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Sandra Bridie
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Conversation between Sandra Bridie and Andrew McQualter

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AMcQ - I just thought we might start by talking about when you took the photographs.

SB - I had the idea of taking these photos on this holiday, which I was looking forward to with great anticipation. The holiday took place from around the twenty-seventh of December last year till the eighth of January at Malua Bay which is on the south coast of New South Wales, just down from Bateman's Bay. I had in mind to take holiday snaps, because I knew that it was a beautiful location evoking the idyll of a holiday to me. We stayed at my sister's partner's grandmother's house she used to live in. His family had used it as a holiday house for the last very long time. The house is on a cliff overlooking the sea, about one hundred yards away from a tiny little bay. I've been there two or three times before. The image of sitting on the balcony and looking out to sea is always something that's very nice to return to.

So does this mean that making your own work is like taking a holiday? Because a lot of the things that you do are collaborative and also you're quite a busy person in other ways, you've just finished a Masters degree and you've got a young daughter, so do you actually have to go on holidays to make your own work?

Holidays are actually labour intensive for me; its more the idea of the holiday than the actual holiday as it occurred that was the idyll. The actual holiday operated on two levels, which holidays often do for me. The image of the setting and being amongst people was idyllic, but my actual state of mind during the holiday was not idyllic at all. I'm always in a bit of a haze on holidays, it takes me a long time to orientate myself into a new place, being around people, negotiating those relationships, all the household tasks - whose turn is whose, and going on walks where you could get lost. So I suppose the images I took were the images of why I desire to go on a holiday, that sense of peopling a place, that sense of casual clutter, the sense of days

drifting, lunchtime merging into afternoon tea into dinner, eating and drinking, of time being a continuum, and the view of the sea. But all this only works as the trigger to the holiday. When I am on holiday, that image is there, but it's in the distance - it as real as these photos are once they are up in the gallery, even when I am on holiday.

Maybe we can return to the idea of the idyllic later on, but the first question that just popped into my head was, that by taking these photographs are you actually allowing yourself to stand outside the situation and observe it?

I think that's the situation I am always in anyway; I'm always removed from a new environment, so in fact a way of engaging with it, making contact is by isolating images. These photos look like video or film stills to me, part of a movement from one place to another. The impulse behind the work was to make it as easy as I could; happening to go on a holiday, happening to take my camera, happening to take photos, really not worrying which ones worked or not. When I got the roll of twenty-four snaps back, I selected ten photos that seemed as a sequence to have a loose form to them - there are two photos looking out to sea without anyone in them and two taken of the carport. That was as far as the method and concept went. But these photos are not meant to look like the holiday snaps that you might take, because I consciously wanted the framing to capture a glimpse of something happening outside it, to lead the viewer to the space beyond the edges of the photo. I know when I take snaps, which is virtually never; they are composed within the frame. I very much like the element of surprise in getting enlargements back from the photo shop, taking that punt, and finding details and surface effects you hadn't reckoned on.

So in a way the photograph is a kind of literal acting out of the distance or removedness that you feel from the situation when you are on holidays, I wanted to ask you also about the size of the photographs. A lot of people at the moment are taking snapshots and having them blown up.

Oh, are they?

I was wondering, firstly, why did you have the photographs blown up, is there something in the photographs that you are hoping to see by having them blown up, and secondly, how does this practice differ from the work of people like Brett Valance and Maria Griffin and a lot of pseudo or neo conceptual art that's happening at the moment?

I really like both Maria Griffin and Brett Valance's work because of the sense of locality about them, of a recognisable place. With Maria's work there's an intimacy I find really rewarding to look at. I respond to both Maria and Brett's work and recognise them as the kind of pictures - not that I make, but they have similarities perhaps in the way I have of seeing things. The images they take and the images that I sometimes take was a starting point I guess, but then I wanted to fill these new pictures up with people. There's a distance in those images, even though I think the artists are getting near to a kind of contact, to saying something direct about their environment, but still there is a pervasive sadness and stillness about them. I think maybe that comes from the emptying out of places that are recognisable. Brett deliberately takes photos of places that you know are peopled and are cluttered, these places are emptied out. My thought was that I wanted to fill familiar places up with people that I know, and to depict a scene, which might correspond with an experience, others can relate to. I wanted to fill the pictures up with the human content so there wasn't that gap for melancholy. Even though my relationship to my environment may be distanced - the people I am photographing are my family, and my relationship with them is quite active.

There's a whole series of ideas there that I respond to, one is the idea of say in the work of Brett, you see familiar places emptied out of people and they are made strange somehow, it's an old trick where the artist presents us with something familiar and by recontextualizing it suddenly becomes very unfamiliar and we're supposed to perceive something beyond that place. Then there's the idea of you going on holidays and this idea I have of you as taking the time out to make some work, but you're going to a place which is unfamiliar and you're peopling it in a physical sense and you're also bringing the people back into the artwork, I don't know whether that actually makes sense but I feel there's an interesting movement there.

I think I do bring people into the artwork often; it's more that the static images I make can have that sense of waiting to be filled. With the FICTIONAL AND ACTUAL ARTISTS SPACE my mother and my daughter Rubie showed there so I guess I like the idea of the artist not being estranged, normalising them somehow. I've always had a problem with the idea that an artist has to be exceptional, that that plays a large part in the rhetoric of the artist, my question is, if you're exceptional, what are you the exception from? My desire is to bring the artist back into normality, to make them recognisable. My desire is to see the artist describe an artwork which is not that distinct from anything else in their day to day existence, for it not to come out of a moment of enlightenment, but to come out of a moment in a day that passes, just like any other task.

So your interviews are actually presenting the inside story or the story behind the artwork, I know that a lot of times you've said that you're not interested in the actual thing but the story behind it, so in a way, this is what these photographs are doing. Another thing that I find interesting in them is the way that you represent, I guess most obviously with things like the parrot grave photo, but also with some of the images of the way that people might lay tables, the way that people occupy unfamiliar spaces, you're looking at a kind of creativity that is very much located within the everyday, do you want to talk about that for awhile?

I really like the idea of the holiday house being the place where you put the things that you haven't the heart to get rid of, things that you don't want to continue having an emotional attachment to but somehow you can't dispose of. These things have a rough and ready use in a holiday house, they don't have to be treated with care and you use them until they break and can throw them away. Perhaps in the holiday house people let down that guard, as far as the things that you surround themselves with, of how they like to present themselves to the world.

The holiday house is a place where you can really be yourself because you're on holidays from who you have to be in normal life.

This holiday was the first one where I felt I could actually do nothing if I didn't want and not talk. It was quite a

dramatic time, interpersonally, with three siblings there, but there were large expanses of time where we didn't feel the need to talk, we would read, or go off and do things without the rest of the bunch. You could be occupied without an object in mind, so going down to the beach for a swim for example, for hours it's not intensely interactive. I guess on holidays you don't grade your day according to your productivity or success or failure, just filling in the day can be the objective.

So the days are like a continuum, and also maybe the fact that when you go on holidays you don't have to be who you are, you don't have to maintain yourself in order to get the ordinary kind of things you need to get done, done. When you are on holidays, all sorts of things come to the surface; you were talking about conflict before. There's something I also find interesting in these photos is a kind of consolidation for you of a lot of artists you've professed a liking for and an interest in. I think the two most important people I can discern in these photos are Jean Le Gac and Eric Rohmer the filmmaker. Do you want to talk about those two people briefly?

*I seem to return to Jean Le Gac each year for some reason or other, its not as if I reread my translations of his French texts always but I return to an image of a distant mentor. His fictional 'painter' was always on holidays, the 'painter' was a hobbyist, so could only produce his work on the weekends or on holidays - this is where the correlation between this work and Le Gac comes in - he had to have time off from his employment, to paint what we presume to be fairly mediocre figurative landscapes. He had adventures on his holidays but I don't think I had any adventures on mine. That always really appealed to me, the image of the artist on holidays or asleep as Le Gac's 'painter' often was as well, as someone who's not doing what he earns his reputation for. I liked the fact that the artwork Le Gac produced is the image of the painter 'stepping' aside from his vocation, although with Le Gac, there's the double flip of the images being of the weekend painter having a rest from painting. Another thing about Jean Le Gac is that his fictions sometimes incorporated remarkable characters, but he also used the fabric of his own life, including his family and his peers, out of which an elaborated story might come. *Les campeurs et le peintre* is an image that stays in*

mind, it is a photo of his daughter standing next to a drawing in the sand, accompanied by another image of his daughter painting with the paint box that was given to him. So I don't know whether I needed Le Gac as a precedent to allow me to re-enter my own life and use it as subject matter for my work, or that once I started including my own circle of family and friends in photographs I recognised that Le Gac had been doing this all along and that I had reached a similar point via my own route. Rohmer's films often take place at an interim time in the protagonists life, at the end of school or college, in between relationships, or on a break from a young persons work, usually a combination of the above but they are almost always on holiday, by the sea or in the mountains or in Paris during the Summer break when everyone else has left. With both Le Gac and Rohmer there is a kind of banal take, a banal framing of the image, nothing seems remarkable. Rohmer makes the French landscape seem pedestrian, it becomes recognisable as an expanse of relatively uninteresting land you might walk through to get to the sea or a scenic spot. The light of his films is often like the bleaching haze of an Australian summer. This flattening or hazy effect is achieved, I read somewhere, by shooting his films in 16mm and then blowing the film up to 36mm, so there is a crappy grain on top of the film.

At the moment I am interested in ideas from a number of different philosophers, all centering around Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations, and that's the idea that somehow when we do philosophy we take what is the substance of our daily lives and we take it into philosophy and it somehow becomes estranged. The argument that Stanley Cavall and Giovanna Borradori have is that what is happening in Wittgenstein's work on language is that he is attempting to lead words back from philosophy and bring them back to their natural home and see how they operate there, rather than what happens when we isolate them in the realm of philosophy. So with these photographs I feel that there's a whole lot of movements away from, but there's also movement towards, in that you are going away to an unfamiliar place so that all kinds of - not revelatory or sensational things happen, but unusual things happen simply because you're in another place, but you are also returning to, your normality, which is practicing as an artist. I don't know, I'm not trying to lead into a

question; I'm just trying to articulate some kind of movement that I apprehend in these photographs, especially in the context of your practice as a whole.

With philosophers and artists - I think my last fictional artist Sandra Bridie b.1/12/1959 was asked a question about why the 'everyday' is an exotic concept. The fact that I have to record my holiday to turn it into an artwork means that taking for granted the events of a day is not native to me. The need to specifically take photos to record an event as regular as a family holiday, the need to enlarge and isolate the photos by putting them up on the gallery wall, means that I have a bit of a distrust of what goes on before my eyes without recording it somehow, I need to externalise the event to convince myself that its actually part of my experience. I think - well I'll talk for myself, but I think that this is the problem with my practice, or my position, is that I can't take for granted, or native, the fact that we just go through our lives and that's enough. The banality is like an ideal aesthetic to me. This need to define the 'everyday' might be a privilege of the middle classes, I don't know, but I know at this stage that I need to have images to convince myself of what's in front of me, and I think these philosophers make themselves remote from being by the abstractness of their thinking which takes them away from becoming absorbed in day-to-day activities. They are needing to make a product of their thoughts, needing to make an object of their trains of thought by recording them, so perhaps that is why returning to the everyday is an exotic thing, to imagine life as someone who doesn't need to make a product of their experience or thought processes.

I don't know if it's a condition so much of artists and philosophers so as part of the human condition.

I don't know, see, and I wouldn't like to ask, it seems like a really patronising anthropological question to go around asking people on the street, what product do you need to make of your day or your life.

How do you need to express yourself creatively?

Yeah, and whether someone like Le Gac's hobbyist 'the Painter', who paints on the weekends, has a

different attitude to the work they produce to someone whose central definition of themselves is as an artist, whether they have to reap something differently from their experience, which is probably not answering your question at all!

It's picking up on general issues that I'm interested in at the moment, and I've spent a lot of the time recently thinking, yes, that this is what we do, and yes it probably middle class, and yes, it probably doesn't have any practical use, so what's the point, mmm...?

Well, my point is that art can be part of a functional activity. With setting up the TALK space, we can make the work to go in the space, we can create the space, we can set up a social area for people to meet and with other people make art functional within a context. The actual artwork I see as only one part of the function, the reason to make an artist run gallery is to put art objects or whatever in it, but I don't see setting up the space as all that different from making the work to go on the walls. I guess in this work I was trying to make the process and the images as incidental or as easy and as seamless as possible, not standing out from other activities that I do. What people will think of it - I don't know whether good or bad will really come into it, I guess I am asking the viewer, just, what do you make of this? What conversation can you get from this?

I guess I'm still pursuing this idea of what the point is, and also the idea of, how is this art? I think was the other thing I was thinking of, and Rohmer's films provide an interesting example, in that they seem to be very uneventful little narratives about a group of nobodies who are going absolutely nowhere, they are just leading normal lives, but the substance and the events of the lives are very important to the individual people. And also in Rohmer's films, I always get the feeling that even though it appears to be very banal there is something very important being worked out.

I think the particular age that he represents around the twenties, I have a very strong image of holidays at that age, looking for love - thinking that maybe you'll have this chance encounter with someone, the self

absorption that he portrays, I find very recognisable. It is very painful, at the time and looking back on it. Rohmer treats this time in a girls life particularly, with respect, his is a very incisive portrayal of part of the maturing process, a stage in a life to look back on and realise you've learnt from, or needed to go through to get to the next stage. Often the characters come to so many insights by the end of the film that it's dizzying.

I often feel by the end of one of Rohmer's films quite confused.

There's no conclusion.

Maybe the reason that I just thought of Rohmer then was that I also leave thinking, well, what was the point of that? But of course there is a point and I think you're right in saying that Rohmer is preserving something that's very precious.

It's very authentic, the voice of the young women in his films is so convincing, I see the films and think, wow, how did he get women to talk like that in front of the camera? Because that's how they talk, or at least that's how a certain type of young woman talks.

Just thinking about that, Rohmer often uses non professional actors in his films, and also thinking about the nature of your practice over the last couple of years, the collaborative aspect of it, working with curators like Kevin Murray and also working with a number of artists at the FICTIONAL AND ACTUAL ARTISTS SPACE, I see as a partly collaborative project. Does this mean in a way, were you getting your family to collaborate with you, when you were making this work?

When I took the photos - I think I said that I had an idea to use photos from the holiday to make a show from - In any case I had them approved by the people in them. David and Jane were pretty happy to have their children included in an exhibition of mine and see themselves included.

Thinking about what we were talking about before, about issues of meaning, and issues of stepping outside

of something in order to understand it better, do you see your family as assisting you somehow, if these are the issues you are trying to work out? I guess I'm just thinking about, in terms of a movement from outside to inside, what you are doing is bringing your artwork to them, into their space, or a space that you can all share and they are participating in it. You've already talked about Rubie and your mother showing at the FICTIONAL AND ACTUAL ARTISTS SPACE, but your family does seem to have a perennial role in your work.

And friends as well. In my family I've collaborated with both my father and my sister as well and my older brother, but not with David because he produces his own work. My sister analysed some of the geometric abstraction I was doing in 1987-9 from a mathematical perspective, and that was her entry point to a kind of regard for what I do. I suppose I've always needed or wanted to bring them along with me.

In the type of investigation you are involved with, maybe I see it as a way of making something of value out of something that is normally seen to be something that is second rate, people who lead unremarkable lives, who don't have amazing jobs, people who are Sunday painters, as it were, who produce work only for their own pleasure and for the pleasure of the people directly around them. You seem to consistently take things like this, the hobby painter, the unremarkable person, the failed artist, and somehow in your work give them validity and credibility.

I think that the artist needs to take more of that and lose more of the bullshit. I've always felt a need to explain the work, to take it away from the unknown inspiration, the tormented artist, the unsaid whatever that's the catalyst for the work, the drama of the artists life, and as I said before, to normalize it, or if not normalize it, to take it to where it came from so that even a slightly traumatic event is part of the causal link toward the work in the end. I see the work is part of a trail of meanings, rather than the thing at the end that you can only guess at the original impulse. I think it's interesting to the links up there so that the work resides with a meaning of it, it doesn't necessarily embody it, but that all this information is accessible.

That type of artwork that you are talking about, that enables us to gain entry into some deeply felt sense of trauma or alienation on behalf of the tortured artist seems a very antagonistic position towards that presented in Rohmer's films where the type of traumas that people encounter and the ways that these people find to resolve those are very normal and they are almost always resolved within the space of the film and maybe that's why his films often appear to be unremarkable...

But why should that story not be worth telling because it's not cataclysmic. I guess I believe in a kind of democratic telling of tales, and I guess I'm trying desperately hard to include myself in the regular story that can be told, rather than utilising a rhetoric about the artist that I felt we were meant to subscribe to, but I could never identify with, I guess I am trying to validate that a colloquial existence is legitimate to portray. Artists have done this for centuries.

But it does represent one of two very separate lines of progression in Western art at least, what you're referring to is something that stretches back to still life painting in the Netherlands.

Chardin, the impressionists, I'm even thinking of the Heidelberg school here, there is something in these photos, the shimmering summer light, you recognise the scenes the Heidelberg school painted because of the Australian light, looking out over the sea, the same sort of hues.

So, in a way, what I began the conversation with was the idea how you went on holidays in order to make artwork, and I'm beginning to form an idea that, by going on holidays you were able to create the ideal that you had in mind, which was an artwork based on a daily experience and a continuum of experience rather than isolating and singling out moments of trauma within an individual's experience. The artwork is seen as part of a life and the process of living rather than something that you take a holiday from living to create.

In my case the artwork functions as the precursor to experiencing the thing, so I generally put things out by creating an image or a fictional artist, and then the next stage is to integrate that back. So maybe the next

time I go on holidays I won't need to produce a work from it to be able to engage in the experience, I'll feel like I am there.