

# CHRIS SOLLARS

by Jasmine Moorhead



"Shave", 2011, still from video, 3 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Steven Wolf Fine Art.



"Saturday Morning Cartoons", 2011-2012. Stills from video, 20 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Steven Wolf Fine Art.

## An Appreciation of the In-Between

From the beginning, Sollars' video art has been ambulatory. In his very first video piece from 1997, the artist records himself as he wheels a bucket full of soapy water around the city, picking up trash off the street, washing it, then carefully replacing the trash as he found it.

From 2002–04, his series *Come Walk with Me* featured him guiding historical walking tours around the city in the adopted persona of a hippy-like Jesus Christ [his calm demeanor, long flaxen hair, and beard produce a good simulacrum of the American, Sunday-School version]. The videos of Sollars' tours are actually made up of the footage taken by the "tourists"—actually friends of the artist—who join and leave the performance as it moves through the streets. No one ever breaks character or reveals it as an art piece. And, whether he is pointing out the original home of the Grateful Dead in the Haight-Asbury neighborhood or confirming the Savior's return to a true-believer at the edge of Union Square, Chris-as-Christ is naturally humble and unsanctimonious. It seems legit.

In a 2012 work called *Saturday Morning Cartoons*, Sollars walks around his Mission neighborhood with a mug of coffee, holding it in the sightline of the viewer/camera, effectively blocking objects in his path. Then comes the classic reveal and we experience the "reality" of the object that was previously obscured—all to a Looney Tunes soundtrack. The piece is complex beyond its conceit because we emotionally experience two different types of relief, one from the presence of the mug and one in its absence.

It is no surprise that when asked about his influences, one of the first names Sollars mentions is Buster Keaton, the grandfather of silent-film physical comedy. The comedian's impeccable timing and straight man's nonplussed-ness show their deadpan spirit admirably in Sollars' work.

Gestures are most often conceived of as simply symbolic. But great video artists, just like their counterparts in physical comedy, have always understood that the gesture is itself something; a mark in space, noted by the camera, whose purpose is both manifest in the moment and self-reflexive. That is the work. The art is the distance between viewer and performer made possible by the intermediary recording medium and device: video and camera.

Sollars is best known recently, perhaps, for a number of video pieces that focus on his substantial beard. Hair has been a favorite subject throughout art history, and Sollars adds to it by approaching from a conceptual angle, while recognizing the beard to be an important set piece in his comedic repertoire.

As early as 1998, Sollars filmed himself shaving with an axe in the Maine woods. Using the discrepancy of appearance between his bearded and shorn self, Sollars subtly but purposely brings gender politics [an important biographical subject for him; see also *Bjorn Again*, 2003, in which he role-plays as a female Bjorn Borg] into this everyday task. When Sollars is shaven, his visage is thin, almost feminine, whereas when fully grown, his beard takes over and he becomes the prototypical hearty woodsman. He re-created and updated this early performance in his exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' "Bay Area Now 10." He's also used his beard to hide objects, which are then extracted and used to greater purpose [*Beard Object* and *Dejeuner sur la Barbe*, 2011]. The latter produced a delicious mushroom meal cooked by Jerome Waag].

Chris Sollars is a clear heir to a 1970s video art history that includes Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, and Bruce Nauman. All performance/video artists who gained notoriety in the avant-garde pages of *Avalanche* magazine. Sollars' work, like these pioneers who first explored

the possibilities of video to bear more permanent witness to an ephemeral moment, is bodily, peripatetic, demonstrative.

Yet to see Sollars' video art as merely an extension of this early moment is to miss that throughout his fifteen-year history, he has consistently used one of video's greatest capacities, the ability to capture the "in-between," for very different purposes than his predecessors. The need to carve out space in opposition to the world, using hard boundaries and even violence, dominates those earlier works. But Sollars makes it clear that those boundaries are a lot less relevant now, both in life and art, so it's therefore less important to know, name, and transgress them. It is possible, he suggests, to make peace with the boundaries, and in doing so, let them go.

To be clear, this eschewing of fixed boundaries does not at all mean a disengagement from difficult subjects. The politics of environment remain a central core of Sollars' work. In *Pile of Trash*, 2006, he orchestrates and records an action in which people dressed as bags of trash disrupt a busy San Francisco intersection. His documentary *C Red Blue J*, 2008, deftly integrates autobiography and presidential election politics. In *Pacific Puddle Pedal*, 2012, he exchanges a jar full of foaming saltwater from the Pacific with one full of dirt and grit from a Mission alley puddle, a potent and real gesture. But Sollars urges us to see these gestures as part of a larger fabric of communal being.

The poetic power that can result from this nuanced engagement with the individual gesture is best seen in an unassuming but very strong video work from called *Left Behind*, 2011. In this work, Sollars walks through the industrial streets of San Francisco, pausing to create small sculptures out of trash and discarded objects that he finds on his journey. Watching Sollars

construct a work of art (an artwork within an artwork) out of broken, dirty, unwanted objects shifts the viewer emotionally from the everyday weight of social despair to childlike delight. He has taken parts and made a whole.

In all his work, Sollars' emphasis is on balance and creation, both of which thrive in the "in-between." This is not to say that a lot isn't at stake. Sollars knows more than anyone that the delicate balance represents an edge between hope and nihilism. But Sollars does not view these gestures as merely symbolic; their enactment in time and space registers within and affects the ecology of the world. Video, therefore, is the tool by which this gesture can affect again and again. The beard might be cut, but it will always grow back.

Chris Sollars is a 2013 Guggenheim Fellow.

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"Pile of Trash", 2002. Stills from video, 6 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Steven Wolf Fine Art.



"Street Clean", 1997. Stills from video, 3 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Steven Wolf Fine Art.



"Left Behind Walk", February 2011. Stills from video, 6 minutes 26 sec. Courtesy of the artist and Steven Wolf Fine Art.