



# Chris Bennie

LAINI BURTON

CHRIS BENNIE'S VIDEOS CHRONICLE the affective moments of the everyday encounter. His inclusion in The Salon Project in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism*, the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art's recent survey of contemporary art, marks a watershed for his status as an emerging artist of note.

In his video *The average* (2007), Bennie and his partner casually dance around a domestic interior, creating their own personal nightclub scene. Bennie seems unconcerned with achieving any sense of synchronicity as the two indulge themselves; sometimes giggling, most often silent, flicking matches, then light switches, dancing, passing one another by. At times the darkness leaves the viewer wondering after the action unseen; their attentions renewed by another flick of a switch, revealing that one or the other of the dancers has simply moved to a different location.

Exhibited on a small format television screen *The average* seemed an almost timid addition to The Salon, one which demands a more intimate engagement with the viewer and contributes to Bennie's denial of the spectacle as omnipresent, even within the confines of a significant show like *Optimism*. A small gesture of resistance, perhaps, but Bennie is serious when he claims that the 'real' can exist alongside Guy Debord's overproduced, homogenised *Society of the Spectacle*.<sup>1</sup>

Eschewing post-production editing and technical virtuosity, *The average* operates as an antidote to the all encompassing theories of the spectacle. Rather, Bennie pursues 'authentic' experience as a counterpoint to today's culture of spectacle; a premise reflected in the video's title.<sup>2</sup> The seduction of the spectacle is diffused by the video's techno soundtrack, disrupting the silent reverie of The Salon and inducing self-awareness in the viewer. Bennie references what he calls the 'existential milieu' of trying to achieve (and record) synchronicity and rhythm within the ebb and flow of everyday reality and directly felt experience.<sup>3</sup>

*The average* is emblematic of the paradox of spectatorship, as the correlative to the spectacle. The opportunity to contemplate this private act is interrupted by the public and shared space of The Salon. Bennie actively draws on this tension in an effort to negate the viewing experience, simultaneously inviting you to enter his world while reinforcing that you're external to the imagery. The work asks us to reflect not only on the way we choose to spend our time, but muses over our interaction with those around us and our immediate environment. The passage of time is also measured in the flicker of light which, at times, echoes the rhythm of the music and at others loses the beat altogether. What remains in suspension throughout this ill-choreographed dance is the anticipation of a climax, or a message – which is ultimately unmet.

The only video work in a room otherwise dedicated to contemporary representational painting, *The average* seemed to rupture the coherent pictorial space of The Salon and appeared, if anything, anachronistic. Nevertheless its inclusion evidenced the ongoing evolution of painting practice, and contributes to artist and writer John Conomos's critical call that video, as a medium, is alive and well.<sup>4</sup>

*The average* exhibits a remarkable lack of self-consciousness. Like a view from the *Rear Window*, we watch the moments slip away in someone else's life; not the tranquillised inertia brought on by Debord's spectacle, but a reflective exercise compelling the viewer to evaluate their own private activities in relation to others. Bennie celebrates the many unremarkable events in our lives in order to find joy in the banal and also lament, perhaps, the passing of such instances. After all it is in those chance moments where the lights go on together, in time with the music, that the optimism and beauty of life is illuminated.

## Notes

1. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, from <http://www.bopsecrets.org/Sl/debord/1.html>
2. Chris Bennie, *Video Art, Authenticity and the Spectacle of Contemporary Existence*, Unpublished Exegesis.
3. Chris Bennie in an email conversation with the author, 7 October, 2008.
4. John Conomos, *Mutant Media: Essays on Cinema, Video Art and New Media*, Sydney, ArtSpace Visual Arts Centre and Power Publications, 2007.



*Contemporary Australia: Optimism* was organised by the Queensland Art Gallery and held at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 15 November 2008 to 22 February 2009.

Laini Burton is an Associate Lecturer in Art Theory at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane.

Chris Bennie, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *The Supernova*, 2005, still image from digital video, 2 minutes 18 seconds; *The Average*, 2007, still image from digital video, 7 minutes 48 seconds; *The Average*, 2007, still image from digital video, 7 minutes 48 seconds; *Holy Cow*, 2009, production photograph for digital video, 6 minutes 42 seconds; *When The Rain Comes*, 2007, digital video, 17 second loop, installation view, Queensland College of Art Griffith University White Box Gallery. Images courtesy the artist.