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Boytown
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Screen Space

Daniel Mudie Cunningham & Stephen Allkins
Boytown 2012

HD single channel video, colour, 16:9, 5:20 minutes

Commissioned by Campbelltown Arts Centre

Cast: Fabian McCallum, Dione Bilsborough, Emma Campbell,
Daniel Mudie Cunningham, Stephen Allkins

Camera: Don Cameron

Editor: Vera Hong

Music engineer: James Atherton

Music samples: Man Overboard by Do-Ré-Mi;
Ghost Town by The Specials; Smalltown Boy by Bronski Beat;
Breakaway by Big Pig; Heaven (Must Be There) by The Eurogliders;
Running up that Hill by Kate Bush
Production stills: Susannah Wimberley

All images courtesy of the artists

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www.screenspace.com
+613 9012 5351

Ground Floor / 30 Guildford Lane Melbourne Australia 3000

SCREEN SPACE



Boytown

Daniel Mudie Cunningham & Stephen Allkins



BOYTOWN

From the first frame of *Boytown*, in the exquisitely honest close-up of a teenage boy's face (actor Fabian McCallum), we catch sight of the intimacy that developed between Daniel Mudie Cunningham and Stephen Allkins in this collaborative work. Beneath the slick surface of their video, set to the rhythmic soundtrack of a sampling of 1980s hit songs, lies the shared pain and confusion of growing up gay in the suburbs and the desire to get away.

Unlike much contemporary video art, this work has a narrative structure that connects the viewer to these themes on an unashamedly emotional level. But its discursive nature is also where its conceptual subtleties lie. The piece has been constructed in the form of a narrative music video, not only because the artists want to tell an archetypal story, but because they are overtly referencing the four minute video clip storyline that dominated eighties MTV culture.

It goes without saying that we live in a world of fragmentation: visual culture exists along non-narrative lines. In a digital era, multiple screens and windows are always open, and through them we catch partial snapshots from an infinite image bank. But this visual culture has a history; it began prior to the Web and is widely known as the era of the MTV generation. While there had been music clips prior to the advent of MTV, there had never been a comprehensive narrative visual culture tied specifically to the world of music.

While Cunningham is very much of this generation, music has been central to Allkins' life since he was a teenager in the sixties and seventies. For both of them music was not only an escape, it was a form of culture that offered alternatives to a suffocating suburban sameness. This is never more resonant than with Bronski Beat's *Smalltown Boy* and its accompanying video, which their work restages in *Boytown*, shot in Campbelltown last year. Not only is the song an icon of gay culture, it was significantly the first truly 'out' video at the high point of the politicisation of gay identity and culture during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

Boytown therefore introduces references to queer politics, not didactically, but via its remembering of the popular culture archive. There are many similar pop cultural references that reveal something about the history of queer politics. The scene that takes place between the boy and his mother in their flat – what looks like an argument about his queerness – is a remake of a scene from Madonna's *Papa Don't Preach*. This is not only an iconic song and video within queer culture, the roles have been gender-flipped: 'papa' becomes mother and Madonna's character becomes a teenage boy. In a simple twist, the video positions anxieties about gay identity at the centre of family conflict, something rarely represented back then. Moreover, by casting Dione Bilsborough – one of the stars of the 1992 series *Sylvania Waters* – as the boy's mother, it seems as if Cunningham and Allkins are giving a wry nod to how reality TV has almost usurped the music video in its ubiquity.

The fact that the video is shot in the outer Western suburbs of Sydney in 2012 reminds us both of the bleak suburban locations in which Cunningham and Allkins grew up and the fact that, despite



the enormous wealth in the inner city which is considered the pulsing heart of gay culture, the suburbs continue to be populated with gay youth. We see it in the exterior to the boy's dreary block of flats, and the cheap, closed-down shops he passes during the opening sequence.

When he arrives in the superficially glamorous Kings Cross – supposedly the place where he will finally find a sense of home – there is a lingering shot of a homoerotic Calvin Klein underwear billboard. This image embodies the commodification of gay culture today – the emptying out of its political struggle in favour of the shallow significations of its mere lifestyle choices. For Cunningham and Allkins, it is symbolic of the forgetting of the historical fight for gay rights that seems to have led to the desire for a bland assimilation with the dominant culture.

Another strategy employed by the artists to intervene in mainstream culture in order to comment on queer politics was to create a 'straight' reading of the archetypal gay story through the remix of seemingly straight pop culture. This is most obvious in the music chosen for the soundtrack. While the core of the music may be a gay anthem by Bronski Beat, the work also repurposes a number of mainstream hits from straight suburban culture: Do Re Mi's *Man Overboard*, The Specials' *Ghost Town*, and *Heaven* by The Eurogliders. Even the video's title is an amalgam of *Smalltown Boy* and *Boys in Town* – a hard rock chick anthem by the Divinyls.

These songs were the soundtrack for the lives of many suburban Australian kids in the eighties, which *Boytown* uses to create a bridge between the isolation of queerness in the suburbs and teenage alienation generally. Not only is the use of these songs suggestive of the fluidity of identity, the artists' repurposing of straight pop music anthems hints at queer culture's critical ability to take what is not theirs and make it their own.

It is this understated commentary on the ethics and politics embedded in everyday life told through the manipulation of the cultural archive that elevates *Boytown* beyond a merely private story; this work connects to universal themes such as teenage alienation, suburban isolation, and the relentless otherness of gay identity. Indeed, a socio-political commentary runs like an animating thread throughout the simple story, offering the viewer deeper glimpses into the world of suburban gay childhoods and its lifelong implications for young men who escape that life. Ultimately, however, the final sequence set to Kate Bush's *Running Up That Hill* refuses any one reading; we are left to wonder whether the boy has swapped one place he is running from for another.

While Cunningham and Allkins are both concerned with the broader cultural meanings of the popular culture they mine – particularly as it relates to queer politics – in the end they have produced a work that transcends the political. *Boytown* is an unassuming and deeply affecting story of a boy who escapes an alienating world to find himself in an alien one, running nowhere fast.