

**WILLIAM HUNT**

**PLAYING THE GOAT**

**PEER**



# PLAYING THE GOAT

*Close your eyes remember what you see,  
Open them again to change your possibilities.\**

Last November, in the early hours of a foggy morning lit only by the grimy orange glow of sodium lamps, William Hunt drove from Düsseldorf to Essex for a planning meeting at the Arena Raceway. As he approached London, he was forced to an abrupt stop by a queue of cars, finally edging past a truck that had crashed a short way ahead. Later, to expunge this experience from his mind he described it using the following image:

*'I saw a man inside a truck who had been in a crash. Still trapped inside the cab, he looked like he was made of wax and had been pushed against a radiator the way that his head and shoulders were melted into the steering wheel and dashboard.'*

The work Hunt had been on his way to plan bore an uncanny resemblance to what he had witnessed. He had first mentioned his idea two years earlier in the video interview *A Moment's Hesitation* (2012). Side-stepping any sensationalism, he had announced in the

simplest of terms: *'my next idea is a car crash'*. By their very nature, accidents lie outside our control: it would be impossible to organise an accidental event. What Hunt wanted to do was to produce the *image* of an accident; a complex moving image that would capture the morbid thrill, confusion and intense physical and psychological effects of a car crash, while also exploring the treacherous path between intention and action.

In *Still yourself and calm your boots* (2014) Hunt tackles velocity and the effect it has on his body by driving a car at high speed and crashing it into a concrete barrier, after which he performs a song he has written for the occasion. Hunt has often tested his body's abilities under the influence of gravity or other physical forces, orchestrating situations in which he sings and plays instruments. These live actions usually lead to sculptural, photographic or video outcomes. This time, the work exists exclusively a video showing the car crash – in reality a mere 10.365 seconds from the moment he stepped on the gas to the impact – and his musical performance. High-definition video footage allows for closer scrutiny of the artist's body. Shot at an increased frame rate ranging between 200 and 2,000 frames per second using multiple cameras, it enables us to analyse in minute detail the physical effects of the crash.

Sudden impacts, such as car crashes, test the wondrous elasticity of the human body, and sometimes break it. When the car hits the wall, Hunt's neck, although encased in protective supports and clothing, stretches beyond its normal range and his head obediently nods forward, bowing down to the tremendous density of the concrete barrier. For a moment, he turns into a rag doll, his body apparently loose and limp; he is the crash test dummy from public service broadcasts, the soft toy tossed out of the crib. The shot switches to a frontal view of his face, showing pupils shrunken to the size of pinpricks by the bright lighting rig used for the shoot. As the car moves towards the barrier, the fate of his skin comes into question. Will it fly forward, wrinkling and peeling away from his nose? Will his face momentarily detach itself under the force of the impact? Another shot, and once again Hunt's spine performs its role, curling forward, conjuring up an image of intervertebral discs and nerves lavishly stretching out. Beyond the visible effects of the crash, the chemical rush of adrenaline and cortisol brings a moment of elation followed by a dry mouth, muscle cramps and breathing spasms exactly when Hunt attempts to deliver the second verse of his song. We read the signs given by his body under duress to imagine what it might feel like to be in his position. We observe the shapes he throws as the car hits the wall and his safety harness breaks his forward motion.



above:  
*Still yourself and calm your boots*, 2014  
production still

*Watch out,  
You don't expect me  
To drive so fast.*

The parts of the human body always sing: the low pitch of the circulatory system chimes in with the high pitch of the nervous system, and the acousmatics of tinnitus too, providing a quasi-musical accompaniment to our every move. In *Still yourself and calm your boots* Hunt sings from the very beginning but it takes time for his voice to emerge from the soundtrack, which is dominated by drone that comes with extreme slow motion. His mantra is a warning – to himself, his family or the world. But the song is also a soliloquy for an audience made up of many facets of his own persona. Hunt speaks to the voices he contains within himself, voices that are variously contradictory or confirming. As he addresses these alter egos, Hunt is also ‘singing to the positions’ he has put himself in.

*Oh, oh,  
You think it's all such a joke,  
Standing here, you're far too near,  
And I'm playing the goat.*

Hunt designed a complex apparatus to obliterate the results of the crash, the moment you most want to see. He reconstructed the back of the car, removed the

seats and built a reservoir filled with 65 litres of white paint. As the car hits the barrier, the paint surges up and over, blanking out the windows, and turning it into an impenetrable white sepulchre. The crash ushers in the second phase of the video. Hunt pulls himself out of the window and climbs up onto the concrete wall; a cannon fires four times, spraying him with silver confetti. Then comes the real endurance test. From his concrete plinth, he serenades his rumpled car. As his body begins to respond to the shock of the impact, Hunt is short of breath. His voice, raw with emotion, wavers and he seems disoriented and unsteady on his feet. A trick of the camera appears to shrink him to the size of a figurine. With his injuries unexamined, he might still be the plaything of the gods. In this moment of devastating sincerity, Hunt enters the phase in the action which ancient Greek dramatists called catharsis, the defining and final features of any tragic artwork. It provides the hero with an emotional release, brings the potential for moral or spiritual renewal, and offers relief from the tension and anxieties that precede it. It wipes the slate clean, allowing the hero, artist, survivor, to walk off into the distance.

Once he has performed his song and climbed down from his makeshift stage, a final bathetic image shows Hunt drenched in white paint and sprinkled with

confetti – a self-inflicted tarring and feathering of the one who broke the rules and played the goat. Is this the picture he imagined so clearly back when he conceived of this project? In a graphic reversal of the traditional white death masks, the paint cloaks Hunt's entire body but leaves his face relatively untouched. It's as though the paint has whitewashed the scene, absolving him of all the risks he has just taken – dangling his mind, his body and his family over a precipice. White paint bathes it all, offering a fresh surface on which to project the images of works to come.

*Why should I feel like I wanted to show this,  
And why should I feel like I wanted to know this?*

With the choice to take such an extreme risk comes a heavy dose of dread and fear. The exact outcomes are unknown both for the risk-taker and for their loved ones. While there may be a structural consistency to much of the work Hunt has made – the artist uses his strength, endurance and bravery to overcome a challenging situation and deliver a message as a song – there is a stark difference in the implications of the work he has made since becoming a father, a condition discussed in *A Moment's Hesitation*. The video starts with a montage of Hunt's existing works, and segues into an interview in which he explains some of the motivations and ambitions for his work. The conversation

hinges on the moment when the woman interviewing Hunt says 'You and me', and with this window onto their private relationship, the apparatus of the documentary interview suddenly collapses. What we are really witnessing is a couple having an intimate discussion that encapsulates his ambitions, her fears and their compromise. Is she a Penelope to his Ulysses, watching him depart for a journey – albeit a short one – while she cultivates her own bravery, loyalty and tolerance? The work reveals some of the complex realities that surround an artistic practice which might otherwise strike us as solipsistic, or more concerned with physics and mechanics than with interpersonal dynamics.

If *A Moment's Hesitation* adopts the format of a television interview, the work that it anticipates brings to mind action films. *Still yourself and calm your boots* uses multiple points of view, a distorted temporality and other cinematic techniques such as delay and deferral, with various frame rates capturing details invisible to the naked eye. The action is stitched together to produce a fragmented whole; a quilt of impressions like the memory of a trauma. It is evocative and accurate in parts but ultimately incomplete and ungraspable as a fleshed-out moment. No sequence of shots could ever capture the searing speed of a car crash.

Hunt's work has frequently trodden two extremes, which are in this case allotted to the two halves of the film. First comes the intense psychological challenge of driving his car into a wall. This is followed by the self-deriding, questioning and melancholy song, which knows that things might have turned out very differently. In moving from the first to the second part, Hunt goes from superman to everyman, embodying a persona whose humility and imperfection are embodied in the car that he has adapted to perform an extraordinary physical feat. After the crash, the make of this performing vehicle is revealed: it is a distinctly understated secondhand Vauxhall Astra estate, the image of family life, the safe choice in which practicality wins over aesthetics.

Ellen Mara De Wachter

September 2014

opposite  
*Still yourself and calm your boots*, 2014  
production still



**William Hunt** (born 1977, London, lives and works in Düsseldorf) He studied at The Slade School of Fine Art, and at Goldsmith's College. He has presented gallery exhibitions and made public performances for over ten years. Recent projects and exhibitions include *BRA-VO OH BRA-VO!* at Rotwand, Zurich (2014), *Ship, Ship, Slip and Drip* at Hunt Kastner, Prague (2014), *Not Knowing, But Looking* at Petra Rinck, Düsseldorf (2014), *Paranalía* at Siobhan Davies Dance Studio, London (2013), *PLAY! Recapturing the Radical Imagination*, GIBCA – Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Gothenburg, (2013), *The World Turned Upside Down – Buster Keaton, Sculpture and The Absurd*, performance at Mead Gallery Warwick Arts Centre, UK (2013) *A gesture that you can't help but make* at Villa Reykjavik, Reykjavik (2010), *I don't believe you, you're a liar*, Camden Arts Centre, London (2009), *Tempting Fate by Swimming Alone*, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, NL (2008) and *Put your foot down*, for Art Unlimited at Art Basel (2007). He is represented by Ibid Projects, London; Petra Rinck, Dusseldorf; Rotwand, Zurich.

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*All the parts have been calculated,  
so now is not the time to re-investigate them.*

*In the past I considered it,  
decided that it was an image I wanted to make happen.*

*I have to trust that past-self,  
continue forwards,  
and will re-examine the image when it is in front of me.*

*I am now at the time  
where the work is only a few days ahead.*

*A time where I have to still my mind,  
make sure I stay on that line I calculated,  
that a more considered version of me worked out.*

*So still yourself and calm your boots.*

William Hunt

7 February 2014