CURA.

Ed Fornieles

IN CONVERSATION
WITH BEN VICKERS

— SPOTLIGHT —

Ben Vickers   Tell me about losing your virginity?

Ed Fornieles   This is a good opening question, which I think is more about someone's willingness to answer than the answer itself. Once you have that you can pretty much go anywhere. So here you go.
I was an awkward kid and a late starter, I was 17 before I went out with my first girlfriend, Debby, who was a mute; I mean she could talk but she was shy and chose not to, I have all our first conversations written down.
For my 18th birthday I had arranged for my parents to be out, I got my mother to cook fish pie, I had candles, there was Cava. After dinner we went to my room to hangout, there was a lava lamp and a sheepskin rug, I remember feeling very hot. We fumbled around, she was wearing a rainbow coloured g-string, she had double d breasts, she had lost her virginity the year before, she guided me through it. I can't remember much more than *Lay Lady Lay* by Bob Dylan during and Jimi Hendrix after. As you see my ideas of romance were teenage blunt.

(BV)   And, your home address, your personal email address, your home phone number?

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(BV)   Blood type?

(EF)   Not sure.

(BV)   Perhaps this may be read as an entirely invasive and inappropriate opening set of questions to an interview – but I believe it's relevant to the way in which your practice has evolved over time, you have a habit of absorbing the personal history of participants or total strangers into the narrative of your work, extracting vast amounts of data.
Often that narrative and data has a significantly blurred quality between reality and fiction – I wonder if between kidnapping your friends, orchestrating parties of inappropriate excess and stalking your characters, whether there are any situations that you feel have gone too far?

(EF)   "Everything is awesome, everything is cool when you're part of the team, everything is awesome when you're in our dream"… sorry just watching the Lego movie, which I think could be really important, def going to start using Lego in the work soon.
"Too far" relative to what exactly, my peers? Think back, Chris Burden had someone shoot him whilst still at art school, Hermann Nitsch performs village wide orgies of excess, much of my work is timid by comparison. But I do question the convenient passivity of art produced in the present moment, the kidnappings and parties are a provocation of sorts – a sort of brutal red eye flight wake up call, to remind people they're actually alive, living and breathing a very strange moment in time.

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Despicable Me 2, Installation view, Mihai Nicodim Gallery, LA, 2013 Courtesy: the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London (pp. 66-69) *previous pages:* Syrup, 2013, Mixed media,114 x 48 x 38 cm Courtesy: the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London (p. 65)
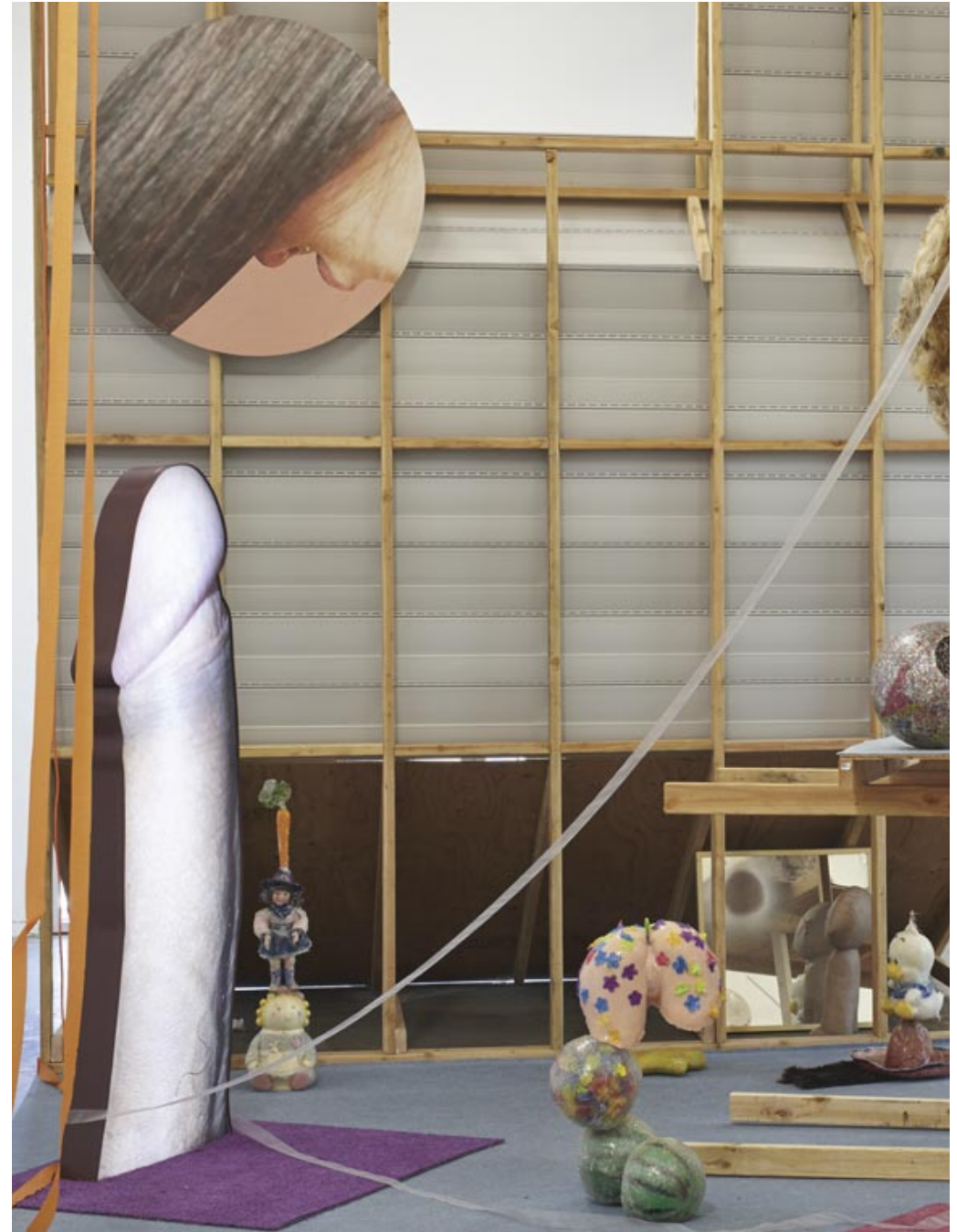
The long goodbye 1, 2014, dried fruits and vegetables, dried larvas and artifical fruits glued and resinated on tissues and wood panels, 240 x 150 x 6 cm Courtesy the artist and Valentin, Paris Photo Sylvie Chong-Liat (pp. 70-73)

I guess in this way I'm interested in disrupting someone's expectations, through a heightening and distortion of them and their environment. The tools are at times very basic, constructed scenarios, often initially built by a cast of actors, responsible for setting the scene, then the social interaction is built on top, this is when we invite a larger audience in, it's then that the potential for what will unfold becomes super powerful. This heightening and acceleration moment also goes hand in hand with a need for content, so the work generally has this escalation contained within it. A natural raw rhythm you can identify in a lot of things, from sitcoms to the economy. People in the performances are always hunting for a way to exist in a space without the normal constraints of its reality equivalent. A story logic kicks in, there is a movement from realism to film logic, a transition from not just enacting a college party, but the college party where they jump off the roof and end up kissing while the BMW sinks to the bottom of the pool.

(BV)   From what you're suggesting I get the impression that things can be unpredictable, I wonder do you feel as though you are you always in control?

(EF)   No, I really don't like being in control, my favorite moment is when I lose complete control of something and the environment becomes self-perpetuating, self-replicating, far outside the original intentions. Much of the participatory work I've sought to initiate can only feel successful to me in the moment in which I personally lose an overview of what's happening, when my directions cease to matter to the unfolding narrative, when each participant (aware or not), becomes responsible for the overall outcome. This is also true of the studio, there is a moment where there is just so much stuff, so much of a certain kind of material it's less a matter of design than doing what makes sense in that environment.
Perhaps a good analogy or contemporary framework for understanding this way of working is a platform like Facebook, which supplies the context and is then populated by people interacting with each other. It enables a type of communication but does not necessarily prescribe the specifics, it points but doesn't push. In this respect, like Facebook, I don't really care about the quality of data that's shared by participants but rather just that it is shared. What does interest me is the intensity of the metadata, the relationships between individual content, individuals and how that flows within group dynamics – whether I'm putting together a sculpture or a social environment, it's the manipulation of relationships between things that defines the experience.
Since these platforms already exist, it makes sense for me to reuse them to perform works, aggregate and steal personal realities or just mirror their system of logic in other settings. I'm interested in these narratives and systems that are so ubiquitous that they become the background knowledge for most people, which once tapped into can organically guide the actions and conversations of participants without too much thought. It's this incredibly powerful force, which dictates social convention all the time, which is most often unseen and unthought about.

(BV)   Some of this feels slightly dystopic, a sort of implied neutrality, which I'd disagree with, but before we get to that, what strikes me is your causal lack for a distinction between what happens on a platform such as Facebook and what happens at a 'physical event' – do you acknowledge any difference?

(EF)   No. I recognise a shift in the quality of experience but fetishizing "digital" as some sort of discreet class of lived experience seems dumb and opportunistic right now. I guess there was a brief moment when you could identify the sense that this alien cultural space was bleeding

into the world and changing it but that's over now. Facebook and Google etcetera, are like stages, containers or a territory similar to any other that we experience daily.

(BV)   But to a degree you recognise the way in which these containers differ and cannot be said to be neutral in the way they influence the interactions that they have, say Facebook vs 4Chan for example, the interaction and social norms are radically different. In this way, I wonder what kind of constructed effect a work like *Dorm Daze* has on the social norms of its participants?

(EF)   I'd say the sitcom hovered somewhere between 4Chan and Facebook, anonymity played an important part in disrupting the social norms, no one was sure who anyone else was and a lot of the people were recruited from all over, so there was a lot of freedom in that sense. That helped participants free themselves from the anxiety of constructing their own self image. Also because the characters were archetypal, each was built with a pre-existing trajectory and sort of generic history that could be tapped into, everyone knew their type and all the preferences and desires that hover around them. Then it was a matter of feeding the mechanism, which just became hungrier and hungrier for narrative. It's that escalation thing I was talking about before. In *Dorm Daze* people began responding to the environment the way they normally would, daily feed updates, messages and likes, but soon people began creating small events at first, things like pizza parties or dorm room sleepovers, but as that became dull a desire to entertain themselves and everyone else around them took over, more and more extreme narratives were superimposed on the environment. Resulting in murder, waterboarding, organ theft and a terrorist attack. I suppose the terrorist attack was the obvious end for an environment predicated on escalation. Again it's this escalation thing, unlike Facebook or 4Chan the work demands acceleration and eventually end points. It's like The Hangover Part II by Todd Philips, which is constantly supplying new scenes which are more and more extreme, so the viewer while just recovering from the last event is thrown something even more radical and dark, the gaps between these become shorter and shorter until the viewer is trapped in this kind of stunned sensationalism that left reality at the door a long time ago, that, that's what I'm interested in.

(BV)   To expand the point I wondered if it's possible for you to trace the effects on specific participants to this event/work/action and the way these individuals now use the service? Also has it changed the way in which you engage in these technologies personally?

(EF)   The effects on people are multifarious and with each event there are a huge range of intense experiences, for some people it's very light, it might just be a disjointed conversation or sense of unease, with other people it can become more intense, where there is a detachment from their normal way of behaving over sustained periods of time, this can be a very full on and tiring experience. My personal relationship with social networks and moreover everyday life has become significantly disjointed since working in this way, I consider myself primarily an observer, who is constantly on the look out for new sources to tap into. For this reason I try to be as open and accessible online as possible, please friend, please download, please say hi, please.

(BV)   It sounds disorientating, are you capable of drawing a definitive line between the realities and containers that you are constructing and the ones that just flow, without direction?

(EF)   Moving to LA has helped me realise an almost total collapse in my perception of real world reality, as I used to feel and understand it. Now fiction and augmented territories exist as one. It's a place in which you can create a fiction and it quickly becomes a reality. Since achieving this, my mission has become to inform, inspire & ignite people to impact their world as #ArchitectsOfChange, my job as I see it is to construct the container and allow people to populate it as they see fit after some initial direction. Living in a state of constant reality collapse, it becomes very hard for me to draw that line you're talking about, there is a constant shift, a blurring between someone's day to day reality and the reality experienced in the container. I know that the real world is constantly threatening to override the container and everything inside of it, but there are fragments that stick even after the projects are long over. The moment after a performance or show is perhaps one of the most interesting for me, when participants are forced to make sense of what's just occurred, and deal with any tensions left between life and this other thing. That questioning moment has been a hard part of the work for me and others to deal with, but I think it's important. You know relationships have started and ended in performances, rivalries and tensions been given air to vent – at times it's become a very complicated, messy and tangled place. Which I think is fine, actually come to think of it, it's a totally preferable collapse and if through my work I can help to enable others to dissolve the same psychological borders that I've crossed myself, that feels like something worth committing to.

(BV)   Above and beyond the frivolity and borderline insanity that's echoed in your answers, let's get back to basics for a moment. What's needed in order to construct and execute on the kinds of works you produce and scale at which you work, is an elaborate process, akin to the production of a film, with its reversible director roles – but it's not just point and shoot action, there's an infrastructural quality – at times works like *Dorm Daze*, *Maybe New Friends* and *Character Date* verge on being a startup in and of themselves. I wanted to ask you to talk through that process and what this stack-like architecture means for the work.

(EF)   I suppose the aim is to construct an architectural framework, that's capable of straddling the landscape, like a monumental work of land art that makes sense in the age of social networks and the fresh territory available to us. Building a large framework on this territory which has everything necessary for a certain type of state of mind to exist for a fractional moment, like a mirage. The process is aimed at creating the environment, not directing or totally designing it, actions may be scripted or prescribed but they only exist to encourage and nurture this state of mind thing, a shift in consciousness. I mean we are doing it all the time anyway, from supplying alcoholic drinks at a party to putting fresh linen on the bed, a lot of our actions are designed to encourage state of being in others. The layering effect you suggest wasn't initially an intended way of working, although much of my work in the past had this sense of an absurdly layered narrative but more static, it wasn't until I started merging in the data with the installations, that this stack like quality emerged. When I started building works purely from the feeds of other peoples data, from their personal history and then spitting out sculptures to mirror or refer to that data history, that's when the complexity really started to deepen, which really began when I first produced works like *Adventureland*. This all got much weirder in the *Character Date* work though, when it was less about merging in the streams with the gallery space but rather having actors take on these stolen histories, when they started registering real companies, pitching business deals to real clients and ho-

sting events. It got complicated, suddenly there were legal entities, possessions, ephemera, recorded experience, online history, new friendships, sex. It all created a constant exponential growth in the material that was being generated and at some point I have to try and slow it down and make sense of the whole matter.

But I see all this matter in its various forms as individual nodes in one unified network, each pointing to and feeding off one another, I think the sculpture works end up being the closest thing to an end product, they are very spongy, they are constantly absorbing all the rest of the muck, they have little bits of characters in them, exchanges, have living room materiality, they are dysfunctional and trying to reconcile things that don't quite add up.

(BV)   We've focused a lot on the process, the consequences of previous work, what you've learnt but, to finish, what are you working on at the moment?

(EF)   The simple answer? A series of sculptures and online works for the Chisenhale, which tap into the modern family. I'm obsessed with the family unit right now, as the best means society has of replicating itself and the colossal force it has on everyone in defining who you are and what you should be doing at different points in your life. I'm interested in absorbing the content of your family life.

You know there are all these narratives, characters and materials that surround the idea of the modern family, its all very soupy symbolic stuff which makes it very easy to tap into, I feel you can just reach into any interior decoration magazine, a couple of shows with family in the title and a few parental anxiety questions online and you've got the making of a dynamite show. I'm very much looking forward to it.

(BV)   How does this sit with the way in which you've been producing previously in the works that we've discussed, what do you mean by my content?

(EF)   We are developing a Facebook login to the new site for the show, a sort of hub point, which will allow us to trade access for all the users content, so you will see yourself reflected back at you. The depth of information Facebook offers is pretty fantastic, and if it's there I feel a responsibility to use it. Bigger is better, and by that I don't necessarily mean physical dimensions, I mean the kind of scale we've been discussing. Big data, big family. Facebook is particularly interesting in this instance, the way your timeline is constructed, it's like it's designed to create social anxiety for anyone that exists outside of the family unit, relationship status, a million likes for your baby photos.

This work should constantly be striving to expand, to acquire whatever is accessible by whatever tools are available, this is land art from social networks perspective, and it's personal. Back in the '90s sensationalism was important and had something to do with removing a couple of unnecessary stuffy layers and saying here is death, or here is this bit of dirt, look at it, there is lots more just like it outside this room. Now I think sensationalism is equally important, and again about removing a few unnecessary layers, but this time it's linked to your self-identity, your data and connected on a scale previously unimaginable. I'm interested in that.

New York New York Happy Happy (NY NY HP HP)
2014, Performance (in association with Rhizome),
New Museum, New York
Courtesy: the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London