Charles Richardson interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 18 September 2015

Paul Luckraft: Can I ask about your motivation for first using your own body in the animations?

Charles Richardson: I think a lot of the work I have made recently explores ideas around self-image. When I was studying in Valencia on a scholarship I took a performance-focussed course. It was a Fluxus-type approach where you were encouraged to use things that you found around you. I was never totally convinced by this approach; its opposition to the theatrical felt too dogmatic. I was in Helsinki for a year too, where I developed a specific approach to performance. It was really about pushing your own limits and understanding yourself.

PL: Has performance always been central to your practice?

CR: Not really. In Helsinki I got to mess about in many different disciplines. We were encouraged to think psychologically about how different spaces could be used. Across the university and city we tried things out involving spaces, such as transforming overnight the café next door, where all the workers would go, into a jungle. On my BA in Malaga there was lots of interest in technology and art. The director of the school insisted that everyone had to work together, so there was a strong emphasis on collaboration as well as electronics and new technologies.

PL: When you started at the Slade how did all these different experiences manifest in your work?

CR: I was making documentary videos. The one that got me in was autobiographical; about me going home after a long time overseas. It was about how two spaces might link up, and create a single space. I kept going back and forth to my childhood village doing performances related to stories from those spaces, to their history. I did one where I fell back into the river, which was to do with a big flood in the '70s.

PL: Did you always appear as the central character in these videos, as you do in the recent animations?

CR: Yes. It was always a bit infantile. Me dressing up, playing around. But there was something deadly serious about it as well. And I think that comes through strongly in my piece *Rehearsal* [2014]. It's absurd and it's silly, but the figures are so deadly serious. They're so stony aren't they?

PL: They are definitely like statues, like objects. In some ways they are quite impersonal. They don't give much away with their expressions. Was this a move away from explicit autobiography?

CR: At the Slade I had already begun to move towards methods of observation – of my family life, but also a kind of emptiness. One film was called *Nothing Found* that came out of an obsession I had with 'vacant' or 'hundred yard' stares. The move to animation was a combination of performance and technology. I saw something in *Blade Runner* where the heads went round on a monitor. And I thought, 'I really want to do something like that.' I searched the internet, and weirdly this technology had just come out that allowed me to translate photographs into revolving objects.

PL: What was the technology?

CR: It's an online photo scan programme. But it has a lot of shortcomings and is temperamental.

PL: You like that about it I'm guessing?

CR: Yes. Because professionals seemed to skip this particular programme when better alternatives came out. They went on to scanning technologies. But what you lose is a kind of hyperrealism, because scanning technology doesn't seem to attain a photographic realism.

PL: So your textures derive from the series of digital photographs you take? And there are mismatches where these join?

CR: Exactly. It's messy, and there are lots artefacts within them. But you get parts that are incredibly real. When I was a child I was fascinated by Vermeer's interiors because they had an almost photographic realism. It wasn't about them being a highly detailed representation, rather that it was a simile – an uncanny copy of the world.

PL: And of course Vermeer was probably using a camera obscura to project his images.

CR: Yeah, and I was always drawn to the skull illusion in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*.

PL: But aren't these kind of illusions an anathema to the Fluxus ideas of 'truthfulness' you mentioned earlier?

CR: Totally – it is its antithesis. But I've never been that consistent. I'm a crap fan of anything!

PL: Can I ask about the binding of objects to the figures. Was that an attempt to disrupt the smooth surface that the software produced? Or did these 'costumes' have a symbolism from the outset?

CR: Well, no. I started with people's heads at first, and I found that some just never came out right. Whereas people that were bald, or with strong jaws would come out. So I put a bike helmet on my head, and I came out really well. I realised that the object allows the person to enter into the virtual world. It's kind of the opposite of *Terminator*, where you couldn't be transported into the past without being naked. But in my world you have to have an object attached to you to be transported properly.

PL: How does *HEADBONE* differ from your previous animations?

CR: Well, this one is very connected to my current circumstances and desires. And also it's about who I can rope in to help. It's a much more ambitious project involving many more people. I like that circumstances communicate, and I like to let the people I work with have their say. That works better for me.

PL: Although you respond to circumstances, I sense you have a clear idea of what you are after?

CR: I wouldn't say there is that much of a clear sense. I just get a vision of some things I want, such as the sofa as a real object in the show and present in the animation. This points to the question of which world we occupy, the real or virtual? And which came first – was this sofa made in the virtual world and then sent off to get made?

PL: Have you explored making sculptures using digital technology?

CR: No, I've not had anything 3D printed. I've got the feeling that that would break the spell.

PL: It's a different trajectory perhaps? You're taking material into a space that appears virtual. But when projected the data has a huge physical presence.

CR: This physical presence is exactly what I am trying to do.

If you make something, and then print it out, for me, it's because you've lost the faith. You're thinking, 'Now, let's birth the thing, and get it out into the world.' But what I am trying to do is make it as real as possible within the virtual. Not in terms of looking realistic, but creating some kind of presence the spectator experiences.

PL: You mentioned to me yesterday the phrase Keller Easterling used, 'the real that is yet to come'. There is something in the work about regeneration, and cycles…

CR: It's about latent potential. At the Slade I did a lot of presentations exploring their structure to emphasise the presence of the present. For example, I walked round the quadrant listening to 'Greensleeves', while inside people watched me live on Skype. It's always interested me to use a sense of nostalgia in addition to a strong realisation of the present.

PL: So are your choices of soundtrack a foil to the new technology you use?

CR: It is always that. Because if you use sounds that are from the same moment as the technology it can feel too obviously about 'now'. So when you use something unexpected, which relates to different historical threads, it displaces the whole perception of the thing.

PL: Would it be right to say you're not only interested in visual illusion, but also in complicating ideas of 'perfect' digital design?

CR: It's about the psychology of how we relate to and use objects. A resistance to the ever-growing obsession with the new, as if the new is the only thing we can relate to. I stuck with the software I was using even though it might not have been the best option or the easiest process. I liked the images it produced, and the idiosyncratic nature of it meant I had to compromise. A number of artists are now using virtual reality headsets to bring experience closer. I am more interested in creating a space where the spectator and I can meet in the middle.

PL: But by designing an obstructed route into your installation you are also asking viewers to make an effort?

CR: Well, I feel VR headsets make everyone extremely singular and internalised. And I want those that experience my work to be more aware of the space, and for there to be something communal in it.

PL: So the physical properties of the space you show in are very important for you?

CR: Yes, and it's about what the space wants. If I were to ask the Invites space 'what would you want inserted into you' I think the space would be happy with that. It links up with all its corners; it's very sympathetic to its beams.

PL: So underpinning your work is a set of circumstances – a space, a body, a psyche, an ego. This is the starting point?

CR: Exactly. I start with a set of circumstances, and then others come along, and they meet and fuse. This may sound a bit hippyish, but I don't find anything to be disconnected. It's just a very logical way of going about things for me. Because if you work against things, you find you don't let other unexpected things pop up.

PL: Finally, what is the significance of the pig motif?

CR: I was using the pig thing on Instagram. Placing him with me on these journeys. I was feeling a little alone at that time. Pig was a friend and also stubborn. When you're stubborn you don't get knocked by the world you just deal with it. Pig was dealing with it better than me. I took the persona of the pig on a little, so I could put my back up against things. There is no problem admitting you're not a perfect person, and I feel like the pig is a metaphor for that.

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