New York

Rotating Painting # 60, 2001
Plexi, enamel, plywood, rotating hardware
38 1/2 x 7 x 4 1/2 inches

wants to run off this thing to the floor. I don't just throw paint at it and walk away. I try to manage but not control the outcome.

AN There is something poetic about the ordinary negotiation with things that is part of our daily lives, and your work is really about giving those awkward poetic moments center stage. I think this goes to issues that are really important to you, and that ultimately amount to an anti-authoritarian streak in your work.

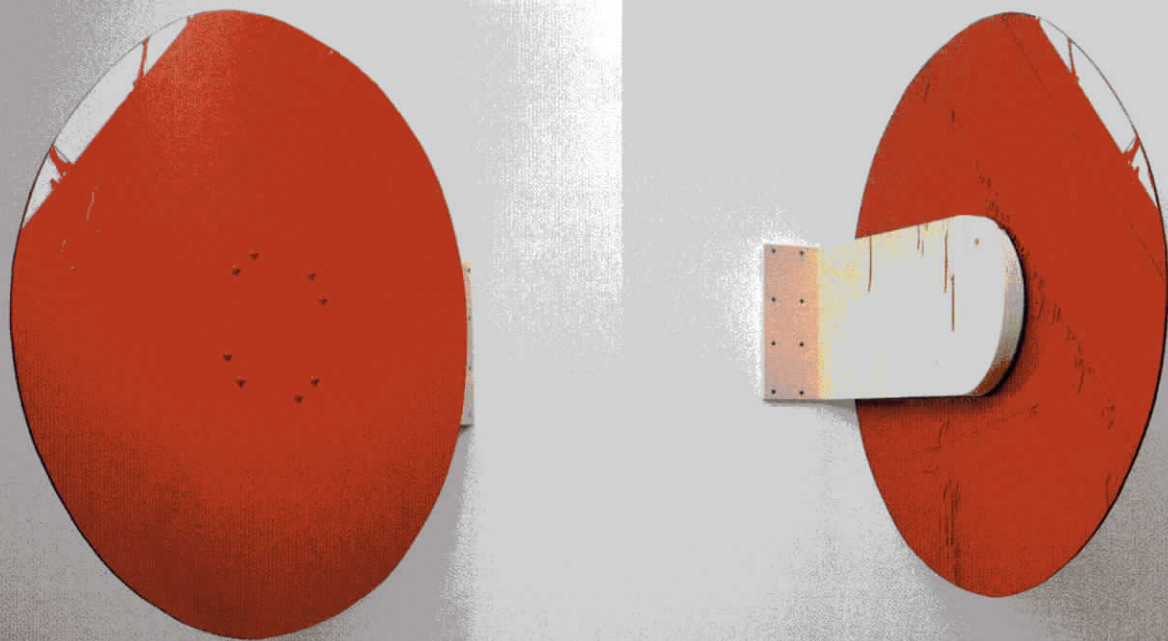
JB It is a collaboration with the materials and tools of making something. I'm not trying to master a trade.

AN At the same time you do impose some boundaries. How do you create those edges where the paint stops?

JB I tape it off and then remove the tape at a certain point.

AN But you do that while the paint is still dripping.

JB Yes. It's trying to make the painting immediate without taking the



precautions, like laying it flat and letting it dry for 24 hours.

AN So the rotating mechanism allows an accidental process more scope and more play by giving you the flexibility to be able to contend with it.

JB And that makes them open in other ways. The rotating sets up a way of painting that is not giving you a single correct viewing position. There's no up or down. There's no front or back. Both sides usually have some paint covering. Often I paint them in one position and then install them in another. You can see the back of the paint surface through the Plexiglas.

AN It's true, seeing that is pretty unusual and really beautiful. And it is not just that we're offered the normally concealed back view. You are not saying one is primary; you are offering both. There is also an ambiguity in the way you mask off the paint to leave a transparent segment of Plexiglas. It is part of the painting since we inevitably see the disc as a whole piece, but it is also where the painting stops; it is also the handle that you use to turn it.

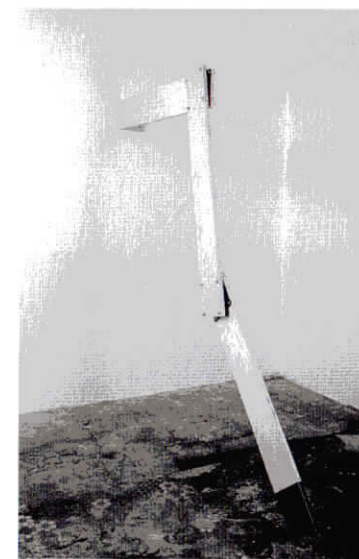
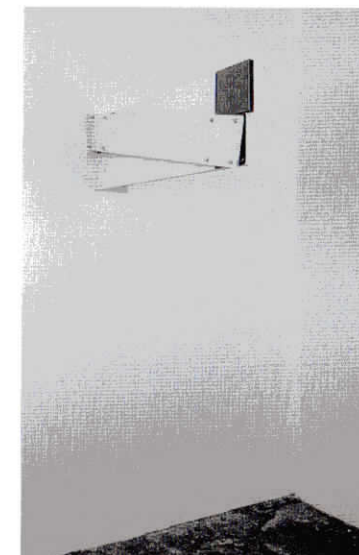
JB Right. But it's left unclear whether the viewer should try and move them. It's really not about seeing them move.

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AN These projecting works create special problems. When, for example, you make a *Projecting Painting* that's eight feet long and affixed to the wall at the short end, it is hard to keep it from bowing. That was not your intention—you intended to make a painting projecting straight from the wall—but that is a contingency that comes up when you do what you do and it may be a challenge for you to incorporate that into the way you work with the piece.

JB I suppose I was inviting something like that even if I didn't expect that in particular. They're awkward pieces; the bowing underlines that—they're deviant and humorous and wrong in a way.

AN But it's not just a matter of accepting that as part of the piece now that it's happened. How do you think you might work with the bowing as part of your collaboration with the materials, really pushing that as part of the piece? For example, would you be interested in making the bowing extreme?

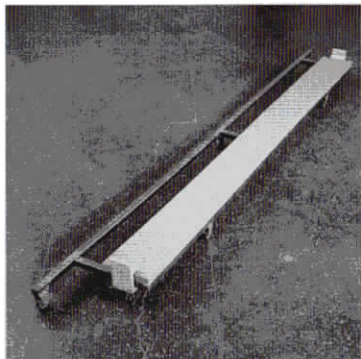
JB Generating that level of bowing sounds sort of annoying and interesting.



Articulated Barrier (Obstacle # 3), 2000
Plywood, Plasterweld, rotating hardware
13 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 43 1/2 inches
When extended, 71 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 78 inches



Neoprene Sleeve, 1993
Rubber, plywood, steel armature
77 x 77 x 7 1/4 inches



Rolling Platform with Glue Painting, 1998
Steel, glue, linen, casters, plywood
144 x 17 1/2 x 9 1/4 inches

I could make the supporting bar shorter, and then the Plexiglas would twist and head for the floor. I'd like to see how that might work.

AN After all, you've touched on similar problems in *Articulated Barrier (Obstacle #3)*, which looks like a toll barrier that can't keep itself up.

AN I like to think about the *Sleeves* as a case of productive displacement. It's as if you've transferred painting to the crate that the painting comes packed in. The lowly container becomes the support for the painting, and in the process paint is substituted by an industrial rubber facing and spreads to cover the inner cavity.

JB But it is important that I make the crate form. I want it to be only a crate reference. If it were an actual crate it would dominate the issues of the piece. Essentially I want it to be read as a painting with an interior cavity.

AN The rubber looks clean and machine fitted at first but actually it's not.

JB It has been applied in a hands-on way: the joints aren't perfectly flush. On the bigger ones, like *Neoprene Sleeve* of 1993, there are seams across the face where the sheets of rubber meet that provide a literal drawing embedded in the surface.

AN Another case of displacement is the *Small Rolling Platforms*, where you introduced the dolly reference, throwing painting onto its means of conveyance. I see the whole process spelled out almost diagrammatically in the *Rolling Platform with Glue Painting* of 1998, where you have the painting placed on its platform and its form of conveyance.

JB But it is also true that even here the painting is a glue painting, sizing for a painting, so even that is a kind of platform for painting.

AN You have worked as an installer in museums, and although I wouldn't want to see your work entirely as a commentary on that, I think the issues you are interested in are acutely raised in that setting.

JB Right. Working in museums exposed me to the life that a De Kooning has when it's not on the wall of a museum. It seemed necessary to me to see what the back of it looked like, how heavy it was. That knowledge did

matter to a sense of knowing the piece. It fills out the reality of what a painting is. I want this sense of grounding to be brought forward in my work. I want it to be an evident part of the piece.

AN It brings to mind that photo you took at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where you see the Jasper Johns *Flag* next to a utility box cover.

JB The thing is that the frame for all of this is MOMA, the ultimate white box. It does make you want to interpret *all* its contents.

AN What do you like about that cover?

JB It's sort of a masquerade really. It's a rectangle on the wall, it's doing what a painting does, minus the art. It's even roughly the right height for a regular painting.

AN And there's the counterpart to the Johns' wall text in that little square next to the panel.

JB It's interesting and a little humorous. You can imagine that this panel actually does have something to offer in the way that the Johns does. It has a long hinge on one edge, informing you that maybe inside there's something more, a painting folded back on itself.

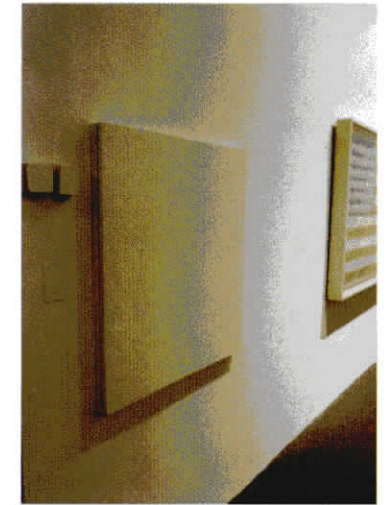
AN But this is obviously unintentional; it's not a Duchampian gesture.

JB Yes, it's so unintentional and yet it's so there—it's not hidden in a corner; it's actually occupying a fair amount of wall space. It isn't interesting the way the Johns is—it's not about the surface, the way that it's painted, the color. The piece doesn't make itself distinct from the wall, it's the same exact paint as the wall colour.

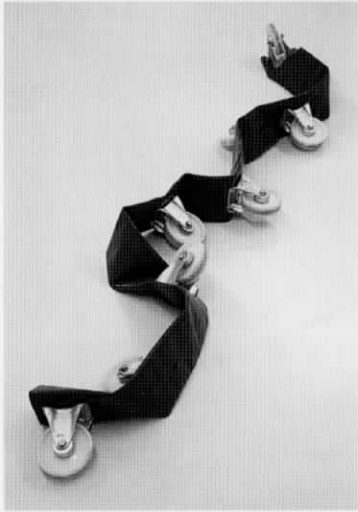
AN Right, you're not saying that this is as good as Johns. You're not saying this is art.

JB I'm asking, what happens if I do read into it. What properties about this might I want to put into my work that really is about art?

AN The *Small Rolling Platforms* make one think of movers' dollies. They are perverse dollies. They sprout wheels in the wrong places, or they have



Utility box, 2001
Color photo



Floppy Rolling Beam, 1999
Rubber pipe, casters
113 x 13 x 6 inches (variable)

them facing in opposite directions, or they roll but only in a circle, going nowhere fast. What was it about dollies in the first place that you wanted to explore?

JB The way that they get left somewhere that is inconvenient to get around, and yet you wouldn't say that they don't belong where they are. They kind of belong wherever they're left.

AN Or maybe they belong nowhere. They are meant to disappear in subservience, invisible under the load of things being moved. But the rest of the time they lie about in a sort of hapless state—the French would say that they are *de trop*. They demand to be noticed, you have to walk around them, and yet they don't quite claim the status of proper things, like furniture or art—like what goes *on* the dolly.

JB Yes, and I like to see them for what they are when stripped of their use.

AN Right, then their thingness is exposed. When tools work like perfect instruments we don't notice them. They are invisible, completely used up in their function. But when that functionality is disrupted or suspended we become aware of them, and of ourselves, in a different way. Martin Heidegger called this awareness “being-in-the-world.”

AN Your work has helped me to see that dumpsters are inherently awkward.

JB They exist only to be filled with garbage, and yet they remain these ubiquitous big things that are constantly in your face. I have a lot of photos of them, different types in different settings, including the one around the back of Buckingham Palace. It's a large one. It reads 'GARBAGE GORGER' on one end.

AN As if a tidy appliance had grown to monstrous proportions. To perform its function it has to become this out of whack thing. They always look a little embarrassed to me. Your work really pushes that. The T-shaped *Tri-Dumpster* that you made in San Francisco for example, minimizes the volume of the cavity, and thus puts extreme pressure on the dumpster as *nothing but* container, as a container-object without the use of the container.

JB Right. It's about sculpture. The dumpster reference is interesting to me

because already it formally resembles minimal sculpture. Yet dumpsters are determined by utility. I'm interested in fusing the visual vocabulary of utility and abstract art.

AN With strange and beautiful results. It's weird abstraction on the one hand and weird utility on the other, and they come together to make the work what it is. It's a sort of poetics of maladjustment.

AN Let's talk a little about these object references. They are almost all forms of pedestal—subsidiary, overlooked things implying a more central, missing event, and now mostly just in the way. Dumpsters loitering on the side walk. Parking lot bumpers waiting patiently to receive and reject the car wheel that pulls up too far.

JB Yes, I like it that they are underdogs in a way. They are seemingly generic, without identity. They are at the abstract end of the scale already.

AN And that recommends them as supports for abstract painting. But if they are examples of objects tending towards the abstract, the fact that they are utilitarian also remains with them. And that exerts an influence on your kind of abstraction.

JB I like having both. I am interested in the form too much to make a painting that's just a rectangle, and I'm interested in painting too much to make forms that aren't somehow about painting as well. I want to bring the resonance of abstract painting to the inside of this container.

AN And in turn the dumpster affects the paint handling. I like the way you call your kind of paint application coating and not painting. There is something reductive about it, almost like the surface a house painter produces.

JB But it isn't really house painting either. If I painted your bathroom in this way you wouldn't be pleased with the results. There's build up and runs. It's sort of overdone. It accumulates in the bottom of the container. As well as being physical sculptures, the container pieces are interior paintings of sorts.

AN The *Dumpster / Kit*, for example, is like painting in a box. Traditionally the interior of the triptych or container is the privileged zone, the site of



From the photo-series
Subway Patches, 1998–99
Color photo

plenitude. Here the paint sticks like house paint to the surface of the box, and the interior still looks empty, still waiting to be filled.

JB It's like an empty paint can where the dried paint is inside the form.

AN I think it's interesting that although this involves some aspects that might look similar to gestural abstraction, it's really quite different. The excesses and run-offs that result nod to abstract painting's celebration of expressive release, but now it is cast in the banal language of the amateur bathroom job. So you start with a language of coating and then you let it go elsewhere. I find this path to abstraction liberating. We get the loose paint handling without the expressive claims of abstract painting.

JB It's a follow-through on a decision to paint the surface of a form. You can't really separate the paint from the kind of object it coats. I want there to be different readings of the work. It's possible to see the sculpture as a support for the painting or the painting as a surface feature of the sculpture.

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AN I'm interested in where these things—dumpsters, bumpers—exist on the scale of production. They are above the level of raw materials but they're not packaged items that you buy in a store.

JB The bumpers in a parking lot are an articulated object. They are more determined than a brick, because they are an end product. They're not building blocks in a larger construction. Yet you could see them formally as a long brick with a chiseled off edge. They're not as comprehensible, as recognizable as a dining plate for instance, although they might be almost as common.

AN Once you acknowledge this overlooked zone of object, you see them everywhere, like the plywood patches that you photograph in the subway.

JB They are tailor-made to fulfil a purpose. The platform edge line needs to be reinstated over the patch. They mitre the edges so that people don't trip.

AN And yet they aren't simply functional. Function has been disrupted, and these patches are a temporary effort to do something about it. So in that sense they are verging more on a quasi-artistic intervention.

JB But there is still a kind of ordinariness and honesty about what's being done. It's about covering the hole, trying not to interfere. It's an attempt at being a short-term, seamless solution but it isn't either. It's surprising how long these things stay around. It's also about maintenance, how we constantly have to work on fending off deterioration.

AN All of this involves a certain kind of empirical reference. This zone of fabrication is manual, but it is not craft. It is sort of sub-artisanry. And when you reference autonomous items, like the bumpers, they are things that haven't quite achieved the resolution of commodities. So you're interested in the world of production and things, but it would be wrong to say that you are driven by a Pop sensibility.

JB Right, they are faceless things. Containers, dollies, crates—they don't advertise these things on television.

Alexander Nagel is a critic and art historian who teaches at the University of Toronto.

(following two pages)
Small Bumper Multiple, 1999
During fabrication