**DAVID SHERRY**
HOLDING PHONES, COUNTING CARS, FLIGHTS OF GEOMETRY

FEBRUARY – MARCH

*Running for the tram, de Appel, Amsterdam*  DVD  15:57 mins  2010

ALL IN HIS OWN GOOD TIME

It's a commonly held misconception that artists are 'different'. At least in the wider public imagination, the notion persists that they possess (or feign) a unique insight into the conditions of everyday life or even, god forbid, have access to some reservoir of 'hidden truths'. The perception is obviously tinged with wariness; the artist might be pulling a fast one or, at best, sees and speaks in a way distantly removed from the norm. This attitude, while wholly discredited within contemporary art itself, does retain a grain of truth, however. The critical attention that the artist devotes to his surroundings, to their inner workings and invisible structures, sits awkwardly with the established routines of the population at large. Some things are not only not intended to be noticed but, in many cases, don't want to be seen at all.

It's not the easiest way to work. When David Sherry peers over the precipice of a freeway, methodically and monotonously counting the passing cars below (into the twenty thousands!), one cannot help but admire the single-mindedness of such a futile gesture. The artist must filter out all distractions, every peripheral sight or meandering thought, in his commitment to the task at hand, and it is this selective concentration that Sherry relays in his (mercifully) edited video work, *Counting Cars* (2005 – ongoing). In an explanatory interlude, he extrapolates his findings to estimate the vast quantity of automobiles that one sees over the course of a year in a large city like London. And insinuates the question: who takes any notice of this? Instead, people tend to divert their attention from the overwhelming barrage of information (much as one imagines the passers-by in Sherry's filming of the piece, ignoring this strange bystander who meticulously counts the ceaseless flow of traffic). The intensity of the city's relentless pace induces the individual to adapt, to 'block out' extraneous stimuli and to adjust their own lives to the order of the city: "punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence."[1] In *Counting Cars*, the artist's pattern of speech keeps pace with the rate of traffic, verging on the manic purge of information that accompanies horse racing or any up-to-the-minute sports commentary. The relentlessness of the traffic drives Sherry forward, in pursuit of an authoritative tally that remains ultimately out of reach.

This inquiry into modern transportation persists in his film *Running for the Tram, De Appel, Amsterdam* (2010), where Sherry, laden with shopping bags, repeatedly chases and just misses his connection, always arriving an instant too late. One might get the impression that the artist (or his persona) is perpetually out-of-sync with contemporary life, that he can't quite adjust to the required "punctuality." However, this overlooks the preciseness of Sherry's gesture, the discipline necessary to just 'miss' the tram and the alignment of his arrival to coincide with the exact moment of departure. Certainly, it carries its own risks. In a previous version of the film, performed in Glasgow, the conductor actually stopped to wait for him, leaving one to picture the excruciating explanation that must have followed off-screen. In Amsterdam, such messy eventualities have been extinguished by the technology of automation and its ongoing perfection.

This malleability towards the rhythms, directives and demands of metropolitan existence suggests adaptability on the part of the individual to integrate such routines without question or complaint. In the photographs of Sherry's performances, the self-explanatory *Artist in a Piece of Luggage on a Shelf, MMX Berlin* (2010) pithily sums up the experiences of the frequent flyer; subject to delays, cancellations, updates, and the overall "conditions of spaces in which individuals are supposed to interact only with texts, whose proponents are not individuals but 'moral' entities or institutions (airports, airlines, Ministry of Transport, commercial companies)"[2]. If travel was once associated with freedom and exoticism, then passengers have long since been downgraded from first class. The transitional nature of air travel is replicated through every stage of the journey, as one shuffles through ticket lines, terminals, time zones. Sherry, meanwhile, waits in limbo, hidden within his luggage (or, in the photograph of another performance, wearing a suitcase over his head), in a neat commentary on the way travelers are depersonalised and relegated to the (literal) status of cargo. The gesture also implicates the artist himself. His predetermined 'awkwardness' is more self-aware than it appears, more savvy as to the international artist's relationship with forces of globalisation and communication. Sherry will draft in a proxy performer to enact a work in Beijing, ironically casting him to sit still with a post-it note affixed to his head reading 'just popped out back in two hours'. The substitution of the artist imbues the original gesture with connotations of economics (the Western world's relationship to China as a hub of manufacturing), the hierarchy of labour, and the question of artistic ownership. It is also, of course, a means of solving a problem; if physical artworks can travel and circulate freely then why not performative ones? What's the difference between video documentation of a prior action and its realisation by another actor? Who needs the artist after the idea?

Surely not the poor volunteers of *Holding Phones* (2011), clutching their mobiles as Sherry binds their grips in masking tape and then removes the resulting casts with an utility knife. The 'tape sculptures' and video documentation of the process make for unsettling viewing, as a slight nick from Sherry leaves traces of blood on one of the moulds. Perhaps, subconsciously, he meant it. The work does, after all, put forth the same idea of technology and progress as forms of conditioning, the impetus to conform to society's new and ever-changing requirements. The leftover husks, neatly arranged along a shelf, bear witness to the sacrifices of the networked, multi-tasking freelancer, only willing to loosen their palsied grips on these handheld devices when Sherry cuts them out of their hands. Yet, there is more to all this than just deadpan cynicism towards progress and a blinkered unwillingness to accept the ramifications of modern technology. In a way, Sherry's practice depends on the distractions of everyday life. Through these interventions in the public sphere or through invitations for the audience to perform and subvert the artwork (like his painting of a smile, free to be shifted and turned into a frown by gallery visitors), Sherry counters preconceptions of passivity and compliance. Certainly, one needs to consider why they shouldn't disturb this seamless flow of existence. Why not adjust our relationship to

everyday life's hectic pace in order to actually question its rhythm? Or change the rhythm itself? The performance by Sherry during the exhibition opening might therefore be seen as a way of initiating a different, 'slower' measure of time. In this work, he lies prone on the gallery floor, closely studying a book with a photograph of the petrified victims of Mount Vesuvius, before copying and holding a pose from that image. He shifts to another position and maintains it rigorously, and, in this pause, one becomes aware of the serendipitous proximity of his other works. The audible overlap of the nearby video monitors narrates his silent performance with the relentless counting of automobiles and the sound of Sherry tearing strips of tape, as if evoking the artist's internal clock, ticking down to his next pose, and the immobility of his current, frozen position. In this state of slowed-down concentration, the sensation of watching the artist, and imagining his position, engenders a consciousness of one's own impatience and restlessness. There is an unsettling realisation that the attentiveness that Sherry's gesture projects onto the viewer himself, that is so often at odds with the frenetic pace of everyday life, has become unsettling in its own right. The disruption of the commonplace doesn't induce a pretence of ignorance, or a 'laughing off' of its inherent absurdity. Rather, it is the viewer who is left awkwardly out-of-sync.

Chris Clarke

[1]  Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', reproduced in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 131
[2]  Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995) p. 96



*Car full of mince*  Pen on paper  29.7 x 21 cm  2010
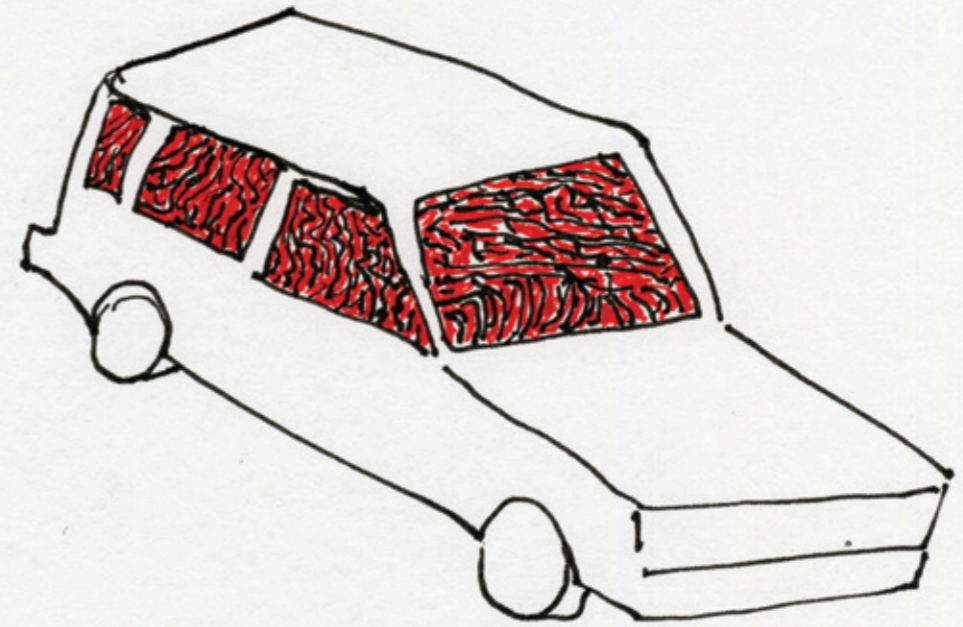
*Holding phones, counting cars and flights of geometry* Installation view, mother's tankstation