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**Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE

# THROWING VOICES

## CELEBRITY & THE ATTENTION ECONOMY





Type of output:  
Artefacts

by  
David Campbell

Cover:  
Vent video still (2016).

Left:  
OMG I love common culture !!!!



Sticker design (2020).

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# SUPPORTING STATEMENT

This research extends Campbell's investigations (as founding and continuing member of artists' group *Common Culture*) into the processes of commodification within popular culture. It explores the relationship between "celebrity" and the "attention economy", the latter understood as the environment in which digital products and services relentlessly compete to capture our attention.

By appropriating, mimicking and recontextualizing material from celebrity interviews and YouTube vlogs and their online responses, the research investigates the use of ventriloquism to interrogate and challenge the forms and conventions used by television and online media to produce attention capital. Each of the three video works employs humour and contextual displacement to explore the principle of 'throwing voices' to create a viewing experience in which the normative forms and conventions of media representation of celebrity are defamiliarised and made available for critical reconsideration.

The video installation *Vent* parodies television celebrity interviews through a fractured ventriloquist act in order to explore how traumatic personal content is molded and monetized as popular entertainment. In the video works *The Age of Chopping Off Heads (Dying is for Amateurs)* and *The Age of Chopping Off Heads (Trail by Media)* Common Culture composed and performed pop songs drawn from celebrity confessions, which are then interpreted through dance as music videos.

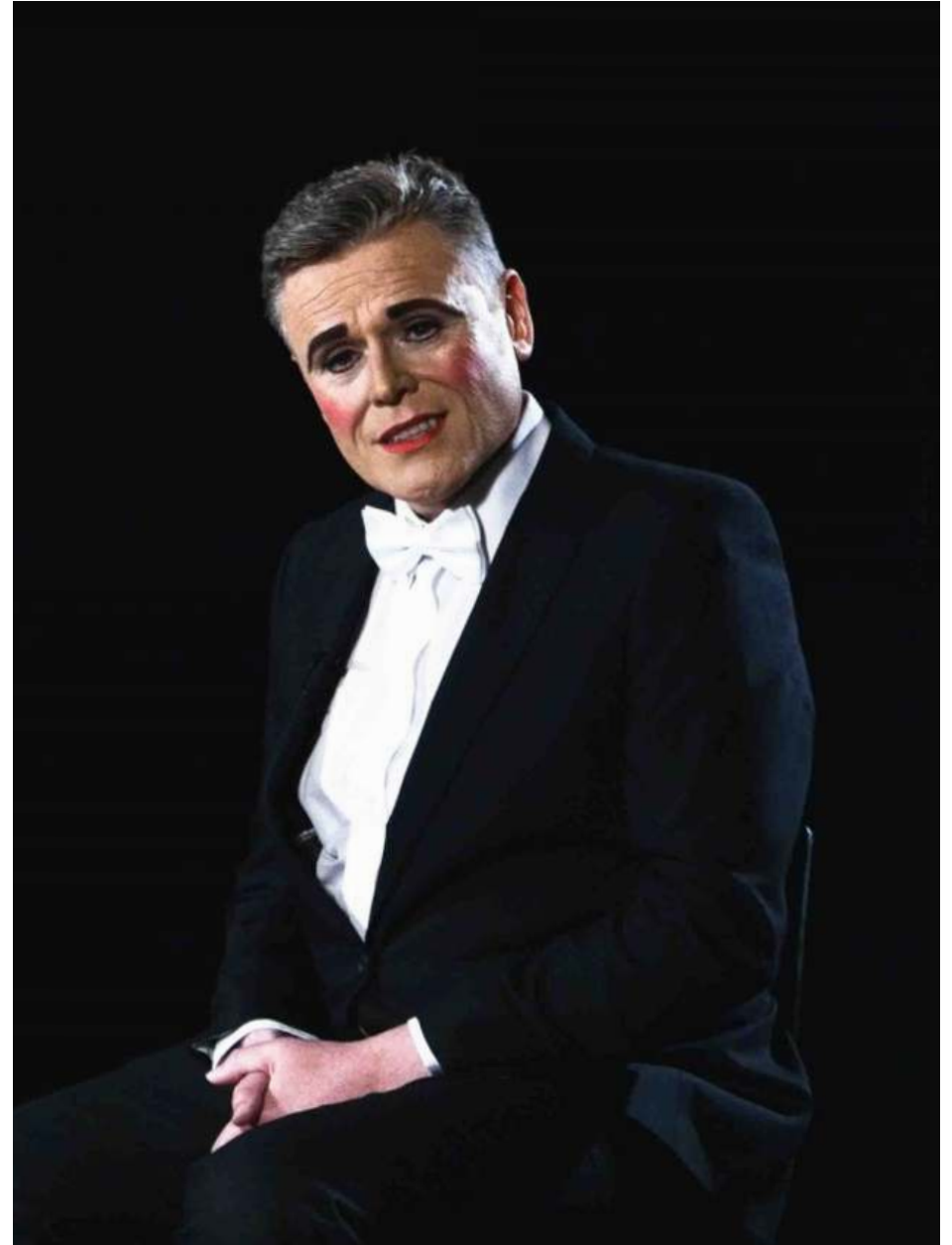
[\*OMG I Love Common Culture!!!!\*](#)♥♥♥♥ was made in response to an American internet celebrity who in order to capitalize on the intimate relationship he had built with his online followers, had trademarked the name 'Common Culture' to brand, promote and sell a range of products. By turning the gallery into our own Common Culture shop, with logo, weblink and an accumulation of graphic stickers based on the online posts of the celebrity's fan base, the exhibition involved a parodic mimicry of the internet celebrity's commodification of himself and his products. It explored how the aesthetics, interactions and transactional intimacy built by internet personalities are ruthlessly deployed to convert followers into consumers.

# RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The aim of the research was to investigate the relationship between celebrity and the attention economy in the context of the distribution and consumption of mass culture and its products. The act of 'throwing voices' is strategic in gaining attention capital, alongside the production of 'familiar' products. The research is interested in how practices of ventriloquism and appropriation are both situated within the entertainment industry, and can also be utilized, through a set of contemporary artworks, as strategies to explore its operation.

## Research question:

In what ways can appropriation and ventriloquism be strategically redeployed within contemporary artistic practice to create a critical platform to examine the relationship between celebrity and the attention economy?



Right: *Vent*  
Video still (2016).

# CONTEXT

The research is situated in and contributes to debates within contemporary art, social anthropology and sociology that explore the relationship between ‘celebrity’ and the ‘attention economy’.

Common Culture are interested in the potential of appropriation, the ready-made, and ventriloquial performativity as forms of creative inquiry that engage with, and interrogate, the practice of speaking for, or speaking through, others.

The use of appropriation and the ready-made are well established in contemporary art, their use by *Common Culture* is informed by Schneider’s (2003), observation that “A move away from formalist approaches... allows different types of property and their appropriation to be analysed as cultural constructions of things and persons”. In this context, the use of existing cultural material (celebrity confessional interviews, the ventriloquist act, YouTube vlogging, brands, musical forms) allows for a consideration of its values and roles within wider societal contexts; for us to pose questions as to its contribution through a process of reframing.

In terms of understanding celebrity, the attention economy is key, and encompasses all the various elements of the systems of the media of television, music and social media platforms. As Franck (Franck 2019, pp10) states “The media are a system of channels supplying information in order to extract attention”. Our interest in the rituals of consumption and the commodification of culture lie in relation to what Franck (Franck 2019, pp10) identifies as the primary aim of the entertainment sector “... the income in attention ranks above financial success.” It is this fundamental activity of converting attention into a commodity, which underpins this investigation and the relationships between the individual figures we have focused on as part of the system of the entertainment industry. As van Krieken (DC van Krieken, 2012, pp.3-4,) discusses, “To understand the basic principles and logic driving and underpinning celebrity as a social, political and economic phenomenon, then, it is useful to identify the ways in which we can see the world we live in today as a ‘celebrity society’ with its own distinctive, constantly changing social practices and structures, moral grammar, construction of self and identity, legal order and political economy organized around the distribution of visibility, attention and recognition.” And “It is possible, then, to look beyond celebrities as unique individuals and see the circuits of power which produce celebrity as a social phenomenon”.

In April 2018 the website of the artists group *Common Culture* was hacked and disabled. Simultaneously we discovered another 'Common Culture' website, one that appeared as the top hit in any google search of the term. This website belonged to Connor Franta, a young American internet celebrity who had trademarked 'Common Culture' as his brand to promote a range of products. <https://store.commonculture.co>

Franta began vlogging on YouTube in 2010, developing 5.12 million subscribers by 2020. In 2014, looking to capitalise on the relationship he'd built with his online followers, Franta began consolidating his commercial projects as the brand Common Culture.

Our use of the term *Common Culture* is informed by Raymond Williams' discourse on culture as 'a whole way of life' and the shared, inter-linked relationship between the categories of culture, and stands in stark contrast to Franta's appropriation of the term as a trademarked brand, marketed on the basis of exclusivity "*Common Culture is a lifestyle brand offering superior clothing, premium coffee, and a variety of undiscovered musical talent.*" (Culture, 2018).

This research investigates the construction of identity within the context of celebrity and the attention economy, exploring how celebrities such as Franta, through their online performativity (Cover, 2012), generate 'attention capital.'

*Common Culture's* focus on the 'attention economy' aligns with the use of appropriated social media interaction by Richard Prince's Instagram "*Portraits*", and the celebrity role play videos of Phil Collins and Candice Breitz. Each of the projects employ contextual displacement to explore the ventriloquial principle of 'throwing voices' to create viewing experiences in which the normative forms and conventions of media representations of celebrity are defamiliarised and made available for critical reconsideration.

# METHODS AND PROCESSES

For both *Vent* and *The Age of Chopping Off Heads*, the starting point for the research was formed around dialogue, appropriated from UK and US celebrity confessional television programmes. The research explores celebrity self-commodification as a mechanism to attain attention capital and economic benefit.

*Vent* consists of three elements; ventriloquist, dummy and audience. All are depicted within the same space, with the scale and orientation of the video projections providing a restructured version of the televisual convention. Significantly, the act itself is displaced; the dummy and the ventriloquist are separated from each other by the confines of their own screen and, although placed in the expected position for 'viewing' the act, the audience's responses are depicted as mechanistic. As the gallery audience inhabit a space centrally between the three screens, they are encouraged to occupy a distinctly different role to that of their televised equivalent. The methodology of dissemination is pivotal to the research, allowing for the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the components to form an unsettling experience. As such, the repetitive and alienating process of mass consumption is exposed and made available for critique.



Top Right: Indicative footage of the television celebrity interviews transcribed and appropriated to form the dialogue performed in *Vent*.

Source: YouTube, *Piers Morgan Tonight – interview with Charlie Sheen*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwa9zPCz\\_3w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwa9zPCz_3w)

Right: *Vent* (2016) Production and installation images.





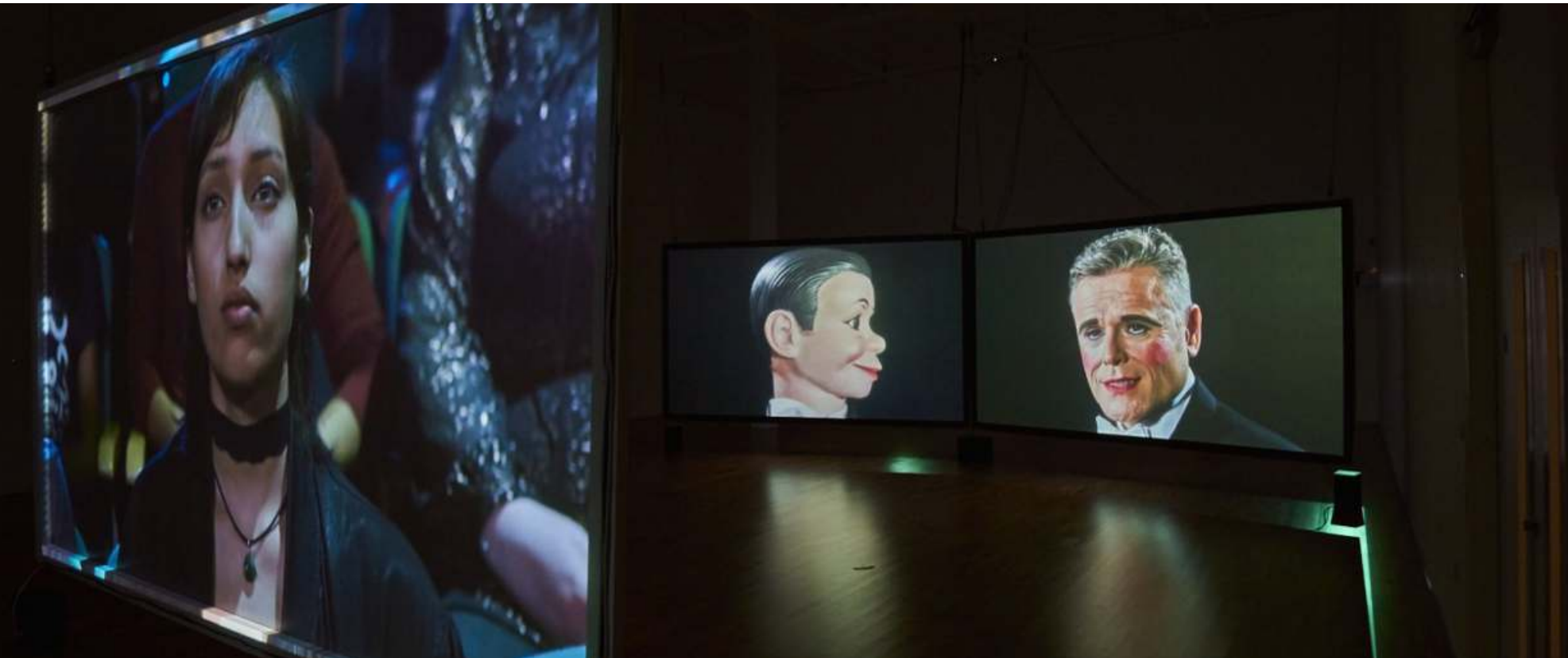


Top Right: *Vent* (2016)  
Installation image, mac, Birmingham, UK.

Right: *Vent* (2016)  
Video still.



Below: *Vent* (2016) Installation image, mac, Birmingham, UK.



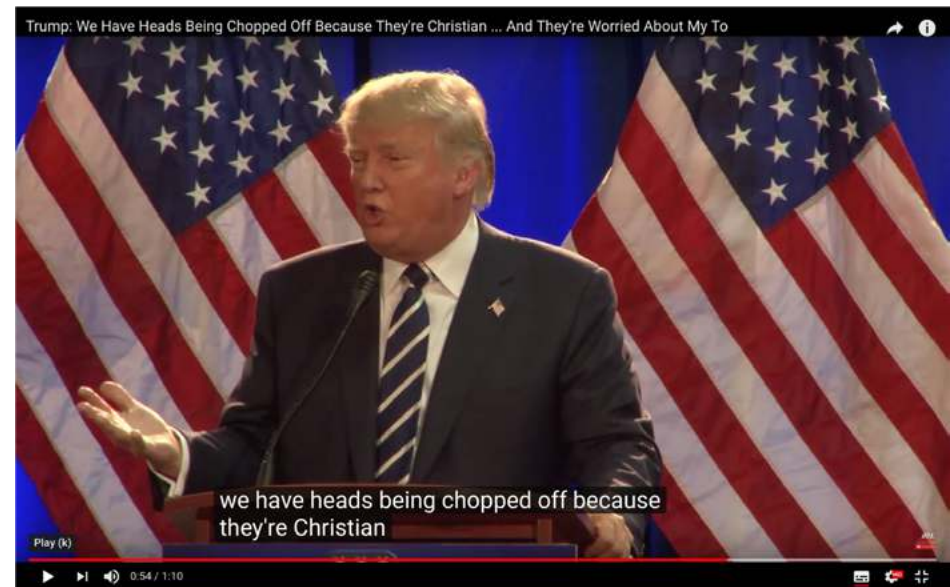
*The Age of Chopping Off Heads* translates the celebrity confessional interviews format into pop music. The use of music and celebrity, and the mechanisms of their production and consumption, allows the research to appropriate, redeploy and interrogate the pernicious conventions used to exploit and commodify individual ambition as formulaic spectacle. The appropriation and adaptation of ‘readymade’ confessional texts from ‘celebrity interviews’ are converted into lyrics to create a popular form, and a context, to interrogate how this material surfaces and is mediated into the public realm. The work is formed around two components; the production of pop songs and the production of choreographed dance routines.

License free generic musical components are used to construct pop songs through a formulaic process utilised by the industry to maximise attention, “One will only move them by closely observing what the general public wants to read, listen to, or watch. Their desire for sensation must be satisfied, catchy tunes have to be put on the air, pictures have to be touched up to catch the eye” (Franck, 2019; pp.10).

*Common Culture* worked with choreographer Kelly Bates. aka Ruby Rich, attuned to the clichés of televisual dance interpretation to respond to their music. The work highlighted choreography as a promotional and packaging device within the music industry, and its redeployment within a contemporary art context enables this function to be critiqued.



Left:  
*The Age of Chopping Off Heads* (2018)  
Production still.



Above: Source material for research: “We Have Heads Being Chopped Off Because They’re Christian ... And They’re Worried About My Tone.” Presidential candidate Donald Trump attends a Republican party rally in Birch Run, Michigan. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poiQ2vbxlHQ>



Above: *The Age of Chopping Off Heads: Dying is for Amateurs*, (2018) Video Still.



Above: *The Age of Chopping Off Heads: Trial By Media*, (2018) Video Still.



For *OMG I love common culture!!!!*♥♥♥♥ we reframed the means by which the internet celebrity Connor Franta creates attention capital through his vlogging and Common Culture brand; successfully harnessing his YouTube followers' attention as potential consumers. The comments on YouTube posts are pivotal in manifesting evidence of this attention, as Franck (2013) indicates "The more that a person gains recognition the more that fascination by others drives an increase in further attention".

Comments confirming Franta's success in attracting attention were collated and developed into graphic designs and mobilised as mini, attention endorsing slogans deployed as gifs on social media platforms, and stickers in the physical environment.



Above: *OMG I love common culture !!!!* ♥♥♥♥ (2020) Sticker designs.

For the Die Raum exhibition we created a *Common Culture* shopfront, converting a cultural space into what appears to be a commercial space, complete with our own logo and domain name [www.commonculture.store](http://www.commonculture.store), linking the physical gallery with a web hosted *Common Culture* video, featuring appropriated YouTube footage of Franta.

Right and Below:

OMG I love common culture !!!! ♥♥♥♥ (2020) Exhibition images, Die Raum, Berlin, Germany.









Above:  
OMG I love common culture !!!! ♥♥♥♥ (2020) Video stills.

# RESEARCH INSIGHTS

The direct use of the ventriloquist act creates a mechanism to reveal and critique the processes by which 'celebrity' is nourished and maintained as an essential component of the attention economy of the entertainment industry. Enabling the deconstruction of the components to form an unsettling experience, highlighting the repetitive and alienating cycles of mass consumption; and expose and make available for critique, the processes by which the consumer is positioned as the source of attention capital.

The reconfiguration of the mechanisms of production and consumption in the music industry, allows the research to interrogate the seductive allure of the culture industry through the appropriation and redeployment of the forms and conventions by which it routinely exploits and commodifies individual ambition as formulaic spectacle. The familiarity of the musical and visual forms, normally used to maximize attention capital, is framed, here, in relation to the unfamiliar narrative of the lyrics. The awkward, confessional narrative, is drawn back into the music, colliding with the well-rehearsed elements of the industries strategies.

The appropriation and branding of the term 'Common Culture' and material related to Franta's development of his consumer base, allowed for an examination and a reconfiguring of the elements deployed by internet celebrities in their accumulation of attention.

By ventriloquising the brand as a shop and repurposing the different components of the promotional system, the work explored how the use of aesthetics, interactions and transactional intimacy might be redeployed to reveal its dimensions in a new way.





***Vent***

3-screen video installation with sound:

<https://vimeo.com/345502919>



***The Age of Chopping Off Heads***

(Dying Is For Amateurs & Trial By Media)

Series of 2 single screen video works with sound.

Online version of *The Age Of Chopping Off Heads - Dying Is For Amateurs* can be viewed at:

<https://vimeo.com/236948242>

Online version of *The Age Of Chopping Off Heads - Trial By Media* can be viewed at:

<https://vimeo.com/236988084>



***OMG I love common culture !!!!*** ♥♥♥♥

Installation with online video:

<https://vimeo.com/392759282>

# DISSEMINATION

## Exhibitions:

Common Culture: Common Culture Cabaret  
16<sup>th</sup> Jul – 11<sup>th</sup> Sep 2016  
mac (Midlands Art Centre) Birmingham, UK.  
Gallery Website:  
<https://macbirmingham.co.uk/exhibition/cabaret>

The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life  
15<sup>th</sup> September - 31<sup>st</sup> December 2018  
Arquipélago - Centro de Artes Contemporâneas,  
Azores, Portugal.  
Gallery website:  
<http://arquipelagocentrodeartes.azores.gov.pt/en/programacao/exposicao-o-risivel-enigma-da-vida-normal/>  
Exhibition press kit:  
[http://arquipelagocentrodeartes.azores.gov.pt/website/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Press-kit\\_OREVN.pdf](http://arquipelagocentrodeartes.azores.gov.pt/website/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Press-kit_OREVN.pdf)

OMG I love common culture!!!!♥♥♥♥♥  
29<sup>th</sup> Feb — 19<sup>th</sup> April 2020  
Die Raum, Berlin, Germany.  
Gallery Website:  
<http://www.dieraum.net/index.php?/exhibitions/2020-0045-common-culture/>

## Related publications by the researcher:

Conference Paper: Throwing Voices: The Commodification Of Culture, From Art Biennials To Celebrity.  
London Conference in Critical Thought 2019, 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> July 2019,  
Goldsmiths, University of London, UK.

Q+A with Artist Group Common Culture, Aesthetica.  
<https://aestheticamagazine.com/q-and-a-common-culture/>

## Events featuring the research output:

In conversation with common culture, mac Birmingham 6<sup>th</sup> September 2016.  
<http://livebrum.co.uk/mac/2016/09/06/common-culture-artist-talk>



Above: Article about *Vent* in Aesthetica.



Right: Guardian Editor's Pick, 23 July 2016.

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All images courtesy of  
*Common Culture* unless  
otherwise stated.



O  
RISÍVEL  
ENIGMA  
DA VIDA  
NORMAL  
THE LAUGHABLE ENIGMA  
OF ORDINARY LIFE

What we find funny can be cruel, hateful, establishing symbolic boundaries that divide people into distinct groups, setting those with power against those without and vice-versa. But it is also a way of bringing people together, providing consolation, a sense of shared experience and a powerful weapon of resistance.

This exhibition will present the multiple forms of the comedic as it is manifested through the experience of contemporary art. Drawing together artists from diverse cultural and political contexts, each of whom share an interest in humour as a resource with which to animate their art practice and connect with an audience, both local and international, this exhibition will explore questions of cultural distinctiveness in an increasingly globalised world.

Curators:  
David Campbell and Mark Durden

SAWY, CARLA CARLASCHI, COMMON CULTURE, DAVID SHERRY, ERICA EYRES, GEMMA MARMALADE, GILLIAN WEARING, JOACHIM SCHMID, JOÃO PAULO FELICIANO, JOHN SMITH, KARA HEARN, MAURICE DOKIRTY, OLAV WESTPHALEN, PAUL MCCARTHY, PETER FINNEMORE, PILVI TAKALA, RICHARD HUGHES, RICHARD WENTWORTH, THOMAS GEIGER.