

Richard Alpert in Conversation with Bobby Coleman

This interview was conducted in September 2016 in San Francisco, California.

BC *Let's talk a little about your latest work, titled *Ball on Track*. As I understand it, you originally shot this in 2011 and just recently re-shot it with a higher level of technology.*

RA *Yes, the first digital recording was a sketch that I did with a 'point & shoot' camera. The small digital camera for me is a quick way to capture a visual idea. I recently had a chance to re-record it with more sophisticated equipment.*

BC *In "*Ball on Track*," we are witnessing, as observers, a scenario from camera angles that are sometimes extreme in perspective, close to a warning light and close to a streetcar track. Geometric shapes, for example, a flashing red warning light, appear as motifs of roundness; then there's the linearity of the tracks. You must have known that the point of view from the track was somewhat expected, but then went ahead and used it anyway. Why?*

RA *It was a convenient, found structure. I used it to carry the ball in a straight line, otherwise the ball would have been all over the place when I rolled it down the street. I didn't think that it was too much of a leap of imagination to ask a viewer to make the connection between the streetcar and the track. Do you? [Laughing.]*

BC *The title seems like it might be carrying some humor, the idea of 'being on track.' And when we're in transit, hopefully we are 'on track' in an assumedly secure and safe environment surrounded by a heavy steel enclosure. Were you conscious of the humor, of the pun that an audience might see in the title?*

RA *Well, you could interpret it that way but I'm reluctant to say it was my intention. Hopefully a viewer would find their own interpretations and associations.*

BC *How does this tie into your entire body of work and your progression as an artist?*

RA *Ambiguity is a theme that repeats through some of my work. Relationships between elements of a piece are left open to interpretation. I feel like my approach in this video is like constructing a visual poem. There are formal elements such as geometry and perspective that I use, and you can see these in other works that I've done in sculpture, painting, photography, etc. You mentioned the geometric shapes and the motif of roundness that you see in this video. I use these elements as a thread to connect one part of the sequence of events to other parts.*

I think of formal elements as a glue that holds the images together in this piece. So I hope that a Minimalist sensibility helps shape the visual experience I'm constructing, as it has in much of my previous work. I think Minimalism is eloquent.

In addition to the formal elements, I feel that in this video we also explore the psychological territories of surprise, anticipation, and humor in the general feeling of the piece.

BC *Danger is a felt element, yes?*

RA *The streetcar has a menacing sound and I intended the close visual distance to amplify a threatening feeling by having it viewed from such a close distance. I think our personal safety boundary is violated in some way. This captures the abstract feeling of danger.*

It is like the feeling you might have when you are standing too close to the edge of a subway platform, or a cliff. When you look over the edge of a cliff, it's scary. Good judgement says, "Don't get too close."

BC *Is it because the streetcar emerges from quite a distance, as evidenced by its approaching sound, and also that you can presume that you're probably in vehicular traffic of some kind, that adds to the danger of the situation?*

RA *Do you mean from the point of view of making the video shots?*

BC *Yes.*

RA *No, I was after something else. The streetcar, the machine, approaches from a distance and shatters the silence, then has this wonderful fading sound as it moves away and resolves into a quiet calmness and a sort of emptiness. You know, no apparent street action. I really feel that this emptiness or quiet and pseudo-calm is an important aspect of the piece. To me there is something disturbing, unsettling, and uncomfortable about being alone in a city crowded with people.*

BC *What visually attracted you to this location?*

RA *It's a transitional boundary between a stark cityscape and a public park with large expanses of open green space. The street slopes down, and then up again, as the tracks leave the streetcar stop and wind their way around the perimeter of the park. However, I used it, not so much chose it, because of the practical layout of the streetcar stop, the slope of the tracks, and the absence of early morning traffic.*

I didn't consciously go out and look for a location for an idea that I had. I found that it was a convenient place near where I was living. I could sort of play with the elements that I found there. I also found it easy to use the area because, and this is odd for San Francisco, at least in this area, people wake up rather late in the morning and there really isn't a whole lot of street action until later.

BC *Another question I have for you is about some of your other work, I believe from the 80's, with a very sculptural flavor to it. How does this compare?*

RA *Ah, vanilla versus strawberry! [Laughing.] I think that all of my work ties into sculptural ideas whether video, performances, and obviously creating objects. All the art that I produce, or have produced, I feel can be interpreted as sculpture, even the work that might be seen as painting. It's just...not strictly painting. It's more about building a painting and object with color. In the series called "Particle Paintings" the process was just as important as the results.*

BA *So here you're working with shapes, putting them together as though they are a sculpture, whether they are rolling or not—the train has wheels, the light is round, the ball is round, and the track has a rounded groove. Things are in motion so it's very kinetic and it's also very sculptural. However, in cinematic form it's very flat. There is depth-dimensionality suggested in a film, but the screen itself is two-dimensional. Are you thinking still in sculptural terms, or do you have to switch your thinking to the fact that the projected or displayed images are now flattened?*

RA *You know, what better way to capture the movement of objects in time and space than video or film! I can make use of a wider range of images, objects, and contexts without the logistical problems of transporting them somewhere for exhibition. I'm definitely thinking in three dimensions in all this stuff. Video is a medium that lets me capture movement, shape, form, sound, and linear time. It's one of the attributes of the medium that is attractive. It seems to be a medium that lends itself to play, which is another theme that runs through some of my works. And what better way to satisfy my curiosity?*

BA *Not just another medium to work with, then?*

RA *Yes, what better way to capture images, objects and motion in time and space! One facet of some of my work is that video allows me to capture things that I want to present as evidence of a discovery of sorts that I have made, or stumbled upon, or found accidentally. The recordings might appear to be performances but they really aren't. They're more like presentations of phenomena that I feel have a particular visual and auditory interest and attractiveness.*

One of the major aspects of video that I find very useful in making art is that technically, things can be adjusted as I'm working, and they can be seen in real time. For me, that is a very important aspect of the medium. The live aspect of the filmed performance can be adjusted, plus I like the idea of it being simple. Without very complicated situations where I have to interact with a cast of characters, I can present some things that I feel are interesting, make links that I feel are interesting and that resonate with metaphor, and make associations that I feel are interesting for people to see and think about.

BC *One thing that is apparent to me from reviewing other video work that you have done, such as "Facture," is the motion of spinning. I'm not sure why you are so attracted to the motion of spinning. You seem to come back to this a lot!*

RA *The universe that we live is full of things that spin and rotate both on a grand scale and on a personal level, and even on the microscopic level. It seems to me to be a fundamental motion that science uses to describe a lot of phenomena in the world, in the universe. I've always been interested in it. You know the magic of the gyroscope, the beauty of a spinning ice skater, the rotation of the Earth, etc. I see it in everyday objects: wheels on vehicles spin, gyroscopes, jet engines, electric motors, and fans spin, to mention a few.*

BC *When you look at these moving, spinning objects, how much does your interest in astronomy play into your sense of things in motion?*

RA *Yeah, right, all sorts of objects in the astronomical universe rotate and spin. Planets are rotating on their axes, pulsars are spinning at phenomenal rates, our solar system rotates around the sun, the Milky Way galaxy is rotating around Black Holes, are some examples. On the subatomic scale the particles have spin. Some of this movement you are aware of and can see and experience yourself, some of it takes powerful equipment to be able to see and measure.*

As you understand more about what you see in the night sky, the rotational motion of objects in the universe becomes more apparent as a fundamental motion. So it's in the big and small picture of our universe. Astronomy and particle physics reinforce the importance of that motion. Expansion, contraction, velocity, acceleration, wobbling—gyroscopes harness that energy creating a force that counters chaos. It brings balance. Objects can spin out of control or can be harnessed to take advantage of this motion.

BC *A spiritual element, let's touch on that? In the spiritual elements of the journey, the pilgrimage, the track, the groove, the being 'on a roll,' we have something of the journey of life here, a very existential aspect. Do you think that this film metaphorically says something about a spiritual path? That sometimes we feel like we're possibly making headway, and other times it's more like a pie in the face?*

RA *That's a good metaphor, I mean that's a good way to see it. You know, be awake to what's around you. Don't be lulled into numbness by all the social, cultural, and commercial noise that vies for our attention. Your own personal life experiences make the story of you. Awareness of the journey, whether it is from the point of view of a physicalist or spiritualist philosophy, has high value to each of us.*

BC *The context you have chosen for this work offers the idea of an urban landscape that is dehumanizing as well as affirming. How do you regard this aspect of the film?*

RA *The word 'dehumanizing' is a good way of looking at it, and I think that the very physical act of routinely traveling from point A' to point B' can be numbing to the senses. It's just very utilitarian. I see it as a danger that could lull a person into being unaware of their surroundings. You know, the social and cultural noise that we are all susceptible to, the numbing noise. Maybe this traveling, this routineness, separates us from our environment and sort of become a joyless trip. It's sad how people are so separated from one another.*

BC *After the shots of the lights, one thing that could have happened, which doesn't happen, is that you could have gotten on the train and gone somewhere so we could have been in motion with the camera's eye, with you. We didn't board this train. All of a sudden something has happened and we're down on our bellies at ground level looking up the channel of the track itself as though we had never been able to board the train. We've fallen. We're not in a very comfortable position at that point. So this seems to be a conscious part of your vision, that you did not get on the train. What does that mean?*

RA *It could be the wrong train. [Laughing.] How could I know, how could anybody know for sure? You take the risk. You make a decision. It could be the train that goes nowhere or the train to heaven. Volition is something that I find very interesting. For me it's a great metaphor for making my art. I try a lot of different roads. Some are dead ends and some blossom into interesting discoveries.*

BC *So now we're at track level, and lo and behold the roundness of things starts to appear again. We're anticipating that something like this is going to happen because we've already been clued in by the title, but we don't know exactly what. All of a sudden, after the perfect timing, something starts*

coming at us pretty quickly, with an impactful result. Not only didn't we get on the train, instead there's something very daunting, very unsettling going on.

This is a work of art that pops, literally. So what are you telling us? You've put us in a very uncomfortable situation, and as an artist you really let us have it, you know. We laugh as if we've maybe gotten a poke, but you've pretty much killed us on our journey, destroying our chances of making forward progress. We're really taking a hit here, so what is your intention?

RA *I can only tell you that I thought it was funny and maybe other people would also. Irony might slip in there somewhere.*

BC *So you found it less disturbing, more peaceful, and with levity prevailing more than the way I'm describing it?*

RA *Well, I don't really want to say anything more than that I hoped the piece held your interest and that you were surprised.*

BC *The camera was actually put on the ground? In a sense, we're grounded?*

RA *Right.*

BC *Worm's-eye view?*

RA *Grounded, that's a good word.*

BC *So really you're challenging my discomfiture by saying no, this is a positive and peaceful place to be?*

RA *No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying that it is sort of that you're alone. You've found solitude. Maybe it's a lonely place to be. It's a place that is devoid of other people. It's a situation as an artist that you probably find yourself in a lot. You work, or I work, by myself. I find that most satisfying! I find working with other people, being surrounded by other people's moving, almost interferes with the place where I am. I think that it is a very personal thing. Even to meditate with other people around bothers me.*

BC *Except with me.*

RA *Yeah, but that's just one more person. I know a lot of people talk about the energy they feel from being in a room where a group of people are practicing spiritual things, they're singing, they're together in churches, et cetera. I don't find that working for me, that's not a satisfying experience for me. My satisfaction comes from inner life.*

BC *The conclusion of the film, would you describe that as refreshing and re-centering, or would you describe it as a reminder of chaos and randomness, or even of mortality?*

RA *I would probably characterize it as relief from the anxiety of anticipation and maybe of expectation.*

BC *So if you have to take an impact between the eyes, that's the way it goes at the grounded level? So be it?*

RA *That's a good way to see it.*

BC *We might expect to be making progress along the track, going forward, and instead something comes back towards the camera, which is our point of view. We are challenged by this, and it's surprising. Is that a good surprise?*

RA *It's a great surprise! A humorous surprise. We are touched by the ball, a simple child-like object, startled, but not hurt.*

Robert Coleman is a writer, artist, and political consultant based in San Francisco.