

Out of Position: The Ball Park of Humour in Contemporary Art

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Abstract

This practice-led research project explores how humour can be employed to develop a methodology for examining the socio-political dimensions of contemporary art practice. This research aims to identify and elaborate on how using the evasive strategies and elliptical frameworks associated with ideas of the absurd and nonsense can lead to new ways of understanding the nexus between social, political and cultural practices. This is achieved primarily through an examination of the art practices of Marcel Duchamp, Bruce Nauman, and Martin Kippenberger. These artists contextualise this research because in different ways they all engage with humour as a device to critique conventional notions of how art can be read or understood. Using these strategies the project aims to demonstrate new ways for considering how visual art can use humour to creatively and critically investigate the relationships between art and the social.

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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

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For all their wisdom.

Introduction

Over the past nine years conceptual interests have formed and informed the core ideology of my art practice, with an increasing emphasis on intertextuality and post-medium forms. It is my belief that this approach enables a range of discourses across the whole spectrum of visual art, as well as with a range of text-based, sound, and community-based approaches to practice such as my own curatorial projects and involvement in artist-run initiatives. Therefore the textual research outlined in this paper is inextricably linked to my art practice as a whole, and provides a site for reflection on the creative outcomes and contextualising them in contemporary art.

The purpose of this research project is to creatively explore and critically examine how I can use humour to negotiate the socio-political realities of contemporary art practice. I am specifically interested in using humour to manage my own ambivalence and anxiety about the role and expectations of being an artist in contemporary culture. This has been done through employing and examining what I consider are the evasive strategies and elliptical frameworks of humour that are fundamental approaches to making in the art practices of Marcel Duchamp, Bruce Nauman, and Martin Kippenberger. I became interested in the critical and creative potential of these strategies and frameworks as an outcome of my previous research into the nature of humour in contemporary art. This research, my honours project, focused on humour's ability to engage with and interrogate aspects of our cultural, political, and social conventions. This research highlighted a number of complications that arose from the use of humour as a kind of ideological framework for creative practice. As a result, I began to seek a more evasive and elliptical discourse that remained engaged with humour but largely bypassed direct discussion on the nature and history of humour, as well as the earlier comic elements in my own practice. This is partly because I have become increasingly interested in the type of humour that often elicits a 'groan' instead of a 'belly laugh,' and the awkwardness of bad jokes.

As a practice-led project, the creative research is the primary means of investigation and the outcomes have been weighted accordingly; with seventy percent of the project allocated to the exhibition and studio component, and the remaining thirty percent forming the exegesis. The exegetical component aims to identify and elaborate on how

these strategies and frameworks inform the creative outcomes of the research project. It will do this through an examination of the visual art practices of Marcel Duchamp, Bruce Nauman, and Martin Kippenberger. These artists all engage with humour as a critical device and play with adopting the personas of detached dilettante, pragmatist, and clown respectively. My own creative research engages with and explores these approaches through a range of material and conceptual concerns. By doing so, it demonstrates the creative and critical potential for these particular strategies and frameworks for contemporary art making.

Chapter 1. Methodology

The discipline of visual art sits awkwardly within the traditional academic framework of post-graduate research paradigms.¹ Despite this, academics like Carole Gray have proposed an alternative method of research – most commonly referred to as ‘practice-led’ research – which “places practice and practitioner at the very heart of research.”² Thus, the ‘practice-led’ researcher engages with a “critical enquiry [which] is conducted through practice, and externalised by predominantly visual methods”³ with an emphasis on *process* as opposed to product. A significant portion of ‘practice-led’ research can be regarded as a form of imaginative enquiry: one heavily reliant on personal interests and motivations. The paradigm of ‘practice-led’ research is an appropriate methodology for this research project as it is motivated by my own interest in the work of Marcel Duchamp, Bruce Nauman and Martin Kippenberger. The nature of this methodological approach is not necessarily to provide conclusive findings, but to establish an environment in which creative practice and more traditional forms of research can be engaged through a dialogical relationship. Because they are different modes of research and enquiry these research activities do not always arrive at the same position, at the same time. As Estelle Barrett observes, “the outcomes that emerge from an alternative logic of practice are not always easy to articulate and it can be difficult to discuss the work objectively given the intrinsically [...] subjective dimensions of the artistic practice.”⁴ Nonetheless, the creative practice and its accompanying exegetical component do weave across one another in unexpected and interesting ways as well as serving to more clearly contextualise and frame the project.

Within the framework of this project, the ‘practice-led’ research paradigm encompasses the use of critical texts as a way to better understand and locate the key developments in artistic practice. Consequently, my visual art practice is not one that is simply responsive to theoretical concerns –I am chiefly driven by my own responses to other artists’ work. The broader range of artistic practices that I have researched all use humour to critique and disrupt traditional conventions of art and art making and can be largely understood

¹ Carole Gray (1996), “Inquiry through Practice: Developing Appropriate Research Strategies,” accessed February 10, 2012, <http://carolegray.net/Papers%20PDFs/ngnm.pdf>, 6.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ Estelle Barrett, “Foucault’s ‘What is an Author’: Towards a Critical Discourse of Practice as Research,” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I. B Tauris, 2007), 136.

as conceptually orientated. They include, Vito Acconci, Marcel Duchamp, a number of Fluxus artists, Pierro Manzoni and Bruce Nauman. The attitudes of these artists are reflected in the practices of contemporary artists who also inform my thinking, such as Absalon, The Art Guys, Olaf Breuning, Cezary Bodzianowski, Catherine or Kate, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Urs Fischer, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Pierre Huyghe, Mike Kelley, Timothy P. Kerr, Merlin Carpenter, Martin Kippenberger, Wilkins Hill, Timothy Woodward, and Erwin Wurm.

In the context of my creative art practice, my increasing engagement with intertextual and post-medium forms serves a particular purpose when developing and producing work. This is because these forms operate in and around the ‘areas of overlap’ that exist between text, image, and time-based art practices. Furthermore, they challenge the “arbitrary discipline boundaries traditionally established across creative practice so as to establish an expanded field of discursive research and creative potential.”⁵ Through this broader intertextual and post-medium approach to practice there are a number of key ideas, methods, and material responses that enable me to development new work. Firstly, I deliberately use misappropriations, misinterpretations, and misplaced techniques (which I will later elaborate on in the section titled ‘slapstick of studio practice’), in my art practice. Alongside this, I use humour and parody as critical and disruptive strategies for making work. This includes the use of language-based games, the grotesque, puerile, awkward, esoteric, and the quotidian as comic devices; the distortion and recontextualising of source material through my own subjective experiences with that material; and site-specific responses to the architecture of exhibition spaces. Finally, my prevailing responses to materials also inform the development of new work. These responses include: using readymades and discarded materials; using hobbyist materials and techniques (such as the use of polystyrene and the modeling and finishing techniques often found in Warhammer figures); and lo-fi approaches to using digital technology. These methods of making are aimed at exploring a range of formal and material possibilities for my conceptual interests, and discovering alternative framing devices for the artwork. I use these approaches to practice to respond to the complex, political realities of contemporary art, art institutions, and commercial art markets. They enable me to form part of a broader parody and critique

⁵ Mark Webb (2011), “Stage Two Proposal for the PhD.” Working paper (Brisbane: Faculty of Visual Arts, Queensland University of Technology), 4.

of some of the myths and conventions surrounding artists and art history that I am also interested in addressing, as part of my creative practice and through this specific research project.

Chapter 2. Contextual Review

In this next section I will more specifically discuss how my approach to making is informed, framed and contextualised by the work of other artists. This section will focus on the practices of three artists for this project, Marcel Duchamp, Bruce Nauman, and Martin Kippenberger. My visual art practice is not one that is simply responsive to theoretical concerns –I am chiefly driven by my own responses to other artists’ work. Consequently, these aforementioned discussions are predominantly developed out of specific practices or art works rather than broad theoretical ideas or approaches.

2.1 MARCEL DUCHAMP’S IRONY AND SILENCE

In his book *Duchamp’s TRANS/formers*, Jean-Francois Lyotard observes, not without humour, that “it’s necessary to be conscientious and phrasey as always, and hide the one important thing, namely, that you’re interested by Duchamp in inverse proportion to the amount you’ve understood about him.”⁶ Here, Lyotard seems to encourage caution from the reader, and to possibly alert them to the fact that while the ‘things’ Duchamp made in his lifetime have been pivotal in his anointment as the father of conceptual art, it is in fact what the artist did *around* these, namely his irony and silence, that perhaps form the core of Duchamp’s ideology. It is these gestures: the provocations, deferrals, delays, and contradictions that are most pertinent to informing my own research project. They are foundational to what I consider to be the elliptical and evasive strategies at work in the art practices I am most interested in. What follows below is a discussion of two works, *mile of string* (1942) and *Door, 11 Rue Larrey* (1927), and how these exemplify Marcel Duchamp’s strategies of irony and silence.

The *mile of string* was installed throughout the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1942. An adaptation of an earlier work, *Sculpture for Travelling* (1918), this environmental piece consists of precisely a mile of string, stretched about the gallery, disrupting and dissecting the ‘contemplative space’ around the other works on display. Duchamp never gave a title to this work, allowing it to be informally referred to as a ‘mile of string.’ This reluctance to assign a directive title, or any title at all

⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Duchamp’s TRANS/former* (Venice: The Lapis Press, 1977),12.

is in itself a curious decision. If, as artist Mike Kelley suggests, the title of an artwork has the potential to serve as a set of parameters, theoretically, *sensibly* limiting interpretation or providing a signpost of sorts,⁷ then, the mile of string seems to suggest that, through a profound silence (the absence of an artist-assigned title), “the artist is unaware of the real significance of his work and that the spectator should always participate in supplementing the creating by interpreting it.”⁸ It also allows the work to acquire a kind of idiosyncratic ‘nickname,’ one given public consensus through use and practicality; hence ‘the mile of string.’ However, this is not the only way in which this lack of an artist-assigned title complicates this work.

As mentioned, this particular work appeared in the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism*, a survey dominated by the convention of two-dimensional pieces hung on gallery walls. Being the only obviously *environmental* work in a show compiled of works on paper, and having no official announcement of the artist’s name and chosen title could be said to cast a shadow of skepticism over the legitimacy of the ‘thing’ present. Rather than a clever disruption of the sepulchral viewing experience, the mile of string – in the first instance authorless and nameless - begins to slide towards the categories of ‘prank,’ ‘mistake,’ and ‘annoyance.’

The transformation of the gallery “into a maze or labyrinth”⁹ that takes place as a result of this mile of string, was accompanied by a performative element of twelve children encouraged by Duchamp to play in the space as if playing in a schoolyard. In addition to this joy-filled disruption, the twelve energetic protagonists were instructed by the artist to respond to anyone’s objections to their presence, with the validating phrase “Mr. Duchamp told us we could play here.”¹⁰ The ace-up-the-sleeve is revealed. What becomes apparent through this performative viewing experience is that there is the potential for a distinct delay between the act of seeing the work, and the kind of brattish initiation into the mile of string. It is a delay that both denies and reaffirms the authority of the artist, and similarly, the audience’s *discernibility*.

Duchamp’s attitude towards the constructs around, and reception of, the mile of string, seemed to encourage him to play with a series of contradictions and deferrals with many

⁷ W. S. Bartman and M Barosh, eds., *Mike Kelley* (New York: Art Press), 42.

⁸ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 69.

⁹ Helen Molesworth, “The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades”, in *Art Journal*, 57, no. 4 (1998): 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

of the ‘things’ he produced in his practice. For instance, *Door, 11 Rue Larrey* (1927) was “Designed for his Paris apartment...The door itself is a conventional wood door about two feet wide and a little over seven feet high.”¹¹ It sits between two doorways, butting against one another at right angles, and is hinged in such a way that it enables the door to be used for both thresholds. In its ability to serve these two separate rooms, this work casts doubt upon the proverb, ‘a door must be either open or closed.’ As Annette Michelson observes, “the door of 11 rue Larrey, in defiance of the apothegm, stands both open and closed, at one and the same time.”¹²

Duchamp frequently stressed the purely utilitarian, quotidian, origins of the door/work.

In Paris I was living in a very tiny apartment. To take full advantage of the meagre space, I thought to make use of a single door which would close alternatively on two-jamb-linings placed at right angles [...] But people have forgotten the practical reason that dictated the necessity of this measure and they only think of it as a Dada provocation.¹³

However, given the artist’s *modus operandi* it is easy to be skeptical of Duchamp’s denial of wit, and the disdain with which he refers to the element of language-based “Dada provocation” is probably best taken with a grain of salt. After all, it was Duchamp himself who first commented on the door’s *proverbial offence*.¹⁴ Furthermore, as noted by Jean van Heeckeren and Jacques-Henry Levesque, the work appears “in the apartment which Duchamp has constructed entirely himself.”¹⁵ Once again, we witness the artist’s reluctance to speak definitively about a work. This reluctance (or silence) is one of the numerous strategies the artist employed during his lifetime in an attempt to distance himself from his artwork.

As demonstrated by the mile of string, and *Door, 11 Rue Larrey*, Marcel Duchamp took care to create a kind of ‘circus of possibilities’ to stand in the way of his work and its reception. What also becomes apparent is that these two ‘things,’ the string and the door, indicate the artist’s keen spatial awareness, and his ability to discern the *physical*

¹¹ Dan Naegele, *Duchamp’s Doors and Windows* (2006): 6, <http://www.unomaha.edu/esc/2006Proceedings/NaegeleDuchamp.pdf>.

¹² Annette Michelson, “Where is Your Rupture?: Mass Culture and the Gesamtkunstwerk,” *October*, 56, Spring (1991): 49.

¹³ Naegele, *Duchamp’s Door and Windows*, 6.

¹⁴ Marcel Duchamp in Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp: Revised and Expanded Edition, Volume 1: The Text* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 497.

¹⁵ Jean van Heeckeren and Jacques-Henry Levesque in *Ibid.*, 206.

language (its prevailing flow of passage, and the context that it provides) of a given space and respond with an array of physical interjections and rebuttals. All of these strategies are important in terms of my own work. However, what is most pertinent here is how Duchamp's irony and silence (his provocations, deferrals, delays, and contradictions) could potentially, according to some art historians consolidate "a position that is practically invulnerable to serious criticism."¹⁶ I am not convinced of this given the tomes of critical writing dedicated to him, however it is the artist's contradictory nature – of being "in revolt even against himself"¹⁷ that I find fascinating. The humour of his physical gestures enables this reading to happen, and this develops out of a position of *contradiction*. This ironic and paradoxical approach to framing (or not) a practice has been a key influence on my work in this project.

Duchamp's comic and critical engagement and manipulation of architectural spaces has helped me realise the potential for site-specific artworks to disrupt conventions around the experience of art viewing. His persistent claim that "the artist is unaware of the real significance of his work"¹⁸ has informed my own doubts about the myths and conventions around the image of the artist as a mystical distributor of meaning. Finally, his continual recourse to irony has been central for formulating an understanding of humour as a way of establishing a certain distance between the artist and the artwork.

2.2 A SHORT WORD ON BRUCE NAUMAN

The artist Bruce Nauman has exacted a significant influence on my practice, in terms of both the material and conceptual concerns central to my work. Nauman's use of black, droll and elliptical humour, the off-hand or unceremonious way he discusses his own work, and his precise use of material (precise in terms of the material's relative agency) have all informed my own thinking and approaches to art making. However, what I find most fascinating about his practice is his use of language to construct a certain tension in the work. The works discussed below, *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear* (1972), and *Violent Incident* (1986) demonstrate his use of language and 'tension,' not only as raw materials to work with, but also as a kind of *propellant* in his practice. In other words, what

¹⁶ Thomas B. Hess, "J'Accuse Marcel Duchamp," in Joseph Masheck, ed., *Marcel Duchamp: In Perspective* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 115.

¹⁷ Harriet and Sydney Janis, "Duchamp, Anti-Artist," in *ibid.*, 31.

¹⁸ Cabanne, *Dialogues*, 69.

interests me here is the role of language and linguistics as an integral part in the creation and development of work.

In 1970, in response to Willoughby Sharp's question, "Then we come back to where we ended the last time: who is your art for?" Nauman, almost perfunctorily responds, "To keep me busy."¹⁹ In a later interview with Joan Simon, he explains a belief "in a kind of logic and structure in art-making that you can see as game playing." Typically complicating the matter however, he adds that,

game-playing doesn't involve any responsibility - any moral responsibility - and I think that being an artist does involve moral responsibility. With a game you just follow the rules. But art is like cheating - it involves inverting the rules or taking the game apart and changing it.²⁰

For me, these two responses demonstrate markedly different attitudes to the age-old Pandora's box of what art, and the role thereof, can be. These comments seem to suggest that Nauman thinks the artist oscillates between a position of "moral responsibility," and a position of *fool-ish* self-indulgence. The artist in his own work and thinking vacillates between these two 'characters.' However, I would argue that it is the space of play *across* and *between* these apparently opposite characters that is the most interesting aspect of his practice.

In his interviews Nauman often refers to 'edges' and 'areas of overlap.'²¹ Furthermore, his work frequently seeks to amplify phenomena that result in a kind of physical and mental anxiety. Nauman's architectural pieces like *Room with My Soul Left Out*, *Room That Does Not Care* (1984), are particularly refined examples of this. For me it is an anxiousness that seems to arise from ambivalence around the reception of such works that is very interesting. Should the work be construed as funny or tragic, arousing or repulsive, intellectual or dumb? In many ways there is a dichotomy here that could indeed be analogous to the disparate positions, of "moral responsibility" (tragic/repulsive/intellectual) and *fool-ish* self-indulgence (funny/arousing/dumb) that

¹⁹ Bruce Nauman, "Nauman Interview, 1970." By Willoughby Sharp, in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words, Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 153.

²⁰ Bruce Nauman, "Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman, 1988 (January 1987). By Joan Simon, *ibid.*, 327.

²¹ See Michele de Angelus' "Interview with Bruce Nauman, May 27 and 30, 1980." By Michele de Angelus, *ibid.*, 285-286. Also see Christopher Cordes' interview with Bruce Nauman "Talking with Bruce Nauman: An Interview 1989, (excerpts from Interviews: July, 1977; September, 1980; May, 1982; and July, 1989." By Christopher Cordes, *ibid.*, 354.

the artist alludes to above. However, for me what is most compelling are the areas of *overlap* that exist between these dichotomies – as the humorous shifts towards the tragic, when the abject becomes fetishised – to produce the image of a ‘wise clown.’ It is the tension present within the interstitial zones that his practice operates in that I feel is the real strength of Nauman’s oeuvre.

Run from Fear, Fun from Rear and *Violent Incident*, are both contingent upon ‘edges’ and ‘areas of overlap;’ zones of slippage and ambiguity. *Run from Fear, Fun from Rear* (1972) – a neon text piece that switches between the fluorescent phrases “run from fear” and “fun from rear” – is direct, and is perhaps more demonstrative of his framing of the ‘ethical artist’ and the ‘self-indulgent artist.’ One could even suggest that, as an earlier work, it announces this framing of the image of the artist. Through a simple switching of the letters ‘r’ and ‘f,’ it draws attention to the areas of overlap between them and to the deviations and disfigurations of language and meaning²² that become a central concern evident in much of Nauman’s text-based work.

Violent Incident on the other hand manipulates the slippages of humour into tragedy and back again that mark much of his screen-based work. This is a twelve-screen video installation that “presents a kind of psycho-sociological experiment in humor and aggression that begins with a physical prank [...and] that escalates through a sequence of comically violent exchanges ending in murder.”²³ The basic scenario is repeated with a range of permutations; female/male, male/female, female/female, male/male, slow motion, and accompanied by the directorial voice of the artist. As the scenario is repeated, and the characters swap and shift around, so too does one’s certainty about how to engage with it. As with all dark, or black humour, *Violent Incident* questions what is assumed to be essentially funny – “should I *really* be laughing at this?” Through repetition, reversals and shifts, and temporal manipulation *Violent Incident* creates a profound tension, as it pushes and pulls at the boundaries of comedy and tragedy.

Run from Fear, Fun from Rear and *Violent Incident* through their employment of a kind of “exploratory humour”²⁴ show Nauman to be an artist that uses tension and ambivalence

²² Johnathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism and Structuralism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 228.

²³ John Patrick Heon, *The Dionysia of Science: Humor, Rational Madness, and Comic Experimental Methods in the Works of Bruce Nauman and Thomas Pynchon* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2008), 42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

to establish a feeling of uncertainty and conflict in his work. For me the kind of experiential space he constructs results in a semantic fission of sorts: between the apparently disparate attitudes of “moral responsibility” and *fool-ish* self-indulgence. Because of this *in-between-ness*, the work *simultaneously* acknowledges and denies the extremes of this spectrum of attitudes, as well as encompassing the shifting tensions of the ‘middle ground.’ Its humour is generated from maintaining the contradictory positions of *and/or* and *both*.

What I find most compelling when thinking about my own practice is Nauman’s ambivalence about the role of the artist in contemporary society. I am interested in how he uses it to investigate and disrupt the ‘edges’ and ‘overlapping areas’ of systems of belief and hierarchy, assumptions and conventions, and many other symbolic forms. Thinking about this ambivalence, and his framing of the artist as being *both* morally responsible and self-indulgent has helped me come to terms with my own ambivalence towards, and anxiety around the complex, political realities of contemporary art, art institutions, and commercial art markets.

2.3 MARTIN KIPPENBERGER

There is a tendency among writers who tackle Martin Kippenberger – with perhaps the exception of Diedrich Diederichson and Roberto Ohrt – to convey a sense of bewilderment, even disbelief, in the face of Kippenberger’s hyperactive oeuvre. Jessica Morgan likens his practice to a “complex constellation.”²⁵ To George Baker it is a “vast field of positions.”²⁶ Raphael Rubinstein recognises in Kippenberger a cultural omnivore.²⁷ These metaphors, again, seem to point towards a feeling of collective bewilderment or disorientation amongst the ‘rubbernecker’ of Kippenberger’s handiwork. Yet, whilst it may alienate some, it is precisely this sense of disorientation, of becoming increasingly lost within the artist’s practice that is of interest to me.

Throughout his career (and oddly it seems, also after his death), Kippenberger made use of a number of evasive strategies and elliptical frameworks. Ghost writers, authorised

²⁵ Jessica Morgan, “Saint Martin,” in *Martin Kippenberger*, ed. Doris Krystof and Jessica Morgan, 11-22 (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 12.

²⁶ George Baker, “Out of Position,” *Artforum*, 2, no. 6 (2009): 150.

²⁷ Raphael Rubinstein, “The Bookmeister,” *Art in America*, 91, no. 10 (2003): 51.

and unauthorised collaborations, appropriation, misappropriations, “bad” making, replication, redesign and repetition: all these approaches to practice were aimed at deliberately confusing the role of commissioner and commission-ee, and disguising astute observations as beside-the-point ramblings. By mocking the tradition of the artist as autonomous distributor of meaning, he seemed to argue for an image of the artist-as-clown and undermine the high moral tone of ‘good’ and ‘useful’ art. As Kippenberger said, “you can’t cause anything by art! [...] You can change the world for yourself, but exhibitions are in fact totally superfluous.”²⁸ Here the artist appears to draw a parallel between art’s supposed incapacity to effect change and a kind of inherent solipsism or self-indulgence. To a certain extent, the artist took the problematic, or paradoxical, nature of art in his stride. “I’m no ‘real’ painter, no ‘real’ sculptor. I just watch it [art] from outside and sometimes interfere, try to have my good-hearted say.”²⁹ However, the way he continually brought his personality and his life into his work “as an ever shifting archive of anarchic observation, [and] perspectives on others,”³⁰ seems like an attempt to overcome this inherent solipsism or self-indulgence, to somehow make art more potent - and ironically - in the most personalised way.

Kippenberger implemented these strategies as a way to confound conventional approaches to criticism of his work, and to circumvent the argument of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ art altogether. His paintings are possibly the finest example of this. Here the artist drunkenly applies paint to the surface careening across genres and styles: occasionally surrealistic, occasionally expressionistic, occasionally abstraction-ish, occasionally pop-ish, but always, it seems, with a sense of impertinence for the beacons of art history. The logic that accompanies Kippenberger’s disruptive consumption is beautifully comic. A simple solution to the issue of technical critique: if an artwork is *intentionally* made to look bad, it becomes difficult to criticise it for being so. What follows is an analysis of one of the most provocative of these paintings *Ich kann beim besten Willen Kein Hakenkruz entdecken/With the Best Will in the World I can’t see a Swastika* (1984).

Ich kann beim besten Willen Kein Hakenkruz entdecken (1984) is an oil and silicone work on canvas, measuring 160 by 132 centimetres. The composition consists of

²⁸ Martin Kippenberger, “One has to be able to take it: Interview with Martin Kippenberger, 1990-May, 1991.” By Jutta Koether, in *I Had a Vision* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 16.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 14.

³⁰ Baker, *Out of Position*, 148.

a jumble of intersecting and overlapping cubic rectangles in grey, white, yellow and red against a dark grey and black ground, it suggests Cubist spatial deconstruction as well as the outward-directed motion of a Suprematist composition.³¹

The inept aping of Cubist and Suprematist forms is exaggerated by the juvenile quality of line, and accompanied by the dull flatness of the colour palette appears to ‘de-deify’ these canonised periods in art history. In mining the tropes of these movements, however poorly, Kippenberger establishes a situation where, at first, Cubism and Suprematism appear to merely fulfill the rather diminutive role of setting up the artist’s joke. Yet, it is not so straightforward. The act of appropriation – if one subscribes to the idea of imitation as the highest form of flattery – contradicts the perceived sublimatory role that Cubism and Suprematism play in this painting.

In addition to the work’s mischievous engagement with art history, *Ich kann beim...* also, in an almost offhand way, refers to the Nazi lineage via a visual pun. It is a considerable risk to make light of such a sensitive socio-political issue, but Kippenberger placed a great deal of significance on the act of social exchange.³² As Gregory Williams observed, “few contemporary artists have pursued as persistently as Kippenberger the idea that social context and group conversation form the crux of the art-making process.”³³ The most direct and effective way of encouraging this is through provocation. This work glibly challenges the character of the viewer. While encouraging one to tap the resource of the *best will in the world* and remain ignorant of the swastika form at the centre of the painting, we are of course led to start searching for one courtesy of that very title. Thus, we are further led to consider the connection between the claims for ahistorical purity that are often attributed – regardless of their ‘truth’ - to both the early Modernists and the Nazis. As he frequently did with his practice, Kippenberger adopts the persona of the jester or fool to, despite all his puerile posturing, explore the complex socio-political and intellectual histories that make up his own nationality and identification with that history.

Ich kann beim besten Willen Kein Hakenkreuz entdecken reveals, on the one hand, the complexity of his endlessly mischievous provocations, and on the other, the artist’s

³¹ Gregory Williams, ‘Jokes Interrupted: Martin Kippenberger’s receding Punch Line’, in *Martin Kippenberger*, ed. Doris Krystof and Jessica Morgan, 39-48 (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 45.

³² Here Kippenberger dramatically contradicts himself – “You can’t cause anything by art.” Evidently, art is not *really* ineffectual, he is just thickening the plot.

³³ Gregory Williams, *Jokes Interrupted*, 39.

ability to adroitly engage with and critique a wealth of historical, cultural and social references. To say these ‘methods’ are indicative may miss the point of Martin Kippenberger’s artistic practice altogether: he remains, if nothing else, the consummately elusive fool. It is this image that informs my own creative practice and thinking in many ways. Firstly, I strongly identify with how he applied himself across a range of materials and approaches to making work in a way that seemed to avoid a single aesthetic style in favour of a kind of trademark conceptual approach. I also respond strongly to how he strategically used the figure of himself as buffoon to challenge the archetype of the artist as a technically adroit, mystical distributor of transcendental experience. Finally, I am interested in how his use of the iconoclastic apothegm ‘quantity over quality,’ and the *corpulent* body of work that comes out of that carries with it a hint of underlying menace or anxiety alongside its humour.

Chapter 3. Analysis of Work

This chapter looks to reflect on the creative outcomes of the practice-led research and map how these are located across the methodological and contextual fields discussed previously. The list of works in this section is not exhaustive. I have chosen to focus on work that has been particularly important in forming the trajectory of my practice since beginning this project. To begin this discussion I will elaborate on how I consider my main approach to art practice as ‘slapstick’ and then move on to the centrality of the body to making and exhibiting work in my practice. This will be followed by a discussion of specific examples of work that demonstrate these ideas and approaches to practice.

3.1 THE SLAPSTICK OF STUDIO PRACTICE

There is a fairly widespread tendency amongst popular film and literature to present an image of the artist as a (mad) genius: as a purveyor of transcendental experience. Films like *Goya in Bordeaux* and *Basquiat*, and novels such as *In the Blazing Light* and *Sunflowers* are fine examples of how popular culture perpetuates the romanticised image of the artist’s life and “life-work.” In mythologising the artist’s apparent transcendent ability (the artist’s ‘hits’), the pedestrian reality of the ‘scores of misses’ – what Harold Rosenberg refers to as the “prolonged hacking and gnawing”³⁴ - often remains hidden. It is these comically frequent ‘misses,’ that form an integral part of my creative process in developing new works. The idle ‘stuffing around’ in the studio, the playing around, becomes an important and necessary part of making work. I have come to recognize that it also takes on temporal qualities similar to those that are present in slapstick humour. As Susan Stewart argues, “beginning again and again in a repetition impervious to historical constraints is at the heart of slapstick – a clown who, knocked down time after time, bounces back in a reversibility that cannot be marred.”³⁵ In trying to better define my approach to practice, these comic ‘misses’ – the ‘slapstick of studio practice’ – becomes the most useful phrase to describe the misappropriations, misinterpretations and misplaced techniques I find helpful to make new works. The comic potential of

³⁴ Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 20.

³⁵ Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 131.



Figure 1. Joseph Breikers, *Balsack*, 2011

these apparent incompetencies have, over time, come to be employed as a deliberate strategy for art making and exhibiting work. Through an analysis of two individual

works (*Balsack* and *Phases of the Moon*) and one ongoing series of puppet-based video works, this section explores the potential for the ‘slapstick of studio practice’ when carried over into the exhibition space. The aim of this is to not only disrupt the image of the artist as a mystical distributor of meaning, but to also interrogate and play with the criteria typically used to assess the cultural significance of a piece of art.

Balsack (2011, see fig. 1), a work included in the *Regards, the Pit* installation, is a re-imagining of Auguste Rodin’s *Monument to Balzac*: poorly constructed from excess material lying about in my studio. The work consists of a miniaturized, structural-pine and latex figure of the French novelist and playwright, Honore de Balzac, resting on a plinth of plywood off-cuts and construction adhesive. The nature of the origin of this work continues the tendency in my practice to use language-based games or humour as a place from which to develop work. In this particular instance, it comes from my interest in exploring a kind of ‘juvenile’ or puerile humour, and sprang from the homonymic similarity between the words ‘Balzac’ and ‘ball-sack.’ Similar to the process of disguising the use of heavy metal culture at work in *Very Best Definitive Ultimate* (which I will later elaborate on in the section titled ‘morbid angle’), I wanted to somehow disguise or defer this, apparently, simple play on words. I am interested in exploring these seemingly childish or foolish puns because it is arguably the type of humour that often elicits a ‘groan’ instead of a ‘belly laugh’: because it is the awkwardness of bad jokes that fascinates me. So investing (or wasting) additional energy constructing an object based on such a failed joke seemed like a wonderful misapplication of labour, it opened up the initial play on words for me, and provided further complexity to the connotations associated with *Balzac/Balsack*.

Offering up such a ‘half-arsed’ appropriation of the work of Rodin and Balzac was an attempt to critique the romanticised masculinity of the ‘heroic’ sculptor, plying his trade in relative isolation, and the sentimentality of the ‘ Sturm and Drang of the artists life’ (something that is all too frequently brought to the fore across the range of literature pertaining to Balzac’s creative work). By deliberately eschewing the technical skills and virtuosity associated with the ‘master’ artist, I also wanted to play with some of the conventions surrounding art making and art history.

This deliberate rejection of technical skill is also apparent in the construction of the plinth. The plinth, much like the default setting of the ‘white cube’ is a structure, a framing device that seems to not only announce “this is art,” but also “this is *good* art.” Commenting on such structures, Estelle Barrett observes, “the viewer [...] relinquishes time and lived experience within the frame of sympathetic magic or mystique that is created.”³⁶ By including the display structure as an integral, and inseparable, part of the artwork (and thus, placing the work directly on the floor), my intention was to parody this kind of didactic mechanism (the plinth), which continues to be relied upon in many galleries and museums. Rodin’s work, *Monument to Balzac* in particular, marked the beginning of modernist tendencies in art. It signaled a shift away from the figurative, towards the abstract and material concerns of the next 100 years – particularly by fusing the base/plinth with the subject of the work and becoming inseparable from the ‘work;’ a development for which Rodin received much criticism. The incorporation of the display structure into the work, which also occurs in *Balsack*, can be read as an attempt to diminish the *gap* between the viewer and the artwork by shifting the sculpture “towards the floor and by association into the viewer’s space.”³⁷

What I set out to do with this piece was to work through a series of deliberate conceptual and technical incompetencies. *Balsack* responds to what I see as a ramshackle, amorphous figure that is this 19th century homage to the French novelist and playwright by Rodin. I associate this lump of a thing with the equally grotesque imagery of the monstrous form found in John Carpenter’s horror film, *The Thing* and from there it turned into a juvenile linguistic play on formlessness. This ‘groan worthy’ joke was the *catalytic magic* behind the misappropriations; misinterpretations and misplaced techniques that are at work here. The use of leftover materials, the amateur construction, and the lewd drippings of latex (which suggest bodily fluids), can all be read as various studio ‘misses.’ By employing these strategies deliberately - in a sense, throwing a pie in my *own* face – I am attempting to set up a certain awkwardness about how the work should be read or understood, as well as parody and critique conventions surrounding art making and art history.

³⁶ Estelle Barrett, “The Exegesis as Meme,” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt eds. (London: I. B. Taurus, 2007), 160.

³⁷ Anna Malik, *Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel* (London: Afterall Books, 2009), 10.



Figure 2. Joseph Breikers, *Phases of the Moon*, 2011

Another work that explores the possibilities for making art through the process of ‘slapstick’ is *Phases of the Moon* (2011, see fig. 2). This was a specific response to the architecture (in this case a single curved wall towards the rear of the gallery) of MetroArts main exhibition space. I had also been considering the curvilinear arrangement apparent in many stitched photographs of the lunar cycle, and how the planar arc and environmental arc could, in this instance, be part of a kind of ‘concrete-comedy.’ Concrete-comedy is a form of gestural humour that remains tethered to the actual, and cultivates the experiential tensions that can exist between people and objects.³⁸ Furthermore, works which can be read as concrete-comedy offer “at once an alternative to conventional comedic practice and an alternative reading of recurrent visual art strategies.”³⁹

Phases of the Moon takes the form of six digital black and white photographs, arranged sequentially in an ascending arc on the curved gallery wall. As the viewer traverses left to right the images show myself gradually exposing my buttocks to the viewer. The work developed out of thinking about images of celestial arcs – the way the moon’s phases are depicted, the insolent gesture of ‘mooning’ and the curvature, the arc, of the architecture in the gallery. Underlying this, I was informed by the way in which Bruce

³⁸ David Robbins, “Concrete Comedy: A Primer.” *Artforum* 43, no.3 (2004): 208.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

Nauman “used the human body, particularly his own, as the medium of sculpture, and indeed of art in general.”⁴⁰ By using my bare buttocks as an artistic medium in a *mooning performance*, and the juvenile nature of such gestures, I was thinking of this work as a comic misapplication of Nauman’s early photographic and video-performance works.

The formal arrangement of these images plays a crucial role in establishing a kind of physical joke on the audience which results in the viewer, literally, *looking up to my arse*. The various phases of the ‘moon’ were mounted on black, freely cut and creased ovals (made from crumpled bin-liners), which were an attempt to make the images more object-like, give them some ‘space’ to float in and ‘shift’ them away from the wall; to make them less like photos and more like badly conceived pastiches of outer space with my buttocks replacing the moon. In *having a crack at* making the work even more amateurish I dry-brushed grey over black on the drawing pins to make them into mini moon rocks. Because if my bare buttocks are the moon, then by extension, moon rocks are ...

In *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, Susan Stewart presents the ‘inversion of metaphor’ as one of many strategies for cultivating nonsense.

This type of inversion insists upon consistency: the rules of logic, devoid of common-sense content, are presented. Language is continually reduced to a set of parts with a mechanical rule for putting them together.⁴¹

So while the interpretive inversion of the phrase ‘phases of the moon’, is not necessarily indicative of the strategy of metaphor inversion – in other words, when the metaphorical is made literal – there is, arguably, a similar kind of skewing, or inversion of signification present. This is what I was playing with in this work. By bringing these images together with the other objects, and arranging them in the narrative of the *Phases of the moon* I was wanting the work to be a piece of both visual and textual nonsense. But I also wanted it to be a pun that might also appear to invert the typical brashness of the gesture of mooning, by adding an element of ironic brevity.

⁴⁰ Helen Molesworth, *Part Object Part Sculpture* (Columbus: Wexner Centre for the Arts, 2005), 151.

⁴¹ Stewart, *Nonsense*, 77-78.

3.1.1 Video Hits and Misses

Acoustic and Luminous Effects, *Detox*, *Experiment in Terror*, and *New Car* (all 2009) form part of an ongoing series of video works that also employ the strategies of misappropriation, misinterpretation, and misplaced technique. In each of these works, an inanimate and rather pedestrian object is animated either through movement alone, or movement and an accompanying dialogue. In *Acoustic and Luminous Effects* one old black sock acts as both perpetrator and victim of a crank call, in *Detox* a toy dinosaur admits to self-harm, in *Experiment in Terror* a ceramic garden statue spins (assisted by a visible forearm) on a verandah, and a toilet discusses the advantages and disadvantages of his automobile, a “Toyota Solace [in] baby-blue,” in *New Car*.

Prior to exploring the mediums of video, performance, and text in this manner I had been researching a number of William Wegman’s early video works. Two videos in particular *Spit Sandwich* (1970), and *Pocketbook Man* (1970-71) were compelling not only because “they often drew on domestic, banal props, found at home or in the studio,”⁴² but also because of the way in which these videos seemed to be a prescient for a type of YouTube video I was seeing: where the humour generated by it came from the same place - it was simultaneously esoteric and pedestrian. I am very interested in this type of video because it has the potential to set up an awkwardness about how it should be read or understood. These kinds of videos which are most often found on YouTube, are particularly relevant to my practice and my approach to making videos due to the amateurish handling of the material, and the often embarrassingly diaristic content. I find the beguiling nature of such content, particularly how the subjective is often presented as impartial, as significantly informing my early thinking regarding the comic and critical potential for the ‘slapstick of studio practice.’

Similar to the approach I take to making images and object based works, these video works rely on a deliberate and sustained play across conceptual, formal, and technical incompetencies to generate new ways for humour to appear. More often than not, the ideas and materials I use to ‘play’ come from popular culture as much as they do from research in art. This is important as it allows these two fields to be folded across one another during both the process of making and the process of reading the work. For

⁴² Joan Simon, *William Wegman: Funny/Strange* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), 1.

example, *Experiment in Terror* apes one of the more unsettling scenes from William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* in which the head of the possessed girl defies human anatomy and rotates a full 360 degrees, and the Toyota Solace from *New Car* is a completely fictional model of car based on the James Bond movie *Quantum of Solace*.⁴³ These works become somewhat distorted and re-codified through a conflation of the original sources, and my own subjective experiences of popular culture. Formally and technically there is a deliberate attempt to expose the methods of making behind the work and their temporal boundaries; arms remain visible, and a shift in character is signaled by the clunky horizontal flipping of the same image (*Acoustic and Luminous Effects*). Each video is exhibited as an 'infinite loop.' However, the loop is anything but seamless, thus reinforcing the role of repetition.

Works like *Balsack*, *Phases of the Moon*, and the ongoing series of puppet videos demonstrate how a *skillful* incompetence has the capacity to transform skill itself into something gratuitous and suspect. By working with these comic and continual 'misses', these strategies of deliberate misappropriation, misinterpretation, and misplaced technique propose an alternative to the archetype of the artist as a technically adroit, mystical distributor of transcendental experience. I am much more interested in presenting an image of the artist as a determined, yet bumbling clown. One caught in an eternal return, a continual 're-birth' in the face of failure, of the 'slapstick of studio practice.'

3.2 POSITIONING THE BODY

The early video performance works of John Baldessari and Bruce Nauman, and the prevailing irreverent proclivity of many Californian conceptual artists from the 1960s and 1970s, along with the insistent use of repetition in these early video works, have significantly informed my approach to the body in my own practice. It is the irreverent engagement these artists have with the canons of art history, and the way they develop humour in these works out of a sense of futility that I find particularly compelling. Alongside these interests, the work of architect Peter Eisenman and his theory of

⁴³ Finding the praise heaped upon the actor Daniel Craig unjustifiable, I thought it fitting to turn the title of his Bond debut into the model name of a common, reliable van.

Somatic Expectation,⁴⁴ began to resonate with the way I approached making in the practice. These video works and Eisenman's ideas got me thinking about a kind of physical cognition that can become established through repetition, and working with the process of disrupting that expectation. As Nauman observed with his own approach to work,

it had to do with going up the stairs in the dark, when you think there is one more step and you take the step, but you are already at the top [...] It seems that you always have that jolt and it throws you off.⁴⁵

The comic potential of disrupting expectation, of slipping up or throwing something out of order got me thinking about how physical comedy does this and how the body could become a site for exploring humour and the absurd in visual art as well. This interest in the relationships between the body and space began to resonate in my undergraduate video works that were loosely choreographed around the idea of setting the artist up for a fall.

This interest in the way the body can function and be positioned within a given exhibition space has since resurfaced in the sculptural and object-based work done in this project.

Revisiting the work of Bruce Nauman alongside further research into the rhetoric around sculptural practices of the 1960s and 1970s culminated in a sort of 'fine tuning' of these interests. This informed a number of the works discussed below. These deal specifically with the positioning of the *viewer's* body in exhibition spaces, and the comic potential for this by using ambiguity, anxiety, and physical awkwardness as strategies of exhibition. These works include *Very Best Definitive Ultimate* (2009), *Very Best Definitive Ultimate* (2011), and *Goyim* (2011).

Very Best Definitive Ultimate is a 'participatory' work made in 2009 (see fig. 3), consisting of a set of hand-painted footprints, and a leering pet-rock made from carved polystyrene, acrylic paint and googly-eyes. This work emerged from a prevailing interest in the on-stage antics of heavy metal musicians, specifically in this case, the convention

⁴⁴ Peter Eisenman, *Written into the void: selected writings, 1990-2004* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 109.

⁴⁵ Bruce Nauman, "Nauman Interview, 1970." By Willoughby Sharp, in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words, Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 151.

of the spread-legged 'power metal' stance. Essentially, I wanted to create a circumstance, or set of circumstances, that encouraged the audience to assume, or 'settle into', this particular stance for the potential amusement of other people in the gallery space. However, this was complicated by my own desire to somehow disguise the works origins. This act of disguising, or displacing, the source material was a strategy I employed in an attempt to open up the work to multiple readings and misreadings.



Figure 3. *Very Best Definitive Ultimate*, 2009

To 'spread your legs', no matter what the stage setting is, (concert hall, bedroom, park bench) is commonly understood as a sexually provocative act, one that that I think of as being fundamentally voyeuristic. The grinning pet-rock, with its unerring ogling eyes, is an attempt to disguise the practice of mining the tropes of heavy metal culture, by comically drawing attention to the perverse and voyeuristic nature of this act or stance. *Very Best Definitive Ultimate* (2011, see fig. 4) is a reworking of the earlier version (the three-eyed, grinning rock of 2009 is replaced by a cyclopean, cylindrical form) and was made to function in a similar way. I am interested in this as a strategy for engaging audiences because I am often critical of the way galleries and some artists insist on providing explicit instructions for participation with interactive works. By doing so I feel that much of the potential ambiguity and anxiety that can occur in the act of audience participation is diluted or displaced. What I enjoy is the tension that can arise from a

confusion about how to negotiate artwork; it is what I find most interesting and potentially productive about participatory works. For these reasons, it becomes important for my work to be, in some form or another, self-activating.



Figure 4. Joseph Breikers, *Very Best Definitive Ultimate*, 2011

The footprints in both versions of this work were intended to operate as a kind of invitation to participate. Drawing on the codes of instructional diagrams, the footprints in *Very Best...* (2009) were a simple outline, hand-painted onto the timber floor. While this 'invitation' seemed to actually deter the audience from interacting with the work in the manner I had intended (spreading their legs over a trio of unblinking eyes), the ambiguity around how to engage with the work created a tension that was amusing to me.

Very Best... (2011) attempted to address this issue of the clarity of the 'invitation' by using solid black footprints, which were computer generated and manufactured as a vinyl appliqué. These mechanically produced footprints were more effective in encouraging interaction with this version because there seemed to be less hesitation about ruining the 'hand made' gesture of the previous work. The voyeur in this version, the second in an ongoing series, differs quite dramatically to the grinning rock in the initial version. In its place is a length of cylindrical timber, messily covered with tan, grey and green acrylic paint, over which a thick layer of high-gloss clear varnish was applied.

At the end of the length of timber sits a lone, googly-eye. The finish on the timber allowed it to 'disappear' into the floor when approached from certain angles. Consequently, it became one of the more successful physically comical pieces in the exhibition as viewers stumbled over and around it. With people tripping over the work and the exaggerated care that they took as they negotiated the work, the resulting humour of the situation seemed to ease the anxiety of physically interacting with it, and led me to consider other strategies for having people participate with works without having to explicitly spell it out for them.



Figure 5. Joseph Breikers, *Goyim*, 2011

Goyim (2011) (see fig. 5), is another 'participatory' work that suggestively implicates the viewer if they chose to engage with it; either becoming a patron of a (non-existent) saloon, or the protagonist in an incomplete 'man-walks-into-a-bar' joke. The freestanding saloon doors, which constitute *Goyim*, were an attempt to resolve a problematic area in the exhibition space in which they were first shown. I always think of this particular zone in the main gallery at MetroArts as an ill-defined hall or passageway, and I became interested in responding specifically to this problematic site. So, rather than leave the space uninhabited, or retreat to the walls, I attempted to use the passage-like space and engage with the physical flow of it. Because saloon doors are by design never entirely open or closed structures and reciprocally open inwards and outwards, I used them as a way to nonverbally encourage passage through the space for the audience; to activate the previously 'dead' space.

The title of this work, *Goyim*, refers to *Death and the Compass*, a short story by Jorge Luis Borges in which the term 'goyim' translates to the notion that all roads lead to Rome. I was intrigued by the equivocality of such a phenomenon, of something that is potentially either comforting or terrifying in its certainty. It also called to mind Albert Ritter's geographical sketches of the circular purgatory of Dante's *Inferno*, and Marcel Duchamp's *Door, 11 rue Larry*. Of course the work also draws on the visual language of a million westerns ever made.

The success of self-activating interactive works such as the ones discussed above can depend on a number of largely unpredictable variables. What has become apparent through reflecting on these 'participatory' works is the difficulty of encouraging specific, pre-determined physical interaction with an object without the aid of a didactic. While the use of 'visual instructions,' such as footprint outlines might encourage participation with works in the end I find it equally interesting to continue exploring the humour, awkwardness and misreadings that come from simply exhibiting this kind of work. This comes from being skeptical of the cultural significance placed on a lot of 'interactive art'. So these works – *Very Best Definitive Ultimate* (2009 and 2011), and *Goyim* – aim to satirise not only this 'genre' but the participatory audience as well. However, the physical stumble or fall that characterises my early video works inspired by Nauman and others, has been replaced by the viewer experiencing the potential psychological pratfall of being the subject of a joke.

3.3 MORBID ANGLE⁴⁶

The macabre and the grotesque have been areas of interest of mine for some time. Rather than coming from their traditions in visual art, this fascination took root during adolescence as I began to seriously explore the world and peripheral zones of heavy metal, horror films and literature. Over time, I became increasingly drawn to those musicians, authors, and directors who played with the nuanced contradictions that I felt existed within these sub-cultural forms. For me, these interests represent the conflation of horror and humour, combining seriousness along with the excessively theatrical. The film clips to Strapping Young Lad's song *Love?* (an homage to Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead 2*), Cephalic Carnage's *ohrwurm*, and Impaled's *Operating Theatre*, and the promotional video for Goat the Head's album *Darwinian Minions* are indicative of the tendencies I am interested in exploring in my practice. What follows is an examination of three key works in which I also aimed to explore these incongruous elements of the macabre and grotesque in my own work.

Supertitled 2009 and 2011 are part of another ongoing series of work. The initial version of *Supertitled* (2009, see fig. 6) is a text-based video work with an accompanying audio track. I was interested in the way Martin Kippenberger made frequent use of in-jokes and his idiosyncratic approach to practice as a place from which to develop work. As Gregory Williams notes, with particular regard to the artist's paintings, "it is only through recourse to the anecdote that are we [sic] capable of gaining any significant purchase on his work."⁴⁷ Recognising the potential for humour in this method of developing work, this single-channel video unfolded from a puerile conversation I had about an IGA employee and a late train. The text itself evolved over a period of time as a game of absurd one-upmanship with my own imagination. In this language-based 'game,' I was interested in the lyrical content of death metal music, and how I think of it as often simultaneously gruesome and humorous. Consequently, the passage appears to gather momentum through a series of escalating *textual stunts*, yet has no real focused narrative thread other than that of increasingly over-the-top violence.

⁴⁶ Hilarity abounds: Morbid Angel is a death metal band based in Tampa, Florida.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Jokes Interrupted*, 39.



Figure 6. Joseph Breikers, *Supertitled*, 2009

With this work I was formally interested in reproducing the colours and font types associated with the omnipresent computer system HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey* as I was drawn to the way in which the latent menace of this particular character develops and escalates over the course of the movie. Through the temporal manipulation of language, this work attempts to frustrate the viewer as the narrative scrolls upward off the screen at a painfully slow rate. I wanted to reveal the comically futile plot developments at a tempo that seems at odds with the histrionic violence on screen. This disfiguring of narrative structure, by the ‘glacial’ pace of the text, was also an attempt to accentuate what Bruce Nauman describes as the “functional edges” of language, “the point where language starts to break down as a useful tool for communication,”⁴⁸ and to create a kind of *visual stutter*, as words and phrases are continually read, misread, and re-read until they become nonsense.

I also wanted the accompanying audio to tell a slightly different story to what the viewer might piece together from the text scrolling in front of them. The acousmatic sound suggests an imaginary, lone human exploring a labyrinthine space that is neither industrial, nor domestic. This space is populated with everything from telephones to

⁴⁸ Bruce Nauman, “Talking with Bruce Nauman: An interview, 1989 (excerpts from interviews: July, 1977; September, 1980; May, 1982; and July, 1989).” By Christopher Cordes, in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words, Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), 354.

toilets, and drum kits to golfers. For the most part, the audio is comically at odds with the text-based narrative on screen. This creates a kind of tension between the two. However, there are points of random synchronisation where the video and accompanying audio appear to be somewhat sympathetic to the 'action' on screen. This seems to have the effect of slightly shifting the reading of the work as the atmosphere momentarily slips between humour and horror and back again. It was this slippage and the use of the absurd, the grotesque and the puerile as comic devices that I was exploring with this first version of *Supertitled*.

The most recent adaptation of *Supertitled* (see fig. 7) was exhibited as part of a new body of work in early 2011. This version, whilst maintaining the audio, dispensed with the written narrative in an attempt to shift the emphasis towards the sculptural elements of the first variation of this work. In place of the text-based video, an object-based element that alluded to the comically-excessive nature of the original text, and which also drew upon the techniques and styles present in the construction of Warhammer terrain and figurines, which often results in a kind of grotesque caricature of both the familiar and alien. The object-based element that developed out of these preoccupations was a set of two vicious-looking maces, dramatised by a surface appearance of medieval use (rusted spikes, congealed blood, and worn, grimy handles), which were casually leant against the gallery wall.

The significance of this work for me was that it encouraged a further exploration of the potential for audio and acousmatic sound to be used in the context of large installations. In Joan La Barbara's video *She is Always Alone* (1979) the artist argues that sound is in fact an object; one that, like a mass of rock or soil, occupies actual physical space. La Barbara asserts that in order to no longer be within the audible range of any uncontained sound one has to physically move away from its source. It follows then, that sound can be discussed as if a three-dimensional object. This particular version of *Supertitled* became an exercise in exploring the way sound can indiscriminately permeate space and disrupt the funereal silence that often pervades the gallery space. I was interested in playing with how sound could convey a feeling of distress or violence in order to create some tension between that and the potential humour of the objects in the installation.



Figure 7. Joseph Breikers, *Supertitled*, 2011

Sexual Profligate, Corruptor of Youth, Practitioner of Black Magic and Friend of the Devil, or SP,CoY,PoBMandFotD (2007-2011, see fig. 8 and 9), is an object-based work which draws on the humour that I find comes out of the use of special effects in horror movies from the 1970s and 1980s as well as the comic potential of the ‘theatre’ of heavy metal. This particular era of horror film, which predates computer-generated special effects, gave rise to a more mechanical and sculptural style of horror special effects: and a sense of a kind of *analogue warmth*. Films such as *Scanners* (1981), *Gremlins* (1984), and *Bad Taste* (1987) foreground what I consider to be an essentially tactile mode of special effects, which in present day viewing provide a viewing experience of both horror and humour.⁴⁹



Figure 8. Joseph Breikers, *Sexual Profligate, Corruptor of Youth, Practitioner of Black Magic and Friend of the Devil*, 2009-2011



Figure 9. Joseph Breikers, *Sexual Profligate, Corruptor of Youth, Practitioner of Black Magic and Friend of the Devil* (detail), 2009-2011

SP,CoY,PoBMandFotD, is an amalgam of the infamous impalement scenes from the movie *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), a hospital intravenous stand, the enigmatic Easter Island sculptures, and the corpse-paint design of the musician Gaahl,⁵⁰ and was

⁴⁹ For films such as *Gremlins* and *Bad Taste*, this conflation of horror and humour was the initial intention, which is amplified as the special effects accumulate a certain ‘historical charm’ when viewed in the present day.

⁵⁰ Gaahl, Kristian Eivind Espedal, was the vocalist for the black metal band Gorgoroth from 1998-2007. Living in relative isolation in the valley of Espedal (named after his family who have inhabited the valley for many generations), Gaahl has meticulously cultivated an image of a hermetic and feared persona whose “whole process of creating is based on being away...from people.” (*True Norwegian Black Metal*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32iX5lbVDto>, accessed on October 30, 2011)

conceived as a self-portrait of sorts: where these things come together with the shape of my head made in the manner of the Easter Island moai.

When thinking about bringing these various elements together I was reflecting on the archetype of the artist plying his or her trade in relative isolation, Gaahl's careful cultivation of his intensely private public persona, and the many inward-facing moai on the coastline of Easter Island. I was interested in playing with these ideas and images to produce a work that might offer up a number of cultural reference points depending on the viewer's own experiences. Alongside this, the poorly-made and portable stand, the distracted sculpting of the figure's head, and its gruesome final resting place (the potentially morbid nature of such imagery is mirrored, and somewhat undermined, by the juvenile nature of the nostril impalement), was meant to diffuse not only the horror of decapitation, but also the *horror* of such romanticised stereotypes pertaining to the figure of the artist.



Figure 10. Joseph Breikers, *The Long Pig*, 2011

The final work discussed here in relation to the subject of the macabre is *The Long Pig* (2011, see fig. 10). The title, taken from a song by the heavy metal band Strapping Young Lad, refers to the culinary practice of preparing human flesh for food. In a similar way to SP,CoY,PoBManFotD, *The Long Pig* developed out of an interest in the

intersection between the comedy and revulsion that is generated through schlock horror genres when the human form is subject to some form of violent or punitive action. This coincided with becoming quite interested in the sculptural quality of the freshly dug, unmarked grave and the burial tradition of Tumulus (mounds of earth or stone raised over a grave site). These mounds mark a resting place for the dead and I thought they represented the cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth present in the folk carnival culture I was also researching as part of a broader survey of humour. Sixteenth century novelists such as Francois Rabelais and Miguel de Cervantes celebrated the folk carnival image of ‘mother’ earth as the womb returned to upon death; a temporary resting place before rebirth. The grinning pet rock, which first appeared in *Very Best Definitive Ultimate*, peers out from beneath the layer of rocks, seeming to revel in the folk-carnival gaiety of death, and its escape from an 80s special effects studio.

In the context of this research project into contemporary practices that also deal with these ideas and strategies around humour, the rambling text and acousmatic disruptions, the pencil shoved defiantly up the right nostril, and the grinning head peering out through the burial mound, can also be seen to intersect with the macabre and the grotesque that is present in the work of Olaf Bruening, and Jake and Dinos Chapman. The way these artists parody the textual and visual resources of heavy metal and horror film and literature has informed my own thinking and making when putting these works together. In this section, I have aimed to reflect my enthusiasm towards these often dismissed and misinterpreted genres, and the complex array of humorous and nuanced incongruities that exist within these sub-cultural forms.

Conclusion to a Shaggy Dog Tale

The aim of this practice-led research project was to critically examine and creatively explore the nexus between humour and the aesthetic and socio-political contexts that impact on my visual art practice. *Out of Position: The Ball Park of Humour in Contemporary Art* also aimed to establish a foundation for further formal enquiry into this area of interest. Rather than function as a definitive survey of these ideas, the nature of the practice-led methodology means that the project offers a more speculative and open-ended discourse to encourage and provoke future creative possibilities. This also means that “the relationship between the practice and the exegesis continue[s] as a circulating exchange.”⁵¹ Such a ‘continuous exchange’ informs my ambivalence, and anxiety, regarding the role of the artist and art within contemporary society and that has also been the focus of the project’s research.

The visual art practices of Marcel Duchamp, Bruce Nauman, and Martin Kippenberger have formed the historical contexts for a more *parenthetical* engagement with the nature of humour in contemporary art. Through an analysis of the work of these three artists, it became apparent that their approaches to practice provided what I consider as a variety of evasive strategies and elliptical frameworks that can be employed to generate new ways to think about humour in art. Duchamp’s use of irony and silence represent two such evasive strategies, and the artist’s cultivation of a ‘circus of possibilities’ provides a complex elliptical framework for his ‘things.’ Bruce Nauman demonstrates the ability of humour derived from *and/or* and *both* to offer a similar kind of ‘buffer of ambiguity.’ Martin Kippenberger represents, in this instance, the most comprehensive employment of evasive strategies and elliptical frameworks. His use of ghost writers, authorised and unauthorised collaboration, appropriation, misappropriation, “bad” making, replication, redesign, repetition, deliberately confusing the role of commissioner and commissionee, and disguising astute observations as beside-the-point ramblings, makes for one hyperactive oeuvre.

Through an analysis of my own visual art practice, I have identified a number of persistent conceptual concerns that resonate with humour. These include, a comic-critique of the cultural significance placed on, and the didactic frameworks around, a lot

⁵¹ Stephen Goddard, “A Correspondence Between Practices,” in *Approaches to Enquiry*, 116

of interactive art. Most importantly I have developed a space for perversely mining the humour I find in heavy metal culture and horror film and literature “in opposition to a loosely defined group of cultural and economic elites;”⁵² along with a method of productively employing these through the comic and continual ‘misses’ of studio practice. One unexpected outcome of this research project was the recognition of quite specific personas cultivated and employed by Duchamp, Nauman, and Kippenberger (detached dilettante, pragmatist, and clown). These guises –regardless of their constructed nature– have become critical for me when thinking about the possibilities for iconoclastic approaches to practice.

To finally put this shaggy dog tale to rest, this research shows that humour can develop out of the use of the evasive strategies and elliptical frameworks discussed above. It demonstrates the way such strategies and frameworks provide a means to extend on the discursive field of humour, and map out a territory in which more *divergent* interrogations of the comic can take place. These frameworks also offer up a kind of ‘buffer,’ or insurance, against the complex field of intellectual and socio-political contexts and histories that impact on my ambivalence around the role of the artist and contemporary art. For me as an artist they provide a space of denial and deflection, and allow me to remain “out of position” as these contexts and histories are teased out around me.

⁵² Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” in *Horror Zone: The Cultural Experience of Contemporary Horror Cinema*, Ian Conrich ed. (New York (I. B. Tauris, 2010), 106.

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Supplementary Material