



## A Vast Landscape Fills the Frame: An Interview with Richard T. Walker

BY **EMMA KEMP** IN **INTERVIEWS** | APRIL 1, 2014

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Richard T. Walker is a British artist now based in San Francisco. His sumptuous video projections, text pieces, and musical accompaniments make up a body of work which charts and challenges the idiosyncrasies of the human condition. Through comic and endearing gestures he encircles the tenuous bond between man and nature, exposing the disregard with which the world responds to our fervent desires. Walker's engagement with the American landscape—specifically the desert hinterlands of the West—playfully calls into question our longstanding relationship with the sublime.

His work has been shown extensively throughout the U.S and Europe. I first came across Walker's sonic installation *Trying to cope with things that aren't human: part 1 (2009)* as a bestial art student scouring the East London gallery scene. I walked into Cell Projects and was hooked.

Richard and I conducted this exchange via email after several false starts (my emails repeatedly bypassing his inbox and heading straight into spam) and from opposite ends of the desert—he in the Eastern Sierra battling a sandstorm, me in the Southern Mojave repairing my car after a collision with a tumbleweed.

### i. Under Certain Conditions Language Fails to Perform

**EMMA KEMP:** Text is obviously integral to your practice. You have such a beautiful and complex relationship to language, evident in nearly all of your pieces. For me, when I think about language in the context of your work, I think about sound and the first utterance of human suffering—a cry, a growl—and the slow transformation of sound into music, voice and eventually language. These primordial sufferings become very apparent to me when I'm watching one of your performances or videos, given the history of the landscape and your partiality for rocks and prehistoric plants (cacti). Can you talk a little about how language performs, or fails, for you? How do you cope with the image and the text in one confined space (the frame)?

**RICHARD T. WALKER:** The lineage of sound to music to verbal language that you speak of is fascinating. The relationship between uttering sound and an innate understanding for need or desire is so fundamental and timeless.\* It speaks of existence in a visceral way, exposing how we relate to everything based on an assessment of need, how our understanding of everything that is, is there for us. We can't help it. We understand the world through a cause-and-effect paradigm where the ultimate effect, in one way or another, relates to our survival. Though evolving this has of course diluted and on many levels become somewhat confused, at the base level every time we make a sound with our vocal chords it is a call for the will to live, the call for an acknowledgement of existence. Speaking is an abstract way of existing in the world; it allows us to be many places at the same time, it enables the production of thought and concepts but it can also reduce things to an abstraction that has taken the place of reality. We give things relevance through the naming of them. Language prioritizes; it compartmentalizes, and puts things into tidy boxes, filing them in an organized system that adapts our world to us. So, although on many levels it has enabled us to process the world in a way that produces a use-value to us, it may also be limiting as anything that we haven't deemed useful for one reason or another may be completely outside our perceptual and conceptual awareness. On the radio the other day I heard about a scientist who, due to her autism, thought in images as opposed to having a word-based thinking process. She was employed to work with animals in farming, as she could think in ways more sympathetic to the way the animals think, i.e. through visualization. I was thinking about this and although I can understand what she says, I know what it is to visualize and I know what it is to think, it is impossible for me to disconnect the visual from the verbal. So as much as I am interested in the failure of language to adequately communicate experience, I am also interested in language's thwarting of our ability to experience. It seems that language can't express an experience that it has already partially obfuscated.

This is why I am interested in the relationship between feelings and emotions in relation to music and language, one being a more literalized or language-based version of understanding an experience than the other. The initial moment of feeling that swells before it is placed neatly into its allocated emotion is like music, an abstract entity whose references are a complex multi-layering of sensory memory. Music resists intellectual interpretation in preference for a kind of affect-based knowing, which I think may be related to the aforementioned thing that language obfuscates.

\*I actually think it is rather of time. It gives us grounding, a sense of before and after—to some extent it helps process and delineates time.

## 2. The Literal Appearance of the Self

**EK:** In many of your performative/video works, the eye of the camera is directed from behind, meaning we, the audience, are similarly orientated. We face the same direction as you, we look out at the same scene as you, only we are a little farther away, so we see you, the back of you. It is a strange and solitary feeling (for me) to be faced with a great motionless vista up ahead and to see another lonely figure presumably contemplating something similar to myself, but to be held at a distance by some invisible field, to be held back, prevented from communing. Instead we must talk to that ungraspable world through you, and so your voice, action, body becomes a portal. The facelessness of the body making this an even easier transmission. Can you talk a little about the kind of decisions you have to make when inserting yourself into these works? How much of your 'self' is present? How much of the outside is mediated through the appearance of self? What is the relation between the artist and audience in these video works? (I notice you play around with voice a lot, switching from I, You, He, She, Ourselves, Themselves—again, it is this all-encompassing everything that seems to be so important to your work.)

**RW:** This is something I think about quite a lot. It is important to me that the figure in the work is primarily a figure. I appreciate that the figure has specifics (white, male) but as much as possible I think it is important to retain the notion that he is representative of a larger thing, but maybe remaining just short of being a person. An idea of a person, and a type of person, but by facing away from the camera I want to limit the viewer's reading and refrain from allowing the figure to become a personality. Or at least I'd like to establish fluidity between the personality that is depicted though spoken and written dialogue and the figure that is on screen.

As the figure may be a portal for the viewer, it is also a portal for me, both watching the videos and filming them. As I stand in the middle of nowhere with the camera filming behind me, I experience everything through an insistent and inescapable awareness, a perpetual sense of "This is how you see these things, this is how they are affecting you." So I am very aware of this portal-like condition of witnessing myself witness or seeing, 'seeing.' This removal, this inability to really be 'there' whilst acknowledging the values that constitute being 'there' is a paradox that has essentially formed the foundations of what I do. The inability to acknowledge experience without reducing the experience to an 'acknowledged experience.' The frustrations inherent in this scenario have been hugely inspiring, translating into an array of perception-based conundrums that, when aligned with their attributed emotions, become a kind of expose on the (western?) human condition. I play around with 'he,' 'us,' 'you,' 'we,' 'I' as a way of expressing the whirlwind of what it is to have a thought, of what it is to be a person in the world—the 'I' of you or me consists of all these positions. You are 'we' as much as you are 'I' and 'you'; they all come from the same place and we choose accordingly to position ourselves in reference to something. We judge and apply. The myriad positions that come together to form how we understand ourselves in the world is always on the verge of collapsing, in fact this partial or potential collapse forms the energy that drives us, I think, the attempt to keep it all confined, together, whole, safe. And it is this point, here, that the landscape serves as metaphor. Something that exists only in our understanding of it, a universal construction of perception (I am differentiating it here from nature) that can be pulled apart and fragmented in order to challenge what it is to us and thus what we are to it, and further what we are to us, and then even further, just simply what we are. Nature and in particular the construction of landscape seems a natural place to contemplate and ponder these rather grand thoughts.

## 3. The Universe at Large

**EK:** I find your work both joyous and despairing (I mean that as a compliment) because it seeks out the great unanswerable questions of human life: What are we doing here? How do we deal with being alive in the world? How can we live? I still haven't found any certifiable answers, and I often return to your work when I feel like I've strayed too far from the questions. For me, your work examines the position of the individual in relation to society and the universe at large. There is both a refusal and simultaneous acceptance of the textures of modern society, the desert as an ancient dwelling place for those seeking spiritual guidance, but you bring along icons of our time, electric keyboards, recording equipment—there is a sort of tension in this which I think is very important. Can you talk about this? What draws you to the desert specifically? (For me, growing up in the UK, the notion of there being any space vast enough to really lose sight of yourself was impossible to comprehend. It never crossed my mind that that was a possibility—visiting the desert, I discover it is.)

**RW:** That is really nice to hear. I am interested in exposing the nature and mechanics of how something operates but doing so in a way that falls just short of undermining its initial intentions. There can be a sense of something being undermined, but it is important that full undermining does not take place. These instruments help disrupt the equilibrium of a proposition. If a vast landscape fills the frame, the viewer is located somewhere very specific. We have come to understand these spaces in a very particular way through the history of painting, literature, and to some extent Hollywood. There is a very tight relationship between a depiction of a vast landscape and music, and when put together its ability to seduce is undeniable. I work with this seduction in my work, but I imbue it with a moderate sense of awareness and it is in doing this that these outdated technologies become useful. These small keyboards produce rather meager sounds, but when a tune is played that has a certain resonance, there is earnestness to them, a trying that comes across that readdresses the music/landscape paradigm, tilting it slightly. My hope is that this tilt helps reestablish what it is to us, whilst at the same, through their stature and undeniable synthetic-ness they become symbolic of endeavor and tap into our desire to become something greater. The cassette recorders act in a similar way. By recording my voice, it pushes the words outside of themselves slightly so that they address the nature of what they are as much as what they say, becoming a fabrication, a stand-in for the real.

Catch Richard T. Walker's work at the James Cohan Gallery, New York from March 27th to April 26th, 2014.

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