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Bringing It to the Table: Alex Hubbard

by Anthony Huberman

Alex Hubbard, *SK 22*, 2009
Courtesy: Maccarone, New Yorkk

Anthony Huberman is a big Fischli & Weiss fan, probably because they wear their seriousness so lightly and their lightness so seriously. There is a similar sensibility in the work of young New York-based artist Alex Hubbard. In his videos, objects push, pull, crash, slide, and roll up against each other, dancing a secret choreography.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: The most straightforward and literal way to describe your work might be to say that you make tabletop movies. Tabletops, or, more specifically, the depiction of objects on a table-top, have been central to the history of art for several hundred years, in the familiar icon of the still-life painting. Your work, of course, doesn't allow the objects to sit quite so still, but throws them into motion, as if they have lives of their own that have been unleashed.

ALEX HUBBARD: A moving painting has never been a specific goal but it is something that people often use as shorthand to describe the movies. Maybe the simplicity of the structure relates to painting. A painter may start out with an idea, but the painting will take over and have drives of its own. In a similar way, the videos have their own demands.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: What do you mean? That the video-camera has demands? That it asks the objects to be something other than what they are?

ALEX HUBBARD: Well, there's the way objects can be placed on the table, the gesture involved. In the movies, the idea of the gesture is very important to me. For some reason, setting a glass down in one manner can either look stupid, or it can look graceful, forceful or timid. It's a video's relationship to gesture that makes it good or not.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: A lot of the time, the gesture seems violent, or destructive. You do a lot of breaking, throwing, and slamming objects against each other.

ALEX HUBBARD: I tend to think of it as transformations. Really, I never set out to destroy something. As a kid I often used the excuse of taking something apart to see how it worked or what was inside, and that never felt like a purposeful destruction. Now, the excuse would be an exploration of materials.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: And not just any materials… you are making very specific choices of the types of objects and materials you're filming. Usually they are scavenged, or cheap, or home-improvement. What draws you to those kinds of objects?

ALEX HUBBARD: Sometimes it's the desire for the reference that leads me to pick a certain material or object; Mylar balloons, fluorescent tubes, palm trees, carpet pad. The choice of cheap materials is a part of the moment we live in, or was at least when I first made a tabletop movie. I have the advantage of just needing the object for a cameo, though. As a brief cameo, a cheap object can stand in for what could be a more expensive object, and be just as expressive or successful. Using a found Mylar backdrop and cheap pink champagne still expresses a certain celebration, even if it's a cheap dirty celebration. It also comes out of being broke.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: Ah, being broke… the eternal New York problem…

ALEX HUBBARD: I feel like these movies could have been made anywhere at anytime, but I know that New York creeps into a lot of what I do and how I behave.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: One thing that feels like New York is the speed, the frantic pace of the actions and the movement or dislocations of the objects. There is a sense of irreverence and impatience, but also one of joy, flux, unstoppable-ness…

ALEX HUBBARD: The pacing is a force of habit, I don't know if I learned it from watching MTV, or from somewhere else, but it's something that in other times I have tried to work against. So much of the structuralist cinema I admire is so slow. But my films do take on a type of immediacy that feels like New York.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: Immediacy, yes, but the films somehow manage to be really slow and really fast at the same time.

ALEX HUBBARD: Comics always talk a lot about the timing of a joke, I am sure it's the same in cinema. It's also true in karaoke… someone can have an awful voice, but if their timing is right, they can carry the song. I think I am an impatient person, and editing becomes about matching the speed of the movie to what I can tolerate and what I want people to sit with for a second and enjoy, or then maybe extend just a second too long and make them uncomfortable. Like waiting for an overfilled tire or balloon to explode.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: I like that… that seems like a very appropriate image to linger in a reader's mind, as he or she tries to get a sense of the spirit of your work… and it also points to the close relationship you have with the work of Fischli & Weiss, which is filled with tires and with balloons that actually do explode!

ALEX HUBBARD: Yeah… it's clear who has influenced me when I look back at the movies in retrospect. My friend Jay Sanders, who has helped me tons and tons with the videos, has been interested in Stuart Sherman for a long time and has shown me lots of that work, which I am fortunate to have seen. Once I start building and planning and filming, the influence is suddenly so obvious.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: Stuart Sherman is brilliant… another master of the table-top performance. But your works seem more framed, edited with more control, with acts that are more planned out, prepared, and rehearsed… Maybe you can talk a bit more about the process of making the films? How much of it happens in the editing process, for example?

ALEX HUBBARD: The editing is akin to drawing in certain ways. I have ten minutes of film of me doing one thing and one action I want to express. The editing can focus the action down to just a second, but the feeling and look of a movement has to be natural or logical, or the movie loses its flow. A hand reaches out, and paint spills. But to go back to what I was saying about gesture, there is also the question of how the hand reaches out. Was it tentative or certain? And where was it throwing the paint? I can watch the footage until I find the right kind of gesture, which is what helps me cut down and edit the videos.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: Are you trying to tell a story? Is there a linear narrative in the kinds of gestures you're doing?

ALEX HUBBARD: With video, I can create a chain of gestures, in a sequence. It's these chains that create meaning and form a story. Even if it's a story about paint and mops, it still operates like words in a sentence, in sequence, and so it mirrors the logic of verbal language. But with moving images on a screen, instead of words on a page, the language is confused, and we get to see a much more abstract form of communication. I feel very lucky that I work with gesture and sequence. But really the movies involve weeks or months of preparation and frustration and work. What gets produced is the "documentation" of artistic labor. With the editing and cropping and sound work, the labor goes back to being more of an abstract ideal of freedom or play.

Alex Hubbard, *Heads in the Dark*, 2009
Courtesy: Standard, Oslo

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: So while you're putting months of preparation into a single shot, the editing process allows you to add a looser sense of playfulness back into the mix. But when you turn on the camera, how strictly have your actions been pre-choreographed? Or are they driven by chance?

ALEX HUBBARD: They are choreographed, some more heavily than others. I made a movie called Cinépolis that was planned from start to finish and everything went perfectly. But when I turned on the camera to make Heads in the Dark, I had almost no planning, as far as the life of the objects. Usually they don't go so well as far as a plan, which goes back to the question of destruction we were talking about. If a "trick" doesn't go so well, one way out is to smash everything on the table and move on. That was one of the reasons or problems I started with when making Heads in the Dark. Although I'm not really destroying the objects, there aren't any fireworks, or hammers, or gallons of paint…

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: That's an interesting way to think about the work… almost like short spurts of pragmatism, where someone is solving problems and moving ahead step my step.

ALEX HUBBARD: Yes, often it's about handling a problem… more in the sense of a formal problem or a math problem… not some kind of existential problem someone is losing sleep over. There is a problem, but how do you get on to the next step? Getting to that next step might involve pushing everything out of the frame with a cane, just as a bad comedian might do in a cartoon, as a way to move to the next act. It also forms a path through the movies.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: Hold on, that's the second time you've brought up comedians… and humor is clearly at the heart of your practice. What is it about humor or laughter that you find important for an artwork to contain?

Alex Hubbard, *Heads in the Dark*, 2009
Courtesy: Standard, Oslo

ALEX HUBBARD: I think it comes down to shorthand, again. Comedy is really so complex, if you give it a second. It's a whole different economy of thought and expression. The best way around an awful subject can often be a joke. I don't know if I can define what that operating device is, but I would like to think that there can be a visual equivalent to it. This is where humor, or timing, or a punch line would come in… it's a way to express something larger or deeper or possibly more troubling, with visual shorthand. That could take the form of a clichéd device (a cane clears the screen) or just something insane that doesn't usually line up, like stapling a washcloth to a tire.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: Of course, an artist who knows all about this is Bruce Nauman, whose work seems relevant to bring up here, as another master of the tragicomic. But beyond the relationship to humor, your work, like his, seems to be in the studio, with the studio, and about the studio. But there is also the basic concept of the artist as a particular kind of worker… If Nauman is setting a fence-post, what are you working on?

ALEX HUBBARD: Nauman is sculpting the space under his chair or abstracting his shoe, while my ceiling becomes a formal element when it is reflected back by a mirror that faces the camera. I think my motivations are slightly different, but it's still about the act of making, or the labor of creating things. Art-making specifically. Nauman's work is a closed system, it's very literal, but this is why his work is successful. His work can be prismatic, revealing far more than just the piece. Work I enjoy functions in that way, I really don't want to know everything or be shown what I should know or understand when looking at art. An artwork that tells you how to look at it or how to think about it would have no poetry. Improvised music would be such a drag if you had a sheet to follow along that told you when and what was going to happen. For me, the finished movie is closer to imagined artistic expression. There's that still of Paul Mc- Carthy throwing paint against his studio's glass windows, maybe that's what makes that work so good, it's fantasy art almost in a funny way.

ANTHONY HUBERMAN: Nice. Let's leave our readers there, with the urge to go out and throw some paint against some windows. Thanks for taking the time to talk.

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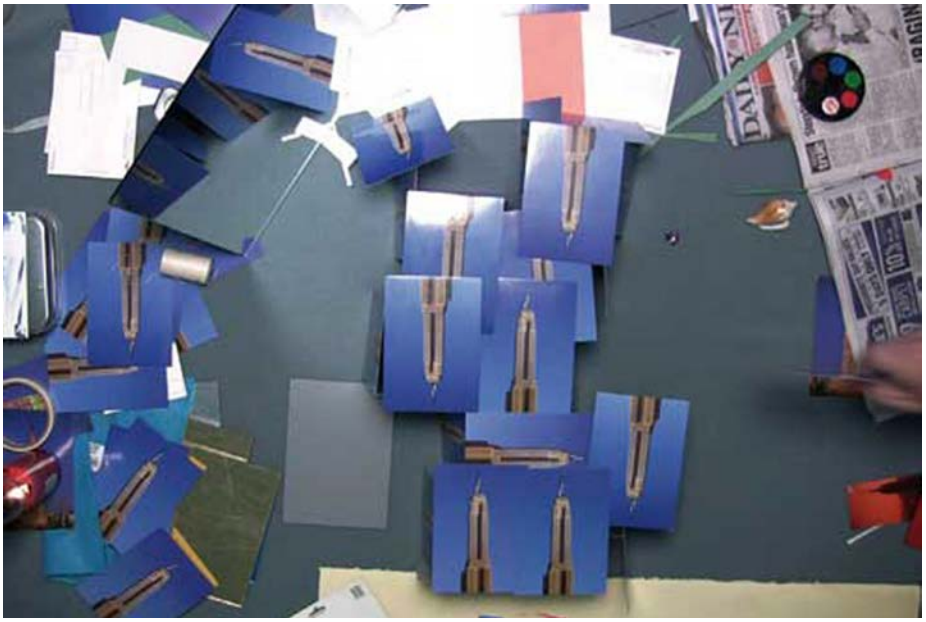

Alex Hubbard, *Heads in the Dark*, 2009
Courtesy: Standard, Oslo

Alex Hubbard, *Heads in the Dark*, 2009
Courtesy: Standard, Oslo

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Alex Hubbard, *How to smoke on a plane*, 2009
Courtesy: Maccarone, New York

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