

**George Barber explains the transition**

# From 'S'AP'NIN' MAN?' to 'WHA BLOW, BLUD?'





**M**emories of one's life are forever being redrawn, withdrawn, or coming up for parole. The teenager who once hated his father wakes slowly to find he is exactly like him, receding little by little, inch by inch both in hairline and tolerance. Memory, in many ways, is an art work. Kutlug Ataman argues much the same thing in this year's Turner Prize, that everyone's recollection of their life is fundamentally 'art', not truth or lies but art. All of us then have our own art memory project going on within, a Christo valley curtain running throughout our lives, undulating from the beginning until end, stringing all the disparate islands together.

My parents were unusual, of course at the time I never realised this – they were just my parents and everything we did was I assumed much what anybody would do.

My father came from a tough background in Stepney, East London; he vividly used to tell me some of the boys in his class had no shoes. This propelled him all his life to get away, and to move on up the ladder. His parents concurred and made him study very hard with little time for playing on the street. During the Second World War, he had what is known as a 'good war' and rose up through the ranks to become an officer. This was quite a rise and was driven by the fact he was a gifted mathematician and could organise his company's pay-roll, whereas the people paid to do it, the officers, could not. At the end of the war my father left Egypt and came back to England but it was so poor and everything rationed that he and my mother decided life abroad was far more exciting. They got married and went back. He found some work in a local Egyptian business, and my mother became the manager of a Cinema for the armed services in Cairo. My father did all the admin for her, but she chose the films. The soldiers would get very drunk and shout their heads off throughout the performance. My father related that in *Brief Encounter*, that esteemed classic by today's standards, hundreds of irascible voices could be heard, screaming for Trevor Howard to get on with it, and to 'fuckin' well give her one... And in a way, they have a point; Trevor, in that windy suburban railway station, does seem a bit slow in on marshalling his desire into an achievable action plan.

My parents carried on moving like this from one country to the next. They lived in Persia, Canada, Deptford and New York and travelled widely, ultimately when it came to having a family they had by then settled in a place called Guyana. Georgetown, Guyana. This is where I was born on a very obscure sugar estate named after the previous Dutch owners.

UITVLUGT is unpronounceable but roughly sounds like 'I Flucked'. My father by now worked for Bookers – the same people who founded the Booker Prize, until Man so recently spoilt the name.

As a child I had incredible freedom, I used to walk all around Georgetown all day on my own from about the age of 6. There was no fear, the society worked, people were poor but not vicious, I can't remember anyone worrying about where I was, I had a local accent and spent hours talking to people and swimming – both in the sea and in the pool. I went all over the place, hanging around in bakers, barbers, rum shops, the market, other kids, cycling for miles and just hanging out in the town. In truth, I was a kind of novelty, a little white kid who sounded black. A harbinger of a whole UK generation to come. Of course when you are a child everything seems bigger, but the colours and noise of the West Indies made a lasting impact. If you could earn a living no one in their right mind would move anywhere else. The weather is always fantastic, bright strong light all day long and the sun, as if on a timer, goes down and up at 6. I would probably say that my natural disposition is related to my childhood in the West Indies. I had a good start in life – but it was ruined aged 9. My parents put me on a BOAC VC10 with a badge on my coat, and kissed me goodbye. I went to some dreadful Nazi type establishment in Worcestershire with a very nasty midget headmaster. It really was a terrible boarding school, with many incidents that would be considered child abuse today. I was very pleased to read of his death many years later. I went from doing what I liked in the sun to being in a sub army cold joyless place where the whole business was concerned with churning out the same type of regimented obedient clone. In a way, I never really grew to hate my parents – from now on I only ever saw them during the summer holidays. Fortunately, my second school was a happy place, with good people and I became determined to be a writer or artist.

Moving on, at St Martins, under the influence of John Stezaker, I became interested in image with captions. Later in a similar territory, Godard, fascinated me and I begun producing Super 8 films with voice-over. (*Walking off Court*, a recent video is very much in this tradition.) However, at the time, and this is the late 70s, I could already see that in art circles video artists were taking too long, something was dull and bloated about the whole scene. I went to numerous screenings at the Air Gallery and at the ICA and all the videos just seemed dull and you could never quite understand why anyone would think anybody would be interested to watch them for so long. So, I think my first feeling

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for video was something very simple to do with getting on with it – so that the audience would enjoy it rather than feel dull and afraid to look at each other. Yet, I didn't know how I'd solve this I just kept feeling it. Obviously, 'Materiality' dominated colleges and notions of the avant garde, yet as the 80s kicked in, that set of interests lost energy, and had become a set art school orthodoxy. At The Slade things fell into place. More or less coinciding with my arrival they suddenly got a Sony editing suite. It was basic but you could do cuts. I bought a VHS machine for home – so suddenly the idea of recording stuff and then going to the Slade to re-edit it made a great deal of sense. My time had come. I basically went on to spend hours listening and watching films for bits that I might be able to use; a curious pastime requiring endless packs of blank VHS and marking the schedules for oddities.

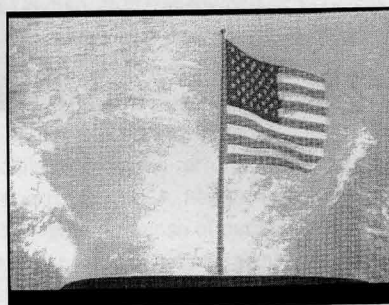
Scratch made a name for me and around 1985-87 I could have spent my life on planes going to video festivals but it petered out slowly because it couldn't be sold and the art scene didn't regard it as anything to do with them – it was more to do with pop and the pop people saw it as too arty and weird for them. Plus I found being asked the copyright question around 50 times a week really irritating. In fact, I wonder if my tombstone should not simply say, 'George, what about copyright?' At screenings, there is that eternally reasonable bloke, hand raised eyes bright, motivated by the sneaky feeling that he's spotted something dark and lurking just out of sight below the waters, something bearing profound menace for the Barber ship. 'What about copyright?' he asks eternally as I sit on stage, the question arcing over the audience, always demanding an answer of its target. In effect, being asked about copyright led me to shooting myself – as in shooting my own stuff. I am grateful to my tormentors to that extent. You did well, it was a sustained campaign and though not organised centrally, each cell performed admirably.

Most of the things about Scratch are well known. I think a lot of my work then shows a lucidity, wit and compactness that will keep it of interest to a small field for some time. Sometimes I feel it has aged well, at other times, its sensibility seems commonplace, primarily in the way that no longer are there just cuts on television but moving backgrounds or graphic devices that go over the cuts. We have theories of cutting but scratch yearned for a superimposed seamlessness at the same time, so that the images were cut well and fast but superimposed on that was an undulating line that took the eye over everything attempting to link and tidy up everything into one long shot. In effect, it is both busy and the same thing continuously. After Scratch I started thinking more about myself as an artist and my role.

Over time it seemed to me that unless you have unlimited funds and time, it's very difficult to say what you can offer the world that isn't directly linked to your personality. Okay, so you live this particular limited life but no two lives are ever the same, with little funding it seemed to me that the biggest space left is really a novelistic one, a place where you use your imagination and speak, confess, admit. Nobody can quite do it like you do it – and thus you have a space and providing the work is reasonably interesting then it has a right to exist – and is by default and by definition different to the masses of output released by the commercial sector. In retrospect, Scratch confessed nothing, it spoke in formal terms but you could never expect an audience to really 'get into it' – 30 minutes of scratch is boring – sure, no more boring than any other kind of formal filmmaking – but none the less it presents a cool, inscrutable face, no one prone to personal insight or revelation. Thus, this is the background to why I started producing low tech slacker monologues, like *Passing Ship* or in more recent times, *Refusing Potatoes* – they also registered my dislike of



Previous page and  
small pic on this  
page: *Absence of  
Satan* (1985)  
Left: *Yes Frank No  
Smoke* (1985)



the pomposity of the art scene where so often, artists who can't talk, the cream of our great not-being-able-to-finish/start-sentences art royalty, have this void generously filled for them, like a luxury hamper, by obliging critics equally as keen to write their ticket to the big Serota picnic. But at the centre it is all blank, dull not very interesting, not very clever and all hailing from this default British conceptualism that essentially wants to remain aloof and just enjoy the free noise – that surrounds our glamorous silence.

Another way of looking at my interest in Scratch subsiding was connected to other creative activities. Frequently, in the early 90s I would get on tubes and make a great deal of effort to visit shows, but somehow the whole engine of the enterprise seemed to entail simplicity, so that an artist would essentially be offering one idea, presented in as much white space as possible. The Default mode. The work, coupled with the reticence of the creator, seemed to me, that the work might just as well be whiteness too. Indeed Martin Creed did this – and his white room, though stark, was just the ultimate white room over and above all the other white rooms that did have something in, but in reality were secretly just as white too. Creed was the ultimate, and greatest and most acerbic Turner Prize winner and was only bleaching and white-

washing the path upon which numerous others were heading and still are. Everything had become another white room. The Turner Prize was the new White Concept Album. Martin Creed, white, Liam Gillick, off-white, Anya Gallacio, flowery white, petal white? Or put another way, what I really found was that the book I was reading on the way to the exhibition, contained far more food, intellectual stimulation than the actual exhibit so that it became much more rewarding, to get on a Tube with a good book, each page generating one or two interesting thoughts, all the way – and then find that the show was generating nothing much – and that again the journey home was by far the more interesting cultural experience, given that each page did contain at least a couple thoughts, ideas, written in a manner that clearly suggested talent. Calvino, Borges, Bellow, Roth, Southern, Wolf or whatever. Thus again, I think I was really looking for confession, talking, admission, some place where the excitement of Fine Art could be restated rather than the more common diet of the glamour, wealth, fame and media madness of collectors and dealers – all daubed cleverly in Brilliant White and in all its glorious shades of silence. (Of course, here I am attempting to give an accurate account of a personal experience as an artist – rather than a more precise historical view – for that look no further than Julian Stallabrass or Matt Collings.)

Now this is a clandestine thing, and many others will have their own impression but ultimately, I had to admit to myself that if I consider myself an artist I had some bad ideas going around in my head. Like De Niro in *Taxi Driver*, I was longing for the rains to come and wash the scum off the streets. You see, really I did want more white. But I didn't know it then. Again, as with the start of my career I felt that what was going on was repetitious, and full of windbags whose only interest is really writing the history with them on page one. (These people classically work their way into colleges and then inch by inch get students making the same work as they do...then they in time become ex-students and start writing books and curating exhibitions with their mentor/tormentor in.) Anyway, I decided, rather than burning my wrists of an evening over the gas hob, to stick to just making whatever I genuinely thought was good and see if anybody turned up. I wanted to make a canon that had a decent range, was lucid, witty and a good honest index of a creative character working with video in the late 20th, early 21st century. This seems to make sense but I concede when compared to the glamour, fame and money being lavished on contemporary artists, it does have a 'loser' dimension – however, it's very hard to feel validated or approved of, or appreciated, if you're not in the headlines today. This is a fact of our lives. We've all been co-opted into fame junkies.

So, when I'm working at the moment I am excited about two approaches. The first way, is like *Walking off Court* were like a craftsman you keep trying out your material in different ways, driven by the writing and until finally it all seems to hold together in an engaging whole – something hopefully that is not like anything anyone else's doing. The second strand of my video work now falls into monologues. These much more fit in with that idea I mentioned earlier of perhaps in an age of CGI, big budgets, brand name actors, studios, it is hard for artists to carve out their own space. Monologues therefore become a legiti-

mate space. Bourgeois individualism aside, there is only one you; nobody can 'speak' you better than you. The viewer experiences a direct account of a creative person when as artist speaks in their own words. This doesn't necessarily follow on that individualism is the answer to everything but in a world of massive image making teams and corporations, the monologue is perhaps the equivalent of the hand-woven Persian rug. A welcome break in a sea of office grey carpet, the standard surface upon which 90% of all office workers tread. Again, the analogy works with the direction of Hollywood films, where classic narrative space is dwindling and there emerges for each new movie more what one might think of as a chance for a famous actor to play themselves in a new costume. Hollywood now 'peoples' its films with familiar faces – who just do what they usually do – but in a new setting. They don't really act; they situate themselves within the proposed theme – like a dinner party game. An artist doing a monologue is therefore a mirror of this – and seems to be picking up on a tendency that privileges the subject's character and personality as more important than the form. Anyway, going back to the art world, the monologue is fundamentally more engaging than *Brilliant White* – even if its self regarding tendencies are difficult to paint roller away. In a world filled with stainless steel, laminated glass and white, the monologue is a very British anti-IKEA attempt to bring back the tat. Those terrible untidy things that make a life and character quite unique: the ums and ahs, the strange facial expressions, the odd idiosyncratic voice, the curious preoccupations....

In the West Indies, upon passing each other in the street, the young used to say, 'S'ap'nin' man?' Now they say - and also in the trendiest bits of London – 'Wha' blow, blud?' I used to say the first as a boy, but fortunately for my son, who is 13, I have not adopted the second. But I like saying it to him in the house.

**George Barber**

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September 24-October 31 2004

**George Barber's exhibition at London Gallery West presented a wide cross section of the artist's work from recent years.**

Known as a video artist who made his name with Scratch Video milestones in the 80s, such as *Yes Frank No Smoke* (1985) and *Branson* (1984), Barber was once described by *Art Monthly* as "the Henry Ford of independent video," a title which presumably alludes to Barber's ability to present his forcible personality through myriad aesthetic gestures, all ultimately expressing his singular voice.

Since Scratch Video, George Barber has defined himself as a versatile and diversely interested artist, developing alongside his Scratch-esque video graphic image manipulations a strong repertoire of personal, diaristic pieces, displaying humour and criticality.

The centrepiece of the exhibition at London Gallery West was a display of photographs, not videos, made during Barber's recent time in Los Angeles. The large colour photographs, accompanied by Barber's essay "Signs of Los Angeles" (published in *Filmwaves* 25) depict a range of LA houses, their typically suburban lawns and each lawn featuring a sign which is a message from the absent occupants to the outside world.

The appeal of La La land weirdness is a common subject for artists, but the danger has always been that the subject is treated with an air of cultural superiority jollying the audience to join with the sneering disdain of the artist. From Warhol or Rauschenberg's seminally incisive treatment of American trash culture onwards, there has been prominent confusion whether artists, especially non-US artists, are being critical, celebratory or dishonestly nostalgic when selecting Americana as the subject for their work. For example, the genius of Bruce Connor's films should make him US enemy number one, whilst the banality of Noble and Webster's dollar in lights should send them back to art school. Wim Wenders achieved an intelligent European vision of America in his film *Paris, Texas* (1984), but presents nothing but imitation aesthetics in his photographs of similar subjects.

George Barber, then, who has already boldly aligned himself with Warhol with his tongue-in-cheek video *2001 Colours Andy Never Thought Of* (1996) investigates Los Angeles, maybe the ultimate modern US city, with his typical fusion of myth, mirth and reality. The ambiguous presentation of the photographs as documents of a reality Barber actually encountered problematises the initial familiarization of the viewer with the work. We cannot easily scope out what is portrayed in the images and then go on to lazy qualitative judgments or other moribund habits of art viewing.

The humour always present in Barber's work takes a dark turn in the LA images. The bland suburban houses

with sunlit lawn signs present us with disconcerting messages such as: "ABOVE Security - We Are ABOVE Average (lethal force approved) (really random visits 24/7) 1-800-500-HELP"; "FEEL SAFE? YEAH RIGHT 1-888-450-4455" and "ARE YOU AN UNKNOWN CREEP? Wilson Jones & Company (323) 825 -1-HIT, SECURITY MAGIC". This is mixed with the odd plausible, (or really more plausible sign, because the point in Barber's choice is that the insanity of the signs is perfectly imaginable to our paranoid minds) such as "WE ARE PROUD OF OUR NEIGHBOURS" which contains a kitsch black and white image of two 70s era men. We start to get the sense that Barber is truly aping the situation, with the hilarious, but no less sinister, sign: "SHEEP / PEOPLE Biggy Choses People Everytime". The sign looks like it is a choice over who Biggy will shoot should they dare trespass on his shabby lawn.

Woody Allen's remark that tragedy plus time equals comedy (or as Alan Alda's character puts it in Allen's *Crimes And Misdemeanors* (1989) "if it bends it's funny, if it breaks it's not funny") seems to be appropriate to what Barber is achieving in his LA photos. Whilst no self-conscious war-on-terror artist, or state-of-the-nation reporter from USA, Barber nevertheless picks up on the heightened sense of public panic in the States since 9/11 and the definite signs that foreigners are treated as aliens, guilty until proven innocent before a kangaroo court. 3 years ago the satirization of America's needy display of paranoid fear and defensiveness in the nations picket-fence signage might have looked cruel, but now Barber expresses a rightful exasperation felt towards this absurd US practice. He avoids playing with Americana for its own sake by using black humour to expose the darkness below and makes us realise how far we have become comfortable with USA's society of fear.

The other rooms of London Gallery West display recent videos by Barber. These fall into two categories. Firstly his reworkings of performance art videos with the visceral, non-verbal actions of *Miss Christ* (2002), 4 min loop and *Shouting Match*, (2003) 12 mins. Secondly, the monologue-based *Walking Off Court*, (2003) 10 mins, which charts the tennis playing relationship Barber had with a tennis coach whose mental health declined after a motorway was built outside his front door, and *Refusing Potatoes*, (2002) 7 mins, plus a recent return to Scratch territory with *Quiet, Listen*, (2004) Video, 5 mins. Best seen in a proper screening setting, rather than on a gallery monitor, there was at least this chance during the show when a well attended screening and conversation with Barber was mounted at University of Westminster's Old Lumiere Cinema.

**Matthew Noel-Tod**

Matthew Noel-Tod is a filmmaker and artist.