

Adam Gill – 2014

Mathew Parkin Interview

You work in a variety of media, but video strikes me in particular. The screen has been endlessly theorized—for example, as supplanting and altering the terms of reality as spectacle or simulacra, as a surface of communication and exchange between subjects and as somewhat necessary in how we come to understand our experience of selfhood. How do you think video and the screen figure in your practice?

Video is something I made a very definite choice to work with. It doesn't feel as instinctive as other media - I guess I use it because it is so prevalent in all life and central to how people experience things. For example when I read fiction I plot it out in my head as a film and to some degree as a result of this loose that textual pleasure

None of this is fixed but so far I have nearly always shown video on screens and I have been interested in the actual surface of a screen. So much of my life is experienced through screens and it is this developed system of a two-way interaction that I am interested in more than projection. I am aware of constantly interacting with video on screens, objects on screen and images on screens - and maybe within that there is something about equalising content. A youtube video can have more entertainment value and be more pervasive than a TV drama – and as a result these processes of viewing become more of a conversational interaction, I feel like it makes me a more active or selective consumer whether this is an illusion or not.

I often make video that is too long to be watched, or I don't envision people watching it, so it becomes another material for the installation that is partial and editable via the gaze of different users. The video work that was in One Touch was a series of short videos edited together. A lot of them were of my friends responding to my request to produce content for me. There was a script at some point but I developed that more for myself than for them. It also included some cropped found video. I became concerned last year about setting out to make content, and using yourself to make that content, which I do to a degree, and what that means. I mean like content for a youtube video for example, deciding that you want to sit and make a videoblog about yourself and that people will want to watch that – but in a way that isn't confessional or naive but is fairly knowing. Maybe seeing oneself as a media producer, or an awareness that you are producing media and how that relates to what I am doing making art although it is less explicit. And this kind of connects for me to making videos that people don't actually watch as a narrative whole; trying to communicate the totality of something, an experience or thought, is unachievable. I suppose I was trying to make something with a slippyness. I am very hesitant to propose a piece of work being a definitive statement, instead things are more open to reconfiguration and temporary.

A technique that you often use in your videos is the superimposition of one screen over another. The effect is either that of the obstruction of the initial screen or the creation of a moving frame,

depending on the way you look at it. Toward what ends does such superimposition work, is it more than just an aesthetic choice? Do you see significance in the frame or margins that result?

When I have used that technique it was nearly always about obstructing a view of the initial video, but also a way of revealing something else. The obstruction intends to frustrate or confuse the original gaze. A phrase someone used recently when talking to me about my work was the lusty gaze - which I liked a lot. In those works I have tried to interrupt that idle gazing, even if I do that with something more erotic. I think that looking can be a very political thing, and there is a kind of power dynamic there. Look is fairly central to a lot of gay culture but the actual power and privilege dynamics of being able to look and be looked at are interesting. The videos where I used cropping were doing the same thing in a different way. This also relates back to the screen, having multiple windows open and stimulus simultaneously, but seeing cropped things or glimpses. I wasn't really interested in seeing the margins created as new films but more in what was being blocked and revealed. I did not want to make something with a linear narrative structure, or with hierarchies of cutting and this was a strategy to avoid that.

Branding also plays a big role in your artwork. One can see references to a range of popular brands in your installations, from Adidas to Burberry. Does this somehow relate to your deployment of the screen, like the prevalence of spectacle and its connection to desire and identity in late capitalist modes of production? Is thinking about experience in terms of a division between authentic reality and spectacle still useful or simply a tired cliché?

I haven't thought about them being similar things, but that could be the case. I suppose I try to not separate out my work in that way. I don't necessarily see individual things as works in their own right nor am I trying to work with installation- I am interested in producing exhibitions, whatever format this may be in. I am attracted to the definition of an artist as being someone who shows something, with the showing being the important part. Showing to me is just thinking aloud in a particular time and place within a longer process of engaging with cultural production.

I think the screen is a site for desire and playing out that desire and representing and re-representing identities. I read a lot recently about Queer as Folk, the UK TV show, and how that was constructed and issues around its representation. The idea of representing anything is so problematic. Once you represent something it could be seen as dead- it stops being present and becomes a re-interpretation. Brands are a way to socially construct your identity and they are something that is easily read. I am interested in the point where brands can become user-controlled or the user gains some power to affect the reading of a brand. I suppose this does relate back to the screen as that point where things become conversational. I think the idea of seeing anything as authentic is slightly awkward. Also I just find the Burberry pattern really attractive.

Do you see your usage of well-known brands as a critical move?

I don't think its necessarily critical so much as wanting to problematise things. I am not aiming to set out a critique of capitalism or branding, I think I was more interested in how people had used that existing language of branding to communicate themselves.

Active wear and references to sport recur quite a bit in your art. These include sneakers, tracksuits and bleachers and are definitely loaded with specific gender and class connotations. More recently, young gay men throughout the UK and Europe often referred to as scally lads have appropriated hyper-masculine, conventionally working class sports attire towards fetishistic ends. Is the presence of active wear in your work informed at all by this appropriation?

Yes, it is informed by the scally thing, but I am not sure it is very recent- it is something I grew up with. But sportswear or leisure wear is also tied into all these cultural, class and financial hierarchical structures. It seems that a brand is always part of a battle of ownership: it gets appropriated by working class culture, then by gay culture, then by parts of the art world...I think perhaps it is this that I am more interested in, but the scally thing is there too. Its all a certain amount of play acting, or Butler style performance, the actual scally and the gay scally are doing the same amount of dressing up and pandering. I have made all of the work involving sportswear with an awareness of its current trendiness within fashion movements, particularly within the contemporary art world that I am engaged in. This relates to what I was trying to say earlier about how the work is about a certain place and time- it's not seeking to be iconic or repeatable. But it is all to do with these levels of understanding and symbolism – where they exist and who controls them. I got refused entry to a Whetherspoons recently because I was wearing black Reebok Classics and a Burberry shirt, and they thought I looked like a hooligan while I thought I looked like a sensitive boy who likes art, but they didn't understand that I was wearing these symbols in a restructuring way. God that sounds dickish doesn't it? I genuinely love Burberry and the Reeboks. I am not taking the piss, wearing them ironically, but I am also not trying to look like a hooligan.

What do you think of the gender dynamics at play in scally lad culture? There are clearly elements of fantasy and performative aspects involved, but does this sort of appropriation of active wear perpetuate and privilege heteronormative masculinity?

It completely and purposefully perpetuates it - but I think a lot of gay culture does this. It's something I find personally problematic, being slightly attracted to these images but also finding them incredibly troublesome conceptually. I have often considered myself slightly camp, but someone recently called me hyper-masculine which really shocked me. I tend to dress in a way that is aware of these codes of masculinity on purpose but also aim to soften this so there is still something other about this. I know that you did not ask about my fashion choices but I think it is really important: people can read clothes incredibly well and they are a visual language that everyone uses, but one that different people read very differently.

Desire is something that strikes me throughout your body of work, from the desire to consume, to the desire to perform an identity, to erotic desire between people. I note that you often focus on the workings of desire between men. Is a notion of fluid sexuality or queerness something

that you consider? How can you account for sexuality as something fluid while representing a more or less gay, male formulation of desire?

Absolutely, I can see sexuality as fluid. But I suppose for me queerness isn't the same thing as fluid sexuality. It is about an otherness. I am not aiming to make something that is objective or that deals with queer theory, I want things to be subjective and polemic and problematic. I hate to sound all YBA but the desire I am thinking about is my own. It is really difficult for me to verbalise well but I suppose I want the work to in some way be to do with me and my relationships (be they to with objects, people or theory). A friend in Berlin in February told me that he kind of always makes his work for the person he is sleeping with, that is his first audience. I was really attracted to this idea. Female identities do exist in the work but I would not want to speak on behalf of these identities as they are not mine. I am really aware of not wanting to be a gay artist who makes art for gay men, but simultaneously I do want to make work that is erotic to some degree and that works from my understanding of erotics.

We've already spoken about the screen, but other types of technology seem to have a place in your work. I remember when I saw *One Touch*, these included a Spotify playlist and a Blackberry plugged into a wall. To me at least, there was a sense of obsolescence to certain technological objects (like the Blackberry), as if they were treated like artifacts. How would explain the function of objects of technology in your artwork?

The Blackberry was really awkward in that show, and wasn't really properly integrated. I was really attracted to this image of a phone being charged in the gallery, as a visual set up I really liked it. I like the idea of the work taking resources from the gallery, or the artists treating the space slightly badly. I find I often end up making things that are vaguely like workspaces or desks without really trying to (like the wooden structure in *One Touch*, it looked like a desk which wasn't my intention) so perhaps I am attracted to workspaces or making production spaces, but this isn't my intention. The Blackberry had periodic texts sent to it which an invigilator or member of the gallery was to read aloud when they came through. There was also this thing of who uses Blackberries and again this reflexivity of trends I see in the art world. The Spotify playlist was similar; it was set up to be used by anyone so that the playlist was out of my control. Music playlists can be a democratic thing, anyone with a computer can make them and like the video the playlist was too long for someone to really listen to it all in the space. I suppose I treat them just like the other materials, as objects and reference points. Seeing technology as much more than that is hard as it changes so quickly, it's constantly out-dated. *One Touch* and *When Passive Aggressive Strategies Fail to Get Results* were both concerned with how people interact with each other and how technology affects this - even just in an ergonomic way.

Does the prevalence of social media play any part in your art practice? Is it related to any of the themes, identities and relationships you're concerned with and if so, how? Are social media even worth discussing or is the topic banal in its ubiquity?

When Passive Aggressive Strategies Fail to get Results and One Touch had references to social media in a context of how people interact with each other and the impact the internet has had on this. I am interested in social media as its something I use in my life, but less so in the work I made. I don't really want to speak about it but it is implicit in the world I am making work in. I don't think there is anything amazingly new or interesting that I can say about it; social media has been well mined in critical theory. I think there is a still a lot to discuss but perhaps I am not the one to discuss it. I have been talking to friends a lot lately about forums and webchatting. These feel like something very much of my generation, that you would fairly facelessly exist on these forums and become fairly emotionally invested in these communities. I don't know if forums are still a thing like they were then (perhaps being a teenager at that time made it all more intense) but I don't think they are as widely-used. One friend spoke about some of their early sexual experimentation being on webchats, completely through language only - no images or webcamming, just using language. The Internet allows people to get really intimate with each other quickly, and partially I want to defend it as a place of communication. It is often seen as secondary but I think digital relationships can be really important and valid as well. I think I am defensive of it as a lot of my friendships and pretty much all of my relationships have come through, or been mediated through technology, and the internet, or text messaging, so I see it as really important to how I interact and have extended conversations. Maybe this is about making work as well, maybe making work is an extended conversation and shows are occasional quote out of context. That sounds tacky. I don't know if any of this is relevant to the work I am making. I've been thinking a lot after doing a fair few projects last year and I don't really want to make work that is about the internet or being gay or sportswear I think these are just ways to vocalise underlying concerns about how people interact and how they represent themselves and each other. I need to research more and think more. I am trying to work harder and be better.