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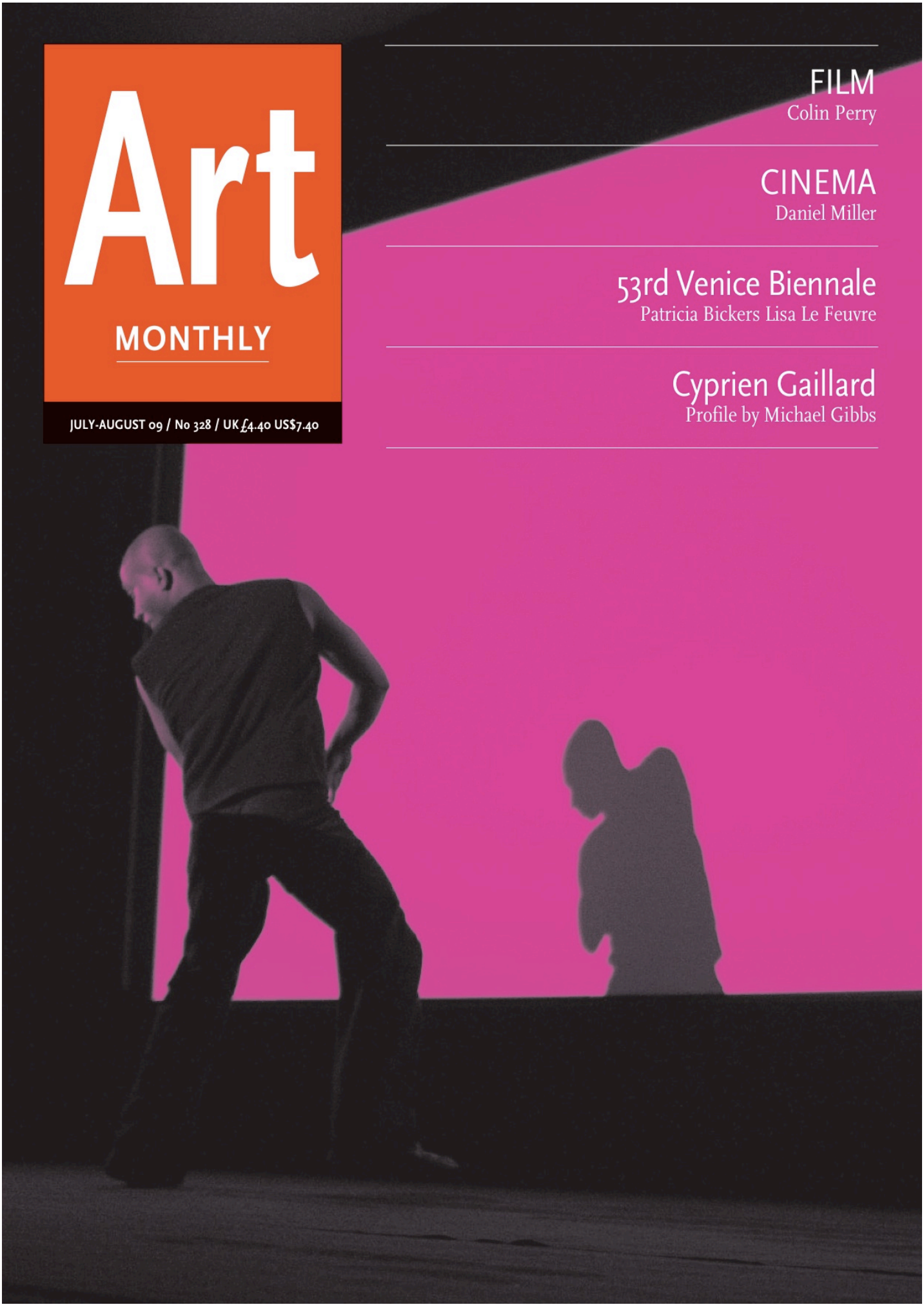

selected exhibition that highlights how contemporary artists continue to be drawn to landscape precisely because it remains such a highly contested field. Time and again the genre's key attraction is that it can provide a space to destabilise any notion of a fixed identity and revel in this uncertainty. As Irit Rogoff wrote in *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*, 2000: 'It is not scientific knowledge or the national categories of the state which determine both belonging and unbelonging, but rather linked sets of political insights, memories, subjectivities, projections of fantasmatic desires and great long chains of sliding signifiers.' ▮

Figuring Landscapes was at Tate Modern London 6 to 8 February and is now on a rolling tour of the UK and Australia. www.studycollection.co.uk/figuringlandscapes

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George Barber
1001 Colours Andy Never Thought Of 1989 video still

George Barber: Beyond Language, Selected Video Works 1983-2008

Martin Herbert

'Structuralism plus fun' is how George Barber defined his early video work in a recent interview. No surprise, really, to find the English artist being his own best interpreter: Barber, over the last quarter-century, has been very much a DIY kind of guy. How many other video artists self-distribute their output through record shops, as he did with the early compilation 'The Greatest Hits of Scratch Video'? How many selections of artists' video come, as this two-hour, 23-film package does, with a director's commentary? But then language has been intrinsic to Barber's art from the start. His productions may be parsimonious of budget, but they overflow with words: monologues, voiceovers, dub-style echoes, sampled snippets of film dialogue. And if accordingly it's a touch ironic that this compilation is titled after one of the only films here with no actual speech acts in it – the ten-minute 'Beyond Language', 2005, features two distinctly unglamorous women howling, grunting and whooping together in an elevated garden overlooking an urban street – that piece could also be considered a summa of Barber's restlessly impious, comically earthy superseding of consensual sense.

That's where he began, in the early scratch video works: taking segments of Hollywood films and trashy American television shows and chopping and looping them into rhythmic, senseless (in the best sense of the word) structure, like *Absence of Satan*, 1985. A slamming car door, a helicopter whirr and Paul Newman saying 'where were you?' become percussive elements in a piece of danceable music/video concrete driven by the classically 1980s sound of the Roland TR-808 drum machine. All of which is fashionable again; this is a well-timed release. Keyed to the era's Marxism-driven debates about ownership, originality and meaning, nodding equally to Jack Goldstein and Afrika Bambaataa, this work is smartest in its accessibility: textbook Postmodernism, but with a groove. (And, in the halcyon days of early Channel 4, this kind of thing could even get on TV.) Amid the cheap clouds of video graphics and Rob Schneider stuttering 'Y-y-y-y-yes Frank' in *Yes Frank No Smoke*, 1985, Barber tosses out an idea – a montage of people in different films answering the phone – that Christian Marclay later made a whole work out of (*Telephone*, 1995) and that Apple lately 'borrowed' from the American artist for an advertisement. In Barber's piece, as we're released from the narrowness of narrative, all vestiges of storyline turn libidinal.

The sense one gets, frequently, is of the artist struggling to master, and combat with humour, an unpleasant situation – whether it be the tides of banality issuing from his television set, or the vicissitudes of the creative life. For examples of the former, consider the numerous works here which layer outlandish new voiceovers onto advertisements or shaky footage of consumer products: *Hovis Ad*, 1994, with its hard-luck narrative delivered in a comedy-Northerner accent, or *The Story of Wash & Go*, 1995, which offers a farcical tale of Vidal Sassoon coming up with the idea for an all-in-one shampoo and conditioner while driving his ill and foul-mouthed chauffeur, Murray, around. ('You and your fucking hair,' the latter opines from the backseat.) The art world, meanwhile, is painted as an unhappy and under-funded place to reside: in the miniature *Arts Council GB Scratch*, 1988, some late-1980s sample-heavy electro forms a winningly ridiculous framework for clips of Bridget Riley and David Hockney and a snippet of James Brown shouting 'I wanna get into it!' followed by someone saying, heavily, 'grant'. Things are little better by the time of *I Was Once Involved in a Shit Show*, 2003, a double-projection affair. On one screen we watch a man painting some railings. On the other, a lugubrious Barber recounts his experience of contributing to an exhibition sponsored by a cement-works owner, who wanted all the work to be about cement; his wife, meanwhile, insisted that the art also be Impressionist. (And then there's the anti-capitalist demo at the opening to take into account.) 'At the level of sense, it was found wanting,' Barber concludes.

The latter film is emblematic of his shift, in the 1990s, into a faux-confessional, slacker-art mode which reaches some kind of transcendental peak of inertia in *Waiting for Dave*, 1994, whose speaker – sitting beside a chimney, on a roof – has nothing to do, but is diligent about it. ('I don't like to be wishy-washy, say you're going to wait for someone and not put the time in.') Barber, though, seems to like being a moving target. His art has been used by U2; his videography is spiked with oddities like *Curtain Trip*, 1994, a flow of abstract patterning set to a psychedelic soundtrack, and *Automotive Action Painting*, 2007, Barber's contribution to Film and Video Umbrella's no-edits-allowed 'Single Shot' series. Here, an overhead crane shot shows the artist pouring buckets of coloured paint onto a roadway (in reality, an airstrip): cars swerve around, and then finally drive through the pools, presently engendering a sensuous polychromatic blur. On the commentary track Barber notes that, among other things, he liked the idea of 'boring commuters making an emotional abstract painting'. Again there's a sense of democratisation at work here, that the ostensibly elitist language of art can be possessed by anyone, even without their knowing it. (Although the ad men knew it whan using the idea for a recent car ad, soon after the release of this DVD.)

By the last inclusion, when Barber returns to heisting and recombining elements of advertising in *Following Your Heart Can Lead to Wonderful Things*, 2008, the semi-reprise of scratch video techniques underlines how debates on intellectual property have remained timely over the intervening years, with the owners of copyrights becoming ever more litigious. (As has been pointed out, try remaking the Bomb

Squad's densely layered hip-hop productions for Public Enemy under today's prohibitive sample-clearance laws.) In Barber's case, where this seems to intersect with language is in the latter's inextricability from issues of definition, control and power. *Following Your Heart*, with its repeated fragments of advertisements for Mediterranean holidays and Hardy's wine, and Barber's berserk, gravel-voiced exhortations for us to 'get it now on DVD', treats advertising as syntactical, assumes the right to use its elements and pointedly deranges its codes. Like much else in 'Beyond Language', it is both comical and purposeful: indeed, the two can't be separated. To borrow one of Stuart Morgan's favourite quotations, from the Talmud: 'A lesson learned through humour is a lesson retained.' You know that Barber knows it too. ▮

DVD distributed by Lux, 2008, £20.00.

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15mm Films: The Way Out

Maxa Zoller

The deaf acid messiah Jim Chosen plays guerrilla monopoly with a Japanese spy, the disabled underground glamour queen Peedy Starling loses herself in excessive headbanging at a punk concert, and Suzy leaves the terrorist camp in her wheelchair ready to face the ultimate suicide mission. These are some of the bizarre scenes from 'The Way Out', a series of new films by the artists' collective 15mm Films. 'The Way Out' presents seven trailers for a movie that never existed about a revolution that never occurred: the disabled revolution. This fictional revolution is hatched by a gang of disabled, distopian hippies-cum-terrorists whose absurd plots are fuelled by drugs, violence and empty ideologies. Set in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the railway arches of Beaconsfield, which commissioned the work, the films were shot with a handheld digital camera in order to evoke the domestic aesthetic of amateur filmmaking and 1970s Blaxploitation B-Movies, which is further highlighted by the cheesy soundtrack of James Bond music and loud explosions. One of the main qualities of the work is the skilful appropriation of the reduced ecology of the cinematic trailer; its effective, perfectly timed staccato of sound and image and catchy phrases that leave the audience in great anticipation of the film.

The films are marked by a high dose of humour, satire and over-the-top performances by the members of the collective. While the Japanese mole despairs over martial arts ('Confucius, it just confused me!'), terrorist Suzy sends her trembling chihuahua off on her suicide mission ('Go blow these pigs up, I want to smell that bacon!') and Starling plots the new revolution over the phone ('Some of my best friends are able-bodied. I can't ask them to just donate a limb!'). Transgressing the borders of political correctness, the collective's relentlessly honest approach to the subject of physical disability places the abled-bodied viewer in an uncomfortable position. While disabled persons historically have been disempowered through pity, fear and physical exclusion by a dominant abled-bodied society, 'The Way Out' is an act of empowerment of the subject of marginalisation. This subversion of power structures makes 'The Way Out' a deeply political work of art.

Another complexity lies in the conceptual structure of the work. In the light of a re-emerging interest in western forms of terrorism, which has also been the subject of various films, such as Steve McQueen's *Hunger* and Uli Edel's *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*, 'The Way Out' stages a fictional revolution through the medium of cinema. While Gil Scott Heron claimed in 1970 that 'the revolution will not be televised', 15mm Films directly situates the disabled revolution within the imagination of mainstream media. Fiction becomes a key tool to work through the trauma of the real and its signification as an 'otherness' based on absence. In 'The Way Out', this absence, or lack, is twofold: there is the absence of the revolution, which historically never happened, and the absence of the film that the trailers announce. Absence also defines the tongue-in-cheek name of the collective itself, which refers to the standard 16mm film format 'but with a bit missing'.

15mm Films was founded in 2003 and consists of, among others, Aaron Williamson, Laurence Harvey, Juliet Robson and Katherine Araniello. The collective was born out of a frustration with the production and reception of so-called 'disability arts', which are largely excluded from the mainstream art world. Though disability arts has been the subject of various debates, such as the 2007 Tate Modern Alternative Arts Debate organised by the disability rights campaigner Paddy Masefield, most mainstream artworks dealing with physical disability lack the subversive complexity that 15mm Films stands for. For instance, in Marc Quinn's public sculpture *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, which was displayed in Trafalgar Square in 2005-07, disability is indirectly 'othered' through fetishisation. While the heroic Lapper sculpture sought to contest the 'ideal form' based on the flawless male body of Greek marble sculpture, it only reinforced a classic binary system in which the disabled body is defined as the 'other' of the abled body. The question here is not how to relate the other to the ideal, but how to undo these oppositions in the first place. In this regard, the artistic intention of 15mm Films is universal: to find 'a way out' of the Cartesian grid of subject and object, and to create new forms of perception that allow for movement, transformation and ambiguity.

The question of how to resist fixed systems of signification has been theorised by the psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik, who made the distinction between the 'anormal' and the 'abnormal'. The Greek word 'anormal' relates to the 'rough and uneven' that, despite its singularity, can be appropriated and reproduced in late capitalism. The Latin 'abnormal' on the other hand signifies the undesired, that which cannot be fully understood by the viewer or consumed by the system. According to Rolnik, true artistic creation is only possible through an encounter with the latter. With 'The Way Out', 15mm Films engages with this notion of the abnormal on many levels. Their disabled bodies are already located outside of what Rolnik calls 'prêt-à-porter' identities. The collective's vigorous performances push the work into a discourse that radically challenges the freak-cum-fashionable capitalisation of individuality. Less obvious, but equally important in relation to the 'abnormal', is the conceptual basis of the work: at the heart of the films lies the desire to subvert clichéd perceptions of disabled bodies – and by extension to undermine the supremacy of the abled body.

For a long time disability has been a very sensitive, almost taboo subject in the arts – too great the threat of disempowerment, too deep the trauma of otherness, too intimate the proximity to death. Artists and, most importantly, critics and curators, feel ill equipped to address these delicate issues (in fact, this is the collective's first mainstream art magazine review). This apparent problem was turned into a positive at the Alternative Arts Debate, where it was stated that disability artists are 'the last avant-garde'. While the 1970s witnessed the feminist, civil rights and gay rights movements, which radically changed the socio-cultural, artistic and economic landscape of society, the 'last revolution' only exists as a series of cinematic trailers, which defy the reality of existing stereotypes through a fictional history. ▮

The Way Out was at Beaconsfield London from 25 March to 14 June.

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