

— SPOTLIGHT —

## Richard Sides

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### Good Trash

IN CONVERSATION WITH ANNA GRITZ





Richard Sides's multifaceted output in video, installation, sound, performance and collage blurs seamlessly allowing characters and abstract notions of consciousness to emerge from the complex social composite environments he creates in his work. This interview was conducted in the days and weeks leading up to the move of the Woodmill GP, an artist-run studio space and gallery that Sides spearheads with a group of artists in South London.

(AG) You recently concluded a body of works consisting of three parts, *He tried to be a nice guy, but it just didn't work out*, 2012, your MA exhibition at the Royal College of Art, *Stop Killing My Buzz*, 2012 at the Zabłudowicz Collection and your recent show at Carlos/Ishikawa *the omega point just ate his brains...*, 2013, which you described as being intertwined by your interest in a certain character, protagonist, or form of consciousness. Can you speak more about this investigation and how consciousness features in the work?

(RS) I was primarily thinking about character as a double meaning – in one way where objects stand in as anthropocentric symbols embodying human consciousness i.e. the recorded voice, but at the same time believing in the object's existence as a character in its own right, something non-anthropocentric. It's quite a confused position, but I think it has something to do with acting out an existential crisis and if we were to take the object-oriented ontological argument into perspective, then how do we equate for a non-human consciousness whilst already questioning our own semi-autonomous worlds. The idea of acting is something I am provoked by.

(AG) The term acting is of interest here. Without wanting to go so far as to identify a particular 'method' - infused strategy in the work, there is nevertheless a certain tension or charge that plays out across the work, augmented by the insertion of minute details or clues, such as quotes and phrases, carefully selected newspaper clippings, the use of colours and sounds, that construct a character as an atmosphere or stream of consciousness.

(RS) Yes, and I guess I think of that as the reality of the 'other', a character, like how in a lot of films we are manipulated to empathise in certain ways, where particular scenarios are given a charge. For example, I recently rewatched Michael Mann's 1995 film *Heat* and was super interested 'after the fact' that the film triggered a spate of glamorous armed robberies.

(AG) Do you mean in reality or in subsequent films?

(RS) In reality. It makes me think that maybe some things are too provocative for mass media consumption.

(AG) It appears to me that it is not just about trying to create a character in your work, but much more about how identity develops more generally. It is about the ingredients that make us who we are – it is about decision-making. I am thinking in particular here of an interview that I recently came across with the writer Leonard Michaels in which he stated that: "Conservative politics is built into biology."<sup>1</sup>

(RS) Yes, decision-making is one of the hardest problems we are faced with as humans. We make them often unaware of the consequences yet they are what form our identities. The question I find interesting is how much are we manipulated? How do we reflect our subjective realities?



(AG) Maybe this is a good point to talk about the *PAWG* file.

(RS) The *PAWG* file was a brown plastic ring binder presented in the recent show at Carlos/Ishikawa. It was full of printed material where perhaps half of the content was images of “Phat Ass White Girls” sourced from the Internet.

(AG) I thought it was curious that not many people that came to see the show actually saw it, that it was in a way easily overlooked, almost hidden away like an under the counter magazine.

(RS) Maybe, but it could also have been the first thing one encountered upon entering the show, it was placed right by the door, next to a coffee machine that people were invited to use.

(AG) The format of the ring binder has something administrative and its position by the coffee machine adds to this sense of bureaucracy and office paraphernalia, while simultaneously situating itself in the traditional place of the artists’ clippings and press release. The obsessive categorization of images could be seen as a strategy of a category of stimulus that is banned from public discourse?

(RS) I like the idea. I did spend a brief period thinking I’d kind of lost the plot whilst making that exhibition. Like I’d over thought the world into something so futile and meaningless that I had cut all association to any form of value I might usually attribute to things in my life. Not crazy, but just not intense. I often get that feeling when I think about being trapped by things like capitalism, hypocrisy, obligations etc., but I know I’m not an activist so I can forget. I find a level of comfort in hostile situations. Not in a social sense, but in the sense of how we confront the world physically.

(AG) This type of confrontation takes place in your work on multiple levels, on a formal, as well as on an experiential, moral and content level.

(RS) I use conflict as a way of creating intensity. Sometimes this can come across as dark and aggressive, but I personally don’t think of what I’m doing as a necessary evil or anything. I feel like it’s my own subjective way of deprogramming myself and at some point I pursued the ‘artist’ position as a way to help this. Perhaps that’s where I am at the moment too, in the position of questioning my own belief in art / the arts. I have an addiction to it and I am attracted to that addiction as a means to seek some kind of relevance... Systems are also interesting to me as they are generally ideological and in many ways that relates to the links I like to make between things – it implies a hierarchy, which art shouldn’t adhere to. The best creative acts are like good trash.

(AG) I am curious to hear more about your relationship to trash – good trash and bad trash. I enjoyed reading the conversation between you and Steve Bishop that was published as the press release for your recent show *To clear the bush of your garden*, 2013, at David Dale Gallery. The conversation starts with the sentence: “The idea of ‘bin juice’ or trash in general was probably the first thing we had a genuine alliance with.” And you speak of the relationship between trash and conspiracy theories. This made me recall Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49*, and a



particular scene in the book where Pynchon speaks about the stuffing of an old mattress as a “memory bank to a computer of the lost”, a place that kept “vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream.”<sup>2</sup> Trash appears as a code that the right scrutiny can decipher, do you think this is true about your art as well?

(RS) Trash presents many ideas for me, it can take on a compositional role: how it assembles and presents things, often digested and contaminated, something that surrounds us yet is often undesirable. As a code for excessive consumption, it presents a dissonance that feels like a pertinent idea in relation to art and an elaborated point in the conversations with Steve. For example, we’d find ourselves filming the corners of lakes and puddles where all these eroded bits would be swimming, animated by the motion of the water – dead fish, food wrappers, toys, algae, cans, all rooted with memories related to things we understand through various codes or have never grasped, functioning as a found language. I find the potential really influencing, something I kind of trust as equally as I question, finding a direct impetus hard to understand. But perhaps for me art tries to reveal new truths – things we don’t often assume – and similarly conspiracy theories are one of the cultural practices that mine scraps of evidence, attempting to reveal a new truth where the embedded memory of trash and theory become helpful to one another.

(AG) The term collage has often been used to describe your work. Many of the fragments that come together in the work, such as newspaper clippings, sound bites, photographs, and YouTube clips have, however, already a collaged identity when they enter the work. As part of a piece they then become something new and it becomes at times difficult to differentiate the found from the new. There is a strategy of flattening or annihilation at play that appears to go against the collage spirit. How would you describe what happens to the materials when they enter the work?

(RS) The intent behind annihilation goes back to trash and subjective realities maybe. Arranging parts of things in certain new ways can be effective in a way that seems to communicate in the right slippery language for me; sometimes re-contextualising fragments, or even whole objects, completely reconstructs its meanings. I want to say “lay bare” which I think is naive, but there’s an uncanny actuality that I try to reach within my work. In a sense the edit, or collaging, with an expanded use of the term, interrogates the structure of objects.

(AG) As you are working simultaneously visually, sonically, and spatially, I wondered how these different approaches register in your practice?

(RS) I approach them all in the same way and produce them simultaneously. When making video for installations I often produce sound spatially and re-present different audio compositions in various performances that then might also exist in videos. I often generate archives in which material gets used many times for various purposes, allowing for contrasting readings. This is something that can be quite an ephemeral thing like a particular object, a red light, or a musical chord. A more weighted thing might be something like Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* as that has appeared in three of my videos now, re-worked for synthesizer. There’s a cultural weight to it that might be read as melancholic and poetic, but mainly as something most peo-



ple have experienced and feel they understand as a soundtrack. In the same sense, when I produce 'music' I often use the same structures with different synthesizer presets and altered tempos to explore ideas of temporality and how this affects our reality. The gentle repetition and alteration of the opening chords to Underworld's *Born Slippy* as a symbol of pop euphoria has also made its way into my work on more than one occasion.

(AG) For one of your forthcoming projects you are working on a video documentary about four musicians, some of them friends and former collaborators of yours. Are you at a stage where you can talk more about the project?

(RS) I am in the early stages of a new video. This will develop out of documenting, in various ways, meetings with Theo Burt, Roc Jimenez de Cisneros, Mark Fell and Lorenzo Senni, all of whom often make work with synthesised sounds, computer music and occasional references to musical subcultures. I'm not exactly sure where the project will progress, but I find the correspondence between their practices stimulating, yet even more fascinating is the relationship between the sonic environments they create and the environments they occupy domestically, geographically, historically...

1. L. Michaels, "The Lost Interview" in *The Paris Review*, N. 841, Spring 2008  
<http://www.theparisreview.org/miscellaneous/5847/the-lost-interview-leonard-michaels>

2. T. Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 1966, J. B. Lippincott & Co., p. 93