

Transcription

Jenni Lomax in conversation with Alexandre da Cunha and Phillip King
The Royal Society of Sculptors
October 2018

(0' – 3'35": indistinct chatter)

3'35"

Caroline Worthington

Hello everybody, my name is Caroline Worthington and I am the director of the Royal Society of Sculptors. Welcome to our house this evening and thanks for squeezing in. This is what happens when you let two sculptors loose in the studio for a week.

(laughs)

Thanks for your patience. As I was saying, I'm sure we are in for a fantastic evening tonight, hearing from Phillip and Alex about their experience and their work. So Jenni, over to you!

4'02"

Jenni Lomax

Thank you! Thank you Caroline for organising this amazing event. And thank you all for squeezing in. So what we are going to do, I'm going to start these two off, talking, in a while, and then we hope we'll be able to have a polilogue. And that you'll join in because I'm sure you're all dying to ask lots of questions about this work, so have a look around. Here we are in this amazing space, with a very particular history. Lots of artists have used this space as a studio in the past, and I think that's something that you found compelling when you came here. Coloured a little bit about the way you wanted to work on this project. But here we are with two artists from different generations, from different parts of the world. And they've occupied this wonderful historic space to create a work in dialogue or duologue. I'm sure they don't need introducing, but I'm just going to say a little bit about Phillip King. As you know, he's an internationally renowned sculptor who was president to the Royal Academy from 1999 to 2004. He studied at St Martins in the late 1950s with Anthony Caro, and worked as an assistant to Henry Moore. And his work on the 1960s, which is when he was making inovative sculptures with the relationship between form and colour. These were included in the Whitechapel's *New Generation* show. Any of you that went to Frieze Masters over the last week would have seen a wonderful kind of re-telling of that show on Thomas Dane's stand in Frieze Masters. Also in the seminal *Primary Structured* show at the Jewish Museum in New York, which brought Phillip to a very international audience. And both of these exhibitions in the mid-60s celebrated a dynamic new approach to sculpture, that really was very different at that time from the sculptures which you've done before. And since those really early, important shows, Phillip has continued to exhibit and produce art in galleries, and also many important public artworks, really across the world. And his longstanding practice, to me, is really distinguished by his ability to constantly challenge, and push, what he does. Not only his own boundaries but sort of bigger boundaries. But he never lets things rest in the past, and he's constantly thinking through material, which is evident here. And as many of you know, he began working with ceramics in the early 90s, which was a really big departure for Phillip, and is now really current in what a lot of people are thinking about ceramics as a medium. But I found this quote from Bill Feaver, which I think it's particularly apt in the environment or the circumstance of this project. And he said, 'King is the one sculptor of his generation prepared to jettison what has proved itself good art in order to explore what cannot be programmed'. And I'll wrap here.

Alexandre da Cunha was born in Brazil and has worked in London since 1999. Is that right? He has studied at the RCA and Chelsea, and more recently worked between London and Sao Paulo. Are you still doing that?

8'18"

Alexandre da

Cunha Yes

8'20"

JL

(laughs)

He's become widely known for his work that scrutinises objects, through the use of readymade. Pawn shopping's a vital source for his supplies. And he once described his work, his way of working, as 'pointing rather than making'. So pointing at existing objects as they are for all to see, then revealing the unexpected, or new facets of meaning around those things and within them. So since graduating from Chelsea in 2000 he's exhibited widely and internationally. The most recent solo show was in Sao Paulo, at Pivô, is that it? I've never been, so I don't know. Of course he had a really fabulous one person show at Camden Arts Centre in 2009. There's a review of Alex's exhibition *Free Fall* that I found. It was at Thomas Dane Gallery and it utilised parachutes, rather like this one here. And Matthew McLean writes, 'Da Cunha thrives on unexpected assonances in which both hackneyed or kitsch imagery and icons of 20th-century art chime together in found forms'. I think that is still relevant to your work. But also he quotes Alex as saying, of the objects in his work, 'it's almost as if they were (...) ready, and I just re-arrange them'. So, I think again it's a quote that's pertinent to what is happening in here. Really the first thing I began to think about, when Alex told me about this project and that he was working with Phillip, was 'what brings these two artists together? What are the crossovers? What are the similarities in their work?'. And I hope that you are going to talk about some of the things you share and the things that brought you together. But thinking about it, for me there is a particular, very inventive use of colour, often playing with the delineation between the outside and the inside. Also thinking with and through the materials, neither of you work from plans or sketches, do you?

11'05"

Phillip

King No

11'06"

JL

(laughs)

And also there are shifts in scale, you both work in very big scale. Public works but also, particularly Alex works also in a quite small scale, and you've seen in the salon there that Phillip also makes works on small scale. Sometime maquette, sometimes not. And while Alex uses found objects and pawnshop purchases as his building materials, Phillip will often use found objects but usually as a source material. We've got evidence here where you used something for the first time. And I was thinking that also, of Phillip's work, often has classical references, Alex's sculptures also collect references in connection to Brazilian Modernism and its Neo-concrete. So as we said, this room in the house was used as a studio for many artists. But I think Alex told me that he started the conversation with Phillip before this opportunity arose. So I wonder whether you could tell us more about these initial conversations, and then how you approached the start of your week in the studio. Did you make rules, were there tasks that you needed to do? How did you approach it?

12'35"

AdC

I think this process, what we see here in the space, it's a result of almost two experiences overlapping – or over-layering. There is one that actually happened here, during the week that we worked together. And the other idea, or the other possible project, started well before this week. So when we started this conversation, both Phillip and I discussed – although we intentionally didn't want to discuss much before

we moved in here – we did come up with some initial ideas. So to me also it was one of the things that was an exciting thing, that there was not much planning, although there was a structure. So we sort of established some basic rules, or ideas, and came here, and basically disobeyed all the rules that we had established, and everything started pretty much from scratch here. So there was an initial conversation, and then when we came here, I think the first two days, at least for me, it was quite difficult to actually engage with what was happening here. Getting to know the space and knowing that this had a timeframe, that there was a schedule. So what we see here is pretty much the outcome of these two things, which I think somehow clashed and that's what happened.

14'20"

JL

Also I came just before it opened and was talking to Phillip. And Phillip began to talk about this occupied space in a very physical way. You've started with that piece at the back, and almost creating a barrier in the corner. I think somebody is standing behind the barrier, over there (laughs). So can you tell us how things progressed from there in that corner, and then began to crossover with Alex somewhere along the line?

14'52"

PK

Well, I always liked Alex's work, when I first saw it at Thomas Dane. And then Alex seemed to like my work as well. But with no thoughts of having this sort of dialogue. Because I've never done any work with any other artist before. I don't know if you have either, have you?

15'19"

AdC

No

15'21"

PK

So when it was proposed, not very long ago really – about six or eight weeks ago? – just before the summer.

15'30"

AdC

It was just before the summer.

15'32"

So I just had two major exhibitions this year, so this idea of having something together, not under pressure to produce something finished, was a great relief. And you came up with the idea of, you know, 'why don't we just bring some stuff in and see what happens'. And that sounded very good, but being traditionally an artist who likes his studio and I don't like to be working with other people really, it was a challenge. How do I prepare myself for this? And I thought, well, maybe I need to make a corner for myself somewhere, to start with. I meant it to be there, and then Alex, when he came and he had this thing here, and he said... Well, he needed a window, and it was a wonderful experience when, during the daytime, when you're looking down from that corridor, you come through the hallway and you get hold of these exotic kind of plants on the outside there. And these are the parachutes, it came originally as a parachute, which has been framed to be... And he wanted that and I accepted that straight-away. 'OK, that's your, you decided to do that, that's fine'. And then I started my corner over there, with the idea of a barrier, which I could open up, and then put my stuff in there, and then gradually come out and do crazy things with that. But that idea, when I actually came here, felt to pieces quite quickly, because you want to get to know the space, and it got divided in that one bit over there, which is a barrier which opens, and the way we just saw it, it looks like a Henry Moore. In fact on one of the sculptures on the back, there's this sort of letter that I began to write:

Dear Henry,

I hope...

(laughs)

Because, you know, there was something to do with the image of a reclining Henry Moore. I don't know if you know it, the way he puts his space in-between the legs, forming sometimes a big arch like that, a horizontal arch, and that sort of made me think of Henry Moore. I had the idea of a shovel that sort of goes through this fake bit of steel. I can fake steel very well now, I could almost have come in as Iron Man if I wanted to, just have a thin layer of some kind of glue like PVA. And then you shove powder, steel powder I think, and then you put in sulphuric acid that you can buy, it's called petrol cleaner, just add a bit of water, through it on, and then within a day you've got a perfect steel finish. So what you see looking like steel is only one real bit of steel (laughs). Some of the ideas – I must say I did prepare some works before coming, but not knowing how do we finish, so leaving them here. And one work I didn't know what the hell I was going to do with it to begin with, except that I just lacked these elements. I don't know if you can see that these big circles there, that's the one that I take the most risk with, because I didn't know... All I want to do was that, I found these Chinese brushes, I think they are used for cooking, in Wing Yip, you know, the big supermarket, and I bought ten for one pound each, and brought, and thought 'I think I can use that'. And then the true cooperation, when we sort of began to sort exchange really, was... Alex had this red piece in the corner, which you had in your studio for a while, haven't you?

19'49"

AdC

Yeah, I had that piece, it's a fleece blanket, that red piece. And going back to the initial proposition, when we came... In a similar way that Phillip came up with the idea of the corner to start. And very, just few days before we started, I realised that I had to make a choice in terms of materials and what I was going to bring to the studio. I decided to just take things to the studio that were wall based. So I didn't take any 3D, or objects. Basically things that I had in my studio, and I didn't have time, or didn't like them, or didn't resolved completely. So I decided to take three or four big problems to this space. Things that basically you struggle with them, and kind of don't like them, and don't know what to do with them. And I said, 'OK, there we go, that's an opportunity to deal with these things, and have Phillip around. (laughs). And maybe he's gonna hate them even more, or help me to like them'. And one of the things, which is this parachute piece, was part of a project that I had before with a similar parachute. And I had a very basic problem that this didn't fit properly in the studio because I wanted to stretch this really big. And also when I found out the measurements of this space, I soon realised that I wouldn't be able to fit this on the wall. So I decided to embrace that problem and bring something that didn't fit in the space. And possibly to talk about something that I'm interested in, which is this idea that very often people refer to these works as paintings, and to me they are sculptures on the wall. So I said, 'ok, there we go. That's a chance to bring something that actually doesn't have a wall, and we are gonna have to deal with it as sculpture because you have to see it from the back. It becomes this kind of weird big elephant in the room'. So that was my... And in my little collection of elephants in the room, I brought my ugly red elephant in the room, which is something that was in the studio and I never actually, as I said, resolved properly. And I equally liked and disliked it. And that is actually the only piece in this room that we both worked together.

22'15"

PK

I loved it because of the huge effect on the difference in the circles, dark and light, purely down, when you look at it, purely done with some kind of fixative that stiffens some and make the other soft. And it's basically down to the carpet almost, isn't it? (Jenni interrupts, saying 'it's that fleece'), and the circle. And I thought, well, you know, I had this idea of reusing these Chinese kind of brushes to kind of stab. But not easy, and I thought to bring some clay and then putting it first on there, and then stabbing it. I didn't wanted to spoil it forever, but just to stab it – and I knew clay wouldn't do any long term harm and it's easy to work

for about 5 minutes, isn't it? And then it sort of dropped off! So the choice was, you know, do I carry on or? And then the other thing that happened was that, in order to get these brushes, the way we call them, to be able to stick, I had to cut them with an angle grinder, to take about two inches off. And they were much more stably then. And there were bits of the kind of falling bits that funnily seemed to stick into there. And I said, 'oh, that's great! We'll use the stickability of these things'. And I sprayed a bit of varnish, and then tucked some more down, and then let the brushes that had fallen down onto the ground with a lot of accumulated sort of paste. So that's how that one happened.

24'19"n'

AdC

I have to say I've tried to establish some rules.

(laughs)

He didn't pay attention.

24'25"

JL

It was very funny when I first walked into the room I just laughed, and it had been tied up. But it was so painful, so dynamic somehow. But it also struck me as being very painterly and, while I associate you both with colour, I don't necessarily associate either of you with gesturally painting. I know that you've got something like that. But in here there seem to be a lot of paint, a lot of splash. It was interesting, then talking with Alex about the fact that everybody thinks these are paintings, or refers to them as paintings, but you are very adamant that they are sculptures, they're like reliefs with unknown found objects also. But I was just wondering, Phillip, about your use of paint and colour here, because it's very different from probably what we all think of you and colour.

25'25"

PK

Well, I have used colour since 1962 (laughs), a long time. But there's always something different. I guess there... In fact Catherine, who is over there, showed me how to make... She had to do a project, which had to be with a sculptor for a day and she's been teaching along with children and so on, and she brought some slime with her. I was fascinated and that was only a few weeks ago, we had this slime. And then I looked at it online, and there was something like five hundred thousand children, in America alone, that are slime-mad! They make slime a way of life almost. So I thought, 'oh, I'll have a go!', and bought some Borax, and you buy cheap blue, from school blue, which is used for in schools. And then you mix a bit of water, colour, glitter, whatever you want, and then a bit of Borax gradually added, then stir, and you get your fingers in there and you can get a wonderful goo which I have used in this piece over here. And also the big thing there, it is actually a rather strange, the tallest piece in the room, is a funny work because that was finished here but, a bit like Alex's work, this one was yours, for instance, it's extraordinary, for me I love it, because it's a very simple idea. You got the... Basically it's a car tyre, isn't it?

27'20"

AdC

It's a rubber ring.

27'22"

PK

A rubber ring, yes, which is pumped up, and then you just place the cloth gently over it, and it becomes a classical work of art. This one, that was brought in, but you did it on the moment here.

27'39"

AdC

Yeah, yeah.

27'43"

JL

And that process is very different from the process that you described, about bending that metal over there...

27'48"

(a bit of overlapping)

PK

Yes, that was about six weeks ago. I mean, it was a strange idea. I had to have... I will show you my teeth, but I had to have a new teeth and I have a kind of semi-relative in Greece who's a specialist in teeth. So I had to go to Thessaloniki, where he runs a practice. And I was there for a whole week, I spent about 20 hours having him work done on my teeth, which is not finished yet, I'll have to go back soon again. And in the meantime I discovered some, when I was free, I could go and look at the churches. Byzantine, early Byzantine churches, one from 400 A.D.! Before Byzantine in fact, it was just pre-Byzantine. But with strong elements that were followed up by... And I walk in this and there's this sort of... At one point I could see through, quite a small church, but there was like a balustrade and a strange kind of beam like steel, like over there, and a beam of light that seemed to be bent slightly, but just light. And I took a photograph of it. And I decided that maybe I should... And then also, a few weeks before that I was in Corsica, where I go regularly, where they have a deposition of Christ, at Easter, an 18th Century Christ, with a figure, a bit of a model. Except that there's something odd about the show, there's a made-up ladder. So it looks like a show, so it means that you can bend the arms of Christ. And at Easter at this small church they have a whole ceremony where they put two ladders, on each side of this Christ, and then they through a lot of polyphonic singing and so on. With black clung? cloths hanging down. They tide the arms of Christ and lower him down, and put him in a kind of coffin, and then hold the procession, a few people put him on their shoulders. Then they take him through the town, with singing and so on. I found that quite fascinating. So I linked the two things together, this photograph, and then I decided to make a deposition of my own, which is... And I had a piece of steel which I used for a show, the long curling bit there. And that steel I actually made, because I haven't used steel for a long time. I'm getting too old for it now. So I didn't want to bend, I thought, 'I'm sure I could bend steel that wide'. I had these sheets of steel and I tried to bend them, and I just couldn't do it. Me and my assistant, who is here tonight, without help, we tried to bend it around a pole stand, and we just couldn't do it. So I thought, 'oh, well, I'll put a concrete block', and then I lined up my car and drove on the steel. And then it bent, it worked! (laughs). But that was sometime ago, four years ago. I had this laying about, and I knew it was in the stepper, where I saw it. I went to fetch it, and then I ran into a broken wood inside. And I wanted also to use this slime, to represent the body of Christ. I hope there aren't too many devout Catholics (laughs). But I think it was sort of very personal interpretation of something. It's not meant to be comic really, but it's not meant to be Spiritual either, really. I just wanted to make this wood vulnerable inside this steel, and I had to cut it, I want to break it. I had these beams that were 5 inches by 2 1/2 inches. And I thought, 'how do I break a beam? Oh, I did before!'. So it's my car (laughs). I had to actually try it, but it didn't work. And I had to really encourage the steel to break by doing a bit of a chainsaw cut on it first. And then it broke and the car went 'boom!' (laughs), so I had all these breaks, six times I had to do it to make the wood broken inside it, and then paint and slime, to create this sort of thing. And then when we put it up, which was very difficult because I thought that this ceiling would... Might be of help. But you can't use it, it's all kind of thin wood. It's really, I don't know what it was like before, but it's really hardly any... You know, it's hollow and thank god we were able to do what we wanted here. Thank you Caroline... (JL interrupts)

33'41"

JL

Did you nearly kill Alex with that? (laughs)

33'47"

PK

What happened was that, we tried to get it up and so on, with ladders and all kinds of things underneath it, and then there was this piece which was partially, the curved mirror thing there, was partially there, doing some holding, but not quite, and somehow we got this lodge, and the whole thing felt just as Alex was walking through (laughs). And it just missed you, didn't it?

34'20"

AdC

Yeah.

34'22"

PK

But I don't think it would have killed you (laughs/ overlapping voices)

34'25"

AdC

It's actually, I just wanted to say like, it was very good that you were telling these stories, bending that thing with your car. And I was just thinking during this week, I mean it was a delight to be with you here. This story, and many more. I have to say I'm very privileged because it was really fun. But I'm just thinking in terms of processes like, I don't even drive myself (laughs). It makes me feel so, like, something between lazy and very minimal (laughs). And I have to say that one of the things that actually really works for me, in this dialogue, or duologue, is this clash of, you know, how physical Phillip's work is, the way that he's just describing this action in a very logical way, like, 'oh, I need to do this bending, but I don't know how. I'm gonna drive my car'. And it happens. And in a way, to me, it makes my gestures, let's say of stretching something, equally physical. So there was something that... It was a very, for me it was a very inspiring and rich conversation, because seeing him making all this – and first of all I was also really impressed how he was also coming up with solutions, very physical things, in the work here. But also made me realise that what I, how you introduced me as more like picking things than making things, how most of my time I spend looking at things. But it's equally exhausting, if you know what I mean.

36'05"

JL

Yeah, it's a different...

36'07"

AdC

And it was a really good thing to have this happening in the space, because usually the work is quite protected in the space of the studio and I'm like, sawing something, and it's comparatively gentle. But I really like now, when you're describing this, and I remember when you were installing something, and meanwhile I'm spending hours stretching a parachute, and then going back, and putting more staples, and more staples, and, you know. But...

36'39"

JL

In fact that is a question that I was going to ask. So one of the things that you commented to me, and this kind of very physical and active things of Phillip's and yours work, because they're around the wall, here here and there, they're somehow watching, in a rather sentinel – is that right, sentinel? – And yet when you start to look at them again there is this sort of tension and action within them. Certainly within something

like a parachute, and what that implies in terms of what it is and what it does. But then also what it becomes here, which is like a screen with the light coming through. The stained glass window that echoed the leaded windows of the front, so there's this play with the space in that way. I was wondering again, maybe how, Phillip saw these works in this kind of quieter, sort of watchful things while you were...

37'42"

PK

Well, I was very influenced, I mean I have a book of Alex's works, and I'd seen some of his works here and there was... I mean, what I find fascinating about them is that they turn a very ordinary object that you use everyday into something quite extraordinary, making kind of sudden jumps in function and you know, kind of putting things together that you wouldn't... So that was something that was in my mind for the last three or four months. Trying to get something to deal with object-hood, with objects. And I bought, for instance, I kept my eyes open and bought one of this (point to something), in order to bury it through the steel. Purely because I wanted to go back to having objects and things. I mean, the same with these stabbing kind of brushes. But there is a very nice link, I think, looking at these objects that turn from one thing to another in the other room. All that work next door has been made before we came here, of course. Some of it is a few years old – how many?

39'13"

AdC

Mine, we were talking about that (JL overlaps). It's a mix of my works for the last two years.

39'22"

PK

Same with me...

39'26"

JL

In the choice of those works, there are somethings where I had to think twice about whether whose they were. I don't know if anybody else had that feeling. And the way they change (PK overlaps)

39'38"

I have to say that I have the same feeling as well

(laughs)

39'45"

JL

Did you choose with that in mind? Did you choose that particular (PK overlaps)

39'50"

AdC

I nearly took one of his objects home. I said, 'yeah yeah, that's mine, thank you'.

(laughs)

39'55"

JL

Good try, Alex.

39'57"

AdC

What I like about that display is that, I mean, there is also this... I think there is a quite nice, quite generous, both of us, I think we are quite, I mean, we have to do it this way to put in the same platform, the same level, these objects. They are similar in... You know, they have forms and things and sometimes shapes in similar forms and colours, but they are actually quite different. And I think, what I like about this is they really function almost as if they were characters. As if it was a play. And they were put together like this and now they have to get on with this play, make this work. And I really like that tension, that they are sometimes quite; they don't quite work together. And I like how, there is like a bronze next to an object that I made with a belt. And the textures, and the colours... It makes, you know, both the bronzes become really simple and fresh and precarious, and an object become quite more noble because of that. And also I think there is, in general, this conversation about scale, because my works they are not moquettes. They are independent objects. And most of Phillip's works are moquettes.

41'19"

PK

I have to say that there's only one work there which is not a moquette. I mean, I didn't particularly... I just brought a lot of... I think about 10 or 12. All the others were actually small works. But somehow, in the end, moquettes got chosen unintentionally. Perhaps they were better (AdC overlaps)

41'45"

AdC

I personally...

41'48"

PK

I left Alex in charge of doing...

41'54"

AdC

Not only me, but yeah. We did sort of together, Tom and Caroline. But I think it was, I actually think in general this whole project, there is this very special thing because a similar situation, you know, in the show, in the front, if you have this in a gallery or museum, typically there would be a big... a text talking a lot about scale, and moquettes against objects and materiality and so many things. And what I like is that because of the situation here, we were able to pretty much just do whatever we wanted. And initially I thought this could be one of these things that it would be a lot of fun for us and the public would not engage much. And I'm now more inclined to, you know, just in these few weeks after the feedback we had, to actually think that people are into reading a more intuitive process like this kind conversation.

42'59"

JL

Do you think that is because there is a sense of something having been very immediately made, but it's still slightly open-ended perhaps? So there's a real space for people to look at the work. You know, it's much more immediate than something that's been sitting around in the studio or somebody else's collection, or an important gallery. You can really feel the activity.

43'28"

AdC

We talked a lot, during this week here, like, how we felt really free. Because we were making all these things, and even the way that we are displaying things, sometimes we were just laughing and saying, 'that would never happen in a gallery'. And we work with good galleries and good museums and they're very open and, you know, welcoming to artists to try different things. It's just the system, it's some sort of model

that we are so used to go to a show and the first thing you do is to read the press-release. And then we need to think the space to either feel really spacious and balanced, or it has to be cluttered. And this just kind of happened very naturally. And in the end I just felt that even the first room, which is meant to be more like a showroom display, it feels quite similar to the vibe of this space.

44'24"

JL

Yeah, it still got that playfulness, hasn't it? And works talking to each other. And also each of you got an introductory work. Alex's is outside (PK overlaps)

44'42"

PK

That changed a bit, didn't it? You decided not to put some elements that you had previously...

44'45"

AdC

Oh yeah, the sculpture outside, which is part of a series of works made of concrete; underground sewage pipes and concrete pipes, most of them, including the one outside, have another element which has colour which is foam. And so the two circles inside they are filled with foam, pink foam. And when we installed here... Actually in some of the images of the leaflets you can see some images of how it's supposed to be. And I very last minute decided to not use the foam. Which is also against something very... I felt really inclined to do this because there was this whole atmosphere of being quite playful and trying things. And I actually really liked that, in this case I think that the relationship with the building is the most prominent... And what I wanted to have is the contrast between the concrete and the brick, and the architectural aspects, instead of the cheap materials. So I think... It was again one of these last minute decisions that was possible because we did this in this environment.

45'55"

JL

And there is a nice formal thing that Phillip got in the hallway, or whatever that is...

46'01"

PK

Yes, I think I made that a few months ago. And it's a finished work...

46'08"

JL

But there is somehow a nice relationship with...

46'10"

PK

Yes, absolutely. I think it links with the circles and... yeah.

46'22"

JL

You were here, was it seven full days?

46'25"

PK

Sorry?