

Mores McWreath: “Maybe If I Keep Talking...”

By Cameron Shaw

This essay was written as part of the Young Art Critics Mentoring Program, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays on a specific exhibiting artist. Please visit www.aicausa.org for further information on AICA USA, or www.cueartfoundation.org to learn how to participate in this program. Any quotes are from interviews with the author unless otherwise specified. No part of this essay may be reproduced without prior consent from the author. Elizabeth Baker is AICA's Coordinator for this program for the second season.

In 2003, after graduating from Cooper Union in New York City, Mores McWreath had the letters WW tattooed onto his bicep. His inverted initials and the monogram of his alter ego Will Westlake, the tattoo now resembles a pale stencil. His body literally rejected the ink. The incident makes a striking metaphor for the relationship between McWreath, the artist, and Westlake, a recurrent character in his art. Ironically, it has also come to symbolize a sense of failure for McWreath that he embraces and actively cultivates in his practice—failure to be unique, failure to communicate, failure to make the “right” choice.

The Manhattan-based McWreath works primarily in video and digital animation—two distinct arms of his practice that sometimes converge to haunting effect on screen. For an artist whose mediums are immaterial, he is constantly bringing objects into his studio, like packing peanuts, cardboard boxes, plastic masks and balloons. He uses them as building materials and props in scripted vignettes that he stars in, and he treats his body as just another object on set. Recalling the corporality of late 1960s Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, McWreath kicks walls, bangs the floor and hurls himself in front of the viewer. Often appearing with a

shaved head, donning a tee, polo shirt, or hooded sweatshirt, McWreath asserts an aggressive masculinity on camera. He produces unintelligible sounds, rants about losing a leg, and makes hand puppets mocking the correct pronunciation of Iraq. This is Will Westlake.

McWreath has lived in cities throughout the South and Midwest, but he considers himself and the character Will Westlake to be products of Westlake, Ohio, near Cleveland. Reflecting the area's dreary post-industrial history, Will Westlake is part defeatist, part agitator—a volatile and sometimes hostile poster child for suburban malaise. He first appears in a series of mock commercial spots simply titled *Westlake* (2004). Set to the blaring guitars and alt-rock crooning of Top 40 hits, each numbered segment is an individual advertisement for the eponymous community or for a suburban lifestyle brand: mega-chains like Abercrombie & Fitch, Burger King, Outback Steakhouse and Kmart.

Though McWreath does not acknowledge his doppelganger by name until later work, *Westlake - Spot #18 Dreams End* articulates the separation of the two. To the soundtrack of Avril Lavigne's *Complicated*, one cowers on the ground while the superimposed double taunts him and throws rocks at him. The viewer's ability to identify McWreath as distinct from Westlake here is confounded by the fact that they look alike, but it is their actions that set them apart. Westlake is clearly the antagonist, McWreath the victim. Together they suggest the schizophrenic relationship to modern consumption that subsequently unfolds within the series, and throughout the artist's growing body of work. And like much of his subsequent work, the *Westlake* spots vacillate between grotesquerie and restraint. Some of the segments are deliberately ridiculous as the Will Westlake character revels in the excesses of consumerism, for example, gobbling Burger King hamburgers while wearing a devil suit as if in fast-food hell and loving it. Most, however, sidestep the confident images and affirmations that are habitual to commercial television in favor of abstract visuals or decontextualized facts.

In 1973, Chris Burden purchased airtime on two Los Angeles television stations, to broadcast himself crawling through broken glass. Over the next few years he periodically interrupted late-night programming with puzzling, if not disturbing, imagery. Fifteen years later, Canadian video and installation artist Stan Douglas created his *Television Spots* (1987-88), brief glimpses of totally banal commonplaces interspersed into regular broadcast television. Though McWreath does not rely on the same modes of dissemination as these predecessors, one main intention remains the same—to challenge viewers' acceptance of television's endless monologue and its bombardment of capitalist ideology.

McWreath continues to build upon established models of advertising to subvert its system. Most of his work is composed of short scenarios that can be as brief as a few seconds.

With this format, the artist captures not only the feeling of television, but more aptly the variety of the internet, emulating the infinite stimulation of the digital age. In *The Bud, The Seed, The Egg* (2008), McWreath (as Westlake) seems to be trapped in a miniature, empty office space. He performs a spectrum of actions which include laughing hysterically, describing the number of toothpaste choices at a Target store, and singing the theme song to the television series *Growing Pains*. The work brings to mind the erratic video blogs that pepper YouTube.

This idea of information overload may be best evidenced by the artist's digital animation pieces. Begun in 2006 and continuing, *Everything's Better* is a collection of clips that digitally combine audio and visual elements—both original and appropriated. McWreath borrows from popular songs, television shows, YouTube videos, and cult science fiction movies like *Cyborg, 2001: A Space Odyssey, A Boy and His Dog,* and *Terminator 2*. He also creates his own images, ranging from actual footage of a desert to animated crashing waves or the cartoon silhouette of a man seen against television static. For example, one segment pairs a floating figure from the apocalyptic film *Omega Man* with the theme song to the television show *Cheers*. Another pairs a falling boulder extracted from a Roadrunner cartoon with the theme from NBC Nightly News.

Everything's Better embodies the informational potpourri of surfing the web, but there is one major modification: lack of viewer control. Here, the viewer is force-fed the artist's desired messages. It is a referential exercise, as the viewer attempts to unpack the familiar and the unknown in the videos. Much of the source material can be recognized by a viewer well versed in recent history and popular culture—a line from John F. Kennedy's inauguration speech, the Pizza Hut logo, or a classic guitar riff. Some of it, however, is extremely obscure or too divorced from its original context to be recognizable, though McWreath willingly divulges its provenance on his own website. In pairing familiar elements with visuals that he has produced himself, McWreath thwarts the impulse to attribute every image to an identifiable source. Despite the plenitude of information being exchanged, the question of creating meaning still remains.

One way of understanding this question is to look back to McWreath's earliest video project. The same year he sat for his WW tattoo, McWreath completed a documentary on aphasia—a condition caused by brain trauma that results in the loss of a previously held ability to speak or understand language. For *Picturing Aphasia* (2003), which is now widely used as a rehabilitation video, McWreath worked with patients to translate their experiences into drawing, thus transforming loss into a new mode of exchanging ideas. While this project may seem unrelated to his later work, it establishes his interest in multiple ways

of generating meaning, and the potential freedom that can exist in bypassing expected modes—an interest that is the cornerstone of his current practice.

In his most recent work, *Remain* (2009), McWreath appears again as Westlake, wearing a succession of polo shirts acquired at a Wal-Mart. The shirts come in a rainbow of colors; he wears pink in one scene and green the next, and so on, symbolizing the plethora of choices available in today's marketplace. In front of a crumbling set, composed of cardboard boxes digitally layered close to 100 times, he offers a litany of sound bites and platitudes. "Maybe if I keep talking, I'll say something profound," "Craft matters," "Your instincts are always wrong," and "Fashion is all about self expression" are just a smattering of the variably deep and inconsequential statements thrown at the viewer. The on-screen provocateur has left the tags on all his clothes and wears a visible microphone as evidence of his making as a fictional character in a fabricated environment. Like many of McWreath's other works that evoke science fiction movies, this scene establishes an apocalyptic context. It seems possible that Will Westlake is the final survivor of some cataclysmic event. He is trapped, talking to himself, failing to communicate with others. Perhaps there is nobody else left.

The writer, **CAMERON SHAW**, is a critic and fiction writer based in Brooklyn, NY. She graduated from Yale University in 2004. Shaw frequently contributes to *Artforum.com* and her articles have also appeared in *BOMB Magazine*, *SZ-Magazine*, and on *ArtinAmericaMagazine.com*. Her essays, poetry, and short fiction have been included in books on Marcel Dzama and Chris Ofili, among other artists.

The mentor, **EDWARD LEFFINGWELL**, is an independent curator and writer who lives and works in New York. He has published reviews and articles for a variety of publications and is corresponding editor for *Brazil to Art in America*. He served as program director and chief curator for P.S.1 in the 1980s and subsequently as director of visual arts for the city of Los Angeles.