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**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

I CAN'T GO ON
I'LL GO ON, I CAN'T GO ON, I'LL GO ON - DAVE, KAREN



Probing established
televsual languages of
filmed performance and
the exploration of the
social and commercial
dimensions of stand-up.

Type of output:
Digital Video
Installation

by
David Campbell

Front cover image:
Common Culture,
I Can't Go on, I'll Go On,
I Can't Go On, I'll Go On (2016).

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SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION

David Campbell (Common Culture).

Common Culture's two videos, *I Can't Go on, I'll Go On, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On - Dave, Karen, 2016. (ICGO, IGO....)*, strip down the conventions of televised stand-up comedy, interrogating the mechanics of the routine by filming comedians performing to an empty room. The work furthers their interrogation of comic effect, exploring the processes by which individuals attain commodity form. Deconstructing components of the comic's act and subjecting the routine to atypical conditions of reception, the video's probe established televisual languages of filmed performance and the explore the social and commercial dimensions of stand-up.

In this absurdist scenario, the alienating staging and cruel humour of watching a comic, bereft of audience, faltering under the strain of the silence, positions the work in dialogue with Beckett. This association is alluded to in its title, and as video works there is further alignment with the performance works of Bruce Nauman and Paul McCarthy in the exploration of the failure of human interaction.

Revealing the structures of the 'product' of entertainment, the videos manipulate the efficacy of the performance, skewing the conditions to which each act is exposed. The subversion of conventions of edits and camera angles, indifferent to the actions of the performer, emphasises the alienation of the subject. As a gallery installation, there is a redoubling of the stand-up routine as it is filtered and framed through habits and protocols of art spectatorship. In this context the viewer is made awkwardly aware of their role as consumer, of the comic spectacle.

The work was commissioned by Clarissa Corfe for Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, and formed part of the museum's *Dance First, Think Later* contemporary art programme. The work was exhibited in two group exhibitions: *Nothing Happens Twice: Artists Explore the Absurdity of Life*, Harris Gallery, Preston, and *Double Act: Art and Comedy* at Bluecoat, Liverpool. The exhibitions were reviewed in *This is Tomorrow*, *Corridor8* and *Art Monthly* and accompanied by two commissioned essays responding to the Harris Gallery exhibition.

TIMELINE

2015 SEP	2015 SEP - OCT	2015 NOV	2015 NOV - DEC	2016 JAN - FEB	2016 APRIL - JUN
<p>SEPTEMBER Received invitation from Clarissa Corfe to participate in <i>Nothing Happens Twice: Artists Explore the Absurdity of Life</i>, Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston.</p> <p>Meeting in Preston with curator to discuss the exhibition's thematic and see gallery space. New video project commissioned for inclusion in the exhibition.</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER Common Culture hold weekly reading group to discuss Beckett's plays and novels.</p> <p>OCTOBER Meeting with Clarissa Corfe to outline project and confirm title of the video.</p> <p>Open Call for comedians to participate in the project.</p>	<p>NOVEMBER Meeting with Bren Riley of Big Comedy UK to discuss project and identify potential comics in the Midlands/North West UK.</p> <p>Arrange equipment hire with FACT, Liverpool: two-camera shoot.</p> <p>Audition of six comedians at Magnet Comedy club, Liverpool.</p> <p>Finalised selection of comics: Dave Twentyman from St. Helens, Karen Bayley from Birmingham. Invited each comic to develop a 40 minute routine based on the themes of: Boredom, Being in the wrong place, Failure, Death, Loneliness, The future, Strangers, Fear.</p>	<p>NOVEMBER Booked performance space at Bluecoat arts Centre, Liverpool for filming of comedians on 21st & 22nd December.</p> <p>DECEMBER Filming in Liverpool.</p>	<p>JANUARY Complete Post Production at FACT Liverpool.</p> <p>Visit Harris Museum & Gallery, Preston to discuss the video installation with exhibition curator and technical team.</p> <p>FEBRUARY Install <i>I Can't Go on, I'll Go On, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On, (Dave)</i> in <i>Nothing Happens Twice: Artists Explore the Absurdity of Life</i> at The Harris Museum & Art Gallery.</p> <p><i>Nothing Happens Twice: Artists Explore the Absurdity of Life</i> opens to the public.</p> <p><i>I Can't Go on, I'll Go On, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On, (Karen)</i>, selected for <i>Double Act: Art and Comedy</i> at The Bluecoat, Liverpool.</p>	<p>APRIL <i>I Can't Go on, I'll Go On, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On, (Karen)</i>, installed in the exhibition <i>Double Act: Art and Comedy</i> at The Bluecoat, Liverpool</p> <p>APRIL -JUNE <i>Double Act: Art and Comedy</i> at The Bluecoat, Liverpool (8th April - 19th June 2016).</p>

Below:

I Can't Go on, I'll Go On,
I Can't Go On, I'll Go On -
Dave (Wide Shot) 2016,
(Duration: 43.03 mins).

Click link to view. Password: commonculture1

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/3781991?video=154295141>



Below:

I Can't Go on, I'll Go On,

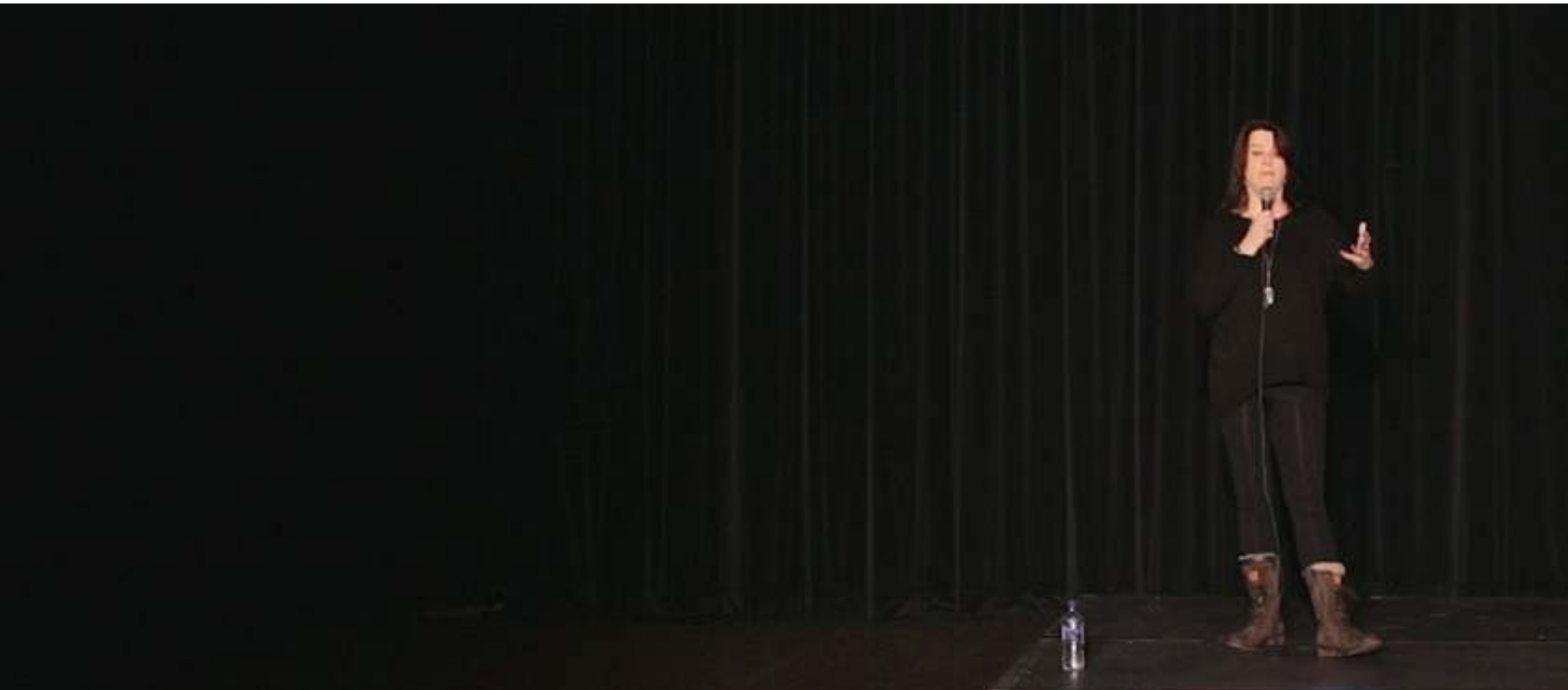
I Can't Go On, I'll Go On -

Karen (2016),

(Duration: 42.09 mins).

Click link to view. Password: commonculture1

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/3781991?video=154295145>



RESEARCH CHALLENGE

This research responds to a commission to produce new video artwork for inclusion in *Nothing Happens Twice: Artists Explore the Absurdity of Life*; an exhibition centred on the influence of Samuel Beckett's work on contemporary art. Common Culture's project sought to align their previous research exploring the commodification of workers employed within the entertainment industry, with an engagement with Beckett's absurdist theatrical techniques.

The research challenge centred on developing performance conditions, and techniques of video production and post production, that would, through the development of atypical relations of consumption of the comic routine in a gallery setting, interrogate the production and reception conventions of televised stand-up comedy.

CONTEXT

The research was commissioned by Clarissa Corfe, for the Harris Museum's exhibition *Nothing Happens Twice: Artists Explore the Absurdity of Life*. The exhibition was part-funded by the Contemporary Art Society's Annual Award for Museums, and included other commissioned work by, Pavel Buchler, Nathaniel Mellors, Hardeep Pandhal and Sally O'Reilly, as well as existing artwork by eleven other contemporary artists.

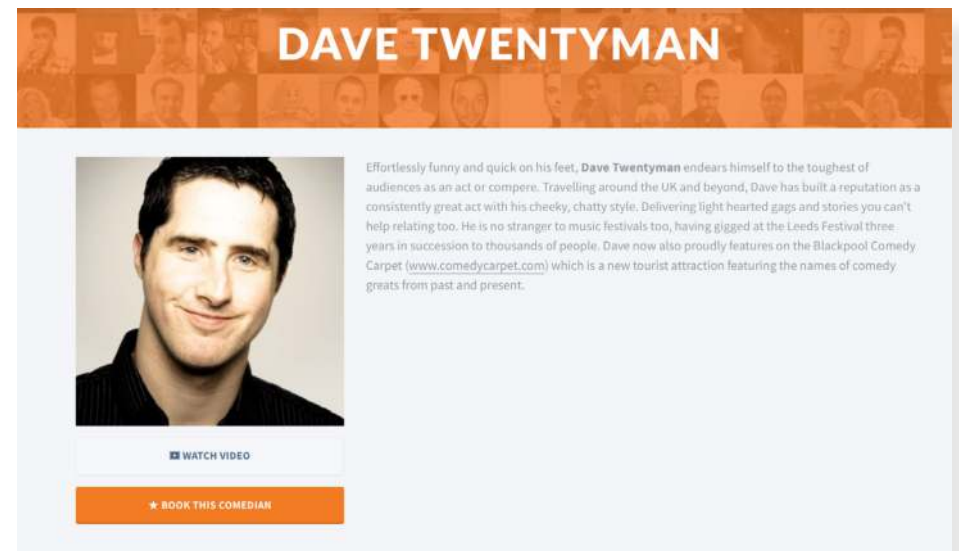
Common Culture's videos (*ICGO, Dave, Karen*) responds to the exhibition's focus on art's exploration through tragicomedy and absurdity, notions of performativity and the human condition. The videos strip down the conventions of televised stand-up comedy, interrogating the mechanics of the routine by filming comedians performing to an empty room. In this absurdist scenario, the alienating staging and cruel humour of watching a comic, bereft of audience, faltering under the strain of the silence, positions the work in dialogue with Beckett. Beckett's exploration of creative failure is alluded to in the video's title, which takes as its starting point a line from his 1953 novel *The Unnamable*, "... perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (Beckett 2009, p. 407).

In the filming of the comic's tragicomedy performance to an empty room, as video, there is further alignment with the performance to camera of failure and absurdist actions in the art of Nauman and McCarthy. The videos extend the interrogation of comic effect previously undertaken by Common Culture in works such as *Comic Battle* (2008), to explore the social and commercial aspects of the stand-up comedian within popular televised entertainment. The research is of relevance to artists, scholars engaged in comedy studies research, as well as practicing comedians interested in exploring notions of tragicomedy performativity.

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Engaging with the thematic of the *Nothing Happens Twice* exhibition, and its particular focus on the work of Samuel Beckett, this research is underpinned by a study of Beckett's existential and absurdist drama, and his search for an "aesthetics of failure" (Cerrato 1992).

Common Culture's reading of Beckett's trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* (Beckett 1979), inspired both the title of the video and suggested formal strategies with which to develop techniques to interrogate of the conventions of televised stand-up comedy. Beckett's deconstructive strategy of creating instability through atypical conditions of performance was adapted by filming comedians delivering their routine to an empty room. This built on Common Culture's previous video practice where the labour of workers associated with the entertainment industry was displaced and recontextualised in unusual contexts. In *Bouncers* (2005) 20 night-club security staff 'performed' their crowd control duties, arranged in fixed configuration within a gallery space on the opening night of a Common Culture exhibition. Such contextual displacement, and the convention instability it created for both performer and audience, had proven productive in heightening the possibility for performative failure and audience discomfort. *I Can't Go on, I'll Go On...* extends this strategy to interrogate, and make explicit to an audience, the processes of commodification and alienation at work in televisual representations of the comedic act.



Above: 'Comedian Dave'.

Karen Bayley



Brummie comedian & writer, **Karen Bayley** is the first ever female winner of the prestigious Comedy Store King Gong Award. The same year she reached the finals of the BBC New Comedy Award & The Babycham Funny Women Award.

A regular guest on BBC Radio 5 Live, Karen's television appearances include The Last Word, Take The Mike, Sex On The Job and 100 Greatest Cartoons.

She recently completed an extensive UK and overseas tour, supporting Joe Lycett. Karen has also written for Joe on Celebrity Juice and 8 Out of 10 Cats.

Karen is passionate about sport, especially her beloved football team West Bromwich Albion. Regular radio appearances talking about rugby, motor racing and football led

to Karen being nicknamed "Geezer Bird". Not that she minded, in fact Karen embraced all that this entails in her hit 2015 Edinburgh solo show, whilst still aspiring to slap on some lippy and slip on some heels.

As an actress Karen is best known for her role as the Holloway Prison Warden in the multi BAFTA winning film LONGFORD, directed by Tom Hooper and starring Samantha Norton as 'Myra Hindley' and Jim Broadbent as 'Lord Longford'. Karen is also fondly remembered for playing Paul Whitehouse's 'Goth' wife in a series of adverts for Aviva.

Prior to comedy, Karen had a successful career as a primary school teacher and before teaching she worked as a professional dancer. Throw her a pair of tap shoes and she can still hot shoe shuffle!

"Karen Bayley is one of the most consistently hilarious comedians I've had the pleasure of working with. She's a sharp writer and an unflappable compere, able to cajole any room with her warm audience interaction and precise, intelligent gags. A truly hysterical professional." **Joe Lycett 2016**

"I saw her recently and she blew my socks off. She doesn't dwell too much on 'lady issues' she was funny in her own right, she was brilliant, clever and she's going to be huge." **BBC online**

"Bayley's material surprised with inspired and sparkling punchlines... With comic timing that is rarely less than brilliant." Steve Bennett **Chortle**

"Warm, bright, funny." **Rory Bremner**

Above: 'Comedian Karen.'

An open call posted on the North West comedy circuit attracted comedians who were subsequently auditioned at the *Magnet* comedy club, Liverpool. Two comedians were hired and the project, the conditions of the filming and how the work would be exhibited, were discussed and agreed. Each comic agreed to being filmed performing to an empty room for 40 mins and was invited to develop a routine based on themes of:

Boredom

Being in the wrong place

Failure

Death

Loneliness

The future

Strangers

Fear

Filming the comic's performance in an empty room, without audience feedback and for longer than normal, sought to reveal the structures of the 'product' of entertainment by deliberately constructed conditions of duress for both the comedians and a gallery audience. The subversion of conventions of edits and camera angles, indifferent to the actions of the performer, emphasises the alienation of the subject. As a gallery installation, there is a redoubling of the stand-up routine as it is filtered and framed through habits and protocols of art spectatorship. In this context the viewer is made vividly aware of their role as consumer, of the comic spectacle.

Below: The set for *I Can't Go on, I'll Go On, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On - Dave, Karen (ICGO, Dave, Karen)*.

“As in *Nothing Happens, Twice*, it is the performed, repetitive ‘nothing’ that creates a potential new moment. In *Common Culture’s* not-stand-up, Dave keeps saying there’s ‘nobody there’: watching the video you’re almost insulted, as of course you are there, seeing him say that. Dave might be there, doing expressly nothing - twice, or indeed 1,173 times during the exhibition - but it is the conni-sewer who changes.”

Chris Fite-Wassilak, in *The Cant of the Conni-Sewer: Repetition and Affirmation* in *Nothing Happens, Twice*, essay commissioned by Harris Museum & Art Gallery, 2017.

https://researchportal.northumbria.ac.uk/admin/files/20596592/The_Cant_of_the_Conni_Sewer_Chris_Fite_WassilakFINAL_.pdf





Above:
Karen Bayley, Birmingham comedian
and the first ever female winner of
the prestigious *Comedy Store King
Gong*, about to be filmed,
21st December 2015.

“...humour is
important in the
piece, yet it is worth
noting how Common
Culture question the
efficacy of comedic
performance even as
it is enacted.”

Dr. Conor Carville,
in *'Samuel Beckett, the Long Sixties and Contemporary Art'*
essay commissioned by Harris Museum & Art Gallery, 2017.

https://researchportal.northumbria.ac.uk/admin/files/20596590/Samuel_Beckett_the_Long_Sixties_and_Contemporary_Art_Conor_CarvilleFINAL_.pdf

The video, *I Can't Go on, I'll Go On, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On, (Karen)*, (*ICGO, Karen*) was exhibited in *Double Act: Art and Comedy* at The Bluecoat, Liverpool (8th April – 19th June 2016). The exhibition included work by Alex Bag, Bank, Mel Brimfield, Common Culture, Maurice Doherty, Erica Eyres, Peter Finnemore, Thomas Geiger, Kara Hearn, Peter Land, Sarah Lucas, Gemma Marmalade, Jo Spence, David Sherry, Pilvii Takala, Bill Woodrow.

Reviews:

Double Act: Art and Comedy was reviewed by Sophie Risner for *This is Tomorrow* (20/05/2016).

<http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/double-act-art-and-comedy>

Double Act: Art and Comedy, Corridor 8, 24/04/2016, by Georgina Wright.

<https://corridor8.co.uk/article/review-double-act-art-and-comedy-the-bluecoat-liverpool/>

Double Act: Art and Comedy, Art Monthly, May, 2016 by Laura Robertson.

Two essays commissioned by Harris Museum and Art Gallery, responded to the exhibition:

Samuel Beckett, the Long Sixties and Contemporary Art by Dr. Conor Carville.

The Cant of the Conni-Sewer: Repetition and Affirmation in Nothing Happens, Twice by Chris Fite-Wassilak.



Above: Common Culture, *I Can't Go On, I'll Go on, I Can't Go On. I'll Go on - Karen* (2016) installed in *Double Act: Art and Comedy* at The Bluecoat, Liverpool, 8th April – 19th June 2016.

Harris Museum & Art Gallery

The Cant of the Conni-Sewer: Repetition and Affirmation in Nothing Happens, Twice

by Chris Fite-Wassilak

It arose first in a dream: a flat stopping-starting moaning. After a few jarring moments between states, I stumbled awake – the sound continued, coming through the floor and the window. It was just getting light outside. The sound became louder at points, like a zombie intoning a morse code message, and at times the voice split into two: a male and a female, singing together. I could make out the words ‘...the mind...’, which seemed to be the apex of the song. After a few minutes they went quiet – then they began again, evenly chanting a tune with the same rhythm, the same stops, the same apex - the same song. The dirge continued. I wrapped a pillow around my head, and eventually drifted in and out of a sleep surrounded by their plodding ritual and incessant chorus. A few hours later in the morning sun, they were still going with the one tune.

The delirium of sleeplessness turned it into a comedy, a perpetual purgatorial sitcom accompanied by a pair of tuneless troubadours. Warming in a way to the farce, I thought that this, in part, is what it must be like to be in the audience in front of a defiant performance – the actual listening bodies in those legends of insulting punk bands spitting and mocking the people in front of them, continuing despite the boos and the thrown beer bottles. I’ve always wondered, when you hear reports of ‘riots’ at plays and concerts in the early twentieth century, reactions to things like *The Rite of Spring* (1913)ⁱ and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907)ⁱⁱ, what that actually means. The sleepless song cycle reminded me of the stories of one Iggy and the Stooges gig from a January in the early 1970s, playing in a small club in Michigan to an audience of mostly bikers who weren’t so keen on the stringy singer. The accounts agree that Iggy Pop asks the restless audience what they want to hear: the Kingsmen’s ‘Louie, Louie’ is the shouted consensus, and the band launches into the song. In one version, told by artist Mike Kelley, they finish the tune, then ask the crowd again what they’d like to hear. Ignoring whatever responses was given, the band launch again into ‘Louie, Louie’. Then a third time, a fourth. The other version, told by music critic Lester Bangs, has Iggy carry on a 45 minute rendition of the song, improvising lyrics to insult the biker ‘sissies’. Both tales end with Iggy launching into the crowd and getting beaten up; but what’s the difference? One is of a song repeated, the other a song being sustained. In all likelihood, they took up roughly the same amount of time, occupying around 45 minutes of someone’s life – but each carries with it

Most the characters trapped in these loops don’t change – they can’t change. They’re stuck in a space where, ostensibly, ‘nothing happens.’ The title of the show is taken from a review of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953), and a line from the play provides the title for Common Culture’s video *I can’t go on, I’ll go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go (Dave)* (2016). In the video, a comedian (presumably named Dave) spends 40 minutes on a small stage, facing the camera. He’s on his own in a mostly dark room, so instead of performing a stand-up set, he sets into a nervous series of anecdotes and autobiographical tales about old jobs, gender differences and animals. It’s not terribly funny, but then he doesn’t look like he’s enjoying himself, either. He constantly raises his bottle of water to his lips, as if about to drink, before stumbling into another tale; he takes only one quick swig about halfway through. He keeps saying, ‘I’ll crack on,’ his own way of expressing the existential angst of the title, that gives in to visible relief when he reaches the 40-minute mark and hastily makes his exit. Though, of course, he’ll inevitably be back a minute later, forced back onto the stage as the video starts yet again. Dave seems to think that for in order for ‘something’ to happen – in this case, comedy – it needs an audience. Does the occurrence of something, anything, rely on it being shared?

Above: Essay commissioned by the Harris Museum and Art Gallery to respond to the exhibition, *Nothing Happens Twice*.

The Cant of the Conni-Sewer: Repetition and Affirmation by Chris Fite-Wassilak.

Page 1, and extract from page 3.

Full essay available at:

https://researchportal.northumbria.ac.uk/admin/files/20596592/The_Cant_of_the_Conni_Sewer_Chris_Fite_WassilakFINAL.pdf

Harris Museum & Art Gallery

Samuel Beckett, the Long Sixties and Contemporary Art by Dr. Conor Carville

Why is Samuel Beckett's writing such a touchstone for today's visual artists? Of all the great literary names of the twentieth century: T.S. Eliot, Marcel Proust, Bertolt Brecht, - it is Beckett's name that crops up constantly in lists of influences, in interviews or, as in the current exhibition at the Harris, in the titles of the works themselves.

Artists are not alone in venerating the Irish writer of course. It's often said that at any given moment there are several plays in production somewhere across the globe, and in the thirty years since his death Beckett's star has been steadily rising, so that his reputation is now in danger of eclipsing that of his mentor James Joyce. In the mass media too the elderly Beckett's craggy, hawk-like features, peering out from one of the great photographs by John Minihan, have become ubiquitous.

Yet Beckett's sudden impact in the art world seems even more pervasive and vital than elsewhere in the culture. So much so that it seems not simply a case of a body of work gaining in status and prestige over time, but rather of an oeuvre suddenly beginning to function in a new, more active way. Just as a shift in personal circumstances can dislodge memories, so that past events that had been forgotten begin to loom large, pressing in upon consciousness in insistent and sometimes troubling ways, so too artworks can abruptly start to register in the cultural present with increased force.

In the present moment, where value is assessed in exclusively economic terms, and the humanities in general are being hollowed out by a Dragon's Den culture of enterprise, it is perhaps no surprise that Beckett's lonely dedication to his art has assumed a kind of talismanic role. In such circumstances Beckett emerges as what has often been called the last modernist, a survivor of the great, revolutionary artistic movements of the early twentieth century. For those artists seeking a bridge or link between their own practice and that of Joyce or Duchamp, Beckett - who knew both men intimately - seems the ideal figure.

And yet artists like those in the current exhibition do not merely contribute to the ongoing canonisation of Beckett as secular saint of modernist art and literature. Such a canonisation is all-too-often a way of co-opting the work, reducing it to a formula that can be easily assimilated and leached of its power. And anyway Beckett is not really a modernist, late or otherwise. His major work comes after the great divide of the Second World War and continues right up to the 1980s. To associate Beckett solely with pre-war

Common Culture's *I can't go on I'll go on, I can't go on I'll go on (Dave)* makes use of one of the most famous of all Beckettian phrases, taken from the end of *The Unnamable*. As with Bock, Sorin and most of the other artists in the exhibition, humour is important in the piece, yet it is worth noting how Common Culture question the efficacy of comedic performance even as it is enacted. A stand-up takes to the stage in an empty theatre, his routine becoming increasingly desperate in the absence of the confirmation and approval of an audience. Similarly, in Hilde Krohn Huse's *Hanging in the Woods*, the artist records a performance piece that goes badly wrong, leaving her screaming for an absent assistant to come and release her. In both cases a performance is attempted but fails, and the failure itself becomes the performance. Such a procedure is very Beckettian indeed, and it marks one of the points at which his writing departs from the more general post-war avant-garde faith in art as an active and successful intervention in the world. This is brought out still further in Mel Brimfield's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Here Brimfield stages Martha Rosler's famous feminist short film of the same name

Above: Essay commissioned by the Harris Museum and Art Gallery to respond to the exhibition, *Nothing Happens Twice. Samuel Beckett, the Long Sixties and Contemporary Art* by Dr. Conor Carville. Page 1, and extract from page 3. Full essay available at:

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Below:

I Can't Go on, I'll Go On,

I Can't Go On, I'll Go On -

(Karen),

exhibited in *Double Act: Art and
Comedy* at The Bluecoat, Liverpool,

8th April – 19th June 2016.



REFERENCES

Beckett, Samuel. 2009. *Three Novels. Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* New York: Grove Press. (Beckett 2009), p. 407.

Cerrato, Laura. (1993). 'Postmodernism and Beckett's Aesthetics of Failure', in Marius Buning and Lois Oppenheim (eds.) *Beckett in the 1990s*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 21- 30.

Selected Papers from the 2nd International Symposium Held in the Hague 8-12 April, 1992, ed. Marius Buning and Lois Oppenheim (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 21-29.

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