Boytown
16 May - 1 June 2013
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-Re-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
ISBN: 978-0-9872860-7-9
Published by
Screen Space
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ARTS VICTORIA

Daniel Mudie Cunningham & Stephen Allkins
The fact that the video is shot in the outer Western suburbs of Sydney in 2012 reminds us both of if Cunningham and Allkins are giving a wry nod to how reality TV has almost usurped the music centre of family conflict, something rarely represented back then. Moreover, by casting Dione scene from Madonna's and his mother in their flat – what looks like an argument about his queerness – is a remake of a remembering of the popular culture archive. There are many similar pop cultural references that Boytown culture during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. restages in resonant than with Bronski Beat's a form of culture that offered alternatives to a suffocating suburban sameness. This is never more was a teenager in the sixties and seventies. For both of them music was not only an escape, it was While Cunningham is very much of this generation, music has been central to Allkins' life since he been music clips prior to the advent of MTV, there had never been a comprehensive narrative visual culture existed along 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 referring to 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 – 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 infuses any one reading, we are left to wonder whether the boy has swapped one place he is running from for another.

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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 transcend 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.

Carrie Miller