

## Tolerable Risk

A Conversation Between Artist Ben Woodeson and Curator Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk  
4<sup>th</sup> November 2011

**Ben Woodeson** In the Florence Trust which is a converted Church used for annual residencies, so its very beautiful and very cold, so you might hear our teeth chattering!

**Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk** Ben, in your practice you work with all sorts of materials and systems in your installations: from a randomly timed match sculpture to an automatically rotating bucket of red paint, from the more subtle and furtive addition of pincushions in the exhibition space to grand gestures, including a sculptural alignment of glass plates that could collapse at any time. You once told me you were concerned with materials that were originally 'innocent' and belonged outside, or to the practical aspect of the exhibition space, which you then combine and active to put forward a state of ambiguity, enhancing their movement and potential to inflict risk or damage. I was wondering whether this relationship between the internal aspects of the work and the surrounding architecture with its viewers, carries some kind of metaphorical and psychological meaning for you. Could you talk about that a little?

**BW** I think the word innocent is very interesting and I may well have said it, but I don't remember saying it, so that's really making me go 'ur, um, ur' kind of thing. I think the pragmatics, I think my work is very pragmatic, I think my choices and materials are certainly very pragmatic, I wonder what I may have meant by innocent, because I don't recall saying that but that's extremely possible. Maybe, depending how many beers I've had [Laughter] but I wonder if maybe 'harmless' is another way of putting it, I don't know if its harmless, maybe materials that are not culturally loaded, so its not a lump of marble or an oil painting or a bronze "thing", but I don't know, certainly material-wise I think for me, there are materials that I find particularly interesting! At the moment I'm working an awful lot with glass, we'll probably talk about the *Causality* series which are quite new, a lot of those are using glass, and that's something I've been playing with now for a couple of years and as a material it is very loaded because its very beautiful but its also very dangerous, which as we know - it is something that I find rather interesting! Its interesting because I don't think that my work is particularly metaphorical. There may be... there are readings within any artwork but I don't think of it as particularly metaphorical, it is very direct actually, it is a thing or a group of things or a process or an action or an implication and this event either happens or may happen and then the direct result of that is that it affects the space or it may affect a viewer or visitor to that space, so I think psychologically, yes that's definitely for me very interesting, but... I don't think its metaphorical, but yeah its definitely psychological. The works exist to affect the people who are coming in.

**NJL** It becomes more of a body-space relationship?

**BW** Yeah, I think so and its certainly an experiential one, Paul Bailey the director here at the Florence Trust said of my exhibition "some exhibitions you could sleep walk through, you don't dare sleep walk through mine, because you'll get hurt" Hmm, I sat there and thought 'well yeah I quite like that, I'm good with that!' And the relationship with the architecture, over the years

I've vacillated between describing myself as an artist or a sculptor or a sculptor or an artist and backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards - I'm an artist I make three-dimensional work, it always has a very intense relationship with the architecture of the space where it is shown or exhibited or existing and, certainly with the older works, with the *Health & Safety Violation* works I'm really looking for a visceral, a really intense reaction from the viewer but also I think from myself. Ultimately, I'm making these things for myself.

**NJL** As we have worked on one exhibition before...

**BW** The *Textures of Time*.

**NJL** At that point we, as a group of curators, worked with a certain concept and a set of ideas which were perhaps deviating from your practice. I am wondering what you think about , for example, when a curatorial text is included and starts to conflict with the fact that you don't think your work is metaphorical?

**BW** But I don't think it's a conflict. For me, I make the things I make because it's kind of like an addiction, I'm constantly chasing that excitement that edge which is almost like the moment just before an orgasm and it's like the artist or the art orgasm, you get that moment of invention and experimentation and creation and discovery, you stand back and you're just like "ooh fuck that's good" you know and it's really like "phoaw!"

**NJL** [Laughter] And when that process culminates in a show? For example a group show, because then it's a different polemic?

**BW** Definitely and I mean it has to culminate in a show because otherwise... I basically love making my work, but it has to be shown otherwise effectively it's kind of masturbation. And you know, if I was locking myself away and doing it simply for my own pleasure, but it's not, I'm doing it because I'm addicted to doing it but it's meant to have a life, it has a life; it goes out there, people react to it and people will come and they will say "God it made me think about this and this and this and I'm like "wow ok." But whatever people bring to a work is down to their culture, their baggage, their history, their existence, their attitudes and surely that has to be valued and you cannot control it. You see it sometimes, I teach and you can see people sort of trying to pin it down, almost like a butterfly in a glass cage with a pin through it's body and your like "no, no, no step back." So yeah, I'm happy with it, so far no one has come up to me and said it makes them think about something that I find drastically objectionable.

**NJL** In terms of affect you mean?

**BW** ... And also how they felt about it, I've had people come up that are angry or challenged but they're meant to be challenged, the work is confrontational, it's meant to get up their noses. It's meant to be shocking, not in the sort of cultural sense of, I don't know, but if we go back to the Marcus Harvey's *Myra Hindley* hands portrait that was in *Sensation* or something, not in that sense of trying to deliberately push the buttons culturally but more just you know it can be like "Holy fuck I nearly just tripped over that, or that nearly took my head off or whatever?" But

yeah people have definitely, I've had people get very angry at me in my exhibitions and I'm quite happy with that [Laughter], I'm ok with that!

**NJL** In a recent body of sculptural works, the Causality Series, you exercise a stronger awareness of a different, perhaps more aesthetic visual language. In so doing, I think you not only deviate from your earlier series - the Health and Safety Violations - and their inherent modes of operation and visual tropes, emphasizing states of 'anger', 'friction', and 'surface tension'; moreover, it seems to me that you opened up another space of conflict. Could you tell a little bit about the work's antagonism in relation to, but also in terms of your new directions, involving different notions of pleasure, stimulation, and altered ideas of beauty?

**BW** I think you're definitely right, they're definitely more present, it sort of... the *Health & Safety Violations* were, I mean they still exist, I will undoubtedly still be making them but somehow they are more antagonistic than confrontational. The first one that was exhibited was the 33,000 ball bearings on the floor (*Health and Safety Violation number 7 - "9/10 of an iceberg is hidden from view"* 2009) and that was shown in Copenhagen; Kunsthall Charlottenborg in their spring exhibition and it was extraordinary because, 2500 drunk, wonderfully drunk Danes at the opening and all signing the liability and signing their life away, there are photos on the website, there's some of them are like almost surfing on the ball bearings and it was the first one of these that had really been shown and I was standing there, I was like 'Holy shit!' At one point I had to just go away and almost step away and see what happens and I think for me, that work was so much about the confrontation with the exhibiting space whether it be a gallery, or institution or whatever. The viewers didn't find it confrontational at all they just found it brilliant and literally hundreds and hundreds of them were signing away - launching themselves in there, I was just staggered. I think there's a sort of, definitely a tied up, or tangled up in this is probably a better way of putting it is definitely anger. Yeah, I mean as a teenager, I was angry and everyone's angry and I thought I'd get less angry and I don't seem to be getting less angry, I seem to be getting more angry. I think that quite a lot of that energy and confrontation is from there. I mean the artist Stephen Sutcliffe and I studied together on an MFA in Glasgow quite a few years ago and at the time he turned round and said "look what you're doing is naughty boy art" and I couldn't accept it at the time I was like "you think? I'm not sure about that" but actually in a way he's right. It is it's like the work is kind of walking up to someone, poking them in the chest and seeing how they react? The 'someone' quite often is the institutions and I think especially so with the *Health & Safety Violation Series*. *Schlagbohrer* which was made in Berlin at Lobe, during a Lobe residency (2010), and basically it's a lump hammer attached to a drill that smashes the hell out of a wall and breaks the wall and it's quite literally confronting, it's like 'yeah you've got a nice gallery space, I'm going to make a fucking big hole in the wall! [Laughter]

**NJL** This reminds me of the MacGuffin...

**BW** Well actually that is a really interesting thing, yeah. The sort of the plot device almost

**NJL** Misleading...

**BW** I think in a way the *Health & Safety Violations* as a title, I think that is the MacGuffin. There's two strands starting to develop in the work recently; the *Health & Safety Violations* tend to be quite in your face, they're not necessarily subtle works, they can be beautiful or not beautiful but they are like coming along and trying to knee you in the balls almost. I think the *Causality Series*, you say about the pleasure and stimulation and beauty and there is definitely a more, the works are becoming more subtle, it's like their moving away from that 'the drunk in the pub' kind of *Health and Safety Violation Series* but they still have this confrontation, *Slice & Dice* which was just in Elevator Gallery is actually very unusual for me in that there's no motion, it is actually a static work, it's a strip of bungee across a corner and a 4ft x 1ft piece of glass just balanced coming out, so it's very static or course unless someone walks into it, because there is this transparent sharp edged 4ft thing sticking out into the gallery. But at the same time there is all that tension and potential for harm and potential for harm either to the viewer or the work itself to be broken. But there's no battery, there's no power pack, there's no motor so there's quite unusual but I did it in the studio and I stepped back and thought 'God that's actually really quite lovely.' It still had that 'yeah ok I'm not quite easy... I'm not easy to process, if you don't pay to attention to me, bad shit can happen,' but it's actually beautiful. So yeah there's definitely a more, there a subtlety coming in and maybe it's because the *Health & Safety Violations* have been worked on for quite a few years and so maybe they're just growing up, I'm pretty sure I'll still do the big in your face stamp on your toe installations, but yeah they are more beautiful but they're still, let's face it there was a piece in Elevator, *A Perilous Environment Positively Oozing With Pain and Suffering*, which consisted of twelve 4ft pieces of glass, suspended at an angle on fishing twine with wire wool fuses, the computer randomly triggering by burning the wire wool which, released the glass which then fell crashing down, so this circular array of glass, it was maybe 2-21/2 metres in diameter, but of course it suddenly expanded to about 5 metres because the glass just came crashing down. So it's not like, we are not talking like Prince Charles' nauseating water colours or something horrendous like that, they are not getting that old.

**NJL** They are more subtle, at first sight. What I meant was perhaps more related to how you, as an artist, keep control over the work - especially since most of them are randomly timed?

**BW** Yeah I mean the random thing is definitely a big thing for me, I don't use motion detectors because somehow especially with the *Health & Safety Violation Series*, I think if I used motion detectors that makes it theatre...

**NJL** Makes it more of a staged experience...

**BW** Yeah exactly or people jumping backwards and forwards activating and deactivating the work, and that doesn't interest me. I mean, I want people to see the work, but at the same time if they happen to turn their back and then the work happens to randomly activate, so they actually miss it, well that's also antagonising them. A show for Electrohype in Sweden, the middle room had a piece, *Low Tech Breakout*, that only activated every 5 minutes and I deliberately timed it so it was just at the limit of people's attention span. So they waited and they waited and they waited and just as they got pissed off and walked away it did it! So then they came back and stood there again and again, and again just as you know, so it was really sort of, work out just the point when people are getting pissed off and then extend it just that

little bit more. But that was that's around the time I started the Health & Safety Violations so I was definitely feeling very antagonistic [Laughter].

**NJL** I guess maybe we could continue from here to the position of the viewer, because I think the issue of the spatial and psychological confinement is very clear, as you pointed out, as well as the field of interaction between architecture and viewership as fields of conflict. I wonder how you connect these fields of architecture and viewership and the varying degrees of intensity and the visceral relationship with the viewer? In that, you talked about the placement of the works before: do you make a route, or by what means do you set out?

**BW** Yes and no! [Laughter]

**NJL** Good.

**BW** Inevitably you know, you spoke about form and function and it's something that we've discussed in the past, certainly with the Health & Safety Violations it was function over form, it's still function over form but with the form becoming more part of the conversation, and the works, it's almost like the one hand clapping in a certain extent, the works exist irrespective of the viewer - they're not reacting to the viewer, there is no circuit for reaction built-in to the works. It's like they're dumb animals, they have no awareness of our existence so they're going to do their thing irrespective of whether we are there or not and irrespective of whether someone is in the way or not. From my point of view I'm very interested in the reactive part of, not so much the work but of the viewers, the works exist to do this stuff and they don't give a shit whether we are there or not, but people do react to them. As I said earlier you can't sleepwalk through one of my shows because something nasty will happen to you and so let's face it; when you hang any exhibition, the conversation between the works both formally and conceptually, critically everything is considered. In mine - all of that takes place, plus the sort of thinking it's like 'ok if someone jumps back from this, then they had to jump into a massive pile of glass or something spiky sticking out of the wall or whatever' and sometimes that's deliberate, the piece that was just at Elevator, *Randomised Shredding Devices*, the little sort of metal spikes that were built into the wall, they're actually quite innocuous but they were deliberately positioned at average hip, elbow and shoulder height for the UK, the average UK population. But they were also deliberately located in the places that people would think were safe and would chose to lean on the wall, so there's these areas of reaction if you like, around the works and I worked out where the little bits which seemed safe and then I'd put something that wasn't safe.

**NJL** Perhaps we could also talk a little bit about the works' afterlife. Before this interview I proposed you the working title "Not To Play With Dead Things": I think it is two-sided in that sense you and your work are very active, but also in regard of what remains of the work after the show...

**BW** It has a very finite life... Yes, well the debris if you like, or the remains are there, this is something that's particularly come to the fore with Causality at the Elevator Gallery. Quite a few of the works, something happened, for example *Ball-droppingly Awesome Sculpture* was basically a sculpture which was a sheet of glass on the floor, full size I think it's 7ft x 4ft something like that, sheet of glass with a little mechanism up near the ceiling that just, very

quietly, at some point nudged a quite large and heavy ball bearing about an inch diameter so it just dropped straight down in the middle of the sheet, shattered the sheet and then that was what remains. So, great if you were there during the event, but also therefore what was left is then the sculpture, as well. So it has this brief performative moment of 'wow that just happened, I was here, amazing' but actually most people are not going to see that they're going to see a broken piece of glass with a ball bearing. They're then going to go "What? What I don't understand this?" and maybe, hopefully they're reactive enough to look up and see or maybe it's thoughtful enough to look up and then see, the mechanism and they're "oh ok that's nudged that, that's happened there." So about half the works in the Elevator show were "eventual" if you like, they were an event and then something happened.

**NJL** So you don't feel bad about the moment where it would become static? When it's silent and 'inactive'?

**BW** No. No I feel completely comfortable with that, it is obviously something I've been thinking a lot about because, especially, if the works are random then there is a chance that there is nobody in the gallery when they happen to activate or a work happens to activate, so something that I may regard as being super important then actually has no witnesses or maybe the gallery invigilators are there and just going "hey shit nobody saw that, but I did!" That's fine.

**NJL** There is also the case in which nothing might happen at all...

**BW** Yeah well definitely let's face it, a lot of them are computer controlled and computers crash and things go wrong that is the nature, if you have a practice of this nature there is always that sort of slightly, things suddenly something has crashed or changed and you're reacting to it. But I guess with what you are saying about the static is really bringing to mind for me the pictures of Richard Serra throwing lead and just those, extraordinary photos of this crazy bastard like flinging hot lead at the wall and the sculptures that became from that are static and beautiful and have all the implication and all the rest of his action, but also I mean wow those photos, gorgeous.

**NJL** Considering that, would you make stills of the works, after they have happened, as part of your practice?

**BW** It's something I've always avoided doing which I think for me is quite interesting because someone like Roman Signer or even Gordon Matta-Clark with his collages I adore the works, there's not many things I covet but I definitely covet having a Gordon Matta-Clark or I covet owning a Roman Signer work and some of them they're these grainy pictures from film or video but they absolutely have this quality and I think in tandem with the increasing consideration of the form is also coming, this sort of a desire to translate that if you like and certainly there are editions which are being worked on at the moment which are prints from the works like *One shot pretty sculpture* which was the flaming text made out of matches, *Health & Safety Violation #15 - Spiral twist hazard* which is in Spain at the moment there is this capturing, trying to capture maybe that moment that it isn't the work but it becomes another work, that has the historical reference back to the thing that caused it, so yeah I'm definitely, I'm working on that at the moment.

**NJL** I guess, inherent to the debate of health and safety, is the idea of a fearing society, of paranoia and misbelief. Do you think the Causality Series are more paranoid than the Health and Safety Violations?

**BW** That's interesting.

**NJL** The Health & Safety Series...

**BW** Were more direct, they were less subtle. That is interesting, firstly just coming back on the whole paranoia because obviously that is all over the western world, or maybe all over the world and it has become much more extreme post 9/11 and clearly, a frightened population is a population that is easy to control, so politicians jumping up and down and talking about safety and security, it's like the thing if you turn round to someone enough times throughout the day and say "look are you ok?" by the end of the day they are not going to be ok, they're going to be fucking wondering why you keep saying "are you ok?" But yeah it's interesting, I feel the *Causality* series are more subtle in certain respects, but they also I feel are more sophisticated. And that's maybe just the conversation I'm having with the work progressing, as the concerns, are discussed within me, me in the studio reacting, thinking, planning, all that sort of thing. I think, definitely the work evolves and I hadn't actually thought about whether the work was trying to make people paranoid, so maybe I'm just as bad as the politicians at trying to make us scared? At least I'm honest about it!

**NJL** Is it more a kind of 'what if' scenario?

**BW** Yeah definitely. But also I think the word paranoia is very interesting because ultimately these are artworks, they're sculptures, we've discussed in the past what if someone actually did get hurt? Well I actually don't want them to get hurt, there is the potential and that is what I'm challenging, is this - what is safety, something I've talked about in the past is, when they brought in the seat belt law in cars in the UK the statistics for injuries to car drivers and passengers went down, but the statistics for injuries through accidents to pedestrians and cyclists went up, so basically there is this discussion not had by me but had by researchers, that people had this acceptable level of risk, I ride a motorcycle, I cycle in London which some would say is incredibly dangerous, personally I love it, it's the only way to travel. But I would never go cave diving, to me that would cross my personal limits, not to mention I'm a bit claustrophobic so it would scare the shit out of me. So, it is this paranoia, safety, security but ultimately they're artworks - it's not like I'm telling people 'go into that room, I've turned on the cooker, it's a gas cooker, now strike a match!