Ian Gouldstone in conversation with David Surman

because because because because because
Ian Gouldstone
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Sim Smith

David Surman It's a pleasure to be able to talk about your new work *because because because because because* on show at Sim Smith. It's the latest in a series of projection based works that depart from filmmaking into digital simulations. Can you tell me how you moved from filmmaking – particularly animation – into this practice? Your graduation film from the Royal College of Art *guy101* won the 2007 BAFTA for short animation, and yet now you seem to have abandoned narrative filmmaking altogether and embraced abstraction.

Ian Gouldstone Thanks Dave. I've had a long relationship with animation that has changed and grown a lot over the years. I moved to abstraction instinctually because, in the right context, abstraction tells the best stories. That idea permeates all my work going back to art school. Narrative provides context, but abstraction always tells what's at the heart of the matter and, crucially, places any responsibility for storytelling on the audience. Over time, I've grown more confident in asking my audiences to intuit their own meaning, and as a result the abstract elements of my work have grown too. At the same time, I've found I can be more playful with the contexts within which these abstract animations exist. They needn't be situated in films. They can be in texts, on sculptures, with sounds, or across architectural spaces.

As for moving away from traditional pre-recorded films to live digital simulations, I see that as an essential move to working in these new contexts, outside the cinema, where you cannot control how an audience encounters the work. I hate the idea of someone coming into a gallery with a looping film only to realise that they've come in part way through and they've missed the beginning. It starts off the relationship entirely on the wrong foot–putting everything in a self-conscious, human-centric timeframe. With my work, I believe there should never be a wrong time to encounter it, just as there is no wrong time to encounter a river, a rock, or a forest. Live simulation can provide for this. It can go on forever without repeating itself, changing, pausing, animated in its own time.

DS You've been creating works since 2014 that emphasise visible processes, such as games that play themselves as in *Love Love* (2014) through to the projection works that you exhibited in your solo exhibition at SLEEP CENTER in New York in 2018. There we saw for example an infinite number of blocks stacking up until they collapse in your serial work *Drop Process* (2018) and a falling ball triggering a random number of tones in *Instrument* (2018). Now in this latest work on show at Sim Smith titled *because because because because because* (2020) we're immersed in a projection filled space, and the overall effect has changed. The work now fills the expanse of the space, and our attention is drawn to many different points, with invisible elements being revealed by contact with falling spheres. It evokes a sort of feeling reminiscent of Francis Bacon's notion of "a deeply ordered chaos". Can you talk a bit about the way your practice has evolved to this point in the latest work.

IG I think the general trajectory of my practice is to give up control more and more. It's a mirror image of technology's own supposed trajectory of offering us more and more control over ourselves and the world around us. There is a clear line between *Instrument*, the work you mentioned, and

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because because because because because that demonstrates this movement. From a software perspective, both pieces rely on a simulation of balls falling and hitting fixed objects on the way down. In *Instrument,* the objects the balls bounced off were carefully positioned into a ring that would, as a whole, create a large variety of behaviours given a very small variation in initial positioning of the ball. (This incidentally, is one of the key properties of a chaotic system.) They were also positioned so that a ball could never get stuck or spend too long on screen. What I saw as undesirable or problematic outcomes were designed out. In the software of *because because because because because*, I decided not to remove those behaviours because I realise how potent they can be. I gave up a great deal of the control of the placement, the shapes, the pivots, the simulated masses of the bodies in this simulation to the computer, to algorithmic chance. As a result, this piece pushes back much harder against me and, I believe, the audience. It has a stronger presence in the world, asserting itself as a thing that sits on the same plane as people, not a tool that sits below them.

DS I think for most people chance and happenstance aren't qualities they would associate with computation. Inputs are processed according to coded laws to yield certain outputs, computation is a deeply orderly thing. Am I right in saying that the falling balls and spinning objects are adhering to strict laws at the level of code, but our experience of the final visual output expresses the feeling of chance and unpredictability?

IG Yes. Most computers these days are deterministic–any one initial state has only one possible output. Raspberry Pis, the computers I used in *because because because because because,* are no different. In the majority of my work, I employ random number generators to help produce a varied performance. They're used both during runtime, determining where the balls actually fall from for example, and during setup, where they determine the overall layout of the field of pivoting platforms. However, it is important to say that the random algorithms I use only produce the appearance or the feeling of chance. They're only pseudo-random and are still actually deterministic. In the past, I attempted to get closer to 'true' randomness by using external sensors or the physical qualities of the computer chips themselves, but realised that my work isn't about producing randomness. I'm more interested in producing a complexity that invites you in and holds you. I believe that when we're being held in that manner, we have a greater capacity for imagination.

DS What you're describing – complexity that invites you in and holds you – makes me think of it as an absorbing spectacle. Do you think there's any relation to the sort of experience *because because because because because* offers and spectacular popular media, computer generated special effects that throw particle systems and many millions of polygons around the screen? I can see how this sort of work comments on the history of complexity as seen in things like pinball tables through to videogames.

IG There are some commonalities with spectacular popular media, yes. At a mechanical level, I use some of the same tools and libraries they use in films and mainstream video games like Angry Birds. And at a psychological level, the complex behaviours those tools can generate attract and hold an audience in both cases. However, I think things diverge at the point where audiences are held. In most spectacular media, the next step is to double down on this simulated complexity in order to convince you of the authenticity of their constructed world. We can see this in contemporary effects cinema, like superhero films, where visual realism is regarded as extremely important despite the unrealistic subject matter. In my work, I am not interested in convincing people that my simulations are real. I want them to be seen in relation to the world around them, whether that's the object or space they're projected onto, the person who is observing them or perhaps something even bigger. On one level, I believe the success of my work is measured by how much of and how well the surrounding world is brought into it. Having said that, I am also content to think that my work

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simply provides someone a visual pleasure without asking anything in return.

DS It seems what you're describing is a kind of realism. I'm not thinking of representational likeness, but a kind of perceptual realism, that speaks to the biology of our eyes and the mind that makes sense of external stimuli. Our eyes evolved in relation to the world, they serve (served?) our needs as hunters-gathers. By employing simulated physics in combination with the colour you use, I feel like the pleasure I have looking at the work is something fundamental to the seeing mind. A falling fruit or a twitching fish in a rushing stream, animated bodies that are full of vitality – what you're doing is a realism insofar as it seems to prompt us to consider our worldly senses, albeit through a digital simulation. Do you think about these art-historical concepts such as 'realism' or are they not useful to you?

IG That's really interesting. In the studio I spend a great deal of time tuning my work for it to feel real in the sense that it's sufficiently, but not entirely, predictable. I want people to be able to build a loose model of it in their heads. This model will draw on both reality and observed patterns in the work itself. And I think you're right that this taps into our hunter-gatherer brain, which is itself always trying to predict and to imagine the future whether it's 10 seconds or 10 years away. That's the most important part! At a basic level, when our brain imagines the future, it tests and strengthens our intuition both mentally and physiologically, but at a deeper level when we imagine the future, our desires are revealed. When I watch *because because because because because* empty-mindedly, I often find myself hoping for a ball to take a particular path, or for it to collide with another ball, or even for periods of total emptiness where all the colours have faded. When I watch it with a narrative scenario in my head, my desires change accordingly, revealing something I perhaps didn't know I felt.

DS I want to ask one final question, and it has to do with peoples' perception of the 'normal' versus the obviously 'fake'. The explosion of fake news, conspiracy theories and general disinformation as a political tool has become a mainstay of everyday life. The generally accepted view is that this comes as a consequence of increased complexity. Peoples' lives are burdened by this crisis of complexity, that is, a moment where the crisis of representation intensifies via global digital systems – financial, commercial, managerial – that put greater demands on the individual. Making sense, making meaning, everyday comprehension of the 24/7 world become more difficult. Could it be that behind the abstraction there's an aspect to your work that speaks to these new conditions? The simulation presents as a kind of rules-governed nature, and we're caught up in that complexity – are we meant to think about the system that drives it?

IG It's my hope that my work will encourage people to think about systems, but I appreciate everyone will do it differently, to different levels, if at all. I believe abstract systems literacy is a necessary skill for any citizen of the 21st century. Our project cannot continue if people rely solely on their aforementioned hunter-gather brains because the natural world no longer works in a natural way. We don't hunt and gather any more. We primarily interact with human-made technological systems. And to make things even more difficult, those systems are now the dominant forces on the planet and our own bodies. Earlier on, I alluded to how our hunter-gatherer brains needed to plan 10 seconds ahead in order to plan the trajectory of a spear towards prey. Now, we need to plan 10 months ahead in order to make sure we can pay for dinner. Our survival depends on our ability to engage with systems, and our ability to use them, author them, and understand them objectively is hugely beneficial for the individual and society.

Unfortunately, many systems around us, whether they are technological, political, or some other sort, are designed to be inscrutable, hidden, or disguised. *because because because because because* takes its name from

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The Wizard of Oz, a film that demonstrates this idea. In it, the wizard exploits the technological literacy gap between himself and the citizens of Oz to convince them of his magical power. Dorothy's dog, Toto, pulls back a curtain to reveal that his power actually comes from a surprisingly simple, but hidden machine. In my work, I try to keep that curtain slightly open for those that want to peer inside.

David Surman is an artist and writer.

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