



shaun gladwell

the deep madness of...



IHOR HOLUBIZKY

This text is a continuation of a dialogue with Shaun Gladwell that began five years ago, and picking up where we left off on the cusp of his survey exhibition at Artspace, Sydney and the first presentation of *MADDESTMAXIMVS*, late 2007. I had been receiving interim reports from Shaun as he was working towards the *Venice Biennale*—messages from the desert with still images and video clips. The starting point for this epistolary exchange would be a simple question: “What are you doing for Venice, and how is it related to *MADDESTMAXIMVS*?”

I did not expect the ferocity and detail of the first response. In effect, he wrote it all with the clarity and erudition which I have come to expect. This is by no means a given, and not simply the exegesis mode that has become the new artist-statement, and which is gathering momentum as an ideological positioning. The stand taken by artists is that they too can think and don't need to rely on or wait for critics and curators.

The title of this text comes from the opening line of his response, a form of apology, in that it was penned in the “deep madness of sleep deprivation” after surviving a brutal shooting schedule of ten sessions over the Easter break—he detected what he described as a “near mutinous level of stress” within the crew. There is nothing spontaneous about videowork, which is slow and demanding, and in my very first writing on Gladwell I wondered if he would continue, given his broad range of interests—his painterly concerns for example—that could not be fully expressed in a single medium. I have been proven wrong—there is much more he has to say and in the process moving to places where I could not have imagined. Video is a hybrid and malleable medium, its language always forming. Gladwell's work is not that of a film-auteur, but nonetheless retains the immediacy and agility. He is an artist who is fully cognisant of the what-and-why of his work, yet still allowing things to reveal themselves in the making.

Firstly, the background to his *Venice Biennale* work.

SG: *I shifted the subject of my work from urban-based activity to performances in the Australian hinterland and desert for the MADDESTMAXIMVS series. There is still a creative misuse of space and various objects; for instance, a car is used as a surfboard, but as with previous projects, I have attempted to find a para-function in this vehicle. A more general connection between my urban and desert based projects is a sensitivity to the environment in which the latter take place. The project also differs from previous work in that I am finding inspiration in Australian material and issues, as much as references and material that are relevant to an international audience.*

Gladwell explained the sources and what he described as “local conversations” at work.

SG: *The primary Australian cinematic reference is the Mad Max film trilogy by George Miller. I am not however, engaged in appropriating this material, yet I do closely chase the aesthetic of these films in detail (Mad Max 2 in particular), redirecting several props for a very different purpose and atmosphere. In my treatment of cultural activities—extreme sports and skateboarding etc., I have worked around and often against the popular modes of representation in the media, the MTV model of fast cuts and loud soundtracks. Yet to a large extent it is a self-representation. I've used slow motion replay in order to present more detail in activity that is often edited to death, to explore the grammar of gesture in these works. Apart from the effects of slow motion and its psychological impact, it is also a way of distancing myself from that MTV model, which is evident (as a precursor) in the Mad Max films, where the violence and action is driven with high velocity, jumpcuts and close angles etc. At the same time, I am interested in connecting to the content of the film in relation to Australian art history.*

My relationship to Max may be similar to that of Sidney Nolan and the outlaw Ned Kelly, inhabiting the same Archetypal Heroic space defined by Joseph Campbell—a critique—but ‘the hero’ in my project is drawn from drama, not history, although Kelly is as much a fictional character through mythologising. Nolan haunts this project as a painter, who took it upon himself to explore the Australian interior and represent the severity of those conditions.

The first site—Gladwell's location for the video, its cultural and ‘spiritual’ resonance and the main character.

SG: *Broken Hill is arguably one of the most filmed parts of the Australian inland, nicknamed the ‘Outback Hollywood’. I felt I knew this space and region before actually visiting. Mad Max 2 was filmed here and I located my own work there for its significance in the construction of the Australian image and identity construction. Locating the project there was a case of participating in the universe I wished to examine and critique. So while my presence was still very much one of tourism, I can justifiably claim to feel a close connection and communion to ‘this place’. As well, I have a fascination with deserts and the ontology of the desert. If the work performances are read as transcendent, then I consider them hallucinations, mirages of transcendence within a desert, illustrating Deleuze's plane of pure immanence. There is also a notion of bare life in the desert—a space of almost clichéd brutality—beyond the institution of law, and perhaps governed by nature directly? But there is a more nuanced set of relations. Max is a law enforcer who became vengeful and operated outside its already frayed edges; the Giorgio Agamben notion of homo sacer, someone who has been exiled from the law, lost their protection, yet is still considered sacred. In the second film there is a shift from homo sacer, due to a general collapse of civilisation into a field of lawlessness—there is no institution of law to be excluded from. But the Mad Max films only serve as a point of departure or set of associations.*

My character is a protagonist of sorts, a black leatherclad figure, who wears a full-face helmet—totally anonymous—without a ‘face’ and defined by actions or ‘deeds’. Max and Ned Kelly are only possible projections onto this blank, monochromatic figure, but there is some reference to Joseph Campbell's The Hero With a Thousand Faces (1949), which did inspire George Miller's character construction of Max.

The second site is that of the Australian Pavilion in Venice. As Gladwell noted, the pavilion is something of a *cri célèbre*—as if a vernacular Australian beachside café or hut (a similar *cri* is heard with respect to the Canadian Pavilion and perhaps that of all outsider nations on a world stage), but Gladwell has chosen to work with this space as he has in the past, with nominated uses of extant spaces in galleries. He intends to alter

the space, cut into it and to park the ‘video car’—the ‘interceptor’—in front. Gladwell regards the ‘interceptor’ as the second character in his work. Accordingly, he undertook research into its origin, naming, variations and urban mythologies. He also made note of the absurdity of the ‘interceptor’s’ appearance in Venice.

SG: Perhaps the ‘interceptor’ is an assisted readymade that is both functional as a vehicle and if not totally dysfunctional, of limited use in Venice, a city without vehicular roads. It is therefore, an object, parked. The casualness was inspired by a replica ‘interceptor’ in front of a pub in the desert town of Silverton, very close to the location of my own work and the Mad Max films (it suggests to tourists that Max is inside having a drink). It is a way of bringing objects (one of my ‘characters’) from representation into the physical world, to replicate and simulate. I call the car’s placement the ‘Silverton pub position’.

The second object intervention is the motorcycle, an active prop (rather than a character) from the ‘Apology’ to ‘Roadkill’ section of *MADDESTMAXIMVS*. It will be lodged into the wall of the Pavilion with only part of the front tyre visible from the inside, but in such a way that it appears (in Gladwell’s words) as a “planned intersection” instead of the remains of a crash (that is, the Planet Hollywood version of a crash). In proximity is a re-edited version of the *MADDESTMAXIMVS* ‘Apology’ video. In this segment, a figure rides past dead kangaroos on the side of highways, stops, dismounts the bike and then picks up a kangaroo carcass, cradles it and carries it away.

SG: It is a performance, wherein the kangaroos are given a ritualistic removal. I was thinking of the Joseph Beuys’ performance How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare, (1965), and Phlegyas (or Charon) from Greek mythology, who ferried souls across the River Styx—yet grounding the idea in the real. It is actual roadkill. I extended this piece from its original two to six separate apology-actions, a repetition to better express the sheer volume of roadkill. Although I am not pointing to a human incursion on the landscape, or necessarily to a political-metaphor end, the reading is there for the taking. Similarly, the term ‘apology’ has a polysemous aspect in an Australian context that is loaded with signification. While there is no direct equation, or need to define its history, I would like to leave the work open for such readings.

Installed above a flight of stairs in the Pavilion, *Interceptor Surf Sequence* is the next video seen. Each video channel shows the same performance and location, but at different times and under different weather conditions. The setting is an open dirt road.

SG: The camera tracks the ‘interceptor’ and after a few moments a figure emerges from the window and slowly mounts the roof of the car. The figure, who then stands on the roof trying to find a balance, achieves an upright position before slowly re-entering the car. The simple set of actions have an association with filmic stunts, but are too reductive, too simple and perhaps too hard to read in terms of speed and risk to qualify as a stunt per se. This character is more interested in surveying the landscape or even in the very act of balancing.

The figure, who is looking ahead, is always viewed from behind. I thought of Gustave Courbet’s The Artist on the Seashore at Palavas (1854), as much as Caspar David Friedrich’s Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1818) in terms of a composition; staring across that expanse, like an inland sea. Courbet is also a counterpoint to Friedrich’s romanticism and I aim between these two figures. The Courbet painting is less transcendent, more earthed, and the dust kicked up by the ‘interceptor’ (instead of fog) is significant for me.

I was also hoping to describe the progression of a life-cycle of being. Let’s say that the figure emerges from a trans-dimensional vehicle (terms borrowed from American ‘counter culture’ writer Terence McKenna, but without drug theory attached!). Having reached maturity, the figure eventually returns to the original exit point. In order to disrupt and split a sense of the singularity of this moment, it is replayed with slight variations on the obverse. The performance occurs during the onset of a storm, which may amplify references to the Romantic Sublime but only on one side of the screen. Again, I love the notion of a continued empirical observation of conditions—a history from Manet’s ‘Rouen Cathedral’ series (more than thirty versions painted in the 1890s), Arnold Böcklin’s Isle of the Dead (five versions painted 1880-86) to the Harvey Keitel character in Smoke (1995), who photographs the same street corner everyday.

In this representation, I am not only manipulating time within the performance, by slowing down the playback, but also extending across to another time frame altogether. The jump between the two is unstated—it could be a few years, or decades—and this figure is positioned on a moving vehicle they are no longer driving, performing a form of ghost riding.

The next video work, a large composition of stacked, wall-based monitors entitled *Centred Pataphysical Suite*, is on the lower floor of the Pavilion. Each features a spinning figure; Gladwell’s first such titled work was a single channel video *Pataphysical Man* (2005). Gladwell was still working on the *Suite* at the time of writing.

SG: The figures are involved in different types of sport or street culture activity and movement; skateboarding, break dancing, a contemporary dancer, a BMX rider, and all performing very tight and continuous spinning motions, and all held by centrifugal force. They are all shown as spinning in slow motion. The monitors will also be installed, so that they share a centre of gravity along the same axis; the different movements of the figures will always move off centre, but all are seemingly within each other’s axes. I think of the figures as molecules, planets or stars in orbit—operating together, yet in individual rotation. A distortion results from spinning, like a dysfunctional panopticism. The spinner can see three hundred sixty degrees, but at speed the blur takes any resolution away. It is a paradoxical space of simultaneously seeing everything and nothing. The removal of the blind spot through rotation is to discover an even greater blind spot. I found inspiration in Jacques Derrida’s 1993 project Memoirs of the Blind and the images he selected for that text—the picturing of blindness, or in this case a temporary loss of detail. The effect of speed on vision—and for the editing to then slow down the subject—is my take on all the other slow motion projects. It must be analysed not only over time, but with time. The experimentation with slow motion is to consider temporality as being perspectival.

The last two works within the Pavilion deal more specifically with issues of temporality. The first, Endoscopic Vanitas, is closely connected to the Centred Pataphysical Suite. A monitor displays a live feed video from an endoscopic camera, recording the interior of a human skull; the monitor is slowly rotating via a geared electric motor on a bracket behind it. I wanted to explore the direct translation of vanitas as emptiness; the skull as an object has been exhausted and played out in terms of that object-ness and external surface. The actual human skull was borrowed from a doctor and friend of mine. I am greatly inspired by Andrzej Czajkowski, the Polish composer and pianist, who died in 1982, at the age of forty-six. He bequeathed his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company for their performances of Hamlet. Not unexpectedly, there was controversy and reticence, but it was finally used in a 2008 production.

The movement of Endoscopic Vanitas is connected to the spinning action in Centred Pataphysical Suite, as the two works are caught in each other’s fields. The space, like Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’, with light spilling in, is the site and space of a former subjectivity. The dimensions of our neurological seat. A ruin.

The final video work in the show is from the series entitled Planet and Stars Sequences. It shows ‘street genre’ paintings being made in quick succession with objects (vessels) used as stencils and erased. It is the only work in the pavilion that is in real-time, and by the time viewers have experienced the temporal manipulations of other work, perhaps this element will be questioned. The objects used for the process will be on display adjacent to the paintings, but not the paintings by themselves. There is a connective tissue, and with the staging of vehicles and vessels within the pavilion; the vehicle as a vessel, the notion of interiority from the desert to the location of consciousness. But there is a connection to Venice as site. I have now titled the entire project Maddestmaximus: Planet and Star Sequence, as I also consider it to be a poem for Galileo Galilei (amongst others, of course, as noted); it was in Venice that he first demonstrated his improved telescope. It profoundly changed our view of the cosmos and our place in it, yet as the British-born mathematician, biologist and author Jacob Bronowski noted, there was a personal misfortune. Galileo, who opened up the observable universe, became blind late in life; he was contained in his own body, internalised. Endoscopic Vanitas, which is a form of telescope, is the interiority of Galileo’s condition, a counterpoint to the obsessive imaging of surface. It is part of this poem and the larger metaphor.

There may appear to be a degree of passivity in this text and ‘non-writing’, which by necessity has removed many of Gladwell’s (considered) asides and (rich) digressions—his thoughts about things (an inclusive term, wherein art is also a ‘thing’), film, being in a place, in our bodies, as social beings with an ethical dimension and responsibilities, and at the same time, his complex and nuanced orchestration of things as episodic moments and moving images. As the visitor moves through a space and architecture that is from ‘another world’ and time, it may appear to be discontinuous. There is no way of knowing in advance, although that cannot be an artist’s objective in this forum. The *Biennale* is itself another world, and not necessarily one-and-the-same as art in the world. In my previous published outing with Shaun, I cited the ‘eye-trace’ dictum by film editor Walter Scott Murch, and I’m drawn back to other Murch commentary in pondering Shaun’s ‘walk-through’ (projecting into the near future—thinking about what I might experience) and its cinematic terms and expanded conditions. I have compressed two Murch passages: “[Almost every] theatrical film is made up of many different pieces of film joined together into a mosaic of images. [The ‘cut’] does seem to work, even though it represents a total and instantaneous displacement of one field of vision with another... that sometimes also entails a jump forward or backward in time, as well as space. Nothing in our day-to-day existence seems to prepare us for such a thing [yet] I believe ‘filmic’ juxtapositions are taking place in the real world, [which are] part of the method we use to make sense of the world.”

And sometimes, it is making sense of the deep madness of thought. Shaun ended with, “I’m still looking forward to life after Venice.”

