



WEBEXCLUSIVE **IN CONVERSATION**

PETER SCOTT

with Andreas Petrossiants

I first saw Peter Scott's work at the Emily Harvey Foundation in SoHo (April 2016), where his exhibition *Picture City II* addressed his major concerns: urbanism, the built environment, and mediatized representations of a changing New York. Parallel to his own artistic practice, Scott founded and runs the programming at carriage trade, a gallery which recently moved to Grand Street on the Lower East Side. At Carriage Trade, he curates group shows (almost exclusively) that address similar research interests to those of his own work. We spoke first at carriage trade where he is installing the forthcoming exhibition *Picture City III*, opening November 2. We then met again at his studio, where he is working on his upcoming solo exhibition at Magenta Plains. This interview is edited and condensed from the two conversations.

Andreas Petrossiants (Rail): How did you arrive at the name Carriage Trade?

Peter Scott: The name came from the original site of the gallery, above Fanelli's Café in SoHo. When the gallery started in 2008, the growing gap between rich and poor reflected a moment that some people were referring to as a new Gilded Age. If you go further back than the recent history of Soho to the mid-to-late 1800s, or the first Gilded Age, the neighborhood was then also a high-end shopping district. If you were a person of means you would walk along Broadway, and your carriage would follow. The side streets were kind of dodgy. You'd get back in the carriage, and street merchants would come up and sell you things. The term eventually became associated with high-end retail which seemed like an interesting irony given the alternative nature of the neighborhood between what it once was and



what it's become.

Rail: What was your interest in opening a space?

Scott: I'd done a number of independent curatorial projects, but an exhibition space makes it possible to develop an institutional identity larger than any one show. As an artist, I'd exhibited in non-profits, galleries, and museums and found that while each exhibition model served its purpose relative to the other, there was a kind of hierarchy where non-profits might help launch an artist's career, galleries would work to make it commercially viable, and the museum would sanction the end result. Some very interesting artists who don't fit so neatly into this continuum can end up being overlooked. I ultimately arrived at a kind of hybrid model for carriage trade that drew from what I saw as the strengths of each; the non-commercial mission of the non-profit, the programming flexibility and relative autonomy of a small gallery, and the historical scope of a museum.

Rail: What would you say were the themes behind *American Interior*, the first show at the new Grand Street space?

Scott: While it might have seemed like *American Interior* was a reaction to the election, the ideas behind it were first developed three or four years ago, specifically when I saw some disturbing images of the "booby-trapped" apartment of John Holmes, the mass shooter in Aurora, Colorado. This event was one of many mass shootings across the country over the last several years, with each one being treated as a "one-off." If you add to this the rampant homelessness, police shootings, the health care crisis, among other social ills, it's clear that they represent pathologies, rather than aberrations. But, because the media tends to have no memory, preferring to focus on "incidents" rather than causalities, the idea of social pathologies tend to be written off or underreported. *American Interior* was not necessarily dealing with those themes in particular, but with a pathological condition. The term "American interior" refers to the idea of an American psyche, along with the concept of regional and domestic interiors.

Rail: And the psychic interior as well, right?

Scott: Right, the name of the show refers to how all three of those spheres are overlapping. That those pathologies, unchecked and unaddressed, in the media or

politically, caused the lid to blow off. Rather than what I see as a much more simplistic notion of “rebel rage—the idea that a bunch of racists have taken over the country. I think separating xenophobia from economic conditions is a mistake. Despite the fact that economic problems were more or less made invisible, there are many people who never experienced a “recovery” since 2008. In art discourse as well as political discourse, there’s a tendency to focus on the “now.” It’s something that the media seems to thrive on. Historical perspective can promote critical thinking, while the “perpetual now” with no context leads to bafflement, disorientation, and sometimes, as we’ve seen in the recent election, unmitigated rage.

Rail: Which allows history to repeat itself, so to speak.

Scott: Yes, and in this way providing historical context to contemporary discourse might be read as a kind of implicit criticism of topicality or the “perpetual new.” I think Walter Benjamin got it right when he said that fashion’s focus on newness is inherently conservative. If there’s an insistence that things must be always be new, then on some level they will always remain the same. For example, in *American Interior*, I showed Bill Owens’s examination of middle class life in the early seventies in what one could now refer to as its apex, and Dorothea Lange’s picture of the Manzanar Japanese internment camp from the 1940s which, in contemporary terms, addresses the intransience of racial issues.

Rail: This reminds me of the sign you see at almost every protest as of late, which reads: “I can’t believe I’m still protesting this.”

Scott: Right.

Rail: I think the three exhibitions this year at carriage trade (*American Interior*, *Social Photography V*, and *Bill Owens/American Icons*) get at something in your personal artistic practice. It seems, in part, that you’re aiming for an unsettling of the political and aesthetic imaginaries of the private home and of the built environment. Could you talk about your practice and how it relates to your larger concerns, many of which are addressed through the exhibitions here?

Scott: I’m interested in urbanism and its relationship to representation and perception. Urbanism is very broad and all-encompassing, but it’s also about locality and specificity. The photographs that I’ve been doing for some years have

been in response to the sense of disorientation that one might experience now in New York. Overall, a lot of people are subject to this sense of a place that's constantly in flux. Through the Bloomberg period there's been a massive rezoning on par with Robert Moses. I just finished reading *Vanishing New York* by Jeremiah Moss, with a litany of examples of businesses that have disappeared, replaced by chain stores, drug stores, banks, and that sort of thing. Living in Williamsburg in the mid-2000s, I experienced the re-zoning first hand. So everyday there would be a place that disappeared, and something would come up in its place, often in the form of new steel and glass pastiches of modernism or "ye olde" reproductions of cafes, bistros, and beer halls. A common refrain is that the city is "dynamic" and constantly changing, but it's worth asking "for whom?"

Rail: I wanted to bring that up with regards to your essay in the catalogue for the carriage trade show *Picture No Picture* (2011). You write that with the advent of a pluralistic postmodernity, one sees architects like Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, and Frank Gehry as signs of "progress," which simultaneously reproduce a pervasive recapitulation of Corbusier-like modern glass towers.

Scott: A kind of re-modernism.

Rail: Right, and you describe that they're filled with mid-century modern furniture, and that they're advertised in that way. Some of the photos that you've taken of the large advertisements on the sides of buildings under construction show idealized images of promised lifestyles. One even features a Corbusier Club chair!

Scott: I think that a lot of that furniture is very beautiful, but it's also become a kind of fetish. It speaks to the idea of authenticity that's so important in gentrification. There's a theatrical aspect to it. It seems like we're in an odd moment when Corbusier-like steel and glass towers, which fulfill techno-utopian promise, pop up on every block side by side with a more romantic history via reconstructed European-style cafes, bistros, and boutiques. In a strange way gentrification seems to be reminding us that while American history has often been borrowed, it now seems more facile and stage-managed than ever.

Rail: In this context, I'm reminded of the first exhibition I saw of your own work: *Picture City II* (2016) at the Emily Harvey Foundation. You installed a double screen projection. On one side, you projected film stills from *Taxi Driver* (1976),

and on the other, stills from *Sex and the City* (2008). The two bled into one another creating composite images. That made me think that there's also this fetishization of the 60s, especially in the art world. A time before the glass towers.

Scott: Looking to the past to recover the “authentic.”

Rail: Yes, I remember Carrie Bradshaw's West Village sushi overlaid on top of Travis's dingy diner coffee. Is this ubiquitous search for “authenticity” something that you're trying to tease out with the historical re-openings, or is it something that you criticize perhaps?

Scott: The idea behind the piece was to get at what I see as this seemingly contradictory time in which there's a fetish for the 60s and 70s, in the midst of a kind of hyper-consumerism. For example, TV shows like *Vinyl* produced by Martin Scorsese and Mick Jagger, hazy reconstructions of CBGBs in a recent film on Hilly Kristal, and multiple Peter Hujar exhibitions all promote a kind of nostalgia during a moment of rampant consumption that seems blissfully unaware of the past. There seems to be a yearning for an authentic past through a nostalgia that's satisfied through the past's continual replication in the present. Consumerism, symbolized by shows like *Sex and the City*, has had profound implications for New York's cultural, economic, and built environments, while the seductiveness of the city's allegedly more “authentic” past, as exemplified by *Taxi Driver*, currently provides a kind of patina that might alleviate traumas associated with such profound change. Rather than critique either one, I was interested in overlapping the two.

Rail: That's why I think *Picture City II* was so successful. You seem to create snapshots, not so much of what things look like, but rather of what we want them to look like: a coming together of a foregone grit and fabricated comfort. I recently watched Adam Curtis' documentary *HyperNormalisation*, whose title is taken from anthropologist Alexei Yurchak's description of the USSR in the 1980s. He writes that people knew that everything was fake, but they went along with it because there was no other option. Curtis applies it to the current post-Brexit, post-Trump, and subsequently “post-truth” moment as well.

Scott: He talks about the idea that, rather than opposing ideas of “true” and “fake,” the public is presented with an endless array of competing narratives that

they have neither the time nor the capacity to verify. I think there is increasingly a sense of separate worlds. Some serious journalists are trying to counteract this trend, but what were once seen as alternatives, like social media, seem to be contributing to the problem.

Rail: He also brings up the problematic idea of individualism, which you critique in your work as an artist and as a curator.

Scott: Definitely. One of the points that Curtis makes, which I think is really valid, is that the dilemma for culture in terms of its relationship to society, enacting change, and having influence, is undermined by its focus on individualism. It might sound a bit absurd within the art world to be critical of individualism because there's so much emphasis on it, it's at the center of the whole notion of creativity—but in Curtis's view, individualism can function as a kind of retreat from the social. Individuals are isolated and celebrated, while the audience stands back to watch.

Rail: That's sounds like the inherent paradox to notions like Appropriation art, or in a broader sense, to postmodernity.

Scott: Well there have definitely been challenges to what is essentially a product of Romanticism, but despite the work of Duchamp, Warhol, Sturtevant, among others, the cult of personality dies hard. It's also present in politics of course, which feeds the media's obsession with the actions of individuals over the less sexy issues of how their behavior affects our political system. The Pictures Generation, for example, really grasped the importance of representation and its relationship to reality, the notion of a separation between actual experience and an image world that's been prevalent since Reagan. They were looking at it at the time, in the middle of it, with a keen understanding of the political power of images. While things are far more diffuse now, there are a number of artists that continue to recognize the power and insidiousness of "everyday propaganda."

Rail: Dieter Roelstraete claimed a better name for "Appropriation" art might be "incorporation" art because very often the artist incorporates work by others, citing Marcel Broodthaers's legacy. Take Lawler's exhibition at Metro Pictures in 1982, when she arranged work by the gallery's artists into a single piece. You incorporate a lot of artists' work, and you never show your own at carriage trade. I've asked you this before, but do you consider yourself using the exhibition as medium?

Scott: Some people have said that the gallery is a facet of my work...

Rail: I would also make that point.

Scott: ...and that there's a "completeness" to each show, that the text for any one show is at the core of the exhibition, and that the artworks are an expression of that. The shows are absolutely a reflection of my interests, and as an artist-curator there is a kind of empathy that exists with respect to my interests and any one artist in the show. So, it may be artists that I've been influenced by, or work that interests me because of my own practice. It's similar to the ephemeral nature of theater. These pieces will be in this relationship for a given amount of time, and it'll never be replicated again.

Rail: Could you introduce the concept of your *Social Photography* exhibitions, which echoes this ephemerality?

Scott: They began as an alternative to the typical benefit show. The first *Social Photography* show took place in 2011 when we were on Walker Street, and Instagram had been around for just a few months. As a non-profit focused on exhibitions, I felt that the raffle-type benefit was a bit problematic as it often looked like the visual equivalent of a bake sale.

At the time people still had flip phones, and no one took cell phone photography that seriously. It was a kind of novelty. I asked people to email me images from their cell phones, and we produced everything in-house, printed the photographs and put them in a grid. I think that *Social Photography* is important to the gallery, as it speaks to the idea of the vernacular, and a de-emphasis on individualism. There's the idea of community and a kind of anti-professionalism associated with the accessibility of cell phone cameras.

Rail: How did you decide who would be included in the various iterations?

Scott: I felt it was important to maintain an openness about the contributors, and I was also fortunate to have some great benefit committee members this year who were instrumental in expanding our group of participants. As in all the previous years, this recent show combined a wide array of people: students, current and former assistants at the gallery, neighbors, as well as well-known artists like Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin, Dan Graham, Alex Katz, and Neil Jenney, musicians like Lee

Ranaldo, the writers Hal Foster, Thierry de Duve, and Saul Anton, and gallerists Miguel Abreu, Magda Sawon, and Kai Matsumiya. The model raises questions about what one might consider professionalism in art. I'm not saying that artistic "skill," or whatever you want to call it, doesn't mean anything, rather that the emphasis here is on sensibility over a recognizable style or level of achievement.

Rail: It's interesting to have that up at the same time as the Bill Owens exhibition, a rare solo show seen in the context of your ongoing examination of cell phone photography.

Scott: I've shown Bill's work a few times at the gallery. He did a wonderful talk during the *American Interior* show. Very funny, a kind of wry humor as you might expect. Afterwards he told me that he was excited to be taking pictures with his cell phone and posting them on Instagram. It occurred to me that a lot of what we see now on Instagram is informed by historical photographers like Bill, and that it would be interesting to see them side by side. The way he captured his neighbors in *Suburbia*, seemingly candid but also at just the right moment, seems to be what a lot of what people are after with cell phone pictures today.

Rail: To jump just a bit: now a reality TV host is president. How are you thinking about this?

Scott: The idea of the reality TV host being president is a consequence of what's been brewing for decades, and it goes back to Reagan in terms of a completeness in the rapport between a construction of reality and the reality itself.

Rail: If Kennedy was the first TV president, Reagan's image management via television brought us into the age of simulacra.

Scott: That was something I tried to emphasize in *American Interior*. There are many images of TVs in the works, in pieces by Barbara Ess, Steel Stillman, and Owens for example. If Reagan was a TV president, then Trump is a Twitter president. But the difference is that Reagan manufactured images, like "Morning in America," a Rockwellian campaign that branded the American experience as this happy moment. It completely dispensed with all the dreariness of the Carter administration and the recession.

Rail: It's a similar rewriting of the past and of the present like "Make America Great Again." It's a reference to post-war moments of bliss, that disregards the horrors and traumas of that time.

Scott: Right, and with regards to Trump and Twitter, I guess it's a version of the "fireside chat," but with much more hostility, a kind of adolescent angst which speaks to a lot of people. What I was trying to get at with *American Interior* is that the current moment is a rupture in which, finally, there are people who feel that the image and their own reality are completely divorced from one another. While this might have led to real changes in the political infrastructure because there's this groundswell of frustration with the status quo, it led instead to a worse-case scenario. He carries on this mediation and in some ways, plays the people who are the worst off and most in need of a connection to reality and real economic/structural change. In terms of the gallery's relation to this moment, a lot of the shows have to do with the slippery nature of representation and mediation. The condition now is that through social media, we're absorbed in this reconstruction of reality, and we now seem to be participating in our own replication.

Rail: That's a phenomenon that is very intimately connected to an "American condition." That's why I think Umberto Eco's term "hyperreality" speaks more to this as compared to Yurchak's "hypernormalization." And of course, also Baudrillard's "simulacra." I remember Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, specifically the "most photographed barn in America" quip, which speaks of a prominent tourist destination, which is famous only because it's been photographed more than others.

Scott: Like Carrie Bradshaw's place in the West Village.

Rail: Or anything else you included from *Sex and the City* in *Picture City II*. Rather than a falsification of a sense of normalcy, it seems we have a falsification of a sense of reality. A lot of carriage trade shows (*POP Patriotism* or *Cutting Through the Suburbs*) get at something really "American" in this way. Is that a motive of yours?

Scott: I think the connection to the American psyche or political reality is through identity and the social. *POP Patriotism* was in two iterations. The first was at Momenta Art in 2002, and then I redid it at carriage trade in 2011. I felt at the time

[2002] that something was happening that was being missed. It was very much related to Naomi Klein's idea of the "shock doctrine," which describes the opportunistic management of a disoriented citizenship by those in power. There was concern as to whether people would "stray" from their role as consumers.

Rail: "What's going to happen to all our products in the stores?"

Scott: Yes, consumerism is seventy-five percent of the American economy. In the immediate aftermath, there was a pause, and there was an eerie quiet in New York. Very quickly, there were people like Giuliani saying that your American duty is to go back to the mall. And the gossip columnist Liz Smith said something like, "don't worry about your nest egg, go out and shop." On September 10th, 2001, there was no sense of patriotism in New York. There were few flags around. But on the 12th and after, there were a ton of them. After the attacks, the city was no longer this weird anomaly for people who didn't fit in elsewhere. It was embraced by America; "we're all New Yorkers," like "je suis Charlie."

Rail: What form did the show take?

Scott: In the first version at Momenta Art in 2002, included in the show was a museum case filled with patriotic tchotchkes that I collected in the fall of 2001. I gathered everyday banal objects: sandals, lunchboxes, mugs, t-shirts, and magazines that were covered in flags. I was aware that this burst of patriotism would subside, so I presented them in their moment as historicized objects. I think the show would prove to be significant for the development of carriage trade because it constructed a temporary, skeptical institution within a gallery setting. I had museum labels, archival material, and all this was partly a consequence and a reaction of my experience in museums. I think there was an enormous amount of fear among business and political leaders that this could challenge the status quo. So, a lot of it was subsumed into the discourse of patriotism via commerce, and some of it was really perverse.

Rail: In the catalogue, you mention car ads that used the tragedy as a marketing tool, like the Range Rover campaign that read: "All SUVs promise freedom. Few have actually fought for it."

Scott: You could never do that now. It's so extreme. But at the time it was normal, because the moment was so abnormal. One of the things that's been clear to me for

a long time is the dilemma of democracy and management. If the gallery and my own work has a purpose, it's to react to that kind of management of reality. In the mirror works that I do, where there's an image and two-way mirror, there's a merging of the image behind the mirror and your own reflection. As we spoke about in a previous conversation, it's like Foucault's idea of power working through the individual.

Rail: The bio-political threading.

Scott: Yes, it's not an outside force. In some ways, it's what makes media, and now social media, so effective. With individualism, we have this idea that we're separate and apart from the world. But there's a porousness between the individual and the social through mediation. I think social media is another phase in which there's a presumption of community, but one that is managed and mined for profit. In the case of Facebook's leaked "mood" experiment, they effectively managed, tracked, and ultimately exploited their users' moods.

Rail: That reminds me of one of Owens's photographs from *American Interior*, his *Untitled (Empty Room with TV and Two Chairs)* (1971/2008), which shows a suburban room, completely empty, apart from two fold-out chairs and a TV set. It's almost exactly what using Instagram for a few hours is like. When you position the work in this way, rather than in an ahistorical or individualistic way, the exhibition seems to become more than the sum of its parts.

Scott: Ideally, that's absolutely what I'm after. I agree with the urge to have harmony or a connection between the works, but on the other hand, you want some tension or conflict too.

Rail: You've told me that cynicism is a very faulty way of operating, while skepticism can be a powerful tool.

Scott: I see skepticism as a kind of unattached position, but one that's engaged in looking critically at the way things are. A cynic sees a flawed world as an excuse to proceed opportunistically. A skeptic examines the flaws and sees opportunities to improve on them. As such, I think it's a position that is not about adopting ideologies as much as identifying where they've gone wrong.

Rail: I'm looking now at the catalogue for *American Interior*, and there's a lot of what you refer to as archival material in the exhibition. There's an image of an industrial kitchen from 1942, for example. How did you decide to include such materials next to work by Lawler, McCarthy, and Sherrie Levine for example?

Scott: One influence for the archival material is the structure of *Harper's Magazine*. In the front, they have "readings," which are odd "truth is stranger than fiction" letters, charts, or found texts, which inform the essays. In one case, there was a letter from the wife of Milošević, the Serbian dictator, which had something to do with how the bathroom floor is not heated properly. [laughs] The choice of the archival material is a form of cultural production. They're things that I find and repurpose, which offer a counterpoint to the more subjective nature of the artworks within the exhibition. They're almost the fact to the fiction of the artwork.

Rail: How did this model develop in your own curatorial practice?

Scott: There was an exhibition I saw at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam—curated by Harald Szeemann—which was a very big influence on my curating. Specifically, the way the show incorporated diverse sources and different historical periods. At the time, I'd never seen anything like it. The exhibition was one of these projects where they let a curator have their way with the museum's collection.

Rail: Similar to the now established trend of artists entering into the managerial sphere of the museum?

Scott: Well, it eventually became a thing where they would let the artist raid the cookie jar, but in the case of this Szeemann exhibition in particular, there were very jarring relationships between the historical and the contemporary, the aesthetic and the industrial. So, for example there was a Rembrandt next to a Bruce Nauman, and then some American industrial furniture from the 50s. There was something incredibly liberating in this willingness to jump categories and jump periods. Quite honestly, sometimes curatorially I feel like I'm going out on a limb, putting Sherrie Levine next to Gordon Parks for example. Or a found photograph of a tipped over house that is almost Buster Keaton-like next to a Paul McCarthy photograph like in *American Interior*. I suppose what gives you the confidence is the text. I see the text and the exhibition as inseparable.

Rail: It might be that the text is your artistic contribution to the exhibition that you curate.

Scott: That's an interesting idea. In some ways, it's kind of like a legend. You can come back to it for orientation, but it's not dictating where you're going. Because I work in different disciplines, they all inform each other, but I try not to let any one take control over another. A lot of times, the images come before the text and then the text comes when I have a good idea of what the show will be. In this way, the artwork informs the outcome.

Rail: You're working on another iteration of *Picture City*, which will be the third in the series. However, the interesting point here is that this exhibition will be a group show you curate at carriage trade, rather than a third solo show in a different institution.

Scott: It has to do with my interests in urbanism and media, which started with the first *Picture City*. I worked with sitcoms about New York as historical material. I showed portraits, interiors, and exteriors from *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *Mad Men*, and *Girls*. The idea was a mediated history of the city, and how media narratives of the city inform people's ideas about it. Then the city reshapes itself physically to accommodate such images. I came across a quote from a Union Square BID (Business Improvement District) rep in a Sharon Zucker book which said: "We're constantly trying to attract a specific demographic. Young moneyed consumers who know New York City from *New York Magazine* and who watch *Friends*. We can train these young consumers to think of urban living on Union Square." *Picture City* addressed these TV shows chronologically and geographically, from *Seinfeld* up through *Girls*, from the early nineties on the Upper West side to the present day in Greenpoint. The fact that there's a broad audience for such shows demonstrates a sort of parallel between gentrification and culture. That process of a transformation from grunge to charm starts as a fiction and plays itself out "on the ground," if you will.

Rail: And so then, how do you approach that differently curating a group show rather than a solo exhibition of your own work?

Scott: You're looking around for artists that are making work that has some relationship to urbanism that expresses it as a fiction. I'm including a Cindy Sherman *Film Still* for example, where the identity of the city is inseparable from

the subject. To me, there's something very beautiful that each persona is contextualized by a particular environment or a version of the city expressed in an imaginary film.

Rail: What else will be in the show?

Scott: There's a Stanley Kubrick photograph from when he was working for *Look Magazine* in New York in the 1940s. In this particular photo, there's this ambiguity about "is this real or staged?" There's a bit of his characteristic edge to it, but at the same time it was taken in the context of daily life in New York. There are also great photographs by John Schabel. They're very large images of billboards seen from below in Long Island City. They're these odd, seemingly anachronistic, structures.

Rail: That reminds me of your photographs.

Scott: Right, there's a strong relationship, but at the same time the emphasis is different. In my photographs of luxury condo construction sites, the banner ads are in the forefront and the images are cropped so there's some ambiguity about the structure and the rendering that shows the promise of the life that can be lived in this place. One of my interests is this very aggressive promotion of privacy within the public realm. Benjamin writes something to the effect that in Naples the living room is out on the street. It's a different manifestation of it, and a different class situation, but I think what he was getting at was this bleeding of the private and public.

Rail: The piazza used to be where one did everything besides sleep. In New York, you might only have the illusion or image of such a shared space.

Scott: Well, part of my interest with the gallery is the idea of a space to congregate, a space that in an ideal framework will create the possibility of agency. In my photographs, I show a disorienting relationship between the public and the private, and where lifestyle culture, in the case of these big banner ads, boldly imposes itself as a commodity on the street, which is a shared place. Shows of my own work segue into carriage trade projects, and then vice versa, meaning that there will always be a sequence and chronology that dictate when and where the show happens. But, on the other hand, these overlaps and influences are in constant flux. Any show that I do of my work will reflect influences of other artists in this or that way. In a carriage trade show, particularly with subject matter that's

so caught up with my work, those influences are evident in the exhibition. I'm feeding off their work as a curator and an artist simultaneously. Maybe the artist-curator has a potentially unique relationship to the work that they show, and there's a kind of empathy at how one arrives at the artworks one selects.

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GREY

IN CONVERSATION WITH PETER SCOTT

by DAVID COURT
6 March 2014



Artist and writer David Court met with Peter Scott to discuss Scott's latest exhibitions in New York and Brussels, and how his interests inform his work as an artist, curator, and writer.

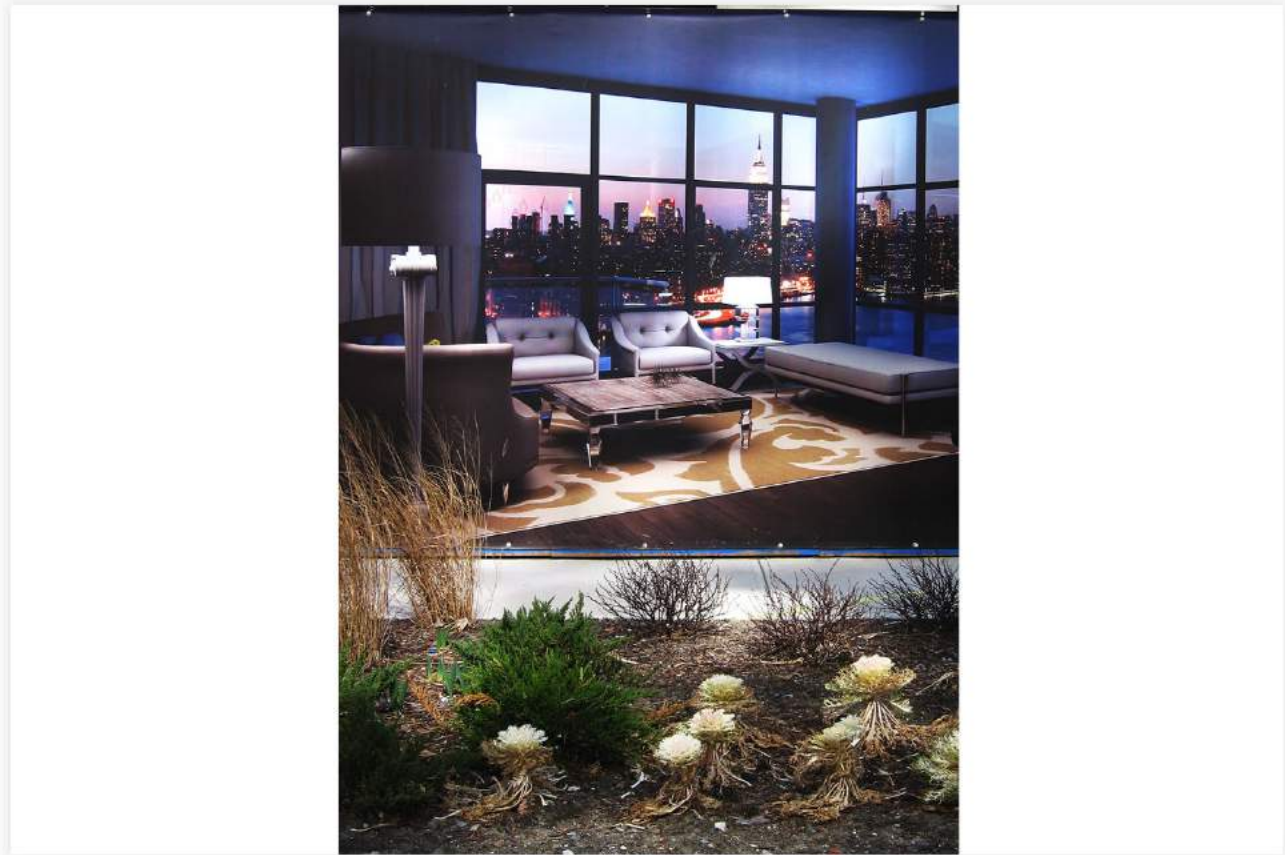
The following conversation took place on the High Line in New York City.

I thought we could start, maybe just diving into the conversation, and talk about about how you approached the shift in context from your show at Martos gallery in Chelsea to your recent project in Brussels.

Well maybe I have to go into a bit of the exhibition at Martos Gallery first, because the project for the Brussels show came out of spending time around the High Line, which influenced both exhibitions. In fact, it had what I think of as a site-specific element, because it was meant to address the locality.

The photographs that were included in the Martos Gallery show are very much about site. They're about the relationship between sameness and difference, or conformity and specificity, and a sense of the loss of the local to the generic reshaping of the built environment by the pervasiveness of luxury housing developments. The title, *No Place Like You*, is obviously a play on the cliché "there's no place like home." As urban dwellers are increasingly outfitted with gadgets that communicate, orient, and entertain, they carry "place" with them. As site becomes a backdrop for autonomy, consumer culture's investment in the "you" often comes at the expense of a connection to one's surroundings.





Above: Green Apartment, *inkjet print, 19" x 14", 2012.*

Right, and transformed into something that is consumed as an image, as part of what you're calling "lifestyle culture."

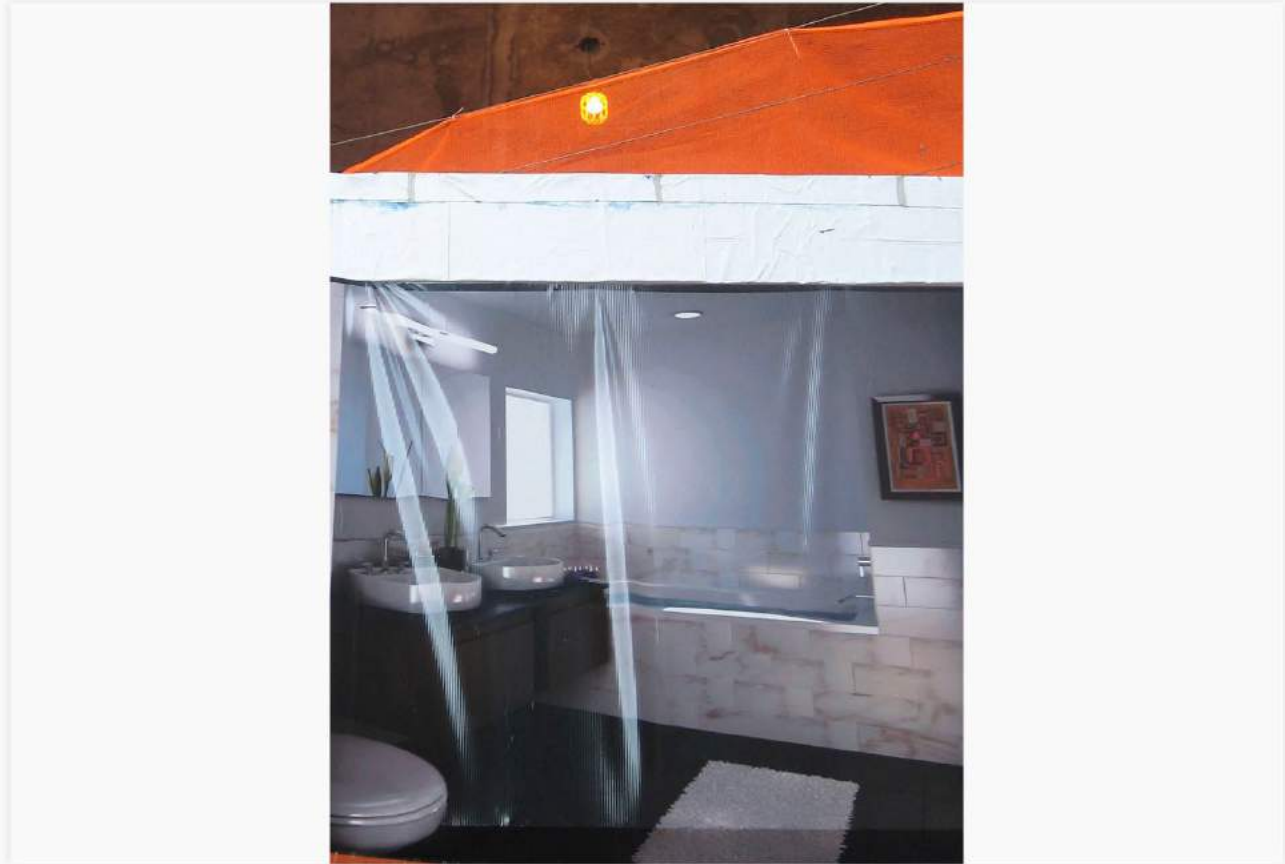
Yes, where it becomes less about living in the city as living with its representation.

And you can see that in the way that people—tourists or anybody really—experience the city, where so much of the experience is about taking pictures.

Well now with cell phone cameras this phenomenon of experience yielding to representation is much more emphatic. I read an interview with a Facebook executive about the increasing significance of images for young people (which led them to acquire Instagram) and she claimed that young people now plan the way they're going to document an experience *before* it occurs. Which to me is an amazing idea. It's like we're perpetually starring in our own little feature films, produced by and for us. And this is a long way around, but that preoccupation with the individual and their relationship to locality was embedded in the title of my show.

Also, given that I run a gallery and curate mostly group shows, I have some ambivalence about solo shows and the way that the artist is often seen in isolation. I wanted to arrive at something that wasn't simply a solo show or a group show. The

idea was to take the title and extend it to the backspace at Martos Gallery without explicitly taking credit as the curator of that show. I chose to focus on a thematic connection, and what's going on in these different works—the group exhibition and my own work. And I believe it did question the autonomy of the solo show without falling into the trap of either/or.



Above: Dream Bathroom, *inkjet print*, 19" x 14", 2012.

Yes, one of the things I liked about that is the way it enabled you to shift the reading of the work you've produced under the auspices of being a "solo artist," which was the initial impression of the work in the front rooms of the gallery, but then there's this progression into the back room where there's a group of work that broadens the context of the things you're addressing in your own work, and also raises these questions of authorship and institutional framing. And so you kind of read your solo work first on its own, and then as part of this larger conversation.

But returning to what we were just discussing about the city, one of the things I thought was quite funny in that back room was the image of the High Line that you included. The architects of the High Line, Diller Scofidio and Renfro, set up these situations that are very much about framing the city and the visitors to the park as a picture, and I like how your approach starts to reveal the cynicism of

these gestures.

I don't think many people consider the area of the art galleries in Chelsea as a neighborhood, but I was thinking about it that way when I was working on the show at Martos Gallery. I kept encountering that big frame on the High Line at 26th Street and 10th Avenue and seeing people within the frame. They become very much like an ad on a billboard, and I was thinking about that gesture and what kind of engagement that is with the public, where the public gets flattened out as a display, an advertisement for the experience of the park. I took a picture and framed it as though it were a postcard and called it *Archival Material (High Line Postcard)*. I'm not sure if they really have High Line postcards. I guess they must.



Above: *installation of Picturing the City on a billboard in Brussels in occasion of Scott's exhibition Here Comes The Neighborhood at Rectangle gallery.*

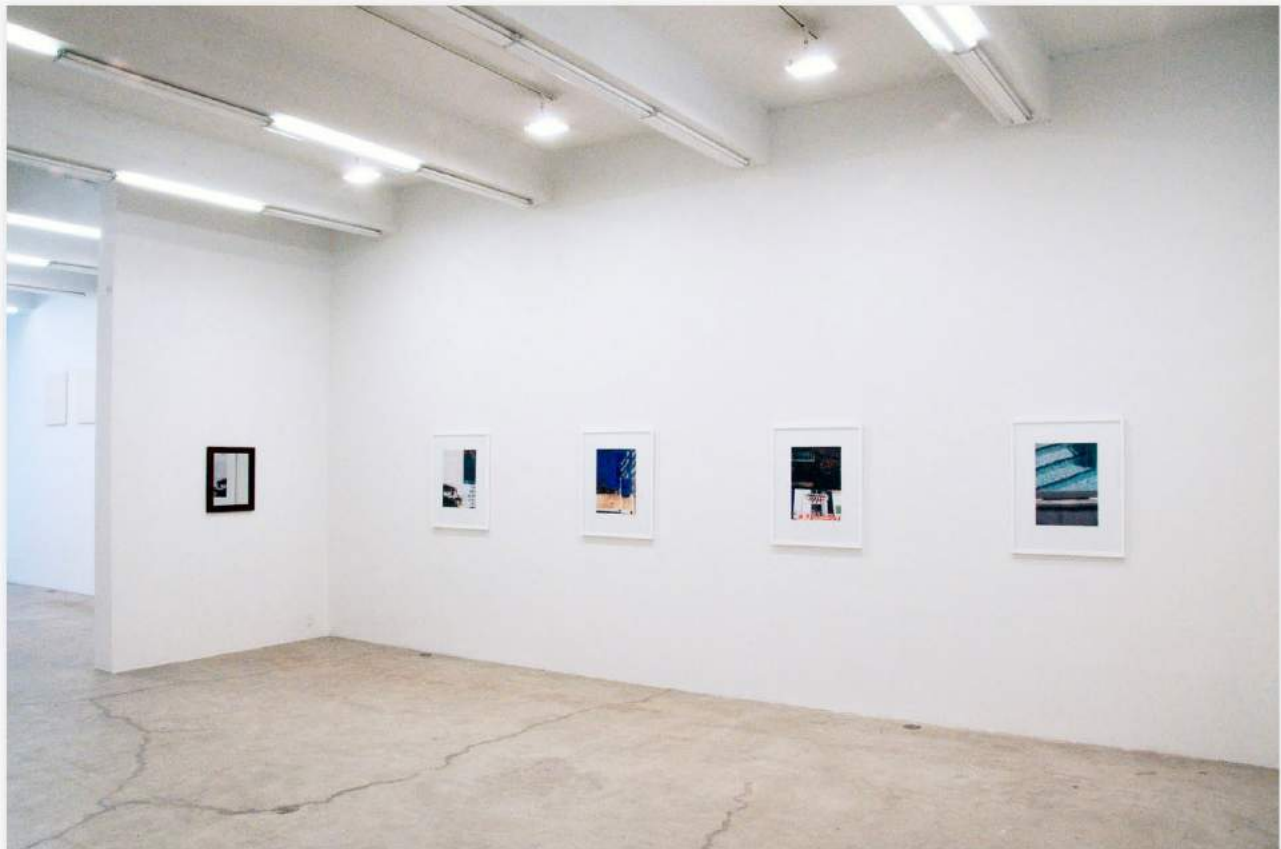
Yours would be a good one!

Even though it was quite small that piece was very significant to the whole show.

Right, well it became part of this bigger dialog with the other works in the show, with the surprising links between Dan Graham's work (*Performer/Audience/Mirror*, 1975) and the Jacques Tati film (*Playtime*, 1967), or the Tati and your work.

There are other oblique references, like the placement of the High Line image opposite a light box piece by Heidi Schlatter of a housing project very similar to the ones across 10th Avenue, close to where I took the postcard image.

I think generally people think of the art gallery as a place in isolation from the street. In a sense it's like a movie theater, where you walk in and there's no relationship to the outside. I'm not necessarily critical of that, but my interest is to refer, perhaps subtly, to overlaps and connections, via an emphasis on perception, between the artifice of aesthetics and the reality of social conditions.



Above: *installation of Scott's exhibition No Place Like You at Martos Gallery.*

Yeah, well that's one of the things that interests me in your work with carriage trade, and it was visible in the Martos Gallery show as well, where, especially in a commercial gallery, the norms of presentation are pretty close to a boutique, where you're having this de-contextualized relationship with an object that is limited to the terms or the materials of the object itself. But with the Martos Gallery show, each work is supplemented by the others, so it amounts to something more, and insists on context and relationships as important factors in reading an artwork.

My idea is that depending on the context that you create, the work can both relate in a

general way to things outside the space and also to the local conditions in the space and to each other. And that's what I like about the group show. It's a transient form, kind of like theater, where these specific objects will be together in the space for a limited amount of time. And so it's more than the sum of its parts, and I think if it's done in an interesting way the show creates a specific resonance that's unique to the duration of the exhibition.

At the same time, you know, it can be very arbitrary. And that's the downside. To me, some group shows, because they tend to reinforce the idea of an artist's autonomy, present artworks as though they're in competition with one another, with each one fighting for its survival.



Above: Purple Chairs, *inkjet print*, 19" x 14", 2010.

Well it's about setting up a more stable relationship between the consumer and the object on display, where it's more coherent how these things are to be considered or consumed. And that's something I see in your curatorial work, where you're combining the work of greater and lesser known artists with various forms of archival and found material in an unconventional way. And this relates to how you're setting up the gallery as a space that operates outside of the norms of the institutional forms of the commercial gallery or the non-profit space. And this questioning of identity seems to run through your projects, where you'll have a show of monochrome paintings made by a fictional artist (Henry

***Codax*, 2011) and then a show addressing counter-narratives of patriotism in the wake of September 11th (*Pop Patriotism 2002, 2012*). But it all seems to come back to foregrounding how different forms of cultural production relate to questions of identity.**

I'm interested in the idea of things not being what they seem—which fundamentally is a question of perception. Perception, the way that you see something, has a lot to do with belief. *Mistaken Identity*, a show I organized in 2010 at carriage trade, came after a series of events that were the results of "too much" belief. It's easier to see now that the subprime bubble was generated through mass hysteria, and that the housing market could not rise forever, but such rational thinking was no match for irrational belief stimulated by what people "wanted" to believe.

The exhibition included a Yes Men video where Andy Bichlbaum posed as an executive for Union Carbide on the BBC news (*BBC World News Bhopal, 2004*), and falsely claimed that the company would devote billions of dollars to compensate the several hundred victims of a gas leak at the plant, which caused Union Carbide's stocks to plummet briefly, until the BBC reported that they'd been the victim of a hoax. There was also a collaboration between carriage trade and the Innocence Project, a non-profit law firm which exonerates those that have been wrongfully accused of crimes. They provided me with some individual cases and I displayed photographs of the wrongfully accused person and the actual perpetrator side by side. In eyewitness testimony, witness's perceptions are often a conditioned response to what they already believe.

So my interest is in playing with what we think we see. In the case of the mirror piece in the Martos Gallery show, there's a sense of encountering something that isn't what you thought and adjusting to what it might be. It's about experiencing yourself "having" the perception. And it's inviting the viewer to question their expectations. I don't know if that answers your question, but that whole issue of expectations and belief is a very rich area for me, and it informs carriage trade as well.



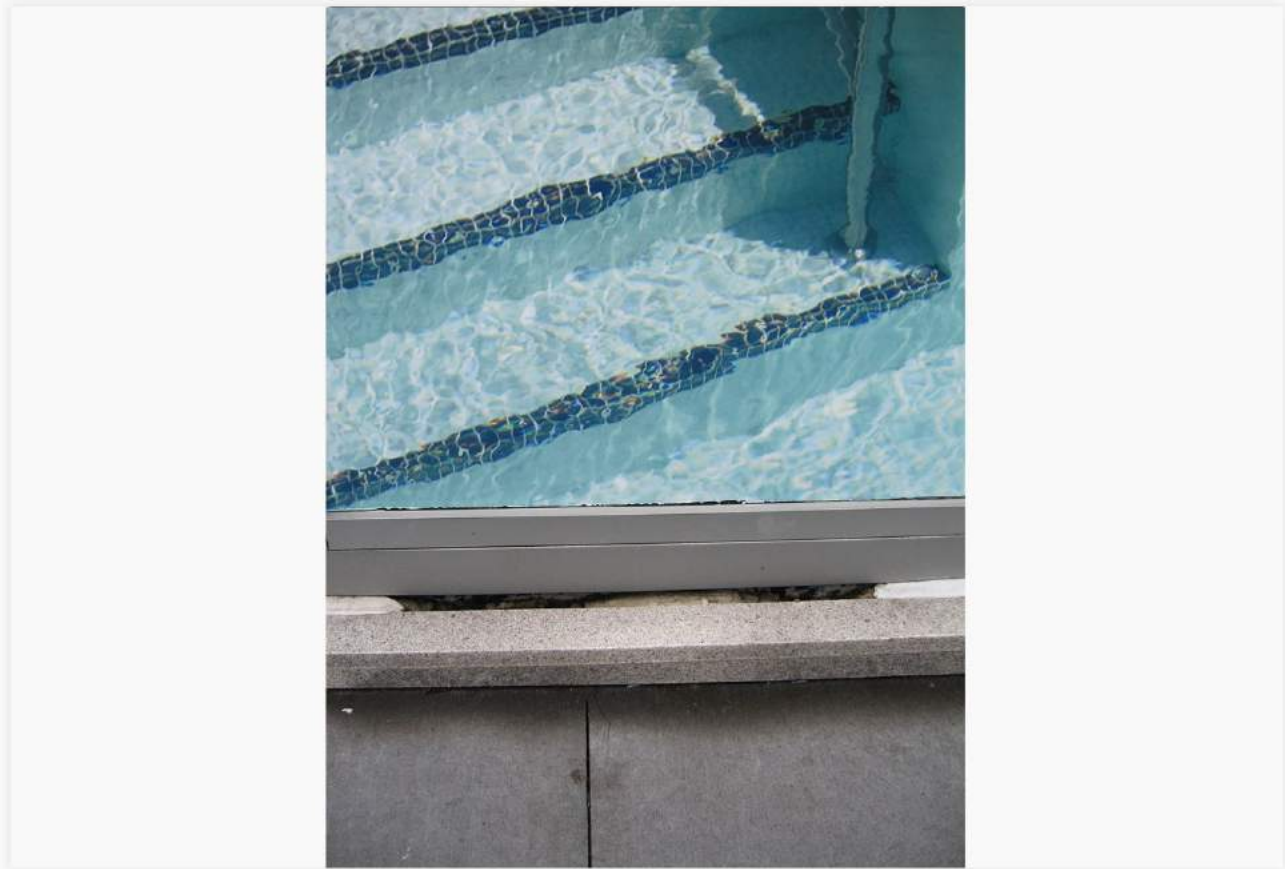
Above: Untitled (Carrie), *photograph behind two-way framed mirror*, 2013

That's one of the interesting things to see is that there is a dialog between the carriage trade exhibitions and the concerns that are consolidated in your work.

Yeah, well this is another area where identity is so important. Being an artist, curating, running a gallery, writing... they're all interesting to me and my approach is quite similar with all of them. Beginning with art making, then writing, then curating, I found that each time I worked in a new discipline I could then look at the others with a different perspective. Organizing shows with other people's work and organizing shows of my own work enables a certain detachment from my own work that I think is useful. Ideas from my work generate ideas for the gallery and vice versa.

How did the curating emerge?

I felt as an artist that it was sometimes hard to find the appropriate context for what I was doing, so essentially I made it up each time. My artwork does not appear in carriage trade exhibitions, but in a sense I am in each show by an assertion of a certain set of interests. Each show built upon the previous one and inevitably it seemed that the next thing to address was the creation of a context itself, so the gallery came out of that. It's been in the same place over four years, and over that period, if you put the shows together, I believe there's a fairly clear conceptual thread that runs through everything.



Above: *Walk In Water*, inkjet print, 19" x 14", 2011.

So what you're doing with carriage trade is creating an institution that makes space for the kind of conversation that you want to see happening. There's a history of that in Soho—with White Columns and Artists Space, etc.—but it's something there is less and less of in NYC...

I think that's probably true, because it's getting harder to do that.

Right, the urban space doesn't have the same kind of flexibility or availability.

You know, I think there's a kind of nostalgia for the sixties and seventies, which is on some level a manifestation of markets. In some ways we're consuming that past, which is unavailable to us, given the present circumstances. At the same time, it is a point of reference for some very important things. I've worked with artists from this generation, like Dan Graham and Olivier Mosset, who have been supportive of the gallery and given me some perspective on the period, as well as Louise Lawler and Jennifer Bolande from the following generation, plus many artists from my generation and younger who "get it" in terms of the need for spaces that present programming that is not so easily consumed or assimilated.

But I also have some ambivalence about what I see as a fetish for artist-run centers from the past, because the situation is so different now. Due to market and real estate pressures, the experimental nature of the artist run gallery is at constant risk of being purged in favor of a normalizing professionalism, and it's worth continually reassessing what we mean by artist run, alternative, or non-profit.



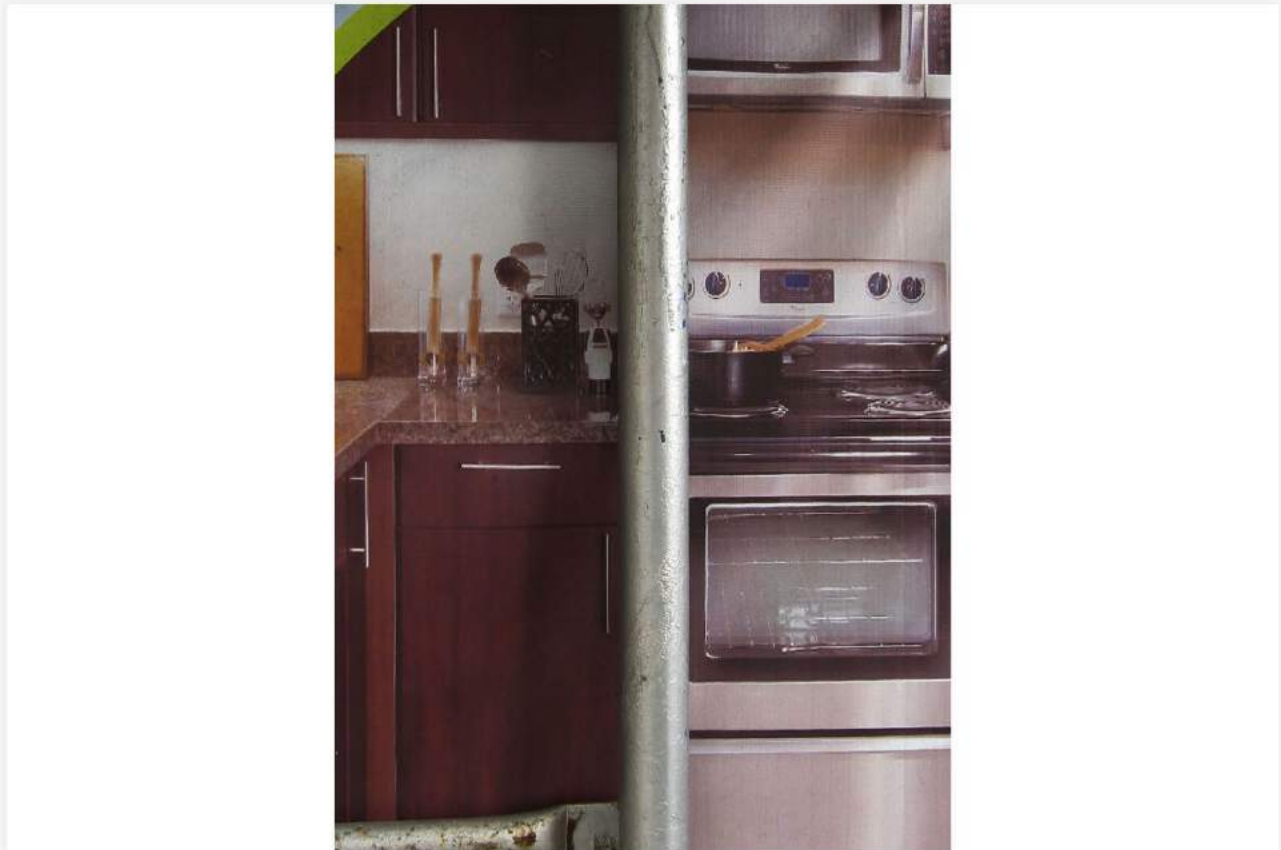
Above: *Yours and Mine*, inkjet print, 19" x 14", 2012.

Right, it seems very difficult for an artist-run initiative to stay independent or flexible for very long. The necessity for survival leads towards different forms of acquiescence or integration into the existing economic and professional models.

Well, this is my fear. I've always been wary generally about the needs of an institution overwhelming the content or reason for the institution's creation. And you can see a lot of examples, where culture is supported through branding and corporatization. We're told that this is what cultural institutions need to do to survive and I'm hoping, perhaps naively, that this doesn't have to be the case entirely, that perhaps it's a question of degree.

To circumvent the potentially negative aspects of institutionalization, my initial notion was for the gallery to be a series of long-term temporary projects. But when I set up on Walker Street in 2010, it took a lot of time and energy to get the place into shape and it

seemed self-defeating to keep moving around, and it made more sense to just try to deal with this problem. And one of the ways it's evolved is to build in some contradictions, or accept some contradictions in the space, where it's kind of a hybrid of the commercial, artist-run, and museum formats in terms of the materials that are included in the shows. There are established artists whose works are found in museums and blue-chip galleries, combined with artists doing great work that's not as visible, and there's the archival material or occasional historical show, which could be seen as the "non-fictional" or institutional element in the programming. For me it's more interesting to combine existing models into a kind of hybrid that is unlike any single element, than it is to pursue newness for its own sake, which in many cases doesn't seem all that new to me.



Above: Kitchen Pole, *inkjet print*, 19" x 14", 2012.

What's behind the emphasis on group shows at carriage trade?

When I started the gallery I wanted to present an alternative to a tendency to isolate artists by celebrating individuals at the expense of contexts or influences, which seemed at odds with certain realities. There are many connections artists have to each other, to history, to those that have informed their work, etc. that are downplayed in favor of a view of the artist as a unique being that "goes it alone." This to me promotes an unhistorical and competitive arena for experiencing art, which, ironically,

makes it more difficult to understand any one artist's work.

If we consider that society is made up of many individuals currently subject to constant corporate commands and appeals along with increased governmental scrutiny, while negotiating less than stable economic conditions, then art's celebration of individualism seems kind of out of touch right now. The idea of the individual in art is more often than not a construction of institutions that have become indispensable, as bigger art projects require bigger funders, auction houses flaunt record breaking sales, and the generalizing nature of art fairs emphasize mass inventory over settings which might lend meaning to any individual artist's work.

Given these contradictions, it seemed to make sense for an individual artist to create and inhabit a small-scale institution that could function as a means of expression rather than as an organization that might eventually subsume individuality.

Right, this emphasis on individuality cuts both ways, and it plays into what we could maybe think of as the division of labor in art. Artists have the freedom to do whatever they want in the role of the artist, but little agency in the institutional structures that shape and profit from culture. It's the freedom of the precarious worker. What you are doing is taking more seriously this idea of the freedom that comes along with the artist identity, and using it to create an institution that works for you—which is also more like "taking liberties" with the artifice of the institution to get around this distribution of power and visibility.

And to put it in a more positive or optimistic light, what's great about art is that you can do whatever you want. In principle anyway, if not in reality. In principle, you can just make stuff up. Carriage trade is a venue "made up" to present the kinds of shows I wanted to see but there was no place for, and it's important for me to maintain that sense of openness about it. There's a lot of play in it, like with the archival material, the fact that as a curator I'm showing this stuff but not claiming or attributing authorship, as well as a flexibility in the programming schedule, which allows me to assimilate things that seem culturally relevant into the content of the exhibitions. I was working on the *Color Photographs from the New Deal* show around the time of Occupy Wall Street, and eventually incorporated archival material from strikes and protests from the thirties and forties that offered visual evidence of historical precedents for the Wall Street protests.



Above: *installation of the exhibition Picture No Picture at carriage trade gallery.*

So now maybe we can come back around to the most recent show in Brussels. That's an artist-run space, right?

Yes, an artist-run space called Rectangle. I really like what they're doing. In each of their shows, there's a billboard piece on the roof that relates to the exhibition inside. I like the inside-outside thing. It's something I referred to a lot in the Martos show and that my work is very much about. I realized that as the city becomes more about artifice, it increasingly resembles a gallery, in terms of display and self-conscious representation. There's a kind of seamlessness between lifestyle culture's effect on the built environment and what's happening within art galleries. So doing a billboard piece was very interesting. I used the image of the High Line, so there were people looking out from Chelsea into Brussels.

What was your thinking about the title *Here Comes the Neighborhood*, and this shift in context from New York to Brussels?

Well, I didn't want to do a carpet-bagging kind of thing. There's a tendency in site-specific art to dig up materials from the library that make reference to some local condition, kind of putting your stamp on the place, and I'm suspicious of that. Putting an image of the High Line in this other location, which is also an urban place, references how these changes are taking place everywhere. The neighborhood of Rectangle is a low-income neighborhood, near Wiels, a major exhibition space in Brussels, and it's undergoing changes. It's not so much that I'm assuming it will play

out similarly, it certainly won't, but this phenomenon of the cult of leisure within the urban environment is a global phenomenon.

You included some of your photographs, which, as specific as they are, identify something that is widespread, which is this constant renovation and recreation of urban space. And you can see this anywhere, or at least anywhere that artists happen to be.

Right, and that to me is an important part of what my photographs address: the issue of locality and how it's at risk of being subsumed by image. Taken in various neighborhoods of New York City, the photographs are "straight" documentation, but can appear fake because of how they are cropped. In isolating a particular view, my intention is to create some ambiguity between the real and the fake, so the illusion used to sell the reality sometimes "comes forward" and is mistaken for the real.

As many areas of urban centers resemble theme parks, I think one can be forgiven for not knowing "where they are." It was in this spirit that I started taking these photographs, which, because of the interplay between disorientation and the "fact" of their source, are maybe oddly optimistic, as they might be seen as betraying the resilience of uniqueness within the undifferentiated dream of endless leisure.

carriage trade's upcoming show, Cutting Through the Suburbs, will open in March.