SHAUN GLADWELL

DOUBLE VOYAGE

14 August - 6 September 2008
When I was about six years old, my Dad decided it was time I learned to ride a bicycle. He sat me on an old, overmended postman's bike and pushed me down our street, trying to shout instructions over the sounds of my screams. Though my memory is sketchy, I clearly recall my fear at how wildly unnatural it felt. Then at a certain moment, after hours of gravel rash and tears, everything suddenly clicked into place. I could balance, pedal and move at the same time. From then on, I really thought about balancing again — it just felt right. Probably the only time since then, when I was conscious of balance, was a brief moment when I cycled at speed across gravel as a teenager. In a second I became aware of a lack of balance and was painfully introduced to gravel rash. Living now involves more or less complex skillful engagements with the world. When we learn to ride a bike, drive, walk, eat or play football, we perform skills that have become ‘naturalised’, as though part of us. A fascination with skill performance underlies much of Shaun Gladwell’s video work, however, it is the intuitive relationship between performance and an internalised sense of equilibrium that comes to the fore in Double Voyage, 2006.

Performance is an over-riding theme in Gladwell’s work. Sturm Sequence, 2000, while primarily a re-take on sublime aesthetics, focuses on the boundless skillful-arts of the artist. Gladwell is both the artist and the performer. Similarly Kickflipper, 2004, Phantasmagoria, 2004, and other works, Gladwell documents skillful performances. In fact, these works are not documentaries, as Blair French notes, Gladwell’s works are a kind of ‘study’ of something down the rabbit hole of the intuitive exploration of movement. He draws human motion to a point at which at the extenuations of the movements of bodies are cracked open.

Equilibrium is also an ongoing subtext in much of Gladwell’s work. Works such as Pataphyscal, 2005, Bios Triptych, 2006 and In a Station of the Metro, 2006, are poetic explorations of equilibrium in its everyday sense, literally, and figuratively. He performs skillful engagements with the world in all forces acting on them are equal. However in Double Voyage, 2006, equilibrium functions in more subtle and layered ways, literal, metaphorical and phenomenological.

Beneath the literal balancing-acts shown, equilibrium functions conceptually as a metaphor. Double Voyage is a double portmanteau: a word combining two or more meanings, which in this case occurs through the tension of intersecting dualities. The two performers in Double Voyage become mid points in a nexus of binaries: able-bodied/disabled, male/female, upright/inverted, left/right, subcultural/canonical, erotic/athletic. Importantly, in Double Voyage these binaries are held in balance as these dichotomies are unresolved and ambiguous. They are played off against each other, as equal force bearing subjectivities in equilibrium, in a state of being and becoming.

The particular bodies in Double Voyage being another layer to the work. In terms of mainstream normalisations, these could be seen as problematised bodies – the skateboards; Or D’Souza, cannot use his legs, something we might relate to with the apparent distance between the performer and subject, or draw our attention more acutely to his performance. The dancer, Grace O’Hara, is transsexual, and Judith Butler’s argument that gender is a performance is perfectly played out. Both performers defy, even exploit, their ‘natural’ condition, something now being seen: male, female, upright, in their performances. And as they enact a performative ‘pausing’ – they are both: unequivocally that which they perform.

Through these two performances, Double Voyage also explores equilibrium in a deeper and more complex phenomenological sense, that is, to do with how we experience the world. Gladwell studies these performances as an outsider would consider his/her own performance – not as display, but as a body engaging in its world with a particular skill.

The phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty uses the word ‘equilibrium’ in a particular sense, as something internally felt in performance of a physical skill. Learning a physical skill (whether skateboarding, or play football, we perform skills that have become ‘naturalised’, as though part of us. A fascination with skilled engagements with the world. When we learn to ride a bike, drive, walk, eat or play football, we perform skills that have become ‘naturalised’, as though part of us. A fascination with skill performance underlies much of Shaun Gladwell’s video work, however, it is the intuitive relationship between performance and an internalised sense of equilibrium that comes to the fore in Double Voyage, 2006.

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