

Huw Davies Gallery
30 July - 29 August 2020

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Split **Chris Bowes**

As Bowes stayed at home during the COVID-19 lockdown, his attention turned to live streams from CCTV cameras as one of the only methods of public 'watching'. Using footage sourced from a surveillance device in New York's Times Square, Bowes created *Split*, an imagined narrative featuring one of the area's best-known characters and reflecting on our separation from the world.

Set in a post-apocalyptic future, the video explores a world in which The Cowboy wanders the streets alone, stuck in a loop as plays his guitar and poses for the pigeons, oblivious to the fact that the world has crumbled around him. As Bowes says, 'The Cowboy fought for his freedoms, and now he has as much of it as he could want'.



Image: Chris Bowes, *The Cowboy*, 2020, video Installation, 8:20 minutes, edition of 3, 1 AP, \$1000

Essay: If a man did what he had to do

...he suggested another world, one which may or may not have existed ever but in any case existed no more; a place where a man could move free, could make his own code and live by it; a world in which, if a man did what he had to do, he could one day take the girl and go riding through the draw and find himself home free, not in a hospital with something going wrong inside, not in a high bed with the flowers and the drugs and the forced smiles, but there at the bend in the bright river, the cottonwoods shimmering in the early morning sun. – Joan Didion on John Wayne.

We are relieved when the cowboy arrives. He is here, more or less, to save the day. The cowboy has been refining his craft, developing his talents, repressing his emotions, all in the service of his own survival, his enduring a hostile world. And now he has come to rescue those not brave enough or masculine enough to defend against whichever outside evil has beset them in the cowboy's absence. Traditionally, when the evil is banished from this town, the cowboy moves on to the next one. Now, however, the town has moved on from the cowboy. Here, in Times Square, there is no one left to rescue, no one to protect. Despite this, he keeps his obligations.

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Nobody monitors the cameras, yet they continue to capture the cowboy whenever he passes through their visual field. Where once they captured unending crowds of fleeting tourists and the grifters scheming to skim whatever cash they could, they now register stillness disrupted only by a man with his guitar and, sometimes, wildlife. The cowboy wonders whether the birds appreciate his songs. He appreciates their songs, disrupting the electric hum of neon that he'd never before registered, concealed as it was by the droning traffic and clamouring crowds. He tries to pretend that the thrum of electronics that penetrates the silence is in fact the rush of a river guiding him home, or the wind on the prairie whipping up dust. He struggles to maintain these pictures, in the shadow of concrete, steel, and glass, but the cowboy is accustomed to struggling.

His baritone, American, contains his history and yours. Imagine it. The tunes he plays are those he's always played but now they sound like elegies. The guitar has kept him company – a companion, an ally, an icebreaker –but it can no longer be used to console, distract or entertain, can no longer be strummed to avoid the kind of small talk the cowboy finds pointless, can no longer be deployed to prevent the onset of unguarded moments, to at once keep others at bay and bring them near.

The cowboy describes himself as naked but he is only as naked as the conventions of our postlapsarian world permit, conventions that persist because the cowboy, even when completely liberated from the presence of others, continues to be shaped by a code that presumes a society. His bare skin is the evidence of his resilience, his muscles the evidence of his work, his beauty the reward he has earned. But what are they with nobody else to see, nobody else to value them? His poses repeat, echoes of a time just gone when citizens were there to respond, to cheer and be grateful.

The same is true of the geometry of New York. The lines, concrete and digital, presume a swarm of bodies, individuals negotiating one another's presence with a blend of exhilaration and hostility. With the space emptied out, light bounces in new ways and shimmering billboards project themselves into the void, mourning the purchasing power withdrawn.

The cowboy shares in this mourning, having spent his adulthood building brand recognition that vanished with the city's inhabitants. Although threatened with irrelevance, he knows what his President would want. He knows he is exercising the power and liberty that a life in the United States of America has granted him, and he is fiercely grateful. He is fulfilling the desires, the vision, of his leader: a lone man – strong, white, hat-wearing – and what sustains him today, in the absence of others – surveilled by unmonitored cameras – is his now limitless authority, ordained by citizenship and patriotism.

He has spent his life wandering in search of a unified place, unassailed by the foreign forces that have sought to eradicate his freedom. And here he stands, unassailed. Many have died, but the threnody of sirens that were ever-threaded through the city are mere memory. There are no more dying, only dead. The cowboy is what we have left behind and what we will return to, he is a guardian of the American past dragging his nation into the future, the world with it.

The age of the cowboy is upon us as we recede into the distance. The west, the wilderness that he roamed, its desolation, has become general. He wears a white hat, white boots, a white mask, so we can tell that he is good. He sings for us. We are nowhere to be seen. A sunset shapes his silhouette.

Dan Dixon, July 2020

Dan Dixon is a writer and academic living in Sydney. He writes and teaches on literature, politics, America and art, and has been published in The Sydney Review of Books, Meanjin, The Guardian, The Australian Book Review and The Point.

Chris Bowes | About

Chris Bowes is a multidisciplinary artist based in Melbourne, Australia, who uses photography, video and installation to explore the complex and evolving relationship humans have with technology. Most recently, his installations have used webcams, either within the gallery or to record online footage, as a catalyst to explore the overlapping boundaries between entertainment and surveillance.

Bowes has exhibited extensively within Australia and internationally. In 2015 he won the People's Choice Award at the Macquarie Group Emerging Artist Prize and in 2016 was the winner of the IRIS Award at the Perth Centre for Photography. His works are held in several public collections including LACMA, the Macquarie Group and the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Bowes extends a special thanks to City of Melbourne for supporting creation of *The Cowboy*.

List of Works

1 Chris Bowes, *The Cowboy*, 2020, video Installation, 8:20 minutes, edition of 3, 1 AP \$1000

Artist in Conversation

6:30pm, Thursday, 13 August, 2020

Online via the PhotoAccess Facebook page

Join PhotoAccess for a live streamed artist-in-conversation event with Chris Bowes and fellow exhibiting artists Jacinta Giles and Victoria Wareham. Discussing their current exhibitions, Bowes, Giles and Wareham will reflect on how their practices have changed in the time of COVID-19, the possibilities of art for negotiating the pandemic and the role of video in contemporary photomedia. An interactive conversation with live Q & A via Facebook comments.