

## IN CONVERSATION I

**Rebecca Geldard and Jacques Nimki**

30 May 2010, The Greenhouse, Tatton Park

*In 2008, Jacques Nimki was commissioned by Danielle Arnaud & Jordan Kaplan, Parabola to develop a new work for the first Biennial. **A Tatton florilegium** was sited in the Mercury Pool area of Tatton's formal Gardens, and played host to other artists and artworks. In 2010, Jacques is delivering a programme for engagement of younger visitors to the site, encouraging children to discover works with the assistance of the adults who accompany, asking them to actively question what they see and how they can creatively categorise their experience. This conversation was recorded in one of Tatton Park's greenhouses. Every four minutes, the timed misting system in the greenhouse goes off.*

**Rebecca Geldard:** What I was interested to know was how the project in 2008 worked in the Formal Garden context of Tatton, given that you were dealing with weeds and plants that are seen as a nuisance and need to be culled and eradicated and how you were cultivating them in this space.

**Jacques Nimki:** Well, the first thing was the idea with the greenhouse. I went out in the parkland and looked at weeds. When I first came to visit, I did a whole walk – this is how I work – I walked the whole area, not just the gardens, but the whole area looking at what kind of weeds there were. And obviously, because there are gardeners here, they could tell me what things were and what things weren't. They were amused by it but I don't think it was that strange to them really. It worked fine – it wasn't really that difficult – it fitted. The only thing that they found difficult, or amusing, was that all the greenhouses where plants are grown or seeds are seeded are not in the Formal Gardens, they're actually in the back – there's another section hidden away: the potting sheds where they grow everything. My idea was to have a greenhouse of theirs from that area, moved into the garden. But several issues, like Health & Safety, meant that I needed to go out and get one that was as close as possible to what is here.

**RG:** But what it ended up being was a kind of project space.

**JN:** Yeah, it was. It was a project space where things were growing and things were changing and the idea was it was about me collecting things that were in and around Tatton, Knutsford – I went into Knutsford and collected loads of vases to put cut flowers in, I had butterfly collections in there. And eventually, the plants went berserk and took over the glasshouse and this whole collection of stuff. To me, it was almost like the house, with its collections – it was too much almost.

**RG:** It's interesting really, because you quite often work in an urban context and bring plants into it to understand the way plant life survives against all odds and in very odd places, and bringing that in to the gallery context makes us much more aware of the green. But here, it's almost as though that was turned on its head because you made us much more aware of how things work in a garden context.

**JN:** I've done this before and it is very difficult. I've done two projects in forests and that is a strange thing because the context changes with the plants – because they're wildflowers in the countryside, they're not weeds! Everybody loves them! What are weeds in forests are actually saplings of trees because they just take over. The foresters are trying to control the amount of trees that grow there. For me, it's about what people see and what they don't see.

**RG:** Yeah, and how we control space and how space controls us. And did you feel that this project enabled you to do quite different things when you went back into an urban context in terms of how it worked as a site?

**JN:** More than anything, it made me think about what I could do in a gallery with a greenhouse, actually! I've done things in shopping centres so that changes again, but it's still an urban environment. In some ways, because the context has changed, I don't know if people are challenged enough. I think they were challenged by the concept of the greenhouse more than by what was actually in the greenhouse.

**RG:** But you're forcing them into a particular area, aren't you? What's here, at Tatton, determines how they negotiate the space. Your work became a site for action as much as anything else. You invited other artists to use it, to come and create performances and other events and it was described as a kind of 'indie biennial' or a biennial within a biennial.

**JN:** Well, I just think it's important to work with other people. You get a different context, a different way of thinking about how you're doing things and, as you say, it was this sort of project space, and nothing was fixed. I was coming along every other week or so and just sort of moving things around watching what was happening and taking things out if I didn't think they were working and in the same way, when the artists came up, they engaged with the space, they looked at it and thought about things and it was very much left to them to do something with it. So it built up as a bigger project.

**RG:** What was it like being part of the first Biennial?

**JN:** It was great, really – I did a lot of research – when I came to do the installation, I was one of the last ones to install, so it was really smooth for me.

**RG:** I've come up for a couple of site visits, and you get a glimpse of how tricky but also how exciting it is dealing with a site like this. I was wondering how you found those kinds of compromises in terms of where you set yourself up and how you create a structure that's safe for the public to come into but also one that doesn't compromise your vision.

**JN:** Whether it's working in this space or the gallery, what's really important for me is to consider the space. I did this piece for the Sharjah Biennial – they gave me this massive wall for me to do a drawing and I did all these plants right along the bottom and that was it. You'd walk in and see this gigantic wall and that was it: these tiny plants along the bottom. What I've noticed with these international biennials is everyone tries to bring in the largest work and it's like, "Look at me – I am here!" and in a way, with the Tatton biennial, it was a similar thing for me. I wanted to make something that looked as though it belonged here, but was a bit odd and didn't quite fit. People would look at it and go "Oh, a greenhouse." And then they'd go to it and look and wonder what was inside – it wasn't what they were expecting. It was almost inviting people in, but they had to make choices about what they were looking at and what they were seeing. It wasn't a problem for me, because I'm always thinking about how I can make people look. I'm not trying to be the loudest. I'm actually trying to be the quietest.

**RG:** It's very different here, because people aren't necessarily expecting to walk into art, especially the more general public who come here. I like the idea that there is already a limitation set up. In

many senses you want people to engage with the idea of art in the landscape, but at the same time, you don't want to create something that is *biennial*, that is what we imagine biennial art to look like.

**JN:** Sure. Just to go back, you have to consider things like Health & Safety, because it's all glass. So I got this super tough greenhouse, impossible to break, and the times I was there, you would see a child running with their parents behind them – and they would hit the greenhouse and bounce off. Almost like they didn't see the greenhouse! Or people would walk past almost as though they thought the structure belonged in the space, but would then hesitate as though they understood it was in the wrong place.

**RG:** So a slight change –

JN: Yeah. Enough to provoke. In anything I do, paintings or drawings, I'm not trying to make people uncomfortable.

**RG:** These are quite private places or spaces for contemplation and you're bringing in, well, not high examples of botanical life. I'm interested in the way you stopped classifying things. Initially, you were very interested in the idea of creating quite a unique catalogue that would complement what was already here in a rather opposite way and yet you wound up pretty much falling in love with the structures as they were and the artwork that it became was very much about a process. I wonder what are your thoughts on this Biennial in comparison to the last in 2008?

**JN:** The thing that's really clear is that it's much tighter: the structure, how works are placed, where they're placed, everything just seems much more sure. There are works I like and works I don't like, but as a whole, when you walk around it, there's a much clearer feeling about it.

**RG:** Do you think that's to do with the theme: 'Framing Identity'?

**JN:** No. I think that's to do with the curators and the experience of last year – of having done it before.

**RG:** It's interesting what you say about things seeming more purposeful and things having their place. Given that it's about identity, the first theme was 'Collections and Collectors', wasn't it? Was it perhaps too expansive? That edition allowed doors into nature, whereas this one is much more about site, and site in its widest sense.

**JN:** Yeah, but people talking about their collections, you know that can be the works in the house. No, I think both themes are quite open. I just think the curators know the space a lot better and they also know what they can and cannot do, to a point! That was one of the big problems last time around, was working with these people here. I had to work with the staff – the gardeners were going to look after the plants, I'd done lots of research with them beforehand, and I had to get on with them.

**RG:** And you're interested in what they're doing.

**JN:** I am. I'm very interested in what they're doing. But I think there was a phase – and there's still a bit of it this year – of staff saying, "We don't know what this is about – we don't want to engage with this." There was no perception that this event was theirs. They didn't seem to get that. One thing I've thought about is the people who work here, especially the gardeners, they do this job, for instance,

to be a gardener and they don't want to do anything else – they don't want to engage. I had a similar experience in the forest where foresters, because they can't sell trees anymore, they have to engage with the public (they're having rides in the forest, etc) and they just don't want to! They became foresters so they could be with the trees.

**RG:** On a real level, it's work enough, just to keep the place going.

**JN:** Absolutely!

**RG:** I didn't see the first Biennial, but the way you describe this one, that it is much more sure of itself, is true on an intellectual level. On a formal level, perhaps, there are lots of works here that are *formally* works of art in a sense but I also think that there are other things that counterbalance that are demonstrating a sense of risk – they are actually works that might not live up to expectation.

**JN:** Well, the thing is – like the fossil machine, you might not get a fossil out of it, but as a piece of work, it's there and it's up and running. Whereas last time, there was the paper, the paper stuff that went all over the show, and it became a nightmare, yeah? And also the Tower, that was a nightmare as well, yeah? And the pineapple didn't work. It wasn't just the artists, the logistics of it didn't work.

**RG:** I guess the difference is, this is setting up specific risks that may or may not work, in an experimental way rather than the constraints of the situation determining whether a piece may or may not work. I think it might be quite interesting to talk about the lilies, yeah? Because, you were the first person that I saw (this is Steve Messam's piece on the Mere) and we were in the taxi together and we had just met outside at the train station, and we were driving up for the opening and we both looked out the window and went, "Oh...oh dear."

**JN:** That's right. We did. I was expecting massive big lilies and there were these tiny things and I just thought, "Well, I'm not sure about this."

**RG:** I think the thing about this that interests me is whether the endeavour is worth it? At what point do you choose to give up? Or do you say, 'It's not going to work, it hasn't worked.' And where the responsibility for that lies in a project like this. It's a meeting of a vast group of people – it's not just like the curators run it and it's a boot camp, it's a contract between different people to deliver something...

**Danielle Arnaud:** I think there is a very special point with the lilies, in that if you compare it even with Austin's piece, this work brings a lot of ideas and people respond to it. Now, the lilies, without their physical presence, there is nothing.

**RG:** It's not a nothing you would choose to frame in the event of it not working. I was talking with Jordan about Frieze (Art Fair), and saying that there was a piece of work that was meant to look as though a sculptural structure had landed in a corner of one of their tents and unfortunately, the people who made the structure hadn't used quite the right materials and it just looked too light – it didn't look as though it could possibly have caused the damage – so the artist pulled it the day it opened saying it wasn't right. So they were able to put up a sign saying, "This could have been here, but for these reasons, the artist has chosen not to show the work." I think it creates a debate about how you do it.

**Jordan Kaplan:** We did something very similar in 2008, for the opening, when we weren't able to get the Tower up in time, we marked out on the ground where the Tower would be and put up the sign, explaining what it was (happily it was called *A Tower in the Minds of Others!*) and that it was going to come later.

**RG:** What I will say is that if you at Steve Messam's proposal, he says all he intends to do is reframe the landscape – in essence, that's what he's done.

**JN:** But I think even in the first Biennial, there were a lot of touch and go points – as any artist working in a new context, there are points when you're thinking, "Is this going to work? How is this thing going to turn out?" And there was a bit of that with other artists as well in 2008. And that's going on all the time. But with this year, it just seems much more, well apart from the ice, which I saw the piece on the BBC and everyone's worrying that it's going to break apart, more solid and present. The cinema, the lion, you know –

**DA:** Yeah, but you have got Jamie Shovlin's sound piece which has more –

**RG:** But that's the point, isn't it? That all of them come with something – I quite like the analogy between Jamie's shed and Jacques' greenhouse, where as Jacques says, the greenhouse was beckoning people in with all of the crazy things inside and it wasn't where it was supposed to be, whereas the shed is setting up a tension within the environment. On the one hand, it's sort of tongue in cheek referencing horror or the idea of the uncanny, and on the other, it's really pushing people's attitudes about how they deal with art.

**JK:** We've taken a lot of risks this year – many of which visitors will not be aware of. Danielle and I remember the various difficulties of each one.

**RG:** Well they're props – like Marcia's horse – you can deal with it as an object –

**JK:** Yeah, but the whole process of the horse was very tricky. When you ask, "What's the difference between 2008 and 2010?", Jacques says it feels tighter and more in control. We had more time, but it's an interesting observation because hopefully for us what it means is that we will continue to make it as hard for ourselves as possible and keep pushing in 2012 when we really know what we're doing and we're up to speed and we are ready to start handing it over, we will make ludicrous demands of the artists and the agencies we're working with!

**DA:** But I don't think we will know really what we are doing – you can't – I think if you do know exactly what you are doing it will be very boring and sad. We have the experience of the previous years, the knowledge of the grounds and the staff but at the same time this is also rather dangerous because it can make you complacent.

**JN:** But you have a lot of difficulties all the time in your path here –

**RG:** Which is what makes it a more interesting biennial than a lot of others. But what I was going to ask was do you think you are commissioning objects that you can control?

**DA:** Well, you see the commissioners want evidence – value for money – objects that demonstrate the work. Also, the gardens are big and any subtle interventions just disappear. What we would really like is a mixture of subtle, intangible, ephemeral and strongly sited work.

**RG:** But for all their solid presence, these works can be spread out through the site and you have to find many of them – there is a subtlety in the placing of a lot of the work.

**JK:** If we had it all our way, we would probably have less substantial objects and more performances, films, happenings – but we also recognise the need for objects.

**JN:** That’s something that I think isn’t mentioned: the audience. There’s only certain people who come here – people who drive! They drive in, they pay (it’s not a free event, is it?).

**RG:** I remember, we were in the Mansion near Helen Maurer’s piece and there were these women passing. Danielle was talking and these women brushed past looking annoyed and it seemed as though they were thinking, “What are you doing here? This isn’t about you – it’s about us experiencing a national treasure.” And one woman looked at Helen’s piece and said, “Well, it’s just not in keeping with the building at all.” She had somehow missed that it wasn’t supposed to be in keeping with the building.

**JK:** It’s the challenge of working here, but it can get a bit soul destroying if you’re having a hard day and, as you leave the gardens, you see the comments on the board – “pretentious”, “rubbish” – and yes, that is the core of your audience, but...

**DA:** There is so much you can do – when you take people on the tour, and you can see they really enjoy it and get something out of it, and you hope that maybe it will stay with them and maybe they will pass it on to other people. But for us, first of all, it’s getting the artists and the art out there. Yes, we do need to work on the audience, but –

**RG:** But if you make it with any specific audience in mind I think it is perhaps a bad thing. Jordan’s example, the one piece...

**JK:** This is something we will carry with us for a long time...

**DA:** But as well – in some ways, Neville Gabie’s piece probably would never have happened, but for the two of us cajoling and supporting all the way through.

**JK:** And every time he said, “look I really don’t think it’s going to happen”, we would say, “give it two more weeks”.

**DA:** And he knew we trusted him. That makes a big, big difference.

**JN:** For me, with Austin Houldsworth’s piece, it doesn’t matter whether it makes a fossil or not – that’s irrelevant. It’s about the process.

**RG:** I think some discussion and transparency about the process on a public level would be really welcome. A sense of how a work has arrived might endear people to the work more. Sometimes it is about the wonder and questions about how did this get here? And other times, it would really benefit some of the works to have a diary of the journey.

**JK:** Well, I’ve asked Austin to start a journal as a blog on the website so that people can start to see this is an ongoing, process-based piece of work. That this isn’t a vague, ill considered ‘let’s see if it

works' pseudo-experiment, but one that the artist takes seriously and is monitoring and adjusting – in the same way Jacques in 2008 would return to his greenhouse and tinker and adjust. Jacques also brought artists in to work in his space and one made a whole, site specific performance which was about glasshouses and how he, it was Jonathan Swain, had been followed around and haunted by burning, smoking glasshouses throughout his life. It was beautiful! It was beautifully delivered and the smoke bombs kept going off and all the moths and insects in Jacques' greenhouse would come to the glass and die before our eyes – quite bizarre and voyeuristic. You could have written it and performed it on a stage, but the fact that it happened at his friend's artwork, which was a greenhouse, in a biennial, meant there was a level of perfection or completeness to it. And a real level of generosity from Jacques inviting others to come in and use his space...

**JN:** And smoke all my drawings! I had to throw the whole lot out!

**JK:** But it was very special.

**RG:** Which can only happen if you do have a risky structure.

**JN:** Yeah. And the other performance, that actually didn't work, was a complete failure – this was Savage's breaking glass piece. He recorded the sound of smashing glass and we wanted to play it really loud through the gardens every half an hour or so and we had a big debate with Brendan on the day, and he was saying, "We don't want people in Knutsford hearing it!" and so we were restricted to playing it inside a greenhouse and we could only put it up to a certain level. Well, we were outside, right next to it, and all we could hear was a 'clink'!

**DA:** Yes, and there we were, Jordan and I going around the gardens saying, "Where is this bloody sound?!"

**JN:** So it was a complete failure, but actually, we both learnt a lot from it – he's using this experience in another work and it made me ask what I could and couldn't do at this site. How do you negotiate what they want and what you want without compromising?

**DA:** That is something we have to work very hard at.

**JN:** When Danielle and Jordan asked me if I was interested in the Biennial in 2008, I looked Tatton up on the web and found this really old document proposing a Biennial delivered by the Royal Academy. What that would have meant was fixed art, no risk and it would have fitted in perfectly – no challenges, etc.

**JK:** It would have been a very good fit. It would have reinforced their existing market and visitor base.

**DA:** Yes, it would have been successful for what they were looking for.

**JN:** But would it have brought in a new audience?

**DA & JK:** No.

**JN:** And people are talking about the Biennial in 2010 – people have said, "Oh, I see you're doing Tatton". It is spoken about and mentioned within that world now.

**RG:** Yeah, I've had that.

**JN:** Whereas before it was "Tatton? Where's that?"

**DA:** It takes time. It does.