

artnet Asks: Matthew Higgs

Elizabeth Manus, Monday, March 3, 2014



Matthew Higgs. Photo: Aubrey Mayer

Artist Matthew Higgs has had the privilege of organizing 56 exhibitors for Independent 2014. artnet wanted to know a little about what makes Mr. Higgs tick, and via email in mid-February, he responded to our questions like so:

What's the wildest thing you've done to get to where you are today?

I'm not sure I've ever done anything wild in my life. I used to write a music fanzine when I was 14–15 years old (1978–1979). The first thing I ever organized was a New Order concert in a youth club in my hometown in England on January 3, 1981, when I was 16. That was the first time I understood that organizing things could be as interesting as performing.

What's the nearest you've ever come to giving it all up?

Never. Art is relentlessly interesting, always re-thinking and re-imagining itself. There is so much new art to discover and equally so much art of the past that has escaped wider attention.

What's your definition of the word "artist"?

I'm not sure there is a definitive image of an "artist," as Prince is as much an artist as Cindy Sherman: Both reveal the world to us in new and often thrilling ways.

What are three critical decisions you've made thus far in planning this fair?

Three important factors that help shape Independent: Its form isn't static, it is constantly in flux (new artists, new galleries, new architecture, new positions). It takes place in the former DIA galleries—among the most iconic, and art-friendly spaces anywhere. And it is open and fluid, moving away from the 'trade show' aesthetics typical of most fairs.

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Do you have an “Independent philosophy”?

To try and create an environment that privileges the artist's work, one that represents the genuinely collegiate nature of the art world, where artists and galleries—of different generations and from different locales—are engaged in an organic dialogue.

Tell me about a couple of first-time participants at this 2014 edition of Independent.

Not-for-profit organizations have always had a strong presence at Independent, this year Istanbul's Protocinema will join Artists Space and White Columns. (Previous editions have included London's Studio Voltaire, Oakland's Creative Growth, the Glasgow International, and New York's Printed Matter and The Kitchen). Jose Martos will present a solo booth of work by the late Dan Asher, who was a significant presence in the New York art world since the early 1980s, and Brendan Dugan's Karma—a highly innovative New York publisher, bookstore, and gallery—will participate in a New York fair for the first time.



Independent Art Fair, New York, 2013

How do you know when an artwork is relevant?

If it causes you to think about yourself and your relationship with the world around you in new ways.

Name a few curators whose work you admire.

Bob Nickas, who is arguably among the most influential curators working in New York over the past 25 years. I always follow what Ingrid Schaffner, the Chief Curator at Philadelphia's ICA does. She has a very idiosyncratic approach and writes really well about art (as does Bob Nickas)—an increasingly rare quality among curators.

Aside from Independent 2014, what's been keeping you busy lately?

I'm working on a retrospective of Judith Scott's work for the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, that will open in fall 2014. I'm co-curating it with Catherine Morris, it will be the first US retrospective of Scott's work. She worked at Oakland's Creative Growth Art Center for the last 18 years of her life, her work is extraordinary—among the most important of the late 20th Century.

What was the last artwork that made you laugh out loud, and what was so funny about it?

Park McArthur's installation 'Ramps' currently on view at Essex Street gallery. It is a deadly serious yet strangely liberating work, that is underscored by a kind of melancholic wit. (Albeit a kind I'd never encountered before.) It is among the most thought-provoking exhibitions I've seen in many years. It was a pleasure to be in a room with the work. I took a cell phone picture of the installation—so I don't forget what it looked like.

The fifth edition of the fair without walls opens to the public this Friday, March 7 (the Vernissage the night before runs from 6 to 8 p.m.), at 548 West 22nd Street between 10th and 11th Avenues.