

① harris museum project

NICHOLAS BOLTON

CUT TO THE CHASE

(Harris Use)



Introducing Nicholas Bolton, video artist

Acting Clown

Nicholas Bolton is clownlike in his mischievous reinterpretations of such representational paradigms as space, memory and performance. His videos parody his own comic ability by putting himself in stressful predicaments, trapped in domestic spaces or complying with the routines of everyday machines. The Chaplin of *Modern Times* is brought out of the factory into the home.

Wayward Rebuilder

Though Bolton doesn't bother with the iconoclasm of some of his contemporaries (for example, Sarah Lucas, or BANK), like them he wants to start making art from the ground up, without preconception of the conditions for an artwork, and without caring for a predetermining history of its features.

Dysfunctionalism

The lucid architecture of minimalism gets contaminated by Bolton's video pieces. These have a similarly rigorous logic but are emphatic about their pointlessness. Without any maliciousness, Bolton unmasks the ethical reflexivity of minimalism. Where these beautiful non-objective structures grew out of a censoriousness towards the less disciplined and less pure, Bolton shows a rigorous irreverence towards purity. *Judd Use* (1995).

Record Memory Bolton sings songs, bringing memory to interact with space.

Half-remembered musicals take him out of these confining homely spaces, whether he is seen pinned under furniture or trapped in a light bulb's reflection of a room. *Chaise Longue* (1997), *Singing* (1994).

Space Cadet

By chance coming upon footage of the Apollo space missions, Bolton remembers how affecting these images had been for his childhood. In his studio he reconstructs the moon landing using amorphous stuffed sacks for planets and a TV set for the lunar module. These sway perilously back and forth until joined by Bolton who climbs onto one of the ropes in a poignant representation of moonwalking. *Astronauts* (1994).

Lost in Colour

He paints himself blue, in front of a blue backdrop, in a futile attempt to disappear. Balancing precariously on a skateboard this is a small step in Bolton's progressive attempts to represent flight.

Taking up the bottom half of the screen, a submerged tea bag (seen in extreme close-up) oozes red. Above it, and shown quite small and in multiple exposures, the artist dances, back to the camera, slowly disappearing as the top half is tinted red. *Use Blues* (1998), *Going Redder* (1998).

Machine Routines

The artist gives in to the determinations of machines, all the while keeping up an appearance of subjective volition. Switching on a radio, he sits down and lip synchs perfectly to a recording of Jimmy Young interviewing a supermarket specialist/Wearing a Hawaiian-style shirt and shorts Bolton mimics the stream of traffic as he jogs around a series of local roundabouts/Yielding to the possibilities of breakneck digital editing, Bolton has a staccato conversation with himself, telling a story of which every word elicits its verbal response, the locations changing each time. In a simultaneous, apparently speeded-up vignette, Bolton is on all fours crawling across his carpet. *Trolleys* (1996), *Roundabouts* (1994), *Pony and Trek* (1998).

Nightmare

An artist is invited to show in a major regional museum. Anxious about what he might make for the show, he repeatedly dreams of pursuing someone, or of being pursued (it's intentionally not made clear), through the deserted hallways and galleries of this grand building. At one stage, he leaps off the highest balcony falling several stories into the stairwell. Instead of a spectacular death he rebounds to the first floor where the imaginary chase continues. *Cut to the Chase (Harris Use)* (1998).

In his piece for Preston's Harris Museum, Bolton has used the building as the setting for a *film noir* fragment. *Cut to the Chase* is exactly what he has done, the camera tracking the artist's route, by turns agitated and determined, through the Museum's spaces. But as the parentheses imply, this is also how Bolton will 'use' up the space, plotting it out by his frenetic movements. Beginning with a series of leisurely-paced stills of the hallways and corridors through which he will later run, Bolton sets up the Museum's impressive architecture as a backdrop. We first see him approaching the outside of the building, looking nervously over his shoulder. Once inside, he stumbles and skids past the displays, through storage rooms and onto the roof, until the sequence culminates in his leap from the top floor balustrade down into the vertiginous central hall. This plunge ends well, with Bolton miraculously landing on his feet and springing directly up to the first floor where the chase continues. The soundtrack is in the vein of demented tinny fairground music, with appropriate hints of *The Third Man* and *The Prisoner*. As music did for *The Prisoner*, so Bolton's soundtrack lends an absurd and nightmarish aspect to this chase, charging an apparently neutral space with unease.

We quickly realise that besides the motives of space delineation and *noir* ambience, Bolton has set up the chase for the illusionist trick of appearing to fall several stories and bounce back up again, apparently possessing uncanny powers. He jumps willingly, as if performing for our entertainment. This recalls Méliès, the French cinema pioneer whose mesmerizing films, from 1904 on, exploited the medium's potential for illusionism. Méliès inventively used trick photography to show people vanishing, reappearing, and being transformed into objects. One aspect of Bolton's videos is a similar fascination with the medium itself, with its capacity for deception and its potential for setting up new conditions for representation. *Cut to the Chase* uses a well-known space as a component for an entertainment that goes nowhere. Its narrative starts plausibly and ends in fantasy, and at no time provides signs of motivation. It is as if narrative conventions are under a state of constant elision.

Méliès also made fantastic travel epics which included journeys into space in unreliable spacecraft. In the particularly fanciful video *Astronaut*, Bolton wills himself into space using jerry-rigged surrogates for the planets and spacecraft that were the real players in that modern epic, the Apollo moon landings. Cutting between the transfixing beauty of the space shots, and the strange forms suspended on ropes in his earthbound studio, Bolton has these swinging lumps crash into each other in contrast with the spacecraft whose drifting movement is agreeably reassuring.

In his different personifications of space user, Bolton mixes three roles in varying proportions: clown-performer, machine-imitator, and memory-man. As endearing slapstick, the clown prevails through all the material but his real obsession is space, whether inhabiting, revealing, or remembering it, and his three guises make its representation always unpredictable. An example of all three in more or less equal ratio is the manic *Pony and Trek* where Bolton subjects himself to the mercy of technology, playing two parts in the telling of a modern parable, the camera cutting back and forth from speaker to listener with each word and response. As location and lighting change with each word, Bolton animates himself like a

human cartoon whose super-malleable expressions appear the result of trying to keep up with the camera's frenzied editing. As with other pieces, there is some relation here to early aims of structuralist film making where the intrinsic properties of the medium were given varying degrees of determinacy over the film's structure and appearance. In *Pony and Trek*, to one side of the image is a simultaneous vignette of Bolton moving on all fours over a carpet. For two hours he crawled slowly over the floor recording his movement in time-lapse filming of one frame per second. Once reconstituted, those single frames compress into twenty-four per second, producing an eerie image of jerky movement. As with *Cut to the Chase*, it's not possible to imagine this work being conceived without the editing and retouching capabilities of digital video.

The space-user videos draw on slapstick routines where, in one case, Bolton moves an orange toilet float on the end of a long retractable rod into any part of the Barbican Centre to which he could gain access. The movement is at times exploratory and compelled, as he seems sometimes to be pulled through the architecture as if against his will. In *Judd Use*, filmed in 1995 during the Don Judd show at Oxford's MOMA, Bolton uses the same device to explore every interval and crevice of a multi-part plywood box sculpture in a routine that looks like a test for radiation. Here the signifiers of this industrially produced and desubjectivized minimal artifact are shortcircuited as Bolton 'misuses' the Judd with his own absurdist minimal practice. In *The Space User – A User's Guide*, a parody of a DIY instruction video, Judd's sculpture appears even more standardized as it is used to demonstrate the various maneuvers of Bolton's improvised equipment.

Is Bolton's space any different from that of other artists? It does seem as if he is making propositions as to how space might be redefined after the long history of spatial investigation by contemporary artists. Continuous intuition of space may help us navigate the world and read its representations but this doesn't explain why that property above all others became for historians the principal attribute of twentieth-century artwork, from Cubism to Colour Field Painting, from Constructivism to Minimalism. Perhaps because it could easily be given apriority (arguably we need a grasp of it before we can even enter the world), space could be made the condition of representation underlying all others. Kant's argument sounds compelling: "We can never have a presentation of there being no space, even though we are quite able to think of there being no objects encountered in it".¹ But with our end-of-era scepticism towards lucid conclusions it's evident that space in art is for us neither as fundamental nor even as locatable as was supposed. If we concede, as Kant requires, that objects will only be discernible when we bring space to them, then we ask in turn that our space be polymorphous and undisciplined, that it be multi-layered with memory and time, and as such dissolve internal and external boundaries. Besides seeing it, we want to smell it and hear it, and in this way combine remembered evidence with anticipated spatiality. An equivalent realisation might be Pipilotti Rist's work. Even though her space is a metaphorical representation of both attainable and insatiable erotic desires and thus quite different from Bolton's interests, both conceive their realisations through a carnivalesque mix of spatial, musical, and mnemonic references.

Bolton always seems to be conjuring up this kind of kinesthetic experience of space, whether enacting detective thrillers in the museum, or effortfully mimicking interplanetary travel, or ironically probing minimal sculptures. In the singing videos he engages memory to extend out from a confined space, as in *Chaise-Longue* where trapped beneath furniture, the image pressed up close to the screen, he sings all the songs he can remember from his youth. In the video *Singing*, a mirrored light bulb almost fills the screen with a distorted reflection of the entire room beneath it. After a while we pick out a figure wandering about the space, circling the camera which points up at the ceiling. This is Bolton singing songs to himself for the video's only soundtrack. Here, space is represented structurally, as no more than what is revealed by a static camera pointed at a mirrored convex surface. But it is also represented by Bolton's meandering and by the mapping of his past by old songs that happen to come into his head.

We can see now that the Harris Museum space is 'used' with a kind of free-form inconsistency, as if an extension of Bolton's own studio, which by now includes the virtual space of digital media. As it turns out, the drive for all that movement is neither chase nor pursuit, but a quasi-comic routine that combines aspects of both and then spins off into unexpected fancy, once again with some of that same wonder of early silent movies. The leap off the balcony dramatically reveals the verticality of the building, but at the same time it is Bolton realising his ambition to soar through space, unharmed. This transition from swinging astronaut to digital diver nicely spans the wide scope of Bolton's work, revealing its unusual and vital aspect of a thoroughly optimistic vision under continuous technical, and comic, experimentation.

¹ Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p78, translated by Werner Pluhar, Hackett, 1996

Mark Harris, November 1998