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**Age of
Artists**

Interview with

Anthony Lowe

Nobitz near Altenburg / August 20, 2014

Interview was conducted by Dirk Dobiéy (Age of Artists, AoA) on August 20, 2014 in the workshop of painter Anthony Lowe in Nobitz, near Altenburg, Germany. This text is an edited version from November 2nd, 2014.

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Dirk Dobiéy: Why did you decide to become an artist?

Anthony Lowe: Well, I got really bad results in A Levels, a C or a D. I drew around the question – I missed the question, the problem that had been set by the exam board which was a study in fracture. I tried to combine two different times; I drew a knight in armor and a shopping mall. That's not what they wanted they wanted a study of knives and plates and stuff.

So that experience kind of convinced me that a career in art wasn't such a bad thing. So then I trained in Liverpool, a foundation course for a year, and decided I'd do painting. I messed around with 3-dimensional ideas and made some pretty horrible things. But then, I applied for a degree course, I wanted to go to Brighton but I didn't get into that. So then I went to Canada ? that was 1977-78. I spent some time hitchhiking, went to Mexico, spent some time in jail (the only time I've ever been in jail), where the police made it pretty clear that I had to "pay the bribe now, or wait until the judge got there and the bribe would be more expensive." That was a very interesting year, I survived, wasn't murdered, didn't end up in jail forever and I came back.

So then I got into Bristol Art College for 3 years and that went well, I got a first-class honors and that meant I could do a Master's. And I set my sights on the Royal College of Art and I didn't get in the first time. So I was doing dishwashing [jobs] and then I started a decorating firm with a friend from art school. That firm went on for at least 10 years. We employed people from art schools, and they were all self-employed. That made it easier for us, these people didn't want to be fully employed because they had their own interests. When we didn't need them, they'd vanish back into their studios and come to work when we needed them.

I didn't get into the Royal College the first time I applied, but I did get in the second time, and I went in 1983. I was there for three years, and came out in 1986. When I was there I saw a lot of things,

and one thing that really stuck in my head was an exhibition of East German painters.

I decided at some point I wanted to go to East Germany, the “Other Side of the Wall.” Through the Royal College, a professor I knew put me in touch with the East German embassy in London, and I met with the ambassador and decided to go through the channel of the British Council, who organized exchange students. In 1988 I went, and did an exchange for one year, but in the meantime I was working professionally as artist in Newcastle. I got out of London. There were a lot of ex-Royal College students in London but there were none in Newcastle, because Newcastle is horrible, or at least I found it so – it’s cold, windy, full of unemployment (always has been full of unemployment) – it’s a bit like Liverpool, and I don’t want to say any horrible things about Liverpool. They have a very good sense of humor in Liverpool.

I ended up coming to Leipzig in 1988, and I was influenced by Bernhard Heisig, a post-war painter from Leipzig. In my opinion, he is the best painter, if you can say there is one best-painter. I worked in Leipzig for a year, and I toured around East Germany. I’m basically a painter of cities. Then I went back to England when that ended, and I was teaching in an art college in Cheltenham. I had just come back from East Germany working in an art college near the spy center of Britain. I asked the British council if I could go back again, and they said I could because the program was coming to an end, as East Germany was about to disappear. So I arranged for my post as a teacher to be taken over. It was very difficult for me to get an East German painter as my substitute at that time, because everyone thought he was going to be a spy. But it worked out. And I came back here and worked for another year here and I did that for at least 4 or 5 years, and I ultimately decided to stay here. Everyone else was starting again, so it was a chance of a lifetime. England was a bit dire at that time, it was a time when all young British artists were all getting together. It wasn’t a great time for the arts, I have to say. There was a recession for everyone

apart from the bankers. It's only when the bankers have a recession that everyone notices.

Dirk Dobiéy: And so you stayed here and continued to work?

Anthony Lowe: I constantly took on painting, it's still my only source of income.

Dirk Dobiéy: You said you got a D in art school, and this is not such a good grade, and then you went to study art. Why did you choose it? Others would say "I got a bad grade, maybe I should go into science."

Anthony Lowe: I did think about becoming a vicar, or going to theological school, but - I didn't know this - in order to go to theological school, they really wanted you to believe in God. That seemed to be the pre-requisite. You had to believe in it before you studied it. So I decided not to do that.

Then, I thought about being in a tank regiment. That's strange, because [Bernhard] Heisig was in a tank regiment. Then I met a Sargent Major, and then I thought "God, if that's the public face of the army, what it is like when you get in there?" I suppose not all Sargent Majors are like that. But I decided against that.

So then I thought, "What about art school? That doesn't sound bad, that sounds like fun, even though I got a D in Art." And I still had good marks in other studies like geology.

Dirk Dobiéy: How much was the environment, or Heisig or anything else supporting you in this decision?

Anthony Lowe: You're lucky if you meet a couple of good teachers, especially in the arts. But you've got to really want to do it because there are so many easier ways to earn money. Unless you're really lucky. Let's face it there are very few successful artists in the

world, comparatively. I would say I started to get successful (not like the big artists), but started to actually make a living from painting after I had been here, in Germany, for 12 years. It was the year 2000, and I had started in 1988. I moved here and built this studio in 2000 and I was taken seriously by a bank; that was very important. When you say you're an artist, people start whistling through their teeth, sticking their tongues in their cheeks and are skeptical. You're not only self-employed, you're also an artist.

Dirk Dobiéy: What did you do for those 12 years to sustain yourself?

Anthony Lowe: Worked as a painter. I don't have a gallery and that's odd, most painters have a gallery. It has its good points and bad points, the bad point is you always have to find your own work, there's no one running around for you. But the good point is you don't have to pay this guy a commission and he always takes 100% and doubles the price. The best advertisement for a visual artist is his visual art - that's all you can do. And the best picture is not the sole picture, it's to sell the picture before it's painted. They all do that now the galleries - present it on the wall. But what I do is listen to what the people want. They don't come to me unless my style is what they want. They don't come to me for hyper-realistic paintings.

Dirk Dobiéy: Do you have a position?

Anthony Lowe: I'm a painter of cities. Very simply.

Dirk Dobiéy: How has that developed?

Anthony Lowe: That came out of just studying art, and thinking about it quite intensively. And thinking a lot of crap, probably, at the same time. The city is a really good subject, because it's something that everyone can see. If you're painting a city, the city of London, you have 8 million critics, because they live there. It's a good way to start to talk to your public, or develop a public to

start. Everyone can look at it and say “I don’t like that” or “that’s great - I’ve never seen a city presented like that before.” The city is the conduit where my art meets other people.

Dirk Dobiéy: Is it important for you to meet people and talk with them about your work?

Anthony Lowe: I don’t talk, I paint.

Dirk Dobiéy: Is the people’s feedback important?

Anthony Lowe: Yes, it’s not just feedback it’s putting hands in pockets. It’s people saying “That’s so good, I like that so much I want to buy it.” The economic side is everything.

Dirk Dobiéy: How did you decide to do cities? And in the way you paint them? Other people would say it’s a brand. A style. How was that defined?

Anthony Lowe: That comes out of doing it, it’s the process of making things. Cities are big things and pictures can be quite small. The average work I sell is about 1 meter 50 by 1 meter 20 or 90cm by 1 meter 20. That may be a bit weird, that an artist confines himself to sizes, but that’s how it works out at the moment. I’ve done really big things, but those sizes are basically the daily sizes I produce here.

Dirk Dobiéy: What’s your working process? How do you start with nothing and then end up with a painting that someone puts on a wall or is in an exhibition?

Anthony Lowe: You asked me how I paint cities. Cities are big and pictures are small. I have a tendency to start to push and pack things into a picture, I just want to get a bit more of a city into a picture. At the Royal College of Art, a professor said I was an agoraphobic, because I leave no spaces in the paintings - they’re

packed. And they are, they're packed and twisted - I want to get the entire town into a picture, even if the canvas is one meter 20 by 90 cm, I want the entire town in it.

If I'm painting a room, I don't want just all four walls, I want the flooring and the ceiling, like you're in a closed box and you can see everything. That's my ambition, to show things differently. If I'm painting a landscape, I could paint a traditional landscape, but that doesn't interest me. If I walk outside, into the garden, I can see the sky in front of me, behind me and to the side of me. So why should the sky be at the top of a picture, when, in reality, the sky is not at the top, it's also at my side? And that's a useful discovery.

Sometimes you don't have enough room for the sky at the top of a picture but you have room at the bottom, but that's figuratively correct. Everyone goes on about perspective but that's just one way of looking at things.

Practically, that's what my objectives are in my work. The first thing I always do is stretch the canvas. I always stretch them myself, I don't buy pre-stretched finished canvas, and I stretch them myself and prime them. Then I make sure I have all the information I need. I used to use a sketchbook and draw a hell of a lot. But then in 1998, photography got very cheap, so I started using a camera. Since 1998 or 2000, I started using a camera, but I am a crap photographer. I take loads of photographs, and they're all shit. But they show me what's going on behind a house, down a street. I do a lot of walking around photographing places.

Then I draw with charcoal on a canvas. I'm totally traditional and totally boring. Charcoal is really good, because you can brush it away and still see the old drawing. Then I eventually decide on the drawing. Because of the complexity of the image, that's pretty much what you get. What you see in the drawing, that's what you see in the end, but with color. If I'm doing a picture for someone, I will send them a photograph of the charcoal drawing just to show them and to make sure that I got all the things in there that are

important to them. I don't let them see a half-finished painting though. They are not allowed to come in when they commission a painting, because then they are an amateur trying to be an expert about painting.

It gets on my nerves, in general, if anyone looks over my shoulder while I'm painting. I can hear them breathing and smell their breath, but I'm trying to concentrate and draw. It disturbs me. However, I'm not one of these artists who locks himself away in a studio - you're here in the studio. The gasman walks through, it doesn't bother me, as long as he doesn't stay.

Dirk Dobiéy: If people come, will you get into a conversation about your work, or is that something you'd rather not do?

Anthony Lowe: I'm not rude, I will talk to people, but it depends on how intelligent the question is. If it's not intelligent, I answer quickly, and more intelligent questions I answer more slowly.

Dirk Dobiéy: When you look at the process, how much of your time percentage-wise goes into the preparation - walking, taking photos, looking, preparing and then drawing.

Anthony Lowe: The drawing can be quite complicated.

Dirk Dobiéy: You described three phases: The research, the concept, and the actual realization. Is it something where you can say "here's how I do it?"

Anthony Lowe: Usually the concept - if someone is giving me a commission, I go through the full process. I would go to that person and they're usually in the place that I will paint. I'll talk to them for about an hour or a bit longer. Sometimes I have to go abroad, I don't just paint locally. But often it is close to here, ten minutes away. I'll listen to them and have a talk with them about the picture. I'll know the size of the picture they want already.

They tell me what they want, and I'll ask them questions about living there, and I'll note down what they're telling me. Sometimes it's a huge list of things they want in the picture and it's a nightmare- so many things, for so little money. It's quite a bit of money, and then when you look at the list, it becomes smaller.

Then I'll look at the place they want, and that take half a day. If it's "Berlin" it will take me one or two days to get all the information. And I'll have to go through all my hundreds of boring photos. I also use books. I'm a huge fan of aerial views, I can look at them for hours and hours.

Dirk Dobiéy: Maybe you can get a drone next?

Anthony Lowe: There's a guy who has a small zeppelin with a camera on it.

Dirk Dobiéy: It's about privacy.

Anthony Lowe: I've had people shouting at me, saying they're going to call the police, because I'm photographing their houses. I tell them to calm down.

When I'm drawing, I use about 25 drawings where I use about 200 photos to get all the information down. Drawing isn't just about what's on the paper, it's also in your head. Photos are just what's in the picture, for me. The drawing you remember, because you drew it.

Dirk Dobiéy: Do you do drawings that sometimes become parts of the picture?

Anthony Lowe: Photography has taken the place of that. I do take out sketchbooks if I can't capture what I want in a photo, because it's too far away, for example. But the drawing comes when I'm transferring onto canvas. Just the drawing in charcoal on the

canvas can take a week, 6 days, it's all of Leipzig looking over towards Altenburg. I started drawing it with Altenburg at the bottom, and Leipzig at the top, because it's a panorama with 56 towns in it. The view is from a castle tower, which has a circumference of 20 meters. The work opened last year, and it was really badly advertised by the castle. Before I came to Germany, I thought it was a culture of loving, efficient people. Now that I've lived here, I've changed my mind. They aren't efficient in advertising the culture.

The panorama is relatively successful, despite the bad advertising. It opened Oct 20, 2013. People buy the ticket to visit the castle museum and the panorama. It had more than 14.5K visitors in less than 4 months. The Lindeneau-Museum in Altenburg has a really good contemporary and historical collection. In a year, it has 18K visitors. The castle is so incompetently organized, that I'm trying to take over the publicity for the panorama.

My work, this panorama, took 3 years to complete, and it's 15 minutes of something completely different, it's psychedelic. It's a show, an exhibition of my work, there's powerful music and a light show. And it is a show. It was not meant to be an exhibition of my work, it was meant to be a thing of itself. You're stuck in there for 15 minutes because you have to walk up the castle and there's traffic on the stairs, so you can't go in and come right out, even if you hate it. It was designed to be that way.

I've had people who had to come out because it's disorienting. They became dizzy. I think that's great. It's the experience of going into one of my pictures.

Dirk Dobiéy: You said before you try to put a lot into a painting, and not lose things. Tell me about that.

Anthony Lowe: There's a lot of repetition in cities, so I choose a focal point, like a dome. Then there are lots of streets, and I don't

want all the houses the same size, I want them different in scale so I chop them up. I prioritize elements. But I want to give people the feel that it's geographically correct, the main roads have to be right, so people know they're looking at their city. I can't generalize it, but I do have to chop bits out, like the outskirts. There's a column in the middle of Leipzig, a monument, and that's Nikolaikirche (St. Nicholas Church). It's been placed there by an artist. That's Leipzig's monument, whether the city knows it or not. That's why it's big in my picture.

Dirk Dobiéy: There is a reduction that takes place based on the repetition?

Anthony Lowe: Yes, I decide on focal points and landmarks. I put history into it too. I also put things from the past in, and I play around with the future. That's fun because I can invent it. I put things in, like space. I'd look at the sun, but paint it like a star, because it is a star. I try to surprise people.

Dirk Dobiéy: Is it subconscious or conscious?

Anthony Lowe: It's conscious. I try to move them, to paint intense images. I want to shake people and disorient them, because through disorientation you move. People can see what they're seeing every day but they can see it in a new way. That's the object of my work, to channel chaos and disorientation in other people so they can disappear into the picture and come back and think about things differently.

I like observing people looking at my work if they don't know I'm the painter. People start to try to work out my paintings. I enjoy that, watching people pick through the city I've jumbled. Though I don't take part in the conversation.

Dirk Dobiéy: You say you have the pictures and then you do the drawing, but do you make changes on the canvas? Like “oh I have to move this building.”

Anthony Lowe: That could happen, but generally the drawing takes so long that I’ve already worked it out. But sometimes I have to change the rhythm of the picture. Mostly it’s about working up to colors and patterns that I want. The drawing is a scaffold that holds the entire thing up, it’s the foundation. I try to produce visual patterns within the work that will take the eye around the painting. I try to get their eye to dance.

Dirk Dobiéy: If you look at your profession, you said that you did sketches more in the past, but not as much anymore. How do you describe your development as an artist?

Anthony Lowe: I work the opposite way, I think I’m getting better. But I would say it’s because of immaturity not maturity. I’m old enough now where I realize people listen to me because I’m an old fart – I’m 57 now. I love that. There’s this 10,000 hours concept, where you have to do something for that long to be good. I’ve certainly painted for more than 10,000 hours, but I’m not Bill Gates or the Beatles. I think in the arts, you need that confidence, from that experience, to be able to start to play. That play is a thing from childhood, and it’s not something you learn – people un-learn how to play as they get older. So when playing with things, I would not use the word “maturity.” It’s the opposite – the immaturity – that allows me to do that.

I think a lot of older people judge things differently, they think “I’ve only got 20 years left.” Life’s too short. I think it’s not about being wise, it’s just sorting out all the crap. You already knew things, but there’s a lot of things you don’t need to know, so you put it aside and sort out what’s really important.

Dirk Dobiéy: Has this realization changed your painting?

Anthony Lowe: It must have. I can look back at paintings I did when I was 30, and if I tried to do the paintings I do now when I Was 30, they wouldn't have worked. It would have been like a clockwork mechanism that didn't actually tick. All the pieces would have been there, but they wouldn't have worked together.

Dirk Dobiéy: Is there an attitude you have, a perspective, as an artist?

Anthony Lowe: Resilience is a good word. You have to be able to get by with very little money. Artists are a bit of a "lone wolf." They don't talk to people a lot. I ask if people who want to be artists can work alone for a morning or for a day on their own. I ask how they feel about working alone for a week or a month. Before I got married, I'd go for a week without seeing anyone. It's why I'm a member of the rotary club and a cooking club. It comes from those early days. I wasn't going to be some sort of weird recluse, I had to get out and meet people.

Scarcity is inevitable. People can't just expect to get out of art school and everything will go great. You're going to see all of your mates getting married, buying houses, buying cars. You, the artist, are going to be stuck in a freezing cold room that you can't afford to heat. You will have to make a decision between a pint of milk or a newspaper. And you will have to work very long hours. You will get drunk, because you have to get drunk in order to stand a life like that, but only if someone else is paying.

You also have to be passionate, or you won't be resilient enough. You have to at least believe in what you're going to be doing in the future, if you can't believe in what you're doing now. I'm still believing in my future. I tell my wife that soon I will have a breakthrough. Although, I think that already happened in 2000, when I was able to buy a place in the country, where no one would bother me, and I didn't need anyone's permission to do anything.

Dirk Dobiéy: How important to you are freedom and independence?

Anthony Lowe: No one has ever given me a real job. I'd like to go on record saying that. People probably looked at me and thought "that's a "querulant" [barrater], we don't want him." The only jobs I've ever had were temporary jobs, like digging, that no one would want to do long-term. Or that decorating business, but I was still self-employed and employing other artists.

My panorama work, collaborating with the composer and the light man that was all fine working with them. But when you start interfacing with the Town Hall, that's where the problems start. Or some people sitting on some office, sitting on their hands, then sitting on YOUR hands, and preventing you from doing something. I usually have to get someone who can help me, like a lawyer, so it's a good thing I've been a member of the Rotary Club since the 90s. The good thing about a lawyer is I can structure my thoughts about things (I'm not talking about using a lawyer to sue people). Having that person as a friend to help me structure my thoughts is great. Only through that can I interface with people working at a Town Hall. Two things will happen: either I will get my way, and they will agree with me, or I will explode and completely lose what I want to do. I will be so angry that I have to walk out. And I'm aware that I'm this way, so I just stay silent. I can also compromise pretty well. If someone tells me I can't do something I will come back with a modified idea that's a compromise. But if someone says I just can't do something, or they're not listening to me, that's where the brick wall comes up.

It's really important to be able to laugh at yourself. Even if things go wrong, it's important to stand back and say "where did I fuck up?" With my panorama project, I arranged all the press and it got into 27 different newspapers. And I didn't let the town press officer do that, because he's crap. And I promised some of the free

newspapers the story, and the town press officer said “the mayor is going to open it up.” And I said, “No, he isn’t, that’s not what is planned.” They wanted to open a week early and let these people check things out, to make sure the work was done to their specifications. And I lost it with this guy. And he stood there and he wouldn’t go, so I said if he wouldn’t go, I am leaving. That’s total incompetence, people thinking “oh, he’s just an artist, I’ll go in and flatter him a bit and change things.” They don’t take me seriously. So I got a friend who is a notary, to write a contract. These people just won’t take me seriously, and it’s infuriating.

Dirk Dobiéy: You don’t think it’s a language barrier?

Anthony Lowe: No, I think they just think “he’s just a self-employed artist. He will just cause us more work.” I’m maybe going to cause them a bit more work, but it will be done properly, regarding publicity.

Dirk Dobiéy: You seem to care beyond just when the painting is finished. Your passion goes well beyond the work itself.

Anthony Lowe: I do move on to the next thing, but ...I can remember an important painting of mine that was sold in London in the late 90s. The gallery noticed that my work was coming up at an auction, because the firm who had it had gone bankrupt. I bought that painting back. I made sure someone was there - two people, in fact - to bid on my work. The painting is here now. It’s been sold twice, that painting. It’s like a dog you can sell, but it comes back home.

Dirk Dobiéy: Do you think there is anything that business can learn from art and artists?

Anthony Lowe: Some artists are very good business people. There are all those empty gestures and words that business uses like “we want to have ideas from the bottom up,” and it’s all crap. In big

structures, what people high up don't know is that the staircase only goes down so far and then there's a blockage. There can't be any ideas coming "from below."

I don't think big business can do that, their structures don't allow for it, they are too immobile. That's why usually a business is around for 100 years and then goes bankrupt.

Dirk Dobiéy: Is the art scene mobile?

Anthony Lowe: Yes. You always get new input. You have to keep the young artists down, or they will take over, and take the work. Young painters are there trying to push you out of work. It's a fight for survival, definitely, but it's what we need or we will be resting on our laurels. We need the input and to see new ideas. You want to steal from others. All artists are magpies, they are always stealing stuff.

Dirk Dobiéy: Anything else you want to add?

Anthony Lowe: I wish I had said something more awful about big business. I get worried when I see all these corporations in less and less hands. In time, they will be more powerful than individual countries. Their income is more than the country's gross national product. If you're at work 12 hours a day - that's not democracy or freedom - it's about money and increasing your percent of the market over your competition's. It's survival of the fittest.

I do think people in business can learn - I'm not sure what. Maybe to take it a bit easier and keep their eyes open for interesting other things. And enjoy life and let other people enjoy it. In business, you'll only do well if your neighbor is doing well. If your neighbor is living in poverty, you can only do so well, even if you have money, because money will become worthless.

You can be rich, but if you're in a war zone, all that money isn't going to help you. You see that in America with all the rioting. I have an American friend here who doesn't miss the states. He went back and said "this isn't my country." The US is weird, it has the most educated people in the world, and a huge population that can't even read.

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