



MENTIRAS #6 - JW

J

I know you moved several times over the last years, relocating yourself in very different places in the US. However, you never stopped releasing new issues of your *Elk* zine, and they all seem to follow the exact same production process. What could have appeared as the outcome of technical constraints (5 3/8 × 8" format, black and white printing) seems to have become a strict frame. How do you maintain a production this homogenic while moving frequently?

Jw

The format has stayed the same with only minor changes that came after the first few issues, such as color inside front and back covers, page numbers typed instead of hand written, and eventually landing on sweet spot page count of 65 or 67. The size and formal aspects of the zine remaining consistent in a way is a counterbalance to conditions varying a lot, at times bordering on difficult due to moving around and not having the most conducive environmental factors for making it. There's a whole history of different copy shops and methods and locales over the years. The first ten or so issues were made at the *Associated Press* Photo Library where I worked as a researcher for many years. From starting *Elk* in 2003 through 2006 I would bring the original templates of *Elk* to work and after my shift was over at night use the photocopier there. Then I'd bring them home to Brooklyn and collate them, before taking them to a place called *Wholesale Copies* on E. 28th street that made the color covers on card stock and saddle-stitched (stapled) them. Another thing I did a lot of on that photocopier was copy material I brought from home and re-size it to fit *Elk's* dimensions, and copy a lot of *AP* photos. That copier and all that free paper was an amazing resource. On that subject, my former *AP* boss Chuck Zoeller, who has always been extraordinarily supportive of my extracurricular art activities, came to the *Printed Matter Elk* show opening in December and wrote me after, « Too bad we don't have a picture of the late photocopier. Its legacy endures. And as Bob Woodward famously said, 'All good work is done in defiance of management.' »

That was the relatively stable beginnings of *Elk* and *Elk Books*. In late 2006 I left New York and spent eight months in Los Angeles, house-sitting, sometimes practically living out of my car, often sleeping on the couch at my friends Rick Charoski and Buddy Nichols' studio on Fairfax

Avenue. There I brought it to a place called *Copy Cat* run by two nice Armenian brothers and since I didn't have a photocopier to use I'd take them the original "templates" with the pictures, etc. taped on, and they would run off the issue for me. After that in China for a year I made an *Elk* (No. 17) but I'm pretty sure I had that printed at *Copy Cat* on a visit back to the U.S. I did one *Elk* book/exhibition catalogue in Beijing, with Artus de Lavilléon, and we made it together at a copy shop in Beijing with much confusion due to the language barrier and misunderstandings about metric vs. American paper size (A5, A4, vs. 8 ½ x 11", etc) but we managed it. After that back in New York when I had an apartment in Red Hook the production of *Elk* returned to being somewhat stable with me bringing it to *Wholesale Copies*. At other times I was in Incline Village, Nevada, where my parents live, using a store called *Rainbow Printers*, and while in Tucson 2013-17 I brought it to a place called *Reproductions*, which not only has a funny double entendre name but a really helpful cool guy named Victor who'd handle my stuff. In all these instances there's the dilemma of me bringing this "analog" thing that is an inconvenience for them to do in this digital age. In just in the past few months I made a new issue for the *Printed Matter* show, and reprinted a lot of old ones, and there is no way I could have done that without the generosity of my old friend David Belt, who let me use the copier after hours at his office. I copied everything there, collated and folded them, and had the stapling done in Rockaway where I'm staying. As a coda to all that, I went by *Wholesale Copies* and the manager Chris who I've know for years got all frazzled and basically said, « We can't do this anymore, it's just not worth it for us. » Which was sort of funny but also sort of sad. Like, really? Not even for old time's sake? To summarize, as long as I've had this easy to transport archival box of future *Elk* material with me, tape, scissors, paper, and could use a loaned photocopier or rely on indulgent and obliging copy shop employees, I can make *Elk*.

J

More generally how does your geographical situation impact your artistic activity?

Jw

A lot. Especially after leaving New York, for the first time in 2006, and then again after living in China and coming back to New York and then going to Lake Tahoe and Tucson, my location completely influences





my activity. With *Elk* it's less dependent on where I'm at though hints will creep in depending on things I pick up or find where I'm at, but it's more independent of geography. With the paintings, photographs, and writing it's often very much connected not only when I'm in that place but often for years afterwards too. In China I did drawings of cheap Chinese consumer product packaging (cigarettes, KFC boxes, massage parlor cards, etc) but then five years later I produced a whole series of paintings based on photos I took there, as well as publishing a book called *Geomancy* of photographs from my time there, that came out almost ten years after I'd left. Also I did a series of paintings called "Incline Village" based on photos I took in Lake Tahoe while working as a lift operator at a ski area and a parks department groundskeeper, and a group of photographs called "Tucson Today" that now that I'm no longer there anymore might become a book. There's always a response to my geographical position, and a likely aftermath of gestation and resonation that becomes something when that place is no longer where I'm living.

J

How much does it cost to produce an issue of *Elk*? Is it economically balanced?

Jw

When I have had access to a photocopier the only expense has been the color cover and stapling, but when everything is done at a shop it's usually around \$3 each. The amount of copies, in the early days when I was trying to actually distribute it a bit, was around 150 copies. In the last five or six years I've been less interested in doing that so it's more like 70 or 80. They're really aren't many sales. I make them for myself, the people who are knowing contributors, friends, and longtime supporters, and I send five copies to be distributed by *2NC Books* in LA and maybe a few to *Printed Matter*. And I give copies away, sometimes to some new person I don't know, and hope that it somehow migrates and finds itself in the possession of someone who appreciates it. Trying to do it as a business isn't realistic and it doesn't really make a balance at all in the end. I might have broken even in that earlier time when I was sending them around and dropping them off at different stores, but the hassle of doing that wasn't really worth it. It's a money-losing proposition for sure but a couple hundred dollars for printing and



mailing them out every few months is certainly worth it to me.

J

In the text presenting your current *Elk* show at *Printed Matter*, there is a sentence which starts like that : « Working through the immeasurably huge pictorial archive around him (...) ». What is this archive? Is it the result of a collecting practice? I also remember you writing me about having too much paper around you.

Jw

Yes, paper, it's everywhere, though actually at the moment it isn't because I don't have a fixed location but even with this itinerant existence I manage to collect paper, like a magnet. But that's nothing compared to when I had my own apartment and then studio. And a lot of that paper in the form of zines and various publications and just random written notes of interest found on the street or whatever is in a storage space in New York and now one in Tucson.

Occasionally I have this wry and potentially tragicomic vision of myself as a caretaker and conduit for "paper" in the wide sense, an inveterate magpie collecting "it" in myriad forms, then faced with the dilemma of what to keep, what to give or send to someone, and what to throw away. A Sisyphean task of sifting through all this stuff and assigning it "value" according to my own wholly idiosyncratic estimation, looking at it, savoring it, getting some kind of energy or inspiration, and then figuring out what to do with it next. Almost some kind of circle of life eastern philosophy concept but with printed materials that have their own indeterminate, itinerant, and tenuous existence that intersects with my own in a pleasing and meaningful manner. Though on one hand it's a "dilemma" it's obviously an endeavor, hobby, or compulsion that doesn't stop, so the cycle continues.

That quote from the *Printed Matter* press release could have been less ambiguous. What I meant is the huge pictorial archive around me that is all the images in the world, the gazillion pictures and the billions that are being crated daily. Though obviously I'm not combing through all that. On a broad level I am referring to the incalculable amount of pictures in the world, but on a personal level that means the images that I have collected, the ones I see and find some use for. That includes

thousands of prints that I got while working as a photo researcher for *The Associated Press* and the photo agency *Sygma*, and photos cut out of magazines and newspapers, and of course my own photos. And postcards, and business cards, and notes put on windshields, and candy wrappers and squashed cigarette packs.

So the archive is the immeasurable “archive” out there in the world, but to be more fine-tuned about it I’m referring to the archive within the archive, the things that seem to me to stand out, to have some special indefinable quality that puts them in their own rarified category of interest. And that can come from everywhere, from the most mass produced image that appears in the *New York Times*, to a photo a friend took or discovered from their past, to a drawing in a skate zine made in Slovenia, to a religious pamphlet lying on the floor of the subway car.

I should also mention that Internet is not the archive I am talking about, although now it is the de facto depository, virtual warehouse and “library” of images for the whole world. Nothing that appears in *Elk* comes from an Internet search. If you wanted to get technical about it, sure, some pictures are in emails that I print out, but *Elk* does not include searching that way, via Google or whatever. Because that gives you the average, the most popular, and that’s the opposite, for the most part, of what constitutes *Elk*. On that subject a friend and great painter and zine maker, Chip Hughes, once said that *Elk* was « like the internet but only better » and though that connects the zine to its antithesis, I’d say that’s a total compliment and gets at the heart of the matter. The superlative, the unseen, the forgotten, matched in unexpected combinations, not just ho-hum banalities that bombard us from a thousand directions every day.

J

You have been a photographer for a long time, but on your website, it looks like your painting activity is relatively recent: the oldest pictures are from 2011. Did you start drawing and painting at that time? And how did it start?

Jw

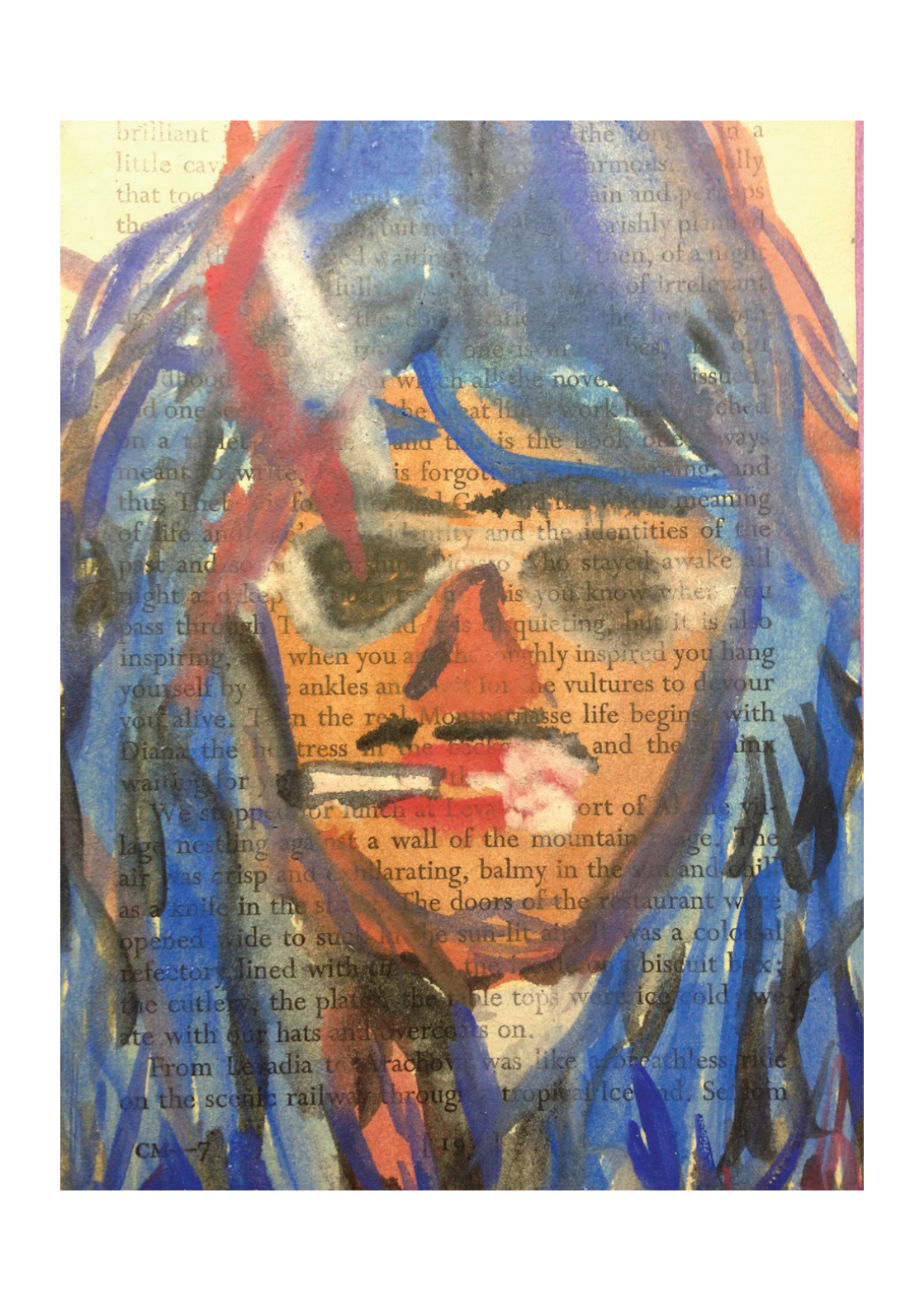
From the time I left college in 1989 to about 2000 as far as visual art I just did photography, and considered myself not so much a photographer

but an “artist using photography” in the parlance of that time. I didn’t draw or paint and never thought I would. But things evolved and changed. I started writing more, and that started giving me a lot of fulfillment, and doing only photos started to feel like not enough.

Honestly I got a bit bored and a bit fed up with photography with a capital “P.” To take a good, really good, or maybe even “great” photo began to seem too easy and not much of an accomplishment. Maybe also the field is just too crowded and making something really special started to seem, well, not that special anymore. Also I got tired of the bother and expense of printing and framing and mounting and all that. It just started being not so vital or imperative and though I still took pictures and “liked” them there was a sense of diminishing returns. With photography in the general sense becoming so ubiquitous and everyone with a phone being a photographer, photography as a so-called “fine art” consequently became more precious and a bit of a joke in its attempts to portray itself as more important or better than what everyone in the world was doing with their handheld devices. That was another turnoff.

It happened gradually, my turn away from photography as the “one” thing, “my art,” and as my passion for photography declined writing became just as or more important. Then when I lived in China in 2007-8 on a whim, because my friend Rich Jacobs asked me to be a in ballpoint pen drawing show at *Cinders* in New York, I started doing that for a change of pace and found it really enjoyable. I hadn’t drawn since I was a kid really, and 35 years later the pleasure, the mental calm, the concentration mixed with meditation, really won me over.

When I got back to New York from China I’d done all those drawings and then thought, well, I guess it’s time to start painting. I bought a small kids gouache set, and on a visit to my parents in Lake Tahoe started doing little paintings of these beautiful and touching folk figurines my mother bought in Russia in the 1960s, and then doing small ones trying to roughly copy pictures from my book *The Powder*. I needed a change and the freedom of pushing paint around and not adhering strictly to “the image” opened up all sort of possibilities. I’d always liked paintings, but never thought I could be a painter and in a sense it was a challenge to do something new, and learn something, at a rather late age, early to



brilliant... the town in a
little cavi... forms. Really
that took... and the... and perhaps
the... but not... planned
back in the... waiting... then, of a night
... dull... of irrelevant
... the... the first...
... one is... best...
... which all the novel... issued,
... one sees... that life... worked
on a tablet... and this is the book one always
meant to write... is forgotten... and
thus Thet... and G... the whole meaning
of life and... identity and the identities of the
past and so on... who stayed awake all
night and kept... this you know when you
pass through T... is disquieting, but it is also
inspiring, ... when you are the highly inspired you hang
yourself by the ankles and... for the vultures to devour
you alive. Then the real Montparnasse life begins, with
Diana the mistress in the back... and the...
waiting for...

We stopped for lunch at Leva... port of the vil-
lage, nestling against a wall of the mountain range. The
air was crisp and exhilarating, balmy in the sun and chill
as a knife in the shade. The doors of the restaurant were
opened wide to suck in the sun-lit air. It was a colossal
refectory, lined with... the table of a bistrot box;
the cutlery, the plates, the table tops were ice-cold. We
ate with our hats and overcoats on.

From Leva... to Arachov... was like a breathless ride
on the scenic railway through tropical Iceland. Se from

mid-40s. And a nice ancillary aspect is it reinvigorated and completely changed my relationship to the whole history of painting, made me look at it all anew, instead of just liking it art historically or culturally it also became « Wow, how did they do that? » It gave me an entirely new appreciation for the endeavor of painting as a separate entity, as more than an image, as a painting and all that entails that makes a painting unique and not a “document” but one person’s interpretation of the world through paint. Also on a deeper level it really filled a void because I wasn’t doing the paintings for some ulterior goal, just for the inherent gratification and around that time I really needed an unencumbered, unadulterated pursuit, and was very lucky to find such a liberating and gladdening activity.

I didn’t stop taking photographs but shifted my attitude toward them, they became more a tool and less a final product. That’s a bit contradictory though, as I still take photos and get satisfaction out of them, and continue to respect and respond to “real” photography when its really good according to my criteria, and still differentiate between intriguing, unorthodox, or engaging photos and all the rest, though maybe with a little less conviction that there really is much of a difference. Somewhat ironically, when I gave up taking photography so “seriously” I was able to get, through luck and chance, some books published of my photographs, particularly *The Powder*, *Danny’s Lot*, and *Geomancy* by *Dashwood Books*. Obviously there is ambivalence and conflict in my attitude towards photography. Not quite a love/hate relationship, but more that the path has widened so photos and writing still happen but now it’s part of something broader, and I’m incredibly thankful to the act of painting for coming into the equation and providing an immeasurably enjoyable new arena for me to explore.

J

Where do you paint? Your first drawings seem to have been produced with a light setup. They could have been done in a hotel room, with markers and cheap paper. Your paintings are more intricate, especially the recent ones, and require more time and maybe a specific working place. Did you make these in a studio?

Jw

The drawings and the smaller paintings were done on a table, either my

desk in Beijing, Red Hook, or on my parents' dining room table after they went to sleep in Nevada. Those were all "works on paper" that don't require much a setup. The transition to bigger actual paintings (acrylic on canvas, etc) came out of something close to a miracle. When Anne-Marie Russell asked me to come to the museum in Tucson to be the curator she also made a big studio on the top floor available to me. The museum is in a former fire station and upstairs are the rooms where the firemen used to live, and one of those became my studio where I started doing larger works, 48 x 36 inch paintings, and a couple even bigger. For almost four years I had that space and since I also lived upstairs in the museum across the hall it was extremely convenient and I was able to paint a lot on a bigger scale. Now I'm no longer in Tucson and I do miss the studio, and am back to working at a table, and certainly at some point in the future it would be nice to have a studio again.

J

In a catalogue published this year, which documents four exhibitions you organized in Tucson, you write how curating was something you were already doing before, but not professionally. You write about it being a vocation, and not a job. Could you develop that distinction?

Jw

That again relates to Anne-Marie Russell. Without her a lot of this, the painting, the curating at the museum, would have never happened. I did not go to curator school, I have never been a "professional" curator. But I am an enthusiast for other peoples' artwork and my experience at the *AP* and doing *Elk* gave me a feeling and sensitivity for curating as a combination of editing and arrangement, of the oftentimes inexpressible associations lurking and coily existing underneath the surface reality of images and objects. Three years after I started *Elk* the curation of images in the zine was starting to manifest itself as a desire to do that in three dimensions. Another happy accident or fate or whatever you want to call it is that around that time my friend Jim Walrod introduced me to David Selig and Tom Sachs. They liked *Elk*, and had a space on Crosby Street in Soho that was supposed to become a surf shop but that fell through so it was empty and they asked me if I had any ideas and on the spot I said, well, yeah, I would put together a show (and make an accompanying catalogue in zine form) about surfing, custom car culture, and 1960s minimalism and how they were





all connected. And their answer was, ok, let's do it, and that turned into the first *Elk Gallery* show, *Now I Hate Summer*. That went really well and organizing it gave me a taste for putting art shows together, which led to thirteen group and solo *Elk Gallery* shows from 2006 to 2011. That's what I mean by it being a vocation, I kind of fell into it.

Referring again to Anne-Marie, what I am so grateful for is that she recognized what I had done even though it was sort of on the margins, realized with an economy of means, in these atypical spaces literally and figuratively off to the side of the "art world". Most crucially she recognized the curatorial impulse and accomplishments while understanding that my own artwork had equal importance and the two weren't separate and are inextricably linked. What she gave me in Tucson, which lasted for four years and resulted in twenty or so shows, along with film screenings, talks, and band performances, was the gift of being able to organize the shows I wanted, at first in collaboration with her, and then two years later when she left to a new position in Florida, on my own, with almost complete freedom, while giving me the studio and acknowledging that the painting and everything else was integral, that it was all related. It was a very special, perceptive, and generous of her to identify that and make what she did possible.

Being the Chief Curator at the museum was my job, and it's nice to have a job and make money. In the end though, especially now that I'm not longer at the museum, my attitude towards curating is more out of desire to bring about interesting, intriguing, perhaps somewhat mysterious and hopefully transporting combinations of artwork and objects and ideas, but the feasibility of making a living from that, and being a curator who has a job at an institution, well, that's a whole other can of worms. I loved what I was doing at the museum but now that I'm no longer there it's time for a break. Organizing exhibitions should stay a calling brought about by desires for exceptional ventures instead of it being professional obligation, unless uncommon, maybe even singular circumstances such as the ones I just described earlier.

J

So you managed to find some time to work on your own art while you were a curator as well. Does this separation between what you do as an artist and what you do as a curator makes any sense, since your editorial

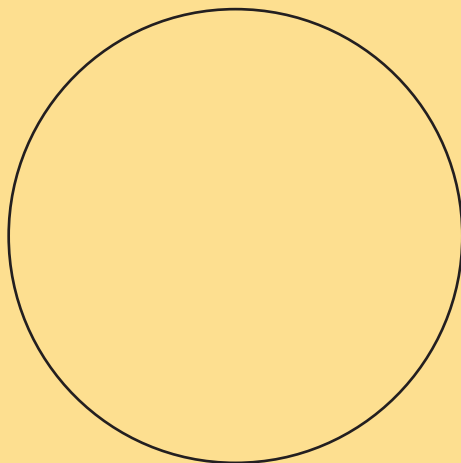
work is already about selecting and arranging different iconographic elements?

Jw

Yes, I was lucky with that. The installation process, three or so weeks long, that would be intense and couldn't really do my own work. But most of the time it was planning ahead and lining everything up but it wasn't so overwhelming that it didn't leave me time to do my own things. And as far as the separation it was possible (though not always easy) to be an organizer and temporarily put my own art in the background. The editorial work as you call it of selecting and arranging in my own endeavors could be extrapolated and transferred to the curatorial work with beneficial cross-referencing and an ability and sensibility to see things from the artist or artists' point of view because of my own experience. And what was the most important thing, with the shows at the museum and other ones, is that the artists are happy, that it becomes the show they envisioned and thought about and obsessed about. To be able to do whatever they want to do, within the realm of possibility, in concert with some guidance and dialogue with me, because that's what I'd want if the situation were reversed. That back-and-forth, the peer-to-peer relationship, means that when things are flowing my own art and the curatorial work are part and parcel of a delicate and maybe even magical psychically connected dynamic that renders the separation extremely nuanced and possibly moot, and if all goes right leads to singular, expressive, and evocative art exhibitions.

MENTIRAS (2014-)

#1	HP	2014	#14	AM	2020
#2	HH	2014	#15	AB	2021
#5	RS	2017			
#6	JW	2018			
#7	OV	2017			
#8	P*S	2017			
#9	AB	2017		cancelled	
#10	LS	2018	#4	IT	
#11	JH	2019	#?	JC	
#13	PB	2020	#12	CF	



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