Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.

Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

ART & COMEDY

Type of output: Exhibitions (+ book and journal essay)

DOUBLE WEIGHTED

by

David Campbell

Front cover image:
Gemma Marmalade,
Seed Series: Green Fingered.
Text and eight black & white
photographs.

Left: Cory Arcangel,
Drei Klavierstucke op 11 (2009)
Single channel video,
15.58 minutes.

CONTENTS

Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

SUMMARY

Art & Comedy (A&C) is an extended curatorial project, initiated by artists David Campbell and Mark Durden, exploring the comedic impulse in contemporary art.

From the intellectual constructs of irony to the performative characteristics of deadpan or slapstick, the research expands a shared interest in the use of comic effect as an artistic strategy, and aims to map out new and expanded thematic distinctions of comedy and its applications.

Comedy, like art, typically involves an awareness of the possibility of reading a scenario in two different ways, creating a division in comprehension and the co-existence of parallel ideas. This transgressive characteristic of putting two disparate and opposing ideas together is understood in the first iteration of the research through the exhibition title *Double Act*; this duality further emphasized by the expansive, simultaneous staging of twinned thematic exhibitions at Bluecoat Liverpool and MAC Belfast.

Campbell and Durden's curatorial focus explored implicit and explicit ideas of comedy, positioning laughter as an important part of our engagement with art. Maurice Doherty's commissioned neon, I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show (2016), epitomizes *A&C*'s artistic vision. Continuing the legacy of Duchamp's readymades, it underlines a key thesis of the project; the joke always has a healthy disrespect for structures and categories.

The topical investigation of comedy was further extended in The *Double Act* publication broadening a comedic reading of Duchamp, and applying theories of comedy by Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Bergson and Simon Critchley in thematic readings of the work in the exhibitions. A variant configuration of the exhibition called, The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life, Arquipélago – Contemporary Art Center, São Miguel, Azores, allowed Campbell to re-focus the curation on 'the absurdity of the everyday.' Associated themes of brevity, disruption and wit and the intellectual referents of humour were subjected to focused analysis in the Cadernos IRI journal article.

Installation shot of
Double Act: Art & Comedy exhibition,
Bluecoat Arts Centre,
9 April – 19 June 2016.
Pilvi Takala, Real Snow White (2009)
9.15 min video.

Right: *Double Act - Art & Comedy* Invitation Card.

Above left: Installation shot of *Double Act: Art & Comedy* exhibition, Bluecoat Arts Centre, 9 April – 19 June 2016. Kara Hearn, Reincarnated Scenes.

Above right: Peter Finnemore, *Eve of Destruction* (2004) Video 4.03 mins.

Right: *BANK*, Fax-back, (1999). (12 in series).

TIMELINE

APRIL 2016

FRI 8TH
Exhibition Launch
Join us for the launch of *Double Act*. Mingle with the artists, have a drink at the bar, and take in the atmosphere.

SAT 9TH
Exhibition Tour: David Campbell and Mark Durden
Exhibtion curators, David Campbell and Mark Durden lead a tour of the exhibition.

Crit-a-Oke
10 artists set academic texts to pop music -- its critical writing karaoke.

THU 21ST
How Not (!) To Write
Laura Robertson discusses art jargon and why we should avoid it.

FRI 22ND
Arabs Are Not Funny
An evening of Arabic comedy from a new wave of stand-up comedians representing the Arab World.

WED 27TH
LJMU Writer's Wrokshop Present: The Comedy of Error
An evening of readings in which error, misfortune and misadventure all feature -- dark comedy from **Steve Ely** and **Samuel Hasler**.

MAY 2016

WED 25TH
What's There to Laugh About?
A lively, day-long symposium questioning how humour is currently used in performance making, presenting and programming.

SAT 28TH
Exhibition Tour: Cathy Butterworth
Performer, curator and researcher in Live Art practices, Cathy Butterworth leads a tour of *Double Act*.

JUNE 2016

WED 1ST
Artists Talk: Harry Meadley
Artists Talk, devised by Harry Meadley, sits somewhere between an artist talk and a stand-up routine.

SAT 4TH
Exhibition Tour: Frances Greenfield
Creator of THAT Comedy Blog Frances Greenfield leads a tour of the exhibition.

WED 8TH
Double Act Book Launch & Panel Discussion

Artists **Gemma Marmalade** and **Mel Brimfield** join exhibition curators **Mark Durden** and **David Campbell** to celebrate the launch of the *Double Act*: Art in Comedy limited edition publication and discuss comedy as an artistic strategy within their own practice. With performances throughout the evening by **David Sherry**.

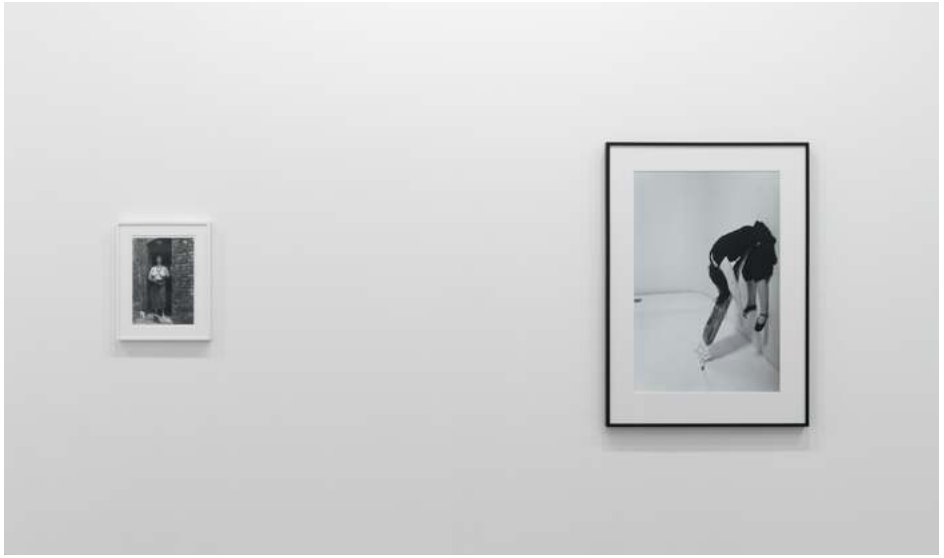
THU 9TH
A Philosophy of Comedy
Drawing on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, the films of Charlie Chaplin, the TV show Family Guy and Samuel Beckett's Endgame, **Shaun May** addresses a distinctive characteristic of human beings: our ability to make and comprehend jokes.

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

This research asked: in the selection, analysis and presentation of individual examples of artwork by international artists in a group exhibition, is it possible for a curatorial project to identify and define shared aesthetic characteristics and conceptual strategies indicative of distinct comedic genres used in contemporary art?

How might a curated group exhibition and related book construct a dynamic engagement with selected examples of artwork in order to develop an understanding of how artists create comic effect?

Can new comedic readings of established artworks be produced through innovative curation and theoretical and historical contextualization?



Above Right: Jo Spence, *Remodelling photohistory: Colonisation* (1981 -82). Collaboration with Terry Dennett. Black & White Photograph. Mel Brimfield, *On Board* (2010) C-type print.

Right: Installation shot of *Double Act: Art & Comedy* exhibition, Bluecoat Arts Centre, 9 April – 19 June 2016. Jo Spence, Mel Brimfield, Sara Lucas, *Got a Salmon on (Prawn)* (1994); Erica Eyres, Gemma Marmalade.

Right: Gemma Marmalade, *Seed Series: Green Fingered*. Text and eight black & white photographs.

Below right: Erica Eyres, *Clay Sausages* (2014), Nudist drawings 2015.

Below left : Installation shot of *Double Act: Art & Comedy* exhibition, Bluecoat Arts Centre, Gemma Marmalade; Erica Eyres; Alex Bag; Jo Spence.

CONTEXT

The exploration of art's relation to humour is central to Campbell and Durden's art practice with *Common Culture*. In video projects exhibited internationally, they have explored how, in an increasingly globalized culture, social and cultural specificity might be articulated through humour. *A&C* reframes this question as a curatorial project, and builds on their co-curated and co-authored project *Variable Capital* with Bluecoat, Liverpool (2008).

The curatorial focus of *Art & Comedy* was the interrogation within a single intellectual framework of a range of formal and conceptual approaches employed by contemporary artists to create comic effect.

Drawing on the affinities between art and comedy to multiply understandings and manifest the co-existence of parallel ideas, the research accentuated this doubling through the nature of its co-curation, the choice of the exhibition's title Double Act and the simultaneous staging of twinned thematic exhibitions at Bluecoat Liverpool and MAC Belfast.

A&C represents a significant contribution to curatorial practice addressing the use of humour by artists. Previous group exhibitions *Situation Comedy: Humor In Recent Art* (2005), *Laughing in a Foreign Language* (2008) and *Deep Comedy* (2008) addressed the relationship of art & comedy but were smaller in scale, lacked the depth of analysis of individual artwork, and failed to undertake the comprehensive mapping of comic genres achieved in A&C.

Above: Maurice Doherty, *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show*, Neon, 2016 — Installed at the MAC, Belfast. One of two versions, specially commissioned for each venue of *Double Act: Art and Comedy.*

The accompanying book *Double Act*, contextualised the exhibition's thesis, locating it in an art historical context, whilst analysis of individual artworks, informed by philosophical theories of humour (Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Bergson and Simon Critchley), provided indicative readings of the major comic genres used by contemporary artists. Extant surveys of the subject (Higgie 2007; Welchman 2010) bring together significant texts on art and comedy, but none offer in-depth examinations of the nuanced nature of the comic genres deployed by contemporary artists.

David Robbins' book *Concrete Comedy* (2011) and his discussion of the importance of materiality and the comic potential of actions and objects informed the curation. The project's thesis was further informed by current comedy studies research, with Stott (2014); Berger (2014) and Critchley (2002) providing an understanding of the wider research context in which the project was located.

Cross-disciplinary interest in *A&C* has resulted in contributions of papers to academic conferences: *'Sit Down' A dialogue between artists, writers and thinkers on the power of 'funniness' within institutional critique and art history*, Central Saint Martins University, London (2019); *Politics and Humour: Theory and Practice*, University of Kent, (2015).

Above: Installation shot of
Double Act: Art & Comedy exhibition,
Bluecoat Arts Centre,
9 April – 19 June 2016.
Pilvi Takala, Real Snow White (2009)
9.15 min video.

Above top: Alex Bag *Untitled* (Fall '95) (1995) Digital Video 57 mins.

Above: Maurice Doherty, *Waiting to Fall* (2016) Looped video installation.

Below: John Smith, *Shepherd's Delight: An analysis of Humour* (1980-84) Colour 16 mm Film.

Right: Installation shot of
Double Act: Art & Comedy exhibition,
MAC, Belfast, 6 May – 11 July 2016.
Bas Jan Ader, Broken Fall (Organic),
Amsterdamse Bos, Holland (1971)
16mm film transferred onto DVD silent
1 min 36 secs.

Below: Julian Rosefeldt,
Stunned Man/Trilogy of Failure (Part 11)
(2004). Two channel film installation
filmed on super 8mm transferred on
DVD 16:9 loop: 32", 50 minutes.

METHODS AND PROCESSES

This project adopts the curated group exhibition & book format of Campbell's previous collaboration with Durden, *Variable Capital*, to examine and map parallels between art and comedy. Structured around the selection and analysis of work by over thirty-four artists, the research opened up new readings of individual artwork in terms of their affinities with characteristics associated with the comedic categories of the absurd, carnivalesque, deadpan, irony, observational comedy, parody and slapstick.

The curation's premise was explained in the accompanying book through reference to salient theories of comedy, and a comic reading of Marcel Duchamp's *readymades* located the project in an art historical context. Theories of comedy by Bakhtin, Bergson, Freud and Critchley informed the mapping of artist's use of comic genres, highlighting the proposition that art, like comedy, typically involves an awareness of the transgressive possibility of reading a scenario in different ways.

Discussions with Bluecoat and MAC venues established the financial, technical and architectural parameters of the exhibitions, a combined budget of £65,000 and a commitment to simultaneously host thematically related but different versions of the *Double Act* exhibition. Bluecoat Books agreed to cover the additional cost of the book's publication, which was distributed through *Cornerhouse Books*.

Above: Adrian Paci, *Vajtojca (The Weeper)* (2002), Video, 9 mins.

Extensive studio visits in the UK and Europe resulted in a thematically focused but formally diverse selection of artwork by 34 international artists, including a specially commissioned neon text work by Maurice Doherty. Of particular consideration in the selection of work was the use of humour by female artists; which highlighted the prominence of parody in relation to the representation of the body and resulted in over half of the work presented at Bluecoat.
Artwork symptomatic of different comic genres and diverse material practices were selected, with significant examples of work by internationally established artists installed alongside work by younger and emerging artists. A feature of the project was the selection of artwork not conventionally considered to be comedic, this transgression of established readings highlighted the exhibition's commitment to emphasize both art and comedy's potential to produce new meaning through contextual shifts.

Above: Installation shot of *Double Act: Art & Comedy* exhibition, MAC, Belfast, 6 May – 11 July 2016. Erwin Wurm, *Instructions on How To be Politically Incorrect: Looking For A Bomb 1*, (2002- 2003), *Instructions on How To be Politically Incorrect: Inspection* (2002- 2003).

Left: Installation shot of *Double Act: Art & Comedy* exhibition, MAC, Belfast, 6 May – 11 July 2016. Jonathan Monk, *Deflated Sculpture No 1* (2009); Erwin Wurm, *How To Be Politically Incorrect* (2002 – 2003).

Reconfiguring the project as *The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life* in the Azores allowed the curators to explore the ways in which artists deployed comedy as a means of drawing attention to the absurdity of the everyday. This iteration received £80,000 of funding and resulted in an expansion of the original premise of the show to include new artists and new work by Gillian Wearing, John Smith, Richard Hughes, Richard Wentworth, Erica Eyres, Paulo Feliciano and Carla Garlaschi.

Above right: Installation shot of *Double Act: Art & Comedy* exhibition, MAC, Belfast, 6 May – 11 July 2016. Michael Smith, *How To Curate Your Own Exhibition* (1996). Maurice Doherty, *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show*, 2016.

Right: Installation shot of *Double Act: Art & Comedy* exhibition, MAC, Belfast, 6 May – 11 July 2016. Terry Atkinson, *Irish Drawings* (1985); Keith Coventry, *Bonham Estate* (1997).

Featured work (L to R) Olav Westphalen, *Le Grand Blanc* (2007); Bas Jan Ader, *Broken Fall (Organic), Amsterdamse Bos, Holland* (1971); Jonathan Monk, *Deflated Sculpture No 1* (2009); Erwin Wurm, H*ow To Be Politically Incorrect* (2002 - 2003); Keith Coventry, *Kebab Machine 1* (1998).

Image: Installation shot of *Double Act: Art & Comedy* exhibition, MAC, Belfast, 6 May – 11 July 2016.

Below: Richard Wentworth,
Making Do and Getting By,
Double Act: Art & Comedy.
MAC Belfast. (1994)

DISSEMINATION

The submission consists of three large-scale group exhibitions, co-curated by David Campbell and Mark Durden, featuring work by 34 international artists simultaneously presented at the Bluecoat Liverpool and the MAC Belfast and then a variant exhibition at the *Centro des Artes Contemporaneas*, Sao Miguel, Azores, which included 19 artists. The project also includes the book *Double Act: Art and Comedy*, published by Bluecoat books and the journal article, *Brevity, Disruption, Art and Comedy*.

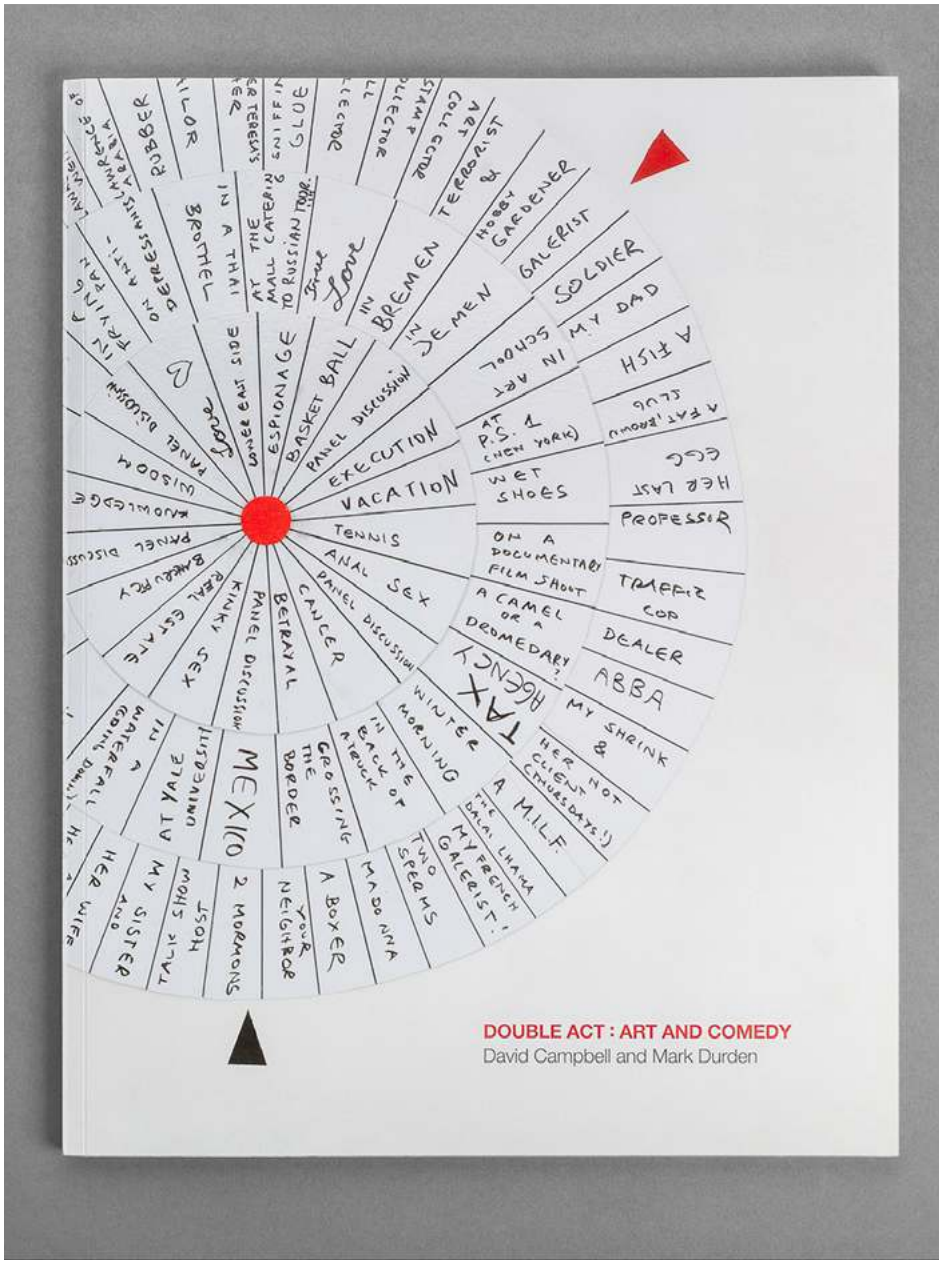
1. *Double Act: Art & Comedy*. Bluecoat, Liverpool. [Group Exhibition co-curated by Campbell, David; Durden, Mark, (9 April-19 June 2016)
   Artists included: Bank, Bill Woodrow, Jonathan Monk, Peter Land, Common Culture, Gemma Marmalade, Pilvii Takala, Jo Spence, Sarah Lucas, Maurice Doherty, Alex Bag, David Sherry, Erica Eyres, Peter Finnemore, Kara Hearn, Thomas Geiger.

2. *Double Act: Art & Comedy*. MAC Belfast. [Group Exhibition co-curated by Campbell, David; Durden, Mark, 6 May-31 July 2016)
   Artists included: Terry Atkinson, Olav Westphalen, Bas Jan Ader, Jonathan Monk, Adrian Paci, Cory Archangel, Erwin Wurm, Richard Hughes. Mel Brimfield, Paul McCarthy, Joachim Schmid, Richard Wentworth, Keith Coventry, Common Culture, Michael Smith, John Smith, Terry Atkinson and Julian Rosefeldt.

3. *The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life*, Arquipélago – Contemporary Art Center, São Miguel, Azores. (Group Exhibition co-curated by Campbell, David; Durden, Mark, 15 Sept 2017-11 January 2018). Artists included: Olav Westphalen, Richard Hughes, Paul McCarthy, Gemma Marmalade, Pilvii Takala, Maurice Doherty, Joachim Schmid, Common Culture, Michael Smith, John Smith, David Sherry, Thomas Geiger. This resulted in an expansion of the original premise of the show to include new artists and new work by Gillian Wearing, John Smith, Maurice Doherty, Richard Hughes, Richard Wentworth, Erica Eyres, Paulo Feliciano and Carla Garlaschi.

4. *Double Act: Art and Comedy*, (Book) Campbell, David; Durden, Mark (2016) *Double Act: Art and Comedy*, published by Bluecoat, ISBN: 978-0-9538996-5-4.

5. *Brevity, Disruption, Art and Comedy*. (Journal Article) David Campbell, Mark Durden. Cadernos IRI 2 2016 UniMAD, Porto. 8-18pp. https://parc.ipp.pt/index.php/ciri/article/view/2549/675



David Campbell
Mark Durden

Brevity, Disruption, Art and Comedy

Comedy is all about timing and we can distinguish between two temporal forms of the joke: the long digressive form of the shaggy dog story, in which the joke is about the deferral of the punchline and a form of wit that is succinct, immediate, a quick gag but whose significance reverberates and lasts. This paper draws on two co-curated exhibitions, held in two venues with over thirty artists, and a co-authored book, *Double Act* (Campbel & Durden, 2016), addressing the relationship between art and comedy[1].

There is an economy of expression in wit: it is sharp, pithy and pointed. Wit is intellectually informed humour and frequently involves a play of words. Wit also debunks. It can be directed against the pretensions of particular social institutions, conventions or customs. As we all know, timing is essential in comedy. Understanding context, being aware of the appropriate way to behave in any social situation, but choosing instead to interrupt the seamless flow of normality through unexpected comments or action, is at the core of comedy. The ability to identify such moments of opportunity, to be quick-witted and deft enough to know how, when and where to take advantage of the situation to unsettle and enrich normal life through well-timed intervention, defines effective comedy.

One of the works we commissioned to be made for both shows is Maurice Doherty's neon *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show* (2016). A one liner that hilariously undermines the assumed impartialities that lie behind the curator's choices to show some artists rather than others. Doherty exposes the vanities and insularities within the art world. It also makes fun of artworks that reveal the conditions of their own existence – Joseph Kosuth's neons from the 1960s, works like *Five Words in Blue Neon* that describe what the work is. But as a transcription of handwritten text it also mimes the look of Tracey Emin's neons and links with the way her art trades on intimate and frank sexual disclosures.

Above: *Brevity, Disruption, Art and Comedy*. (Journal Article) David Campbell, Mark Durden
Cadernos IRI 2 2016 UniMAD, Porto. 8-18pp

Left: Book, *Double Act: Art And Comedy* - David Campbell & Mark Durden

Above: *The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life*, Arquipélago – Contemporary Art Center, São Miguel, Azores. (15 Sept 2017-11 January 2018)

Above: Installation shots of *The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life*,Arquipélago – Contemporary Art Center, São Miguel, Azores.15 Sept 2017-11 January 2018. Olav Westphalen.

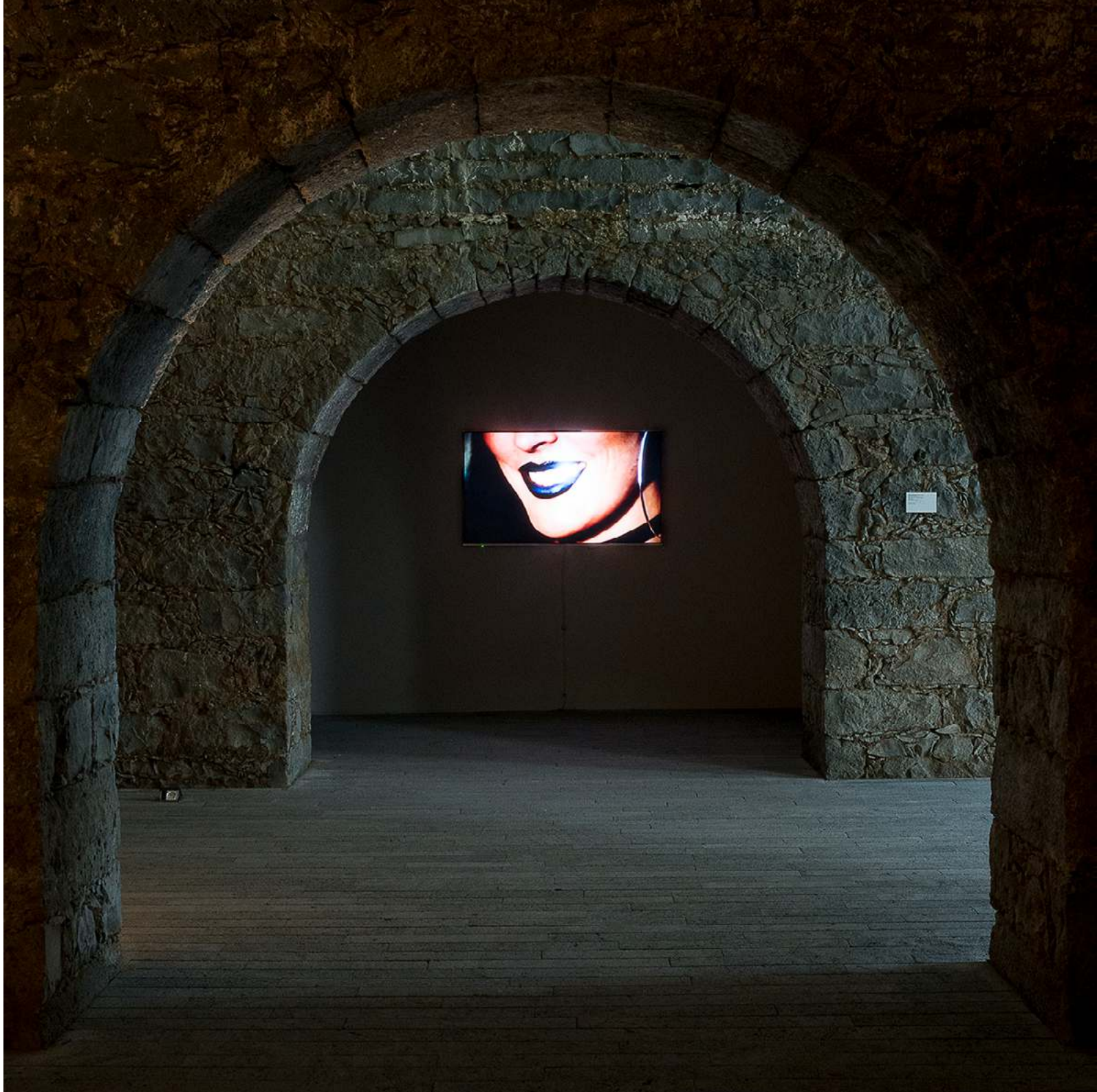
Above: Installation shots of
The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life Arquipélago – Contemporary Art Center, São Miguel, Azores.15 Sept 2017-11 January 2018. *BANK*, Gemma Marmalade, Maurice Doherty, Joachim Schmid.

Above: Installation shots of
The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life Arquipélago – Contemporary Art Center, São Miguel, Azores. 15 Sept 2017-11 January 2018. Paul McCarthy, Painter, (1995).

Above: John Smith *Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) as installed at Arquipélago.

Above: Installation shots of *The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life*, Arquipélago – Contemporary Art Center, São Miguel, Azores. 15 Sept 2017-11 January 2018. Richard Hughes, Pedestrian series, (2013).

Right: Carla Garlaschi, *The Rich Also Cry or the Rise of the South American Artist*, (2016) as installed at Arquipélago.



Related dissemination events

- Conference presentation: *'Sit Down' A dialogue between artists, writers and thinkers on the power of 'funniness' within institutional critique and art history*. Central Saint Martins University, London, 22/06/2019. Participants: Doug Fishbone, Andy Holden, Mel Brimfield, Elise Bell, Common Culture, Joe Sweeney, Roger Sabin. https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/ual-lol-sit-down-tickets-63394844687

- Conference presentation:' Workshop presentation (with Mark Durden), *On the Use of Comedy in Art as a form of Social Critique, Politics and Humour: Theory and Practice*, A two-day interdisciplinary conference at The University of Kent. 16th and 17th January 2015.

- Film: A film by João Leal about *The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life* exhibition was shown at the NECS 2018 conference *Media Tactics and Engagement*, as part of the panel: *Experimentalism and politics of the form: reflections regarding space in contemporary art and cinema*..Hosted by the University of Amsterdam and VU Amsterdam. https://vimeo.com/276637548/93cd229a02

Links To Bluecoat and Mac Exhibitions:

https://themaclive.com/exhibition/double-act-art-and-comedy
http://www.thebluecoat.org.uk/events/view/exhibitions/3355

Links To *The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life* exhibition:
http://arquipelagocentrodeartes.azores.gov.pt/en/programacao/exposicao-o-risivel-enigma-da-vida-normal/

Videos:

Interview with curators Campbell and Durden at Bluecoat.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZP3moWBaiM

Interview with curators Campbell and Durden at Mac:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-d7LjDWh-E

The project received extensive coverage including Portuguese television's RTP main cultural review programme As Horas Extraordinaries (111), which was presented from the exhibition and featured extensive installation shots and an interview with Maria Marques Pereira, director of Arquipélago, Centro de Artes Contemporâneas, (from 8.00 to 11.45)
https://www.rtp.pt/play/p3140/e306664/as-horas-extraordinarias

Link to: *Brevity, Disruption, Art and Comedy*. (Journal Article) David Campbell, Mark Durden
Cadernos IRI 2 2016 UniMAD, Porto. 8-18pp.
https://parc.ipp.pt/index.php/ciri/article/view/2549/675

Link to Book:

Double Act: Art And Comedy - David Campbell & Mark Durden
120 pages, 230mm x 300mm. ISBN 978-0-9538996-5-4
Ato Code: SQ8051767
Published in 2016

Press coverage of Art and Comedy:

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

http://www.corridor8.co.uk/online/review-double-act-art-and-comedy-the-bluecoat-liverpool/

http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/08/this-weeks-new-exhibitions

Robertson, Laura. *Double Act: Art and Comedy*, Art Monthly, May 2016, p24-25.

https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/issue/may-2016

https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/now-showing-142-the-weeks-top-exhibitions

http://www.thedoublenegative.co.uk/2016/04/culture-diary-wc-04-04-2016/

https://www.rtp.pt/play/p3140/e306664/as-horas-extraordinarias

https://media.rtp.pt/antena3/ouvir/o-risivel-enigma-da-vida-normal/

http://www.dn.pt/lusa/interior/centro-arquipelago-inaugura-exposicao-com-curadoria- de-mark-durden-e-david-campbell-8753628.html

https://www.noticiasaominuto.com/cultura/859752/o-arquipelago-centro-de-artes-contemporaneas-inaugura-exposicao

LISTA DE ARTISTAS E OBRAS
ARTISTS AND WORKS

BANK * (UK, 1991)
Fax-Back (NY: The Drawing Centre), 1999
Tinta sobre papel impresso | Ink on printed paper
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists
*Coletivo de artistas | Art collective: Simon Bedwell (UK, 1963), John Russell (UK, 1963), Milly Thompson (UK, 1964)

BANK * (UK, 1991)
Fax-Back (NY: Holly Solomon), 1999
Tinta sobre papel impresso | Ink on printed paper
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists
* Coletivo de artistas | Art collective: Simon Bedwell (UK, 1963), John Russell (UK, 1963), Milly Thompson (UK, 1964)

BANK * (UK, 1991)
Fax-Back (NY: Margaret Thatcher Projects), 1999
Tinta sobre papel impresso | Ink on printed paper
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists
* Coletivo de artistas | Art collective: Simon Bedwell (UK, 1963), John Russell (UK, 1963), Milly Thompson (UK, 1964)

BANK * (UK, 1991)
Fax-Back (NY: Metropictures), 1999
Tinta sobre papel impresso | Ink on printed paper
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists
* Coletivo de artistas | Art collective: Simon Bedwell (UK, 1963),

BANK * (UK, 1991)
Fax-Back (NY: Paul Kasmin), 1999
Tinta sobre papel impresso | Ink on printed paper
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists
* Coletivo de artistas | Art collective: Simon Bedwell (UK, 1963), John Russell (UK, 1963), Milly Thompson (UK, 1964)

BANK * (UK, 1991)
Fax-Back (NY: Team), 1999
Tinta em papel impresso | Ink on printed paper
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists
* Coletivo de artistas | Art collective: Simon Bedwell (UK, 1963), John Russell (UK, 1963), Milly Thompson (UK, 1964)

BANK * (UK, 1991)
Fax-Back (NY: Andrea Rosen), 1999
Tinta em papel impresso | Ink on printed paper
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists
* Coletivo de artistas | Art collective: Simon Bedwell (UK, 1963), John Russell (UK, 1963), Milly Thompson (UK, 1964)
Carlos/Ishikawa, London

CARLA GARLASCHI (CHL/ SE, 1981)
The Rich Also Cry or The Rise of the Latin American Artist, 2016
Co-realização | Co-direction: Carla Garlaschi, Rotunda Magazine e | and Camilo Bustos Delpin
Vídeo digital | Digital video
04'53" (duração | duration)
Cortesia da artista | Courtesy of the artist

CARLA GARLASCHI (CHL/ SE, 1981)
Laberinto de ilusión, 2017
Realização | Direction: Patricia Venegas
Vídeo digital | Digital video
04'35" (duração | duration)
Cortesia da artista | Courtesy of the artist

COMMON CULTURE * (UK, 1996)
The New El Dorado, 2010
Vídeo HD | HD video
22'00" (duração | duration)
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists
* Coletivo de artistas | Art Collective: David Campbell (UK, 1957), Ian Brown (UK,1972), Mark Durden (UK 1964)

Common Culture,
The New Eldorado, Video Still (2012).
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists

COMMON CULTURE * (UK, 1996)
Trial by Media, 2017
Vídeo HD | HD video
07'30" (duração | duration)
Dying is for Amateurs, 2017
Vídeo HD | HD video
07'27"(duração | duration)
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists
* Coletivo de artistas | Art Collective: David Campbell (UK, 1957), Ian Brown (UK,1972), Mark Durden (UK 1964)

Common Culture
Trial by Media, Video Still (2017).
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artists

Common Culture
Dying is for Amateurs, Video Still (2017).
Cortesia dos artistas | Courtesy of the artist

DAVID SHERRY (IRL, 1974)
Running for the bus, 1999
Vídeo | Video 720x576
08'30" (duração | duration)
Cortesia do artista e Patricia Fleming Projects | Courtesy of the artist and Patricia Fleming Projects

David Sherry,
Red Sauce Brown Sauce Mania (2013), video still.
Cortesia do artista e Patricia Fleming Projects
Courtesy of the artist and Patricia Fleming Projects

DAVID SHERRY (IRL, 1974)
Red Sauce Brown Sauce Mania, 2013
Vídeo | Video 1920x1080
04'55" (duração | duration)
Cortesia do artista e Patricia Fleming Projects | Courtesy of the artist and Patricia Fleming Projects

David Sherry,
Running for the bus (1999), video still.
Cortesia do artista e Patricia Fleming Projects
Courtesy of the artist and Patricia Fleming Projects

ERICA EYRES (CA, 1980)
Conference Drawings, 2016/2017
Lápis sobre papel | Pencil on paper
Série de 20 desenhos | Series of 20 drawings
Cortesia da artista e Lisa Kehler Art + Projects, Winnipeg | Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Kehler Art + Projects, Winnipeg

Erica Eyres,
Conference 3, (2016).
Cortesia da artista | Courtesy of the artist

GEMMA MARMALADE (UK, 1979)
Fish Wives, 2013
Vídeo HD | HD vídeo
09'30" (duração | duration)
Cortesia da artista | Courtesy of the artist

Seed Series: Green Fingered,
Amanda and Cucumber (2014).
Cortesia da artista | Courtesy of the artist

GILLIAN WEARING (UK, 1963)
Dancing in Peckham, 1994
Vídeo, cor, som | Colour video with sound
24'52" (duração | duration)
Cortesia Maureen Paley, Londres | Courtesy Maureen Paley, London

Gillian Wearing
Dancing in Peckham (1994)
© Gillian Wearing.
Cortesia | Courtesy Maureen Paley, London; Tanya Bonakdar, New York and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

JOACHIM SCHMID (DE, 1955)
Other People's Photographs , 2008-2011
18 livros | 18 books
Coleção ARQUIPÉLAGO | ARQUIPÉLAGO collection

Joachim Schmid
Big Fish from Other People's Photographs (2008-2011)
Cortesia do artista | Courtesy of the artist

JOÃO PAULO FELICIANO (PT, 1963)
Mimic Gimmick - Playing 'Air Guitar' to Derek Bailey, 2008
Vídeo, mono-canal, DVD, som, cor | Single channel video on DVD, sound, colour
05'15" (duração | duration)
Cortesia Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art, Lisboa | Courtesy Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art, Lisbon

João Paulo Feliciano,
Mimic Gimmick - Playing 'Air Guitar' to Derek Bailey (2008),
video still.
Cortesia | Courtesy Cristina Guerra Contemporary Art, Lisboa.

JOHN SMITH (UK, 1952)
Girl Chewing Gum, 1976
Filme de 16 mm transferido para vídeo HD, P&B, som | 16mm film transferred to HD vídeo, Black - and-white, sound
12'00" (duração | duration)
Cortesia do artista e Tanya Leighton, Berlim | Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin

John Smith,
Girl Chewing Gum(1976),
video still.
Cortesia do artista e de Tanya Leighton, Berlim
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlim

KARA HEARN (USA)
Reincarnated Scenes, 2005-2006
Vídeo HD | HD vídeo
Cortesia da artista | Courtesy of the artist

I.
Fight Club - 01'45"
Billy Elliot - 02'07"
Dog Day Afternoon - 01'27"
E.T. - 01'27"
Fame - 05'01"
Gladiator - 02'15"
Grease - 03'11"
Grease 2 - 02'58"
Harry Potter - 00'53"
Jesus Christ Superstar - 03'20"
Lord of the Rings - 02'24"

Kara Hearn
Fight Club 2005-2006,
video still.
Cortesia da artista | Courtesy of the artist

II.
Moulin Rouge - 04'09"
Roxanne - 03'28"
Seven Samurai - 01'54"
Sophie's Choice - 02'23"
Spider-Man - 01'24"
Spirited Away - 01'30"
Star Wars/ Episode III - 02'30"
Star Wars/ Episode IV - 01'11"

III.
Amadeus - 00'49"
Beaches - 00'40"
Christ in Concert - 00'26"
Gladiator - 00'52"
History of Violence - 00'25"
King Kong - 00'33"
The Last Command - 00'32"
The Outsiders - 00'37"
Platoon - 00'48"
Rebel Without a Cause - 00'22"
Terms of Endearment - 00'34"
The Hours - 00'30"
Titanic - 00'25"

Kara Hearn
Amadeus 2005-2006,
video still.
Cortesia da artista | Courtesy of the artist

MAURICE DOHERTY (IRL, 1972)
I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show, 2016
Néon | Neon
Cortesia do artista | Courtesy of the artist

Maurice Doherty,
I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show (2016)
Neon.
Cortesia do artista | Courtesy of the artist

OLAV WESTPHALEN (DE, 1963)
The Gothenburg Gag-Master, 2013
Série de desenhos, tinta, acrílico, papel | Series of drawings, ink, acrylic, paper

Série de desenhos baseados num disco aleatório rotativo, concebido de forma a gerar até 30.000 hipóteses para piadas | Series of drawings based on an aleatory, rotary disc, designed to generate up to 30.000 different joke premises
Este trabalho teve a sua origem numa encomenda para a Bienal de Arte Contemporânea de Gotemburgo de 2013 | This work was originally commissioned for the 2013 Gothenburg Biennial of Contemporary Art
Para o The Gothenburg Gag-Master foi desenvolvida uma versão específica do disco juntamente com um grupo de locais, esperando-se que se gerasse algo como humor local | For The Gothenburg Gag-Master a specific version of the disc was developed together with a group of locals, hopefully generating something like local humor.
Cortesia do artista | Courtesy of the artist

PAUL McCARTHY (USA, 1945)
Painter, 1995
Vídeo, cor e som | Colour video with sound
50' 01" (duração | duration)
Cortesia do artista e Hauser & Wirth | Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth

PETER FINNEMORE (UK, 1963)
Psy Ops: A series of short films, 2004-2009
Vídeo digital, SD | Electronic Video, SD
Cortesia do artista | Courtesy of the artist © Peter Finnemore

Showreel 1 - Total Duration 08' 55"
My Head is in the Shed - 00'55"
Gnats and Smokie - 01'23"
Runner Bean Harvest - 01'43"
The Greenhouse Effect - 02'20"
The Beast - 00'43"
The Hidden Fortress - 01'07"
War Games - 00'34"

Showreel 2 - Total duration 11'15"
Polemics - 01'11"
White Noise - 01'45"
The Intelligence Corps. - 02'18"
Guerilla Exercises - 01'16"
Rawhide - 00'38"
Eve of Destruction - 04'03"

Showreel 3 - Total Duration - 08'11"
Shit Stirrer - 02'08"
Shy Gardener 1 & 2 - 02'30"
Law of the Jungle - 00'50"
Gingo Gringo - 01'40"
Things in the Shed - 00'58"

Showreel 4 - Total Duration - 06'04"
Boot Camp Irregulars - 03'18"
The Potato Eaters - 02'43"

Peter Finnemore,
Gnats and Smokie (2004) Electronic Video Film Still.
Cortesia do artista | Courtesy of the Artist.

PILVI TAKALA (FI, 1981)
Real Snow White, 2009
Vídeo | Video
09'15" min (duração | duration)
Cortesia da artista e Carlos/Ishikawa, Londres | Courtesy of the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

Pilvi Takala,
Real Snow White(2009),
video still.
Cortesia da artista e Carlos/Ishikawa, Londres
Courtesy of the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, Londres

PILVI TAKALA (FI, 1981)
The Trainee, 2008
Vídeo | Video
13'55" (duração | duration)
Cortesia da artista e Carlos/Ishikawa, Londres | Courtesy of the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

Pilvi Takala,
The Trainee(2008),
video still.
Cortesia da artista e Carlos/Ishikawa, Londres
Courtesy of the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, Londres

RICHARD HUGHES (UK, 1974)
Pedestrian (Hot Ste P.), 2013
Cartão de arquitetura cinzento, fibra de vidro, pedra, resina, aço e pintura | Architectural grey board, fiberglass, stone, resin, steel and paint
Cortesia do artista e Anton Kern Gallery, Nova Iorque | Courtesy of the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York
Copyright Richard Hughes

RICHARD HUGHES (UK, 1974)
Pedestrian (Frankie Dubz), 2013
Cartão de arquitetura cinzento, fibra de vidro, pedra, resina, aço e pintura | Architectural grey board, fiberglass, stone, resin, steel and paint
Cortesia do artista e Anton Kern Gallery, Nova Iorque | Courtesy of the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York
Copyright Richard Hughes

RICHARD HUGHES (UK, 1974)
Pedestrian (Skinny C.), 2013
Cartão de arquitetura cinzento, fibra de vidro, pedra, resina, aço e pintura | Architectural grey board, fiberglass, stone, resin, steel and paint
Cortesia do artista e Anton Kern Gallery, Nova Iorque | Courtesy of the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York
Copyright Richard Hughes

RICHARD HUGHES (UK, 1974)
Pedestrian (Sketchy Freddy), 2013
Cartão de arquitetura cinzento, fibra de vidro, pedra, resina, aço e pintura | Architectural grey board, fiberglass, stone, resin, steel and paint
Cortesia do artista e Anton Kern Gallery, Nova Iorque | Courtesy of the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York
Copyright Richard Hughes

Richard Hughes
Pedestrian (2013
Todas as imagens são cortesia de Anton Kern Gallery, Nova Iorque. Fotografia: Thomas Müller
All images Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York. Photo: Thomas Müller.

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Impressão a jacto de tinta | Inkjet print
Série de 20 fotografias | Series of 20 photographs
Cortesia do artista | Courtesy of the artist

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Berlin, 2014

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Bermondsey, London, 2014

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
King's Cross, London, 2014

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Manchester, 2014

Richard Wentworth
Making Do and Getting By(2006-2014)
Todas as imagens são cortesia do artista
All images courtesy of the artist

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Bermondsey, London, 2013

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Holborn, London, 2011

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Battersea, London, 2012

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Drury lane, London, 2012

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Islington, London, 2012

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
King's Cross, London, 2012

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Barnsbury, London, 2011

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Battersea, London, 2011

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Umbria, Italy, 2008

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Oxford, England, 2008

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Cambridge, England, 2007

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
South West France, 2008

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Folkestone, England, 2006

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Oxford, England, 2007

RICHARD WENTWORTH (UK, 1947)
Making Do and Getting By
Somers Town, London, 2006

THOMAS GEIGER (DE, 1983)
I looked on my head from above, 2016
Áudio | Audio
22' 15" (duração | duration)
Cortesia do artista | Courtesy of the artist

Thomas Geige
I looked on my head from above(2016).
Cortesia do artista | Courtesy of the artist

WALDEMAR JANUSZCZAK
@JANUSZCZAK

Follow

This is in the excellent DoubleAct show at the Bluecoat in Liverpool. No it is not by Tracy Emin!

Right:
Waldemar Januszczak tweet about *Double Act* exhibition, Bluecoat.

Review of Double Act – Art & Comedy:
This is Tomorrow- Contemporary Art Magazine
: http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/double-act-art-and-comedy

Double Act: Art and Comedy -Bluecoat, Liverpool
9 April - 19 June 2016. Review by Sophie Risner

It is apt that a brass statue of the comedian Ken Dodd saluting visitors with a feather duster resides at Liverpool Lime Street Station, a city well known for its welcoming attitude, cultural legacy and home of 'Double Act: Art and Comedy', a group show curated by David Campbell and Mark Durden (founding members of Common Culture) and currently on show at the Bluecoat, an 18th century cloistered gallery set back from the pedestrian bustle of Church Street.
I'll admit that comedy is not a subject matter I feel most at ease reviewing. Its vast overarching abilities to envelope the entire spectrum of human emotions is somewhat intimidating, which is why Peter Land's video 'Pink Space', greeting viewers on entry, felt like a warm, welcoming gesture to the show. Through Land's video we witness repeated drunken falls, which establishes an ideological framework keen to experiment with notions of failure present within the task of trying to navigate comedy and generate comedic effect. It is important to note that whilst this is an illustrious journey through seasoned approaches to comedy, it is just as much a story of how artists have experimented with the genre and that they aren't necessarily mutually exclusive.
Throughout my time reviewing and viewing art my most treasured moments happen when I come across an artist I've never heard of, who has been practising long enough for it to seem awkward that they remain a mystery to me. Discovering Alex Bag and her canonical DIY VHS work 'Untitled Fall '95' was one of those moments. Widely written about, this work traces the career arc of an art student at NYU. Introspection and frustrations - comedic effect comes about through the painful poignancy of her words, the ability to stingingly reflect on the currency of the path to artist emancipation, whilst picking apart contemporary traits of female and male representation and relationships within the learning and production of art practice, as a mirror to tropes in its existence further afield.
Where Bag subverts a critique of the lived experience through her art student alter ego, Jo Spence's 'Remodelling Photohistory (Colonization)' in the same space does this through the documentation of the working class stereotype. An artist well loved for her charismatic approach to self-documentation, perching on a terraced house doorstep with broom in hand and milk bottles at her feet, she toys with the societal prerequisite to locate cultures by catching the viewer off guard. Her bare breasts create a moment of awkward voyeuristic tension which enables the audience to feel physically foolish for trying to forge assumptions, not just on her but those who surround us.
The fault line of visiting a show regaling comedy is the prerequisite to try and locate 'what comedy is'. An abstract expression of will and determination causes comedic effect just as much as re-telling an old joke or pointing out injustice in the world. The latter is present in 'The Real Snow White' by Pivdi Takala. Here, Takala, dressed as Snow White, is turned away from the gates of what I can only presume to be Euro Disney. The irony that a person dressed in the merchandise which Disney actively pushes onto children from a young age highlights the maddening capitalism inherent within a conglomerate targeted at young people. The reality that adults still attend Disney parks remains present, the fact of upsetting the power structures which govern these spaces even more wonderfully relevant to witness and disrupt.
Thomas Geiger furthers this disruption with the audio work 'I looked on my head from above', a matter-of-fact retelling of an artist's hysterical devices to subvert their practice whilst playing harmoniously into prefixed notions of contemporary art practice today. Spoken to us in a dead pan tone the voice recounts everything from masturbating in the gallery to whispering in visitor's ears, hiring sex workers for a show and beyond. At times this obscene litany feels like a hellish art fair, at times it feels like a well meaning run down of acts generated by artists throughout time - the deadpan tone gives nothing away and leaves us languishing in suspense.
Comedy as a technique illustrates the need to feel awkward, vulnerable and suggestible if we're to challenge norms in society. It also highlights that feeling entertained can also be just as emancipatory an experience when discussing something with potency. This show leads the viewer through the agency of comedy as an adaptable space which just as much equals passion, love, shock and a whole plethora of other techniques and emotions as it does encompass them.
Whilst my review really only serves as an introduction to 'Double Act: Art and Comedy' I feel the show does more to push the lucid qualities of the genre. It's a work in progress portrait of an authorial commitment to comedy which underscores the abilities of those curated - as artists who take a risk with their output and triumph. We may not see it as comedy in its most well known of guises but this proves the ability that art practice has in blurring the boundaries of how we classify comedy and locate what makes us laugh.

Published on 20 May 2016

Above: Review of *Double Act – Art & Comedy*: This is Tomorrow- Contemporary Art Magazine.

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

Review of Double Act – Art & Comedy:
Art in Liverpool.com by Patrick Kirk-Smith – June 20, 2016
http://www.artinliverpool.com/double-act-art-comedy-mac-belfast/

Words and images, Patrick Kirk-Smith

It's not always good to find the greener grass. That's what I learned on Monday when I hopped on a plane to Belfast to visit *Double Act: Art and Comedy*. The exhibition, curated by David Campbell and Mark Durden, is twinned with an exhibition of the same name at Bluecoat. It shows a different story entirely to the one I visited on School Lane, Liverpool.

This manifestation of *Double Act* functions so spectacularly because it sticks so strictly to telling the truth through its jokes. Even the simplest piece in the show, a deflated version of Jeff Koon's *Sculpture No. 1* is a satire on satire. How sick must we have become, as a culture, of satire in art that we have begun to satirise it. No longer can we simply write a joke and call it Dada. And that's very true. It has become near impossible to make art anymore, due mostly to the fear that it will be called pretentious – the result is a new breed of hipster academics presenting timid work masquerading as bold. And the king of those is Koons.

The MAC has become a cultural centre which has made the arts a very popular public face in Belfast. I doubt I need to remind anybody of the Titanic, but the new dedicated museum in Belfast has to be seen to be believed. And the streets surrounding the MAC are a hive of street art and independent spaces, lining one of the main entrances to the city. There's every conceivable reason that Campbell and Durden would choose to twin their Bluecoat show with the MAC, and I'm unsure if I can rightly express how grateful I am that the second show gave a new side to the exhibition's story.

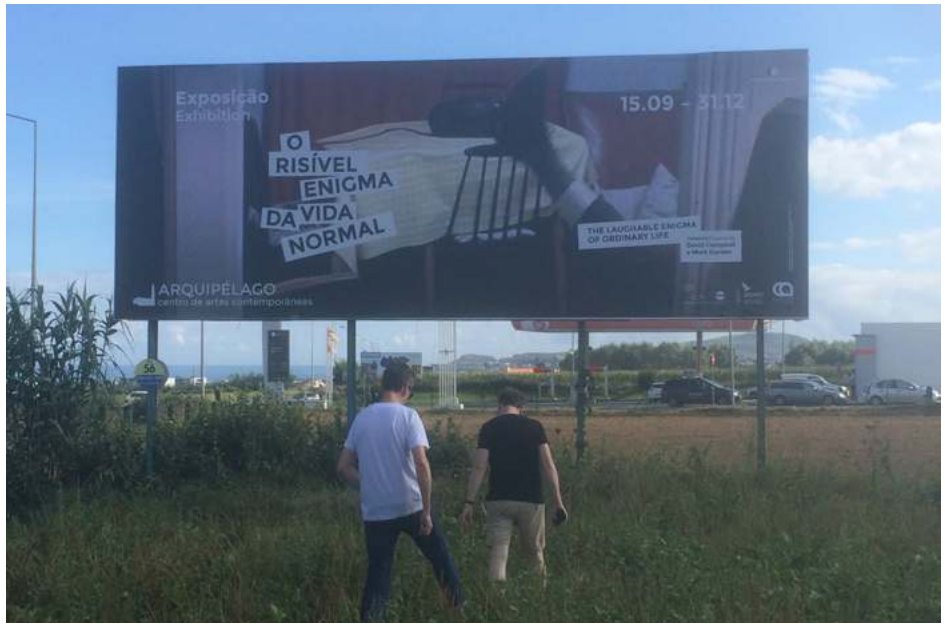
What I'm about to say should in no way be a negative reflection on Bluecoat. Their version of this exhibition is utterly excellent, but MAC's is better. The subtleties of relationships between the works provided a curatorial humour that wasn't as apparent at Bluecoat, and the range in Belfast told a wider story. And simply put, I laughed more often in Belfast.

It wasn't the quality of the joke that made the difference, so much as the relevance. YouTube is touched on in The Vide at Bluecoat by Kara Hearn's Hollywood satires, but at MAC, a film by Cory Arcangel is *just* cats. And faintly from the other side of the room plays Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Memory*, sung by Mel Brimfield, with new lyrics written for her work, *He Hit Me... and it Felt Like a Kiss*.

But that's what comedy should do. Put us at ease, then steal it away with a harsh realisation. *He Hit Me... and it Felt Like a Kiss* was made in reference to the unbelievably poor representations of romance portrayed as clichéd simplicity throughout film and literature. Her work takes one of the most romanticised songs in Western history and turns it into a hymn to Truth. On face value, the film is a funny reworking of a classic, but look a little deeper. That's what comedy does though, nods to the truth.

Cultural partnerships between cities, be they local to the UK or further afield, should be given much more credit from either side. I made a point of seeing this exhibition while I was away because I wanted to understand the full story, and from my experience, both sides of the Irish Sea tell a different tale here, and I wouldn't have got the full narrative without seeing both.

Above: Review of *Double Act – Art & Comedy*: Art in Liverpool.com by Patrick Kirk-Smith – June 20, 2016.



Above: Billboard promotion of
The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life, Azores.

Above: *Double Act – Art & Comedy*.
Bluecoat Brochure.

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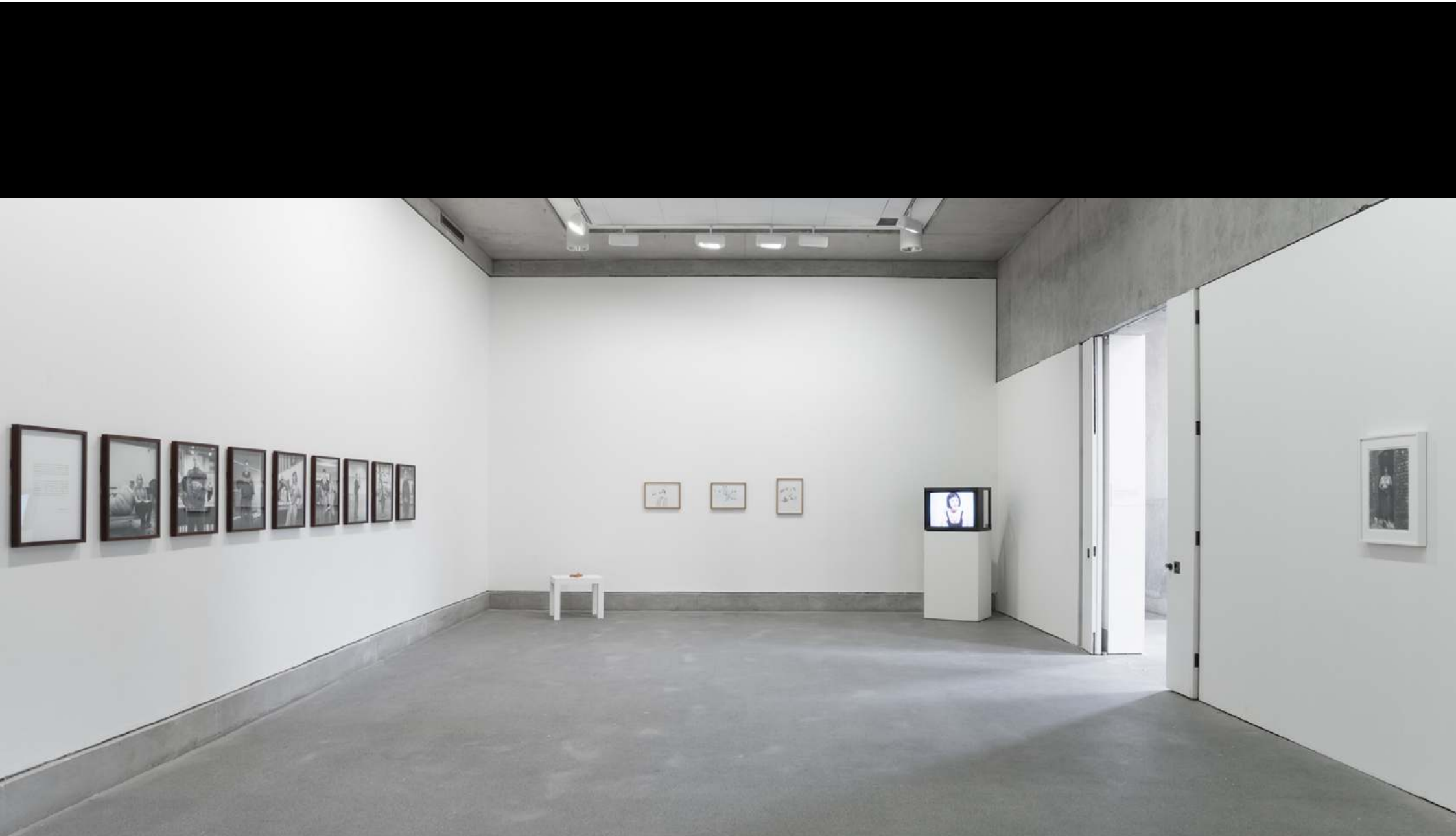
Welchman.J.C,. *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art* (JRP Ringier, 2010)

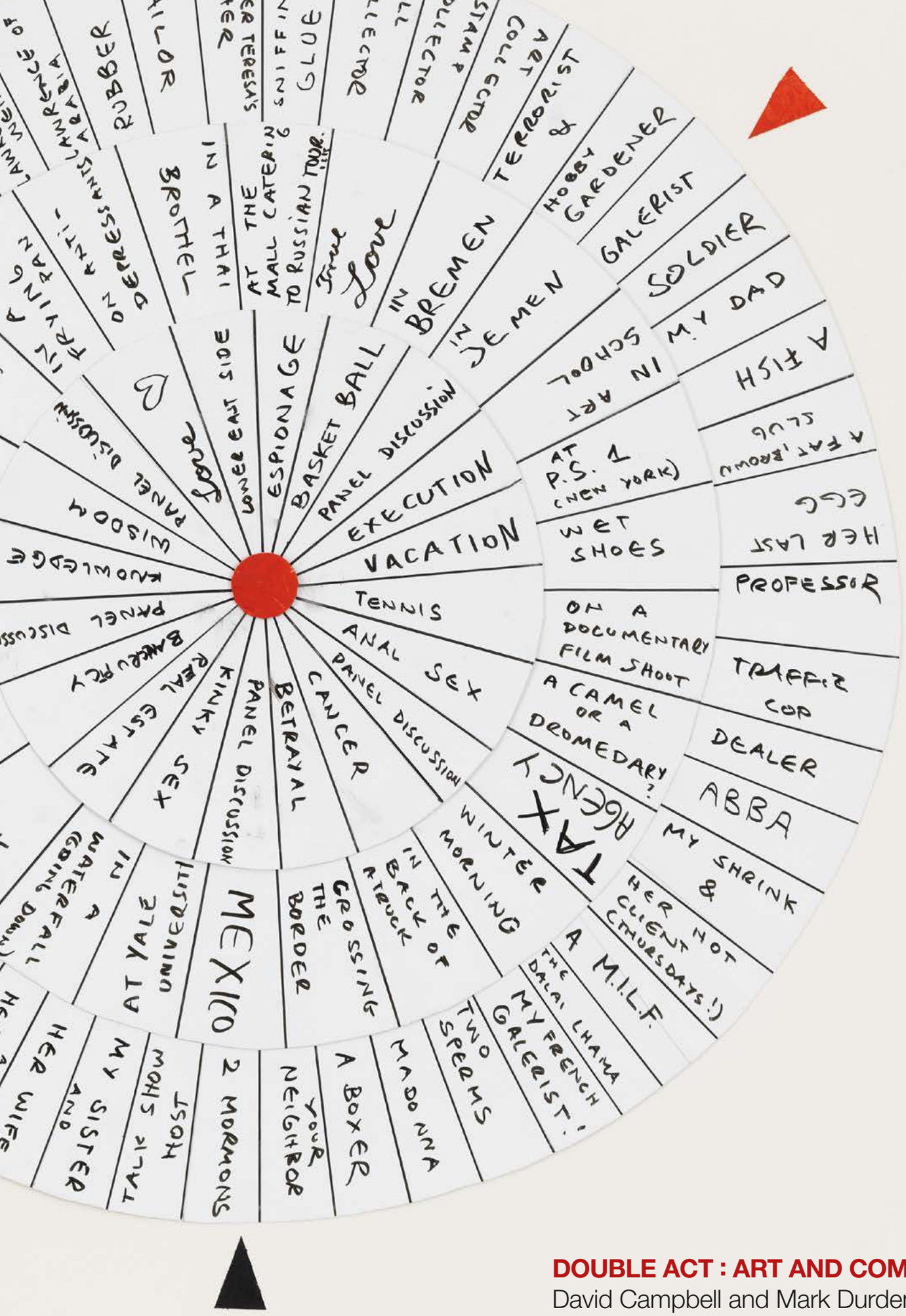
Back cover image: Installation shot of *Double Act: Art & Comedy* exhibition, Bluecoat Arts Centre, Gemma Marmalade; Erica Eyres; Alex Bag; Jo Spence.

All images courtesy of Common Culture unless otherwise stated.

Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory.

REF2021 Research Excellence Framework





DOUBLE ACT : ART AND COMEDY

David Campbell and Mark Durden

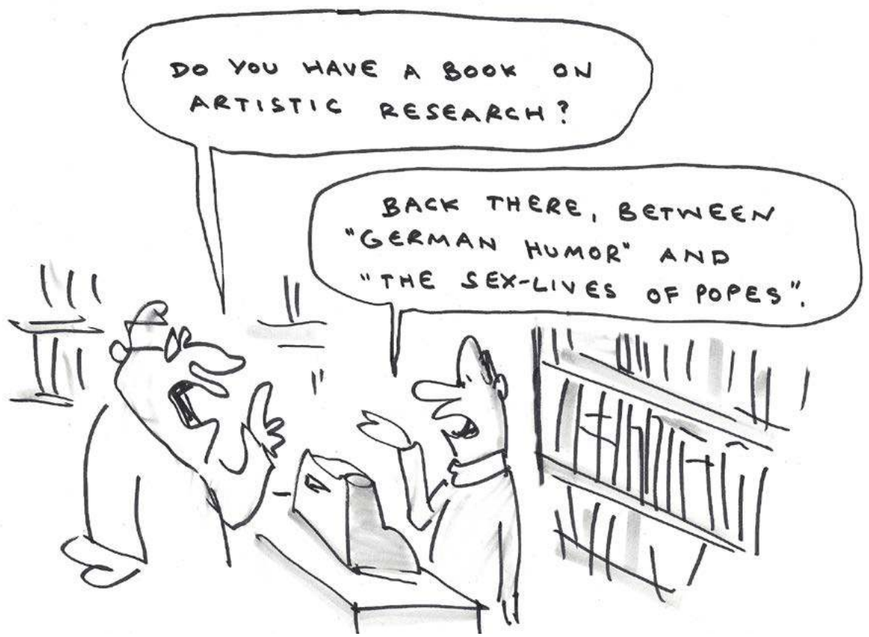
Cover image
Olav Westphalen
White Gag-Master, (2012)
Paper, ink, oil, collage
33 1/4 x 26 x 1 1/2 in.
Photo: André Morin

Previous page
Erwin Wurm
Instructions on How to be Politically Incorrect, (2002–2003)
Two Ways Of Carrying A Bomb

◀ **Richard Hughes**
Super Yob, (2014) (detail)
Cast glass reinforced polyester
Dimensions variable
Installation view 'Field Trip', The Modern Institute, Glasgow, 2014
Courtesy of The Artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
Photo: Max Slaven

DOUBLE ACT : ART AND COMEDY

David Campbell and Mark Durden



Contents

Olav Westphalen
XXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXX
XXXXXXX

Introduction

As Andrew Stott has pointed out, the double act, a staple of comic performance, can be seen to embody the way in which comedy involves 'a continual awareness of the possibility of reading a scenario in two different ways, of a division in comprehension and the co-existence of parallel ideas.'[1] The comic effect of a lot of the contemporary art discussed in this book results from the way in which it sets up a doubled experience, its humour often the result of putting two disparate and opposing ideas together.

Sometimes this doubling involves a form of mimicry or appropriation that entails a comic falling short — Kara Hearn's videos showing homemade reenactments of emotional and dramatic scenes from well-known films. In the case of Pilvi Takala's dressing up as Snow White outside Disneyland Paris, her performance does not fall short, but as a grown up fan she spoils the strict rules controlling the multi-billion dollar fantasy industry. In the video documentation of the incident, *Real Snow White,* we see children repeatedly asking to be photographed with her, while security men try and explain why she cannot go in dressed as one of Disney's well-known characters and end up sending her away to get changed.

Many works entail a doubling through quotation. Keith Coventry's *Estate Paintings* create abstractions that evoke the socialist ideals of Suprematist art while being based upon the plans of British housing estates, more readily associated with the failure of Modernist social dreams. Artists often use other art for their point of comedy — Mel Brimfield makes a mockery of the machismo of sculpture while Paul McCarthy sends up both painting and performance art, including his own earlier performances. Michael Smith creates an alter ego double 'Mike Smith' in videos in which he creates a deadpan parody of both naïve and idealist assumptions about art and its commercial appropriation. Alex Bag's spoof video diary tells us the trials and tribulations of her experience as an art student, semester by semester, intercut by programmes that dwell on the excesses and absurdities of consumerism.

Jokes debunk, cut through artifice, counter hierarchies, puncture pretensions and affectations. Art can be a pompous and self-important affair and an important recurring characteristic of comedy in this book acknowledges art's own vulnerability to comic deflation. There is, then, this double act comedy of art mocking art, which can take a clear target in clichéd past traditions of art practice, as in the work of Brimfield, or take on a whole panoply of performance-based art works in the case of Thomas Geiger's inventory of the absurd shenanigans that people have got up to in the name of art.

Bill Woodrow's sculptures entail a comic doubling as he cuts into familiar domestic appliances and makes new objects out of them that invite new and often fantastic narratives. He is intervening into a familiar everyday world of commodities and products and transforming them through his skills— we see both the remnants of the products he has cut into and the new figurative forms that have been fashioned out of them. Richard Hughes similarly exploits the comic potential from out of the everyday, fabricating

Common Culture
I Can't Go on, I'll Go On, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On (2016)
looped, 40-minute video installation

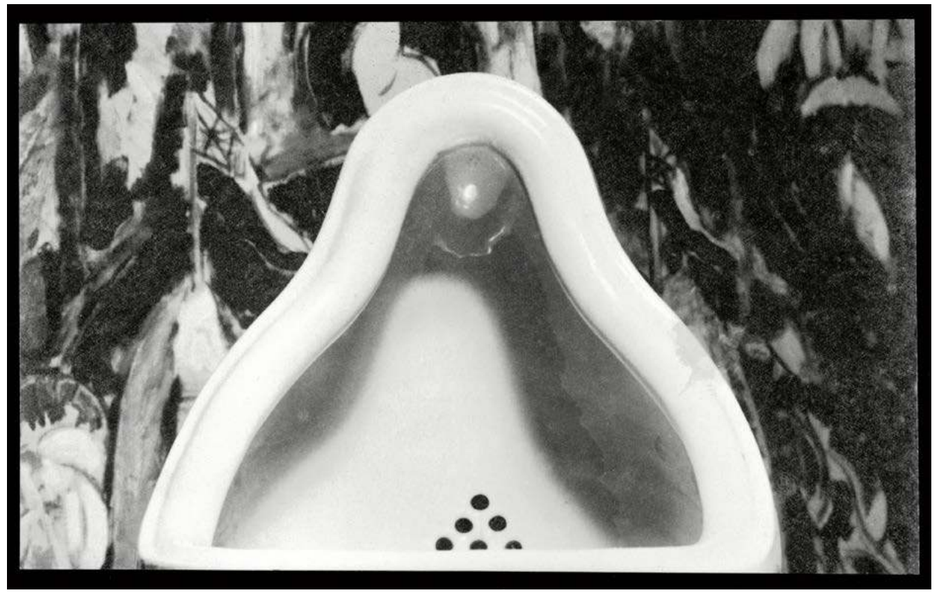
fantastic and absurd new sculptures based upon the bland concrete suburban environments of his youth. The sculptor Richard Wentworth's ongoing colour photographs of things that have been repaired, botched, improvised or thrown away highlights funny conjunctions and correspondences, or a comic re-use of objects, a kind of observational comedy from the street.

Comedy can itself be seen to work in two different ways. On the one hand it can be seen to create a momentary respite from the dullness and heaviness of day-to-day reality, as in the work of Wentworth, Woodrow and Hughes. But it can also bring us down to earth. The pratfall in slapstick becomes an important and recurring thematic, with many artists working with comedy engaging with this act of falling, from Bas Jan Ader's brief films documenting him falling from heights, to a sleep-deprived Maurice Doherty who is filmed standing until he falls, a stunt made less dangerous by him donning a crash helmet.

Jokes also bring in the all too real situation of our physical bodies and their limitations. We laugh when bodies let us down, betraying us by a fart at the wrong moment, for example. One final important comic turn in this book concerns the body and bodily humour, beginning with the toilet comedy of Marcel Duchamp's readymade urinal and continuing with Piero Manzoni's joke against the art market by producing tins of his own shit. The body, and especially the naked body, can cause laughter. There is a strain of *Carry On* humour in a number of artworks discussed in this book — from Erica Eyres' drawings from 1970s nudist magazines to Gemma Marmalade's innuendo-laden depictions of women holding oversized vegetables.

The joke always has a healthy disrespect for structures and categories and, when allied with art, can become a very unruly and volatile impulse. This book seeks to map out and interpret some of contemporary art's great comedic moments.

Maurice Doherty
Waiting to Fall (2001)
Looped video installation



Comedy is often created through the inversion or suspension of a dominant convention, challenging established ways of seeing and understanding the world, offering an opportunity to effect a change of perception. Creating disparity, constructing situations in which people or things seem to be in the wrong place, often typify such a process. Marcel Duchamp's development of the readymade illustrates such an approach where comedy is created by the intrusion of the common and everyday into the sanctified realm of art. The readymades were a deliberate act of provocation, designed to test the conventions policing the boundary between art and the world of everyday objects.

Duchamp's submission of *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal bought from a hardware store and signed 'R. Mutt', to the first public exhibition of the Society for Independent Artists in New York in December 1917, was promptly rejected by the Society, of which Duchamp was a founding member. But nonetheless it established the readymade as a staple tactic of avant-garde transgression. The readymade required no physical intervention by the artist, other than the act of nominating an ordinary mass-produced object to be signed by an 'author' and repositioned, both literally and figuratively as art. In such an act, the accepted indicators of artistic creation, traditionally demonstrated through the display of craft skills, were mockingly challenged, and apparently abandoned by Duchamp.

The incongruity of the readymade results from what appears to be an ontological error where objects belonging to a particular category - mass-produced and utilitarian - are presented as if they belong to a different category, individually 'authored' objects of art.

Similarly, the joke aligns the unexpected with the familiar, the common with the extraordinary. The joke of Duchamp is to place the urinal in the realm sanctioned for art, a special dignified space separated from the everyday, a space for escape and respite from the ordinary world.

For all the cerebral associations of Duchamp's art, the urinal is a comic object, unavoidably associated with a male bodily activity, pissing. Such associations upset the assumptions and expectations of aesthetic value, cultural refinement and dignity attached to art. In this sense, Duchamp knowingly deploys a form of toilet humour as a means to degrade the purity of art. His nomination of a urinal as sculpture inversely mirrors the act of debasement to which the object is normally subjected. The urinal's conventional use as an object into which men urinate, presents Duchamp with

Marcel Duchamp
Alfred Stieglitz, photograph of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain,*
New York, 1917, Archives Marcel Duchamp

an object inextricably associated with grotesque debasement and linguistic mockery.

In nominating the utilitarian mass-produced urinal as art, Duchamp projected a stream of cultural mockery back at the defenders of established art. As we know, the readymade did not destroy the idea of artistic value, but it did transform and expand the criteria by which it is defined.

It is over a hundred years since Duchamp's first tentative move towards the readymade (*Bicycle Wheel* (1913) or *Bottle Rack* (1914), depending on how strict the term, which he only coined after his move to New York in 1915, is applied). The readymade is now established as one of contemporary art's most enduring orthodoxies, habitually enacted by artists around the globe and embraced by the art market.[2] The shock value provoked by Duchamp's first deployment of the readymade has all but vanished and its repetition is now met by weary recognition. Today, it is difficult not to see the use of the readymade as anything other than habitual and conventional, a parody of its former force. As in comedy, timing and context is everything. The world changes; what was once transformative itself becomes a cultural cliché, vulnerable to ironic reframing - and so it is with the repetition of the readymade.

Contained within the form and tradition of the readymade and its dependency upon industrially mass-produced products, but inflected with a debased variant on the artist's authentic gesture, in May 1961 Piero Manzoni did a dump in a tin. Or more precisely 90 tins, each weighing 30 grammes and originally for sale at the current price of gold. Six months later, Manzoni had his photograph taken at the Angli Shirt Factory, Denmark, with one of his cans. He is standing and smiling in one of the factory's toilets, holding his

creation aloft. The toilet visible behind him jokingly becomes the new site of production for his art, and a clear nod to Duchamp's *Fountain*.

The photograph is part of the promotion and packaging of the art, a parodic mimicry of the marketing that surrounds the commodity. Are we to see Manzoni's canned *merde* as an effort to up the ante on Duchamp's toilet humour? He certainly seems to continue the scatological strain. Countering the romantic tradition of artist's self-portraits, he gives us instead a deadpan self-deprecating performance. At the same time it is a triumphant extension of the valorisation of the artist, with primary traces of his or her body now being identified as art.
Much as Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* is about an extension of art to the body, the work is also an ironic response to consumerism, a dirty protest. His primary and expressive gesture, albeit preserved and commodified in tins, satirises art as an essentially expressive act, which had reached an apotheosis in the hyperbolic gestures of Abstract Expressionist painting. Ultimately the primary focus of the joke was the ludicrous excesses of the market for art. On 16 October, 2015, *Tin 54* was sold at Christies for £182,500.

For Peter L. Berger, jokes are said to involve ‘transcendence in a lower key’.[3] Borrowing terminology from the philosopher Alfred Schutz, for Berger ‘the comic breaks into the consciousness of the paramount reality, which is that ordinary, everyday world in which we exist most of the time… This reality is dense, heavy, compelling.’[4] In contrast, ‘the reality of the comic is thin, effervescent’ and ‘the comic posits another reality that is inserted like an island into the ocean of everyday experience.’[5]

This provides a useful way of thinking about Richard Wentworth’s ongoing photographs *Making Do and Getting By*, an epic series, spanning four decades, made in response to often small and overlooked arrangements of things observed on the street. At the outset the pictures tended to concentrate on London’s Caledonian Road but have since expanded to include cities and places all over the world. In Wentworth’s photographs objects are charged with comic potential by the unexpected way they have been discarded, repaired or re-used in creative new ways. He has said that many of the photographs are about ‘people trying to make the world do what they want it to do.’[6] His photography is indebted to the inventive improvisations of strangers, embraced as unconscious collaborators. It is primarily a sculptural language of things that he is drawing attention to in his photographs, a formally inventive and creative use of everyday stuff that he goes so far as to suggest entails a ‘public humiliation of the history of sculpture and for all three-dimensional enterprise.’[7] The world throws up daily amusements, conjunctions and relationships, and habitually overlooked incongruities. Wentworth’s ‘speedy reportage’ creates a new comic lexicon from the thrown away, the crap on the streets, ad hoc repairs and the chance meeting of objects.[8] The urban environment depicted is often marked by a certain economic reality where there are few clean streets or manicured neighbourhoods, but instead places that are run-down, messy and disorganised, where people leave furniture out on the street or hang abandoned clothing on railings. Wentworth’s art might well acknowledge the readymade, but it takes the pretense out of Duchamp’s aristocratic gaze — the work is always grounded. And since the objects’ identity is as photographs, the extraordinary and unexpected is always located within the familiar and day-to-day.

Bill Woodrow’s sculptures, like Wentworth’s photographs, engage with the tradition of the readymade, but refute its dumb obduracy and involve instead a poetic and transformative response to the material world. In his *Bean Can* sculptures made in 1981, for example, the tins, stripped of their labels, provide the metal from which is fashioned a series of new objects, but still umbilically attached — a pipe and tobacco, a padlock, an electric plug, a pen knife and a pair of spectacles.

According to Peter L. Berger the comic may be ‘describable as a form of playfulness’ and its intrusion into the seriousness of everyday life involves ‘the perception of an otherwise undisclosed dimension of reality’.[9] This characteristic of the joke could be applied to Woodrow’s

▲ **Keith Coventry**
Drysdale Street, N1, 2012
Bronze
147.5 cm x 29.5 cm x 29.5 cm
(58-1/4” x 11-5/8” x 11-5/8”)
Edition 1 of 3 Edition of 3 + 2 APs
© Keith Coventry, courtesy Pace Gallery

◀ **Keith Coventry**
Kebab Machine 1 (1998)
Bronze
109 x 38 x 38 cm
© Keith Coventry, courtesy Pace Gallery

▼

Richard Wentworth
London, 1976.
Making Do and Getting By, 1976
C-type print
43.5 x 51 x 6.5 cm
17 x 20 x 2.5 in.

▶

Richard Wentworth
XXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXX
XXXXXXXX

sculptures of the 1980s. Familiar domestic appliances and ordinary objects — kettles, electric fires, car seats, washing machines etc. — are cut into and re-configured until they possess something of the absurd mutability of plastic form found in cartoons: a comic and fantastic potential, where seemingly impossible, nature-defying, shape-shifting transformations occur before our eyes. The artist's playful transformation of discarded commodities release new suppressed forms, often absurd and dream-like. The ecological impulse in Woodrow's sculpture is explicit; similarly, he seeks to accommodate and celebrate the texture of multiple narratives, other voices, other realities, often knowingly mixing the domestic with the violent fantasies peddled by popular culture.

Such works as *Electric Fire, Car Seat and Incident* (1981) stage new relationships between objects, creating alternative narratives between things we thought we knew, producing something unsettling and unexpected, challenging what we thought was the order of the world. In Woodrow's hands, the material elements of abandoned commodities are cajoled into revolt against their given forms. Once compliant, flawless surfaces designed to woo and seduce erupt into transgressive forms, unshackled from utility. A strong redemptive impulse, contesting the wasteful logic of capitalism's culture of consumption, seems to fuel Woodrow's creative process and is registered in his adoption and recuperation of discarded everyday stuff.

Bill Woodrow
Electric Fire, Car Seat and Incident (1981)
80 x 300 x 200 cm
Double Act, Bluecoat
image: courtesy of the artist

Keith Coventry
Bonham Estate, (1997)
oil on linen, glass and wood
122 x 96.5 x 5.5 cm (48-1/16 x 38 x 2-3/16")
© Keith Coventry, courtesy Pace Gallery
Photographer: Stephen White

Woodrow's work is legible as a critique of the societal transformations that were ruthlessly imposed in the 1980s. The sculptor's distinctive appreciation of traditional forms of handmade production can be set against the 'modernising' destruction of old industrial processes and communities of craft skill taking place during the Thatcher years. Staving off the demoralising impact of its historical context, Woodrow's response is witty and playful. His sculptures register the rich, uneven grain of contemporary British culture, its vitality, contradictions and violence.

The recycling impulse and sense of violence, both explicit and latent, at work in Woodrow's art is also apparent in the work of Keith Coventry. To those acquainted with the history of modern art, Coventry's visual language looks familiar, dated even. Refined in its realisation and knowing in its reference to early twentieth-century Modernism, it has nonetheless a remaindered quality about it, seemingly out of place and out of time. The musty whiff of Russian artist Kazimir Malevich lingers over Coventry's *Estate Paintings* (1996-98). In *Spitalfields Estate* (1996) the reiteration of the visual language of geometric abstraction appears like a nostalgic yearning for the formal vitality of Russian Suprematism and the revolutionary social and cultural ideals it once embodied. But with Malevich's work now decorating the mansions of oligarchs, and Modernism's utopian dreams of social and cultural transformation long since withered, to make such paintings today seems like a joke, and a cruel one at that.

Overleaf
Richard Hughes
Super Yob, (2014)
Cast glass reinforced polyester
Dimensions variable
Installation view 'Field Trip', The Modern Institute, Glasgow, 2014
Courtesy of The Artist and The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
Photo: Max Slaven

In the context of contemporary art, Coventry's apparent affinity with the formal strategies and material practices of Modernism, his commitment to the conventions of oil painting and sculpture cast in bronze, seem anachronistic and conservative. The visual language he deploys steers us towards an interpretation of the work that is familiar and 'safe': an avant-garde now long since past, a once radical aesthetic detached from its political intent, a desiccated form consigned to the safety of art history.

In a painting such as *Bonham Estate*, 1997, the title invites us to reconsider the formal language of abstraction presented on the canvas. The fusion between artistic and social experimentation once at the core of the original Modernist project is reformulated in Coventry's art, albeit in ironic form, as we find ourselves aligning the abstract geometry of Russian Suprematicism with the aerial plan of a London housing estate. Municipal housing estates and a vandalised public sphere represent a compromised version of the Modernist project. Abused street architecture featured in works such as *Looted Shop Front* (1995) and *Drysdale Street, N1* (2012) register the trace of urban disaffection and boredom, expressed through acts of wanton destruction. 'Serious' issues are manifest through 'serious' form as Coventry's casting of sculpture in bronze bestows status, value and ironic importance on these acts of disorder.

Coventry's art thrives on the mischievous marriage of high and low cultural associations. *Kebab Machine 1* (1998) elevates and monumentalises a familiar element of British fast food culture, setting up a deliberate collision of tastes, between the refined associations and traditions of bronze sculpture and something that is readily associated with the idea of a boozy British night out— a testament to a form of cultural imperialism, since it is the Turkish or Greek kebab that can now serve as a sign of British culture, alongside, in Coventry's work, the broken sapling or vandalised and decapitated Henry Moore *King and Queen* sculpture.

The ordinariness of everyday life also permeates the art of Richard Hughes. Drawing upon his experiences as a teenager growing-up in the West Midlands, his work reveals an affectionate familiarity with the banality and brutality of his urban environment and its concrete structures. Hughes' visual vocabulary is taken from the same mundane terrain found in British housing estates and shopping-centres where he once hung out. Scanning architectural features, street furniture and discarded objects with the eye of a skateboarder on the lookout for opportunities to refashion the banal urban fabric for his own use and pleasure, Hughes rejuvenates and animates the everyday through acts of fantastic transformation.

He has an affinity with concrete, a building material that literally shaped the parameters of his world. The curbs, benches, and ledges against whose surface he skated, while perceived as bleak and lifeless by others, were valued by Hughes as sites of thrill and pleasure. This attention to detail and the potential of the overlooked, and a mischievous ingenuity to fashion new possibilities, underpins much of his artistic practice. Calling upon both his own, and the viewer's capacity for imaginative projection, he plays with instability, a certain mutability in which things are not what they seem, or become something other to what you expect. There is a sense of something working 'under the radar', clandestine, in his art, as if

occupying a shared public space but in a coded and cultish manner. His adoption of remaindered objects deemed to have reached a certain state of uselessness, discarded and overlooked, suggests a fascination with wrestling the extraordinary from the ordinary. Concentrated looking and imaginative projection invoke transformation.

In Hughes' art this transformation often comes across as a mischievous prank, a dare even. It seems to emerge from having the time to observe, to notice what is normally overlooked. To this extent it brings to mind the kind of intimate interaction with their immediate environment experienced by bored adolescents. With no money, nowhere to go and nothing to do, teenagers encounter the monotony of surplus time as time spent hanging around with mates, punctuated by occasional acts of low-level vandalism and high-level bravado. Daft stuff gets done, for no other reason than for a laugh, but from which status is achieved and pride taken in a prank well done. Often there is a recognition of the danger and importance of elevation at work in such delinquent acts: Hughes acknowledges 'a fondness for bravado and bullying trophies: shoes hanging from overhead cables, well-aimed bike tires, underpants on a bus shelter, that sort of thing.' [10]

The deployment of objects to signify status and identity is of course important in adult life, but in adolescence this takes on even greater significance. There is a close proximity of objects associated with the body in Hughes' work: mattresses host fungi, chairs entwine trees and abandoned shoes sprout grass - wry, comic subversions of the proper order of objects and their use. In *Super Yob* (2014), concrete slabs appear to have been violently thrown at a high wall, puncturing the immaculate surface of the gallery. But the apparent randomness of the projectile's distribution diverts attention away from the actual objects embedded in the wall, inviting us to reflect on what kind of force must have produced such a violent configuration. The work seems to lead us to consider the place from which such a wanton act of boastful violence must have been perpetrated, closer to petty vandalism than a grand artistic gesture. But this sculpture revels in deception; the slabs are not concrete, merely well-crafted polystyrene copies of the material. The implied weight of the concrete, and the violent force suggested by the embedded projectiles, are just a bluff. Hughes is a trickster, his work takes us on a bathetic journey, teasing and joking through our trust in sculpture's formal vocabulary and the etiquette of the gallery as a space for serious expression and contemplation.

There is a lightness to *Super Yob* that literally takes the gravitas and gravity out of those artists who used industrialised and manufactured readymade forms. Like Keith Coventry's art, Hughes' sculpture is drawn from a familiar urban everyday, but instead of using the language of Modernist form, his involve a crafted process of simulation and deception, painstakingly mimicking the appearance of concrete in a lightweight synthetic form. There is always a gravitational pull and solemnity to Coventry's work, as he freezes and monumentalises signs of the urban everyday. In contrast, Hughes' art is light and gravity defying, even when he uses concrete as a medium. In *Pedestrian* (*Frankie Dubz)* (2013), concrete lamp posts defy their implied weight, dancing across the gallery floor, light of foot and jaunty.

Overleaf
Richard Hughes
The pedestrian, (2012)
Polyester resin, fiberglass, paint
206 x 235 x 60 cm
Installation view where it all happened once, Tramway, Glasgow, 2012
Courtesy of The Artist and The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow
Photo: Keith Hunter

Irony

Because he was a founding member of the conceptual art group Art & Language, Terry Atkinson's adoption in 1974 of what on the face of it appeared to be a drawing and painting practice informed by the expressive resources of Socialist Realism, was always going to be a move inflected with a degree of irony. Precipitated by his leaving of the group, Atkinson accounts for this development of his practice as motivated by a self-conscious attempt to break out from what he considered to be the narrowing preoccupations of Conceptual Art. For Atkinson, Socialist Realism was of value as a set of formal resources because it was considered to be the very opposite of what was valued by Western Modernism. Socialist Realism's devalued status was mischievously taken up by Atkinson and deployed as a well-established and respectable avant-garde strategy: namely the use and recasting of ideological and formal material considered irrelevant by mainstream Modernist culture. During the period between 1974 and the mid-1980s Atkinson produced a series of drawings and paintings that played multiple conventions against each other to problematise and destabilise how historical knowledge was constructed. Often he deploys parody in his work, a use that was in line with Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as a form of "extended repetition with critical difference."[11] The use of inherited traditional pictorial skills was combined with extended caption-titles to introduce unexpected interrogative traffic between image, text and the historical references the work addressed. In his First World War, Vietnam and Irish works, Atkinson puts images into a state of tension, pulled and pushed by captions stuttering with contradictions, multiple voices, fact and fiction. The work has an overblown, unapologetic theatricality, a corrosive comedy that lets nothing settle. Atkinson's art vividly foregrounds the fact that as an artist he not only works in a historically given process of representation, but also reminds us that he works *on* that process— contesting its terms, and outcomes. In this sense he sees himself as a kind of 'information processor', an identity he adopts throughout his practice.

In the mid-1980s Atkinson specifically addressed this role through his interest in the political idea of Republicanism, both in terms of what a contemporary English Republicanism might mean and look like, and inevitably, given the political context of Britain in the 1980s, its problematic interface with an active modern Irish Republicanism. In the Irish work a series of drawings and paintings addressed what Atkinson has described as his search for an appropriate simile for the 'black hole' intractability of Anglo-Irish history. Against a black ground, redolent of a bunker's claustrophobic interior, and the Modernist field of Malevich's *Black Square*, Atkinson conjures up scenes of darkly comic still life. The extraordinary and the ordinary lurk in the blackness of the bunker, as representations of ghosts, candles, lilies – all symbols of potent Irish Republican romanticism— inhabit the gloom along with hooded Republican paramilitaries wiring plastic-bag explosives in bunkers in Armagh. Framed by the minimalist geometry of the bunker, an aesthetic point of containment for the volatile pictorial and historical elements, the images almost descend into complete darkness.

Terry Atkinson
No 39. Irish Works
Two hated and veiled Goyaesque figures moving across a bunker in Armagh
Conte on black paper 76.6 x 118.8 cms. (1985)

Terry Atkinson
One-eyed Republican, listening with arms folded, with purple anemones – all more or less luminous – at dusk in a bunker in Armagh
Conte on black paper 95.2 x 120 cms. (1985)

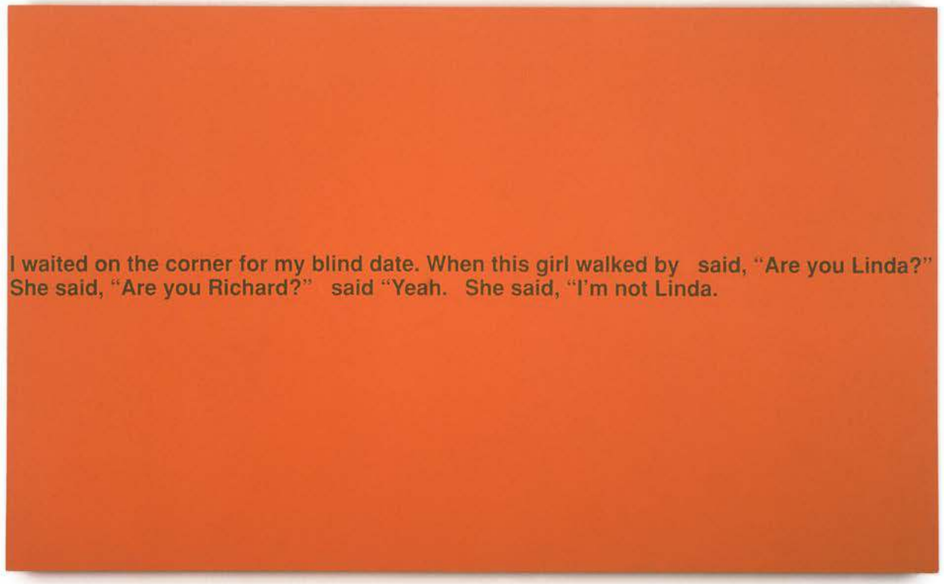
Terry Atkinson
Slat Greaser Trough 2, (1990–2014)
wood, grease, 84 x 120 x 7”

The *Greasers* series from the mid 1980s offers something different, in that these wall-based and sculptural works use regular construction materials of wood and metal to create minimalist, abstract geometric forms to carry petroleum grease, a material considered dirty and unstable, uncontained and unruly (like the hooded men in the drawings). Analogous to the computing model of hardware and software, Atkinson's wooden structures function as the physical 'motherboard' into which the viscous grease 'software' is loaded, enabling the system to run. As in the Irish series, a sardonic, black comedy is at work in *Greasers*; only in this case it is delivered as a slow, almost imperceptible form of extended slapstick. As an oil-derived product, grease functions as an allegorical medium, replete with associations of dirty dealings: whether it be the West's repeated military intervention in Middle Eastern politics to secure access to this economically important commodity, or the antics of greedy, polluting oil companies, or as a material and linguistic signifier of corruption and ambition. The material's viscosity, its sensitivity to temperature changes and gravity, ensures that in 'hot' situations its inherent material volatility will display agency beyond that controlled by the artist. Atkinson's *Greasers* are inherently, and predictably, unstable structures. They operate as a form of sculptural slapstick, a material and conceptual performance of a routine, the outcome of which can be predicted well in advance, but they will always deliver their punch-line, however deferred: Atkinson was once contacted by an irate collector complaining that the *Greasers* he had recently bought and installed in his home had just ruined his beautiful parquet flooring.

Richard Prince is an artist fascinated with common and popular cultural forms. Presenting jokes as paintings is an act of elevation as well as an act of translation. The joke is used by Prince to undermine the authority of a certain form of art. When he was writing out one-liners in pencil or ink on sheets of paper and selling them for $10 each, he commented that 'artists were creating sculptures in bronze, making huge paintings, talking about prices and clothes and cars and spending vast amounts of money.'[12] In making his *Monochromatic Jokes*, which he began in Los Angeles in 1987, Prince combined permutations of standardised elements: store-bought pre-stretched canvases, different planes of colour and stock gags. How do we distinguish between them? Is the value of the painting determined by the quality of the joke or the aesthetic impact of the overall painting? Despite their formulaic presentation, the selection of the joke is not formulaic, it is instead indicative of his taste and preferences, and in this sense the paintings can be seen to retain an element of individual authorship, much as they appear to challenge it.

Jokes are particular and specific; where they are culled from and what cultural set of values they represent are important to Prince — the jokes he has chosen often involve recurring male middle-class fears and fantasies, often to do with infidelity. His work shows us how jokes index and describe a particular historical and cultural moment and define a certain class-marked and gendered world, one that has already passed, locked somewhere in an America of the 1950s and 60s. Jokes, though re-occurring and formulaic, are acutely sensitive to timing and context.

Richard Prince
I'm Not Linda, (1994)
acrylic and silkscreen on canvas
© The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London



Part of the comedy of *Monochromatic Jokes* relates to the elevation of the joke from something lowly, usually encountered in newspaper cartoons, delivered by TV comics or as moments of light-relief inserted into the humdrum reality of everyday social interaction. In other words jokes, by their very nature, are mobile, posses a 'throw away' quality and have a transient currency, but in Prince's work they take on an obstinate permanence in the high art medium of painting. As with much of his work, the re-presentation of overlooked and devalued forms of popular culture provides the basis for the work and the means by which his transgression of cultural boundaries is enacted. With art, as with comedy, context is everything. As the Northern Irish comic Frank Carson used to say, 'It's the way I tell 'em!' and Prince 'tells 'em' in a form and in a context we do not expect. What's at stake in these paintings is not the boundary crossing of lowly popular culture into the esteemed context of high art: that particular threshold, while symbolically important and constantly defended, has in fact been permeable for a long time, as the history of art vividly demonstrates. Instead, the *Monochromatic Jokes* highlight the issue of authorship and value, a concern of crucial importance to the collection of art.

Overleaf
Olav Westphalen
Eight Random Gags, 2012
ink/acrylic/collage on paper, 65 x 86 cm

R.G.P #34

MOTHER TERESA'S FATHER FINDS TRUE LOVE (THROUGH ESPIONAGE)

R.G.P #21

SO, A LITTLE LESS DRAMATIC THAN HIM AND WE ONLY DO ONE TAKE?

CORRECT.

A TERRORIST ON A DOCUMENTARY FILM SHOOT

R.G.P #48

FASCIST!

HITLER AT THE ZOO

R.G.P #22

WHY DO YOU THINK YOU WANT TO KNOW IF I HAVE SINNED?

YOUR SHRINK IN CHURCH

R.G.P #56

...AND THIS BEAUTIFUL SOUL OF AN INNOCENT CHILD GOES TO THE GENTLEMAN WITH THE FIERY EYES IN THE BACK

AN AUCTIONEER IN HELL

R.G.P #1

YOUR PAPERS ARE OK, BUT WE DO NEED A PASSPORT PHOTO OF YOU ALONE AND WITH CLOTHES ON

A SEX-ADDICT AT THE IMMIGRATIONS OFFICE

R.G.P #117

CALL ME! I PROMISE TO GIVE YOU BACK YOUR RADIANT SMILE!

A DENTIST AT A FUNERAL

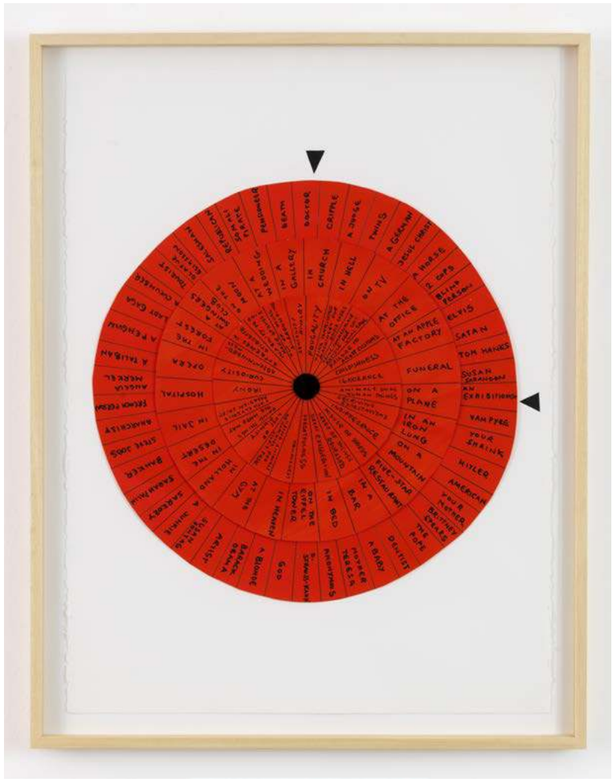
R.G.P #3

I CAN SEE RUSSIA!

SARAH PALIN ON THE EIFFEL TOWER

Monochromatic Jokes function both as paintings of 'jokes' and as 'joke paintings'. Jokes are usually spoken, performed, delivered and passed on, they operate in well-established contexts and through recognised forms of delivery. Painting is not the usual mode by which jokes are delivered, the form is both too cumbersome and slow. The comedy of Prince's paintings is not just to be found in the internal structure of the individual jokes featured, their set-up and punch-lines, but also relates to the incongruity of the jokes' location on the serious surface of monochromatic painting.

In *A Junkie in a Forest Doing Things the Hard Way* (2012) Olav Westphalen deploys a rudimentary, but effective system to generate his art. Borrowing a device known as the cartoonist's 'gag-master', a simple apparatus consisting of three concentric discs on which a range of situations, characters and objects are written, he spins the discs to arrive at random alignments, prompting the generation of thousands of different joke premises. The resulting combination forms the structure of the joke and the basis for his cartoon: examples include *A Cucumber At The Funeral* or *A Desert Island On A Desert Island.* The random selection of standardised component-parts is able to produce a huge but finite number of permutations, which may or may not result in a funny gag. The process carries something of the obsessive mania displayed by 'joke machine' comedians like Jimmy Carr, relentlessly firing off a stream of stock one-liners.



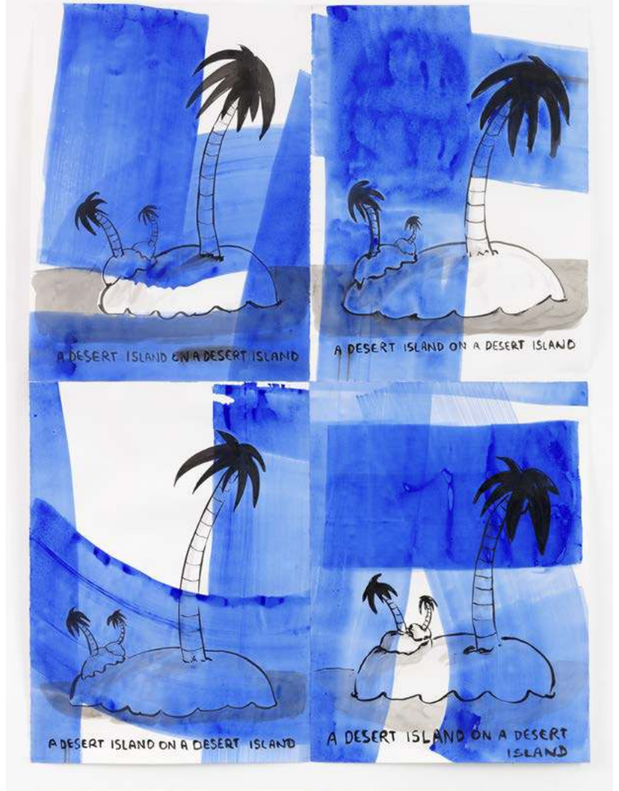
▲
Olav Westphalen
Regawhee, collage, (2012)
65 x 86 cm

Olav Westphalen ▶
A Desert Island on a Desert Island, (2012)
Ink/acrylic/collage on paper, 172 x 130 cm

Overleaf
Olav Westphalen
Le Grand Blanc, (2007)
Galerie Georges-Philippe et Natalie Vallois, Paris

Olav Westphalen
A Cucumber at the Funeral (red) (2012)
Ink and acrylic on paper
86 x 65 cm

Olav Westphalen
A Taliban on a Slide (red) (2012)
Ink and acrylic on paper
76 x 57 cm



The effect is excessive, machine-like, overblown. The production accents the formulaic nature of joke creation, with its reiteration of core themes and subjects in random combination. In this sense the structure of *A Junkie in a Forest…* mimics and mocks both the industrial production of commercial entertainment represented by the professional stand-up comic or cartoonist churning out 'product' and the use of systematic structure and serial repetition in the work of Minimal and Conceptual artists.

The random, mechanical aspect of the joke's generation is of course just the starting point of the art work. Westphalen then has the task to mediate its translation into a visual image. While one could imagine this might provide an opportunity to claw back a sense of individual distinctiveness through the deployment of different graphic styles to deliver the individual joke, this is resisted. The expressive resource deployed in the joke's realisation as drawing is marked by a distinctly uniform signature style, and one that is associated with generic 'cartoon' style familiar through its currency in mass-culture. As in Richard Prince's use of the joke, the old anxiety about high art being vulgarised by vernacular and popular culture is part of the work's comic reach. It is as if Westphalen sees the much discussed 'great divide' between low and high art as itself just another old joke, endlessly recycled. The thematic of recycling is clearly central to the comic spirit of *A Junkie in a Forest…*, it is there in the use of the 'gag master', the use of the generic cartoon style, and it is there in relation to the sense of repetition and recycling in contemporary art. Westphalen's work could be seen

Olav Westphalen
Le Grand Blanc, (2007)
Galerie Georges-Philippe et Natalie Vallois, Paris

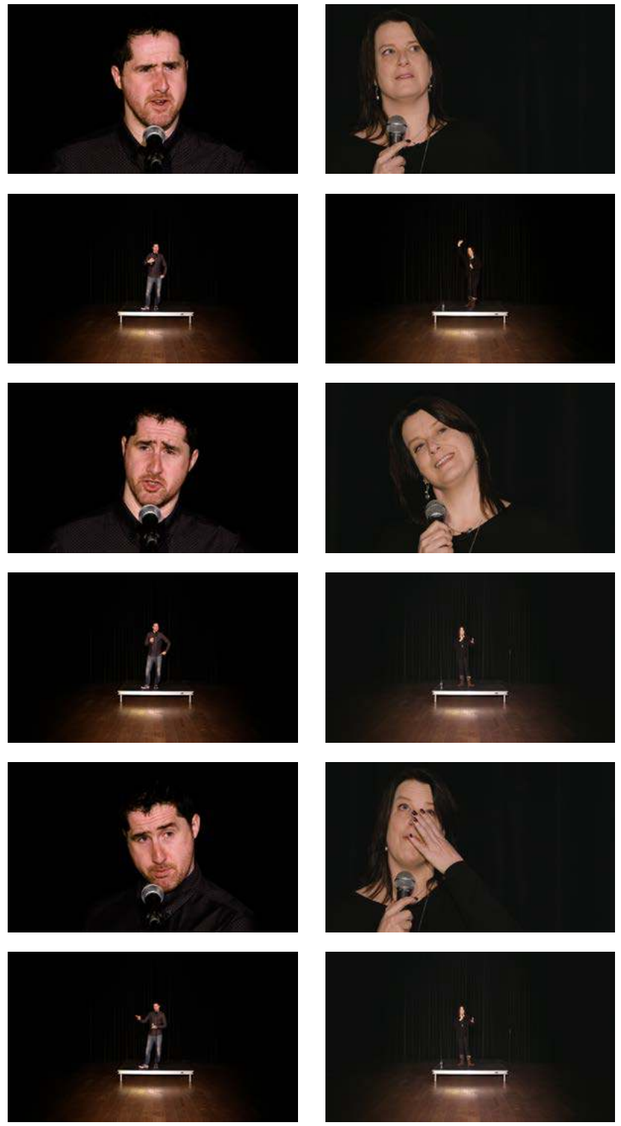
as a knowing and ironic response to Richard Prince, who in many ways has done most to capitalise on the recycling of jokes as art by turning them into highly valued paintings. *A Junkie in a Forest…* still retains the cartoon's connection to drawings on paper, and does not have the authority of painting on canvases. Its mode of exhibition, presented in a salon-style/ fly-posted hang, creates a sense of quick production and ceaseless overproduction. In using the 'gag-master' device, with its ability to churn out a constant stream of jokes, Westphalen may well have found a very appropriate model for the culture industry's capacity to mass-produce banal, standardised cultural goods.

Westphalen presents us with the parameters of a cultural system, and makes us aware of its operational logic, whereas Prince, with his selective appropriation of preferred jokes from *The New Yorker* and *Playboy* magazine, seems content to work within it. Westphalen's approach is more rigorous and critical, but also more pessimistic, as it shows the limits of individual authorship and acknowledges that culture is determined by what the system will permit, which in the case of *A Junkie in a Forest…*, is the result of the random spin of a wheel.

Westphalen's fibreglass sculptures, *Snowmen* (2006), play with a recognisable, naïve and simple rendition of the figurative form. Part of the comedy of the work is in the transformation of materials and their contradiction, making permanent something that everyone associates with transience. Westphalen plays with the primary formal identifiable elements of the figure of a snowman, together with orange carrot-shaped nose, black lumps for eyes and brown branches for arms, extending the figure into a Brancusi-like column made up of five lumpy white spherical forms, with 'nose', 'arms' and 'eyes' distributed somewhat randomly upon them. These snowmen are very much about a mockery and send up of weighty traditional sculptural forms, appearing lightweight both physically and intellectually. He also collides the innocence and sentimentality associated with snowmen, to enact and play out situations to do with real life: one is slumped up against the wall like a beggar, another appears to be giving birth, while in another scenario, one snowman pushes another in a wheelchair, bereft of 'arms' and 'eyes.'

Common Culture
I Can't Go on, I'll Go On, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On (2016).
looped, 40-minute video installation

Common Culture's videos, *I Can't Go on, I'll Go On, I Can't Go On, I'll Go On* (2016), strip down stand-up comedy routines. These looped, 40-minute videos record the full routines of stand-up comedians, isolated and spot-lit on a small stage in a performance space, bereft of an audience. The work is concerned with how the comedians' routines would falter under the strain of the silence, when there was no one to react against. The comedians' acts provide readymade performances, albeit skewed and altered by the lack of an audience. There are elements of cruelty here, especially in *I Can't Go On, I'll Go On… (Karen)*, which involves an editing process that is mechanistic and indifferent to what the performing subject is doing. At one point the comedian starts to cry. She's talking about her father who died recently and without the crowd before her has time to reflect and think about her loss. She goes on, she must go on, but her act is not the same. She has lost the control she once had. Of course she does have an audience. Her stand-up routine is isolated from a live audience but reaches us in the gallery space — now filtered and framed through the different habits and protocols of art spectatorship. While there is cruelty, there is also resilience and humanity here.



Wit

There is an economy of expression in wit: it is sharp, pithy and pointed. Wit is intellectually informed humour and frequently involves a play of words. Wit also debunks. It can be directed against the pretensions of particular social institutions, conventions or customs.

Bruce Nauman's *Eleven Color Photographs* present a playful exploration of the relationship between language, artistic agency and photography. In this series of images, originally made between 1966- 1967 and collated into a single portfolio in 1970, Nauman was photographed enacting inane demonstrations of idiomatic expressions, which in turn function as the titles for the individual images. In *Eating My Words*, the artist is photographed sitting at a dining table, jam jar in hand, knife at the ready, about to eat pieces of bread shaped into letters spelling out '*w-o-r-d-s*.' Through the interplay of title and image, the photographs are both a factual description of what is depicted and a playful, if corny, visual pun.

Eleven Color Photographs literalise metaphor, turning words into pictures: in *Feet of Clay,* Nauman's feet are photographed covered in clay. There is something courageously dumb about this work, a certain persistence to see something through to the bitter end. An echo of the slapstick of Laurel and Hardy, relentlessly enacting a joke, so obvious, that we can see it coming a mile away, but we still want to see it unfold. In *Self-Portrait as a Fountain*, a photograph of the artist spurting a jet of water from his mouth acknowledges and mimics the genre of classical sculpture associated with ornate water-fountains as well as the readymade of Duchamp. Repetition of simple performative acts such as those depicted in the *Eleven Color Photographs* is a thematic of Nauman's work, reiterated in numerous performances, videos and sculptures.

According to Henri Bergson, 'Once our attention is fixed on the material aspect of a metaphor, the idea expressed becomes comic.'[13] This is what happens in Nauman's work. *Eleven Color Photographs* signals his interest in the creative use of language, beyond its normal function as a means of communication. His deliberate use of familiar figurative expressions, literally visualised as deadpan responsive actions, when photographed, offered Nauman opportunities to humorously unsettle language's normal function in everyday life. The playful approach to language in these photographs and later extended to his work in neon, offered a refreshing and mischievous counter-position to the often-sterile use of language adopted by many Conceptual artists.

Sarah Lucas' art revels in innuendo, translating verbal jokes and slang sayings in photographs and sculpture. The comedy stems not just from the original joke itself, which very often carries a specific set of references, and defines a particular working-class and often misogynistic British humour, but from how it is formally translated, a translation that often involves everyday objects — fruit, vegetables, fried eggs, kebabs and buckets become props weighted with innuendo. Like Nauman, she also photographs literal realisations of metaphoric sayings. Her two versions of *Got a Salmon On* play against and

Sarah Lucas
Got a Salmon On #3 1997

Sarah Lucas
Got a salmon on prawn, (1994)
Cibachrome

with London slang for an erection. In *Got A Salmon On #3* (1997), Lucas is photographed outside seedy-looking pub toilets, a cue to the dirty humour of the sexual associations being made. The context is also replete with associations of British realist documentary photography, but its seriousness is scuppered by her knowing deployment of the slipperiness of vernacular slang. With deadpan impassivity and in mock ceremony, Lucas carries a large salmon, held against her upper body as if it were a weapon. This comic presentation conflates the often-absurd phallic display in trophy photographs of fisherman holding their catch, with the sexual slur that associates the smell of fish with female genitalia.

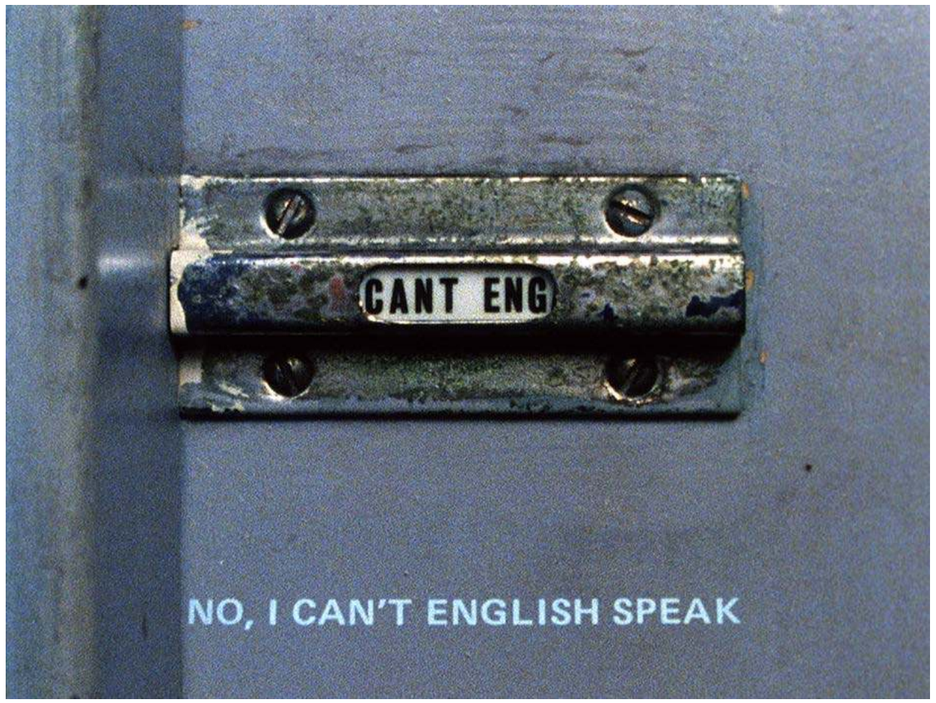
In the earlier block of nine sequential photographs that make up *Got a Salmon On (Prawn)* (1994) the joke is at the expense of the potency of male sexuality. 'Prawn' is offensive slang for a woman who has an attractive body but ugly face, a reference to the act of eating the body of a prawn but discarding its head. By cropping the head out of the seated naked male figure in the photographs, the power of this abusive term is subverted. In the photographs, the can of lager, held over his crotch, becomes a pathetically volatile substitute penis, with the stop motion effect of the sequence recording the can's excited animation and too rapid climax. The comedy here is clearly directed at laddish lager drinkers, whose sexual bravado is both fueled and ultimately undermined by alcohol.

John Smith's film, shot in 16mm, *Shepherd's Delight: An Ananalyis of Humour* (1980-84), with its deliberate, puerile misspelling in the title, highlighting the word 'anal' in analysis, comically upholds the joke to mock academic scrutiny. Smith challenges the truism that you cannot analyse a joke without destroying its humour by revealing how the process of analysis can itself be comical. He takes us through a range of comic forms in the course of the film, beginning with an absurd academic lecture, delivered by an intellectual, that attempts to authoritatively dissect the comedic basis of the proverb 'Red Sky at Night, Shepherd's Delight'. This analytic framework, which informs us how comedy itself is a means of demonstrating intellectual superiority, is then disrupted in a number of ways. The slow and labored dissection of the proverb is followed by a rapid turnover of quick-fire visual gags and puns, knowingly cringe-worthy. A sequence featuring a solitary and lonely man systematically drinking a bottle of whisky over the course of an evening and waking up with a hangover, prompts a return to the authoritative voice of the academic, who begins to reflect on how hangovers can be funny.

Overleaf
John Smith
Shepherd's Delight:
An Ananalyis of Humour (1980-84)
35mins Colour 16mm


delight
warning


WREN
FIRECREST


CANT ENG
NO, I CAN'T ENGLISH SPEAK

The ‘anal’ in analysis becomes a comic decoy and a specific point of reference in the one joke that is delivered in the film. We are asked to imagine that the audience at a party encounters the joke. A young man’s confident delivery of the joke to camera is interrupted by a series of analytical text captions commenting on both details within the joke and the way he tells it. The joke involves an absurd situation in which two horses talking in a pub both recount how they each were losing a race until they felt a sudden pain in the arse that prompts them to win. Smith uses the anal reference to drive both the success of the horses in the race and instill anxiety in the audience as to where the joke might be heading. Ultimately the anxiety attached to the anal reference is abandoned as we are told how the talking horses’ story is interrupted by a greyhound who tells them that he has also had the same experience. The punch-line of the joke, completely switches direction and, rather than addressing the anal incident, instead registers the horses’ shock that a dog has acquired language and could talk. Smith’s film uses comedy to spoof the relationship between the body, language and theory, playfully mocking Freudian analysis.

The film also plays with the conventions of structural filmmaking, using fixed framing, repetition and abrupt, interruptive editing techniques to montage comic juxtapositions of image and sound and foreground the construction of the film. This playfulness is particularly evident in Smith’s treatment of language as an important analytic tool with the power to interpret the world, a power he simultaneously, acknowledges, exploits and mocks. Drastic editing techniques are used to create language-based puns and jokes by reframing the text of consumer product labels.

In one sequence addressing alcohol consumption and its consequences, the label of a bottle of whisky is subjected to selective framing, at one point squeezing out the word ‘ache’ from the *Teacher’s* brand name. The film’s sequential format with its staccato, wisecracking rhythm has a destabilising momentum, as Smith peppers his film with visual and linguistic jokes. The didacticism of the academic’s dry, relentless analysis of comedy is teasingly mirrored by Smith’s focus on the label of the intoxicating bottle of spirit, which of course is a bottle of *Teacher’s*.

Smith revels in colliding different systems together to imply certain parallels or compatibility. The analysis of comedy is simultaneously an analysis of filmmaking, each feeding off the other, and both reflecting on how meaning is constructed within a culture of consumption. He uses jokes to spoof and play with the language and authority of the academy. While his film explores comedy, the hammed-up depiction of comedy’s analysis by academia might also be seen as a host for a playful reflection on contemporary debates about structural filmmaking, semiology and theories of consumption. It was during the heyday of Cultural Studies, that *Shepherd’s Delight: An Ananalysis of Humour* was made. Many academics, particularly those associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, were acknowledging, through their analysis informed by continental critical philosophy, the political and cultural significance of popular culture. In the period shortly before Smith’s film was made a number of influential, and theoretically astute studies of consumer culture were published— in 1978 Judith Williamson’s *Decoding Advertising* and a year later, Dick Hebdige’s *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style*. Material culture had become a legitimate object of academic study. Against this backdrop it is not unreasonable to see Smith’s film as a work sharing similar concerns, though the relationship between consumerism and its theorisation was realised in a more comic, tongue-in-cheek manner. In one section of the film the label of *Comfort* fabric conditioner provides the most extended and absurd reflection on consumer culture. The product’s introduction in the 1960s is said to have started our ‘lust for comfort’. This is theorised in the film as symptomatic of consumerism’s expansion in the 1960s based on desire and the impossibility of its satisfaction. With just enough grounding in reality for this to be convincing, it is proposed that the language of consumerism is a language of seduction: both are driven by desire and neither can be satisfied. The serious and intellectual demeanor of the lecturer gives plausibility to this incredible tale. Her analysis of an early *Comfort* label and the woman’s two-fingered gesture, and its interpretation as a sexual innuendo, combined with the apparent suggestiveness of the pronunciation of the first syllable of the product’s name ‘*Com*’, provide a parody of a form of Freudian-inflected and overtly sexualised semiology. The mannerism of intellectual credibility secures authority and believability, which ultimately take us to an absurd place.

Alcoholism is a sub-theme of the film, culminating in a sequence, with the filmmaker turning to camera and talking reflectively about the un-funny consequences of his struggle with drink and how this has severely impeded the production of the film. Throughout his serious disclosure, he holds a mug that we assume contains tea or coffee until the slapstick moment when he attempts to drink from it, only to spill its content down himself.

This accident cues the film's ending when, having returned to the academic's sober analysis of comedy, and just at the moment when the lecturer reaches for Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, a shepherd knocks her out with his crook. In this final act of violence against the body, it is the shepherd, much to his obvious delight, who is victorious. Despite all her academic authority, erudition and eloquence, the simple act of slapstick violence is enough to overpower and silence the intellectual's analysis of humour, and it is the shepherd who has the last laugh.

Maurice Doherty's neon *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show* (2016) hilariously undermines the assumed impartialities that lie behind curators' choices to show some artists rather than others. He exposes the vanities and insularities within the art world. The work also makes fun of artworks that reveal the conditions of their own existence, such as Joseph Kosuth's neon *Five Words In Blue Neon* (1969) that simply describes what the work is. But as a transcription of handwritten text, *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show* also mimes the look of echoes Tracey Emin's neons and links with the way her art traded on intimate and frank sexual disclosures.

Doherty's spreading of a scurrilous rumour, questioning how one of the artists secured inclusion in a group exhibition, initiated the idea for the work. It is a one-line gag that builds on the competitive gossip of an insular, and by implication corrupt art world, but counters the discrete whispering with an act of overt declaration.

The focus of the joke is the curator, the figure who adjudicates who is, or is not, included in an exhibition. To this extent the frankness of the neon declaration serves to unsettle the legitimacy and ethics of a group of often self-regarding art world professionals whose ranks have massively expanded to dangerous and unsustainable levels in recent years thanks to the proliferation of a host of postgraduate Curating Contemporary Art courses. But the luridly bold statement also announces the unapologetic complicity of the ruthless careerist artists prepared to do whatever it takes to be included in a show. The comedy of the neon piece relates to the brazen manner of its declaration of sexual transaction and corruption.

The art world is probably no different from other situations where the toxic mix of power, money and celebrity are involved, but the frankness and unapologetic tone of the handwritten neon sign seems to capture something of the boastful mock scandal of 'kiss and tell' confessions of wannabe celebrities paraded in the popular press. Such overt, confessional indiscretion illuminated in *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show* also hints at an attitudinal shift within contemporary art centred on the strategy of propagating minor scandal as a means to generate notoriety, media attention and celebrity status in order to acquire market interest and commercial success. It also seems to answer and confirm the view, voiced from outside the art world's inner circle in the popular press that contemporary art is controlled by an elite, overseeing values in art unrecognised by the general public, and that getting on depends upon who you know and playing their game.

So the notion of sleeping with someone to get on in a system that is corrupt, just confirms what everyone thinks.

The inclusion of Doherty's neon text will always be the weakest link in the ethical chain of any exhibition. The sign's embarrassing frankness will forever tar every curator, every show and every other artist exhibiting alongside it with the insinuating smear of corruption. The irony of *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show* is that it both announces publicly the existence of a corrupt system and shamelessly acknowledges its own willingness to participate in it. Or maybe we just assume that despite its apparent sincerity, openness and its refreshing honesty, the statement is just not true – no one slept with anyone to get in the show. If that is a direction in which the work's interpretation might go, then it seems to introduce another comic note, one that undermines and ridicules the compulsion that many artists seem to have, to publicly disclose intimate personal details in apparently sincere and un-sentimental factual disclosure, and the audience's voracious appetite to consume such work. In which case, Doherty's neon will always function like a joke in the company of other art: a disruptive, rebellious intervention, a comic 'whistle-blower' casting doubt on the ethical integrity of the system in which it operates.

Maurice Doherty
I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show, (2016)
Neon
Double Act, Bluecoat
image: courtesy of the artist

Deadpan

Henri Bergson identifies rigidity and repetition as the two core causes of laughter, characteristics which in comic performance often coalesce in a figure who acts in a mechanical and repetitive manner, seemingly disconnected from any expression of human traits or mannerisms. Our response to this behaviour is often complicated: a mixture of laughter and pleasure, but is also tainted with a sense of something unsettling, something not quite right. The disquiet we experience perhaps relates to the mismatch between our expectation to see signs of human presence signaled through emotive behaviour, and the flat, emotionless actions of the comic figure. What we encounter is a performance that appears not quite human, or at least not quite normal.

Deadpan humour plays out this jarring incompatibility between inner and outer, between what we understand to be human, evoked through signs of spontaneous expressive behaviour, and the cold mechanics of rote delivery. Out of this contradiction deadpan creates the necessary emotional distance with which to produce laughter, and create the space for critical reflection. As Simon Critchley points out, 'The extraordinary thing about humour is that it returns us to common sense; by distancing us from it, humour familiarizes us with a common world through its miniature strategies of defamiliarization.' [14]

Artifice and deadpan is integral to Pilvi Takala's video, *The Real Snow White* (2009). Her intervention tests the boundaries that define the maintenance of a fake world. Dressed up as Snow White outside Disneyland Paris she upsets the protocol and order about what is permitted in these places. She is not doing anything wrong and she is no less real than the other Snow White on parade there. The comedy is in her deadpan performance and the collision with the machinations of power and control that determine the Disney illusion. The video is simply a document of a performance and her insistence on continuing to play her role. Children still want to have their picture taken with her. As she stands outside the theme park, she is told she is not allowed in, and has to leave.

The joy of Takala's work is the seemingly innocent way she follows through the contradictions of the Disney illusion to its logical but absurd conclusion. Her straight-faced sincerity disarmingly suggests naivety rather than malicious intent, but cleverly and humorously appropriates the infantilised consumption Disney ruthlessly promotes to stage an incisive critique of the corporation's hypocrisy and avarice. When dressed as Snow White, Takala's deadpan, emotionally restrained manner and her apparent good faith, cleverly exploit the innocent victimhood of the Snow White character Disney has so carefully constructed. In the face of the embarrassed security guard's attempts to prevent her access to Disneyland, Takala's display of naïve confusion creates an awkward, public incident, exposing the absurdity of the greedy corporation's power to control the borders of the fantasy world it has created and use of its brand. The collision between the defenders of the lucrative illusion and the consumers of that illusion, at the boundary between the public and private,

Pilvi Takala
Real Snow White, (2009)
9:15 min video

is comically reiterated, as a stream of young fans attempt to have their photograph taken with their heroine, while her authenticity and legitimacy as Snow White is being questioned by Disney.

Jo Spence's *Remodelling Photohistory (Colonization)* (1982) mimics degradation, or rather how she feels documentary photographers see working class subjects. She is answering back as a female subject to the documentary photographic tradition, presenting herself as a mock anthropological subject on her doorstep: topless, barefoot, her lower body informally wrapped by a towel, holding a broom, wearing beads and sunglasses. When cited in the context of a dreary British backyard, the sunglasses seem incongruous, suggestive of another more exotic context.

Remodelling Photohistory (Colonization) both suggests affinities with, and works against, the insidious objectification that takes place in colonial photographs of native women. The work is also not without an element of seaside postcard humour and coy sexual innuendo through the inclusion of two full bottles of milk on the doorstep, which seem connected, albeit in a displaced way, to the display of her breasts to camera. There is also something of the type of titillating representation of the naked body endlessly paraded in *Carry On* films or the *Readers' Wives* section of porn mags, which both suggest that at any moment the mundanity of everyday British life might throw up opportunities for sexual adventure. There is also a knowing awkwardness in Spence's reassembly of documentary's stock signifiers of sexuality and class:

she confronts the camera as an amalgam of signs, domestic worker and sexualised body. Her defiant display, as if standing on guard in the back doorway of a terraced house, acts to block access to that space and the experiences it entails, but also problematises the objectification of woman's bodies normally enacted in such imagery.

Jo Spence 1934 – 1992
Remodelling photohistory: Colonisation, 1981–82
Collaboration with Terry Dennett
Black and white photograph
41 x 30 cm

Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery

"As each plant cell has self producing phytohormones and clear evidence of the pheromonic properties of natural attraction, including inter-species vertebrate to plant transference, it is not so far a step to consider that human chemical excretions might be propitious to the stimulation of plant growth...

..the female homosexual endocrine response shows evidence that a unique combination of progesterone derivative 4,16-androstadien-3-one and estra-1,3,5(10), 16-tetraen-3-ol, unseen in any other mammal sexual manifestation, could cultivate ideal conditions for pheromonal transmission, arousing both the plant genotype and its environmental biotics to a superlative extent."

Dr. Gerda Haeckel, 1976

Gemma Marmalade
Seed Series: Green Fingered (2014)
Gemma and Cabbage

Overleaf
Gemma Marmalade
Seed Series: Green Fingered (2014)
Lisa and Leek
Amanda and Cucumber

Gemma Marmalade's *Seed Series: Green Fingered* (2014) presents an archive of purportedly historical black and white photographs, each showing women of differing ages and the over-size vegetables we assume they have grown. The photographs are both accompanied and contextualised by what appears to be a scientific text by the German botanist Dr. Gerda Haeckel. According to Haeckel's research, the accelerated crop growth observed among communal lesbian gardeners throughout the 1970s and 80s is a result of the unique pheromones the women transmitted to their plants. This spoof text, with just enough scientific jargon and pseudo-theory for it to seem believable, gains further authority through the academic credentials of its author. Marmalade teasingly plays with the tendency to respect and trust an academic title as shorthand for 'expert', bestowing upon the holder of the doctoral title the right to speak with authority and intellectual integrity on any subject. The Northern European twang of the doctor's name also affords further seriousness, and hints at a familial connection between Dr. Gerda Haeckel and the famous German zoologist and evolutionary theorist Dr. Ernst Haeckel. Marmalade's careful construction of the joke's set-up, by manipulating our willingness to trust the language of science as a guarantor of truth, is deftly achieved. Even the doctor's first name, Gerda, carries a comedic seed relating to the theme of female sexuality and fecundity: in Norse mythology Gerda was the goddess of fertility.

Having established her parody of scientific credentials, Marmalade is able to reap the comic effect through a series of photographs of straight-faced women displaying super-sized vegetables. The photographs, framed by serious scientific research, now have to counter the destabilising impact of sexual innuendo created by the comic incongruity of the expressionless women and the vegetables. The women in the portraits manage to keep straight faces and maintain an expressive neutrality worthy of scientific documentary evidence. There is a clear contrast between their restrained demeanor and the exaggerated size of the vegetables they hold. This comic duality gives us a kind of double act - serious women and their comic crops. The vegetable or fruit as sexual innuendo is a long-standing comic gag, and Marmalade re-plays this joke through the photographs: the phallic cucumber, a huge leek whose roots create a merkin-like cover over its owner's crotch, or the clear visceral suggestions of the form of the giant cabbage. The twist the artist gives to the well-used joke of women holding super-sized vegetables is the way she takes possession of a dominant comic scenario and transforms it to create a new and radically different comic outcome. The work's title, *Seed Series: Green Fingered*, by altering the more familiar 'green fingers', further emphasises the sexual innuendo.

Marmalade occupies the clichéd comic scenario and takes it away from the usual innuendo-laden interpretation found in bawdy sea-side postcard imagery, to a mock-scientific display that purports to demonstrate objective evidence of women's productivity and fertility. Gone are the expressions of mildly embarrassed women, 'in' on the 'sexual' joke, responding with knowingly flirtatious expressions, and in their place we are presented with images that befit scientific discourse, show us women whose expressions carry absolutely no trace of acknowledgement of sexual innuendo whatsoever, and register instead a matter of fact 'scientific' neutrality. Without the acknowledgement of sexual innuendo there is no foundation for the usual comic payoff. Marmalade's joke works against the clichéd, lazy innuendo of the traditional gag that achieves its pay-off at the expense of women. In *Seed Series: Green Fingered* this is resisted through the expressions of the women in the photographs. While the absurdity of the science is clearly mocked, Marmalade's series involves a witty assertion of the freedoms from the norm, of being different. In this respect the joke of this work is subversive, one of liberation and celebration, a challenge to univocal interpretations and an exposé of the ridiculousness of prejudicial assumptions.

Michael Smith's art is deadpan through and through and has involved him creating an alter ego 'Mike Smith', an earnest character who features in many of his videos. The video form allows Smith to parody the machinations of the art world through the adoption of the presentational strategies of commercial marketing, at once making the promotion of art more business-like while at the same time undermining romantic delusions about its purity. Presented as one segment of a television magazine show called 'Millennium Visions', *QuinQuag* (2001) creates a vision of an artistic utopia. In this mock documentary, the artist plays the entrepreneur, Mike Smith, who, while planning an arts and

Michael Smith and Joshua White
Quin Quag, (2002)
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

wellness centre in the Catskills Mountains, uncovers on his estate the existence of a fifty-year-old artists' colony noted for its production of handmade tiles and a rocking chair made famous by being bought for J.F. Kennedy. The community's collective ideal of creativity, revealed through photographs and interviews with surviving 'QuinQuagians', becomes a virtue to be commodified as part of the promotional strategy for Mike Smith's wellbeing business. *QuinQuag* is a send up of the capitalist exploitation of art, how the utopianism of an artists' colony can be now branded and commercialised. The programme's presenter is French-speaking, giving an anachronistic aura of sophistication, as if France was still the centre of the art world. The video ends with Mike Smith rocking in a QuinQuag Kennedy chair, smug and happy over the prospect of his new venture, with the French narrator quoting Victor Hugo, "Nothing can stop an idea whose time has come."

In Michael Smith's short instructional video *How to Create Your Own Group Exhibition* (1996), he plays both the dumb New York artist, living in a glum apartment, and a corporate figure, identified as a Director of a firm called ITEA, bathed in golden light and set against a business cityscape, confidently predicting the changing realm of art and the role of artists as 'content providers for the future'. The video alternates between two worlds: the corporate bluster extolling the virtues of the 'information superhighway' at the cusp of a new millennium, counterposed to an artist going through his mail full of invite cards to group exhibitions and saying to himself, 'My work would look good in at least seventy five per cent of these shows.' This epiphany prompts the artist to embark on the process of curating his own group exhibition that will enable him to show alongside big name artists. We see him selecting and arranging name cards on a table

and coming up with a definitive list: Nauman, Duchamp, Bourgeois, Michael Smith and others. ‘Looks like a very interesting group exhibition,’ he says with a contented smile. He comes up with a title, *Reconsidering Context*, and writes a press release. The video then cuts to the corporate figurehead saying how everyone at ITEA is excited at plans to post the group exhibition *Reconsidering Context* on the website, which, by the way, will be visited by millions, globally.’ There is a comedic constant toing and froing between two worlds in the video. There is a shortfall between the advertising speak and the mundane domestic setting of the aspiring artist. After the promotional guff, we cut back to the artist saying: ‘Boy, I can’t wait to get on line. As soon as I get a modem for this thing, I’m gonna have my own home page.’ To the tune of Neil Diamond’s *Do It*, the video ends with the artist walking down a grim rubbish-strewn street to post his invites to his group exhibition — a comic disconnect from the glistening world of ITEA.

With the values of both art and commerce being ridiculed, what are we left with but comedy’s ability to unpick artifice and the superficial? Smith presses modes of communication that seem crude and inappropriate up against the refined values associated with art. *Curating Your Own Group Exhibition* and *QuinQuag* each have a double structure, playing one phony and clichéd world off against another. Much as the comedy is to do with the apparent collision between the two worlds that each video creates, the big laugh is that both of these worlds begin to mirror each other as delusional fictions.

In the twentieth century, deadpan humour is most closely associated with cinema, particularly the early silent era films of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd. Here we see the impact of the industrialisation of culture on the development of a comedic aesthetic in rhythm with, and symptomatic of, the mechanised character of twentieth-century society. Keaton in particular, mastered the deliberately emotionless, machine-like impassivity and matter-of-fact delivery associated with deadpan to such an extent that he was nicknamed ‘The Great Stone Face.’ It is perhaps appropriate, then, that continuing the tradition of deadpan and film, and with

Michael Smith
How to Curate Your Own Group Exhibition, (1996)
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI)
New York.

an ironic, expressionless nod to Keaton’s ‘Stone Face’, Erica Eyres’ video *Clay Head* (2015), should feature as its central character a polystyrene mannequin’s head whose detailed features are sculpted upon it with clay.

Eyres’ videos, drawings and sculpture, exploit deadpan detachment to explore and challenge how we relate to ‘authentic’ autobiography in a culture intoxicated by the kind of melodramatic ‘sincerity’ solicited by confessional reality television. In *Clay Head,* emotion-lite delivery is paired with an emotion-heavy personal narrative that could be her own or not. An unseen narrator shares her memory of a time when, as a child actor, she won the part to play a character in a movie. The flatly delivered narrative recounts how she endured extended periods of time in make-up in order to achieve the radical transformation of physiognomy her character required. The matter-of-fact narration describes her experience of the arduous process, as her fictional movie character is prosthetically made up over her own face and identity. At times the narration is slightly boastful, at others, inflected with a sense of disappointment and mild resentment. This verbal account of transformation accompanies a visual transformation enacted on a mannequin head, on whose featureless form a pair of manicured hands crudely sculpts in clay a distinctive but somewhat comic face and identity. The bond of trust establishing authenticity that we assume to exist between autobiographic narrative and its sincere narration is unsettled. The deliberate lack of emotion in the vocal delivery, the staged nature of the scene, and the odd and abrupt editing, serve to highlight the fabricated

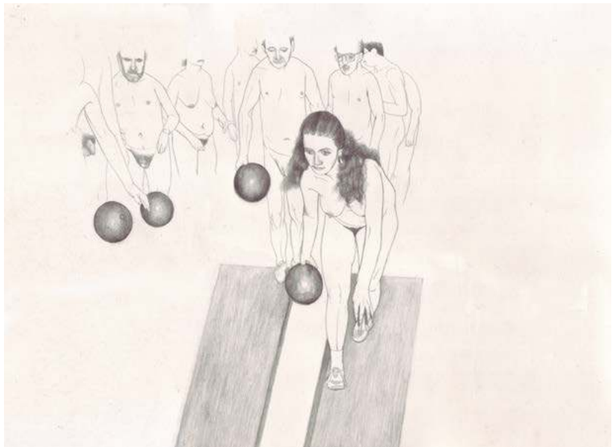
Erica Eyres
Clay Head, HD video, 6 min 49, 2015

Erica Eyres
Clay Sausages, glazed stoneware, 2014

nature of the scenario, casting doubt on its integrity and suggesting that the seemingly straightforward address of the autobiographic narrative as authentic and trustworthy may be destabilised.

A similar sense of dislocation is to be found in Eyres' drawings based upon photographs in nudist magazines that appear to date from the 1970s. They rely on the comedy of the body and anxieties about nakedness. Certainly within the tradition of British humour there is a prudish fascination with pictures of the naked body. Numerous supposedly serious television documentaries and film comedies regularly featured nudist colonies and their naked inhabitants, who were inevitably the butt of the jokes. Part of the comedy seems to lie in the perceived discrepancy between what is considered to be normal social behavior and the abnormality of naked, non-sexual forms of social interaction. Often this is emphasised in films and photographs of nudists carrying out normal mundane activities that just happened to involve men chopping wood or couples energetically playing badminton or bowling. The comic reading of nakedness is never far away in such images, and despite the awkward attempts by naturists to appear as regular folk doing everyday things, the opposite occurs. The discrepancy between normal and abnormal is heightened with the nudists laughingly dismissed as freakish comic figures, and subject to prurient fascination. In part, this seems to be driven by the anxiety created by recognition of the nudists' unashamed transgression of the boundary between private and public spheres of social life, and laughter is one way of coping with such a troubling prospect.

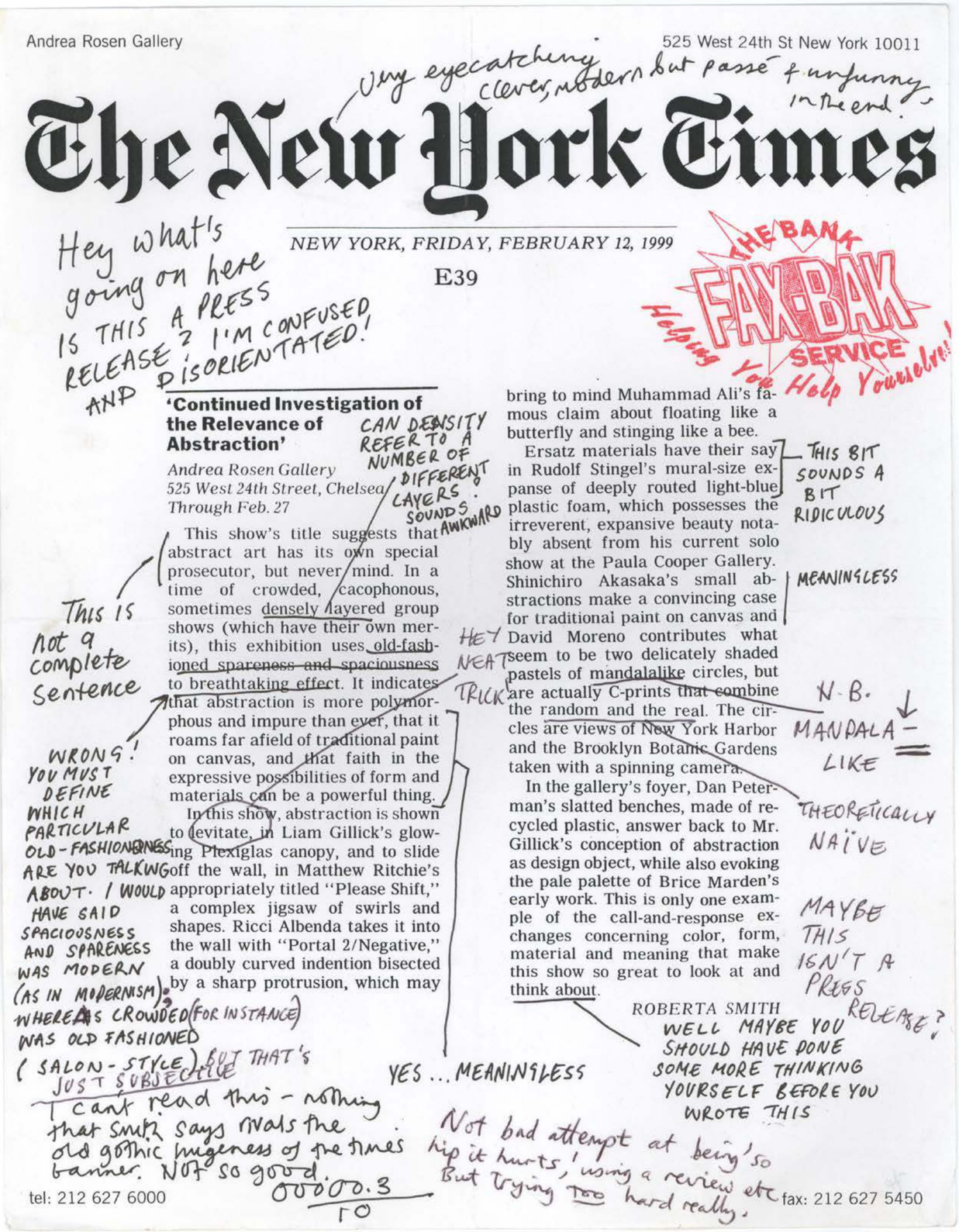
Eyres' use of such imagery as the basis for her economic, compositionally sparse drawings is accompanied by a *faux naïf* drawing style. The sense of social estrangement and detachment, suggested by the nudists' separation from mainstream society and allocation of permissible social spaces in which to exist, such as the 'nudist colony' or 'naturist magazine', is replicated in Eyres' drawings through a similar pictorial form of detachment. Often the immediate context of the nudists' activities is only hinted at, with large areas of the drawing surface left blank, creating weirdly empty compositions. In many, the naked bodies seem to drift in an indeterminable space, only to be anchored by a known action, or the presence of a familiar object: a shoe, a bowling ball, a tree-stump - props enabling the figures to be rooted in a recognisable social space. Ironically, it is often through Eyres' attention to the depiction of hair, between the legs, on the face and on the head, that any sense of the body's solidity is achieved. Her nuanced drawing of hairstyle fashion also provides just enough detail to speculate when such uninhibited behavior might have taken place – sometime in the 1970s seems to be the best bet, evoking the utopian ideals associated with the freedom of not wearing clothes prominent during that period. In her



Erica Eyres
Bowling
Pencil on paper, 47 X 29.7 cm, 2015

drawings Eyres presents unselfconscious bodies of nudists alongside matter of fact objects she allows into their world; there is an oddness about the relationships established. The figures she depicts frolicking are not so much located in a utopian pastoral idyll, which one might expect to see as the backdrop for naturists. Instead we encounter a pared-down stage-set where denuded tree stumps establish a cursory natural setting, replete with phallic appendages. Clearly Eyres enjoys the artifice of the staged displays of 'uninhibited' behavior propagated by nudist magazines. That this might be a disingenuous act of commercial manipulation by the magazine strikes at the heart of Eyres' project, reiterating her interest in issues of authenticity and its representation. As in *Clay Head*, her drawings of nudists deploy deadpan to explore the transaction between public and private identities in a confessional culture obsessed with narcissism and personal exposure and offer a wry, slow burn take on this culture.

Erica Eyres
Shopping For Shoes
29.7 cm x 43 cm, 2015


Andrea Rosen Gallery 525 West 24th St New York 10011

Very eyecatching clever, modern but passé & unfunny in the end.

The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 1999

E39

Hey what's going on here IS THIS A PRESS RELEASE? I'M CONFUSED AND DISORIENTATED!

THE BANK FAX-BAK SERVICE Helping You Help Yourselves!

'Continued Investigation of the Relevance of Abstraction'

Andrea Rosen Gallery
525 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Feb. 27

CAN DENSITY REFER TO A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT LAYERS. SOUNDS AWKWARD

This show's title suggests that abstract art has its own special prosecutor, but never mind. In a time of crowded, cacophonous, sometimes densely layered group shows (which have their own merits), this exhibition uses old-fashioned spareness and spaciousness to breathtaking effect. It indicates that abstraction is more polymorphous and impure than ever, that it roams far afield of traditional paint on canvas, and that faith in the expressive possibilities of form and materials can be a powerful thing.

In this show, abstraction is shown to levitate, in Liam Gillick's glowing Plexiglas canopy, and to slide off the wall, in Matthew Ritchie's appropriately titled "Please Shift," a complex jigsaw of swirls and shapes. Ricci Albenda takes it into the wall with "Portal 2/Negative," a doubly curved indention bisected by a sharp protrusion, which may bring to mind Muhammad Ali's famous claim about floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee.

Ersatz materials have their say in Rudolf Stingel's mural-size expanse of deeply routed light-blue plastic foam, which possesses the irreverent, expansive beauty notably absent from his current solo show at the Paula Cooper Gallery. Shinichiro Akasaka's small abstractions make a convincing case for traditional paint on canvas and David Moreno contributes what seem to be two delicately shaded pastels of mandalalike circles, but are actually C-prints that combine the random and the real. The circles are views of New York Harbor and the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens taken with a spinning camera.

In the gallery's foyer, Dan Peterman's slatted benches, made of recycled plastic, answer back to Mr. Gillick's conception of abstraction as design object, while also evoking the pale palette of Brice Marden's early work. This is only one example of the call-and-response exchanges concerning color, form, material and meaning that make this show so great to look at and think about.

ROBERTA SMITH

THIS BIT SOUNDS A BIT RIDICULOUS

MEANINGLESS

This is not a complete Sentence

HEY NEAT TRICK

N.B. MANDALA-LIKE

THEORETICALLY NAÏVE

MAYBE THIS ISN'T A PRESS RELEASE?

WRONG! YOU MUST DEFINE WHICH PARTICULAR OLD-FASHIONEDNESS ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT. I WOULD HAVE SAID SPACIOUSNESS AND SPARENESS WAS MODERN (AS IN MODERNISM); WHEREAS CROWDED (FOR INSTANCE) WAS OLD FASHIONED (SALON-STYLE) BUT THAT'S JUST SUBJECTIVE

YES ... MEANINGLESS

WELL MAYBE YOU SHOULD HAVE DONE SOME MORE THINKING YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WROTE THIS

I can't read this - nothing that smith says rivals the old gothic ingeness of the times banner. NOT SO GOOD.

Not bad attempt at being so hip it hurts, using a review etc But trying too hard really.

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tel: 212 627 6000 fax: 212 627 5450

In *Fax-Bak* (1999) the British artists' collective BANK bites the hand that feeds it, comically attacking the rhetoric used to peddle and promote art. Press releases are appraised, amended and marked and then faxed back to the galleries that sent them out. BANK undermines the pomposity and pretenses of the way art is 'bigged up' and promoted. It is a deflationary intervention into the art system and language, and this is the comedy. *Fax-Bak* is an exposé of the froth of words used to sustain and promote artists. It is also arrogant and judgmental, a kind of one-upmanship by those who do not want to play the promotional game. BANK's work is doubled, a writing over, and in response to, press releases. The comedy is in the duality of two modes of communication coming together, or rather, one formal mode of communication being ridiculed by another.

BANK are not uninformed outsider commentators. As self-appointed adjudicators, making evaluations on the efficacy of press releases to adequately describe artworks, they remain part of the art set. Their sneers and withering critique are fuelled by knowledge and their evaluations often hit their target, puncturing the promotional blather, critically undermining the supposed authority of the press release and exposing it as nothing more than second-rate advertising copy.

Their intervention mimics the authoritative and punitive assessment familiar to the marked and graded school assignment. But their scrawling, messy handwriting also reminds us of textbooks and library books be-spoiled by often juvenile commentary in the margins. Either way, both suggest a degree of intellectual bombast. Despite the bad handwriting, there is a school masterly pedantry about the work. When exhibited it reminds us of the Xeroxed, type-written propositions of conceptual art and the inevitable reification that takes place within the art system of exchange. BANK can be never be outsiders. As much as they attack and mock, BANK are trapped in the same language game.

For many artists, a written comic text only really achieves its full potential when it is performed, either as a live event, or as an audio recording, film or video. Thomas Geiger's *I looked on my head from above* (2016) consists of a succession of terse, matter-of-fact one-sentence descriptions of events and actions, the nature of which is at first unclear. Originally developed in German as a written text and periodically delivered as a lecture performance, in his 2016 English language version a well-spoken English woman calmly performs an audio rendition of the text, her Received Pronunciation accent only slightly modified by her lisp. Authorship of the actions described is calmly asserted, each sentence beginning with the first person pronoun 'I', giving the impression that her admission of responsibility is both a confession and a boast. But who is she and what is the nature of the inventory of actions she claims to have carried out?

An evenly paced rhythm regulates the flow of her catalogue of odd actions and misdemeanors, a repeated word, place or action seemingly sequentially related is daisy chained together to build a momentum and a strained logic: 'I dressed up as a general and tried

BANK
Fax-Back (NY: Andrea Rosen), (1999)
pen and ink on paper, unique
36 x 29 cm framed

Thomas Geiger
I have looked on my head from above
2010–2016

to hitchhike. I dressed up as a Bulgarian policeman and regulated the traffic. I dressed up as Snow White and tried to enter Disneyland but they didn't let me in…' As we listen to the list of events, occasionally a description will jog recognition, its clipped, short-hand form expanding into a more fulsome memory, allowing the event to be anchored in a recognisable place and time. Having accepted the authority and truthfulness of the speaking subject as the originator of the actions described, we gradually begin to realise that this cannot be the case. As it becomes clear that the list of events intoned are in fact artworks performed by multiple authors, the integrity of the speaker withers. There is a comedy in the sheer nerve and daring of this act of deceit: not only are the descriptions of the most noteworthy artworks by hundreds of mainly male, individual artists claimed by a singular female 'super' artist, but also even this identity is a fabrication, as Geiger ventriloquises his authorship through the identity of the woman narrator who claims the work of other artists as her own.

This is a joke at the expense of an art world in which the need to create 'brand identity' is founded on the ability to carve out a distinctive and recognisable 'product' by developing a 'signature style', one that finds easy accommodation with a market driven by novelty and enhanced by minor scandal. Clearly exploiting the model of Conceptual Art and its taste for terse prose, and the appropriationist tactics of artists such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, Geiger wittily gathers up some of the more newsworthy artworks under the guise of a super, singular, compulsive megalomaniac. Collated from the briefest descriptions of artworks, the details of which he found by trawling the internet, exhibition catalogues and art magazines, he brings together a compendium of other people's ideas and performances. It is a kind of bare bones of recent art history, stripped of embellishment, original context and attribution. It teases and tests the listener's art world knowledge. In fact, it takes a while to get the hang of what we are meant to do with the stream of bizarre descriptions. Only when we recognise the succinct account of a familiar artwork do we get the rules of the game and realise that this is not the inventory of a deranged person. Within the list of novel and scandalous actions, descriptions are occasionally reiterated as more than one artist is shown to have done the same ridiculous thing in order to get noticed, for example: 'I swam along the entire Mississippi. I also swam along the entire Mississippi.' In this way Geiger gently mocks the quest for uniqueness for which both career artists and the market strive.

There is a kind of measured, knowing, deadpan nihilism in Geiger's survey of art that is highly comic and seems acutely aware of its own vulnerability to hyperbole. Bereft of interpretation and context, the effect is to highlight a succession of crazed antics. Maintaining a distanced and detached view of art throughout, Geiger closes *I looked on my head from above* with reference to the ultimate tragic artistic act of Bas Jan Ader's disappearance at sea. Maintaining the first person narration, descriptions of entropic actions crescendo with the absurdity of the author giving voice to their own absence: 'I built a boat out of paper and went sailing with it. I built a boat out of ice. I tried to cross the Atlantic in a small sailing boat; since then I'm missing.'

As we all know, timing is essential in comedy. Understanding context, being aware of the appropriate way to behave in any social situation, but choosing instead to interrupt the seamless flow of normality through unexpected comments or action, is at the core of comedy. The ability to identify such moments of opportunity, to be quick-witted and deft enough to know how and when to take advantage of the situation to unsettle and enrich normal life through well timed intervention, defines effective comedy and is a feature of Alex Bag's video *Untitled Fall '95*. The astuteness of Bag's timing relates to the historical and cultural context in which the work was made, and on which it feeds. All art, like all comedy, carries the imprint of the specific conditions of when it was made, the reference points and familiar conventions that give it currency and meaning, which over time dissipate to be replaced by other interpretations, other meanings, or gradually slide into mute invisibility. This is the fluid nature of culture, and the space in which both artworks and jokes find temporary hold. The points of reference and target for Bag's intervention are multiple: clichéd notions of the artist's persona, the narcissistic indulgence of youth, art school culture, video art, commoditised popular culture, and low-budget trashy television.

Untitled Fall '95 offers an improvised and deadpan reflection on art and popular culture, through a mechanically segmented structure of sixteen parts

I cleaned the street. I cleaned and disinfected a street corner. I highly polished a subway rail. I paint balustrades in public space. I weed traffic islands. I clean street signs. I refurbish zebra crossings with white paint. I cleaned a public trash can. I restore holes in house walls with Lego stones. I plant trees in front of advertising panels. I also plant trees in front of advertising panels. I cleaned the square in front of a museum. I brushed my teeth on the street. I brushed my teeth on the street and washed my hair in a fountain. I went swimming in the fountain of a shopping center. I place my sofa on a public square for common use. I shit in a public square. I filled my own shit into tins. I jumped into a drain and walked through the city wearing my stinking clothes. I collected all the dog-doos that I found in the city. I decorate dog-doos with sweets. I secretly put sweets in people's pockets. I decorate waste on the street with a ribbon. I collect broken objects from the street, fix them, and put them back to the place where I found them. I walk around with magnetic shoes, so that small metal pieces stick to them. I also walked around with magnetic shoes. I walk over parking cars. I walked over Brooklyn Bridge on its railing. I walked 125 kilometers without sleep. I walked, wearing a white tuxedo, through a slum in Kenia. I walked with a boom-box through the city and replayed fictive advertisements. I carried a bucket of water through the city for the entire day. I carried a hand of sand through the city for the entire day. I pushed a block of ice through the city until it was completely melted. I pulled a sand stone through the city until it was completely abraded. I pulled a boat through the dessert. I did a walk through the Harz mountains and orientated myself with a map of London. I swam along the entire Mississippi. I also swam along the entire Mississippi. I walk on a straight line eastwards. I am diving through Europe. I illegally passed the border between the USA and Mexico in a surfboard box. I cross borders without my papers at places that are not controlled. I staged a front crash of a German and a Polish car on a German-Polish border crossing. I walked with a double-Honecker through East Berlin. I dressed up as an SS soldier at the Cologne carnival and did the Hitler salute. I dressed up as a soldier and robbed through the city. I dressed up as a general and tried to hitchhike. I dressed up as a Bulgarian policeman and regulated the traffic. I dressed up as Snow White and tried to enter Disneyland but they didn't let me in. I wore a new Hugo Boss suit and went hiking in Sweden for several weeks without changing the suit. I wore a pair of tights over my head and went shopping. I dressed up with a robber mask and got myself a portray from a street artist. I also dressed up with a robber mask and got myself a portrait from a street artist. I tattoo people on the street without any experience in tattooing. I cut my coat into two pieces and wear one piece each day for one year. I cut salami slices into squares and place them on paving stones. I wear only clothes that have all the same color. I fixed the thread of my wool sweater in my apartment and went for a walk, so that the sweater slowly dissolved. I removed the white lint from strangers' clothing without comment. I wore a suit plastered with seeds and placed myself in a public square spread full of pigeons. I sewed a dress out of old fish and walked through the city. I soaked my clothes in a broth of vinegar, milk, cod liver oil, and eggs and wore them for the entire day. I tried to sell the clothes that I'm wearing on the street. I wore a suit and asked a less well-dressed pedestrian to change clothes with me; this principle I repeated until I ended up with the rags of an homeless. I invited a beggar from Mexico, who earns his money by guarding cars, to a guided-tour in the Daimler factory in Germany. I pushed an old Volkswagen Beetle through the streets of Wolfsburg. I crafted a Porsche 911 out of concrete and placed it in a parking spot. I mount police sirens on parked cars. I transform parked cars with stickers into police cars. I ordered hundreds of taxis in the same place in the city center. I put wrong speed limits on road signs. I put barriers and fences in pedestrian zones. I blew up a huge balloon in the subway during rush hour. I dropped buttermilk in front of supermarkets. I dropped cans with white paint on the street. I asked friends to drop things and to write a report about it. I dropped a car on the ground. I dropped a vase from the Han dynasty. I dropped a small red flower out of my apartment on the street. I left a set of blank keys on the street. I lift out and exchange manhole covers. I wrote the newspaper headlines on zebra crossings. I wrote with oil, the word "Oil" on the water in the bay of San Francisco. I kicked a book about Lenin across the Red Square. I shoot on books, cut them into pieces, and burn them. I wrote a book without any word that contains an "e". I printed Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" without any words, so that only the punctuation marks remain. I ordered Foucault's "The order of things" alphabetically. I ordered Franz Kafka's novel "The Metamorphosis" alphabetically. I ordered James Joyce's novel "Ulysses" alphabetically. I ordered the last speech by Malcolm X alphabetically. I ordered the Bible alphabetically. I got an ISBN number and tattooed it on my body. I mess up bookstores by changing the positions of books. I mess up libraries by changing the positions of books. I smuggled my own books into libraries. I hide my drawings in library books. I make drawings in stationery shops on the papers that are used for testing pens. I collect the papers from stationery shops on which people tested pens. I place my photographs in the picture frames in furniture stores. I showed my private video on a television in an electronics store. I also showed my private video in an electronics store. I build sculptures in the aisles of hardware stores with the materials that I find there. I smuggled a chocolate Santa Clause at Easter

time into the supermarket and purchased it again. I only purchase products that have all the same color. I take a soap out of its packaging, put it in my pocket, and buy the empty package. I made a soap out of the fat sucked out of Silvio Berlusconi. I jump into peoples' shopping carts and ask: "May I get a ride?" I say to a cashier: "You have beautiful hands." I exchanged, unnoticed, products between Aldi and Lidl. I also exchanged products between supermarkets. I shoot the products that I want to purchase with bow and arrow. I buy a shirt at H&M, exchange a button with a slightly different one, and return the shirt. I buy toys, modify them slightly, and return them. I printed political messages on returnable Coca Cola glass bottles. I stand with a sign in the city; the sign says "I am lonely". I stand with a sign on the road and hitchhike; the sign says "Nowhere". I stand with a sign on the street; the sign says "Don't throw away the superfluous thoughts". I stand with a sign on the street; the sign says "I want to become a millionaire". I stand with a sign in the city; the sign says "I am a man". I walk with a sign through the city; the sign says "I'm looking for nobody". I stand with a sign at the arrivals of an airport; the sign says "Pablo Picasso". I purchase the signs from beggars. I organized a demonstration with blank signs. I demonstrate with your message on the street. I ask people to formulate a radical thought. I wrote instructions for a bank robbery. I threw a few hundred one-dollar notes from the visitors' gallery to the brokers at the New York Stock Exchange. I directed a play in front of surveillance cameras. I kidnapped a city tour bus. I threatened to kidnap a museum director. I kidnapped a candidate for the California governorship during the election campaign. I break into houses and build sculptures out of furniture. I break into houses and steal an egg. I plant small trees on other people's private properties. I attack famous people with cream cakes. I attacked a French warship with a model boat. I walked with a loaded revolver in the streets of Mexico City. I walked with a machine gun in the streets of Belgrade. I asked strangers if I could frisk them. I build firearms. I build non-functional land mines and place them in parks. I gild landmines and offer them as an investment. I disarm toys. I equip toys with weapons. I slapped Mickey Mouse in Disneyland. I stole various things from stores and exhibited them. I also stole various things and exhibited them. I steal the works of other artists from their exhibitions. I stole the work from other artists from their exhibitions and placed them in my own show. I also steal works from artists and put them in my show. I steal small parts of works by other artists and create miniature exhibitions of the artists. I advertised a job for an art thief in a newspaper. I stole the painting "The Poor Poet" by Carl Spitzweg from the Berlin National Gallery and hang it in the living room of a Turkish family. I take pictures down from the museum walls and place them on the floor. I stole hubcaps from cars. I have stolen 120 car radios. I stole clothes from C&A. I smuggled joints in a model airplane across a border. I smuggled cocaine in a Hugo Chavez-doll across the border. I smuggled bull sperm in a tuned motorcycle to Cuba. I tore a chicken. I cut off a chicken's head. I chained dogs in front of a museum. I leashed a stray dog in a gallery and gave neither food nor water to the animal. I put sheep inside a museum. I put a fox inside a museum. I put a cat and a mouse inside a museum. I put horses inside a gallery. I put a gold fish inside a washing machine. I put a goldfish inside a blender filled with water. I tattoo pigs. I tried to teach barking to a bird. I gave a concert for cows. I gave a concert for a melon. I design dresses for road-kill animals. I cook meals out of human meat and eat it. I ate the corpse of a stillbirth. I concrete a dead fetus in a concrete cube. I wiped the floor with the blood of murdered people. I had sex with the corpse of a dead woman; then I castrated myself. I offer heroin to addicted people for tattooing them a line across their backs. I let someone shoot in my arm. I chopped my right hand. I asked a knife thrower to throw knives at me. I offered people to throw darts at me and rewarded each hit with 500 Euros. I pushed a nail through my hand. I made blood sausages from my own blood. I also made blood sausages from my own blood. I got a rib removed. I burned down a temple in order to get famous. I peed on Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain". I also peed on Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain". I tried to smash Duchamp's "Fountain" with a hammer. I put black ink in Damien Hirst's "Sheep" and called it "Black Sheep". I erased the drawing of another artist. I slept in Tracey Emin's "My Bed". I sprayed over a Mondrian painting. I colored the water of fountains with red color. I put soap into fountains. I forced my gallerist to jump around like a rabbit. I hung my gallerist on the wall with tape. I worked as a gallery assistant during my exhibition. I cleaned the rooms of the gallery during my exhibition. I worked in a psychiatric clinic for the entire duration of my exhibition. I had sex with a collector and video taped it. I gave a blow job to my gallerist. I transformed the museum into a swinger club. I offered the visitors of my exhibition to have sex with a prostitute for free. I masturbated in a gallery. I took sleeping pills and slept in the gallery. I lived inside movable walls in a museum for one week. I dressed up as a dominatrix and offered lashes to an art collector. I puked into a gallery booth at an art fair. I trained museum workers in team building. I counted the visitors of my exhibition. I hid myself in the gallery during the opening of my exhibition. I asked the guests of my exhibition: "How are you?" I whispered into the ear of the visitors of my exhibition: "You have bad breath." I welcome the visitors of my exhibition with the sentence: "Hello, you are stinking." I carry the visitors of a museum into the exhibition space. I transport the oxygen from one exhibition space to the next one. I walk through the museum and say in front of every image "Oh, how beautiful." I search in the wall-texts of exhibitions for typos and correct them. I asked the visitors of my exhibition to walk around with open laces. I walked through a museum with my fly open. I sprinted through a museum. I also sprinted through a museum. I did fifteen push-ups inside a museum. I ran a marathon inside the Tate Modern. I made a race against a firework rocket. I fought successively against one hundred men. I fought against Mongolian wrestlers. I climbed on a huge statue and smoked a cigarette. I stand for one hour balancing on the rim of an empty metal dustbin. I swam through the canals of Venice. I roll through the city. I ran back and forth in front of a Nike Store. I go for walks with a turtle on a leash. I sit on a bench and count out loud as far as possible. I am chained with handcuffs to a bus stop bench. I attached air balloons on my body and took off. I write messages on the sky with a plane. I empty a helium gas cylinder into the atmosphere. I farted in a crowded elevator. I farted in a gallery space. I created a perfume with the smell of a subway station. I filled the air of Paris into bottles. I emptied out a perfume in the mountains. I threw rhinestones into parks. I went into a forest and threw a coin into a puddle. I threw gold into the river Seine. I threw a diamond into a field. I transformed a diamond into coal. I place each day one Euro at the same public place. I place every day a full bottle of beer on the same bench. I offer a punk to play paper-scissors-stone for his chance to win one Euro. I go with a beggar into a supermarket and pay him products for ten Euros. I emptied a bucket filled with pennies into a fountain. I persuaded a beggar in Vienna to wear a Mozart wig; afterwards his income increased. I scribble on bank notes and put them back into circulation. I destroyed money and let a museum finance the action. I produce counterfeit money. I ask homeless people to wear a badge that says "Observer". I passed by the same beggar every two minutes and gave him twenty cents. I sent twenty Eurocents to a friend in the United States and asked him to give the money to a beggar. I offer money to people in the subway. I recite my CV in the subway. I eat money. I ate a Pizza in a Pizzeria as slow as possible. I requested support money for my new art project that was a surgery for my teeth. I painted a check with which I paid my dentist. I went shopping in a mall carrying a transparent plastic bag, which contained about one thousand Euro in small notes. I transformed myself into a stock corporation. I got notarized that I cleaned my teeth on November 27th at 7:30 pm. I didn't enter a house for one year. I count every step I make in the course of a day. I send a postcard to a person and write when I got up. I asked my grandmother to write me a postcard every day. I sent the very same letter to myself again and again and again. I got a stamp licked by a giraffe in the zoo. I sent canvases by airmail without packing them. I sent Charles Lindbergh's book "My flight over the ocean" by airmail to the USA without packing it. I operated a private postal service and delivered the post during my private trips. I applied to become mayor of a small American town and got elected. I opened a travel office where I offered time travels. I buy one square meter of land in various countries. I opened a kebab shop in my studio. I placed an advertisement in the newspaper and offered people to repair a damage in their house for free. I produce wine that I sell during my openings. I only serve non-alcoholic drinks at my openings. I sell drinks to the people during the traffic red light phase. I sell snow balls on the street. I produced merchandising articles for myself. I finance my artwork with gambling tricks. I do all my activities to 33%. I stopped making art for one year. I stopped making art for thirteen years. I stopped making art completely. I also stopped making art. I gave a present to someone with the advice to open it only in one hundred years. I took an employment and refused all work they gave me. I sleep at the workplace of other people. I try to sleep as much as possible. I spend the day at one bus stop waiting for, running for, and missing busses. I pass the same zebra crossing again and again and again and again. I offer people on the street to wash their dirty dishes. I ask people on the street to dance with me. I offer people on the street to touch my breasts. I follow a person on the street who looks like me from behind. I hired a detective to tail me. I follow a random person on the street until he goes into a private space. I try to enter cars that are waiting on a red light. I ask all people wearing a red jacket what time it is. I stand on the street and preach good news. I recite the ABCs every morning, so that God can make a prayer out of it. I went to a medium to get in contact with dead artists and asked them questions on contemporary art. I went to a fortune teller and then I did what he told me. I went to a fortune teller to know about my success for the next exhibition. I collect my bogeys to rebuilt the Amber Room out of them. I water a plant only with Coca Cola. I broke off the top of the Zugspitze. I flew to London, went to the toilet, and flew back. I went to the epicenter of an earthquake and buried a cough drop. I flooded a city and transformed it into a pond. I roll down of rooftops. I climbed on a tree and sawed off the branch that I was sitting on. I drank alcohol until I fell off the chair. I walked on a semi-frozen lake until I broke through the ice. I traveled with a sailing boat in the sewage system of Vienna. I built a boat out of paper and went sailing with it. I built a boat out of ice. I tried to cross the Atlantic in a small sailing boat; since then I'm missing.

that chronicle the semester-by-semester development of an undergraduate art student's progression at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York. The narrative flow of eight sequences filmed in the style of a video diary are interrupted by other sequences, structured in a manner similar to the operation of a television commercial break. In each sequence Bag plays a variety of roles including a 'Phone Bunny' dressed in heels and negligee, promoting the services of a telephone sex line. 'Call me! Are you tired of being overworked, underpaid, underappreciated, devalued, humiliated day after day after day after day? Call me!' Her concern for customer wellbeing, illustrated by reference to clichéd stock scenarios, suggests her recognition and understanding of the causes of stress on the modern man, only to be instantly undercut by her relentless mechanical delivery and waspish advice. 'Mm…quit your job… no? Well why don't you kill yourself and blame it on the corporation? Oh…Yeah… Are you tired of your wife? Call me!' The video deftly takes a swipe at the vicious banality of contemporary consumer culture, where ruthless sincerity and over-familiarity deployed by advertisers to cast their smarmy charm to lure custom, is wedded to the hypocrisy and cynicism of reality television and its commodification of dysfunctional social behavior and human suffering in the name of entertainment and psychotherapy counseling.

In other sequences, a segment of footage, originally a home video released by Icelandic pop group The Sugarcubes, the lead singer Bjork takes apart her television and philosophises on its impact, of how a Danish poet had made her fearful of TV: 'it just goes directly into your brain and you stop judging if it's right or not, so you just swallow and swallow.' Such sequences overtly refer to Bag's fascination with and critical relationship to TV culture. A wider point of reference, informed by the form, duration and sequential accumulation of televisual-type excerpts, concerns the status and value of the video form itself. If the comic timing of individual sequences relates to Bag's ability to foreground issues of sincerity and authenticity in media-saturated cultures of consumption through ironic narration in individual sequences, then the formal and technical quality of her videos relate to her consideration of a wider time-frame and the use of video technology as an art form.

The historical development of video as a creative medium is an important factor in understanding the comedy of *Untitled Fall '95.* Video is a technology developed for television, which in its early stages was prohibitively expensive, particularly when it came to the editing hardware necessary to achieve the broadcast production values. In response, the first generation of video artists, taking advantage of the release of cheaper video cameras produced for the consumer market, began to develop an approach to video that exploited its potential for live feedback and the opportunity presented to shoot unedited, long durational shots, with artists performing directly to camera. By the 1970s video artists such as Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci and others had established a low-fi aesthetic whose production values and vocabulary were in sharp contrast to those of television. By the 90s, as video technology advanced and artists' access to it increased, artists like Bill Viola were producing sophisticated and expensive video spectacles. It is in this context that the deliberately amateurish, homemade aesthetic of *Untitled Fall '95* is perfectly timed to deliver its comic punch against the overblown pomposity of such video art. Its pretentious excesses are mocked in one of the sequences of *Untitled Fall '95,* where Bag acts out the part of a 'video artist' giving a lecture about *Purse*, a year-long video project that involved filming for seven hours everyday from inside her purse. As Bag's character boasts, 'When it was exhibited there were 365 monitors running simultaneously, each with individual recordings.'

Bag's performance is throughout ironic, yet by the final segment one is left wondering if the mask is down. Holding a tulip and listening to Morrisey's 1988 song *Suedehead*, Bag is shown sobbing to camera, apparently caught in a moment of authentic disclosure. But when she holds up a remote and points it to the viewer, turning off the power and the image and ending the video, the implication seems to be that this is merely another part of the act. And we are left uncertain and unconvinced as to whether we have just watched a revelatory moment of sincerity.

Alex Bag
Untitled (Fall '95) (1995)
digital video 57:00
Courtesy of the artist and Team (gallery, inc.)






In 1986 Jeff Koons famously cast an inflatable toy bunny balloon in stainless steel. The sculpture creates a deception and its comedy rests upon the material translation of its kitsch source object, from something perishable and of little value, to its inflation as a permanent and valuable sculpture. Money, finish and cultural significance intervene to transform the original toy bunny into a completely different object. In *The Deflated Inflated* (2009), Jonathan Monk made a series of sculptures in response to Koons' *Rabbit*. Using the same inflatable balloon toy, Monk comically freeze-frames stages of the deflation/inflation process, casting the outcome in polished stainless steel. The result is a form of lower order mimicry, commodification in a lower key with its own formal decrepitude acting both as a self-mocking joke and a means to ridicule the puffed-up arrogance of Koons, whose access to capital enables such a conspicuous and expensive fetishisation of the banal.

The Deflated Inflated with its erectile dysfunction clearly introduces a sexual dimension to Monk's sculptural engagement with *Rabbit*, an appropriate joke at the expense of Koons, the super-star artist who shamelessly exploited his own artistic and sexual potency in the series of explicit photographs and sculptures he made with his former porn star wife, La Cicciolina. Monk punctures the illusion created by Koons. He does so through gravitational collapse, and this movement is central to a lot of comic art and integral to the nature of the joke. Bringing us, or in this case, someone else down.

The Deflated Inflated, made in proximity to the work of big name artists, functions like a caption to *Rabbit*, depending on knowledge of Koons' work to fulfill the full effect of his deflationary intent. There is something pleasing and justified in the irony of Koons becoming the host of a parasitic attachment by Monk. The former has repeatedly purloined imagery and objects from mass culture as the basis for his art. We should see Monk's work as 'para-sculpture', whose immediate point of reference goes beyond *Rabbit* and is symptomatic of a culture of promiscuous appropriation. In this sense Monk's art is parodic in that it fulfills the criteria of parody as an extended repetition with critical difference. His sculptures draw attention to the material excess of Koons' sophisticated techniques, but never disrupt the circulation of art. In his fascination with art stardom, Monk deploys mimicry and mockery to poke fun at celebrity artists and, in making a virtue of his own art's shortfall, registers its bathos.

According to philosopher Ted Cohen, joking about death is 'a way of

Jonathan Monk
Deflated Sculpture No I, 2009
polished stainless steel
104.1 x 68.6 x 45.7cm
Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery

domesticating something that cannot be tamed… The idea of death can be terrifying, numbing, incomprehensible. Joking about it returns a kind of balance. It is a way of being in charge, even of death.' [15] In Adrian Paci's video *Vajtojca (Weeper)* (2002), the artist exploits the artifice and theatre of a set up in which he mimics his own death in Albania. Paci left with his family for Italy after violent unrest in Albania in 1997, and the death he stages when he returns to his homeland could be seen as an enactment of the death that every exile suffers. Funerals in Albania often involve hiring professional weepers. Paci draws upon this custom but pays the weeper to mourn him instead. It is the overtly staged nature of this dramatic situation that makes us laugh. The video begins with the artist, casually dressed and carrying a holdall, arriving at the house of a middle-aged woman. He follows her upstairs and while she prepares the divan that will provide his bier, he changes into a suit in an adjacent room. As he lies down and feigns death, the weeper, seated besides him, covers her head with a shawl and starts singing her lament. After a while, she abruptly stops and removes the shawl. Accompanied now by jaunty music, Paci gets up and shakes her hand, the transaction complete.

Paci can be seen to buy the ritualised performance of affect, the emotion is readymade stock, but replete with cultural weight, since it links with the way he has positioned his art as addressing the experience of exile. With deadpan, a highly emotive narrative is performed in a flat manner, whereas Paci's death is performed in a heightened manner, it is calculated and premeditated. He makes a mockery of emotions because he shows they can be bought: these are readymade tears. But much as he is parodying ritualistic forms and traditions of mourning, at the same he is giving them a space in his art; the lament of the hired weeper allows him to grieve over his severance from home and its customs.

In Paul McCarthy's video *Painter* (1996) the artist offers an hilarious send up of the abstract expressionist painter, in part modeled on Willem de Kooning, but also having resonances with other painters. The artist is shown working alone in what is clearly evident as a shaky stage set made up of two studio spaces, separated by a corridor. In one there is a bed. This is his world, an arena of staged containment. He is being contained so he can produce, which is almost a commentary on the state of high value artists establishing a signature style, which needs to be replicated in order to satisfy the market. There is a send up of expressiveness as just a repetitious and habitual generation of product. In some ways it is an easy target, and a cruel

Adrian Paci
Vajtojca (The Weeper) 2002
Video with sound, 9 min
Courtesy the artist, Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zürich and kaufmann repetto, Milan

humour in respect to de Kooning and his decline into dementia during his later years when, locked into his own world, there was no devaluation of his output.

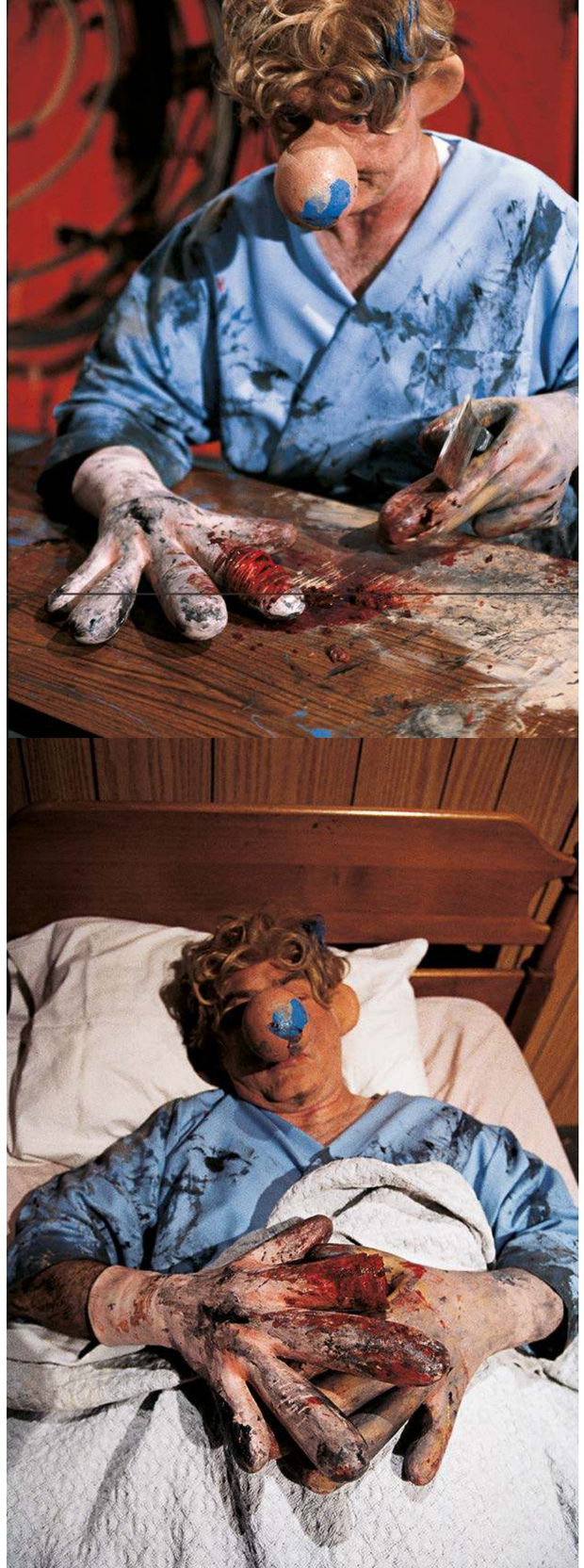
McCarthy wears large prosthetic hands, blonde wig and bulbous nose. He is throughout a comic clownish performer, making silly noises and the sounds of an airplane, snoring, chanting and singing repetitively as he makes his paintings with an oversized brush. At one point he sings, 'dekooning, dekooning, dekooning'. There is a lot of repetition of sound and action. He wears only a blue smock and socks and spends most of the time in his studio cutting open giant tubes of paint, pouring and mixing various liquids, including ketchup and mayonnaise. There are other scenes, equally artificial, two of which show his female dealer, who wears the same comic nose as the painter. 'Bill', the painter, has a fit over not being paid, trashing the office and the art on display. Over and over he keeps saying, 'You owe me a lot of money'. There are also two scenes where the painter sits in silence beside a posh collector couple, one German, one American, who are being interviewed and talk about what they own and who they know — all wear big noses, a leveling anatomical feature that establishes their commonality with the artist. From studio to dealer, to collectors, we are shown the closed universe of the artist's world and his entrapment within it. The parody is not just against the art world and painting but also against performance art. At one point the painter starts stabbing at one of his 'fingers' with a knife, over and over, and then starts chopping at it with a machete, until it appears to bleed and is finally cut off. This act of self-mutilation is a clear joke about the masochism of performance art, as well as testimony to the torture of the creative artist.

The scatological aspect of this painter's art is evident throughout, especially with the appearance of a large tube with the word 'SHIT' upon it, into which, towards the end of the film, the artist puts his hand and arm and pumps back and forth, in a grinding, sexual repetitive act. McCarthy's comic strategy involves repetition, not just in terms of the repeated gesture that becomes sexualized, but also in terms of what the artists says and sings throughout the film, which can become incantatory, an absurd association in such a base context. This is overt bodily humour. At one point he paints with a large brush between his legs, dipping it into the cans of paint, its handle wagging like a dog's tail. He gets a big roller, pours paint on a table and starts rubbing a large stretched canvas back and forth on top of it, singing 'If the women could see me now, my boy, if the women could see me now… Pop goes the weasel.' He pisses on the potted plant in the corner of his studio, and in the final scene when a collector comes, adorned with the same comic nose, the artist gets up on a table, takes down his pants, bends over and allows the collector to sniff his arse — 'very nice' the collector says.

Such slapstick debasement counters the romanticism of the expressive artist, with an expenditure that is primary and basic, as the artist's body, together with comic appendages, becomes the centre of attention. This accent on the body with prostheses continues the familiar repertory of figures in McCarthy's art. He is in one sense using a familiar and clichéd fake scenario relating to the artist, dealers and collectors, to present something that is recognisably and distinctively his world. Much as the reference is to de Kooning, a lot of the film's comedy and theatre is directed at performance art, including McCarthy's own earlier extreme performances involving his own bodily fluids and solids, such as *Shit Face Painting* (1974), in which he smeared excrement over his body and face. *Painter's* gaudy spectacle of self-indulgence gives us a projection of stereotypical art world characters, over-blown and exaggerated. Its excessive nature, the crudity and stumbling buffoonery of the artist, reflects the vulgarity at the core of an art world, that nevertheless likes to imagine itself as refined and sophisticated.

Paul McCarthy
Painter, (1995)
Performance, installation, video, photographs
Photo by Karen McCarthy/Damon McCarthy

Courtesy Paul McCarthy and Hauser & Wirth



Mel Brimfield sets up comic collisions between cultural forms drawn from popular culture and clichéd and romantic art traditions. Her video *He Hit Me… and it Felt Like a Kiss* (2011), made in collaboration with jazz singer Gwyneth Herbert and pianist Paul Higgs, appropriates Andrew Lloyd Webber's sentimental song *Memory*, from the musical *Cats*. In a variation on Ovid's Pygmalion myth about a sculptor falling in love with his statue of a woman that comes alive, the singer in Brimfield's camp extravaganza is a half-finished sculpture, abandoned by the artist. Her song tells of the masochist bond she once had with her sculptor and how she longs for him again.

Having initially trained as a sculptor Brimfield now laughs at its pomposity. As she has said:

There's something about massive serious sculpture that I find particularly funny, also the fact that most often it's men who make it. I suppose it's partly because you really have to mean it— the elaborate fabrication processes, the transport, the budget needed for it all, the unveiling. What if it's rubbish when it's finished? Some of it must be, and everyone involved must know it. The potential for artists' hubris is enormous and that's an appealing comic situation.[16]

Mel Brimfield
He Hit Me...and It Felt Like a Kiss 2011
production still: produced in association with Gwyneth Herbert, Paul Higgs and Edward Moore. Commissioned by Peter Scott Gallery (Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts)

In a comic variation on the critical art historical readings of minimalism in terms of its machismo, Brimfield has produced posters of the 'heavy metal' sculptor Richard Serra that portray him as a male stripper. Her *On Board* (2010) sends up Charles Ray's 1973 photograph *Plank Piece II*, the document of a performance in which the artist treated his own body as a sculptural element, balancing himself on a plank propped up against a wall, drooping over it, reducing the body to an object, subject to the force of gravity. Only the comedy of the fall is kept at bay, through this precarious suspension. Ray's performance was a response to Minimal Art, in particular Serra's prop pieces, which he reprises with a plank and his own body. The comedy and the gag in Ray's photograph of a performance is to do with the treatment of the body as a sculptural element or object, propped up by a piece of timber. We have already introduced the comic potential of the body when we see it as a thing, not a person. In answering back to Minimalism, Ray turns his body into a sculptural element.

In Brimfield's *On Board*, the plank providing the prop, replete with allusions to Minimalist form, is now replaced by a clichéd icon of women's labour. Wearing a flouncy dress, the woman's long hair is draped over the ironing board that pins her to the wall. With Brimfield the joke rests upon the quick link made between the domestic ironing board and the caricatured social role of women. What is important is that it is not the artist's body, but that of an actor, who plays the part of a fictional performance artist in an account of art written by Brimfield but given the voice of a male art historian. So, as well as a mockery of avant-garde male sculptural gestures, the whole thing is a jokey send up of performance art, art history and clichéd feminist art practices. The performer in *On Board* is meant to be the fictitious character Alex Owens (played by Joanna Neary). In the words of the fictitious critic, Sir Francis Spalding, the comic figure through which Brimfield provides a send up of art history, Owens is 'a gutsy young dancer bent throughout her tragically short career on carving her name upon the mighty slabs of sculptural history.'[17] She 'burst onto the parched landscape of desiccated minimalist orthodoxy like a welcome monsoon of ultra-feminine sensuality.'[18]

Mel Brimfield
On Board, 2010, C-type print, 105 x 70cm: produced in association with Edward Moore and Joanna Neary. Courtesy of The Collective

The Carnivalesque

Erwin Wurm's art registers the urge to create new meaning out of the clutter of everyday material culture and the codes of social behavior that determine our relationship to objects. He seems exceptionally alert to the experience of time, particularly the 'slow' time from which boredom springs, and exploits this as an opportunity to playfully re-engage with overlooked objects and social conventions. Out of this emerges an art that incorporates the experience of time as an active component. Wurm's sense of timing in his art is particularly acute and varied, governed by a fluctuating pulse: at times steady and systematic, realised in large sculptural projects involving time-consuming and expensive industrial fabrication processes, at other times revealed through an improvised, DIY aesthetic that is urgent and playful. His *One Minute Sculptures*, which he began in 1988, for example, are driven by restless curiosity and the need to make something different happen, and quickly.

Conventionally, familiar objects, the physicality of which is often overlooked by habitual use, are acknowledged only for the function they perform: a pen to write with or a bucket to carry liquid. In *One Minute Sculptures*, the sculptural potential of the object's physical characteristics take precedence over their function and are released from their normal use to create new and unexpected relationships: a pen becomes something to plug a nostril, a bucket a test of balance or something to wear as a hat. In this work the temporary suspension of the object's normal use and meaning is achieved through the willingness of each performer to submit to Wurm's invitation to behave in a manner that appears foolish, abandoning the rules governing an object's conventional use. This action not only offers the potential to shape new sculptural form, but also sanctions new forms of behavior where play is valued over utility, and participants in effect become 'One Minute Artists'. Such moments of controlled revolt, however brief, stand in sharp contrast to the stifling conformity of daily life and illuminate the social order whose rules and codes are so habituated that we are no longer conscious of their operation, so 'natural' have they become.

Though the controlled nature of this liberation might seem somewhat parodic, the *One Minute Sculptures* offer a temporary antidote to such conformity, a comedic space where the rules determining normal behavior are turned on their head and replaced with the freedom to play and reshape our relationship to the world. In this sense Wurm's art could be said to share many of the qualities of the carnivalesque: the term used by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the main characteristics of the medieval culture of folk humour associated with carnival, as described in the novels of François Rabelais.[19] In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin identifies laughter and mocking irreverence as the prevailing spirit at carnival time, where clowns and fools mimicked serious rituals and social hierarchies were upturned.

Experienced in relation to the rigidity and hardship of everyday feudal life and contrasted with the official and serious tone of ecclesiastical festivals, carnival occupied a special place in medieval society and signified the

Erwin Wurm
Instructions on How to be Politically Incorrect, (2002–2003)
Looking For A Bomb 1

Erwin Wurm
Instructions on How to be Politically Incorrect, (2002–2003)
Inspection

symbolic destruction of authority and official culture and the assertion of popular renewal. The carnival and the carnivalesque is evoked by Bakhtin as a type of communal performance where the boundaries between performers and audience dissolve, liberating new forms of social interaction between diverse voices: 'Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom.' [20]

During carnival normal rank and social hierarchies are abolished or inverted through mockery and profanity and almost any social behavior is permitted. Repressed energies are released and new forms of life experience created, shaped by play and the potent power of humour, often marked by displays of excess and grotesqueness.
The carnivalesque evokes a utopian, collective spirit of liberation, a joyous opportunity to live the world differently, its fluid form affirming that the social hierarchies of the present are temporary and relative, and will one day come to an end.

Disregard for normal behavior and mockery of social taboos are the subjects of Erwin Wurm's *Instructions On How To Be Politically Incorrect*, and the comedy settles on the body and its transgressions. The series of photographs function like jokes in action. The performance of 'bad', incorrect behavior signaled by the work's title is a set-up for the image, a knowing provocation against liberal social order, its etiquette and values. The inappropriate behaviour depicted in the photograph functions as the punchline confirming the title of the work, the two working in tandem to create a joke-like structure. There is however a tension in the comedic process at work in Wurm's photographs relating to the supposed disruptive potential of incorrect behavior depicted in the images. The body's transgression of social etiquette through acts of incorrect behaviour does seem carnivalesque in spirit, and confirmed by the titles of individual works, such as *Pee on Someone's Rug*. These titles are not just descriptive of what is in the picture, but might also be seen as an invitation to act, functioning like an illustrated user's manual for a succession of bad and inappropriate actions. It is about art deliberately crossing boundaries, disruptions of the polite civilising and bourgeois codes; but does it not do so in ways that are themselves conforming to a certain notion of correct artistic transgression, however coyly and wittily this is achieved? Wurm documents ridiculous behavior, social interactions that exceed conventional etiquette, but he does so in a manner in which the etiquette of avant-garde transgression still appears to be maintained. *Instructions On How To Be Politically Incorrect* might be criticised as merely playing at bad behaviour and subversion for the relative aesthetic thrill of a seemingly risqué art. Admittedly, the work does depend upon an active maintenance of bourgeois social order, but it seems intensely parodic and focuses attention on the malleable nature of the public/private relationship of culture as it seeks to maintain control and the status quo in challenging times, when the individual is both cornerstone of liberal democracy and an agent of transgression. Wurm's strength rests in staging this tension in ridiculous fashion, foregrounding its contradictions. In this sense it may also share the same fate as carnival, in that what at one point in history signified the potential for exceptional radicalism, freedom and the possibility of reimagining and living a different form of social life, was ultimately, like Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures,* contained and regulated as a temporary experience. Contemporary manifestations of carnival are highly controlled and commercialised, and rather than being spaces in which repressed energies playfully test radical alternatives to established social hierarchies, carnival seems to have now become an official safety valve where radicalism can be contained and ultimately diffused.

The absurd concerns the outlandish, grotesque representations of reality, a magical counterworld, involving non-sense actions and non-sense language as a means to induce a different perception of the world. Peter Finnemore's short video films, typified by an improvised, lo-fi aesthetic, reminiscent of homemade videos, mostly deploy fixed, single takes from a static camera set within his family home and garden. They are abundant in citations from Spaghetti Westerns and pop music, as well as Welsh folk traditions and myths, and are, in this respect, absurd. Finnemore is both author and performer in his films and seems forever on the move, always up to something. Such restless activity is located in the familiar world of his immediate rural environment and involves the manipulation of the objects, locations and people with whom he is close. There is oddness to his work: in his filmed actions he makes ordinary things perform as props or become the setting for the actions performed in his back garden. Either through mock-ritualistic performance, or as a result of his sharp-eyed attention to the odd and quietly unusual, Finnemore transforms the ordinary into something else. In this sense he might be seen to have affinities with the folkloric figure of the trickster, an archetypal character found in many cultures. The trickster is an ambiguous person or creature unrestrained by normal rules and conventional behaviour, whose tricks transgress boundaries to provide mediation between different realities. This sense of playful transformation typifies much of Finnemore's art; in the enactment of strange fantasies in the untidy rural landscape he appears at times child-like and unselfconscious.

Part of the intrigue of Finnemore's work is that it takes place against a rural backdrop, somewhat mundane and non-picturesque, neither farm nor garden, but the ramshackle space between them. Contemporary art tends to address urban experience: the countryside has long been displaced as the primary site to which artists respond. Finnemore's equivocal rural space is the perfect setting for his volatile play, where normal rules of interaction with the material world seem to have been readjusted or ignored altogether, to fashion often dumb but fascinating encounters.

There is a love of simple accidents and mistakes within his videos. In *My Head is in the Shed* (2004) the artist walks towards the panels of a shed that has not been assembled and laid out against a hedge, and as he enters a door and then returns to camera, his father walks into frame and sneezes. The set up is spoilt. But rather than edit this out, Finnemore sees its comedy and incorporates the happenstance accident and mistake, and puts it centre stage. In *Guerilla Exercises* (2004) the artist is filmed pulling a chest expander attached to a tree, leaning ever further back until the inevitable happens and the apparatus catapults off the tree, accompanied by a comic sounding twang and the squawking of a bird it nearly hits. There is a cartoon-like simplicity and unreality to such brief comic moments and something of the dumb insistency displayed in Bruce Nauman's *Eleven Color Photographs* in carrying through actions whose outcome we can predict.

Peter Finnemore
My Head is in the Shed, 55 sec. (2004)
Electronic Video Film Still, Courtesy the artist.

Peter Finnemore
Gnats and Smokie, 1.23 mins. (2004)
Electronic Video Film Still, Courtesy the artist.

Sometimes the comedic does not have to be constructed to be effective, but instead emerges through the recognition, and highlighting, of what already exists. Such observational comedy is a mainstay of popular entertainment and its best examples demonstrate a similar perceptual alertness to spot and frame everyday situations as comedic. In *Gnats & Smokie* (2004) we are given a view into a small living room interior through a doorway. Between armchairs, a portable music player on a table is playing *Living Next Door to Alice* by the British band Smokie. A man's jerking arm, and then his kicking leg, keep coming into view, comically isolated from the rest of his body, which remains out of shot. He remains, we suspect, unaware that he is being observed and filmed. As he shoos away irritating gnats, his movements constitute a very funny dance to the music.

In his book *Homo Ludens (Playing Man*) Johan Huizinga emphasised the importance of play as a primary condition for the generation of culture. In some respects, one might see Finnemore's work in this context. Play is freedom, play is not ordinary life, it is distinct, and there is neither profit nor material interest in play. Finnemore's play can also be dark, staging scenes of anguish and apocalypse - sporting an Elvis wig and sunglasses while lip-synching into a potted sunflower, which serves as a makeshift microphone, to Barry McGuire's 1965 protest song *Eve of Destruction*. His routine begins by a crazy Kung Fu kicking dance routine and ends up with him violently smashing the sunflower.

Mirrors figure in several of Finnemore's videos, sometimes used to reflect and return sunlight, often blindingly, back at the viewer. In one such work, *White Noise* (2005), the artist carries a mirror as he climbs up a ladder leant up on a tree. He seems to be on the look out for something, but we are not sure what. The light reflected back from the mirror could be a way of signaling to others, but it is also a means of deflection and resistance, of remaining hidden, like the camouflage he wears. Light both attracts attention and repels the viewer, and here it is used as a kind of attack.

Finnemore adopts the role of a mischievous militiaman on operations in his back garden, a slightly demented, but obviously earnest figure whose roguish acts and pranks are safely contained in their rural setting. The small community of characters, family and friends, each wearing camouflaged uniform who join him on his manoeuvres, further confirms this sense of insularity. The theme of camouflage is taken up in his videos as a metaphor for his own lack of visibility as an artist working and living in the margins of mid-Wales. The attachment to and identification with the land and a sense of threat from outside also invites a colonial reading — his work is about territorialism and, for all the comic antics, it can be interpreted as concerned with a defense of his home and his world. Dressed in camouflage gear, Finnemore may present himself as the playful survivalist living by his own rules in a rural idyll. But he is nonetheless knowing and calculating in his playing to camera. The antics he presents are of course directed to that other community of which he is also a part, the urban sophisticates of the art world.

Peter Finnemore
Eve of Destruction, 4.03 mins. (2004)
Electronic Video Film Still, Courtesy the artist.

Slapstick

Slapstick is a physical and boisterous comedy in which the body of the performer is often at odds with his mind. Stunts, pain and violence are standard features of slapstick, the term itself based upon the loud sound made by a wooden paddle, originally primed with a pinch of gunpowder and used in pantomime to strike a blow. Slapstick is most familiar to us through early silent comedy films and the scenes of industrialised life that were often the context of the action. Characterised by scenes of alienation, exploitation, repetition, banality, goal-orientated action (Laurel and Hardy delivering a piano, Chaplin in the factory etc.), slapstick can be seen as a comedy of industrialised experience. It has a frustrating, banal, relentlessness about it and often gains its comedic charge through the presentation of human fallibility, set to work in some form of regulated system of industrialisation. Often this becomes the setting for the manifestation of a repetitive, banal activity, frustrating both the protagonist and the audience - only for the predictable outcome to be confirmed through the resigned acknowledgement of defeat by the central character, or through the defiant conquest of the task. Either way, the worker is at war with his relations of production and it is the body that suffers the abuse.

Julian Rosefeldt's two-screen film installation, *Stunned Man (Trilogy of Failure II)* (2004), revisits the slapstick scenario but removes it from the industrial workplace, locating it instead in a comfortable domestic environment. His film beautifully stages the destruction of a studio set featuring two domestic interiors, and relishes in the choreographed slapstick antics of a man hell-bent on smashing everything up, a destruction counter-posed by the introduction of an identical second character, his double, who is tidy and ordered. The split mimics the format of the double act routine, the orderly normality of the straight person played off against the unruly behavior of the funny performer. *Stunned Man* presents us with two parallel worlds, on two screens, each showing interiors, which are clearly fabricated stage sets. In each one the camera moves between the walls in a regular tracking shot, containing and framing the events taking place in the identical apartment spaces.

The stunt man enters his apartment by crashing through the ceiling and, after periods of relative ordinary calm, dusting himself off and starting to clean up the initial mess, keeps reverting to destructive outbursts. It is an aimless destruction that abandons all sense and meaning — intended to create a dramatic and spectacular action in the film and a disruption of the ordinary and everyday domesticity of the events that both characters undertake in the course of the film: having a drink, reading a newspaper, working on a laptop, etc. The comedy is the pairing of the two characters, both caught in the endless looping of the film, unable to escape their roles and behaviour. The straight man is careful and ordered. The other, ultimately, cannot be contained in the apartment and at one point he appears to cross over, through the bathroom mirror, into the other's world, and across the two screens.

The film explores containment and order, the comedy of the excessive and unruly

Julian Rosefeldt
Stunned Man / Trilogy of Failure (Part II), 2004
two channel film installation filmed on super 16 mm
transferred on DVD
16:9
loop: 32"50 minutes

Julian Rosefeldt
Stunned Man / Trilogy of Failure (Part II), 2004
two channel film installation filmed on super 16 mm
transferred on DVD
16:9
loop: 32”50 minutes

body and bad behaviour. It demonstrates the key dualities of comedy, the split-screen effect and the split personality, the rampant uncontrollable physical body and controlled, orderly and repressed behaviour. It could be seen to illustrate the explosive nature of the joke, from out of the day-to-day. The destructive actions are outbursts, sudden and dramatic, interrupting the calm and order.

The camera movements throughout are indifferent to the actions and create an aesthetic calm and order. Two continuous tracking shots move in synch around the set, creating a formal mirroring between the two screens and the spaces of the rooms, which become increasingly distinct as the destructive force is unleashed, first in one interior and then the other— the destructive figure continues to smash up the other apartment once he has crossed over into it.

Rosefeldt uses slapstick to interrupt and disrupt the normal order of things, both in terms of our relationship to possessions and our patterns of behaviour. Part of the pleasure of *Stunned Man* relates to the tension between the maintenance of a domestic calm and order, and its repeated violent disruption. On the one hand, order is reassuring and desirable, it is how we live our lives. On the other, these moments of revolt against the mundanity of ordinary life are both attractive and exciting, and are habitually codified and consumed through the entertainment industry. The success of *Stunned Man* relates to Rosefeldt’s succinct management and orchestration of the battle between contested primal drives. By locating everything in ordinary domestic settings, his film serves to remind us how fragile the balance is.

David Sherry’s video *Red Sauce/Brown Sauce Mania* (2013) presents the artist lying prone on the floor, filmed with his upper body in frame and facing a camera positioned on the floor next to his head. As if suffering a catastrophic collapse of cognitive and motor co-ordination skills, Sherry systematically squeezes and empties, first a bottle of red, and then brown sauce, over his face. Accompanying this basic misuse of familiar condiments and the chronically poor hand-eye co-ordination of their delivery, Sherry talks continuously. The stream of viscous fluid projected onto the side of his face, slowly sliding down into his eyes, nostrils and mouth, is mirrored by and interferes with, the incessant stream of chatter emerging from the artist’s mouth. Sherry is garrulous, he cannot be shut up and the video sets up an unexpected link between language and this viscous liquid. Sauce over the face also offers a variation on the classic ‘pie in the face’ gesture of slapstick comedy. Tomato ketchup is a cheap clichéd theatrical stand in for blood and in this context carries with it an allusion to the performance art of Paul McCarthy, who uses such products to suggest unruly bodily fluids.

In Sherry’s video the erratic and unfocused nature of the use of the sauces, combined with his incessant babble, suggest a body out of control and, as the title of the work suggests, something manic. The effect of this bizarre behaviour is unsettling and worryingly comic. Although there is no telephone to be seen in the video, the type of dialogue we witness is reminiscent of phone conversations we all have with someone close. The content of this dialogue is familiar enough, a performed sociability whereby arrangements to ‘meet up for a coffee, on the weekend, or during the week, or on Monday, or any time that’s good for you’ belie the difficulty of arranging such acts of affability and the unwillingness to fulfill them. Throughout the video the sense of anxiety created by the constant revision of suggestions as to how, where and why to meet, is accompanied by the visual tension created by Sherry squirting sauce into his face. The application of pressure, both literal through the act of squeezing the

sauce out of the bottle, and social, in the sense of having to behave in a gregarious manner, create the conditions in which controlled behavior seems to collapse into chaos. Our recognition of the unease faced when confronted with the obligation to be sociable is compounded in the sequence of the video where we see the artist trying to extricate himself from such demanding contact through a series of all too familiar lies and excuses. His guilty narrative, accompanied by his squirting of brown sauce into his face, with all of its abject connotations, leaves Sherry on the floor in the dysfunctional mess he has created for himself.

David Sherry also translates fast food signs. Turning these flashing LED messages into spoken words creates the comedy and absurdity. Of course you are not supposed to read such messages out loud - they are not meant to be treated like auto-cues. It is Sherry's unexpected response to cultural signs that creates the absurdity and the gulf between these anonymous author-less messages and the distinctive speaking voice of the artist. When artists are influenced by popular culture there is often been a sense of transformation in their response, but with Sherry it is a much more subservient relationship. He does not bestow added value; instead he becomes a mouthpiece for these garish fast food signs, a mindless mimic.

David Sherry
'Red Sauce/Brown Sauce Mania' (2013)
Courtesy of the Artist.

Plato describes one of the first pratfalls in his account of the astrologer Thales who falls into a pit when looking up at the stars. So eager to know what was going on in heaven he could not see what was under his own feet. There is then a gravitational pull to comedy. It can bring us down to earth, literally. Some of the artists in this book visually play with this gravitational pull, reworking the familiar slapstick gag of the pratfall and, in the process of reworking it, give it added symbolic importance. The pratfall is about the body and can be seen to convey the sense of the person not being in control of the world around them. The fall is a great means of undercutting pretensions. The body lets us down. So comedy can both bring us down to earth and also take us out of ourselves, make us see the comedy of our absurd human situation and condition.

Nearly half of Bas Jan Ader's total artistic production, tragically cut short by his disappearance at sea, had falling as its central theme. His falling films record performances and events presented in Los Angeles and later Holland: deliberately falling from a chair balanced on the roof of his house in America, steering his bicycle into one of Amsterdam's canals or positioning himself to fall from a high branch. Of the few statements he made about his art, the most often cited is: 'I do not make body sculptures, body art or body works. When I fell off the roof of my house, or into a canal, it was because gravity made itself master over me.'[21] While the absolute force of gravity can be seen as a way of signifying his lack of control, all the falls are a result of a conscious decision and manipulation of the action.
Broken Fall (organic) (1971) was filmed on the outskirts of Amsterdam in open parkland crisscrossed with canals. The black and white 16mm film, lasting a mere 1 minute 44 seconds, begins with Ader swinging from a branch of a tree that extends over a canal, some 15-20 feet above the ground. He then moves his hands down the branch so he is positioned more fully over the canal, waits for his body to become stable, keeping his body vertical. After a short while, one hand releases, then the other, and he falls into the canal.

His work has invited some commentators to give it a theological significance and aura. For Alexander Dumbadze, 'If one infers Ader's engagement with falling bears a direct relationship with his Dutch Reform background, then these ephemeral pieces speak to the fall of man.'[22] It is ironic that commentators fascinated with the physical act of falling enacted by Ader, rather than let the work fall into pragmatic reading, prefer instead to seek its gravity-defying suspension by recourse to spiritual and metaphysical elevation.

Ader's films tend to be shrouded in mystery and myth as a result of his disappearance and assumed death in his final tragic act, *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975), in which he attempted to cross the Atlantic in a small sailboat.

Bas Jan Ader
Broken Fall (Organic), Amsterdamse Bos, Holland, 1971
16mm film, 16mm film transferred onto DVD, silent 1 min, 36 sec
Edition of 3.

Peter Land
Pink Space (1995)

Disappearance can be seen to characterise his falling films, since none show us the consequences of the actions he presents – we see no physical harm or outcome. They always feature an abrupt cut that marks the end of the film. As a result, it is difficult to see the fall as humiliation; rather, it retains its status as a demonstration of physical law and a force integral to the vocabulary of sculpture. In the presence of Richard Serra's propped large-scale metal sculptures, for example, it is an acknowledgement of the consequences of gravity that creates the real anxiety and fear.

When making videos of himself falling, Peter Land has said how he took his cue from Bas Jan Ader's falling films. His response is parodic, as he shows us what is missing in Ader's work by introducing the consequences of the fall and its interpretation as an act of humiliation and stupidity. In this respect Land is much more of a clown figure, a fall guy in the full sense. Land situates his falls in plausible contexts— falling off a bike when going round a bend, or off a ladder when decorating and rolling down the stairs. He introduces repetition into his actions, picking upon the comic effect of automated behaviour in slapstick. As the artist notes during an interview, the very first ideas behind such videos come from the influence of slapstick comedy in silent cinema, pointing out an example of a comic scene in Laurel and Hardy: 'And I started thinking… what if the entire film had only been about people throwing cakes into each other's faces? What about 100 scenes only with that, would it stay funny or would it turn into something else?'[23]

Maurice Doherty
Waiting to Fall (2001)
Looped video installation

In Land's video, *Pink Space* (1995), we shift from the everyday to the world of entertainment. The artist plays the role of a nightclub performer, wearing a blue tuxedo jacket and holding a drink, a prop that provides a clue to the cause of his antics. The film shows his repeated attempts to sit on a stool placed on the stage. This simple task appears beyond Land's capabilities as he constantly misjudges what's required. This theatrical and excessive presentation of incompetence carries on throughout the film. It is frustrating and irritating yet able to produce a comic pleasure. There is a *Groundhog Day* comedy of entrapment to the looped video, which underscores the relentlessness and exhaustion of a comic routine. It is also a comic updating of the 'futile and hopeless labour'[24] attached to the Sisyphus myth, punished by the Gods to perpetually roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only for the stone to fall back of its own weight. Land's falls are relatively short falls and always ridiculously comic. In contrast, Bas Jan Ader falls from a height; they are edged by a sense of potential tragedy or folly. With his films it is a gallows humour, laughing in the face of death, a kind of action that is about Eros or Thanatos, the ultimate gamble, the taunt, which he eventually lost.

Maurice Doherty's *Waiting to Fall* (2001) temporally extends the joke of the pratfall, strips it of all metaphysical elements. It is the pratfall slowed down and drawn out. Rather than using repetition as a strategy, in which the comedy can become awkward and painful, this video/performance sets up the possibility of a fall, for which we are left, for some 30 minutes, waiting in suspense. In this sense it is theatrical. An empty studio space provides the setting; the artist enters and puts on a crash helmet. The title and helmet is enough to indicate what is to come, and it is the wait for the fall that constitutes the work's tension. Duration alters the familiar comedy of the joke. When it comes, the fall itself is sudden, dramatic and shocking, with his protected head hitting the floor with some force and a loud crack. Doherty deprived himself of sleep before this performance to camera, an act in keeping with the endurance tradition of some performance art — for example, Tehching Hsieh's one-year performance, in which he attempted to punch a time-clock every hour for a year. But if we are to see his slow fall akin to performance art, its pseudo-heroism, with all the self-indulgence of endurance, suffering and trauma, is mocked with the precautionary crash helmet. The helmet introduces the world of mundane normality regulated by health and safety legislation. Doherty's durational comedy exploits our cruel fascination with the body being damaged or punished. We are made aware of the cruel impulses at the core of comedy, the physical abuses in slapstick and the falls and mishaps that are so compelling in such British TV programmes as *You've Been Framed*.

Falling Short

From 2005-2006 I shot more than 30 movie scene reenactments alone in my apartment using whatever costumes and props were on hand. These crude reenactments are my effort to degrade and venerate the heroics of Hollywood movies. By working completely alone and utilizing the techniques of cinema in the simplest possible ways I hope to recreate narratives that are stripped of everything but the pathos inherent in consuming the medium.[25]

Kara Hearn's homemade videos, show the artist re-enacting scenes from mainstream movies that made her cry. What is funny is the emotional excess and drama of Hollywood film brought back into the everyday and domestic sphere. There is a vernacular element here and a doubling, as popular, epic and dramatic moments from well-known films that have entered the popular imaginary, are revisited. The comedy is in the shortfall and the contingent realm the videos reveal, the way they show both how far she is and how far we are from the stars.

Hearn's videos start with recognisable films of high production value, and then there is a depletion of that quality; but at the same time there is an attempt to preserve the intensity of the emotional effect. The artist has also re-enacted a series of death scenes from well-known films, tragic climaxes that are now replayed for laughs. The emotional roller coaster ride that the original films can take us on entails a departure and escape from our day-to-day lives and worries. Hearn's absurdist little theatres pull us back into the domestic and quotidian realm of the artist's everyday. There is a comic disjuncture between the seriousness by which she performs and invites empathy and imaginative identification and the props and domestic apartment setting. It is the pathetic core of films that she tries to convey in her re-enactments, which suggest the extent of her desire to emotionally occupy stock roles. Pathos is consumed as it is commodified in film and this is the exchange that takes place in her work.

As a variant of karaoke, Hearn taps into the culture of fandom and its excesses, of people living their lives through imaginary identifications with movie characters. One thinks of how the domestic space becomes a theatre for unrealised heroism, inner-worlds and fantasy identifications - a situation also made famous in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* when Robert De Niro's psychotic Travis Bickle character stands in front of his bedroom mirror and rehearses his response to an imagined confrontation: 'You talking to me?'

The joke with Hearn's work is the collision between two worlds. In borrowing and trying out a vocabulary of dramatic responses, the work is not emotionally denuded. The shortfall is that she is not a professional actor, and that these are domestic reiterations. They rely upon the fact we know the references. They are cathartic, intense dramatic moments that are copied, but the production values are depleted. In this respect it is a comedy of the fall from the economically and emotionally charged Hollywood blockbusters to the mini-dramas performed in her bedroom. In the end, Hearn's can never be great moments. But perhaps they never were in the first place. Her work rebounds back upon the movies and makes us think about both

Kara Hearn
Reincarnated Scenes (Gladiator), (2005)
video still

Kara Hearn
Reincarnated Scenes (E.T.), (2005)
video still

Joachim Schmid
Flashing from Other People's Photographs
(2008-2011), courtesy of the artist.

the formulaic nature and the hollowness of the industry's manufactured scenes of pathos.

Joachim Schmid's series of 96 books, *Other People's Photographs* (2008-2011), brings together contemporary forms of photography, mostly amateur, appropriated from pictures posted on the image-hosting website Flickr. The artist gathers similar photographs, organised by subject or in some cases by the type of mistakes made in their taking, which collectively provide a comic reflection on photographic value, authorship and the nature of individuality and shared experience in the digital age.

Schmid's book, *The Picture*, presents a collection of amateur tourist photos taken of *The Mona Lisa* in the Louvre. The images accent the variability of technological representation and the uniformity of cultural consumption. Schmid's compilation, which no doubt represents only a small fraction of the millions of images taken by tourists each year, introduces a new pictorial aesthetic in the photographic translation of the artwork. He makes a virtue of the errors in the recording process, highlighting the shared incompetence of the tourists' compulsion to record their experience of 'seeing' Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting in an endless production of pictures featuring inappropriate cropping, reflections and varied colour casts. The tourist's gaze is also subject to mockery: the people who hold their cameras above their heads to record the painting, clearly do not see it. The work brings up the old chestnut of art's aura being 'lost' in the age of technical reproducibility — at the same time Schmid is musing on the cultural phenomenon of a surfeit

Joachim Schmid
Big Fish from Other People's Photographs
(2008-2011), courtesy of the artist.

of images. His motivation is however ambiguous. Does his book represent a celebration of the democratising, participatory and distributary potential of digital technology as a means for anyone to share in the production and experience of culture, or is it no more than sardonic condescension? There is clearly comedy in the way the book draws attention to the fallibility, imperfections and flaws of our quotidian lives through a ritualised touristic and cultic act, in front of a 'superhuman' masterpiece. As already suggested, we find habitual, automatic behaviour funny. In showing us how attempts to record that moment of special encounter with *The Mona Lisa* results in such inadequate images, snatched from within a jostling crowd, Schmid's book offers bathetic comedy.

Schmid's art can often involve looking downwards, it entails a comic falling. Literally his gaze was drawn to the floor in his *Bilder von der Straße* (*Pictures From the Street)* (1982-2012), a collection spanning three decades, of the often worn and torn photographs picked up from the streets of various cities he visited. Such work preceded his more recent appropriation from the inexhaustible surfeit of virtual images from all over the world now accessible on line. With *Other People's Photographs* we are no longer dealing with something that can be simply described as 'vernacular photography'. This is consumer photography, and consumerism in its many varied forms becomes the focus of Schmid's attention and the subject of his work — pictures of food, products and their packaging chart the emergence of a new visual economy with the development of digital technology and image-sharing platforms, where everyone

Joachim Schmid
The Picture from Other People's Photographs
(2008-2011), courtesy the artist.

with a smart-phone is a photographer now. Like the joke, Schmid's art 'gives us an alien perspective on our practices'[26]; it jolts recognition of our conformity by amassing evidence that demonstrates, counter to consumerism's culture of rampant individualism, how social life is marked by a habitual and formulaic activity, and that we all end up taking the same pictures.

Schmid's books remind us of novelist Don DeLillo's account of the most photographed barn in America in his 1984 parody of consumer culture, *White Noise*. Two academics are viewing the barn and all those gathered to photograph it: 'We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photo reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies.'[27]

The collective *Retort* neatly sum up what is going on in terms of the consumer images Schmid appropriates, when they speak about how:

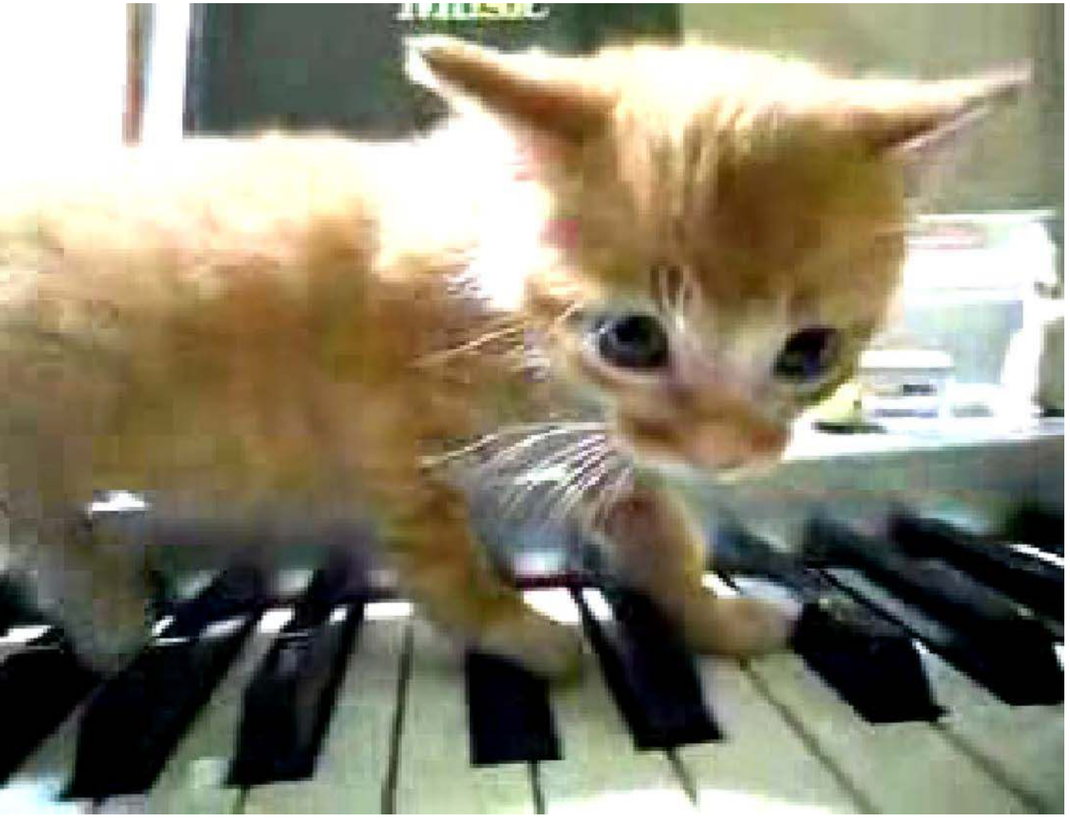
Modernity, particularly in its consumer society manifestation, is less and less able to offer its subjects ways to live in the present, to have the flow of time be accepted and inhabited as it happens. And this is precisely because it stakes everything on celebrating – perpetuating – the here and now. Lately it has built up an extraordinary apparatus to enable individuals to image, archive, digitalize, objectify, and take ownership of the passing moment. The here and now is not endurable, it seems (or at least, not fully real) unless it is told or shown, immediately and continuously to others – or to oneself…[28]

Schmid's relatively old-fashioned strategy of communication through the form of the book extends the life of the transient pictures he appropriates. Through classification and grouping he also highlights their repetitive and rote characteristics. Schmid is not a photographer, but he scans the world through images, excavating patterns of photographic behaviour, identifying types and recurring themes. Like a good observational comic, he notices the typical and plays it back to us so we recognise ourselves and enjoy the comedy of conformity.

Like Joachim Schmid, Cory Arcangel is an artist who collates found digital material and from it arranges new compositions. For *Drei Klavierstücke Op. 11* (2009) Arcangel, who is a composer and computer programmer, as well as an artist, downloaded 170 videos posted on YouTube showing cats and kittens walking along the keys of pianos. Collecting the audio from each, he added the compendium to an audio file of Glenn Gould playing a musical piece by Arnold Schoenberg. Arcangel used a computer programme, *Comparisonics,* to go through the score note by note to find the pitch in something a cat had 'played', and then turned the assemblage back into video.

The joke of the work is the incongruity of cats playing Schoenberg's atonal music in the assembled montage of YouTube video postings. The residual trace of the kitsch source of the video footage collides with the high cultural associations of the audio. The comfort associated with the image of the fluffy kitten stands in contrast to the formidable rigour of *Drei Klavierstücke Op. 11*.

At the same time, the work also plays with the joke that such modern atonal music is itself no longer musical, an unharmonious din. There is a sly undercurrent that mocks the purity and abstract assumptions behind the Modernist work. With Arcangel's art concerned with chance and probability, the joke about monkeys and typewriters comes to mind in considering his work - the idea that a monkey hitting keys of a typewriter at random for an infinite amount of time will eventually type out a great work of literature. There is an element of humour directed at Arcangel and his own aspirations, in terms of the eagerness to signify cultural importance through the reference to Schoenberg's uncompromising music and, we assume, spending such an amount of time trawling through cute videos to assemble a Modernist composition.



Cory Arcangel
Drei Klavierstücke op. 11 (still), 2009
Single-channel video
15:58 minutes
© Cory Arcangel; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Musical tones are gathered, reformulated and given enhanced cultural significance and weight, re-presented as a novel tongue-in-cheek encounter with high culture. While the work might question whether there is now no boundary between kitsch and Schoenberg, these elements are still sufficiently in place for us to get the joke. If the cats played Britney Spears, for instance, it would not be mocking to the same degree, since part of the comedy rests upon the way such high Modernist music disdained the commercial. The cuteness and playfulness of the popular culture realm of cats and kittens meets the cleverness, intellectualism and adeptness of Modernist music, to produce a kind of hybrid. It is this hybridity that is funny. There is an unwitting collaboration.

The desire for elevation and aspiration is parodied in Arcangel's spoof 2014 novel that publishes tweets with the phrase 'working on my novel.' In a world of instant messaging and in a 'character-restricted' communicative form, the artist invites us to reflect on the persistence and lure of a classic and time-honored mode of writing — albeit one that will probably never be realised by those who tweet. Cumulatively the tweets index the varied excuses and everyday constraints that prevent would-be-authors from working on their novel, as well as providing an insight into the tweeters' lives, through an accumulation of everyday details and popular cultural references. Reading the tweets, the phrase 'working on my novel' also becomes a clichéd excuse for people who have not used their time significantly, bestowing seriousness on their lack of an apparent activity. While Arcangel has managed to get his novel book published by Penguin, what remains falls short of the classic definition of the novel form. His book is something that can be read in ten or fifteen minutes. The novel remains always an unattainable dream and fantasy, even for Arcangel, who also puts himself among the tweeters in his own book.

Within literature and cultural history, comedy sits in opposition to tragedy. It has always been undervalued as a lesser or lighter cultural form. Much as that legacy has persisted it now seems to be challenged within art. With the proliferation and visibility of comedy within popular culture generally, and the diversity of its forms and outlets, from TV to homemade YouTube clips, comedy could be seen to have a currency that it has probably never had before. And this has impacted upon aesthetics. There is a different relation to comedy now and anyone can be a comic if they have a camera and access to a YouTube account. As well as these hybrid performances posted on line, there seems to be an explosion in the number of stand up comics.

If people are performing comedy, then the migration into performance art seems to be a natural development. Comedy is very much about delivery and performance. It is more of a visual and performative art than one that functions in script form. Over half of the artists in this book can be seen, in their various ways, to be engaging with comedic performances. And there is a new distinction around such an approach: the way in which it distances itself from the suffering and earnestness seen in the history of performance art. In this respect Bas Jan Ader is an exception and a more transitional figure in relation to the performance of comedy. One suspects he is not playing it for laughs, and if we are to position his work as part of a comic tradition it is, as we have said, a kind of gallows humour. But as Peter Land's response to Ader's work shows, all falls are close to slapstick. Such performative and bodily comedy is the opposite of the more intellectual humour that can be seen to characterise much of the other work discussed in this book. But even here, boundaries begin to blur. What we might take as seemingly ironic artworks — Jonathan Monk's deflation of a now-iconic sculpture by Jeff Koons or Maurice Doherty's neon that comically punctures the assumed impartialities of the art world — could both be seen to entail a kind of fall, and one might even go so far as to speak of slapstick.

A lot of the more theoretical and conceptual art considered here demonstrates a reflexivity and self-critical approach to its humour. BANK make fun of the airs and graces of gallery press releases in a comic debunking that, because it takes the form of handwritten scrawling and scribbling commentaries, is also about the joys of spoiling and ruining something that is presented and delivered with sober authority. There is a flippant answering back and a joy in demolishing something 'official and formal looking'. Like Thomas Geiger, BANK make art about art, and both undermine its pretenses in the process, allowing us to see the absurdity by which it takes itself so seriously. Joachim Schmid and Cory Arcangel draw attention to the comedy within the contemporary vernacular of YouTube, Flickr and Twitter and ask questions about the nature of aesthetic value and cultural distinction within the ceaseless glut of information in our digital age.

As we have repeatedly tried to show here, comedy allows us to look outside ourselves; it puts things in perspective and, in doing so, can show how small

Gemma Marmalade
Seed Series: Green Fingered (2014)
Laura, Emma and Swede

and insignificant we are. It is a great vehicle for dismantling self-importance, insincerity and hypocrisy. Comedy disrupts and defamiliarises. It also upsets cultural structures and norms. One of the supreme instances of this is in the upturning of rules provided by the carnivalesque, splendidly but disturbingly realised in Erwin Wurm's photographic tableaux of people behaving improperly, or in Peter Finnemore's absurdist backwoodsman-like theatres.

The joke interrupts the day-to-day and provides a moment of release and pleasure. Humour helps us cope in the face of adversities. And as we all know, laughing is good for you. To bring this essay to a close, we should then also not forget to laugh at ourselves. If comedy can serve to puncture pomposity then, for those who have read so far, perhaps you might think we have been taking it all too seriously. Who wants to read an unfunny book on comedy? Presenting comedy in any academic frame is flawed and destined to fall short and we are fully aware of how we have not given the reader as many laughs as they might have expected, or wanted, from a book like this.

We do hope however there is some humour and wit in our engagement with art and comedy, and that we have not taken everything too seriously. In this respect, John Smith's mockery of the zealous intellectual in his film *Shepherd's Delight* became an important and useful guide for us in our analysis of art and comedy. As he suggests by the wordplay of the subtitle of his film, *An Ananalysis of Humour*, analysis is anal. So much as we might be seen to have offered a fairly serious and academic response to comedy and art, we are at the same time fully aware of the virtues and need for some slapstick and have, in response to much of the art we have been writing about, tried to acknowledge a counter impulse in which academic authority should allow itself to be subject to comic derision. This book has had to negotiate the tensions between the academic expectation of sense, clarity and authority that this essay carries with it and the unruly, disorganising and interruptive impact of its subjects, art and comedy. It also has had to negotiate the inevitable tensions resulting from its double act mode of co-authored production.

John Smith's film closes with a moment of slapstick and the laughter of a shepherd, a caricature figure who can be seen to stand somewhat outside sophisticated urban culture. He laughs because he has just knocked the academic out, who throughout the film has provided its analysis of humour. He knocks her out just when she reaches for Freud's book, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. In writing this book, we too have reached for Freud's book alongside a number of others in an attempt to help us begin to theorise comedy, but we have tried to keep them to a minimum. Much time has been spent instead interpreting the jokes and comedy we have found in the art works included here.

Comedy, as has often been said, is dependent upon context and timing. Not everyone laughs at the same joke, and not everyone laughs in the same way. In John Smith's film we flip quite quickly from deadpan to slapstick, with the shepherd's laughter replacing the deadpan comedy created through the performance of the intellectual as well as the filmmaker's earlier straight delivery to camera about his struggle with alcoholism. It is a switch we have often made throughout the writing of this text and in many senses marks the polarities of our responses to the comedy of the art discussed. In terms of audience response, it is the difference between the discreet reticence of a knowing smile and the noisy physicality of the guffaw's uncontrollable and contagious belly laugh. But whatever kind of laughter that might be provoked it does not in the end really matter, just as long as we begin to acknowledge laughing as a valid and important part of our engagement with art.

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David Campbell and Mark Durden would like to thank:

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Bluecoat

Olav Westphalen
Untitled, 1999

DOUBLE ACT : ART AND COMEDY

David Campbell and Mark Durden

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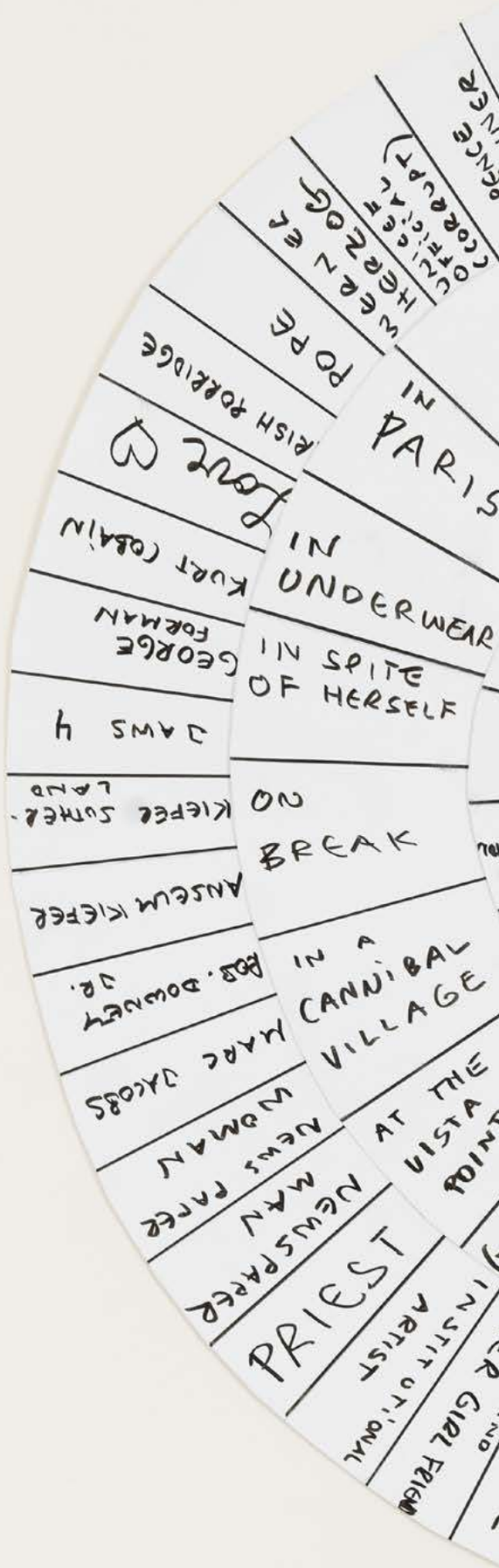

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