

Art

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George Barber

Interviewed by Maria Walsh

Art Pilgrims

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George Barber interviewed by Maria Walsh

SHOUTING MATCH

George Barber *Shouting Match* 2004, video

Maria Walsh: *Your recent work overtly addresses political issues – Drone attacks in The Freestone Drone, 2013, and the migrant issue in Fences Make Senses, 2014, currently on show at Waterside Contemporary. Yet your early work, the ‘Scratch’ videos especially, seems in high contrast to this. I’m curious about this shift.*

George Barber: Yes, it is a big shift but even though I was making Scratch, and consciously getting into postmodern recycling of style over content – actually, I always wanted to be a writer – it just seemed that maybe the Scratch stuff was a blip because I realised it was a way of making something visual fast and I precisely didn’t want meaning at that point, because it was music-based and I wanted it to be immersive. My interest in having conversations with people about the world and projecting that in art was always there, but I can see that it might seem as if I was bumbling around with materials and then became this thinking, issues character.

When I was a student at Central St Martins they used to preach this doctrine about not thinking in terms of metaphors, that you should concentrate on what is in the piece – nothing else. I couldn’t stand all that. Basically, they were telling you to stare at the pattern, the material, the frame, but you would need a lobotomy to keep that up. They also seemed to dislike the idea of a sort of bourgeois discourse: ‘we are just talking about the mechanics of film; we hate narrative,’ they seemed to say. It was a complex moment, but in the late 1970s there was a certain fashion that it was bourgeois to be very discursive or link ideas to a wider field. For a short while, lots of key artists wanted the surface, the medium and the mechanics to be centre stage. The structuralists held great sway in art colleges then. I wanted something else.

It is interesting that you have segued into this as I did want to ask you about your relationship to structuralist film. I always thought of the formalism of their discourse as bourgeois. They looked down on the popular – Hollywood movies were seen as indulgent cultural illusions.

Yes, their great discovery was that boredom was political. A film with nothing going on made you a radical – yeah, right.



Upside Down Minutiae 2001
video

Thirty Minutes of Crawl 2015
video

The Freestone Drone 2013
video

I felt it to be a profound censorship, something totalitarian in spirit. But what I meant was that, say you have a literary critic on the BBC talking about a new novel, they can précis it and interpret it with all sorts of literary frameworks and modes of analysis that seemed revolting, stuffy and old-fashioned in the art world of that time. The structuralists were looking for something revolutionary or tough in their discourse. It was anti-bourgeois in that sense.

The irony about this is that years later after *Scratch*, I realised that I was doing something quite similar. I was doing what I had been taught, only much quicker and perhaps more pleasurably. But in the end I was asking the viewer to fall into the image and just look at it – I hadn't travelled that far from them really – though I did add these meaningless mantras from Hollywood films, pop choruses and music with a beat. Ironically, it was a version of Structuralism, even if it was edited in television time rather than art time.

What do you mean by that distinction?

It used to drive me nuts as a student – the arrogance of most of these makers and it still goes on today. For example, there is a Richard Serra piece I remember where you sit in a room for about 45 minutes to watch somebody placing different coloured paper in front of a rostrum camera, and that's it! It annoyed me, the sense in which you were supposed to just chill and go willingly into this zombie world. I didn't think art should be like this back then. I mean, look at literature – there is no book that does that and sees it as an advantage.

Art is quite bewildering today, too. A lot of younger makers do use durational time because that is actually what television doesn't have, so it is another marker of saying this is 'art'. A lot of contemporary work looks like rushes to me; the tentative, unfinished nature of it. So it is almost like participation for the viewer to think: what does it mean? What is it about? I'm more of a classicist. I still edit and, if it begins to get boring and it is not producing a thought in my head, the chances are it won't produce one in anyone else's either, so I go back to where it seems to work.

The Freestone Drone, at 12 minutes, is a concise piece. I think the times and the experience of time have changed – you can't make work like Chris Marker or take time like Jean-Luc Godard any more, people are a bit more fidgety. One thing that breaks my heart also, in this discussion about time and duration, is that you are not taken seriously if you make short work. Most artists want to take up space and take up time. I have been to many screenings where the 40-minute work is seen as important and the three-minute one is seen as a joke, or as slight, when often the longer work is just very slow and repetitive.

*In another context, I think there is a shift towards the short, albeit shared rather than screened. Some of your early Scratch, particularly *Absence of Satan*, 1985, and *No Frank, Yes Smoke*, 1985, has a contemporary feel with a GIF-like use of repetition and surface materiality. Other work seems more dated because of the imagery, like watching old cult TV. People look different, dress differently – I'm especially thinking of *The Venetian Ghost* of 1988.*

That is my elegy to LA. I always thought that video picked up on the emptiness of LA, which is pretty timeless. It looks terrible now, though. The image is harsh in a way that modern cameras aren't, but they were the best professional video cameras at the time. Now it looks like a Brazilian soap opera. I think at the time I knew that but it was what I could afford. My *Taxi Driver 11* of 1987 is like that too.

The humour of the historical references, for example, Gaddafi and Clearasil, Arab terrorists and portable food, is quite prescient in that video.

If you think as well about the Robert de Niro acting classes in the video – that was really prescient. There is a funny story about when it was shown. Colin MacCabe, who gave me the money to make it, showed it at a very nice plush cinema in Piccadilly. The film on before mine, which had cost thousands, was a ponderous romance. My little thing came on and the audience loved it. Colin was very pleased so he gave me a bit more money to get the ending right – I needed to hire a convertible for the day and get the star a Mohican haircut. Then Colin used to forever get calls from South America saying: ‘This *Taxi Driver 11*, when can we have this new sequel?’ And he had to tell them it is only a seven-minute British video art work. The world always thinks of me as Scratch first and then with add-ons, but what I said about being literary can be seen in both *Taxi Driver 11* and *The Venetian Ghost*. In fact, the last piece of Scratch I did was in 1985 but I was already working with actors in 1987 and 1988. I was always working with writing. I have just put together a collection of short stories, too, which will be in gallery bookshops soon. I was always doing literary things at the same time. Actually, I was always capable of working with actors and dialogue.

The people who appeared in previous shorter works, such as Beyond Language, 2005, and Shouting Match, 2004, were non-actors and executed a set of simple instructions, whereas in the current work you have hired actors and you are directing more.

In *Taxi Driver 11* they were acting students, as they were in *The Venetian Ghost* too. Those works, and others like *Walking Off Court* of 2003 and *Withdrawal* from 1997, are about the common pain that people feel about existence. In my latest work, *Akula Dream*, they are professional actors. The captain, Richard Leaf, has acted in Shakespeare productions and he played Hannibal Lecter’s father in *Hannibal Rising*. He really liked the project as we shot it on a real Soviet submarine near Rochester. The great thing about modern cameras is that you don’t need a lot of power, so we were able to get all the lights we needed, powered by a tiny generator. Anyway, he has that great animism, that presence. In *Fences Make Senses*, the participants are experienced improvisers. I thought they were very talented at running with an idea and acting out the refugee scenarios. Of course, in their tradition they veer towards humour, but so do I. If you look at the greats – Shakespeare, and I was reading George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* recently – they do combine seriousness with humour. Today, there is a tendency to think you can’t have both, especially in politics.

Anyway, the long and the short of it is that I wanted to travel between two registers. I know my way round video art and I just slip in enough to keep it attention-grabbing so you know that is where I have come from, but at the same time the narrative keeps you wondering how it will end. It’s a good combination. *Akula Dream* was shown at ‘Transmètic’ at Lewisham Art house recently and the audience loved it. The art bits are just the length that you don’t walk off, and the narrative gives it drive. It is quite a satisfying piece in that it represents the two sides of me coming together after all these years. They are going to show it at the London Film Festival. This link between registers seems to be acceptable now. What video art does well is that it allows you to dream and drift into the image. It is primarily a visual form. So I’m partly back to what they were telling me at St Martins, but in the context of *Akula Dream* you still have an umbrella of sense and development: you know that it is about a bloke on a submarine, and the dreamy moments punctuate the narrative. They are the shamanic journeys of the crew.

In relation to what you were saying before about being literary, Akula Dream is such a contrast to your use of the guttural aspects of language in Beyond Language and Shouting Match.

I think I have three categories: the narrative poetic stuff, then Scratch works, which is material and quite fashionable now – the younger generation love that all that stuff and there is tons of it on YouTube – and also my middle period, which is conceptual. When I did *Shouting Match* I was consciously thinking that the best video art was made by the early crowd – Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Marina Abramović – they were performing simple animal-like actions connected with language. *Shouting Match* is another iteration, but of course the camera works differently – I had tracks and used dollies – but I would admit that it somehow comes from the founding greats of video art. *Automotive Action Painting*, 2007, which is one of my hits with lots of views on YouTube, is the same.

Where would you place your monologues?

There came the point when I was a bit short of cash and I was struggling, so I made a piece called *Waiting for Dave*, 1994, which was about waiting to come alive so that ‘Dave’, David Curtis, at the Arts Council, would give me a few bob. If you adopt a confessional mode and you have quite insightful things to say about your own life, that is the best an artist can do because you can’t have fancy sets but you have your own body and your own mind. My monologues attempt to get at what it feels like to be alive in quite a personal and extreme subjective mode. You can construct imaginative scenarios of what it is like to be on the airport disaster plane – *Passing Ship* from 1994 – or these kinds of things. It was a stimulating moment I picked up on then, the slacker ethos that I affected. But even though this work had a genuine insight, it was digging me even more into this thing where you had to be an English person to get it. I became worried, especially in the 1990s, about being associated with – a terrible phrase – ‘English whimsy’, and that put me off. Videos like *Walking Off Court* cannot be appreciated unless you have very good English language. The reach of your art is limited if it is so language based. The *Shouting Match* series was a further response to that.

I wanted to ask you about your use of props and installation space in recent and current work. Was The Freestone Drone the first time you exhibited in this way?

I had done a few, but not so well developed, so it is a new shift. I began to see that if you just do screens, it is not much of an event. We walk past screens all the time at stations so I began to think of simple ways of staging the piece. Thematically, the centre point in *The Freestone Drone* is about drones watching the washing-lines. It didn’t take much to turn it into an event. I like the notion of staging the work. I don’t mind phrases like ‘dressing a set’ either. They have a function. They reinforce key points within the video. The hanging washing alerts you – I like crap, haphazard washing – because it is non-aesthetic too. We took it to the Istanbul art fair and it looked very untidy in the space, like an unloved show. Wherever it goes, I have to find dumped washing to put on the lines.

When people write about your work, they say you are critiquing television. Is that how you see it?

That’s a big question: whether anyone’s critique has any effect. I was to some extent critiquing television because I wasn’t taking good stuff, but B movies and cheap adverts and travel shows. I wanted to take that material and put it together in a way that the sensibility of what it produced was a million miles away from the original maker’s intention. I wouldn’t make



Akula Dream – The Admiral Scene 2015
video

Fences Make Senses 2015
video

any great claims for it but at the time I think it was subversive in that I was taking recognisable bits of culture and transforming them. Then pop culture liked it, record companies liked it, so in a way the critique must have worked because commercial culture saw that it was a change in perspective. Obviously it was recuperated in the old Marxist sense soon enough.

Critique has become such a calling card in the art world now.

Yes, who would have thought that research would become so popular at Basel, that university art would become such a scene-setter? If you have a piece of work that connects with the world and connects with famous theorists like, say, Slavoj Žižek, you cover historical ground in a way that gives people lots to talk about and it gives the work great intellectual and critical provenance. You can include my new work in this, though I didn't make it like that as I am not a cynical person. Art has drifted away from being a formal thing. It is a good time to have a repertoire of issues that you situate your practice within.

Like the migrant issue currently?

I didn't know it was going to get as big as it has. *Fences Make Senses* was made last year. It was a different issue then. I'm not sure it would be a similar piece if I made it now. Now, it is a bit like 9/11 – one doesn't want to turn on the TV. It is a bit like we are watching the 21st-century Jarrow March and it looks as if it will be going on for some time. I think that artwork is rather good because it seems to have hit on something, but I am in no way offering a solution. Every country has a definition of a refugee but they don't set up a booth in Somalia to see who fits it. They let them climb mountains, swim seas, walk miles, get to you illegally and then will decide. There is madness to it. The West has its rules but, deep underneath, the true fact is that we all know that if we are going to share everything, we are going to be a lot poorer. And it would seem as if Iraq and Syria are going to become a large military exercise ground without people, like a super large Salisbury Plain for military powers to try things out.

I think your use of found footage in Fences Make Senses has an oblique relation to the 'documentary turn' in the art world. I was put in mind of Nicolai Bendix Skyum Larsson's The Promised Land from 2009, also on the migrant issue. The Promised Land is a very powerful piece using documentary images that are beautifully shot and make one ask oneself: 'is this an aestheticisation of misery?' Art can't but be aesthetic and I'm not saying one way is better than the other, but your poetic – and as you were saying earlier, personal – voice-over makes for a non-didactic way of accessing material that in an art context could seem quite gratuitous. I probably spent too much time watching Godard. I was told at the Slade by Tim Head, my tutor there, 'George, you are always searching for this big meaning, you should just make simple things', because it does actually work. I think art that has the potential for a conversation with you and seems to indicate a mind at work behind it – you, the viewer, can interpret it and you can think, 'I've thought that' or 'I can get that' – that is a lot richer than that lonely feeling which is quite common for a viewer today. ■

George Barber's exhibition 'Fences Make Senses' is at Waterside Contemporary, London until 7 November and *Akula Dream* will be on display at Chapter Gallery, Cardiff to 10 January.

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