WELCOME TO THE TATE CAFÉ

A conversation between Merlin Carpenter, Emily Sundblad and John Kelsey. Paris, March 2012.

Merlin C: I did this two-year project called ‘The Opening’. I had never really done something like that before: to do the same show again and again and self-aggrandise yourself with one style. It was a major effort, it was an intellectual, an emotional effort to push that, because it was like forcing the issue, and nearly every show I did, I had to force the person to do it.

John K: Why force?

MC: No one really wanted to do those shows, and it was just my idea.

JK: We did.

MC: You were doing a show by me, which you were happy to let happen without knowing what it was. The other galleries afterwards knew what it was going to be, and they knew how expensive and uncommercial it was. By summer of 2009, when the project had reached its end date, I was psychologically damaged from this process of having to hustle. I couldn’t even pretend to be the cool artist, waiting for the phone to ring – I was literally cold-calling people trying to get them to do this. Considering what the project seemed to be about - immateriality, fuck you, anything goes – the reality couldn’t have been more different, it was very much of a hierarchical thing where I was insisting.

Emily S: I remember that you were trying to figure out the best locations for it.

MC: But most people said no, which was also scary. Because before that I had just waited for offers, I never asked for anything.

ES: Right. And you had said no.

MC: Yes.

JK: Somebody took your ‘no’ away from you.

MC: I did myself. So I had embarrassed myself on all levels. But I still had done what I wanted and I was happy about it. And then just the kitschiness of the actual work and the concept - which was funny and good - but the directed nature of it was a bit of a mind fuck.

JK: But even before ‘The Opening’, you were interested in what I remember you calling ‘political kitsch’ Like the show you did at Bergen in 2005. You were interested in this idea of an activist gesture in art but that is at the same time indistinguishable from a kitsch aesthetics, or activism as a kitsch problem for art.

MC: Fake political art.

JK: But is it fake or not?

MC: Yes, and real, maybe both. That allowed me to do this fake conceptual, political art strike, painting during the opening. But in the process of doing it, it became quite real. I really was doing it and I was really going for it in a career sense as well. Because I thought it represented something, it represented me.

JK: You, Merlin?

MC: Merlin is me, but for the mainstream world before that I had been someone who had a mini career doing paintings of Kate Moss, and it had kind of fizzled out. And I guess I saw this

as a way of rebranding myself as somebody who could definitively do something else, and sort of forcing that issue. Also as a joke.

JK: So it represents you in the sense of branding.

MC: Well, the idea was that I could still be me at the end, and I could still do what I wanted after this thing, but I could create the impression of having a career by doing this more controlled body of work. And also to negate the paintings of fashion models and be able to say that's just one thing I did, and then there's this other one thing, and they are different.

ES: But the market sort of crashed while you did it. How did that change your attitude towards your project? 'The Opening' started in 2007, and it ended in 2009.

MC: I thought the art market would crash. What does it mean to do all these shows? Which part of our activity is the art world looking at? With those paintings, are people interested in the paintings, are they interested in me, are they interested in the political content of the conceptual aspect of it, are they interested in a distorted version of the political content of the conceptual aspect, or are they not interested at all?

ES: Don't you think it depends on who you are asking? Because you definitely have a fan base. In New York these younger painters that maybe have gone to the Whitney Program really look up to you and they study you so they are probably clued into your political content.

MC: Fuck 'younger painters'. That is so New York, the idea that no matter what you do you're inspiring some younger painter to try and make a career out of it.

ES: I think artists that follow Reena Spaulings Fine Art and other galleries take what you do very seriously.

MC: I think there are plenty of people that fully understand my work or your work, they can get a handle on it. But the idea that they might be trying to convert it into a painting career is to me potentially worrying because it reminds me of the very simple way some things turned out in the late nineties and in the noughties. And I'm sure it's going to happen again in this decade. Once I had done the whole first year of 'The Opening', then came the Simon Lee London show. But now the paintings themselves had this political element. OK, 'DIE COLLECTOR SCUM' in New York had done, but that was more of a throwaway. In the Simon Lee paintings I started to bring in the …

JK: … 'SIMON LEE, UTTER SWINE' …

MC: … anti-banker anger, riots, credit crisis. So there was a double layer of kitsch going on, first of all the actual project, and secondly the paintings themselves were political kitsch. 'BANKS ARE BAD' – that painting has since been picked up by some bloggers as a heartfelt anti-banker statement, on a 7 by 5 foot oil painting.

ES: You're good at making slogans.

MC: I didn't make up that slogan. But anyway, for me that was still political kitsch, but it was a second layer of political kitsch. And in London I have been a 'political artist' in the sense that while I was doing more anodyne art works publicly, I was organising groups in the background.

JK: You are talking about the nineties now?

MC: Yes, nineties, very early noughties. Before I started doing political kitsch art, I was doing more overtly commercial painting, but I had a politico-art practice at the margins of the artworld going on at the same time. Then that shifted through social explosions, getting older, fuck-ups, changes. But I felt that in that process, which was not exclusively positive, I was also able to radicalise my art practice. But when I start introducing double layers of political kitsch in London, I endanger myself toward my own community, my current community in a lot of cases, but also my previous community because I've fallen out with a lot of those people.

JK: You mean the political people?

MC: Yes, Marxists.

JK: Fuck Marxists!

MC: But I am a Marxist. So then I've manipulated the situation to the point where I'm introducing several layers of irony into something that I am committed to, and I'm presenting that in a very public way as if to say 'This is my political practice now: to go to a West End gallery, write 'BANKS ARE BAD', and sell it'. Do you think that is going to wash with my comrades down on the G20 demonstration? No. Not that I wasn't on the G20 demonstration myself.

JK: But it's good that it doesn't work for them. I mean would you really want to make politically correct art for activists? Is that your audience?

MC: Well, who is my audience?

JK: That should be the question. If you make art that is not going to be a problem for Marxists down at the G20, it's going to be bad art – probably.

MC: What sort of thing?

JK: I don't know. I'm just saying that if you catered your art to them, first of all you wouldn't be selling it. Or you might be. But I don't know, I think your idea of kitsch is maybe the only avenue, the only possibility out of the problem of bad 'political art'. Kitsch at least confuses critique with its other, which is top-notch painting and marketable art. I think if those two things are put in a state of tension and undecidability, then there's a possible way out of either of these problems – being a gallery artist or being an activist artist. Kitsch becomes a sort of discomfort zone.

MC: But not everyone chooses to be a gallery artist.

JK: But you have. The project is career kitsch, too, it's not just political kitsch. Because the way you described it, forcing this series of shows, this coherent body of work on a global network of galleries, really pumping it up like Damien Hirst dots with all the Gagosian galleries …

MC: Cool.

ES: Also with the colour scheme, black and white.

MC: OK, let's bring it to 'Pop Life' – psychologically damaged person; paranoia about having introduced too many layers of kitsch, and selling-out to what I perceive as my audience: about twenty Marxists.

JK: You're sure that's your audience?

MC: In terms of political art in London that might be my audience.

JK: Do they even care?

MC: No. But the Simon Lee thing had already had enough turns of the screw of irony. Remember that anarchists came to the opening, and tried to graffiti the gallery?

JK: Yes. Did they actually come in?

MC: No. I had gone home. But the gallery staff wouldn't let them in. And those kids may not have been there by accident. So a few months after this high stress about having pushed myself into very dubious situations comes the blockbuster show at Tate Modern: 'Pop Life'! One of the worst and most compromised shows ever. I didn't see it, but as far as I can tell it started out as something vaguely interesting about the market, celebrity, with critical noises, and gradually morphed into a Murakami mishmash. Anyway, I can understand why Reena

Spaulings was in it. But then my double political kitsch paintings were in the Tate café during the 'Pop Life' show …

JK: … as wallpaper …

ES: … and leggings.

MC: As a Reena Spaulings art work. Then I thought things had gone out of my control. The frames I built for this dubious activity had been exploded.

JK: Well, I don't think either of us had any clue that you were so stressed about 'The Opening' at that point. I had no idea.

ES: No, neither did I.

JK: The impression I got was that you were totally in control of its chaos, that you were comfortable with it, that whatever direction it went you were OK with, because you unleashed it and it was spreading. But I wasn't aware of what the Tate signifies in London, to you and your friends. That was beyond me. Because London as a site for working is a place that I tend to misunderstand. And I think that New York and London are very different places to work and exhibit in. I remember thinking, too, that it is probably impossible for Reena Spaulings to do anything in London without getting into some kind of trouble with you. There had already been a few cases where we had no clue that we were doing something wrong in London. I don't think we know how to decode that city or the invisible lines we always seem to cross. You are super-sensitised to them, but we don't even see them. I am thinking of that party we co-hosted where Stephan Dillemuth's students weren't allowed in, and other things, too, like being in the Frieze fair. There was always some guilt about that, because we knew that you were against it.

MC: That's just another fair, from the point of view of running a gallery, isn't it?

JK: Yes, for us. But for you it's a blight on London, the wrong fair to do and the wrong way to be in London.

MC: It is a blight on the world. But it is also just another fair. Why did you use the Simon Lee paintings for the wallpaper?

JK: I think the initial idea was that we wanted to do something that was somehow honest about our problematic relationship with London. The idea for doing wallpaper came after having worked with you on 'The Opening' and also having worked toward making possible your Simon Lee show. At that moment, those were our main connections with London: you and Simon Lee. So somehow we wanted to reinsert ourselves in that strange 'The Opening' process which we had already been working on together. That was the first impulse, I think: to do something that dealt with what we were already doing in London?

ES: Yeah.

JK: Of course, none of us had any high hopes for the show being any good. There were so many curators involved, and we were only talking to one of them. And he was probably the only one who even wanted us in the show. It so happens that his partner was the first one to buy one of your paintings from 'The Opening'.

MC: So that was actually part of the reason?

ES: … it was part of our reasoning …

JK: … it was part of the reality of the situation.

MC: So you wanted him to get buy another one – or buy yours, rather.

JK: No, it's that he had a personal connection to your work.

ES: It wasn't so much about creating product. The leggings were our stupid product. But I don't think we thought of the wallpaper as product. It was also born out of desperation on our part in not knowing how to approach showing in the Tate, and not knowing how to approach London.

JK: It's kind of sad being in the café, too.

ES: Yeah.

MC: Well, it's more than sad.

JK: And I don't think anybody recognised that our work was part of the 'Pop Life' show. I'm not sure, but it wasn't even in the exhibition space.

MC: I know. But their lack of recognition was part of the reason I freaked out. For people who had seen the Simon Lee show, which is quite a few, the café wallaper did look like my work, or a collaboration between me and you at best. The informed observer would think it was by me if they had seen the Lee show. And also Tate Modern has hundreds of thousands of casual visitors, 99% of whom do not pay to go into a show like 'Pop Life' but do see the café.

ES: But I remember having a discussion with you a long time ago, when I was starting out. Bernadette Corporation had done something that made me irate about what was in my eyes just a theft of some idea, and you just said, well that's fair game, once it's out there, it's fair game. I think that rang in my head.

MC: I totally believe that on all levels, yes. I guess part of the pain of the situation was my own double standards, seeming double standards in relation to that issue. Apart from other people using my ideas, which happens, including you and many others, I've really ripped people off, usually in a kind of critical or even worse fashion.

ES: You have also made people really angry.

MC: Yes, and I have mocked them just by repeating their work, in a way that makes them feel bad.

JK: Maybe it's worth saying for anybody who hasn't seen the wallpaper that we did mediate and change your work in a number of significant ways, shrinking it, putting colour in it, repeating it and turning it into wallpaper. Also, there was a text next to it explaining that it was a Reena Spaulings work, based on a Carpenter work, but not a collaboration. So I was surprised that anybody would have immediately thought it was your work, especially when the authorship was declared on the wall text, which was huge.

MC: So you thought people would see it and think that's just someone else using Merlin's work without his permission? Because the experience I had was people assuming it was my work, either directly or indirectly.

JK: I thought most people wouldn't even see it.

ES: We wanted to make something that disappeared.

JK: Ambient museum gross décor.

ES: My mother wears the leggings all the time, which is pretty funny.

JK: I think the leggings are better than the wallpaper.

ES: I don't particularly like the wallpaper.

MC: The leggings are quite funny. I felt through you asking me, should we do this artwork, me going: no, I don't think so, then there was no further discussion, then it appeared on the wall of Tate Modern, I was put in a situation where I felt I had to say to you please get it out of the show before the opening. I had to do an ultra-ultra-embarrassing boo boo. I'm not saying it's not my fault. But I was put in a situation of ultra-embarrassment. I'm not even saying you put

me there. I found myself in a situation of extreme embarrassment, closely connected to the fact that most of my work as an artist is involved with copying or copyright abuse.

ES: Embarrassment towards yourself then, I guess?

JK: We were embarrassed, too.

ES: I could turn back the clock I would rather have it undone.

JK: Maybe that is what we are trying to do now.

MC: What I want to do is enter the embarrassment.

ES: Yeah.

MC: There is no way I would be doing this if I didn't think it was my problem. Anyway, back to what you said earlier: when you think about London you think about me and Simon Lee?

JK: At that moment those were our freshest dealings.

MC: But isn't that just a topic coming from your own thought process, and not of any real relevance to anybody else?

JK: Reena has often made art that is based on our working relationships in the art world. This is sometimes its only content. It's mostly about finding ways of re-inhabiting or objectifying the relationships that we're all are caught up in this networked art world, making images of that. That's what we do.

ES: And maybe with us playing the double role of gallerists and artists these relationships become inflated and they become sites that are important in the moment, though maybe not in the broader political perspective.

JK: This wasn't the first time that we ripped you off. There was the Paris show, where we made silk screens based on two of your 'The Opening' paintings.

MC: Which was cool. But this time I didn't know what you were doing. You said 'we might do something a bit like that Paris 'DIE COLLECTOR SCUM' thing and we might be in this show in the Tate …'. It was very vague. You didn't say it was in the café.

JK: We probably didn't even know it was going to be in the café at that point.

MC: I said I'd rather you don't do that. I followed it up with an email. After the conversation I had thought it through quite carefully, should I actually allow this? And I thought, no, it's better to stop now, not put myself in the danger zone.

ES: Right.

MC: Because you are my gallery as well as an artist it puts me into the frame. And for various reasons I didn't want to inject 'The Opening' into the Tate at that moment.

JK: I understand that much better now.

ES: Me too. I think when I called you up it felt more like a courtesy warning, since no artist can force anybody else to not do something. But then it took on this level of importance that it was never meant to have from our point of view because for us it just felt like a ramshackle situation anyway, our work being placed in a café in this kitschy show that we then realised everybody unanimously hated so much ...

MC: ... and I was dragged into it, with what I very kitschily imagined to be this key body of work thrust into one of the worst shows of all time in one of the worst spaces of all time. And I felt I could only defend myself from this by seriously humiliating myself, by acting like there was one rule for other people and another rule for myself. And to some extent I'm still doing that. But I'm now trying to relocate that into the space of quite why it is so painful …

JK: … in our space?

MC: … no, in the Tate Modern espresso bar café! What is quite so devastating about that dumping ground?

ES: In New York City, there are several major museums, the Whitney, the MoMA and the Guggenheim, and that new New Museum, but none of them really have this significance. I don't think any of us harbour this extreme hatred towards them that we realised our friends in London have for the Tate. And I think, again, it is one city misunderstanding another.

JK: That's what I would like to understand. In London, how do explain this hysteria around the Tate as an institution? Because I just don't get it. There is something specific about the Tate that really freaks people out.

MC: That has to do with its popularity, its massive expansion in the Blair period, its use of private finance. It's inherently populistic.

JK: They don't have a lot of money for collecting, do they?

MC: No, and their purchases are probably made with private money. It is a model of Blairite public-private populism … it's the next step from YBA, but done by the previous generation of institutional players, more Tony Blair's generation or slightly older, who wanted to fulfil their lifetime's agenda of popularising art. The effect of that is how this café looks. And then there's that flow chart of the history of art drawn on the wall: dumbing-down/education/democratisation. The architecture is authoritarian, it is the public sphere as the private sphere as a kind of fascist railway station. The level of anger about this goes so deep it is quite a responsibility to even try to articulate it. And the Tate model leads the way internationally. The only reason people in other places are not able to see how sinister their own museums are is that other museums take a lot more care to appear to be benevolent. Maybe New York institutions have slightly more sophisticated ways of concealing their agendas.

ES: I think it's more the political difference between America and England. There is a notion of hierarchy within the art world and within politics and what's right and what's wrong in England. In the American system, which I guess is what inspired Blair, the free market reigns supreme. All of the museums in New York are privately funded and everybody already knows that. There is no State money coming into the art world at all. So maybe that is where the confusion lies.

MC: Yes, but I don't think that is a one way inspiration. But first of all, who are these people that hate the Tate? It's perhaps two hundred people. You are talking as if the whole of Britain thinks the Tate is shit. They fucking love it.

ES: We are talking about our friends.

JK: I'm not talking about the critical reaction, I'm talking about the purely nervous, hysterical …

MC: Yes, that's because it has been blown out of what was twenty years ago a regional player into a major power player, and that has revealed the contradictions.

JK: On your poster for the Simon Lee TATE CAFÉ show you have Tony Blair talking to the guy from Oasis?

MC: Yes, that's the round about the era when the Tate was getting its financing and its go-ahead, lottery funding.

JK: And that image was from the nineties?

MC: Yes, it's '97, just when Blair won the election. Noel Gallagher appearing at 10 Downing Street was evil beyond belief.

ES: Right.

MC: Plus it was the end of something and the beginning of something else, the end of the early nineties, the beginning of the late nineties, the end of the pre-internet era, the beginning of the internet era.

ES: But it's interesting where it has all led, at least in terms of music and culture, because Britpop was so huge and now it's so incredibly passé.

MC: It certainly blew itself away, in no uncertain terms. In a similar way people's hopes for Tony Blair were blown away. I was absolutely against Blair before he was elected. But now everyone knows after the Iraq war that Blair is a war criminal ...

JK: … by extension, Oasis: war criminals …

MC: ... worse ...

ES: … and Tate, and Reena Spaulings …

MC: They are super-nationalists.

ES: We didn't mean to show up in London and be British nationalists.

MC: But I think there is something nationalist about what you are saying, in the sense that you keep talking about London as being different from New York. I think they are very similar.

JK: I'm talking about navigation problems.

MC: I think there is something nationalist in what I am saying in that I am protecting my own turf and worrying about my local audience. But I think there's something nationalist about you thinking that things are going on with the Tate in London that aren't going on elsewhere.

ES: No, that's not what I was saying. I was just saying that the attitude towards that institution is different. Our friends in London have a different attitude towards their art institutions than our friends do in New York.

MC: But to start to find the main legimitising national institution in your own city, where you live, to be problematic is a moment of political realisation.

ES: There is nothing wrong with that.

MC: Far from being specific to London, it could actually become a phenomenon that is of some relevance to what artists are becoming and what it is to be one in the more revolutionary era that we are quite probably/possibly entering now.

JK: Yeah, I think we probably are.

ES: Yeah.

JK: And one of the sure signs of that is maybe how irrelevant your Marxist friends in London have suddenly become. I think that the anti-global era activists are somehow sidelined and outmoded by all the weird new shit that is going on, including the riots that happened in London. Nothing against Marxism, but I think that this political economy idea is somehow not the question anymore. The revolution, if it's coming, which I think it probably is, isn't hinged on the Marxist viewpoint. I don't think those activists are going to play a significant role in it, either, the old-school ones.

MC: I'm not sure about that, but even in 1905 in Russia the Marxists were nowhere to be seen during the revolution. To be fair some of them were in prison. In the February revolution in 1917 they were also not leading the events. The Bolsheviks led the October Revolution, but they weren't around in the earlier mass uprisings.

JK: I'm also talking about anarchists and anti-global activists.

MC: Mass movements – although this was maybe covered up by the Communist parties – have usually been led from below rather than by Marxists in the 20th century as well.

JK: I just don't think that Marxists have much to say about what is going on right now in terms of how movements are organizing. Of course, they have a lot to say about debt crisis but I don't think they have much to say about whatever might be revolutionary about this moment. I haven't heard a good description of it, even. I'm talking about the way the world is going, not just Occupy Wall Street. I'm talking about cybernetics and the kind of collapse of the stage of politics as we once knew it. The way that government happens now has nothing to do with classical politics. It's beyond class war even. I think it's really about this production of a population that has no political possibility whatsoever, and that is produced in all kinds of ways, not just economically.

ES: And it's probably felt within every aspect of life, whether you are an artist, or whatever your job is.

MC: It is experienced. Through the internet. In Egypt, where you are used to an old school authoritarian government, and Facebook is giving you the opportunity to have a self-initiated group discussion, then that is a liberation ...

ES: If you need to create a flashmob for instance ...

MC: But what happened in Egypt does not allow us to create a revolution in the UK or the US, because we are not going to be allowed to get rid our dictatorships. It is not going to be allowed by precisely the same means, meaning that you cannot organise your riots or demonstrations on Facebook as they are wide open to police snooping. In the UK two people were put in prison for four years each for just posting 'let's go down to the town centre and have a riot' …

ES: But still, the mob itself is a scary thing for most governments.

JK: Yes, when the population becomes a people, that's the scariest thing ever. It's no problem for any government if there is some kind of revolutionary group in their midst, like anarchists or Marxists. The problem is when the people go crazy, when that controlled population is suddenly out of control.

ES: The way that the Internet functions is a part of this possibility for a new craziness, because it shows how it is possible to be many multiple things at the same time in your own head. I think it allows for anybody to just run out on the street all of a sudden.

MC: Yes. We can look at the interior of the Tate Modern as being a pseudo-democratic space that is of course a sham. It's free to go into the Tate. In JG Ballard's 'Millennium People' there is a middle-class revolution in a housing estate in West London, and one of their pointless terroristic activities, because they are so angry about being middle-class, is to bomb the ramp inside the Tate Modern. I was at an Occupy London meeting on the ramp of Tate Modern, with permission from the Tate.

JK: I saw two people fucking on the ramp when I was coming out of the Michael Clark performance.

MC: Utter freedom.

ES: You have pictures of them.

MC: It's almost incredible containment and democracy and freedom, all at the same time. It's the new soft authoritarian world.

JK: … everybody on the floor, basking under the Olafur Eliasson sun. That's my image of the Tate.

MC: It represents this Blairite democracy turning into authoritarianism. So it's not a joke to talk about it in terms of fascism. It acts out the situation.

JK: It's authoritarianism in the form of a slippery Carsten Höller slide.

ES: But it's also so hard to get to. I mean it is a committed decision to go there. I always feel completely trapped when I go there.

MC: It's difficult to get away from. Facebook and Google try to make minute profits out of people's friendships, at the cutting edge of accumulation, and extract value from previously untapped sources, desperately try to rope more and more things into capital. What Marx already talked about in 1844 – making friendship and love into commodities – has reached a kind of absolute realisation. And isn't that what art practices like mine and yours do, kind of rope more and more things in? Like at the moment we're roping this – well, I'm trying to rope, it's not you who initiated this – I'm trying to rope this embarrassing disaster into some sort of productive art work. What wouldn't I stoop to roping into commoditising? And what wouldn't you stoop to do, like roping me into the Tate café, for example? But that is actually less extreme than other forms of this constant search for the next frontier of micro-increments of any content, to preserve what Baudrillard called nullity of art.

ES: Wait, I lost you.

MC: Well, if the art world is just a pointless, for-profit machine, anything can be the content. Whether it is my embarrassment, your guilt, having a gallery and an artist with the same name …

JK: What do they call that – affective labour?

MC: … so where do we stand on the fact that our own work is nullified by the fact that it really could be anything. It is just about trying to find some other, further level of social nonsense to feed in.

ES: That is definitely a good question. I have no idea. For sure there is a crisis in art, but the way the crisis manifests itself make it incredibly confusing to think about.

JK: It has become as unintelligible as everything else.

ES: Yeah, so then you are left with your daily life. Like the decision whether to keep the gallery going or not, which we always discuss, and we've been open for almost ten years now. In the relationship between these larger concepts and what is worthwhile for you and your everyday life it seems like the everyday wins out.

MC: What is the everyday, in terms of the gallery?

ES: Our relationship to each other and the artists we work with and the people that work at the gallery. The site. Having a platform in New York City to work out of, in a daily way. But it is oppressive, too, I agree with you about this, the questions of the nonsense that keeps happening, and the value of art and ideas. Maybe that is one of the reasons why this Occupy Wall Street movement has been so inspiring to a lot of our friends – especially the art world writing people – because it is somehow allowed to be non-specific. It has just been this weird movement. It hasn't defined itself.

MC: Yeah. And it's not ruined by art.

JK: Art cannot do anything to this thing. This thing is so freaky, it doesn't care about art at all. Although you do get a lot of classic activist art popping up again, people making puppets and banners and stuff.

ES: Yes, and group shows with groups like General Idea and Gran Fury coming back.

MC: I guess people try to solidify it as quickly as they can, and get in there.

JK: The people on the Left are just completely confused about how to fit themselves into it. I don't think there is any obvious way for them to do it. At the New School, for example, there was that occupation and all the teachers, the Marxist professors, were against it.

MC: Captured Marxists within the bureaucracy.

JK: Yes, Trotskyists. They kept telling the students, no, you shouldn't do this because it's not the right or proper time for revolution. The moment hasn't come yet for students to rebel.

ES: But I think also people drink too much to really cause a revolution. They get too drunk, and they cannot do anything.

MC: When I was in New York for a few days in November what struck me about those Occupy meetings I browsed was that I knew a lot of the people there and it seemed to me like the new situation had reversed/relativised their previous positions, so they were in a new context. Almost to the point where people you might have considered might have done bad things or been overtly wrong in their behaviour were now acceptable again. This is just my interpretation. What I mean is the very thing I'm doing now - trying to haul you over the coals for the six-thousandth time - had perhaps become irrelevant. Because the situation had inherently reversed the codes.

JK: Oh, we've all done horrible things in the art world. I don't think I have ever felt myself as inhabiting a proper, right or correct position in the art world.

ES: Yes, it has always been corrupt.

MC: So there is no contradiction there?

JK: Well, the contradiction you perceived walking into a couple of meetings in New York in November, you saw some maybe despicable art world characters sitting around …

MC: No, I saw a mix of people, a lot of whom I knew.

JK: But that is good, don't you think?

MC: I didn't necessarily think they would all be in the same room all agreeing about something. I was just thinking that the situation has changed the terms ...

JK: I think they weren't agreeing at all in that room. Anyway, I think a lot of those people you saw sitting in that meeting are probably back in their holes now. A lot of them came out of curiosity.

MC: It was not just that one meeting, but yeah.

JK: This Occupy thing was for a few people an unexpected new lease on life, somehow. And all the contradictions involved with that are part of the situation, like people's fragmentation, isolation, their self-centredness, it's all part of it. Facebook, all this shit. All the screen-like ways of consuming our own world, our own tourism of our own situations. It is all in there, and it's fucked up. I would never say that the Occupy thing is a 'good' place to be, it's weird.

ES: But it doesn't have any commodity, except maybe that the commodity is a way to spend your time.

JK: It's very much into its own image. Especially the New York instance is very mediatic.

ES: I think it is also just simply really relaxing for people to not have to think about how they are constantly working every day so hard to feed into this system of commodification of an art product.

MC: So that means art is finished.

ES: No, I just feel that the crisis shows up within.

JK: But it is finished, Baudrillard already said it, right? It's nullified.

MC: He said it, but did people get the message?

ES: Obviously not.

JK: It's still being made and bought and sold.

ES: It's not a bad place to be, really.

MC: You can criticise Occupy by the same token: to say previous forms of networking, even Facebook, are now not powerful enough to find new connections, new job creating opportunities and mental gyms to bond yourself to some even more desperate form of value creation. I was thinking in terms of fracking: oil doesn't just come out of the ground, you need to frack it. Frack your network.

ES: That's true.

JK: Do you think Occupy is about fracking New York?

MC: The intensity of meeting all the time is like getting to the fracking level of extraction. You can see it through capitalist eyes. Even if it's completely revolutionary you would be naïve not to see the dead hand of capital grabbing it back.

ES: We are also just a group of very entitled people playing tricks on the city while yellow-cab drivers have to suffer for it.

JK: It's not just entitled people. I agree with the fracking thing. And there is a weird desperate need to be at a thousand meetings per week. And there are a thousand meetings per week, which is weird, there don't need to be so many meetings. I think there is this anxiety that all this is just going to fizzle out overnight.

ES: I think our society has created bodies that want to get caught up in something, in anything, it doesn't really matter whether it is the fashion week or the Occupy movement, they will come.

MC: Most artists, even if they did something halfway interesting at one point, quickly lose touch with what was interesting and they become completely boring. That should be true, because all this art is crap anyway. But apart from the fact that art careers recede from their genesis in collective experiment and become ridiculously boring solo projects with no relevance to anyone, also within that process you can lose the thread. I felt I lost the thread of my work several times, started doing crap. Then I tried to pull it back. The whole 'The Opening' was a response to my feeling that I was losing my way. And I don't mean in terms of producing art, which I find quite easy, but in terms of doing something that is thought to be relevant, which I guess is imagining that it is relevant to someone else who also desires to find some relevance. Because I've been an artist for so long, I'm interested in the idea of the wrong turning, taking the wrong turn in the road, which in German is sometimes called a Holzweg.

JK: What's the difference between a Holzweg and a Feldweg? This is Heidegger, right?

MC: Heidegger worked with the old Holzweg concept and turned it into something more double.

JK: And Feldweg is a good path?

ES: The field path? I've never read Heidegger.

MC: No, I haven't really read it. But I like to imagine that there is something like a wrong turning or Holzweg. And there must be, because people go so badly wrong in their work and also their life. And for me the wrong turning is here a double question: no matter how awful it is to return to the Tate café and just stay there and keep doing shows about the Tate café which refer to the fact that I am so traumatised by Reena Spaulings's feeble wallpaper, perhaps that even that is better than moving on. Because I had allowed myself to get annoyed, which I find deeply humiliating. I thought it would be almost better to stay annoyed

and sit there in that café, fuming forever, rather than trying to move on. Whereas I felt your approach was: something bad happened, let's move on.

ES: It's like one of those homeless people who just sits and screams.

JK: I don't think we were ever actually in the café for more than five minutes, so we never even had the chance to experience its hell. We didn't really show up there, just threw up some wallpaper.

ES: We felt that we just wanted things to be normal again in our relationship with you, we didn't realise that it was never going to happen.

JK: We didn't really want to hang out in the Tate café, either.

MC: I didn't hang out in there, I just went there and got angry and left again.

ES: We wanted to forget about it.

MC: But I'm there right now.

ES: I know.

JK: We all are.

ES: You brought us back. Thanks.

JK: Welcome to the Tate café!

MC: This show now at Reena Spaulings is slightly less embarrassing because I am now coming out about it all, but if you had just seen the Simon Lee painting show TATE CAFÉ: let's say I had left it at that, with some people knowing the secret back story of how angry I was, can you imagine how embarrassing that would have been? But the question is, what do you think of that concept of the wrong turning? Does it apply to you? And was what happened with that installation in any way a wrong turning - a deeper miscalculation than the miscalculation of not communicating with me at the time?

JK: I think Reena has always been on the Holzweg, the wooded way. From the first art we made it was always compromised, whorish, tangled up with other peoples' practices. You can never separate it out as an artist's work, so it is always fucked up, bad, and kitsch, too.

ES: Yeah.

JK: There was never anything clear and progress-oriented about it. Plus, there was never an artist, one of us, that ever needed to defend the practice in a personal way. In the Tate, I think we were aware that we were halfway down a Holzweg as soon as we had the idea to do the wallpaper. We were basically wallpapering a Holzweg at that moment. We were not feeling that we were making good art or in a good situation or even understanding what we were doing, because we felt like imposters in 'Pop Life'. I think that is part of the idea of the Holzweg, isn't it, that you cannot really see where you are going?

MC: I think that you wouldn't know you are in a wrong turning. And also it might look more attractive.

JK: So you cannot decide to go down a Holzweg. Because you don't know that you are already in it. Are you saying there might be something seductive in choosing the woody way?

MC: Heidegger's re-use of the Holzweg word had another dimension: to be happy to be lost in the woods, and find that better than sticking to the normal path. But who the fuck is Heidegger, anyway?

JK: Maybe even kind of heroic, like jumping into a mess. Like Oehlen's squirting expressionist abstractions in 2012, that you could locate some weird inverted form of heroism in the faux-manly mess he makes.

MC: Oehlen is a good example, I think he went into a wrong turning ten or so years ago, and hasn't found a way out. I imagine that is always to do with a block, a blockage of thinking.

ES: When you are asked by an institution to do something, or when you are asked by a friend who is the curator to participate in a show, maybe then there are a series of compromises that lead you into the woody path. But maybe you are not trying to go into a seductive place. You are compromising, and then you end up in a bad situation, like we did with you. I mean I had no idea that it was going to have an impact on our friendship, but it did, or that it was going to lead to such a crisis. Maybe it is worth it now, but it didn't feel like that in the last couple of years.

JK: With Reena Spaulings art there is always the problem of not having enough distance from it. Reena doesn't make that much work. And when we do, it is always in the middle of that Holzweg feeling of being in a situation where the relationships are already functioning in a double way because half the time we are dealing with people that we normally work with in the role of a gallerist. Or we show up in a city where our main relationships have more to do with the gallery than with being an artist. So we try to put that no-distance into the foreground.

ES: There is a sort of a comfort zone that anyone can step into, where your decision-making about what you are doing seems irrelevant. The 'Pop Life' show seemed so irrelevant, anyway.

MC: Well, is it relevant what goes on at the Tate Modern or not?

JK: We had no real feeling for the Tate or for its relevance or meaning.

MC: Do I for example need the Tate to legitimise my practice? And if I don't, what does that say about the power relations involved? Because these institutions are meant to be legitimising: for the market they are seen as the primary legitimator.

ES: I don't think that we thought we were doing it to legitimise our practice, rather the opposite.

JK: As a dealer, I would say you should definitely do a solo show at the Tate because it adds market value.

MC: But if the museum is for legitimating artists for the market, whereas everything else about the museum is a horrific compromise, then it is not all it appears to be.

ES: Of course it is for that.

MC: It is meant to be that I would show in a museum because I want to show my art to thousands of people, and I would prefer that to happen in a non-commercial and untainted public space. My main motivation is not meant to be to increase my market prices. And if it is just to increase market prices, I doubt that the museum is quite such the legitimator it claims to be.

JK: Yes, you are probably right.

ES: I agree.

JK: The museums mostly just follow what the collectors are doing.

MC: There is something desperate about curators.

ES: Nowadays galleries have taken over the more interesting exhibition production. They also have more money.

JK: Museum curators come to art fairs to get the information from the galleries, in a one-stop shopping way. They don't come to the shows at the gallery, they come to the fairs so they can see everything at once, already on the supermarket shelf.

ES: I think the museums, especially in the metropolis cities, are at a very weird place.

JK: I think museums are desperate. I have had a few conversations with curators who for some reason try to get me involved with museums in New York, not in an official capacity, they just want to talk, they want to have lunch. They set up dinners where artists from downtown can hang out with curators as a semi-informal exchange of information. Like: we are all ears, we are really open, you tell us what your ideas are, what we should be doing differently. In this desperate way, they're fracking the Lower East Side for content and also for ideas and strategies.

MC: And every artist must be involved, maybe not with solo museum shows, but with events, nights at the museum, endless numbers of extra activities.

ES: I was part of the 'Grand Openings', and so was John, at the MoMA in July, and it felt so strange to do it. Afterwards, the curator Sabine Breitwieser got into a lot of trouble with the museum. Looking at the footage from that, I think we managed to do something interesting, but it was so weird.

JK: I felt kind of horrible, to be honest, the whole time.

ES: Me, too, I felt like I was dying.

MC: I have a feeling of desperation, they are desperate to get you to do your performance, and that seems to reverse the traditional image of the museum. They want you to legitimate them.

JK: But I don't understand why a museum is desperate, because they don't need to communicate with their outside – when I say outside I mean, let's say, downtown – they don't need that connection. They can just curate shows, get audiences, without having to have these strange informal conversations in Chinese restaurants.

ES: I guess because the art is not enough.

JK: I think it is a connection they are looking for, something more than just new talent. They are looking for a kind of vital connection.

MC: Yes, vital as in the human beings involved, the people involved, not just their ideas or their …

ES: … blood …

MC: … political Rolodex, but their actual …

ES: … blood …

MC: … life-world.

JK: They want to be friends, basically. But why? To me it feels strange that a museum would want to be my friend.

ES: Because it's lonely and it needs a friend!

MC: There is also this gallery in London, the Raven Row Alex Sainsbury gallery. He's from the Sainsbury's supermarket family, is a collector and has unlimited money. He's quite influential in curatorial circles in Europe, and probably in America, too, a lot of artists he is interested in are very curator friendly.

ES: Is he interested in you?

MC: That's what I'm coming to. Some of the London Marxists I mentioned earlier, he has almost collected them, because they are working for him as paid curators, as archivists of Left activist art from the 60s, 70s, 80s. He is interested in my work, but he would not necessarily buy a painting of mine. I mean he hasn't, but I'm also not sure if he would. But I think he would be interested in buying my archive, somehow buying me, buying my time or my friendship, or people like me.

ES: But are you friends with him already?

MC: I know him but I steer clear because I find this quite sinister. But I also think that's the way things are going and I think that is where the value is.

ES: I think you are right.

MC: And if that is where the value is why is anyone buying a painting of mine anyway? OK, they still do, kindly enough. But they are interested in these other things.

JK: It's like buying the concert t-shirt.

ES: Also all these relationships are becoming more abstract. Like our gallery, for instance, it has a non-specific meaning to some of our newer collectors. They buy into something, but they don't really know what.

MC: I've found that people can buy into something without knowing what it is. The fact that you give off a frisson of having had some sort of history is enough, without people necessarily knowing what that history was.

JK: I guess that is when you know that you are on the wooded path. When you start to feel your own frisson. Buying into yourself on the wooded path.

ES: It is important to have friends. But it does become a little bit exploitative. These relationships are so fragile, like with friends that work for us, I thought of that when you mentioned Alex Sainsbury and your Marxist friends that work for him. Our staff might not be not Marxists, but they are pretty radical characters.

JK: We have so many frissons going on right now.

ES: That's all there is.

JK: It's just pumping out of the door.

ES: It runs in weird ways down the street.

MC: Building up trust is worth struggling for and it takes time. So in that context I feel your act of handing me over to this emptied institution, which to me represents nameless and pointless authority, is very questionable. In fact the authority of the institution was in question, and the activity you were performing in re-using my wallpaper wasn't as nefarious as I thought. But some solidarity got lost in that, because these are quite toxic areas. It is sensitive, because these areas can be played with, but sometimes your friends do that and then it feels like you have been traded, which is the worst fear in this type of economy. Imagine how one of your staff would feel if they thought they were being traded to a sleazy curator.

JK: Maybe it was a wooded path of dangerous confidence, but we were confident during the Tate thing that we weren't giving anything of you to the Tate. In fact, the opposite, we were giving a kind of perverted, fake you …

ES: … Chinatown version …

JK: ... on the other hand we never felt the danger of the Tate situation for ourselves because we never really thought that our showing up there was real. It didn't seem like our presence there counted. We felt immune to it.

MC: But aren't you underestimating State power, corporate power and art-historical power? Because look who else was in that show: Hirst, Murakami …

JK: … for somebody like Damien Hirst or Richard Prince, it was maybe consequential, but for Reena Spaulings it wasn't in any way. Nobody even knew we were in the show. There was nothing at stake for us.

ES: We just fucked up in London, again.

MC: No, I don't think it is London. I think it's the world.

ES: We fucked up in the world, again.

JK: I guess we do have a London trauma as Reena.

ES: We don't want to be nationalistic, but maybe we are.

JK: I think it is a problem to disconnect these local situations and make them overly specific, like Egypt and Tunisia. It's a mistake to reduce them to national situations. That's a way of disconnecting them from each other.

ES: And it is also a way of simplifying communication. If you see somebody else as provincial it is easy to dismiss them.

JK: This is naïve but my feeling about the Tate when we did that was that I never took it seriously as an institution.

MC: I think that is maybe a valid point …

JK: I always felt it was tacky, kind of BritDisney.

MC: … but maybe it is taking me time to understand that, that it really doesn't have so much power, but the government has power, and the corporations have power. The Tate is financed by BP. All through that Gulf oil spill all this money was spilling in from them into the Tate. It is hard to check this but maybe half their private funding is coming from BP. It's long-term guaranteed and they have a say. And of course the government is the enemy. But maybe the way the museum legitimises isn't really legitimising. One self-criticism that is I'm not an artist like Reena Spaulings who is someone else. I am me.

JK: Are you sure?

MC: So I am playing this long-term game: 'oh, look, how left-wing I am, give me a massive career, buy me a house in the south of France because I am dealing with authentic left-wing information'. And this is a problem that puts me back in the old Left tradition, despite wanting to fight it. That whole dialectic is so obvious. If you looked at the art world from the outside, you would think it was a fucking joke about hypocrisy.

JK: It's like a Buren problem?

MC: Yes, old Left, but I'm part of that as well. But then again, on the other hand, I also feel that you cannot just say, 'I'm Reena Spaulings, I'm standing outside the art world, the Tate doesn't exist, all these other things don't exist, I'm outside it therefore I can play with it'.

JK: It's more like that we are so inside it that we are not there. There is an idea of being less an artist than a function, and then making our function dysfunctional, or something like that. I'm not saying that we have done that very well, but that was always somehow the idea.

ES: I also thought that from a comedy perspective it would be funny to use your slogans in the Tate, like 'CUNTS', and 'BANKS ARE BAD', 'DESTROY NEOLIBERALISM'.

MC: I thought they were funnier when I was in control of the stage.

JK: In the end, I don't think we thought it was that funny.

ES: No, it wasn't that funny.

JK: I think we felt pretty horrible about it.

ES: We did.

JK: We weren't laughing at the opening.

ES: No. In the end we decided that we were just doing it for my mother. She was the only one who enjoyed herself.

MC: Yeah. So why did you ruin my life? You pretend to be a gallery, but you don't really big up my career, then you rip off my work, put it in the Tate, and collapse everything together. Plus you pretend to work for the gallery artists but actually work for yourselves.

ES: I think we have been really good for your career.

JK: Helped you a bit.

ES: I also helped with the Simon Lee thing. But you have helped us, too. But why was it so traumatic, that's what I don't understand?

MC: Because you didn't listen to what I said. There was some other factor that was more important, a higher power, like the show, the curators or what Reena the artist wanted to do …

ES: … or not getting into trouble.

MC: Yeah. It's like rape. You are saying no, and then the no is a kind of yes.

JK: But there is always rape in art. We used to talk about being art-raped by our friends all the time.

ES: It's a fine line, or not even, but sometimes it's OK and sometimes it isn't. If we had just refused to admit that we copied you, if we hadn't said, 'oh my god, Merlin, we're so sorry', if we had just said, 'what are you talking about, you didn't make those paintings' ...

MC: If anyone else had ripped off my paintings, it would have been fine. It's not the disconnection, it's the connection.

ES: Right.

MC: It looks like I'm conceptually and theoretically involved. Like Althusser said, you can make tactical alliances but not theoretical mistakes. By half asking permission, that is almost confirming that I am involved, because I actually said no, but afterwards it seemed like I had said yes. So that is the problem, it's not the distance, it's the proximity.

ES: I know that when I picked up the phone and called you I made a mistake.

MC: The other thing about the 'Pop Life' incident is that it has an element of Internet LOL, the way you used the wallpaper. OK, you took the jpegs from the internet. But also as the kind of joke it was: it had an element of internet wind-up, slightly more than a real world wind-up.

ES: It was a retweet.

MC: Yeah, it was kind of an internet gag in real time. I am not saying you intended it like that.

JK: Yeah it had that one-line, flimsy, real-time, crappy side to it.

MC: Looking back on it now, maybe that makes it more updated.