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## F.U.V. with Bob Bicknell-Knight of isthisit?

Adapting Roman architect Vitruvius's three characteristics of good architecture, outlined in his treatise 'De Architectura' more than 2,000 years ago, the F.U.V. interview series builds discourse around online curatorial platforms and projects, addressing the experience of UX design as well as the human structures that underpin the production and maintenance of these spaces.

Firmatis (aka Durability) — It should stand up robustly and remain in good condition; Utilitas (aka Utility) — It should be useful and function well for the people using it; Venustatis (aka Beauty) — It should delight people and raise their spirits.

Each question is marked with a F, a U, or a V to denote which of Vitruvius's three principals it was written in relation to. Text in bold is by the interviewee. Collectively the F.U.V. series intends to explore multiple interpretations of these terms by focusing on various facets of curatorial practice online.



Homepage of isthisit?, showing details of offline exhibition 'Algorithmic Bias'.

In the opening interview of the F.U.V. series, we spoke with the artist <u>Bob</u> Bicknell-Knight about his work as co-founder of isthisit?, an online gallery he founded in 2016 that has grown and expanded into multiple online and offline programmes and means of production. Amongst the first wave of what we may term a 'platform builder gallery' - meaning an online art space developed using a service such as Wix, Wordpress, SquareSpace, Cargo Collective etc isthisit? has become a notable hub in which emerging and established artists co-exist in group exhibitions addressing various facets of capitalism and technology. Originally producing an online exhibition every month, Bicknell-Knight's gallery has recently slowed production to focus on commissioning sets of thematically linked shows and publications, moving from a frenetic model to one that is more sustainable for both the artist and the curator. Our interview with Bicknell-Knight addresses a range of subjects, including the design functionality and content manager system the gallery uses, to how the gallery functions as a networking tool and has become recognised as a brand in its own right.

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(U) Exhibitions on IsthIsit? opt to employ one of three orientations that affect the user engagement. Y axis and X axis shows such as <u>Please don't stand in the middle of the road waiting for me to get you on camera</u> (2019) and <u>Piper in the Woods</u> (2020) restrict movement to vertical or horizontal scrolling respectively; whilst exhibitions such as <u>Office Space</u> (2020) combine XY cartesian movement to create a more exploratory, hovering, sensations. When planning a show, what informs your choice between these formats? And what qualities do each embody for you?

So I think I'll start off this conversation by saying that the isthisit? site resides on the website builder Wix, which comes with many limitations. I originally used Squarespace back in 2013 for my personal artist website, but moved away due to it stopping you from having any flexibility whatsoever, simply providing you with a choice of several templates and not much else. So Wix, for me, is the best of a bad bunch. The site has such a large archive embedded within it at this point that it would take quite some time to archive and import everything onto a custom-built site.

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Online gallery founded by Pita Arreola-Burns & Elliott Burns. Research blog exploring the ideologies, systems, architecture and design of digital art spaces.



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A screen capture isthisit?'s Wix content-management-system, showing the installation of 'Networked Visions'
(2020–2021).

Anyway, to begin to answer your question, the different exhibition formats that you describe have been slowly developed by learning the limitations and ways to exploit the builder, working with and against its website tools. As I've continued to curate online the way in which I want people to interact with the exhibitions I organise has changed, especially since the pandemic and the radical shift in the way in which we view art presented in an online setting. As someone who grew up in a world where attention spans are rapidly shrinking due to social media and the internet, with everything and anything just a click away, I used to put together shows where the work was easy to see. A visitor would enter the website, click on the show and see the work, much like the experience of browsing an artist's personal website, with an additional sprinkle of curatorial text.

Since those early beginnings I realised that, even if you put the work front and centre, it really doesn't mean that online visitors will stay and engage with the work for a meaningful amount of time. So, I guess in response to that, my curatorial style changed, creating these shows that purposefully hid the work, requiring visitors to actively engage and pursue the art on show, rather than just having it served up on a platter. This is where the orientations that you mentioned come into play, asking the audience to scroll, click and explore through an exhibition. Like with the artwork I produce, working in a multidisciplinary way, I always try to put concepts first, so the format of (or how you interact with) the show should function in tandem with the conceptual nature of the exhibition.



'Please don't stand in the middle of the road waiting for me to get you on camera' (2019) ft: Aram Bartholl, Petra Cortright, Benjamin Grosser, Joe Hamilton and Pilvi Takala.

<u>Please don't stand in the middle of the road waiting for me to get you on camera</u> (2019) was a show about how human beings are increasingly reliant on digital technologies, using the framework of a Google Maps plotted journey to present several works about digital identities and hypercapitalism. This show was very open, requiring the audience to scroll up and down, hovering on various icons to reveal the different artworks. Looking back, it's a very simple layout and exhibition, before I discovered how to use the X axis on Wix, let alone the XY axis in tandem.

I think <u>Office Space</u> (2020) was one of the first shows I produced that utilised the XY axis, after working out that, by zooming out in the Wix software, you could do a lot more off the page. This, however, came with a few limitations. The first being you could only add content to the right and down of the page, and were unable to choose where a visitor to the site begins their journey. It also forces everything to the right of the page to have a white background. <u>Office Space</u> (2020) was all about the aesthetics of the corporate office, placing the audience into a confusing endless corridor like space, so having the background white throughout worked well.





'Office Space' (2020) ft: Lydia Blakely, Naomi Fitzsimmons, Johnny Izatt-Lowry, Perce Jerrom and Lilli Mathod.

A lot of the time with these online shows I usually pin down what I want the layout to be purely through experimenting on the platform, considering the concept of the show and working out a way of integrating that into the way in which the audience interacts with the site. So when I discovered you could use the X axis, but only with a white background, this fitted into the conceit of the show and complimented the concept of being lost in this white space too. I then used the XY axis exploration again in Networked Visions (2020), a show that featured several artworks hidden amongst a connected network of images and videos.

<u>Piper in the Woods</u> (2020) only used the X axis, and was inspired by the Philip K Dick short story of the same name. In this show I purposefully added a background colour to the web page so that, when you scrolled to the right, you would enter a white space and encounter the different works in the show, kind of like turning the pages of a book. This was an attempt at mimicking the narrative of the short story, about a soldier who deviates from the norm and ventures into an unknown forest, with the audience journeying outside of the web page and into the white space.

So with the shows I curate I usually try to bond the concept of the show to how the audience is going to interact with it. Some of these exhibitions are more successful than others, but more often than not it is very much concept driven. I like curating shows online because of how flexible and experimental you can be. A lot of the time when curating in physical spaces, money and the limitations of the space can really constrict your ideas and what you want to do with the space.



'Piper in the Woods' (2020) ft: John Butler, Stine Deja, Emily Mulenga, Tamsin Snow and Petra Szemán.

## $\boxtimes$

(F) Beyond organising your own online exhibitions you frequently invite external artists, curators and collectives to produce shows within isthisit?, ourselves included back in 2017. Generally, how do you structure these relations and how do you familiarise guests with a content management system they might not have previously used?

I started inviting external people to be a part of the project back in 2016. One of the primary reasons why I started isthisit? was to broaden my creative network, so inviting others to work on the site in some way was a key part of that. The first person involved was Helena Kate Whittingham, at the time an artist and curator, who originally got in touch with me to put together a show on the site. If I remember correctly that's what inspired me to start inviting people. I then sent out a bunch of emails, rather naively, to various collectives and young artists/curators I found online, inviting them to guest curate shows.

Back then I was curating a new show every week, but as time moved forwards that became increasingly difficult to keep up with. These days I take bigger gaps between shows, preferring to work with artists on the website only when funding is available, so having guests curate shows on the site has taken a back seat. I still have an ongoing open call on the site, so if you have an idea for a show and are interested in putting it together yourself you can apply, but that's very rare as I firmly believe in paying artists for their time and energy.



In moting to require whether you would like to be a good constor of an online gallery that i manage called othoct. The platform features monthly exhibitors containing a warst of different works, showcoing emerging to mid-career artists.

I'm coverily puring together a recise of counters that large in their own withis and consept to the virtual pales, salting the inthe spees already exhabithed at prescationable large to put together their men inthe withinties to be inverted in the monthly program of counts, the majority or which attempt to interrupt what an online gallery to and larges to be, with the spees functioning as an experimental platform that hopes to facilitate the vision of an independent counter or organization.

A redacted email from isthisit?, dated 08 January 2018, inquiring about the possibility of a guest curating a show for the site.

When I did invite people, I worked with them in a variety of ways. If they were London based we would usually meet and chat about the show, sometimes spending hours working together on our laptops to organise the layout and integrate the work onto the site. More often, however, they were outside of London, so a lot of the communication was done over email. I used to love emails, and cherished writing them, but now I kind of wish I had scheduled more video calls. Although I've worked with hundreds of people through the platform, this has mostly occurred online, and I doubt that many of them could match my name to my face. Perhaps that's my fault for not posting photos of myself online ahal It would have been nice though, to have physically connected more with these people that I worked with in the past. You live and learn I guess!

Anyway, when they were based outside of London I would either put together the shows myself, being instructed by the guest, or enable access on the site to the guest to organise the show themselves. When I put together the shows it was a fairly collaborative process, working around the limitations of the site to correspond with their vision. I would usually advise them to sign up to Wix, which has a free plan, to check out for what you could do on the site. Every situation was different, but this was the general pattern.

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(F) It'd be interesting to understand what the trigger point was for shifting the economic foundations of isthisit?. Was the decision to create exhibitions only when funding could be secured linked to developments in your personal artistic practice?

It was a bit to do with that, combined with receiving funding for the first time. I feel that once you've been able to pay people properly for their time it's impossible to move backwards. At that point it feels inherently immoral, and makes you think that, if you've got funding once, why not try again and continue to properly pay the artists and writers you work with. When I applied for funding from the Arts Council in 2020 it was a few months into the pandemic, I'd lost both of my paying jobs and it was the first time that I had even thought about applying to ACE.

There's so much that surrounds applying for funding in the UK. I remember hearing a lot about the complicated forms and how improbable it was that you'd be successful, which was probably part of what stopped me from applying until it was the pandemic and I had no other regular source of income. Luckily I was successful, and feel that that has changed how I see working with artists through the isthisit? site. As I was successful I now see that it's a possibility for me and the platform to receive funding again in the future. I also feel like I've established isthisit? enough to take larger pauses between shows. I no longer feel the need to curate a new exhibition every week.

Unlike our previous online exhibitions, which can be viewed in our archive, the four online exhibitions in the Arts Council funded project will not be viewable after the exhibition dates. This exhibition is now closed.

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Statement published in press release pages of four recent ACE supported exhibitions

There was also a shift in my own practice during this time, selling more work and being paid to be a part of exhibitions. This changed how I value my own time, and broadened my perspective on the issue of funding.

In the past I've received a lot of negativity from people around not being able to pay artists who I worked with through the platform. This wasn't a factor in choosing to only work with people when funding is available now, but it's something that I do still think about a lot. Obviously I agree with the sentiment that you should only work with people when you can pay them, but if you're at

the beginning of your career how else do you start working with artists? You can pay thousands of pounds to undergo an MA, or maybe apply to work as an unpaid intern at a gallery with no control over who they work with, but back in 2016 those weren't really avenues I could take, let alone ones that I actively wanted to pursue. Sadly with no real experience or knowledge you can't really be successful in applying for funding in the UK. Everyone has to start somewhere.

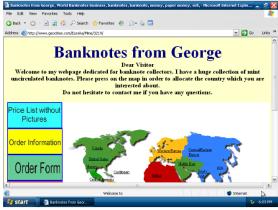
I think not paying artists is such a prevalent thing in the arts, and is something as a young artist I have a lot of experience with. I hope that in the future this is a practice that's eradicated, but looking at how the conservative government has continually stripped back funding for the arts in the UK over the past 12 years, I don't think it's going to improve anytime soon.

(U) Like many other arts platforms of our generation, isthisit? is built within a template builder platform, Cargo Collective in our case and Wix in yours. You've already mentioned some of the limitations you have encountered whilst working within the structures set by the platform, are there any other common challenges and what affordances has it granted that you might not have had if building a site from the ground up?

Yeah, so I've already talked a little about the limitations of using Wix, like the use of the X axis and not being able to choose where to 'begin' on a page. There are lots of other painful elements about Wix, like not being able to customise your mouse icon, not being able to have sound on a video that's the wallpaper of the web page, and being able to have videos on the site automatically play, but in doing so they have to be muted.

There are a ton of other problems with Wix, but with around 200 or so web pages I just don't have the capacity or knowledge to build a website from the ground up and import over all of the content from the site. As I don't have that much knowledge about building websites I don't really know what I'm missing out on by using a website builder. I'm sure that's a problem, but learning to build websites is sadly not at the top of my list of things to do and learn, and I wouldn't really want to rely on someone else to build a website for me, leaving me with even less control than I currently have. Even though there are many limitations with Wix, I feel like I have learned to work in and around those.

I'm sure at some point in the future Wix will be swallowed up, and millions of websites will vanish into oblivion, but I think that's the same for many website builders, and the internet in general.



Banknotes from George' GeoCities site, archived as part of the <u>One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age Photo Op</u> project by Olia Lialina and Dravan Espenschied.

(V) The notion of Wix being "swallowed up" recalls what happened to GeoCities, which was acquired by Yahoo in 1999 and discontinued ten years later in 2009, killing off some 38 million pages. With the death of GeoCities an aesthetic period of the internet was effectively turned into history and lost its living status. Pages have been archived and styles evoked, but a new visual professionalism took over (of which Wix etc are partially responsible). Do you think we're witnessing a similar endgame moment for a generation of practice built on the likes of Wordpress/SquareSpace/Wix? And will we retrospectively be able to classify a period of online-galleries that were reliant on or realised because of these services?

Well, as someone who uses Wix, I hope not aha! But the more people talk about Web 3.0 and the metaverse, and as the internet continues to evolve, it is an eventuality that will definitely happen. To rely on Wix or any other website

builder or hosting company, is giving over a lot of control. As I said before, the isthisit? site has over 200 pages. To transfer everything over to a new website would be slightly beyond me, not impossible but incredibly time consuming, so for now I stay with Wix. I'm pretty pessimistic about the future, so can only really envision that the internet will continue to be flattened by tech companies. I know a lot of people have hope for what's coming, the continued rise of cryptocurrency and DAOs, but I'm not embedded enough in those communities to have my mind changed.

I think there's definitely been a lot of online spaces over the past few years that have used the website builders you mention. I wonder what percentage of those were created in early 2020? Nowadays, rather than using builders that aren't necessarily made for organising online exhibitions like Wix, people seem to be graduating to purpose-built sites like New Art City, or buying plots in Decentraland to show off their NFT collection. Both types provide the user with a set of tools to work within, but these newer spaces that are purpose-built feel, as I said, like they're flattening what it means to curate online. In saying this, though, I'm sure people said the same thing about website builders ten years ago.



NFT collection published on Decentral and by Reddit user  $\underline{HashHoundz}$ 

In 2020 I curated <u>an online show</u> with Dirk Paesmans, one half of the art collective <u>JODI</u>, for <u>Upstream Gallery</u>. Dirk coded the website himself, which basically ended up being a long list of hyperlinks, both to art and various related ephemera on the internet. It was lovely to work with him, an artist who's heralded as one of the early Net.Art pioneers, and to see how he's really interested in current online art spaces and contemporary digital art. I think if I'd have been making art since the 90s about, and on, the internet I'd be acutely offended by the idea of website builders.



(F) You alluded to this earlier, part of isthisit?'s durability is drawn from the platform's ability to network with a huge number of artists and creatives, currently listed as totaling over 800. To what extent do you feel online curatorial programmes benefit from maximising network potentials? And do you see there being an ideological difference to traditional brick-and-mortar galleries that might opt to invest in smaller numbers of artists?

This is an aspect of online spaces that I'm a little cautious about, especially with the rise of online galleries and projects since the beginning of 2020. Like all spaces, on and offline, one of the biggest problems is getting people to actually come and see the exhibition or event that you've organised. The more people you work with, the more your network grows and, supposedly, the more people will take the time to see the experiences you organise. The more people you involve in your project, the more people will share it and see it. And with online spaces the process of involving and inviting lots of artists, as I've already spoken about, is far simpler than for physical experiences. You can put together sweeping survey shows, which is great for the curator, who is more often than not praised for such curatorial endeavours. As an artist who has been involved in those kinds of shows, however, you're usually lost in a mass of artwork with no hope of being found.

2021/2022



the fifth edition of the wrong biennale, entitled nº5, featured 2400+ artists and curators, 140+ pavilions and embassies online at thewrong.tv and broadcasted on cable tv at canaliso.pt from november 1st, 2021 to mereh—ist,2022 may 1st, 2022 with ambassadors in amsterdam, baku, belgrade, belo horizonte, bengaluru, berlin, bogotā, bologna, brussels, budapest, buenos aires, cagnano varano, calgary, chicago, copenhagen, foggia, frankfurt am main, gallipoli, guadalajara, hangploui, kanchanaburi, kolkata, köln, lesina, lila, montreal, moscow, new york city, oakland, osaka, paris, polignaro a mare, porto, porto alegre, rio de janetro, san sebastián, santa cruz de tenerife, santiago de chile, são paulo, seoul, sunderland,

Webpage from The Wrong Biennale detailing the participation of 2400+ artists and curators in the 2021/2022 edition. Fragment of overall list.

It's for this reason why I kind of stay away from curating those kinds of shows these days, thinking less about the number of artists in favour of focusing more on the overall concept and working with a selected few. Obviously these large exhibitions happen in offline contexts too, mostly in institutional spaces but also in small artist run and commercial galleries as well, but the physical nature of those shows changes that relationship slightly. It has similar issues, but, bearing in mind what I've already talked about in relation to online shows and the lack of time that people spend engaging in digital spaces, those problems are amplified in the online realm.

Reflecting on what I've been developing with isthisit? over the past six years, beginning with working with lots of artists (the <u>first physical show</u> I curated in 2016 was a group show consisting of 22 artists packed into my small bedroom), to now curating three or four person exhibitions, I think I'm transitioning to the traditional brick-and-mortar working method. Building relationships with artists, alongside growing and evolving with them, is so much more beneficial and exciting than working with hundreds of artists who you may or may not remember in the years to come.



'is thisit? issue 1' (2017) launched in conjunction with a group show exhibition at Serf Gallery.

(V) In regard to brand identity, isthisit? has grown multiple streams of production over the years, online and offline shows, a residency, an interview series, and books. Can you speak to how this breadth of activity has worked together to increase brand recognition?

Quite honestly the idea of building an identity or brand recognition is otherworldly to me, and really wasn't something I was thinking about when starting isthisit?, or over the years that followed. I didn't start isthisit? to make money or to build a brand. If that was the goal I have failed drastically! Actually, thinking back, an early show I curated at Serf in Leeds was actively responding to the first issue of the magazine (now book) series and its exploration into money-orientated experiences. It featured prints of the magazine, alongside the logo on hats, t-shirts, mugs and pens. It was a critique of those capitalist ideas though, rather than actively attempting to turn the platform into a recognisable brand.

I've spoken a lot in the past about why I started isthisit?, to broaden my network and explore all the aspects of curating. So expanding the platform into an online residency and a book series was just that, experimenting with what a curator is and could be. I haven't had any formal training in curating, so this was my way of educating myself, learning by doing.

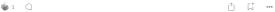


'Character Building Experience' (2017) by Bex Ilsley, available as a digital edition via isthisit?

Last year I actually applied to a programme, a business programme, about developing products for market. The programme paid you minimum wage over a six-month period to develop an idea and make it into a business. I applied with the idea of isthisit?, turning it into a company or commodity of sorts. The organisers were interested, but coming from a business perspective, one that had been honed by starting literally over a hundred companies (which had, of course, all crashed and burned), ultimately didn't know how to respond to isthisit? and couldn't accommodate my platform into their programme. What interested me most in the programme was that the organisers seemed like the epitome of everything I hated, conservative hypercapitalists, and so I saw my application and being part of it as an artistic investigation, but ultimately it wasn't meant to be.

I like working in all these different methods though, and especially enjoy producing the books, as having a physical, easily digestible, manifestation of what you do is a fantastic way of inaugurating people into your project, but I  $\,$ don't really see isthisit? as a brand. Some people know what I do, most people don't. I'm sure there's a lot more I could be doing to establish isthisit?. I see a lot of online platforms that were started later than mine building a much more fleshed out brand and gaining a larger following than I have, but at the end of the day I'm only one person, and have my own artist practice too, so I'm content to grow and work at my own pace.

A big thank you to  $\underline{\mathsf{Bob}}$  for taking the time to answer our questions and for kicking off the F.U.V. interview series. Next up we'll be speaking to the Italian art curator Virginia Bianchi about her eponymously named gallery, specifically considering the move to online arts platforms adopting sales based models  $\,$ and the AR mediation of digital art into physical spaces.



## More from Off Site Project





## Bad Manners - A review of two words

On two counts this is a departure from the writing usually published here. First, the subject matter is not in any way digital and second, it centres on two words of the exhibition text. Bad Manners[1] was an exhibition at...





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