

## Interview with Ian White

by George Clark

Interview conducted in March 2006, in London

Ian White is an artist, curator and writer. In this interview he discusses the intersection of these disciplines in the context of his many curatorial projects and collaborations. The interview focuses on his approach to a variety of projects including Three to the Power of Three, Ciné Lumière, London 2004; The Artists Cinema at Frieze Art Fair, London 2005/2006, and his many programmes as Adjunct curator of film at Whitechapel Gallery, London.

Biography: Ian White is Adjunct Film Curator for Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, an independent curator, writer and artist. Projects include Kinomuseum for Oberhausen International Short Film Festival (2007) and he was associate curator of The Secret Public: The last days of the British Underground 1978 – 1988 (Kunstverein Munich; ICA, London; The British School at Rome Gallery). As an artist his most recent work was a collaborative performance with Jimmy Robert, Marriage à la Mode et Cor Anglais (STUK, Belgium; De Appel, Amsterdam).

**George Clark:** To begin with I am interested in discussing a specific project, Three to the Power of Three, and talking about how that developed. This was a project you developed as an independent curator with the French Institute's cinema in London. The three programmes you curated presented a fascinating selection of work pairing new artists with historical work but also questioning and exploring what the cinema space and a film/video programme could be. What was the starting point and what was the connection with the French Institute?

**Ian White:** Well, the idea emerged because the French Institute really wanted to show artists' work, work that was identified as being made by artists. The idea behind this series was to try and do something that was about historical and contemporary work that had some kind of relationship to France. Either work that had been made in France or by artists who were French or living in France. The idea was to try and put things together in a way whereby in seeing them together meaning would accrue or escalate exponentially. They wouldn't be so much thematic as different but in related ways. So there would be an accumulation of meanings rather than a sort of simple explanation of something.

The Ciné Lumière has a really fantastic auditorium and used to be a theatre with all those trappings like lighting rigs and wings. We started thinking about how the auditorium could figure in shaping the experience. By the theatrical having a more active presence, the auditorium could shift how you would receive the work towards understanding cinema as a place of exhibition as opposed to a place of passive reception in a traditional auditorium sense.

**GC:** When you say 'we,' is that to refer to yourself and the French Institute? Was this programme developed through a dialogue with them?

**IW:** Well, no. I mean they probably would have, on one level, been much happier if it was just really normal and we just did a really normal screening because it wouldn't have involved any kind of hysteria or organisation.

But by saying 'we' I mean that it was a project that developed out of a lot of conversations with a lot of different people. It was my interest to try and use the auditorium, but how it was used and how it developed came out of conversations with a lot of the artists but also other curators and friends. When I'm working on more, say, special projects, outside of the regular film programme at Whitechapel, there's a sense of it coming from somewhere, that it is not just coming from myself, that it's part of a network of ideas.

**GC:** How did you settle on a form for these ideas, to have three screenings each with an invited artist? How did you go from this idea to utilise the theatrical elements of the auditorium to working with these specific artists?

**IW:** Well, it's a good question. I don't know really. I suppose that I'm often led by instinct and by personal relationships too. The process was quite long and the French Institute paid for me to take a research trip and go to Paris. I talked with a lot of people there, curators and artists and saw work and went to Lightcone ([www.lightcone.org](http://www.lightcone.org)) and viewed quite a lot of stuff there. I tried to think by looking at things and feeling for what would be interesting and to get a sense of what is happening now. We ended up with these artists for different reasons.

The Germaine Dulac work I watched at Lightcone. I just think it's fantastic and I still think *L'Invitation au Voyage* (33 min, France 1927) is one of the most brilliant, brilliant films. I just love it. I don't know why but somehow it started to connect to Mark Aerial Waller's work. In particular *L'Invitation au Voyage* and its' interest in the exotic and the naivety with which the exotic is represented in the film, like the very rough hand drawn palm trees and exotic islands, when she goes into the bar. I found them really stunning in the film, there's a sensibility around that work which really connected to what I understood Mark's work to be about. I also knew that Mark had made *Reversion of the Beast Folk* (12 mins, UK, 2003), and we talked about it, especially the last five minutes where the screen goes black and you hear a soundtrack of Brazilian music. As this happens, his original plan was for the light in the gallery where he intended to show it to change, so it would automatically go from white light to red light. I was really interested in that idea, in the simplicity of it and how it would work. That conversation had already happened and it was just in my brain I suppose. So it seemed like an opportunity to try and realise that work in a different way, in a different context than the art gallery that would really lend itself to what we had at hand. As it turned out we ended up having to hire the lighting equipment so it wasn't entirely using everything that was there.

I suppose the other projects grew out of that initial link. I'd worked with Jimmy Robert before, I'd shown his films elsewhere. I'd never curated any performance work that he'd done but I'd seen work that he'd made and it was really fantastic. So I started talking with him, whether he would like to do something and what that might be, and Babette Mangolte is just generally fantastic and so began thinking about her films. I really knew her as a cinematographer for Yvonne Rainer rather than her own work. I suppose one of the threads that was certainly running through the first programme and in a way the last one but maybe in a bit more obscure sense, was an interest in feminism in the broadest sense. Obviously there's more of an explicit sense of that in Germaine Dulac's work and in Babette Mangolte's work. But I think also in terms of how the auditorium started to be used and about different kinds of discourses that might occur in the auditorium. I think it was at least one of the things that were really underpinning the whole project on a conceptual level.

The final artist was Alice Anderson and I didn't know her work so much but she was friends with friends of mine and they kept suggesting that I go and have a look. We spent an afternoon together looking at her videos in her studio and I actually found I was genuinely convinced by them. In a way that I was quite surprised by, I wasn't really expecting to be. I knew she had shown the work in a gallery. In a sense with all of the artists it was about taking their work out of the gallery and into the cinema. But they are all at the same time pretty much familiar with cinema and certainly interested in it in terms of their own practice. They weren't completely out of depth in thinking about what a cinema might be or what that experience is. They have all had work shown in cinema spaces before.

**GC:** The work that you showed with these artists was work that was made more for the cinema because a gallery didn't really exist in the same way as an exhibition space. Would that be fair to say?

**IW:** Yeah, I suppose. The Babette Mangolte films aren't that old but they were definitely made for cinema rather than for the gallery. The works with Alice Anderson weren't really made to be shown anywhere, it was just home movie really. And the other two artists show their work in galleries, so that was kind of coming from a gallery. And yeah, Germaine Dulac was making her films in the 30s...

I suppose by talking about a gallery and cinema a lot of that is predicated on thinking about the commercial gallery, because MoMA has been showing film in its auditorium since the late 30s. I think you need to work out how you define what it means to show work in a gallery or not.

**GC:** The works that you selected are from quite a disparate array of sources. I guess that is what you meant by avoiding a prescriptive thematic programme as here the works are more autonomous and would accumulate meaning through their juxtaposition?

**IW:** In a very general sense I'm much more interested in the way in which work resonates with each other than in lumping everything that's similar together. I think one of the things that people didn't enjoy about the final screening is that the first half was too similar in tone and that became really difficult for the audience. And maybe it was. But in general I'm much more excited by the way that you can put two works that you wouldn't expect to see together and actually something else occurs. It's very much connected to the works themselves, the ways of reading the work or finding other things in the work that you haven't seen before. On another level, it's also connected to thinking about how as a viewer you respond to work that you see in a mixed programme. On a very

simplistic level I understand two works that resonate against each other to be more activating for the viewer than works which are thematically similar or unchallenging in their relationships between each other.

**GC:** One thing that was interesting with the second programme (with Jimmy Robert work) was the inclusion of the film *Kensal Rise*, which was really striking because it was unexpected in that context but at the same time it was completely logical that it was in that programme.

**IW:** Putting together Jimmy's films and *Kensal Rise* was motivated by the exploration of living spaces. Also the way in which film as a cultural document was conditioned differently and what kind of articulation might or might not be possible about those issues and how the self figured increasingly in Jimmy's work compared to the most historical work. I was interested in the way things broke down from over-arching governmental structures into something much more personal. Combining that really early British film with the other work was related to a project that I did for the Oberhausen festival. There I worked with Jimmy, Emma Hedditch and Melissa Castagnetto around a programme I curated for the special programme which was called *Today We Live*. My programme was based around two Ruby Grierson documentaries, quite short, about the way in which the government was constructing communities, literally building community centers, but also instructing people on what it meant to behave communally and how you used a community centre between the wars.

The programme included *Charten Court* by Jimmy and a video by Emma and a double screen piece by Melissa, so in a sense the French Institute programme that Jimmy was in did have a quite strong relationship to that. It was something I was interested in continuing, to experience the work in that way. I was really interested in the way there was a relationship between that early quite strange British documentary work and contemporary practice that seems peculiarly locatable in England. Even though Jimmy was born in Guadalupe, grew up in Paris, lived in London for a good few years and then moved to Amsterdam, so he's not in the least bit British – but at the time it was about a particular sensibility. Actually all of that started when I was asked to do a one night thing at Cubitt which became very collaborative with Jimmy and also with Emma. I made a slide show piece of my own and Jimmy showed the Super 8 films and Emma showed a video with a live soundtrack.

Those two things, the Cubitt event and Oberhausen, we'd really invested in process. For Cubitt we were talking a lot between the three of us about what it should be and almost to the extent that we were thinking more about the things around the work than worrying about the works themselves. The works pre-existed that for that night, my slide show thing didn't but Jimmy's and Emma's pretty much did. We would talk about how we would work together, how we thought we could be together in that space and what it meant for people to be coming into it, how the relations between the works would be and how we would articulate them in terms of the order of things and how people would move around the space. We had a number of dinners where I cooked and Jimmy, Emma and Melissa came over. We wouldn't really talk about the meaning of the works, although we talked a little bit about why I wanted to show them with the old documentaries but not excessively. It wasn't a theoretical discussion about my thesis, say, it was a discussion about what it meant to be showing work in this way and about our relationships and trying to talk about them to the extent that they would really inform what the screening actually was when it happened.

**GC:** Within this process your involvement changed in a way that maybe Jimmy's didn't. For instance, from the event at Cubitt where you were also showing your own work to the programme in Oberhausen where you were showing their work. I'm interested in how the processes that went into how to show your own work then fed into how to show other people's work.

**IW:** All of this needs to be seen in the context of the fact that I've made other work prior to that, so it's not sort of such a linear transition between those two projects. But in all of the work that I've made, it's pretty much always been within a collaborative context. It's never really been about me as an artist with a singular vision in a traditional sense. They've always been collaborative, they've always been based around something live, so they've always been event-based and they might happen once only.

Interpretation has really figured in those. We had this funny situation when I was working with Jimmy on performing at the Tate and we had to write the wall text which I wrote. The interpretation department of the Tate wouldn't allow me to say that interpretation was content. I was trying to articulate the way in which the act of interpretation was really what the work was about and that that was the content of the work as much as anything else. In that sense the things that I've made have a very close relationship to one end of the spectrum of curatorial practice which is a more explicitly constructed way of presenting work, a more subjective way, the opposite end of the

curatorial spectrum from presenting work in a chronological way or an interest in history over and above anything else. I suppose to me there is a point where the two things become very close together. Obviously I don't always work like that when I curate film programmes but I think it's where I feel most alive.

In terms of there being a transition between, say, showing my own slide show at Cubitt and then working on the other programmes with Jimmy and Emma, there wasn't a conscious register of difference for me. It wasn't like I put a different jacket on or anything. In both instances it was really about finding a way of working with other people – they had a really similar base line. I don't know how people perceive that from the outside. I can understand why people question the ethics of making work as well as curating work and I'm open to conversation about those things.

**GC:** I think your stance contradicts the objection that the curator as artist effectively re-authors everything as theirs. Your practice seems much more about a dispersal of authorship; it's much more about community, about forming relationships. The way you work is very much about connecting things together, different people and practices, periods and ideas. Is that fair to say?

**IW:** Sure, yeah it is. I think you can't be too idealistic about it though. There is a difference between the relationships between me and the artists and how a viewer who knows nobody receives the work. At best there will be something shaping the work that won't reveal biographical relationships but will make the experience of that work particular in some way. But I don't think of myself as working as a community-based artist or curator at all, in a relational aesthetics sense, in a kind of Thomas Hirshhorn way. Generally I feel deeply dubious about that work.

The reason for doing things for me has pretty much always been about being alive and feeling more alive and wanting to express and share that. I really don't believe in the invisible curator. The idea of curator as facilitator is something that I've never really wanted to be or to do. I think some people can do it and do it really well and find that immensely satisfying. But I have no interest in that, really. It is connected to a whole set of politics which on a certain level are to do with the way in which the cultural institution constructs authority and masks reasons why works are in a particular place or why some work is enshrined and other work isn't; and I object to that, I really object to that. It makes me angry, I feel like it's a set of lies, often, that you go into a space, especially a public gallery space, and you receive a definition of the work you are about to look at and you receive its place within history and contemporary culture and its status is affirmed by all of those structures – it's affirmed by the invisible curator. Whereas actually choices have been made by one person and have been informed by a network of relationships, whether they are professional or commercial. I suppose I try and make those relationships more visible or more the content in some way. It's not a perfect practice either.

**GC:** In practical terms how do you go about making those things visible to the audience, to someone who comes to a screening, for instance. Is that something you can do through introducing work and the way that work is presented?

**IW:** I think it manifests itself in different ways in different situations. Sometimes it's as simple as the thing we were talking about before, that you are in the audience and you see two things put together that don't traditionally sit together. Which immediately raises a question or at least the issue that someone has chosen to put these two things together.

**GC:** I think there's a problem with that though because you do get short programmes that people call 'pick and mix', where it's entirely random or it just feels random.

**IW:** I think sometimes it is. But I feel weirdly more open to those random things. This is a digression, but when I was running the Lux Centre cinema, there was a mini weekend season we'd just started when the cinema got shut down that we would have done more of. It was called 'Tombola'. It came about because trying to make a cinema programme is just horrendous. I really found it hard. It was good work often that we did there but I didn't find it easy at all. So there was one time when I just decided that instead of me choosing work that we would watch on this particular weekend, we'd have a tombola so everyone who worked in the whole Lux Centre wrote their favourite film on a slip of paper, feature films this was, or feature-length artist work as well. And we just put them in a tombola and Yvette, who was my assistant, and I just did a public drawing and I made up the programme from that. It was kind of great – so I am also interested in the random thing.

But you're right. I don't think it is just about seeing two films next to each other that make people aware that a decision has been made, but when those two things start relating to each other in different ways, maybe that's the thing that is a pointer. But also you are right that the way a

programme is introduced adds to it. This might sound really poncey but I generally try not to use microphones, I generally try not to use any kind of lectern or podium, I generally try not to use the stage in a way which traditionally is used to construct authority to speak at people, unless there is a particular reason for doing that. I would generally try to talk in a more personal way than in a historical or factual way. For example when Stuart Comer makes his introductions at Tate Modern, they are the most fantastically crafted, often ratifying introductions for the work that you are about to see, including biographical information about the artist, where the work has been shown before, and kind of why it's important. Which I love, but I just can't do it. Maybe I should try harder to do it in that way. I think it really helps the audience actually on some level for it to be more formalised. But I generally try to avoid doing that. It's different at Whitechapel because it's an ongoing thing, so if people come more than once, I'd like to think they get a sense of where the programme is coming from or where I'm coming from. For the Ciné Lumière, I would try and sit on the stairs rather than stand on the stage for example and not use a microphone. I have a penetrating voice and can get away with it. I do want people to hear, I'm just trying to avoid the kind of standard authority that inhibits or impresses the audience with things that I don't especially value and I'd rather they were questioned.

**GC:** Would you locate that aversion anywhere? Is that something you felt people were doing? Were there instances where you reacted against the work being presented authoritatively?

**IW:** My position is informed by a general suspicion of institutional practices rather than it being about a specific experience of the way in which film is presented. It's much more generalised and comes from having run the Horse Hospital for five years before I went to work for the Lux Centre. The Horse Hospital was completely deregulated in many senses and the way in which the programme was put together was entirely subjective, to the point of it being an abuse to try and construct the programme. It wasn't the easy option, even though it sounds like it would be and it wasn't necessarily the solution, but it was an alternative to the way that other places were working or felt that they had to work to fill whatever criteria they needed to fulfill. I suppose my general suspicion of cultural institutions and their practices really developed through running the Horse Hospital ([www.thehorsehospital.com](http://www.thehorsehospital.com)) and really believing in that and exploring a lot. But at the same time, we would never introduce anything at The Horse Hospital when I was there, I think they do now and it's different. But when I was there, we would never ever make an announcement before a film programme and it would have felt really weird to do so. But that's because we were a Horse Hospital pretending to be a cinema.

**GC:** I think the idea of 'cinema' is really interesting. I've found this quite a lot where people talk about how they want to make cinema into art or art into cinema like it's just an idea, not really something that's attainable. At Whitechapel, it's more of a space for talks than a cinema.

**IW:** Well, it's not ideal; I'd like it if there was a better space to show work at Whitechapel. It's a lecture theatre over and above being a place where you can screen films even though it has a separate projection box with the equipment, apart from a 35mm projector. It's just the only space that they have there. People don't seem to mind it much. I know some people really like but I have mixed feelings about it. I think it depends on many factors, and how the programme is constructed and what's in the programme and in a sense I've tried quite a few different approaches now.

**GC:** How much free rein do you have for the film programmes at the Whitechapel and how much prescription is there of what it should be used for?

**IW:** Well, in terms of free rein, I can pretty much programme whatever I like. I was only ever censored once, which was for the film programme accompany *Faces in the Crowd*. This was a massive historical show that was attempting to describe an alternative trajectory for modern art that posed figuration as the key defining characteristic of the twentieth century, as opposed to abstraction being the big moment. The first programme that I suggested was about the masses and unionisation and how that intersected with artists making film or experimental filmmakers practicing in the late 60s and 70s. Which I thought was really interesting, but the gallery wanted something that would present a much more traditional overview of the whole of the twentieth century in four film programmes. It was a ludicrous thing to try and attempt, but I had to change my ideas. They were good film programmes and I enjoyed them in the end. But that was the only time they ever told me that I couldn't show stuff what I wanted to show. Initially it's always been contextual around the exhibition, and it's shifting away from that now, so we can do non-contextual stuff which is good. Apart from the fact that at this point in time, I still work through the education department. Education and public programmes are combined at Whitechapel which is peculiar. It might change. It might not stay that way forever in terms of the film programme.

**GC:** How is the film programme seen in relation to the rest of the gallery? How that space that you

are programming regarded, is it seen as an exhibition space?

**IW:** It's entirely secondary. It's invisible. Iwona Blazwick [Whitechapel Art Gallery Director] really loves it and on one level is incredibly supportive of the programme. She loves it happening there, she's always been very respectful towards me and towards what she thinks I know about, so there's not a problem on that level. But it is an entirely secondary negligible space. You know, I sit here in my living room. I do a programme from here and then I go there and it happens there. I don't have a presence within the infrastructure, which is great for me because I'd go mental again, like I did at the Lux Centre. So it's good for my mental health but it's weird in terms of visibility within an institution. You also get the sense when going in for a film screening, not so much from front of house staff, but from gallery managers like you're a bit in the way and that's a weird dynamic. It's got much better over time but it took ages for that to shift. The fact that I was being employed to do this for the gallery, it was almost like I was made to feel guilty for putting people out and trying to do stuff.

In terms of curatorial practice, I don't really know. Some people I feel very close to at the gallery understand it as curatorial practice, others really don't. Not that many people from the gallery ever come to see anything. That's also really weird that any kind of conversation with anyone there is not based on their experience of something but just on the idea of it. I know that people will have seen some of the work that we programme, but a lot of it they won't have seen. So that's a bit peculiar.

**GC:** I think that's probably the way a lot of work in this area kind of survives, is more on the idea of what things are because there's not a lot of people who do the legwork that's required.

**IW:** Absolutely. I think it's also the way art survives. The idea that anyone who's gone to a gallery has actually sat and watched a whole film or video that is being displayed there is a fallacy really. I just don't think that it happens. One of the exciting things about the cinema space is being asked to watch something and agreeing by entering into that space via buying a ticket or whatever other means by which you agree to give this work time. I think you should leave if you are having a rubbish time, I don't think you should stay there if you don't want to be staying there. But I think when showing work in a gallery it is about the idea of the work rather than the experience of the work.

I feel very differently now I've given up smoking about durational cinema. I've always liked being into it and showing it. Like when we did *Monkey's Birthday* (360mins, single & twin screen 16mm, UK, 1973-75), the David Larcher film, at Lux Centre in 2001 that lasted six hours starting at dawn and it was great, it really was. But my own personal experience of that work was affected by smoking. I couldn't sit in a cinema for six hours, I would leave and have a cigarette and have a chat and go back. Now I don't smoke it's an entirely different experience, which I love. And what was really noticeable was watching the James Benning films at the NFT and I feel that they completely changed me, or maybe that's too dramatic but they had a really massive impact on how I feel about the world and my position in it and urgency of just stopping and looking at things and the validity of that as an action. Which sounds incredibly apolitical but I feel like that it's extremely political, actually. Those films I just loved, I thought they were amazing. The experience of them was great when I didn't need to have a cigarette.

**GC:** That reminds me a bit of Mark Aerial Waller saying that he wanted with a certain exhibition, to make people look at art like you would cinema and with the same type of reverence to concentrate your attention on one work.

**IW:** I tried to teach a module at Middlesex [University, London] which I wasn't very good at. Part of what I kept saying to the students every week is that they should think of this work of experimental film and video as existing neither in the gallery nor in the cinema and its defining coordinates are about being not in either of those places. It's almost like the forms become ideas, archetypes that slip around and in terms of how you frame a work physically and where you show it becomes slippery, so cinemas in gallery spaces and galleries in cinemas aren't something that I would attempt to do from an evangelical viewpoint. It's not that I want to make all cinemas art galleries. I don't really. I'm just interested in the shift of experience that occurs when you start doing stuff that allows you to think about it in that way. But it's not about a desire to convert all of these spaces, it's more about a sense of play between the two and the political implications of that play and what it can make people more aware of.

**GC:** One of the things I was interested to ask you about is that despite always situating the work you do within contemporary art, as a curator you're predominantly focused on screenings in a cinema, as far as I'm aware. It's interesting as a lot of people who are interested in this work find it

difficult not to then work within a gallery and in effect turn films into installations.

**IW:** Well, I'm infinitely more interested in the structures of cinema. I'm much more interested in the idea that twenty people in a room have paid £5 each and by doing that, that manifests the screening, the fact that people come, is the event also. It's not just something being projected for whomever wanders through the gallery. The event is people coming. I really enjoy that on a personal level over and above the structures of an ongoing art exhibition. But it's just pragmatics also. I've always found it easier to work in a context of cinema and that there's more room to play around with stuff, in terms of sensibility I find it much easier, I've never been very good at playing the gallery game in the sense of being able to work in a gallery.

I go to a lot of art things and I'm close to a lot of artists, and I really engage in that and I really believe in it, but at the same time I can't imagine myself being employable really, within an institutional gallery context or at a commercial gallery. I don't operate like that. I'm much too likely to offend someone at some point. And somehow working in a cinema, I find it easier to work in that way or people have found it easier to let me work in that way, maybe.

**GC:** Your work has predominantly seen you take on the role of 'curator' which is used more in the art world rather than 'programmer' which is traditionally used in cinema. Are there any issues that arise with using the word curator for what you do?

**IW:** I have no issues with using the word 'curator' but I wouldn't use it about everything that I do. I think it entirely depends on process more than anything. I determine the difference between what my function is in a particular given situation, dependant on the kind of process. If I was working in a much more historical way I might describe what I was doing as programming. You know, like presenting one feature film at the NFT as part of the film festival, I would say I programmed this. I feel totally fine about using the descriptive word for what I do and for that to change. It's something that I'm aware of, it's not something that I do really casually. At the last Whitechapel show I described the relations as me being the person who organises the film programme and this series was curated by me and Mike Sperlinger together. To me that's accurate information. I do organise it, but Mike and I curated it as well. I think that you can call yourself different things as long as you're aware of what the meaning of those things is.

**GC:** Is the title 'curator' ever useful when dealing with certain organisations or individuals, particularly people in the art world? It's one thing how you address yourself to an audience and being open about your involvement in the work you are presenting but it's slightly different how you address yourself professionally?

**IW:** So you mean, do I use the word 'curator' as a validating title to make my proposals to artists to show their work in a cinema more acceptable to them?

**GC:** Well, is it useful when as a way to communicate what it is you are doing to people not so aware of this type of exhibition of artists work?

**IW:** Possibly, possibly. Art curators or artists even that I know wouldn't really know what to call me. They wouldn't really know what I should officially be called in terms of what I do at Whitechapel or what I do anywhere else. In part it's because they rarely come to things and also because it's more idiosyncratic than something that they know. I suppose that using the word curator does impress people as there is a certain degree of consciousness about the operating system that you're working with. I think you can't be gratuitous in using the word curator. But that you should use it if you can be specific enough for it to have purchase.

**GC:** You said that the audience is important for you, that people go to your screenings and take part and see things, and engage in that way. How do you attempt to deal with the idea of an audience? Who do you see as the audience and how do you...

**IW:** Sorry, this is like an Arts Council application form, George.

**GC:** But it is something that you no doubt have to deal with. Isn't it?

**IW:** I think it's absurd. I refuse to deal with it. I do think it's a total joke. Who's the audience? People who are alive, as opposed to dead, is the audience, living people as opposed to dead people. I'm not especially great at audiences. Sometimes a lot of people will come to stuff that I've curated, but not always, you know, and really not always. I have the impression that a lot more people go to Tate and a lot more people go to LUX stuff and a lot more people go to Mark Webber stuff than things that I do. You feel sometimes suicidal about that and sometimes it's not so worrying. I don't

know. I think it's an institutional responsibility really.

When I was running the Horse Hospital and working on other projects outside of The Horse Hospital at the same time as working there, I would be the person who would write the press release and send it out and chase up journalists as well as programming work. On a practical level, I would do everything. Kate, Roger and I worked really, really closely, we made a lot of decisions together. But I would be the one on the ground and doing it. We'd all take flyers around to places. I had a very physical hands-on relationship to promoting the place and be really aware that that was part of my life. If I was going out I would always try and make sure that I had flyers for the next Horse Hospital thing. I had fantasies that I was being quite strategic in where things were being advertised. I would go to stuff that I didn't necessarily always have a huge amount of interest in because I knew that it would be good to communicate with those people, or to advertise and promote something we were doing at The Horse Hospital.

But I think that it's a very different situation when you are working in an institution and you have a marketing department and you have a press department and communications. How they articulate what the gallery is, to me is as much a part of my project as choosing films, that it's not about me having to take to the streets with my Whitechapel flyers, it's about how the institution articulates that in terms of the film programme's place within the institution. I send out emails to my email list, to advertise the programmes. But that's about it in terms of direct attempt at audience because I think that the institution should do it. I mean for other projects it works in different ways, it's not always like that. But I think if there is a marketing department then they should work on that.

In these flyers for Three to the Power of Three and the majority of the notes for the Whitechapel programme, there are no images. Is that conscious on your part or is that again working within these organisations?

**IW:** Well, I just think images are overrated, really. I could be very wrong in this, because people like images. Obviously I love images in a general sense, but not in terms of programme notes. In terms of flyers advertising programmes, fully illustrated flyers would be fantastic, but Whitechapel won't do that. I don't really have a choice in that respect. I think that that would be much more successful.

In terms of programme notes, I think images are entirely unnecessary, I'd much rather have something to read. But it changes. In terms of the text for the programme notes, the notes for the Ciné Lumière were a bit more tangential than would be standard in terms of the content. They were not really about describing the work or providing a synopsis of the films in the programme, they were about other things, sometimes written by the artist, sometimes from other sources. Other notes I have done have been much more standard in terms of describing the work.

**GC:** Does this also relate to your work as a writer? As I see it part of the way you approach work is through discussion and critical debate. What sort of role does that have in your curating? How do you balance writing with your work as a curator?

**IW:** Well, I think it's tricky. I don't really write reviews anymore and that was a conscious decision because I felt like it was becoming too tricky. And because of making my own stuff and especially doing the piece with Jimmy at the Tate which was quite high profile compared to the other things that I'd done which had always been negligible in terms of their cultural visibility. In terms of what I've been writing most recently I've been doing a column for ArtReview which is a preview column, more discursive than critical, I mean there are occasionally comments on things that have happened in the past and there are occasionally comments on things that I'm working on, but they are always acknowledged if they are things that I'm working on. And frankly no one else is writing about any of this stuff.

I feel less resolved about my writing really which is why I'm being a bit hesitant in connecting it to my other work. The essay in Afterthought, the book Mike [Sperlinger] edited for example, I liked it at the time I wrote it and now I feel less sure about it. Some people have read it and there have been a few small conversations about it, but it's odd. Writing is the inverse of curating a film programme. You write something that you know will be published. Okay so there are 1000 of these books, God knows how many ArtReviews get printed. Magazines are weirder than books because you know they are on shelves in high street newsagents but you have no idea if anyone reads them. You have no idea. There's no actual sense of communication constructed through writing for these publications and I do find that odd.

Maybe that's one of the things that I find less satisfying because on some level it has to remain a



private pleasure. You have to have this private knowledge that you have written something; that it was good, that it does exist in the world. But there's no real way of knowing whether it does or it doesn't. Maybe that changes the more you write? I wrote a chapter for a history book that the Tate is publishing that I found really, really difficult. I found it very difficult to write and part of that was because the sense of it entering into history and providing the kind of linear history or narrative of things I just don't do. So that was quite an odd experience.

**GC:** When I asked Mark Webber about what it is that he does he said that in some ways he is like a publicist, a PR person for this work, paying attention to it when no one else is. How do you balance your critical engagement with the requirements of promoting work you show?

**IW:** Well, I think the other thing to say about that is you shouldn't necessarily assume that because you have chosen to show some work you like it or you're advocating it. I wouldn't possibly like to say that. I have been in situations where it hasn't been about my pure love of the work. But there have also been times when I've wanted to show one work with another because I have a problem with it or because it's perceived as being a great work and I think it needs to have other questions asked of it. I don't have a simplistic relationship, as in loving everything that I show. Sometimes there are instances where you do feel a kind of responsibility towards some work or area and that it ought to be represented even if you wouldn't choose to have in your life. Well I suppose where Mark thinks of himself as a publicist for the work – I think I'm more interested in being alive, really. Life interests me more than...

**GC:**...more than work?

**IW:** Well, they are profoundly interconnected. But I don't really feel like I need to be invisible in the equation of them being interconnected, I suppose. Another thing I should say about the writing is that I have a degree in English Literature. So maybe this has informed some of it. And I think I am very textual in the way that I respond to works.

**GC:** That's interesting; my relationship to writing is very different as I come from a fine art background and find writing quite difficult. But it's necessary, if not pleasurable, because writing is very important to make this work accessible, to engage with it and giving people routes into the work.

**IW:** I think it's not just about accessibility, it's about how it's understood in relationship to other kinds of art making. That is the other reason why it's important for there to be critical mass as Ben [Cook] would describe it, around this area. Writing and publishing are absolutely important. What I was saying before wasn't contravening that it was just kind of where I am at this point in time, about my own activity. But it's incredibly important and there ought to be more of it. I mean there ought to be more... I'd like someone to write something about the Whitechapel film programme, George, as a writer. Could you do that? You know, that would be nice. Loads of stuff goes unremarked, loads of things happen and they don't exist in text form, which is really tricky. And not enough people read *Vertigo*, frankly. What the solution to that is I don't know. But it's not read widely enough, as the main publication say that makes an account of a lot of work that's shown.

**GC:** For the Whitechapel, as it's a year-round programme, do you consciously select projects that might relate to the time when the work is shown? Is that something that you think about when developing a project or programme?

**IW:** Not especially. It's weird because you always work with different time frames. So the Whitechapel's already programmed until the summer, which I always think is absurd. I knew in the middle of February what would be happening in June at the Whitechapel. So what the current moment is, is always a grey area. Say fashion magazines which go to press three months before they come out and are of the moment. What is of the moment? You have to really define what the moment is. In other projects there would be less of a running time. Although it's not like I really think about, in an overly conscious way, about current critical debate or what work's been shown.

I didn't choose to have the Terrorism screening on the 7th of July when the bombs happened; it just was chance. But I guess there's a broad political sense in that making things, showing stuff now has meaning for now, but it's not necessarily led by a debate received from somewhere else. I think that everything that's shown is relevant and important and people should see it when it's shown.

**GC:** What do you mean by everything?

**IW:** Well, not everything, that's being ridiculous, but in terms of the Whitechapel programme or

other projects, I have a real sense of cinema as something which is alive rather than a museum. That it's live and happens in the instant of it being shown and in that sense everything is about now, is about our lives and the things that we bring to it. Which is what I mean by it being very broadly political rather than informed by a specific agenda.

**GC:** I'm interested in is where seeing work can turn into showing work – how do you decide to introduce something into a gallery or cinema context? I guess it also relates to the idea that there is the work that exists, in an archive, which is one history, but then there is the work that is shown, which is another history, constantly being constructed?

**IW:** Well, surely it's ridiculous not to show things? Although I think it gets weird when you have filmmakers like Morgan Fisher suddenly resurrected for the sake of contemporary art, or Kenneth Anger, or Jack Goldstein. I think those kinds of instances ought really to be looked at from a much more critical perspective. I think it's great, on one level, although obviously Jack Goldstein is dead, but Morgan Fisher and Kenneth Anger aren't, and I think if they want to participate in showing their work in an art gallery and if that means they earn more money, for example, it's a great thing. But it is nevertheless perverse, who the art world chooses to resuscitate. The approach is particular to art galleries looking at work by filmmakers, or artist filmmakers for this kind of rediscovery. Experimental filmmakers, artist filmmakers who have traditionally worked just within that sector, within a film co-op sector say, suddenly becoming celebrated within the art world, is something that I would not exactly question, but there are issues around it that I don't think are addressed.

**GC:** I guess what I'm thinking about is how you decide to begin a project at a certain time and where the motivation comes from. For instance do you have a certain amount of slots you have to fill at the Whitechapel or do you say this is something that you're interested in doing and then make room for it?

**IW:** I suppose I'm quite responsive really. The Whitechapel is an ongoing programme. I have a fixed number of programmes and that can shift around a bit. But there's a fixed budget. I have to come up with something, once every two months, off and on. Then other projects that I've worked on have emerged because people have asked me, sometimes I might have been thinking about something and then someone asks me and it's the right place for it to happen. I don't have a fixed process in relation to those things at all.

**GC:** Presumably the process that's required to put something on varies between the different projects. Do you see a lot of work naturally or do you do a lot viewings specifically for projects, how do you balance those two?

**IW:** I don't really balance them in a conscious way. I see stuff if I see stuff. I don't have a project to view everything. I was just in New York, but I didn't go to Anthology to have a look at anything. Sometimes I don't view things; I haven't seen everything that's in the programme. It's not possible sometimes. It's just not possible. That's not my project. So I show things that I haven't seen sometimes and other times, like for the James Benning retrospective at the Whitechapel, I paid out of my own money and went to Berlin, I was going to see friends, but I was going because they had some of the Benning prints there and that was the only way I could view them. It just depends. I think you also have to take some risks sometimes, and that that's all right.

**GC:** What is it that you get from showing the work? Is presenting it an extension of the ways you can explore this work?

**IW:** When you have a sense of sharing something with the audience that's really great. Experiencing the work with other people, and you happen to be the person who's chosen the work, sharing it with people in that way is great. I think you're right as well, that it's also exciting for the act of viewing, that watching stuff can be an extension of exploration; also it's the exploration of films in relationship to each other, not just in terms of a general enquiry into this field.

We do open screenings at Whitechapel without selection criteria so I don't watch anything before. I really like them despite the work being really mixed. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's dreadful. But in terms of not watching anything and watching it with people who are there and working out what you say about it, they function really, really well.

**GC:** Are they open screenings something that you initiated or inherited?

**IW:** I think it was initially the gallery's suggestion. They run a thing called Peer Critiques and kept getting filmmakers or video makers turning up for that. It was once a month maybe and allowed artists to present their work and discuss it in an open forum. They weren't really able to

accommodate video projection or film projection when they were doing those discussions so we started doing the sort of film equivalent really. But obviously it connects to a whole legacy of that kind of work. Greg Pope used to run Roll Your Own at the Lux Centre, which was open submission. It is a really, really important aspect of running a place for artists or a place that attempts to have some kind of experimental agenda behind it. Openness in that sense and being able to be responsive to work that's made is really, really key.

Sometimes people from the open submissions screenings start getting gallery shows or have already shown elsewhere. It's a really an enjoyable ongoing relationship with these people, and sometimes they come back to other screenings and sometimes they don't. I like the way that a lot of the emphasis of the Whitechapel programme is on new work or contemporary work. It's so hard showing contemporary stuff in London, people really don't take that many risks in terms of going to see work, people are very reluctant to take a chance on seeing something that doesn't already have status attached to it, or isn't familiar on any level. Which is a massive problem and it's very difficult to know how you overcome it. With the Ciné Lumière screenings, part of the desire to include more recognised or historical works or artists was in part so that there would be some kind of hook for people who were not familiar whatsoever with the contemporary work, to encourage them to come and experience it in relationship to more familiar work.

**GC:** How does the open submission screenings relate to recent 'New Work UK' screenings organised with LUX?

**IW:** Well they are non-curated screenings whereas each programme of New Work UK is selected by an invited curator from a different UK based institution. They are invited very specifically to curate a programme about new work.

**GC:** How was this developed and why have people from these institutions?

**IW:** Actually they're not all from institutions, the first three are but the fourth, Sinisa Mitrovic, isn't from an institution. The idea was about inviting people who worked in institutions to put together the kind of programme that they wouldn't necessarily do in their daily work. They were opportunities for people to do something outside of the frame of what they normally do.

**GC:** People occasionally float the idea that there should be a centre for artists' moving image work but I'm not convinced. One of the things that's important is that this work is not buried away on its own. But it is a difficult balance as the screening situation in London is very decentralised at the moment without the Lux Centre and is not so visible.

**IW:** No one ever came there, George. It was the centre of nothing. People didn't really come that much. I mean they did sometimes, but you know, don't perpetuate the myth.

**GC:** I'm not saying that it was this great thing, but it acted like a symbolic centre for this work. It seems that now, for this work to be recognised and seen as valid, the way it emerges in many contexts is more important. Do you agree that it's a more healthy situation now with lots of events at different places rather than all just in one central place?

**IW:** I think that things are really good at the moment. Really active. There are a lot of people seeing work that weren't going out to see work a few years ago. And where they see it is a really diverse mix of places, and the work that's being shown is pretty diverse. It's pretty good, in terms of the amount being shown and people's response to it generally. I think more and more people are literate in terms of feeling comfortable responding to work and liking and being excited by things or disliking them. I think people are much less anxious about how to respond to work.

**GC:** Do you have any perspective on the situation outside of London? How was it with the The Artists Cinema screenings that were just at FACT in Liverpool?

**IW:** Well, they have no audience. So, it's really strange. I went up to the second programme at FACT and at the first one apparently there were more people, not loads more, but more, yet other screenings that I went to, there were seven people in one and three people in the other. It was nonsensical really. And I think it's this week that they screen at the Arnolfini so I'll be interested to see what kind of difference that makes. But I think at FACT it's also about how that screening slot is understood by the institution and supported or not supported, and how it's communicated out into the world. You know, there are art students there, there are people who are doing film studies who are interested. I don't believe there aren't interested people. I don't give any credence to that. I don't really know what the issue is with getting an audience of twenty people to go there for something.

But sometimes seven people come to a screening in London, it's not unheard of. I've been to FACT a few times and the Arnolfini quite a few times, so I do have a sense of things outside of London. I suppose there's less awareness of the work but I'm not that interested in evangelism. There is less interest in the work. And that would change the more work is shown and how people write about it and articulate it. I think it's the case of the media having a really strong role to play. Especially outside of London.

**GC:** With less developed networks, these screenings have to be thought about in different ways to get those messages across. It's much harder for things to travel or for there to be that critical mass without lots of activity.

**IW:** For sure. But I think it's just dependant, in many ways, on who's organising it and who they're connected to. Mark Webber organising Little Stabs of Happiness at the ICA was a massive, massive success. The institution was happy to promote the fact that he was in a pop group. You know, that was really part of the whole deal and it worked. It was fantastically busy. I think if FACT started doing a series of screenings that was organised by someone who had more purchase on kids who are into that stuff, then it would be busier. But I think it's quite hard to be so engrossed within an institution and then attract new people.

- i Faces in the Crowd - Picturing Modern Life from Manet to Today, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 3 December 2004 – 6 March 2005