

This conversation between Chris Bennie and Francis Parker, Curator, Contemporary Australian Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia, took place in the Members' Lounge at the Gallery of Modern Art on Friday the 16th January 2009 as part of the 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism' Up Late program.

Francis Parker: Welcome everyone and thank you for coming along this evening. First of all I should mention that Chris is a Brisbane-based artist, originally from New Zealand, and he's about to become a Doctor of Visual Arts at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. I should just situate his work in the exhibition – has everyone had a chance at some point to go through the show and has an idea of where things are? Chris's work is part of 'The Salon Project', which is comprised mostly of painting and it connects to 'Optimism' through ideas around the Enlightenment (1). Of course it's picking up mostly on the history of painting and the salon but we chose one video work...

Tamsin Cull (Gallery Members Coordinator): Sorry to interrupt, we're just getting the music turned off because it seems to be getting louder and the people up the back can't hear. We might just wait until it is turned down...

FP: Well that's actually quite apt because Chris's work functions in the salon as an intervention, in part because of its music, but it also plays with the idea of enlightenment in a very literal way because it involves lights coming on and off. Perhaps Chris, you could describe the work and tell us what it's about.

Chris Bennie: *The Average* is a video made in 2007. It's about 8 minutes long and that is based on the length of the record that was playing at the time. On the evening the work was made, Nicola and I were about to go out and we had a few moments to spare. I was playing records and dancing to kill some time and thought 'Ok, I should get out the camera and set it up'. It wasn't planned at all and one important aspect of my work is that I try not to plan anything, but we'll get into that later. So *The Average* is a spontaneous performance - I simply pressed record, put on a new record and started dancing again. After a while Nicola and I started turning lights on and off to the beat of the music. The music is contemporary

electronic music – techno – made by German producer Sascha Funke. Basically we created our own homemade disco. The beautiful thing about the work in the end, not knowing I was actually making a work or that there was anything significant in what I was videoing, is the moments where Nicola and I are in time, so lights are going on and off with the music. Then there are moments when we've got no timing whatsoever and it's completely human. I was really interested in the idea that a spontaneous event resulted in perfect rhythm as well as an altogether more flawed experience of existence.

FP: One of the things I am particularly drawn to in your work is the way that you take something that seems extremely banal and entirely ordinary, and one's first reaction is, 'Why bother filming this?' Then, somehow, because it has been filmed and because you're there watching it, you give it a little more attention, and it seems to become something quite extraordinary and you find you've become quite transfixed. I saw the project that you did for the State Library of Queensland in 2007 that is just that sort of thing; this was when the State Library was still being renovated. The video contains views of people going about their day-to-day tasks, the builders and then eventually the visitors to the library. It's almost like Hitchcock's *Rear Window* I suppose; you're watching people doing things that become fascinating because you speculate on what it is exactly that they are doing. It seems that because of the choices that you make in editing the material, even though it may be chosen spontaneously, its presentation turns it into something more than what it is, which is very interesting.

CB: My work results from a philosophical exploration of my immediate surroundings in the form of them being extraordinary – continually extraordinary – more so than things that are meant to be extraordinary or spectacular, like what we're given in the media and on TV, or what we're told is fascinating and informative. I'm of the opinion that the banal can be truly remarkable, and that it's where real meaning resides, in the experience of the ordinary. A video camera has the ability to capture subtleties or particularities that draw the banal, the everyday or the simplistic into a visual realisation that it's actually not meaningless, that it's actually part of an extraordinary cosmological existence, which purveys

everywhere and always exists. The challenge is to represent that balance between what is ordinary and having something more, which is, in *The Average*, the unspoken agreement between Nicola and me turning the lights on and off and a resonance with what people can identify with - with what they may have already experienced before, and if not, can at the least associate with it in terms of the scene's familiarity. Familiarity is important because it allows for the communication of shared experiences in recognisable ways.

FP: Do you think that it's in part the act of framing something, of it being on a screen and presented in a certain way that draws the attention to begin with? That is, as opposed to just seeing things as everyday, they're taken out of context.

CB: Although I'm focusing on banality and everydayness I'm also taking advantage of institutions and formal contexts to re-present the banal with authority. At the end of the day, the work is made to be seen, and institutions are a popular forum for the distribution of visual culture. What I think is more important, though, is the possibility that, through my work, viewers identify with their own individualities in everyday existence and take note of new banal and unremarkable experiences. The videos themselves are redundant, and I'm not interested in them being artworks as such, I'm more interested in the translation of immediate and ordinary experience and that can happen in a number of different contexts.

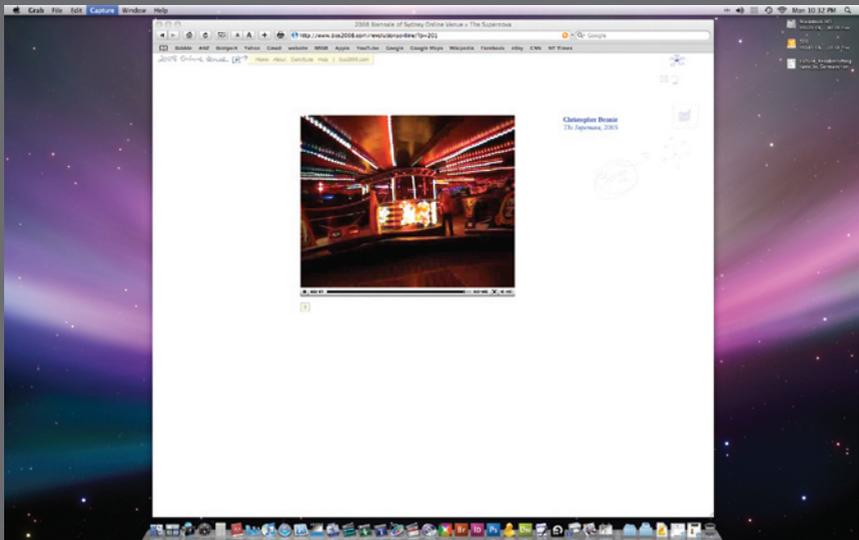
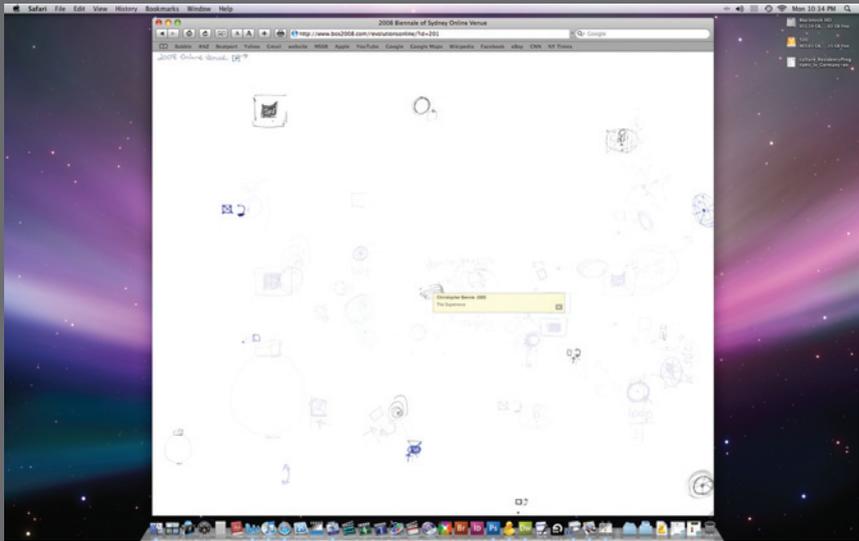
FP: I know that I've had the experience with some of your works where I'm sitting in front of the screen and watching the video unfold makes me think of moments in my day-to-day life, maybe waiting for someone and just becoming transfixed by traffic moving somewhere or by the way the light is reflecting off something. You kind of lose yourself in those moments and then the person turns up and you're shocked back into consciousness. I think with your videos, quite often there is that sense of being lost in the moment and I find that, as you were saying, the experience in front of your work taps into that experience that I've felt on many occasions.

CB: That's been a major concern of my Doctoral research over the last four years and I've been framing it around the notion of authenticity, and

what is authenticity and where is it placed and how do we describe it. As a starting point I drew upon phenomenological experience, or an experience of immediacy, so that what we perceive in those, as you describe, 'idle situations', is the fundamental present moment. In these moments we don't even recognise ourselves and it's only when, like in your example when you meet a friend, that you realise you don't actually know where you were. These kinds of situations can be thought of as an immediate experience of existence or what Edmond Husserl calls 'first sense' experience (2). From a phenomenological perspective what I'm exploring is how to draw out this immediacy – how can video translate or communicate the concept of 'first sense' experience?

FP: The ideas that you're dealing with in your writing at the moment, and in your work relating to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (3), are about living in a constant state of spectacularity. How then, because you're using one of the very media that is integral to society's surrounding of itself by images, do you feel that you're subverting that spectacular tendency of the moving image?

CB: I know. It's a paradox in itself, you know, using the tools of the Spectacle. But there's also a number of artists in the last five to eight years who have been slowing video down to examine individual experience, and by that I don't mean slow motion, but by observing phenomena in a way that slows down our attention span and makes it more receptive. For example, Francis Alÿs's *Zocalo, May 20 1999* is a twelve-hour video of Mexico City's main square, framed around its flagpole and the congregation of people who line up in its shadow during that time. That's an example of endurance video similar to Warhol's early films but it's contemporary in that it reflects lived social experience. By disregarding the Spectacle's tactics of fast cuts and overlaid music; strategies that fracture experience and actually decrease attention, artists like Alÿs, Anri Sala, Tacita Dean and Yael Bartana – and this is the kind of contemporary context I'm locating myself within – are subverting the Spectacle most obviously by slowing it down, then by presenting individual realities in a way that represents them more truthfully. I feel video is the most relevant medium to reinvestigate



The Supernova 2005, 2 minutes 18 seconds with sound, stills from '2008 Sydney Biennale: revolutions forms that turn' online venue

individual experience in daily life – to translate it – because it happens through time and your audience is experiencing it through time yet again.

FP: Have you thought about doing any larger scale videos like that, or is that something outside of your practice?

CB: Part of the conceptual premise for exploring immediate or authentic experience in the work is that it can't be planned or that, you know, it's a spontaneous act. Recently I've been considering photography in terms of whether a still frame can represent the notion of immediacy or authenticity in an image when there's no movement or action taking place. What's in a photograph is the result of everything that's happened around it and prior to it, but how can authentic experience be explored when the final product is static? With these thoughts I'm considering how authentic experience can be explored beyond the time-based nature of video and whether it can be transmitted through a photograph.

FP: And that idea of the authentic, how do you address the paradox of making work that deals with ideas of authenticity when what you are doing is copying moments of real life? By definition the act of filming creates something from the authentic original.

CB: As I was saying before, the video isn't really the work; rather the translation onto video of an authentic or immediate experience that might be recognised by the viewer is the work. If someone can comprehend some kind of familiarity to his or her own experience when viewing my work, whether personal, nostalgic or immediately – right there in the gallery space – then that translates a shared experience from which universal meaning may begin to take shape. The video is simply the mechanism for the communication of shared unique experiences that should be thought of as truthful. How those experiences are interpreted, internalised and subsequently integrated into viewers' everyday lives is what really matters.

FP: So it's a medium for reaching something else beyond the work?

CB: I believe so. And that's why it's been important to me to record so many different subjects. I have been using video consistently for seven years but I

focus on a diverse range of subjects, from dancing, like in *The Average* and *Mothership*, to an amusement park ride (*The Supernova*, opposite page), to a polar bear, to lens flare, to my own back, but there's similarity between them in that they present a form of immediacy that's been translated through different forms in each and every work.

FP: Well, looking at the time it's probably the moment where I should hand over to the audience to ask any questions. Does anyone have anything in particular that they would like to ask Chris, either about his practice in general or the work in the show?

Audience member: I just want to say first of all that I haven't seen your work yet, but I'm interested in your description of it about being able to connect with an audience with a sense of familiarity – to me it sounds like it's culturally specific, your use of a particular kind of music, a particular kind of context – do you want to connect with people who relate to that?

CB: If my response is immediate, or 'first sense' and as authentic as it can possibly be, then hopefully that is what is being translated through video – experience – and not specifically the cultural signs and codes from which I have been brought up with and which I choose to operate within. Ideally the premise of my work is that unremarkable, ordinary but unique individual experiences are common to everyone and transcend specific cultural and social signifiers. Again, this is what I mean when I'm talking about using different subject matter – not just dancing to electronic techno music for instance, which barely anyone I know really likes anyway. I think ideally my work is probably more profound if there's three or four or more videos so you sort of keep seeing that immediacy or that translation of it in different forms, and that's where it sort of keeps hitting home. It eventually becomes obvious that in a Spectacular culture, where meaning is placed on what you identify with and not with who you are, that simple, straightforward and banal experiences eschew a universal commonality.

FP: Could you put your works into a series that would then be displayed always in that particular grouping or can they be mixed up for different contexts?

CB: They can be mixed up certainly. Works do play

off against each other but it's ultimately contextually based. I don't plan relationships with works until I know what kind of space I get to work with. For example in my Doctorate exhibition videos will be projected onto each wall of the White Box Gallery. A selection of about eight videos will be played discontinuously in the installation so a work will appear in front of you and then another work will commence behind you, or beside you and you'll switch your viewing between them and actively participate in the work.

Tony Albert: I was just thinking that having the opportunity to have seen a lot of your work, what I find happens after seeing it is you take those moments with you, you see them again differently. Like I could be on the bus and miss my bus stop after seeing your work because I'm looking at different things that I don't often see in life. And I think that's a really great gift that the work gives, this element of slowing down and looking at moments in time as something really precious that don't have to be about family or snapshots, just things that you see everyday. There's a beautiful one of a tiger shaped balloon floating that is just very simple that I really like.

CB: There's a balance between that simplicity and going overboard. Timing is really important. Knowing when something is too long or not long enough are kind of the most difficult judgments to make. It could be a twenty-minute static shot of cars coming towards you at an intersection, but then how much of that is too long and superfluous for a viewer? The challenge is to strike the balance between simplicity and profundity.

FP: The work you've described there was the first of your videos that I actually saw. It was screened on the side of a building in Melbourne in 2006 for '+Plus Factors', which was curated out of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. There were these cars coming towards the camera and then turning in either direction with subtitles that would come up as the car reached the closest point to the camera before turning. That was quite a puzzle trying to work out what these strange subtitles were. It was only later that I made the connection that it was a game of making words out of number plates, which is

something that I know I've done.

CB: That work is called *Name That Tune* (opposite page) and the footage was very seductive but resembled the Spectacle too much. It straightforwardly revealed shoppers and motorists at an intersection and it just reeked of consumption, but it was really gorgeous. So I intervened and made up three word haiku-like poems to match the number plates like 'I found utopia' and 'don't know everything'. They're kind of dumb and flippant, but existential at the same time. It was a strategy to rupture the formality and regularity of this particular shopping Spectacle and suggest that playfulness and immediacy underlie spectacular environments.

FP: Thank you very much Chris for conversing with me and thank you very much for everyone who has come along and I hope you enjoy the rest of the evening.

1. 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism' (15 November 2008 – 22 February 2009) was the first in a triennial exhibition series at the Queensland Art Gallery's Gallery of Modern Art. The 'Salon Project' was a mini-exhibition embedded within 'Optimism' that featured contemporary representational painting and sought to draw attention to the shared origins of both optimism and the academic salon in the Enlightenment. The inclusion of Bennie's video *The Average* 2007, with its ambient soundtrack of techno music, deliberately disrupted the decorous nature of the 'salon-style' hang, while also sharing the preoccupation of many of the painters with rendering the mundane in art.

2. See Husserl, E 1977, *Phenomenological psychology: lectures, summer series*, trans. J Scanlan, Mertinus Nijhoff, The Hague.

3. Debord, G 1994, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. D Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, New York.



don't know everything



I found utopia