

# The Artist Taxi Driver is Off His Nut: The Madness and Motives of Mark McGowan

27 September 2013, Siân Robinson Davies

In 2010 Mark McGowan started a video blog under the name of the Artist Taxi Driver. Since then he has posted multiple videos daily, shot on his phone while sitting in his car as he vents his rage at current political and economic affairs. His Youtube channel, ChunkyMark, contains over 2000 videos including those prior to the arrival of the Artist Taxi Driver, which include protest performance works of varying absurdity. His latest project, *Where's Daddy's Pig?*, involved Mark pushing a plastic pig along the pavement with his nose, from King's College Hospital in Camberwell, where he is currently receiving treatment for cancer, to 10 Downing Street. On arrival Mark delivered a letter signed by himself and his two sons in protest against the current privatisation of the NHS. *Where's Daddy's Pig?* was recently shown alongside a selection of earlier Artist Taxi Driver videos at Trade gallery, Nottingham.

Madness is an underlying theme in much of Mark's work. In his latest videos, 'He/She/I/They must be off their nut', is its most common reference and mania is an ever present force. It's a fine line between being dedicated and unbalanced and it's Mark's persistence that lends his work a feeling of the unhinged. He sits alone in his car shouting at his phone, swearing one minute, laughing the next. Madness is associated with abnormal behavioural patterns and different realities, and Mark's relationship to reality, narrative and insanity is worth spending some time unpicking.

In an appearance he made on the Keiser Report<sup>1</sup> in June this year madness is explicitly a reoccurring theme throughout the ten minute interview. He asks, "Am I mad?" He explains that in preparation for the show he was told to stay calm and breathe deeply before replying to Keiser's questions. He explains he is trying not to swear, but gradually gets more worked up as he talks about PRISM. 'But PRISM, can you even get your nut around PRISM!?', he asks, referring to the recent NSA scandal involving public money used to gain citizens' private data from online companies, which in itself has qualities and scale of a conspiracy theory.

By Mark revealing the show's request that he remain calm, he not only makes explicit the behaviour that is expected of anyone in public discussion, but also of his stated inability to maintain a collected demeanour when talking about such topics. This is Mark saying that you might think he is mad, a ranting guy wearing sunglasses during an interview in a TV studio, but his madness is an absolutely valid response to the madness by which we organise ourselves economically, socially and politically. It is a refreshing change to see the outrage usually saved for private conversation being

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<sup>1</sup> *Artist Taxi Driver (Mark McGowan) on Keiser Report*, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f\\_mTYaI4VN8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_mTYaI4VN8)

aired publicly. As he talks about the distribution of wealth and recent benefits cuts, he asks, 'When is enough enough? [...] The queen, a multi multi billionaire gets a five million pound pay rise. She rubber stamped the welfare reform bill!' It is his mania that makes this declaration interesting, because it embodies the feeling one might have in the face of such powers, but it is also the mania that disrupts it's truth claim.

He ends the interview by quoting Nietzsche as saying 'the real is of no significance to man what-so-ever. That we live in a state of continual and perpetual fantasy'. Nietzsche is a writer more closely associated with nihilism and perspectivism than politics and activism, but the Artist Taxi Driver is born of a situation in which reality has been divided into subjective positions, while still wanting to have a say in the organisation of systems that affect his life. Despite uncertainties, he suggests that our collective narratives need to be publicly discussed, so as to include diverse alternative views. I understand the Artist Taxi Driver to be saying, 'My guess is as good as yours, but if you don't have a go at trying to affect things in accordance with your values, the power of private capital will continue to assert itself, and it's own agenda is being enforced all the time as we watch the X Factor'.

Another interesting thing about the absurdity of Mark's protest performances is that it makes for an entangled relationship with the press. *Where's Daddy's Pig?* happened at a similar time as Greenpeace's stunt of climbing the Shard in protest against Shell's planned oil drilling in the Arctic. Both Mark and Greenpeace use the media's feverish hunger for drama to get themselves in the press and both provide a clear meaning for their actions. This is helpful for the reporters as they just have to repeat, 'Members of Greenpeace are climbing The Shard in protest against Shell's proposed oil drilling in the Arctic'. But as they report on Mark's protest they find themselves saying things like, 'The Artist Taxi Driver is pushing a toy pig with his nose from King's College Hospital to 10 Downing street, in protest against the privatisation of the NHS', or 'Mark McGowan is eating a swan in protest against the royals'. As they report the meaning they have been given, there is a look of suspicion in their eyes as they wonder if the joke is on them. They usually deal with this by reporting in a bemused manner as a way of distancing themselves from the story.

Mark's 'ridiculous' protests are in part a ridiculing of the spectacle one must create to start a debate or to get your point heard, but that doesn't mean it is not also an expression of dissatisfaction with privatisation and monarchism. It doesn't mean that it's just one big joke on the press. While some of Mark's work, such as when he 'sat in a bath of baked beans with two chips up his nose and 48 sausages on his head for 2 weeks in an attempt to raise awareness about the much maligned English cuisine'<sup>2</sup>, was concerned with how the media reports on life, this later work is more layered as

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2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRh8ZUbTao>

the interaction between the press attention, the absurdity of his actions and the cause of his protests become further interlinked.

While Mark has featured on many television programs such as the BBC News, ITV's London Tonight, CBS News, Russia Today, Richard and Judy and in national newspapers, such as the Independent, Guardian, Daily Mail, Mirror, among others, The Artist Taxi Driver's YouTube channel functions as a form of alternative media. He speaks frequently of his incredulosity at the lack of discussion in the mainstream media around certain crucial issues and actively takes steps to represent those stories he feels have been ignored for ideological reasons. One such issue is the efforts of the current government to privatise the NHS. His protest performance, *Where's Daddy's Pig?*, was carried out on 24<sup>th</sup> April, the day the House of Lords debated Section 75 of the Health & Social Care Act. The result of their vote, approving the act, opens the doors to the privatisation of NHS services.<sup>3</sup>

The Artist Taxi Driver's activities have been furthered by the recent development of his interview series, soon to be made into a film entitled *It's Not a Recession, It's a Robbery*. For these interviews Mark invites economists, MPs, firemen, nurses, journalists, activists, artists and comedians to share their views in his taxi. On occasion Mark holds back respectfully letting the interviewee tell their story, such as in his interview with the late Christopher Alder's sister, who has been fighting for justice ever since the death of her brother in police custody in 1998<sup>4</sup>. But others, such as his interview with the Labour MP, Paul Flynn<sup>5</sup>, feel more like an attack than a conversation due to the Artist Taxi Driver's dominant personality leaving the interviewee unable to say much at all. Those with louder voices, able to hold their ground, are a better match.

One such example is the interview with American radio host and author, Alex Jones, who Andrew Neil said was the worst person he had ever interviewed after Alex Jones shouted his way through through the end of an episode of Sunday Politics.<sup>6</sup> While speaking to the Artist Taxi Driver, Alex Jones describes being called crazy by the media in the past concerning his theories on the Bilderberg group, but says that now the press have been forced to admit that the group exists, he is still thought of as a 'kook'. Some of his other theories, such as one of the current headlines on his website, infowars.com, 'Merk developer admits vaccines contain hidden cancer viruses derived from diseased monkeys'<sup>7</sup>, are pretty far out there, but following the recent leaks on NSA information gathering, which he claims to have tried to warn

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3 Section 75 (Requirements as to procurement, patient choice and competition) was opposed by health care professionals as it states that all NHS services must be put out to tender unless it can be proved that it could only be provided by one particular provider.

4 *Appalling murder of Christopher Alder interview with Janet*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJsmSANfRBg>

5 *Interview #4 Paul Flynn MP*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGoReqio0c8>

6 *Bilderberg: Alex Jones disrupts BBC's Sunday Politics*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22832994>

people about fifteen years ago, the line between conspiracy theory and reality becomes increasingly blurred.

Like Alex Jones, the Artist Taxi Driver is motivated by an awareness that the media is key to our understanding of politics, current affairs and culture and if we are dissatisfied with the motivations of those that control the mass media, then we must create our own. However, unlike Alex Jones, the Artist Taxi Driver's insistence that his work is first and foremost art, prevents him from being so easily shunned as crazy. The term 'art' comes with creative licence, and although fictionalising is a process that is inherent in everything we do, we pretend it plays no part in politics. Alex Jones, who does not fall in line with the pack behaviour of the rest of the mainstream media, but still speaks under the sole label of journalism, enables the presenter of Sunday Politics to confidently laugh at him with the knowledge that the audience will be laughing too. People approaching the Artist Taxi Driver do so from a much more precarious position.

While you can see all of the Mark's videos on YouTube, one of the surprises about seeing the videos at Trade gallery was some of the sound overlaps between the films in different rooms. One moment I particularly enjoyed was, while watching Mark pushing the pig along with his nose<sup>8</sup>, having done half a mile of the four mile journey, he stopped an NHS worker who was passing by, explained the cause of his protest and asked if she is worried about her job. She quietly agreed and ended by saying, 'Hopefully if we all stand up against it, it won't happen'. As she walked away Mark elaborated on her words, saying that 'she is going to go into work and tell everyone in the hospital, "No fucking more!"' As he continued this clearly fabricated story, with all the conviction of someone who believes in the power of protest, I heard, from next door, Mark shouting questions of scepticism. 'What are you...? What? What? What are you doing? Crawling on your hands and knees pushing a pig? You fucking idiot! [...] What do you think that is going to do?'<sup>9</sup> Enticed into the second gallery at this point, half way through the video, it was unclear to me whether he was impersonating someone else's view of his activities or voicing his own doubts. He then fell into silence for what felt like a long time before repeatedly shouting, 'I don't know what else to do! I don't know what else to do!' This seemed to exemplify where the motivation for the Artist Taxi Driver comes from; in the face of power that is not listening, it is an attempt to take back a bit of control by using whatever means are available to him. This is where the emotional investment that Mark has in the Artist Taxi Driver comes through and it's a roller-coaster ride of humour, anger and pathos.

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7 <http://www.infowars.com/merck-developer-admits-vaccines-contain-hidden-cancer-viruses-derived-from-diseased-monkeys/>

8 *No more Stop NHS privatisation*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXjOR8Ug86w>

9 *Saving the NHS #wheresdaddyspig*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3yQMnDFn1U>

His emphasis on his job as a taxi driver and taking his protest to the streets (literally by crawling) have a different feel to Greenpeace's stunt of climbing up the Shard, which required a huge amount of expertise and took the protesters way above the heads of the people. While Greenpeace manage incredible acts of dissent, the lowly nature of Mark's protest, arriving at the door of power, on hands and knees, having made his journey through the neighbourhoods being affected by the policies he is protesting about, is a way of him using what he has. And it is his use of a phone as a camera to upload no-budget videos to YouTube that remind us that this is art for any of us. You do not need a place high up in the art world, a lot of spare time or a funding grant. In fact, those things may lead you away from the absurdities and clumsiness that reflect life's problems.