



A SPACE THE EYE CANNOT SEE

Lucas Brunelle grew up in sleepy Martha's Vineyard, USA, enjoying "the kind of childhood that produces psychopaths and career criminals," riding BMX and getting into trouble. He slid in and out of jail and reform school. Returning home after a spell of detention at 16, he founded his own landscaping business and used the proceeds to buy his first road bike from Cycle Works bike shop. "I hung out at the bike shop on rainy days and ran into a couple of racers who invited me to come with them to the Plymouth Rock Criterium. Seeing this race changed everything for me – the speeds, corners, tactics, aggression and rain all added up to my destiny."

He started to train, and race, and win. Had sponsorship for a while, but his troublesome side brought him down again – his coach Frank Jennings was busted for coke dealing and Lucas ended up with a two-year suspended sentence for "18 felonies plus numerous other serious offences" including burglary and dangerous driving.

He did his time, pulled himself together, went to college, got a job on Wall Street and then set up an IT business, all the while racing and winning. But Lucas no longer got the same buzz out of riding. "It was like the passion was gone. I did well by taking risks and being aggressive. I often rode tight courses like I was on a BMX bike and dropped riders that were much faster than I was – but for what? Amateur racing is filled with catty dickbag riders who think they're better than you even if you win the fucking race. I was stuck racing Cat 2, trying to decide what to do. I kept couriering and fixing people's computers. I went on Critical Mass rides for comic relief and it was in 2001 that I met my friend John McLean, who sported a shoulder camera. Bikes had helped me get out of a self destructive cycle, but it wasn't until I saw his footage that I finally understood my calling in life."

That calling has proved to be the development of a unique and frankly terrifying brand of cycle cinematography. He films alleycat races from right in the quickest thick of the action, keeping level with the riders as they hurtle through the busiest cities in the world.

For those that don't know, alleycat races involve riding at breakneck speed through the traffic, battling to be first to complete a series of checkpoints on a wild-goose chase across the city. There are no fixed routes and few rules. Usually the only rule strictly adhered to is that bikes must have no gears and no brakes. The only way these riders can slow or stop themselves is by locking the fixed-gear rear wheel into a skid.

The checkpoint locations are usually issued to riders on a manifest at the start of the race. To add an element of chaos to the proceedings, manifests are often thrown into the air. The riders' bikes may be strewn at random around them; the first thing to do after you've fought for a manifest is to find your bike. Then you're off, using your wits and your legs to get round the checkpoints fastest. With no fixed route, knowledge of the streets is a big advantage - but following the rider in front offers no guarantee of success.

Imagine you're in New York city – though it could be London or Berlin or Tokyo or anywhere - you're riding at lung-burst pace, absolutely flat out. Your brakeless bike sways beneath you in time to your furious cadence. Someone leans down and grabs the wheel arch of a passing cab, enjoying a free ride for a few blocks. Your competitors whoop and holler as they swerve and dart between the tight-packed traffic.



**“THOSE SPACES,
THOSE OPENINGS,
THOSE BLIND SPOTS...
THAT’S THE SPACE WE EXIST IN.
A SPACE THE EYE CANNOT SEE.”**



Up ahead, a cross-roads. You barely have time to register the red lights before you're past them, taxicabs and trucks bearing down on you from all sides. You swerve left behind a bus, then power right, inches from the bull-bars of a pick-up. Horns are blaring wildly. A rider in front tumbles over a station wagon, his bike clattering to the tarmac. But you must push on, lunging and feinting through the snarling traffic, whipping round sleep-walking pedestrians, cutting corners, bouncing down steps, running your fingertips along the side of a bus as it thunders past in the opposite direction.

Lucas Brunelle rides with the very fastest riders in these races, taking even more risks than they do: he has two cameras strapped to his helmet, one pointing forwards, the other back, and even at the busiest intersections he doesn't look left or right. He relies on steely nerves and a highly developed peripheral vision, keeping his cameras focused on the riders ahead and behind.

These races are controversial to say the least. They're generally unauthorised and often illegal. The racers' breathless bravado can scare the general public, catching drivers and pedestrians unawares. In a recent UK TV show sensationalizing the 'war' between cyclists and other road users, snippets of Brunelle's footage were used (out of context, in a highly manipulative way) to highlight just how dangerous and out of control modern cyclists really are. Alleycat racers are often blamed for giving cycling a bad name, for committing all the clichéd crimes – riding on the pavement (sidewalk), jumping red lights, playing fast and loose with the rules of the road.

Those who defend such rides highlight the astonishing skill the riders possess. They make urban traffic look every bit as slow and lumbering and bovine as it is. However crazily they ride, they'll never be as hazardous to health as the city-choking, obesity-encouraging, motorised traffic they so nimbly negotiate.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the races themselves, the footage Lucas has collected makes for compelling viewing – as seen in his films *Line of Sight* and *Road Sage*, directed and edited by Benny Zenga – a long-term friend of Boneshaker.

Brunelle's commitment is absolute. For him, riding like this adds a level of hyper-existence to life. It acts as a wake-up call to those who are not living their lives as fully as they could be, to "give them a poke", "to awaken them ... to make them aware of themselves, of their potentiality."

He follows the races around the world – often the best alleycats form part of the annual Cycle Messenger World Championships, an international competition hosted by a different city each year.

"It's always the same riders up front, the same riders winning these events," he says, "because they have that skill... being able to go in a space that the eye cannot see. It's a place in between cars, in between trucks and buses, taking a certain line through a curb, a corridor, that people just don't realize is there... we use those spaces, those openings, those opportunities, those blind spots, and that's the space that we exist in, where we race. There are certain things in life that require total complete focus and this is one of them."

Lucas Brunelle nowadays is a man of pure focus. After 30 years of racing and 13 of filming, he's open about his troubled past, using it as a tool to show people that they can "rise above anything". He doesn't drink or use drugs. But he does not deal in half-measures; he has a reputation as someone whose commitment to the extreme reaches almost to the point of cliché.

He thrives on calculated risk, speed and chaos, yet he finds a kind of spiritual purity in all this swift-sidestepped danger. The voice-over in his latest project, *Road Sage*, throws a meditative, transcendent light on the footage, bringing together voices as disparate as Henry Miller, Ben Okri, Allan Kaprow and David Foster Wallace:

"There are totally different ways to think about these kinds of situations – in this traffic, all of these vehicles stuck and idling in my way, you get to decide how you're going to try to see it. If you really learn how to think, how to pay attention, then you will know you have other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow consumer hell-type situation as not only meaningful but sacred - on fire with the same force that lit the stars. The liberated spirit... not being enslaved by the stupidities or by the rules of the machine of today. The big thing is to keep the flame, keep your own flame going. Take a chance – go nearer to the edge."

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