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Interviewed by Domenico Ermanno Roberti

Mitchell Anderson, Plymouth Rock

Domenico Ermanno Roberti

Mitchell Anderson: This is Mitchell Anderson, and I consent to this being recorded.

Domenico Ermanno Roberti: That's great, thanks. So, what is Plymouth Rock?

MA: Plymouth Rock is a project space that I founded and have run since 2014. Its main goal is to show that which is not being shown in Switzerland, in Zurich, or outside Switzerland. It can be giving first exhibitions to Swiss artists, first exhibitions to international artists, or pulling in perspectives from elsewhere in Europe or the world that aren't getting shown here.

DER: And where does its name come from?

MA: I had a different name like up until a week before I had to set up the e-mail address for the first show and then I switched it. Plymouth Rock is a mythical site in the States where the pilgrims landed. Supposedly this rock was stepped on when they disembarked. So, I guess 6 years ago I was making some kind of joke about a reverse colonization. I mean, in the end, as in any kind of space perhaps, this is about my ideas, about my taste. I can compete with myself against that but at the end, it's about pushing what I want to see more of in the cultural world.

DER: Because you are actually the solo person behind the space, correct?

MA: Yeah.

DER: You are the one that writes the program and selects the artist. How do you choose what to show?

MA: If I hear or see something that's going to be interesting or something that I'm interested in, or maybe some artists that I don't understand or that I think maybe I can understand through giving them a show, providing this larger opportunity they haven't had, this is what I'd go for first. Other times there are people that I've wanted to work with or art that I've loved since I was a teenager in my 20s. I mean, it depends. In the last year, I gave the first show to a Swiss artist, Zurich-based Mohamed Almusibli, but also did the first show in Europe of Tony Feher, who died of AIDS related illness in 2016 and was an influential sculptor in America, though his work never crossed over the Atlantic. And then within that I get to play with exhibition format through a group shows, which is something fun for me to play with.

DER: You are also a practicing artist yourself; you work on a different range of mediums. So how do you combine your own practice, and do you see it complementary to what you are doing here?

MA: No. I know people that think that their curatorial work is part of their practice. This is not me, this is like a hobby for me. In the good, true sense of that word. It's a way to interact with the wider art world, to get out of my studio and outside of my head. If I see a work that looks like mine, in some ways that I understand the work very clearly. I'm less likely to show it here. If I understood the work exactly, then what would I learn from it? It wouldn't work. So, it's usually work that I'm interested in learning more about.

DER: And would you define this space rooted within the Zurich art scene?

MA: The Kanton and city repeatedly refuse to grant Plymouth Rock any funding, but still, it's a Zurich-based space. That being said, I think I make a big effort to balance it with an international position. And over the period of six years, I think it's been very balanced. In order to keep a total audience engaged, I make a mix. So, when you come here as a visitor, you never know what you're going to get. It can be a show of someone that you have known for a long time. Or it could be somebody that's known elsewhere in the world and you discover here. Or it can be a crazy group show. I don't rely on sales, I've paid for it almost totally from my own pocket, so I have the freedom to experiment and I allow the artists that freedom too.

DER: Some artists you have exhibited have since gone a long way – thinking for example at Jon Rafman.

MA: I have good taste [laughs] and I have my ears and eyes looking outward from this provincial city. My relationship with these artists usually finishes after the show. In the exhibition way. It continues as a friendship. This is why I couldn't run a gallery for example. This idea of continuously working with one artist. There's something very lazy for me in that, but also the needed independence of an art space where you do a show and you can move on to something else. You know, I'm not tied by having to make lifelong commitments.

DER: And how much of you is actually in these shows and how much is the work of the artists themselves?

MA: It depends on what the artist needs. Primarily I want the show to be good and necessary. I want it to make sense with the artist, but sometimes we don't agree on that. But that's also where the very interesting conversations happen. I want it to be a project space show, the location here is a bit shittier than you'd get with an institution and this can be the chance to take more experiments and more chances.

DER: I am thinking about your locker room show.

MA: That was a pretty great show, but I was also lucky. Before moving to where I am now, I shared a larger, industrial space that had been a boxing gym. We built walls and had our studios in the main space, but the storage units were actual locker rooms for the boxing gym. There were built-in showers, built-in lockers. It was a locker room. So, the whole time I had that space, I was playing with this idea in my head. I was reacting to a situation. There's no way I would have done this anywhere else, it'd have required a big budget, it would have been so wasteful. I'm really committed to having a kind of economy of means. What we have is here already and we react to that. We're not going to build another situation. That's something for the institution to do, if that's interesting. I don't think it's always necessary for art.

DER: How do you position Plymouth Rock next to the larger art institutions in the city? Do you feel your program questions or perhaps complements theirs, or the other way around?

MA: This isn't possible but, ideally, I would not need to do any of this. Ideally these things would get shown on their own. But this isn't the case, this isn't the reality.

I'm not competing with institutions such as the Kunsthalle or the Kunsthau, because the styles are different, and also the situations. I guess our works are complementary. At times, of course, there are shows that are done here where I think they could have been in a bigger museum. But part of doing this is also having curatorial positions to see the works. And in the past six years I have learned over time that people did see things here that ended up in bigger shows later. So, we are making small changes here. We're opening people's eyes, but also the other way around, I learn a lot from their work.

DER: Do you have a long-term vision within your work?

MA: Well, I'd like to see the artists and the works I show also in larger situations. If I believe in it, I believe in it to the logical conclusion. But Plymouth Rock is a project space, it's not that if all of a sudden I get three million dollars I build a new large building for it. I don't think that there's that kind of ambition. Its power, its vitality comes from being a project space.

DER: So could you still see yourself doing this in 10 years?

MA: Yeah. I mean, originally, I started it because I wasn't having so many shows at the time. I was younger, so it was a way of filling my time with something related to art when I wasn't having exhibitions of my own things. There are times now when I have a few shows at the same time, when it becomes kind of stressful. But you just stay up eight hours longer and finish it.

DER: Next question would be to me how many personas Mitchell Anderson is, considering how many activities and roles you cover.

MA: Lots? I am an artist, I run a project space. I also write quite often for Art publications. I used to work for galleries, and I used to collect as well. I kept all of them very separate, professionally. I have a way of doing it in my head. But I am also playing videogames four hours a day, so there's probably something else that I can add to it too, if it was interesting. I take Plymouth Rock very seriously, but also very casual. I'm not going to spend time polishing and shining it. It is what it is, and I think that's enough to get the art across.

DER: And would you ever show your own work here?

MA: It's happened. If it makes perfect sense, which it never does, I'd do it, but it's really rare. One time, in 2015, I had a group show and one of my pieces just made perfect sense. I was curating the show and it was clear that this piece was also related to it. There's an idea that this is inappropriate, but it's only inappropriate if it doesn't fit perfectly. You just have to question yourself endlessly. I'm not against it, but I think it's difficult.

DER: Who's your work addressed to and who's your public?

MA: You know, the obvious kind of cheap answer would be that I do it for myself. And that's not untrue. But it's also a lie because I work actively to have as many people come to see the work in person as possible. So, I would say people interested in art within Zurich, within Switzerland. And then there's also the international group of people throughout Europe, in New York and L.A. that also actively look and check on images online or come when they're visiting. I think they're all interesting and important in their own ways. At the end of the day, if I like someone's work, and I think it's good, I want to see it reproduced elsewhere. I want to form connections with people to have that show be shown in institutions and galleries elsewhere in the world.

DER: So your work is addressing to the art world specifically, not actively trying to engage a larger public.

MA: Why do they have to be separate? I mean, we have opening hours. There are people that I don't know that come in every week. Maybe one or two, but that feels like a million for me, this is a small space. But the power of the offspace is in its ability to highlight something for someone with more power to show. My job is to show it to somebody who has more resources, who can execute the grander work.

DER: And how do you record and archive what takes place here?

MA: I have everything photographed. Usually I write a text for every exhibition, somewhere between a press release and an exhibition, or more lyrical text. And this is all saved on the website. I save one or two paper copies, as a small archive, but for what I don't know.

DER: As a queer artist, is sex, gender or race balance a specifically relevant issue for you?

MA: For the first two years, there was only one woman shown. And then, over the next year and a half, just with the natural occurrences I was able to overturn that, since then the gender parity became equal. It's not something that I'm actively sitting thinking about, but I am interested over a period of years to look at this retrospectively. Because if this wasn't equal, I'd be questioning myself why.

There's kind of a moratorium in my head on working with straight guys right now. Opportunities exist elsewhere bountifully for them. There were also times where I hadn't shown a gay artist for four years and then I showed three or four in a row. So, I mean, it's like everything has a way of balancing out naturally when the opportunity exists.

DER: You always mirror to yourselves the questions your shows raise.

MA: A group show is a good place to talk about these kinds of issues. If I have to put a group show together and I have eight men and only one woman in mind, then there's something wrong with the show or it has to be what the show is about. The locker room show was a show about the male locker room, it had no women in it. To me it didn't make sense to include them. It was about men and the homosexual gaze in the locker room. I feel comfortable in defending that, there was a reason for it.

It still is true that men have the most visibility. And I do want to show here positions that aren't getting the visibility they deserve. It's the same with mediums, for example for painting. I have had three painting shows in here, which is an extraordinarily low out of over 50 shows.

DER: Fundamentally this space IS you. But why Zurich?

MA: Because this is where I ended up. I was waiting tables in Marfa, Texas. Then a friend called me for a job of two weeks here. I stayed two weeks. Then a month. Eventually I was living here.

DER: Is there an artist that you wish you had shown here and for some reasons you couldn't?

MA: On the basis of economics it's been very rare that I've been able to fly people over. Normally I rely on people who are in town already. There's tons of people I'd like to bring here. But in a way it wouldn't reflect the space as much. I don't know if the space would be better with more money. Probably It would be just easier.

Thinking on a big reach, who should reflect that at a museum here: Jim Hodes. He made really beautiful, poetic sculptures such as the spiderwebs, dealing with this kind of poetry of loss and AIDS. Really beautiful and political work. But I'd rather see it at the Kunsthau, and I shouldn't have to do it.

DER: You are not openly political although, based on what you are telling me, your program seeks to be political when it tries to subvert some sort of established economics within the art world.

MA: My politics would be expressed with what I am showing. I could never sleep at night if I exhibited a fascist here. I think about the space as a way of launching a reproduction of ideas and images into the world and I want to reproduce what I believe in. But the basic thing of showing something that's not being shown is a critique of what it is currently being shown elsewhere.

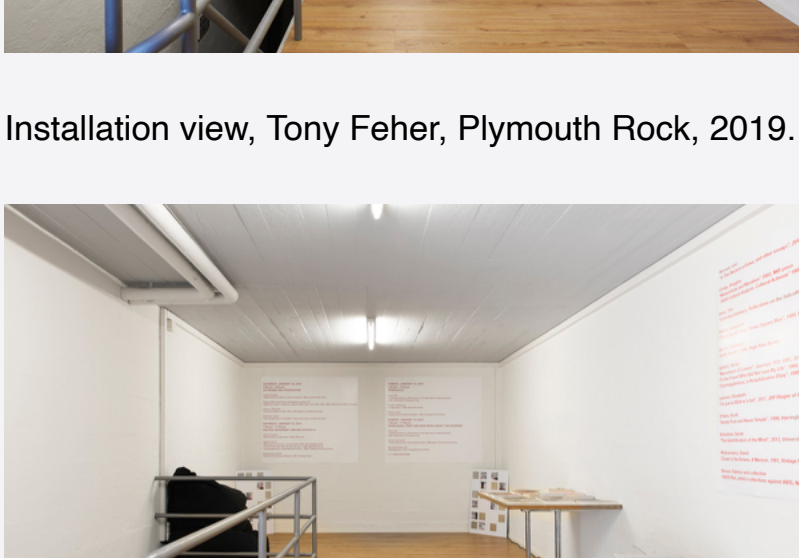
DER: Who are the people that you feel support this project the most?

MA: I think there's a difference between a friend who comes to an opening and somebody who supports the artist. The types of people who support the project are the same who support me as an artist. There's a large group of curators who come almost every time. And there's people that live in New York who every time I send an email out, I write back and forth with. That's also a different form of support, making you feel that the work you do has been seen.

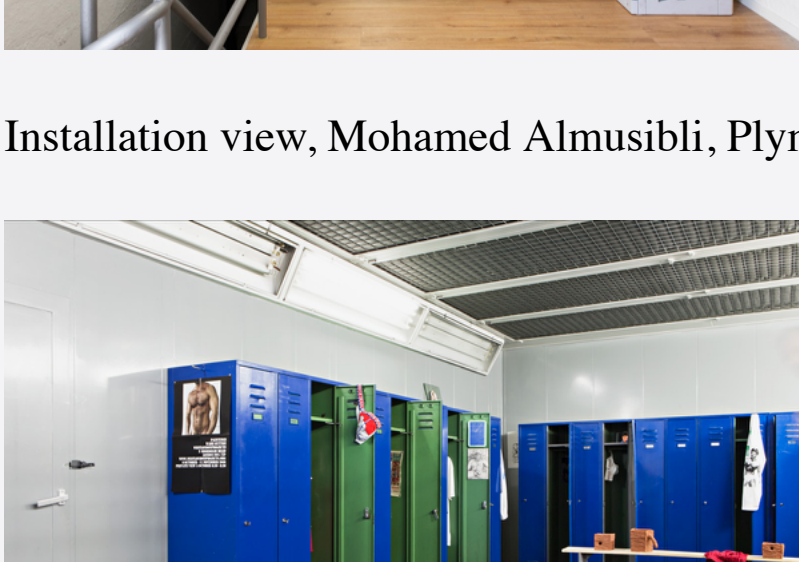
DER: What I enjoy about Plymouth Rock is that is pretty much a matter of what you are and what you like. Which is different from how many other off spaces operates. Can you mention any other place in the city that raises your interest?

MA: What separates me, which isn't in itself a better thing, is the freedom of my program. I can switch from a young artist to a historic position, then a weird group show. It's the inconsistency that keeps me interested, and I think that's what sets the space apart.

The ones I visit consistently are Longtang here Milieu in Bern, Cherish in Geneva.



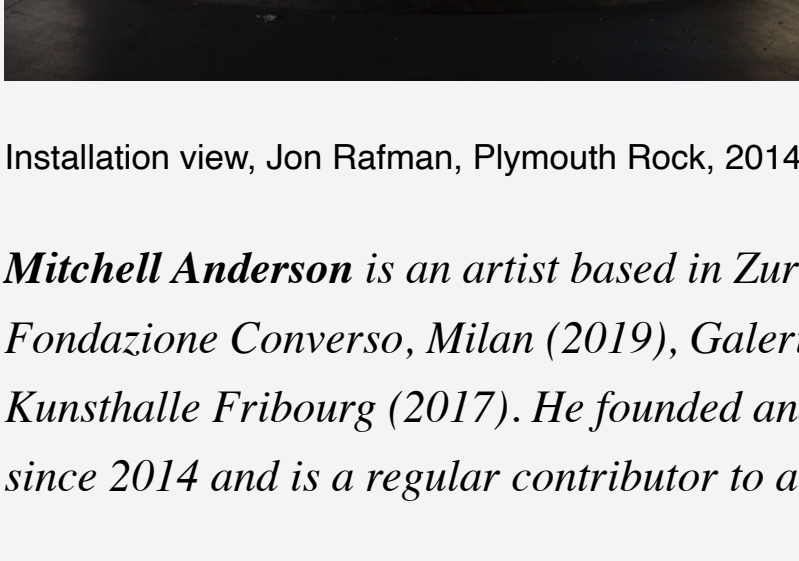
Installation view, Tony Feher, Plymouth Rock, 2019. Photo: James Bantone



Installation view, Mohamed Almusibli, Plymouth Rock, 2019. Photo: James Bantone



Installation view, *The Locker Room Show*, Plymouth Rock, 2017. Photo: Gina Folly



Installation view, Jon Rafman, Plymouth Rock, 2014. Photo: Douglas Mandry

*Mitchell Anderson is an artist based in Zurich. Recent solo exhibitions include **Fiducellae Converso**, Milan (2019), **Galerie Marcia Bernheim** (2018) and **FriArt Kunsthalle Fribourg** (2017). He founded and runs the alternative space, **Plymouth Rock**, since 2014 and is a regular contributor to a variety of international arts publications.*

*Domenico Ermanno Roberti is an independent curator based in Zurich. His research focuses on the links between space and architectures of power, most recently on the notion of the interface as an agent in the exhibition mechanism of the work of art. In addition to being part of Roehrs & Boetsch, he is a member of the curatorial team of the **OnCurating Space** in Zurich.*

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