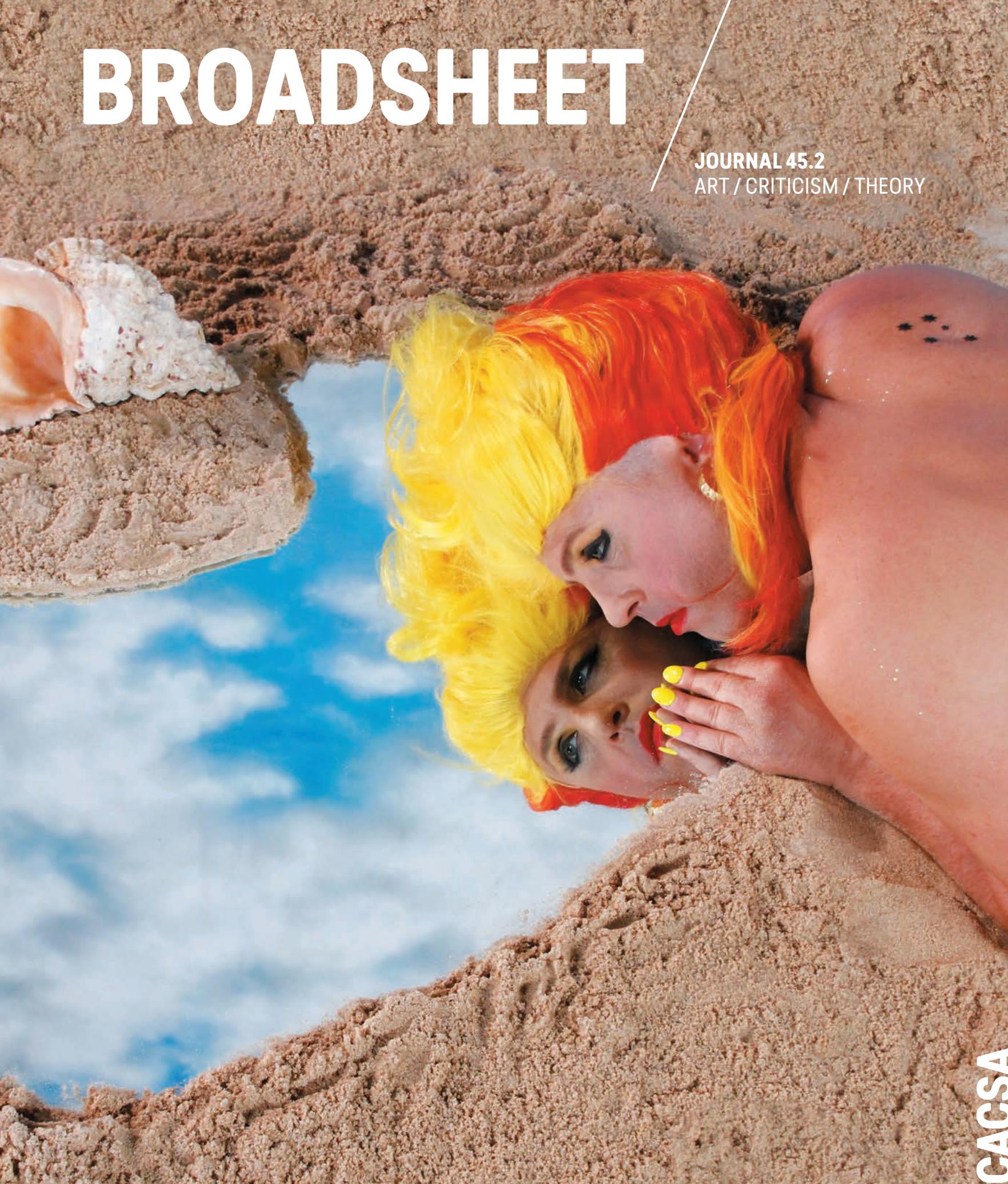


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GARY CARSLY

THE IMAGE IN THE SHADOW OF MUSIC



The music video as it emerged in the 1980s shared many of its formal and conceptual proclivities with post-modernity, not least a disavowal of authenticity as any meaningful measure of artistic value. Presently music videos cohabit a material language and approach to authorship with atemporality, particularly when seen from the perspective of what has become a habitat natural to both, YouTube. The links between art and popular music have been examined at great depth, producing much scholarship and their nexus is now a heavily trafficked intersection for artists and curators. Popular music and its tributary expressions generate motifs articulated across various media and have been the subjects of important exhibitions here and elsewhere.

Writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold argued that the sensibilities of individuals and nations were abidingly shaped by the philosophical and economic forces preeminent at the time of their birth. Although many recording artists had made promotional or documentary films prior to Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*, its release in 1975 is generally regarded as the moment at which the ascendancy of the music video within visual culture commenced and the (moving) image likewise attained equivalence with the music itself. Coincidentally, that same year colour television was launched in Australia and in the maternity ward of a Melbourne Hospital, Daniel Mudie Cunningham entered the world. For many reasons before beginning to think about his work, it is important to acknowledge that the music video genre was born at the same moment and shares a timeline with the artist, who for typographical economy is occasionally referred to here as DMC.

Cyndi Lauper's 1986 song *True Colors* was a worldwide hit and its accompanying film clip subsequently nominated for the 1987 MTV best female video award. In April this year, Daniel Mudie Cunningham reauthored *True Colors*, presenting it as a single screen installation at Alaska Projects in Sydney. The landscape format HD screen, floated in/

on a sky blue wall (dis)playing a more or less frame-by-frame translation of Lauper's 30-year-old precursor. Three piles of Cronulla Beach sand on the ground in front and to the side of the monitor objectively localised one of the most intractable international political and social issues of our time. In truth, *True Colours* (2016) is more palimpsest than remake and in it the artist meticulously transcribes the context of the Patricia Birch directed original from the vilification and demonisation of (predominantly but not exclusively) gay men – at the apogee of the AIDS hysteria in the late 1980s – to that of the refugee or asylum seeker today.

The beach holds a singular place in the cultural construction of Australian identity. As a sub-genre of landscape, the beach is where Cook landed and the ANZACs stormed ashore; it is the fountainhead of bogan culture, 'yet strip away its visionary or functional character and what is uncovered is a psychological need in relation to the idea of Australia, not some ultimate "real" nature or "authentic" Australia'.¹ In the short history of second settlement Art the beach has evolved into a contested rhetorical site. Neither really nature nor culture, pictorially it is a narrow sun-bleached stretch, where suburban ennui evaporates like metho off glass. Many artists have used – and continue to represent – the beach as a horizontal proscenium arch for staging the eugenic fantasies of white Australia, making it an appropriate locale for critically engaged, socially committed artists to pick at the scab of nationalism and culture.

True Colours transforms the symbolic vacuity of the beach, peopled but still somehow empty, into what Terry Smith in his article on David Bowie's music video *Let's Dance* (1983) terms 'a domain of local history'.² As a discourse on race and place it is to *Let's Dance* that *True Colours* best relates. Both highlight the continuing privileging of whiteness in Australia as a benchmark against which 'otherness of others' is measured, while developing a narrative structure actualising hope 'that a *de* colonising art is possible'.³ In both these works the disjunction between image and lyric, the rupture that in most music videos normally results in the death of context is bridged, by what David Bowie describes as a 'very simple, very direct statement against racism'.⁴

Left: Daniel Mudie Cunningham & Stephen Allkins, *Boytown*, 2012, detail, production still, Zan Wimberley. Courtesy the artists.

Generally speaking, Smith argues that the music video ‘throws in associative material to increase semantic density’.⁵ Similarly, John Conomos and Carolyn Symonds refer to the alluvium of borrowed images and cinematic quotations central to music video’s alluring veneer and claim it ‘can be conceptualised as an “assemblage” (to use Deleuze & Guattari’s notion) of rhizomatic discourses: it is a rhizome-text.’ They cite music video as ‘a site of multiple utterances appropriating quotations from a far-ranging array of aesthetic, cultural and artistic sources.’⁶ If this attitude to authorship is analogous to promiscuity, then DMC’s approach to his source material is monogamous. He is touchingly faithful to Cyndi and it is an interesting exercise to view his and hers, side by side. Daniel takes the role played by Cyndi Lauper; he is she from a parallel universe. In an ink dark, night sky the constellation of the Southern Cross as it appears on the Australian flag twinkles, below it a yellow and scarlet harlot wiggled, heavily saturated Pauline Hanson-esque creature stands, back to the camera. The flag motif – further echoed as a patriotic tattoo on Daniel’s right shoulder – is visible under his black, low-backed gown. A sprig of flowering wattle to his right, the beach inferred by canvas tarpaulins. A shirtless Abdul Abdullah strums a guitar and nods his head. Nell Schofield is adrift on an acetate sea with Rubana Huda. They mime drinking tea but

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tellingly do not speak. Adonis, a Sydney alternative scene familiar, plays the recurrent male role of angel or zephyr and Rei Robinson gambols on the sand. The set and costume design by Sarah Contos create a series of images with the visual honesty of Lars von Trier’s *Dogville* (2003). For those who know *True Colours*, it’s all verisimilar familiar. The penultimate scene shows a puddle of blue sky and cloud-clotted water resembling the map of Australia, further cartographically refined when Daniel supine, creates the Gulf of Carpentaria by bending his head. The artist’s face reflected, doubling up upon itself, his tequila sunrise wig and bare back with its Southern Cross tattoo floating in a beige skin sky: a classic image that heartaches with affect.

Daniel grew to adulthood in a Christian household. Not allowed to gorge on television like his peers, he had to watch old *Countdown* clips on *Rage* in private, at night when everyone else was asleep.⁷ The pop clip for him was a furtive nocturnal emission, onanistic, sublimated and hermetic, late night VHS lubricant that miraculously didn’t stain the sheets. Conceivably, the residual claim that popular music has to rebelliousness and as a conduit for righteous anger is more circumstantially palpable for Daniel than others of his generation. Perhaps this explains why much of his oeuvre proceeds from the capacity of music videos to (re) address issues of injustice, marginalisation and angst.

Recent video art in Australia can be divided into two dominant stylistic tendencies – the moving picture, or more accurately the very

slowly moving picture, in which the afterlife of painting bleeds out at significantly fewer than 24 frames a second and those videos produced by artists experimenting with a more prosthetic aesthetic.⁸ In its most elemental, the former is straight and the latter queer; generally speaking one pheromonally nourishes the dominant white, heteronormative culture, while the other chooses to look to some utopian, inclusive future in which it is more than OK to be, (in the words of Cyndi Lauper) ‘so unusual’. It is in this category of video art that the family tree of Daniel Mudie Cunningham’s practice has its roots. The work of Philip Brophy is seminal for any consideration of the prosthetic aesthetic in Australia and his influence is one of the few examples of a new media practice transmitting its formal language and methodologies inter-generationally. His 2004 work *Fluorescent*, devised as a ‘mock video clip’, instructively elided elegance, sophistication and vulgarity for many younger Australian and East Asian video artists. Its lurid light, flattering in the illuminated path it lay for a particular type of heightened individual trying to navigate the boring miasma of baggy jeans and inverted baseball caps. The Kingpins are also honoured antecedents. They preternaturally hacked music video clips’ corporeality and made it their zombie concubine. Conflating the disconnectedness of image and voice in the music video with the distinction Roland Barthes made between the geno-song and the phenol-song⁹ was exemplary badass theory as practice.

True Colours is a breakthrough work because it builds on nearly a decade of the artist’s engagement with music video as both subject and object. In 2007, the year that YouTube set up its Australian subsidiary, DMC recorded the first of his regularised renditions of Tina Turner’s signature treatment of *Proud Mary*.¹⁰ Shaking like a dashboard wobble doll, the not quite perfect lip-sync, tight head-and-shoulders close-ups and the way the camera slips in and out of focus like it’s filming amateur pornography anticipates much of the formal language of artists working currently with the degraded and poor image. Having decided to re-perform and re-record the work every five years, in 2012 he completed a second iteration of *Proud Mary* with a third due next year. *Boytown* (2012), a collaboration with cult DJ Stephen Allkins was commissioned by Campbelltown Arts Centre for the exhibition *Transmission* and posits issues of juvenile anxiety, isolation and queer politicking as the larval stage of many memorable music videos. This gorgeous work, a same with same incubus on the hot teen body of Bronski Beat’s 1984 *Smalltown Boy* mashes together tracks from Do-Ré-Mi, Kate Bush and The Eurogliders, among others. In it DMC makes an appearance – evasive but recognisable under a Magnum P.I. moustache and baseball cap. Working at the Campbelltown City Bowl, he serves the protagonist and slips him one of those looks your mother warned you about. *Boytown* is an interesting evolutionary ancestor to *True Colours*, almost a stepping-stone in the way it coheres fragments of popular music into a visual narrative. It uses the moving image as text and spools back to the originating loci of the epic in oral rendition, which as we know from Homer was accompanied by music.



Above: Daniel Mudie Cunningham, *True Colours*, 2016, 4K single channel video with sound, 4:06 min. Production still Susan Stitt. Courtesy of the artist.

The music video is a curiously pervasive vessel for meaning in Australian art. It now has a significant history of achievement, a genealogy of distinguished practitioners, its own elders and a self-renewing cohort of ingénues. Perhaps it is the special status of *Countdown* in the history of the development of the genre of music video. In normal circumstances it would be unusual for a locally produced TV program to exercise influence in the development of a globally significant mode of creative expression. *Rage*, which shows overnight on Friday and Saturday, is the longest running video music program in the world. Music is central to the life of Australians in a way in which Art is not. Making music and getting it before an audience is less mediated than Art. It does not carry the baggage of elitism, nor is success so overwhelmingly determined by the opaque and venal world of prizes, competitions and patronage. Above all, music's recent history of effectively pushing back against power and the catalytic role that the music video has played in projecting that, probably recommends it to artists. All recent work uses music. It is perhaps more central to DMC's practice than that of any other Australian artist. As a fulcrum, music has allowed him to leverage progressively complex discourses into the realm of public consciousness. The intentionality of his social justice advocacy, particularly of queer causes are opaque topics made transparent by his practice being a

sybiote on the history of music's accessibility and translatability. As Lindy Morrison, the drummer in legendary Queensland band The Go-Betweens reflected, 'Music is opposition.'¹¹

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ian Burn, *National Life & Landscapes*, Sydney & London: Bay Books, 1990: 8
- 2 Terry Smith, 'Nationalism and Culture: Let's Dance,' *Anzart*, Hobart, 1983, supplement to *Island Magazine*, issue 16, Spring 1983: 26-29.
- 3 *ibid*.
- 4 Interview with Ian Meldrum, *Countdown*, ABC, November 1983.
- 5 Terry Smith, *op cit*: 26.
- 6 John Conomos and Carolyn Symonds, 'On Rock Clips: Music in the Shadow of Image' in *On The Beach Magazine*, issue 3/4, October 1985: 59.
- 7 From a conversation between the artist and the author, Macleay St, Sydney on June 25, 2016.
- 8 I have borrowed the title from an essay *The Prosthetic Aesthetic: An Art of Anxious Extensions* by Tiffany Funk, Chicago University Press, 2012.
- 9 Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of The Voice' in *Image-Music-Text*, New York: Hill & Wang, trans. by Stephen Heath, 1978: 179-189.
- 10 *Proud Mary*, written by John Fogerty and first recorded by Creedence Clearwater Revival, peaked at number 2 in the top 100 of March 1969. It was later re-recorded by Ike and Tina Turner and more recently Tina Turner, for whom it became a signature tune.
- 11 Lindy Morrison on Berserk Warriors, Episode 4, *It's a Long Way to The Top*. Australian Broadcasting Commission (first broadcast in 2001).