

The Mark Siebert Interview — 2007

by **Ken Bolton**

I see Mark Siebert sitting outside the Iris Cinema, opposite the Jam Factory, uncustomarily early in the morning.

KB: Mark, how's it going?

Mark: So so.

KB: What you up to?

Mark: I'm working.

KB: It looks like you're having a smoke to me.

Mark: No, hard at it.

KB: What are you doing?

Mark: (indicates Jam Factory): I'm setting up.

KB: I think of you as one of those I-don't-get-out-of-bed-for-less-than-X dollars sort of guys. Like 'top models'.

Mark: Yeah. (Takes a puff.)

KB: In fact I can imagine you saying, "\$500? If I give you back \$100 can I still sleep in?"
Not today?

Mark: Nope.

KB: Want to talk about your art? Sometime?

Mark: Um, couldn't *you* talk about it?

KB: I could! I will, if you like?

Mark: Let's get together.

Some months later. A visit to Mark Siebert's studio.

KB: (knock knock): Mark, you're in?

Mark: I am, yes come in.

KB: I've been looking at these things as I go by. (Indicates the works tacked up around the studio.) Nothing has changed.

Mark: I'm a busy man.

KB: Mark, I was bowled over when I saw the Fan Letters show (Downtown Art Space, November 2007).

Mark: Why's that?

KB: The format of large, badly typed letters on the walls at regular intervals, with the corresponding envelopes. Visually it looked like something you'd see at the EAF in 1977! Conceptual Art!

Mark: Things only get better with time.

KB: Yes. Maybe.

Mark: You don't think so?

KB: It seemed a step back—in terms of quoting an earlier style. Previously you'd been doing paintings of CD spines and record covers—similar tributes to popular culture I take it. The slacker 1990s! The present!

Mark: My culture.

KB: Right.

Mark: With Cezanne I believe that Nature must be the sole authority, the court of appeal, if you will.

KB: "With Cezanne"?

Mark: It's a turn of phrase.

KB: Yeah, yeah, I know. But 'Nature'?

Mark: What I see about me. Every day.

KB: So Nature, for you, is just the stuff you see about you: your record collection, the pub, your friends—just what's in your apartment?

Mark: Yeah. And my girlfriend's apartment.

KB: How does that differ.

Mark: It's a lot neater, I suppose—and it's more colour-coordinated. I don't know if that makes it more like Nature.

KB: Well Nature often is colour-coordinated. Think of flowers, and zebras, and crystal.

Mark: My room's really messy compared to hers. Maybe that's Civilization—as opposed to 'Culture'. Mathew Arnold.

KB: Maybe it's Barbarism?

Mark: My apartment?

KB: In a manner of speaking.

Mark: Civilization and Barbarism—that's Adorno, right?

KB: So?

Mark: I just wonder what you're getting at?

KB: ‘Attitude’ seems to be the key to your work, Mark. The recent show was like Joseph Kosuth meets Jonathan Richman. The fan letters were presented as if literally. Bald, guileless. But one quickly realized that there was a register that they ran up and down—between abject and gormless, and frank irony and sarcasm. They were knowing.

Mark: But not too much. Actually they were just how I felt. I really did think those things. The things that it said in the letters.

KB: So how much are they an in-joke, shared with the audience? Do we take them as you knowing what you’re doing—laughing at the innocence the letters enact—and knowing how much they are really meant?

Mark: Ambivalent? I mean, I don’t want to seem a total smart-arse. You know, snide, too smart by half. But I don’t want to appear like a jackass either.

KB: So?

Mark: So if you ask me if I’m really saying that stuff I’d say Yes. Unless you thought I was dumb—and then I’d say No, I wasn’t.

KB: I did ask.

Mark: Well that’s what I’d say. I like your Jonathan Richman remark though, that identification.

KB: Why?

Mark: He’s really cool.

KB: He does delicious irony and some humour around very curiously and subtly inappropriate address. Like you.

Mark: Yes, but not just Jonathan Richman.

KB: I’m thinking of something like his ‘The Morning Of Our Lives’. Do you know it? I mean most people just think immediately of “Pablo Picasso — no-one ever called Pablo Picasso an arsehole” when they think Jonathan Richman.

Mark: There’s also the White Stripes—in the show—and Lou, even Miles Davis. Though that was just a short one, almost a joke really.

KB: ‘Poetic’.

Mark: Yeah, unfortunately.

KB: You know the long ‘live’ version of ‘Roadrunner’? The song stretches forever because Richman goes on just talking, about driving alone, about alienation: winding the window down to test the air. “I wind the window down. The air’s cold.” And he talks about riding well past the town limits and coming across this field “right out there in the middle of nothing!” where there are lights and things. I mean, the song is playing with the literalness of duration, of *its* duration, which is potentially ‘endless’, in the same way

as his driving experience is endless. But, even more like Minimal art: it echoes that famous essay of Michael Fried's, the bit where he quotes David Smith's recollection of a night where he and some students go for a drive out to the new turnpike that is still under construction, not marked out with lanes and lights and guard rails: just large, bare areas of concrete and desolate landscape with the odd, distant tower or building in lights: "The road and much of the landscape were artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its affect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art." He follows with "Most painting looked pretty pictorial after that."

Mark: Yeah, well I'd like that—the Jonathan Richman. The description of the shopping centre. I don't drive though, actually, so maybe this stuff is less relevant.

KB: You know the essay?

Mark: Of course, yes. I think John Barbour or Pam Zeplin—the bozos at the Art School—made everyone read it. I never really got it really. I found it annoying. All that driving around. What was so special about it, the open space, the endlessness?

KB: Zeppo didn't tell you?

Mark: May have. I maybe wasn't listening. Why didn't she just play the record?

KB: So: we've got Nature and Civilization—in your work. And maybe Barbarism.

Mark: Leave John Barbour out of it.

KB: Ha ha.

Mark: Yeah.

KB: You don't regard it as Culture really, your stuff? Not Nature, not Cezanne?

Mark: Cezanne? Well, I mean only that it's about what I know and think about. TV, music ...

KB: Culture.

Mark: Culture? Most TV... 'Culture'! I think you mean what's on the ABC—or SBS! I know where to get culture. In fact *most Nature programs* are in fact on Channel Two! I don't know if you know that. A lot of people equate Channel Two with Culture. But there you go.

KB: I hear you made the filmed bit of the *Fan Letters* show just the afternoon before the opening?

Mark: The day before, yeah. I just thought it would be cool to do it. Bianca Barling shot it for me and downloaded and edited it overnight, and we showed it.

KB: Bianca admired your relaxed attitude. Your 'courage', she said.

Mark: Farout. She said that did she?

KB: 'Attitude'. But it didn't *have* to be perfect, did it?

Mark: Not really, no.

KB: Of course if you can't fail can there be success?

Mark: Well, not to succeed, that would be failure, right?

KB: If that's what you want.

Mark: I thought it was you who wanted it!

KB: I was trying to make a point.

Mark: What—by inference? by implication?

KB: Why don't we go back to the attitude question?

Mark: Back? Sure, bang on.

KB: Is it the the humour of the abject—or is it the spectacle of the attitude's circumventing or short-circuiting the objections the standard attitude evinces?

Mark: Hey?

KB: Is the abject funny? Is the attitude funny because it's *abjectly* inadequate? Or does the attitude comically triumph through circumventing or short-circuiting the objections of a more censorious set of attitudes?

Mark: "Does it win or lose?" I think it wins hands down and when it doesn't it fails loveably. In its failure, Ken, it implies an equal degree of failure or 'inadequacy' in the high-cultural episteme that finds it wanting? See?

Wendy: I'm having a beer. You guys want one?

Mark: Nup.

KB: Nup

Mark: Oh, okay.

KB: Yup.

KB: The other thing we haven't got at is how those letters sometimes identify, or 'capture', the way quite subtle aesthetics are thought through when pop music is thought about, if it's big in someone's life. They're real discriminations.

Mark: Who said they weren't? That's what I was telling you. I really did mean the things in there.

KB: Irony and sincerity.

Mark: 'Zackly. You got it.

KB: If we talk about Downtown — the gallery you guys ran — it began with exactly that mix. Remember James Strickland's film, with the cowboy and his sheep? Or the tears in the Barling/Kutschbach film?

Mark: That was ages ago. They're long gone. We're about the third generation of Downtown directors.

KB: Andrew Best, Bridget Currie, Sarah CrowEST and them, they were the middle generation then?

Mark: ‘The dead hand’ — that’s right. Then there was Peter McKay, Tamsin, me. The game lifted I think.

KB: Why’d it close, finally?

Mark: (burp) Well, a number of reasons. The lease was coming up. That brought things to a head. But also we couldn’t find a new team to take over who had enough experience curatorially not to run the reputation down. Better to go out on a high note.

KB: The aura can dissipate pretty quickly, true.

Mark: We were all getting pretty busy.

KB: Yes, what have you got lined up?

Mark: New pastures, Ken.

KB: You’re moving on? Moving ‘away’? Where to exactly? Don’t you think you fit in here, at least temporarily? I mean a lot of you are working with the street-cred thing: Matthew Bradley, KAB-101, James Dodd— and there’s the play with contemporary ‘genres’, Bianca Barling and the Gothic ...

Mark: I’d get by, I reckon.

KB: There’s Paul Sloan.

Mark: Paul?

KB: Yep, a painter who seems to dip into a kind of free-floating pool of imagery — from ‘the Imaginary’.

Mark: I hate all that stuff. Remember the show where I cut those books up, burned them — Virilio, Derrida and that?

KB: It’s not Paul you hate.

Mark: No, no. He’s fine.

KB: I like what he does.

Mark: We’re talking about *me* here. [laughs]

KB: Well, The Imaginary. I was pushing it.

Mark: Push away! Push away, pard! This is the art-world we’re in.

KB: What are you working on, next, now?

Mark: Oh, stuff. Stuff.

KB: What’s this?

Mark: Put that down.

KB: But what is it?

Mark: It’s going to be my next big work.

KB: Right.

Mark: It's sort of a mistake.

KB: A mistake.

Mark: But I like what I did when I made that error.

KB: Ah-hunh.

Mark: It'll be a series.

KB: So you *can* fail and succeed at the same time?

Mark: Them's the breaks.

KB: As I think Julian Schnabel said.

Mark: Yeah.

Wendy: Mark, I'm going to the corner shop, want anything?

Mark: No.

[pause]

KB: Whatever happened to Julian Schnabel I wonder.

Mark: Moved to Sydney?

KB: You don't know who Julian Schnabel is, do you?

Notes:

Michael Fried in 1967. 'Art and Objecthood', collected in *Minimal Art*, ed Gregory Battcock, California U Press, 1995.

Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers--'Roadrunner (thrice)', on Beserkley records BZZ7