

Alan Currall

we lie makes us instantly more interesting anyway. And although we realise that we're probably not fooling anybody, we can sometimes half fool ourselves and rewrite history, mistakenly labelling the rehashed stories we tell ourselves as 'factual memory'. We are all neurotically delusional.

Unpicking Currall's processes is a frustrating task: whether he is creating a verbal or visual illusion to fool us, or pretending to take us in while letting us know that we're supposed to realise this, or acting that he is pretending to fool himself, which we are also intended to be privy to, or... There are many layers at which the videos' subtext can be interpreted, like a phenomenological onion, but each level of interpretation requires the recognition of the others. This process is like the defining of a word. There is no possibility of escaping the need to have already understood a word before attempting to explain the process of understanding that word. The detail is understood within the whole, and the whole from the detail.

Sally O'Reilly

Alan Currall

The search for universal truth is an unending one. Even armed to the teeth with language, a faculty for reason and extensive technology, absolute reality cannot be located. We deal with this in many ways – by accepting the pluralistic model of society, so that our own irrefutable facts are not expected to be universal; or by approximating, so that we can at least proceed with everyday life. Another method is, of course, lying vehemently to everyone, including ourselves; or we can build independent and stable belief systems within which to operate. We can adopt an established faith or philosophy, or make up our own strategies from experience and common sense. Perhaps the average person uses a hotchpotch, hokum brew of all these methods to locate themselves in the misty confusion of life.

Wittingly pulling apart the fabric of understanding is a dangerous action, but Alan Currall mischievously explores our complex belief systems. Somehow the medium of low-tech video, with the trend among artists and amateurs to film confessionals to camera, doesn't appear to ridicule our ignorance, but sympathises and plays to our strengths. The unprofessional finish of low grade video suits unpolished performances, highlighting human fallibility. In Currall's

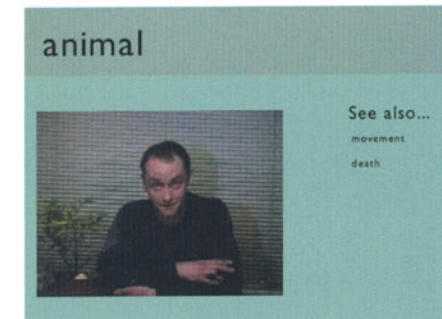
CD-ROM 'Encyclopædia', the artist asked people that had influenced his world view to give definitions of words that had been selected to represent the breadth of human knowledge. Hundreds of interlinked subjects are grouped into categories: The Natural World, Society and Culture, Science and Invention, The Atlas. Disarmingly vague, over-specific or totally oblique, the answers are funny and anthropologically significant. These people are not specialists in either their assigned subjects or etymology, so their definitions tend to be based on a combination of common sense, experience and knowledge remembered from school textbooks. They can speak with confidence on the molecular structure of water, but flounder over more subtle ideas such as what makes a person human.

"Animals are lumps of flesh that move. Except when they're dead."

"People are like animals with memory and conscious [sic]. In a sense we get ashamed about stuff that we do when we're animals. I think shame is the thing that changes animals and people. That's it – people are animals with shame."

There is an ever-present element of schadenfreude, as we laugh at the

'Encyclopædia', 2000, CD-ROM



struggle for an answer, yet we have an equally strong admiration for the inventiveness of the speakers. After listening to a number of responses, a humanist pattern emerges. Many people start out objectively, in confident tones and bent on accuracy but, as they run out of stored knowledge, they start to improvise with more personal responses. The content becomes personalised and the science of definition gives way to the anecdotal. Currall and his friends assure us that we are not alone in our uncertainties, insufficiencies and neuroses. Individual words enable us to compare and contrast our understanding at a fundamental level while language, as a complex medium, can act as a belief system in which to position ourselves in relation to others. Language is, however, an irritable set of semi-consistencies, with built in ambiguities and hyper-sensitive grammatical rules; it is the mother of confusion and a superb tool for telling the truth in a misleading way.

Common sense, we hope, is a more reliable set of rules that can forestall failure or accident in daily life. But it must be supposed that common sense has its limitations too – it is learnt early on in life and therefore bears no relation to advanced knowledge. For an atomic physicist, relativity is the result of a series of computations, theories and observations

that are, at all times, accompanied by the scientist's own common sense; yet to a lay person it is not at all intuitive. But we can attempt to rationalise extreme situations so that they have a ring of plausibility, we can make 'educated guesses'. In 'Survival kits', Currall's parents answer his questions about how to survive a shipwreck, plane crash and nuclear war. It is vaguely possible that they have experienced the first two, having lived through the Second World War, but nuclear war is an unimaginable scenario. Their advice on how to survive is the desperate application of common sense: "think about taking some high energy fruit" or "if you could catch a bird, you could actually drink the blood of the bird, which would be a liquid as well as a nutriment". In turn macabre, futile and surreal, the obvious parental desire to help is touching as they wrestle with the unknown, with only personal experience to guide them. Christmas cards are strung in swathes, the dog wanders to and fro and the loaded clock ticks off minutes as the three figures, with their heads out of shot, ponder the avoidance of doom. It makes for a portentous Christmas diorama.

The progression in 'Survival kits' from shipwreck to plane crash to nuclear war mirrors the ascendancy of technology during the twentieth century. Our ambivalent relationship to technology

peaks into critical levels as our belief that it can do unending evil as well as good is played out before us, both in fact and fiction. Science fiction is a good yard stick for measuring societal and scientific change: imagine a face off between the now rather quaint Frankenstein's Monster and the near unstoppable Terminator. Our images of horror and dystopia become more extreme as technology amplifies our hopes and fears.

'Pretending to live in a safer world' places technology on our side through its dumb slavishness to the human command. The video does just as Currall asks it and runs backwards at the press of a button. By reversing the action, a door becomes barricaded against intruders when, in reality, Currall is removing the furniture from the doorway, leaving himself vulnerable. He walked, carried and dragged objects backwards so that, when reversed, his actions seem logical, but not quite natural. Although his movements look puppet-like or vaguely alien, Currall does not look over his shoulder, which would be a tell-tale sign that he is really working backwards. At times our assurance that the video has been reversed wavers, but the paradox is that Currall could only pretend to us that he is barricading himself into the room, and could never fool himself – the one person that really needs to feel

that he is safer in this particular world.

Currall bombards us with more transparent lies in 'Lying about myself in order to appear more interesting'. He stands awkwardly in front of the camera, shows us a series of personal possessions and proceeds to tell obvious and escalating whoppers about their histories.

"This is the guitar my Dad bought me, my first guitar, when I was twelve. This is what I learnt all my chops and licks on. Of course I've progressed onto much bigger and better guitars after that, going through Strats and Gibson SGs, and getting plugged in to the electrics."

As we all know, it's the insistence upon unnecessary details that gives the liar away. Nervous justifications like pointing out the 'collectable item' label on the box of his great grandmother's old tin toy, or insisting on the authenticity of a watch, supposedly a family heirloom: "You can see it's very old because all the numbers are Roman numerals rather than Arabic numerals, as we call them. I've changed the strap of course, because I'm vegan". Currall is acting out a fallible version of himself, which exemplifies our own weaknesses. We all aggrandise our pasts, so that our personal mythology saves us from feelings of mediocrity – the fact that

'Survival kits: shipwreck, plane crash and nuclear war', 1997, video triptych



'Pretending to live in a safer world', 2001, video projection

