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Foam Rainbow

Where humour, disgust and failure
mingle in contemporary art

by
Jane Polkinghorne

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

This thesis explores the potent interconnections of humour, disgust and failure to understand their function in contemporary creative practices. Operating in shifty and nebulous terrains, the three experiences are under-researched, and rarely considered in combination. Fused together in certain creative practices, they operate on the threshold of pleasure, revulsion and fiasco. Such an intersection has the potential to produce surprisingly profound aesthetic experiences that fuse cognitive and emotional responses, momentarily disrupting the artifice in art and representation.

Humour, disgust and failure are corporeally grounded experiences. Focusing on representational, embodied creative practices, the thesis relies on feminist and aesthetic critiques of representation and gendered subjectivities to position disgust and humour as critical mechanisms. The risks of failure are rethought as disruptive modes through which meaning is created and disturbed to generate new ways of thinking and making. Using my studio-based practice and key works by artists, comedians and filmmakers as examples where all three intersect, the thesis illuminates the peculiarities of gender in the formation of humour, disgust and failure in creative practices. With myself as image source I explore vulgarity, revulsion and representation within an ethical framework that places embodied subjectivity as vital for critiquing and messing-up gendered representation. Combining video projections with sculpture, installation, images and odour, the studio research invites the viewer to experience the work through multiple orifices.

This thesis demonstrates the intertwined affectivity of humour, disgust and failure in creative works, how the power of revulsion to arrest merges with the rush to laugh in thresholds of experience that can at any moment collapse, wobble or explode. The interactions of humour, disgust and failure generate complex insights and potent affects which momentarily allow us to “enjoy” a sense of dissolution, to acknowledge our corporeality and aesthetic senses as unified and yet overflowing and intermingled with the world. When this occurs, the ridiculousness of gender, representation, fashion, codes of behaviour and the corporeal nature of ourselves can be revealed.

Introduction

Perhaps it is not filth per se that troubles history's gaze, but the compulsion towards cleanliness that can locate its pragmatic function only after the fact. **Dominique Laporte**¹

This thesis explores the potent interconnections of humour, disgust and failure in order to understand their function in contemporary creative practices. Operating in shifty and nebulous terrains, the three experiences are under-researched, and have not been considered in combination. Fused in certain creative practices and works, they operate on the threshold of pleasure, revulsion and fiasco. Such an intersection has the potential to produce surprisingly profound aesthetic experiences that fuse cognitive and emotional responses momentarily disrupting artifice in art and representation.

This research is grounded in feminist discourses and understandings of representation, subjectivity and construction of identity. The limits of feminist critique are reached when the feminine operates as abjected other and concurrently aestheticised fetish in representation. I posit that in the particular and peculiar fusion of affect and sensation generated through simultaneous operations of humour, disgust and failure, lay generative and innovative experiences of gender and subjectivity. Rather than avoiding the problems of representation, working through and beyond its clichés and banalities opens up new territories for discourse and understanding.

In demonstrating the intertwined affectivity of humour, disgust and failure in creative works, the research makes evident the power of revulsion to arrest when merged with the rush to laugh in thresholds of experience that can at any moment collapse. The interactions of humour, disgust and failure generate complex insights and potent affects which momentarily allow us to “enjoy” a sense of dissolution, to acknowledge our corporeality and aesthetic senses as unified and yet overflowing and intermingled with the world. When this occurs, the ridiculousness of gender, representation,

¹ Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Documents Magazine, 1993). 11

fashion, rules of behaviour and the corporeal nature of ourselves can momentarily be revealed.

A dog shits on a footpath. We cut to a plump transvestite with an outrageously high hairline, backcombed hair/wig and eye shadow that stretches glamorously half way up her forehead. She licks her lips and rubs her bespangled belly as if seeing something delicious. Without the camera cutting away, she bends down and grabs the dog shit off the footpath and eats it. Maintaining her gleeful smile throughout, the transvestite manages to chew, swallow and simultaneously gag. She is acting, she is really eating dog shit, she is gagging, she is Divine.



Figure 1: *Pink Flamingos*, 1972. Directed by John Waters. Starring Divine.

Described above is the final scene from the 1972 film *Pink Flamingos*. Written and directed by the so-called ‘Pope of Trash’ US filmmaker John Waters, the plot of the film revolves around characters vying for the title of “The Filthiest Person Alive”, which Divine, played by Glenn Milstead, resoundingly wins through committing the act of canine coprophilia described above. I first saw *Pink Flamingos* as a young adult in 1986 and its combination of the real (shit eating, chicken fucking) and the ridiculous (the excessive figures of Divine and her “mother” Babs played by Edith Massey) has had a lasting effect on me. The film exemplifies, even into the present, a fusing of the revolting and the hilarious, and a self-conscious embracing of the

paucity of production values, and has long fascinated, casting an influence over my practice as an artist.

Pink Flamingos shows the allure and the repulsion when disgust, humour and failure combine,² operating in part through the lens of gender. It is an allure that I have been pursuing throughout 20 years of practice-based research that has consistently used humour and disgust as devices for working with unsettling ideas. I work with failure both as a signifier of too much and not enough. Humour has long been understood for the ability to work with complex and difficult concepts, as well as its ability to render complexity stupid. Through humour pleasure is gained, usually signified by laughter and its various modes of appearance. However, humour and laughter have their evil aspects: their appearance does not always signify delight, joy and enrichment. In some circumstances laughter is cruel and unforgiving, derisive and deeply conservative. Disgust, at first glance, is seemingly never experienced as pleasure, although on consideration it is crucial to many apparently pleasurable activities, most obviously sex and eating, as well as a range of other bodily functions and cultural understandings that are formed around the body and its various actions, activities and proclivities. Failure is frequently a powerful mechanism within comedy, yet we experience it personally as a negation of pleasure when it is our own failure(s), and we associate it with shame, rather than pleasure or joy. While pleasure can be found in abasement (just ask any S & M partnership), there is also the delight taken at the failure of others, which comes not via a comedic impulse, but from deeper impulses that generate “evil” laughter through laughing at, not with.

The complexities of humour, disgust and failure and their combination, form the basis of this research. I propose that disgust, humour and failure operating together in creative practices offer a very particular experience for us as subjects. Through the distancing of art, literature and televisual materials, we are able to feel those sensations that, were they experienced un-mediated such as being in a war zone,

² The dog shit eating scene in *Pink Flamingoes* was used in a 2007 study of the relationship between humour and disgust. Participants were shown the 2 minute clip and asked to think of themselves either as protagonists–Divine (the shit eater), or as an outsider/spectator. They were asked to grade the intensity of their reactions, which as you could imagine, differed. Protagonists felt more disgust than the observers, who felt more amusement. Scott H. Hemenover, and Ulrich Schimmack, “That’s Disgusting! ... But Very Amusing: Mixed Feelings of Amusement and Disgust,” *Cognition & Emotion* 21, no. 5 (2007).

would overwhelm us. Representations allow us to experience those sensations without them *necessarily* swamping us, in aesthetic moments where the “realness” is kept at a slight remove.³ Although, some of us *will* be swamped in an excess of feeling, forced to tears reading a novel, or to vomit watching a film, or piss ourselves laughing.

The difficult sensations we seek out in representation (drama, art, music and so on) have long been analysed in philosophy. The ‘desire’ to feel difficult emotions such as grief, revulsion and pity was named “tragic pleasure” by Aristotle in his work *Poetics* written in 335BCE. *Poetics* speculates that the catharsis or purgation of emotions is one of the purposes of tragic pleasure.⁴ In an operation similar to that of tragedy, the simultaneous effects of humour, disgust and failure function as an acknowledgement of the frailty of self. The physical and psychological boundaries we erect in an attempt to keep the world in some kind of perspective, are, when met with the interaction of humour, disgust and failure, momentarily breached by the recognition of the horror, pathos and ridiculous nature of the self.

This research seeks to understand why artists (I include here all creative practitioners) work at the intersection of failure, disgust and humour, and to analyse my own aspirations to evoke this state. The combined affect is multi-directional, operating around a precarious cusp or threshold where a tilt one way, towards disgust for instance, renders the experience solely disgusting. Disgust, humour and failure are each already multifarious in their generation and in the experiences we have of them. I analyse, through studio and textual research, the particularity of their synthesis.

The puree of subjectivity, hairy central core imagery and ridiculous televisual representations in my practice is an exploration of the subjugated self in relation to representation. Pathetic, and yet familiar, disruptive of clichés yet indebted to their forms and functions, self-disgust is ingested and the attempts to repel it through critique, parody and excess form the ground for the studio research. Popular culture is

³ An example of the inability to distinguish between the ‘real’ and its aesthetic reflection occurred at the 2015 Art Basel Miami, where witnesses initially construed a stabbing as performance art. Daniel Chang, Nicholas Nehamas, and Jordan Levin, “Fight Leads to Woman Stabbed at Art Basel Miami Beach,” *Miami Herald*, December 5, 2015.

⁴ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. S. H. Butcher, 3 ed. (London; New York: Macmillan and Co, 1902).

reflected in the forms I generate here: screen-based warpings of the self across multiple screens. The screens, televisions embedded into a structure, act not as individual worlds unto themselves, but as fragments for subjectivity, or multiple subjectivities and multiplied bodies, constructed in space from a pile of monitors.



Figure 2: Jane Polkinghorne, *Self Portrait (Bikini line)*, 2012. Digital image.

Our experience of ourselves, our bodies, is necessarily fragmented and partial: the face we pull when we look into a mirror, what we see when we look down at ourselves, the strange bulges, and tufts of hair, scars and skin blemishes only known privately. This self we love and feel comfortable in, yet all too frequently we are forced to acknowledge a lack, or a gap between how we feel and how we look. This gap, or chasm, or “failure”, is easily filled with self-loathing/self-improvement as we recognise we do not match the polish and perfection of popular representations. Art theorist Hal Foster, in the 1996 book *The Return of The Real*, calls this the “gap of (mis)recognition.”⁵ The particularity of “selfness” is repressed as we endeavour to force ourselves into that which aligns with popularised forms in any television show, film, magazine, newspaper, or music video representations.

⁵ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996). 159

This gap/chasm/failure is not strictly a negation, but a hole of potentiality where pleasures are to be found. The pleasures of creativity, of difference, are in operation, messing up and slipping, being not quite right, muddying the forms and functions and possibilities of representation. Disgust here seeps into pleasure in a revelling and embracing of wrongness and difference. Failure is potentially generative, forcing us to acknowledge, if only briefly, our wrongness and our ineptitude. Laughter and humour, as Freud noted in his short essay published posthumously “On Humour”⁶, allow us to continue in the face of our bodily and psychical annihilation, and therefore function as means of coping with our ever-imminent failure.

My undergraduate art student days of the 1990s corresponded with the rise of “Abject Art”, with works that often used excrement, orifices, and waste materials as referent. Artists Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley, Kiki Smith, Paul McCarthy and the Chapman Brothers were lauded for their art that used disgust. Failure was not explicitly articulated historically: this is a more recent phenomenon that highlights the more repellent and pathetic aspects of being human. “The Abject” has most clearly been analysed by French theorist Julia Kristeva in her book *The Powers Of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. The lasting influence, the stain, of theory and art aligned to the abject is significant in relation to this research, but is not the sole influence. I have long looked to another area of cultural production where disgust and failure are used to generate laughter: B-grade films, and in particular films on the margins. Historically these are the midnight movies, the drive-ins and late-night television. Various known as shlock/horror, exploitation, cult, mondo, and underground, the film scholar Jeffrey Sconce names this cinematic underbelly “para-cinema”, a genre of which John Waters’ *Pink Flamingos* is an exemplar.

As an art student in the late 1980s and early 90s, the environment I found myself in was serious however. Post-modern and conceptual approaches were the preferred modes of making and thinking about art. I soon realised the works I made that were most effective were those that, through the operation of what could be called base

⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Humour,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961).

materialism “lite,”⁷ provoked laughter. My “significant”⁸ works from this time include the video *Destiny* for which I animated shit and other things (Coke cans, the pope) coming out of my arse. The jelly installation *Vroom*, the first collaboration with Helen Hyatt-Johnston (a collaboration still active as *The Twilight Girls*) is another work in which the visceral impact on the audience became an end in itself for my developing practice. Concurrently my brother and I were working together making short narrative films. Sharing a sensibility mired in comic baseness, we used our friends as actors and crew in a series of polymorphous and absurd horror comedies, including the masterpieces *Steroid Stampede*, *The Good The Bad The Chubby*, *Sex Starved Space Sluts*, *Mud*, and *Boots*.



Figure 3: Jane Polkinghorne, *Destiny*, 1991. Video animation. 3min



Figure 4: Jane Polkinghorne, *Destiny*, 1991. Video animation. 3min

While these works were made in different mediums, both relied on visceral responses from the audience for their effect. In *Destiny* the shit that comes out of my arse, followed by dollar bills, was real shit, (yes I videoed myself shitting) and it was disgusting as shit usually is when represented. Simultaneously it was funny. *Vroom* meanwhile began its installation life highly aestheticised as a backlit red jelly corridor, jelly on the walls, 40cm deep on the floor and dripping overhead through some chicken wire. After a few days of people tramping through, the knee-deep jelly turned mouldy and reeked. *Vroom* literally grew its disgust, provoking uncomfortable

⁷ Base materialism is a concept first articulated by Georges Bataille in his essay “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” from the book *Visions of Excess*. Georges Bataille and Allan Stoekl, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

⁸ I consider these early works “significant” for the manner in which they combined laughter and disgust that has been a consistent aspect of my practice since that time.

laughter, as it was unclear if this was “serious” installation art, or a ridiculous mock set of an alien womb from a cheap science fiction television show.



Figure 5: Jane Polkinghorne and Helen Hyatt-Johnston, *Vroom*, 1990. Gelatine, food colouring, wood, glass, wire. 2m l x 1.7m h x .85m w.

In the film *The Good The Bad The Chubby*, 1996, a transvestite nun, a lady cowboy with a huge cleavage and pencil moustache, and a chubby chicana with a handlebar mo’, collude in the death of a Midnight Cowboy-esque young man. The final scene has the nun flashing his genitals, the lady cowboy shitting on the face of the man, and the chubby chicana eating it. This power and mystery of humour to turn something awful, horrible and disgusting into a pleasurable and transgressively humorous experience has driven much of my practice since.



Figure 6: *The Good, The Bad, The Chubby*, 1995. Written, directed, produced by Jane Polkinghorne and Anthony Polkinghorne, 3min, B&W 16mm film. Production still.

The carnivalesque as theorised by Russian academic Mikhail Bakhtin in his influential 1965 book on the medieval era *Rabelais and His World*⁹ is often cited for its connection to contemporary practices. For instance the multitudinous inversions in *Pink Flamingos* can be understood as demonstrating a key Bakhtin concept of inversion in the social field. Social positions, in the Bakhtian model, are inverted at certain socially accepted times: the slave becomes king, the criminal is elevated to judge and the wife becomes husband. Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque demonstrates the ability of humour to point out the foibles of the powerful, and to give disruptive power to those who have none. This research uses Bakhtin's ideas as the groundwork from which the more grotesque aspects of humour operate: the blurring of social hierarchy through a focus on bodily functions (eating, shitting, fucking, vomiting and so on), the use of inversion to disrupt, if only temporarily, social and cultural norms (gender, class, race, sexuality), the potential of humour to show to us where power resides and how we might undermine it.

⁹ M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984).

Focussing on particular methods of generating humour, this paper explores creative works where humour, disgust and failure fuse and their disruptive potency. I demonstrate how and why these emotions and affects operate in my practice, which ranges across mediums—photography, video/film, installation and sculpture. The relationship between disgust, humour and failure is examined. Some art, and some artists, work into the spaces and chasms between humour, disgust and failure (not a singular gap, but particular to each of us) as they oscillate, vibrate and throb, occasionally filling up and overflowing. Humour, disgust and failure are prime “gap-fillers”, the expanding foam swelling into these spaces as we respond to the chasm’s approach. The experiential aspect of art brings us to a position where the self is forced to experience, even if vicariously through the distancing of the aesthetic, its affinity with abjection.

Chapter One “Humour (a not so funny analysis)” is an investigation of humour, its function and its use in culture as well as within art and film. The chapter summarises various theories of humour, and as both Sigmund Freud in his influential book *Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious*¹⁰ and Henri Bergson in his 1911 book *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*¹¹ tell us, we note the difficulties in theorising laughter and humour. Explanations that seemingly explain the mechanisms of humour instead seem to miss the point, as if explaining humour forces it elsewhere. Chapter One in addition explores the connections between humour and gender. The research is implicitly operating from a feminist position wherein the intersecting function of power on and through gender is continually acknowledged. We will come to understand that humour, often cited for its subversive possibilities, can function just as well as a mechanism for maintaining the status quo and for reinforcing social and cultural norms. Humour’s complexity however is revealed through its function in the opposite direction, as the great deflator of power, critiquing and undermining the powerful, as theorised in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Through Bakhtin we can identify the kinship of humour with some aspects of disgust that lies at the core of this research.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, Angela Richards, and James Strachey, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, The Pelican Freud Library (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin, 1991).

¹¹ Henri Bergson, Cloudesley Brereton, and Fred Rothwell, *Laughter; an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Macmillan, 1911).

Chapter Two “Discussing the Disgusting” reveals that scholarly research of disgust follows a similar trajectory to that of humour. Long cast aside from any discussions of aesthetics as being indescribable, in more recent texts disgust has been reappraised for its strange fascinations, its pull on us, and its use in defining boundaries in taste, in aesthetics, in the body and in art. In this chapter, I use ideas suggested by theorist Winfried Menninghaus and his assessment of disgust in relation to gender in the writings of Georges Bataille, Julia Kristeva and Sigmund Freud. Disgust that surrounds the feminine becomes, via their writings, a crucial aspect in defining subjectivity, and in particular the normalised subject (implicitly white, male, heterosexual) who somehow is above or outside analyses of race, religion, culture and gender. I utilise the concept formulated by theorist Carolyn Korsmeyer in her 2011 book *Savouring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*¹² of the “sublate” as a revolting inversion of the sublime that reveals the complexity of disgust. Drawing on aesthetics, film theory and critiques of beauty and the sublime, this chapter discusses the complex fascination of disgust and its use by artists and filmmakers to provoke revulsion.

Chapter Three “Styled Failings” is an examination of failure as a strategy used by artists, and as an aesthetic form in cinema. In defining failure we must have an apprehension of what it is not—perhaps most obviously failure’s opposite, success. We do not advertise our failures. Generally failure is considered a private affair. However within contemporary practices failure has become another way of “succeeding,” a matter of style or form. Understanding the paradox of “failure as success” forms much of this chapter. Failure as instrumental in the functioning of disgust and humour, and the operation of failure in relation to gender, are also analysed. Judith (Jack) Halberstam in her 2011 book *The Queer Art of Failure*¹³ asks us to rethink failure as an inversion of expectation of how to function in contemporary Western culture. Halberstam critiques the culture of the pursuit of success, however that might be signified: wealth, fame, fortune, beauty and health. Halberstam argues that the success obsession of advanced capitalism has brought us to the brink of mass extinction, post-colonial upheaval, environmental degradation, huge wealth disparity,

¹² Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹³ J.J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

and depression as one of the biggest health issues in developed countries. Our “success” in gaining wealth and a high standard of living has ramifications we are only coming to realise.

This chapter illuminates the possibilities of failure as aesthetic form. Genuine failure is hard to identify, as we tend to deny its occurrence, both publically and privately. Dwelling on failure is considered failure in itself in a culture where positivity is all. What are the risks in failing? What is the relation of failure to disgust and humour? What might an “abject” failure look like in relation to gender? Queer and trans theories are rapidly expanding how gender is considered, in considering gender less an either/or duality and more as shifting spectrums.

In Chapter Four, “The Foul and the Funny,” I draw on Korsmeyer’s concept of the sublate to connect the operations of disgust, humour and failure and demonstrate their joint operation in a selection of creative works. As identified originally by Kristeva in *The Powers of Horror*, art (used here to include visual art, film and television, literature and music) has that function in culture of bringing us to the experience and witnessing of the abject without collapsing into it: “... the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religion.”¹⁴ The significant role art plays in bringing us towards unsettling emotions and experiences operates through a strange desire to seek out the tragic, the violent, the disgusting, the funny and the failures, through the distancing mechanisms of creative forms. This has been a perplexing paradox since Aristotle wrote his theory of tragedy *Poetics* in the fourth century.

In Chapter Five, “Ideal Failure,” I focus on the persistent combination of humour and disgust and their operation through failure within my studio-based research. The decision to be physically present “in” my work is crucial to its material presence and ethical commitment; I invite an audience to laugh and be disgusted, but not at themselves, rather at and with me. My artwork is a manifestation of the desire to

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives: A Series of the Columbia University Press (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). 17

participate and create cultural forms in the public realm, to work within representation. However a concurrent desire compels my efforts to make works that are disruptive of the clichés inherent in popular cultural representations. An art practice is perhaps one of the few effective positions from which to respond to the world of representation without being beholden to it—particularly when we consider the strictures of paid employment within the context of creative forms such as the film and television industry or design. In focussing on the primacy of bodily sensation, particularly my subjective experiences, I make artworks that operate through a certain level of disgust, yet maintain the release of humour rather than only revulsion. A fixation on using myself is narcissistic at the most obvious level (who doesn't want to be the star of their own show?), and could be understood as self-obsession and self-aggrandising. There are aspects of this in the work; however using my self-image is a strategy for disrupting and problematising the sheen and polish of contemporary gendered representations.

My endeavour is to do more than simply provoke laughter. If that was the primary aim, then why not be a comedian? The strictures of comedy are manifold as the chapter on humour addresses. Fusing subjectivity with the shame and disgust inherent in the spectacle of representational modes (shame because I am not a model, an actor, or a public figure, the beautiful, slim, feminine, smooth of body, hairless-in-the-right-places persona we usually encounter) is a classic second wave feminist action of inserting subjectivity into culture. The critiques directed at Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke et al during the second wave of feminism and afterwards are still relevant here: does it not add more fuel to the spectacular fire of representations of the feminine? Rather than reiterating feminine representation, would avoiding it altogether be a more effective way of countering the use of the feminine as primary fetish, as the object of the gaze (for all genders)? The use of my subjectivity, and physical form, is a crucial aspect of a practice with on-going explorations of the ridiculousness of the experience of and relationship to embodied representation.

In the Conclusion “Foaming Thresholds” I summarise the key findings of the research presented here: how the curious complexity of humour, disgust and failure intertwining brings us momentarily to an awareness of our embodiment in the world. Nausea, usually undeniable and difficult to repress, reminds us of our connection to

the biological processes of existence. Humour as a response/reaction is similarly difficult to suppress, yet our experience of it is generally one of pleasure, even if it is a response to an extreme situation (gallows humour for example). Failure by contrast is usually experienced as a negation, or even a denial of sorts; certainly if it is genuine it is singular (see the losing team at a grand final: the winners celebrate together, the losers mourn alone). Combined in the apprehension of particular artworks, humour, disgust and failure generate complex insights and potent affects which can momentarily allow us to “enjoy” a sense of dissolution.

1. Humour (a not so funny analysis)

This chapter investigates humour's role and function, and its relationship to art and my work in particular. I have a crack at unravelling the complexities and definitions of humour by analysing various theories of the situation and function of humour in the human psyche and in culture. From Aristotle to Freud, from Bergson to Bakhtin, humour, laughter, jokes and comedy have perplexed those who have attempted to understand its biological, psychological and cultural functions. I explore humour in relation to gender and sexuality because of the connections of embodiment to representation.

What is it?

While very difficult to define, humour, most of us would agree, is a positive and pleasurable emotion or feeling that often (but not always) manifests through laughter or smiling as a response to stimulus that amuses us.¹ US psychologist Silvan Tomkins through his framework of affect theory wrote that there are nine affects, of which joy is one of the positive affects. Tomkins connects laughter to a more primitive function as laughter in primates appears aligned to human laughter: "Laughter we take to be a more primitive, and earlier, form of the enjoyment affect, which in man became differentiated into two somewhat distinct forms, the smile and laughter."² Tomkins aligns enjoyment and the smile with a number of other affects through a reduction in intensity:

... sudden relief from such negative stimulation as pain, or fear or distress or aggression will produce the smile of joy. In the case of pain, fear and distress the smile of joy is a smile of relief. In the case of sudden anger reduction it is the smile of triumph. The same principle operates with the sudden reduction of pleasure, as after the orgasm or

¹ Delia Chiaro and Raffaella Baccolini, *Gender and Humor: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*, 1 Edition. ed., Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies. 1

² Silvan S. Tomkins and Bertram P. Karon, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1962; 1992). 370

the completion of a good meal, there is often the smile of pleasure. Further, the sudden reduction of positive affect, such as excitement, also activates the smile of joy, in this case usually the smile of recognition or familiarity.³

Although Tomkins does not use the word humour, and therefore distinguishes it from the affect of joy, we can see how enjoyment arises from any number of experiences, and that humour is not the sole route to laughter; being tickled, play, a sudden feeling of relief, and being nervous may also trigger the response. The complexity of laughter, smiling, and amusement make them extremely difficult to define categorically; some writers, philosophers and psychologists have made distinctions between humour, laughter and the comic while others conflate them.⁴

We distinguish between fun and funny in the same way that we distinguish between enjoyment and amusement. We enjoy playing a game, but it does not necessarily amuse us (even though we may laugh). Something that is fun implies engagement (play), while for something to be funny we require comic distance. Canadian academic Robin Tapley unravels the distinctions between fun and funny, and explores recent theorizing on humour that links it to play. Tapley writes that humour and play are homologous in that both might result in laughter, but distinct in the method and social function through which they come about.⁵

Comic distance is the intellectual space that allows us to separate ourselves from something in order to laugh at it. For instance, I cut my hand while talking to my mother on the telephone. At the same time, with the phone cradled between head and shoulder I was attempting to cut open a watermelon with a large knife. Inevitably the knife slipped and I sliced into my hand. Though the cut in my palm required stitches, the incident amused me because when it happened I was behaving like my mother who always multi-tasks, and which I was also doing to the extreme so much so that I

³ Ibid. 371

⁴ For an overview of some of the theories see Stefan Horlacher, "A Short Introduction to Theories of Humour, the Comic and Laughter," in *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*, ed. Gaby Pailer, et al. (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2009).

⁵ Robin Tapley, "On Morreall: A Failure to Distinguish between Play and Humor," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36, no. 3 (2012).

injured myself. However, rather than dwelling on the foolishness of using a large knife while talking on the phone, I converted the experience (painful, requiring 6 stitches) into pleasure through self-reflective humour.

Humour via these broad definitions occurs when we are amused, but it is a particular kind of amusement akin to, but not the same as, pleasure; similar to, but not the same as, the fun we have while ‘playing’. It is beyond the scope of this research to list or define all the differences (semantic or otherwise) between the numerous categories of humour, though some theorists have made distinctions between humour, the comic, jokes, black comedy (tragicomedy), wit, sarcasm, irony and so on⁶. For this paper I consider laughter as an embodied manifestation of humour. Humour itself is an intellectual and aesthetic response to the world that generates a very particular form of pleasure distinct from the joy experienced having fun, and from sexual pleasure, and the enjoyment of a good meal. My primary focus is on humour that is self-reflective, vulgar, tendentious, the crude and the bodily, while drawing on other categories and forms where necessary.

Most of us would like to believe we have a good sense of humour and find it attractive in others (if the singles listings are anything to go by!). This implies there is a general cultural understanding of what humour is, and that humour is a personality attribute we aspire to have. We enjoy the company of funny people, while comedians and comedy in film and television are intrinsic components of contemporary culture. In our everyday lives a humorous work colleague can disrupt the mindless repetition of a mundane job, squeezing some pleasure out of what is for most of us an otherwise tedious and frequently pointless activity (pointless, that is, apart from the money). As humour almost always occurs within the company of others (it is rare to laugh out loud when alone) we can therefore say it has social functions.

As humour itself has no singular cause or provocation similarly we can say it has no singular function. It allows us to respond to the failings and shortcomings in ourselves, in our lives and of those around us, and yet this acknowledgment is also a refusal of those same failures. Rather than experiencing the pain of humiliation, we

⁶ Sigmund Freud distinguished humour from jokes in his short 1927 paper. Freud, “Humour.”

make a joke, a self-deprecating remark, over an incident that manages to teeter on, yet avoid tragedy—we laugh and we can continue. This is a Freudian understanding of humour, wherein we use it to deny the punishing effects of the world upon our psychological states. In his short 1927 paper “Humour” Freud wrote:

The grandeur in it [humour] clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure.⁷

Freud's analysis here is in reference to individual experience, and as such we can understand humour as an essential mechanism for coping with the vicissitudes of everyday life, enabling us to brush off the minor disappointments and failures we encounter. However, as stated earlier, it is rare to laugh alone. Humour generally requires both a performer and an audience, requiring the social sphere in which to operate and to function. Socially it functions as a method of breaking down social inhibitions between people, a means to connect with others, a distraction from suffering, and a form of calming or dissipating tension. These are all fairly benign aspects of humour, which can as easily be used aggressively, to hurt others, to offend, to irritate and to attack. Rather than a device for bonding people together, humour can be deeply conservative, used to reinforce social strata and power relations. Consider the Australian Opposition Leader Alexander Downer's 1994 speech in which he made puns on the Liberal's slogan “The Things That Matter”, including on domestic violence: “The Things That Batter.”⁸ Downer managed to transgress taste in making fun of a nation-wide problem, and to demean women's experiences of domestic violence.

⁷ Ibid. 384

⁸ Alexander Downer in 1994: “When we release our domestic violence policy, the things that batter. Our marginal seat strategy swings that matter. And our family policy, look this is a reflection of our own home I suppose, the flings that matter.” Cited at crikey.com. Accessed 22 June, 2015. <http://www.crikey.com.au/2008/07/02/memorable-quotes-from-alexander-d/>

The paradoxical nature of humour, used to amuse and wound, both pleasurable and excruciating, means it is difficult to quantify and define, puzzling philosophers and theorists since Plato. The perplexing relationship between the body and the mind is brought to the fore in the telling of a joke. The joke tellers generally do not laugh at their own joke; in fact many consider it bad form! The joke teller gets pleasure eliciting laughter from the audience, while the audience receives pleasure through the provocation to laugh. Jokes and the comic generate pleasure and amusement that is demonstrated through a release of energy in the form of laughter.

The work of humour

Historically the study of humour and laughter has not been a subject of great interest with few over the centuries attempting to unravel this aspect of human emotional life. Aristotle,⁹ it's believed, wrote one of the earliest analyses of comedy in a book within his larger work on drama *Poetics*,¹⁰ (incidentally, this is the book which lies at the centre of the investigation in Umberto Eco's medieval detective novel *The Name of the Rose* published in English in 1983, where laughter was the subversive act driving the narrative). Aristotle's writings on comedy have vanished, and he mentions comedy only in passing in *Poetics*¹¹ pointing to a paradox of comedy: "It [comedy] consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive."¹² This is not dissimilar to his concept of "tragic pleasure" in which we *desire* to experience the emotions the tragic generates through the distancing of art: sadness, pity, and grief, and feel a kind of pleasure, through a process Aristotle called purgation, sometimes translated as catharsis, or cleansing.¹³

From Aristotle until the twentieth century there have been few attempts in Western philosophy to analyse and understand humour, though it plays a major role in our

⁹ Lane Cooper, *Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, with an Adaptation of the Poetics, and a Translation of the "Tractatus Coislinianus."*, 2 ed. (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969, originally published in 1922). 4-5

¹⁰ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle. Poetics* was written in 335 BCE.

¹¹ Cooper, *Aristotelian Theory of Comedy, with an Adaptation of the Poetics, and a Translation of the "Tractatus Coislinianus."* 7

¹² Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*. 21

¹³ Ibid. "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; . . . through pity [eleos] and fear [phobos] effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions." 23

lives. Most analyses have focused on its negative aspects and are scant in length. Philosopher Henri Bergson's book published in 1900 *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*¹⁴ is the first extended writing on the subject, with Sigmund Freud publishing *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*¹⁵ in 1905. In the early twentieth century increasingly laughter and humour were deemed topics worth considering, with many subsequent writings, theories and journals exploring the humorous arena. Over the course of the twentieth century humour has been roughly categorised into four theories:¹⁶

1. The Superiority Theory: laughter is a signal and demonstration of our superiority over others. This is a 'negative' theory first put forward by Plato, in which he suggested laughter was to be avoided as it indicated a lack of self-control.
2. The Relief Theory: laughter acts as a release of nervous/psychological energy. Sigmund Freud wrote about jokes utilising this idea that we laugh when an excess of energy used to repress thoughts becomes superfluous through the comprehension of a joke (the thought made conscious).
3. The Incongruity Theory: the disruption that occurs between expectation and experience when experienced as amusement. Other ways in which we experience incongruity include disgust and fear, so that we generally experience the incongruous as amusing when it does not threaten us in some damaging way.
4. Humour as Play, Laughter as Play Signal: a more contemporary set of ideas in which play is understood as pleasure with no outcome except the experience itself. This theory sees humour *AS* play, categories Robin Tapley sees as homologous yet distinguishable from one another.¹⁷

Through these theories we can see the difficulties in coming to an over-arching and singular understanding of humour. It requires a complex array of operations working together to function, such as language, a keen sense of the metaphoric and symbolic,

¹⁴ Bergson, Brereton, and Rothwell, *Laughter; an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*.

¹⁵ Freud, Richards, and Strachey, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

¹⁶ These definitions come from John Morreall "Philosophy of Humor," Stanford University, Accessed 17/06//2015. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/humor/>.

¹⁷ Robin Tapley, "On Morreall: A Failure to Distinguish between Play and Humor."

abstract thinking, social awareness, and theory-of-mind (to comprehend one's own various mental states and to know that others may have differing views, emotions and perspectives).¹⁸ This suggests humour's 'work' in culture is also complex, and this complexity is why it is so difficult to analyse and theorise, and therefore remains elusive as a subject.

Potently conservative and sneakily subversive, humour is a crucial aspect of the everyday affecting our personal relationships and situations: the wry comment made by or to a colleague, the ability to perceive an incident as humorous rather than annoying (or both at the same time), the humiliation of being laughed at. At times used to enhance social situations, it is also used to reinforce power relations. It can reveal the foibles of the powerful and make us laugh at those who have control over us, and it can be used by the powerful as a force of subordination. Humour is ubiquitous yet special, as most of us enjoy both those everyday manifestations of the humorous as well as structured and prepared 'manufactured' comedy (film and television, plays, radio, stand-up).

In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud described three methods by which jokes operate, relating directly to methods of humour and the comic: condensation, multiple use of the same material and double meaning.¹⁹ Through condensation and double meaning, jokes create effects through an overlaying of words and comprehension. A joke taken at face value is a failure of language, of comprehension and of meaning. We have all been in the position of not "getting the joke". When this happens the way in which a joke "works" in making us laugh, eludes us and we cannot comprehend where the joke lies. In this sense a joke is always toying with a failure in meaning. It is only through our ability to fuse meanings, and, conversely, to pull apart and expand a joke's condensation and tease out and comprehend the multiple meanings, that a joke succeeds in being funny.

The only joke I ever remember illustrates this quite well:

¹⁸ Joseph Polimeni and Jeffrey P. Reiss, "The First Joke: Exploring the Evolutionary Origins of Humor," *Evolutionary Psychology*, Vol. 4 (2006), 348.

¹⁹ Freud, Richards, and Strachey, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 76-77

Question. What's worse than silicon tits?

Answer. A cardboard box

The play on words doubles and conflates the meaning of box as a four sided container and slang for vagina. To 'get' the joke the listener must unravel the pun on the word 'box' as well as comprehend the notion that fake breasts are 'bad' through the implied moral aspect in having fake breasts. What could possibly be worse than breasts made from something other than flesh? A vagina made from cardboard. But why would this be bad, when obviously many people are very happy with their silicon breasts? The implication is it is bad for any attempt at penetrative sex, as the lovely soft wetness of a vagina is suddenly transposed into the hard-edged dryness of a box, while the soft squishiness of the silicon breast does maintain a relation to the softness of flesh breasts. My analysis demonstrates how readily humour evaporates under inspection, indicating some of the difficulties experienced in analysing it.

Academic Richard Keller Simon argues that Freud's *Jokes and the Relation to the Unconscious* is his most undervalued book, and yet combines the philosophical, psychological, scientific and aesthetic. He claims Freud's (then) new understanding of dreams, the unconscious and sexuality are synthesised in *Jokes*, retrieving the concept of humour from being solely an aesthetic formulation²⁰ into a key element of human psychology. Freud combined the different analyses of the comic from an aesthetic and philosophical understanding with the Darwinian ideas that laughter must in some way aid the survival of the species.²¹ Freud blended the Hegelian argument that the comic needs to have distance from reality (comic distance as exemplified in my joke above: while people really do have breast implants, nobody has a cardboard vagina) while simultaneously being tied closely to it, with the Darwinian notion that laughter aids the survival of the species even though for Darwin it produced pointless and perplexing behaviour. In *Jokes* Freud retrieved jokes from the nineteenth century understanding of a purely contemplative, intellectual, and aesthetic form with no

²⁰ An aesthetic understanding of humour was first forward by Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, translated with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Bernard (2nd ed. revised) (London: Macmillan, 1914). Accessed 12 December, 20152015. http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1217#Kant_0318_400

²¹ Richard Keller Simon, *The Labyrinth of the Comic: Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, Florida State University Press, 1985). 214

connection to the basic necessities of life. He altered the understanding of humour from aesthetic (detached, intellectual) to being one of the most basic characteristics of the unconscious.²²

There are a number of theories about why humour and laughter evolved into key aspects of human thought and sociability. In The False Alarm Theory formulated by neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran,²³ laughter communicates to others that a situation is trivial rather than alarming, hence the connections laughter has with terror aurally and in the closeness of the laugh to the scream. Literature scholar James Caron in his 2002 essay “From Ethology to Aesthetics: Evolution as a Theoretical Paradigm for Research on Laughter, Humor, and other Comic Phenomena”²⁴ usefully summarised the evolutionary developments of laughter, smiling and humour from the higher apes’ ambivalent ‘play face’ that hovers between sneer and smile, through to the highly complex and interrelated communication systems of speech, language and signs of Homo Sapiens. He notes the intertwining of humour with aesthetics:

Differences between Neanderthals and modern sapiens suggest that an artistic tradition marks this boundary within play behaviors: modern sapiens with and archaic sapiens without the cultural artifacts that induce laughter. The notion of specialized play, then, implies another distinctly human cultural “invention” — aesthetics.²⁵ [...] The play of animals becomes the aesthetics of humans.²⁶

Mikhail Bakhtin’s formulation of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World*²⁷ posited the Renaissance carnivals as moments where hierarchies were inverted, a time of liberty and excess. Similarly to Freud’s analyses of jokes allowing the repressed to have form, the carnivalesque allows those in lower social strata to have agency in

²² Ibid. 216

²³ V.S. Ramachandran, “The Neurology and Evolution of Humor, Laughter, and Smiling: The False Alarm Theory,” *Medical Hypotheses* 51, no. 4 (1998).

²⁴ James E. Caron, “From Ethology to Aesthetics: Evolution as a Theoretical Paradigm for Research on Laughter, Humor, and Other Comic Phenomena.” *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research*. 15, no. 3 (2002).

²⁵ Ibid. 267

²⁶ Ibid. 270

²⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

culture, even if momentary. This clearly demonstrates a Freudian function of humour, to allow in a permissible form, with the distancing of the comic, the repressed (literally those lower in the social scale) to be made apparent. This comprehension of humour in the public realm, specifically through a Bakhtinian reading, has held considerable sway. Theorist Andrew Robinson describes the carnivalesque thus:

In carnival, everything is rendered ever-changing, playful and undefined. Hierarchies are overturned through inversions, debasements and profanations, performed by normally silenced voices and energies. [...] The authoritative voice of the dominant discourse loses its privilege. Humour is counterpoised to the seriousness of officialdom in such a way as to subvert it.²⁸

Fixated on the grotesque, overblown and ridiculous, the carnivalesque looks to the materiality of the body and its orifices: shitting, fucking, eating, birthing. This downward progression is a means of regeneration not just destruction, a return to the body away from the abstraction of spoken and unspoken rules and regulations that the state and culture imposes from above and outside the subject. The connection with my practice is obvious, with my interests in the body, not as a site of trauma, but of pleasure and excess, grotesque and localised, embodying and subjectifying responses to culture.

Critical laughter

The carnivalesque is inherently a critique of hierarchy, and yet this occurs only momentarily. This reveals the difficulty in the concept of humour as critique: humour is itself a transitory state, not fixed or stable, nor really repeatable (jokes are rarely funny twice, though as Freud tells us repetition is an aspect of joke telling).²⁹ Humour's instability is central to our enjoyment of it. It requires constant renewal, it is creative and is generated and used at any time, appropriate or not: black humour, bad taste, gross-out function through being inappropriate in timing, location or

²⁸ Andrew Robinson, "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power," *Ceasefire*, Accessed 20/06/2015. <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/>.

²⁹ Freud, Richards, and Strachey, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 66-67

subject. We laugh at something, somebody, an action, and that is the limit of what is required.

Political satire exposes this aspect of humour: we laugh *at* our politicians, and yet they retain power. Rarely does humour directed at the powerful result in change, though it can signify cultural shifts and attitudinal change. In particular instances, humour reveals that moment when power slips away. In his two years as head of the Australian government ex-prime minister Tony Abbott was continually a figure of ridicule and jest. From the onion-eating episode to his knighting of Prince Philip, Abbott, with his so-called “captain’s calls” and his pledge to “shirtfront Putin,” was so intensely ridiculed and lampooned he was stripped of legitimacy in the public sphere, losing a leadership challenge to Malcolm Turnbull in September 2015.³⁰ In Abbott’s demise as leader of the Liberal party, we witnessed the scope of humour to counteract and undermine ideology in order to countenance alternatives and offer critiques of the dominant culture.



Figure 7: When Tony Abbott ate a raw onion, the story went viral. Photo: ABC

Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque reconsiders the debased, the low, and the vulgar in culture and society for their subversive potentialities. Called Folk Culture by

³⁰ James Glenday, “Tony Abbott Intends to Remain in Parliament after Losing Liberal Leadership to Malcolm Turnbull,” Australian Broadcasting Commission, Last modified September 17, 2015. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-16/tony-abbott-intends-to-remain-in-parliament/6781870>.

Bakhtin, and situated historically in medieval times, the medieval carnivals were generated from the low class, not from the official culture sanctioned by the upper social strata. Often read as a veiled critique of Stalinism,³¹ the regime under which Bakhtin wrote, the carnival has remnants in contemporary life, with aspects of the carnivalesque in Rio's Mardi Gras, the Notting Hill carnival in London, and Sydney's Mardi Gras. However, increasingly in the contemporary world the carnival has been taken over by the state, and by capital, draining it of many aspects Bakhtin believed so vital: the direct contact between disparate social groups, disruption of social roles, symbolic degradation as form of renewal, participatory rather than spectacular, celebratory and filled with laughter, rather than codified and formalised.³² This begs the question, where is the carnivalesque currently located? Once identified, the process of codification (one in which I am participating through doctoral research) seemingly drains the phenomena as it too is gentrified, capitalised and ossified.

This 'devolution' into a formalised rite, for example, has occurred with the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Political from its instigation, the very first march in 1978 ended in arrests and police bashings.³³ In subsequent years it developed into a community driven political march, carnivalesque in its overt critique of the powerful (floats in the past have included a gigantic replica of Reverend Fred Nile's head on a platter). Since the mid 1990s Mardi Gras has increasingly entered the mainstream, and in 2015 floats in the parade included AirBnB, Qantas, The Labor Party and The Greens, NSW Police and an official float from the Australian Armed Services. While people still participate from diverging sexuality, gender and lifestyles (Dykes on Bikes, leather pride, transgender floats and so on), Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is increasingly a state sanctioned event reflected by the number of corporations that now participate in the parade as a form of marketing. The Mardi Gras' mainstreaming reflects the broad acceptance of homosexuality within Australian culture. Its carnivalesque 'edge' is forced elsewhere, into underground parties, smaller venues, and alternative events. Interestingly this demonstrates the slipperiness of

³¹ Renate Lachmann, Raoul Eshelman, and Marc Davis. "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture," *Cultural Critique*, University of Minnesota Press 11 (1988). 116-117

³² Robinson, "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power".

³³ "Our History," Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. <http://www.mardigras.org.au/history> Accessed 23 November 2015

subversive humour. When it has been co-opted humour transmutes into other forms, shifting and sliding elsewhere, ever to be renewed.

Humour, for academic and former comedian Joanna R. Gilbert, is a strange enterprise where critical discourse is allowed and disavowed simultaneously. Humour's peculiar subversive power is grounded in an acknowledgement of reality. Gilbert cites the writer Ted Cohen's belief that jokes 'work' (are funny) because of their grounding in truth: "... not truth about the object but truth about the far-reaching influence and impact of the stereotype."³⁴ Gilbert discusses the connections between stereotypes and objectification as cited in the works of Edward Said and Tania Modleski, where one of the risks and potential outcomes of the use of stereotypes is that the "other" becomes a "thing". Comedy can and at times does reinforce the stereotype rather than expose it, revealing comedy's conservative potential.

Paradoxically comedy can de-legitimise stereotypes through exaggeration and ridicule both of the stereotype and those who peddle them. The persona Pauline Pantsdown exemplifies this aspect of humour. In embracing, parodying and confronting Australian ex and ever-hopeful politician Pauline Hanson's aspirations and ideas, Simon Hunt, the person behind Pantsdown, very strategically used Hanson's own words to demonstrate the absurdity of her proclamations on immigration, Aboriginal Australians and homosexuality.

³⁴ Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, Humor in Life and Letters Series. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004). 151



Figure 8: Pauline Pantsdown, "I Don't Like it." Video still.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SxFc37h6js>

Interestingly Pauline Pantsdown, rather than disappearing with Pauline Hanson's diminishing popularity, has had somewhat of a comeback through social media. Using Twitter and Facebook, Pauline Pantsdown/Simon Hunt continues to parody, interject and confront some of Australia's extreme right-wing politicians and organisations, including Tony Abbott, Cory Bernardi (renamed 'Corgi Bernardi' and claimed as Pantsdown's sister on her Facebook page³⁵) and the Marriage Alliance Group. With over 5,000 followers on Facebook and 3,329 on Twitter, Hunt continues to use the persona of Pauline Pantsdown as a platform for political engagement through humour, parody and satire.

Joanna R. Gilbert makes interesting claims for the contradictory efficacy of comedy as an agent of social critique and change, and in particular comedy performed by marginalised people: "Although the disruption, dislocation, and subversive potential of marginal humour make it a likely candidate for postmodern critique, humour *requires* a hierarchy in order to *subvert* a hierarchy."³⁶ Gilbert explains comedy's peculiar position wherein a performer is permitted to say vicious, outrageous, right and wrong, true and false statements that in any other context would be deemed too

³⁵ Simon Hunt, "The Pauline Pantsdown Story," (Sydney 2011). Accessed 27 October, 2015

³⁶ Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. 178

offensive for a public audience. The audience pays to hear these statements and may believe these statements and yet, because of the nature of humour, afterwards the audience can dismiss and forget the statements:

Humor is itself paradoxical. Because it functions as an “anti-rhetoric,” always disavowing its own subversive potential, humor provides the performer with a unique guarantee—the opportunity to critique with impunity. Ironically, it is precisely this feature of humor that ensures the “safety” of the status quo; humor, no matter how subversive, will never be taken seriously.³⁷

Gilbert discusses stand-up comedy, which is by definition, entertainment. However political satire in, for instance, the Australian television show *The Chaser's War on Everything's* notorious 2007 APEC motorcade stunt, demonstrates the ability of humour to expose the absurdities of power and its manifestations.³⁸ In the month following The Chaser APEC stunt, along with the art duo The Motel Sisters, I dressed as then Prime Minister John Howard and went along to an open day at Kirribilli House. The Motel Sisters were wearing glittery buckets on their heads as modified Ned Kelly armour, while I dressed in Howard's casual sporty style. For some reason the security let us in, though they made the Motel Sisters check their helmets at the coat stand! We wandered around for about 15 minutes, posing variously, taking photographs before being asked to leave by police and a man in a suit who seemed to have the most authority. Our presence was ridiculous, and the police officers and public good humoured in their interactions with us. However, the power of parody is the conflation and association of the parodied with its corrupted parody. Our silliness was construed as infectious and therefore presumably a threat to the legitimacy of Prime Minister Howard.

³⁷ Ibid. 177

³⁸ The group, including one dressed as Osama bin Laden, staged a fake motorcade through Sydney's CBD, and into the restricted zone. The three cars bore Australian and Canadian flags, and were waived through a checkpoint by police. Staff reporter, “Chaser Stunt Raises Questions About APEC Security,” ABC, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-09-07/chaser-stunt-raises-questions-about-apec-security/662730>.



Figure 9: Jane Polkinghorne and The Motel Sisters, *The Howard Years*, 2007. #4 from series of 6 photographs, 10" x 8".

The relationships between the carnivalesque and contemporary comedy, and I would suggest the practice of art, are clear via the possibility of the temporary release of, and engagement with, disruptive ideas. The seemingly necessary everyday world of work, education, cleaning, eating and so on, are momentarily ruptured even with the smallest application of humour. Humour allows us to continue in the world, to rethink the world as absurd, and to gain pleasure from situations that are difficult, awful or mundane, such as the seemingly never-ending prime ministership of John Howard.

Humour, gender and sexuality

The relationship of humour to gender and sexuality is complex. Freud did not mention women as generators of humour, as subjects of laughter nor as having distinct perspectives. Instead, in Freud women are primarily the objects at which the joke is directed. Freud interpreted jokes as being symbolic sexuality, but a sexuality that 'ejaculates', directed *at* women as the subjects of male sexual interest. Men use humour as veiled sexual aggression. Academic Richard Keller Simon writes that Freud stopped short of connecting the release of energy and outburst of laughter with

ejaculation, a relationship Simon himself makes: "... laughter is ejacula not of semen but of psychic energy."³⁹ The comic is understood here as symbolic sexuality and laughter the physiological sign of a psychological process, a kind of mimicry or rehearsal of actual sexuality. Simon connects humour to aesthetics, where the comic is a folding in, conflating and blending of the biological (sexuality) with the aesthetic (play, mimicry).⁴⁰

Women, through Freud's understanding, are, at best, absent, or at worst, have no sense of humour. Unfortunately this is still a common contemporary belief,⁴¹ even though popular comedians include women such as US actor/writer/producers Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, writer/actor/comedian Sarah Silverman, Amy Schumer, and Australians Rebel Wilson, Jane Turner, Magda Szubanski and Gina Riley. Cultural norms, no doubt, informed much of Freud's understanding of humour in relation to women, gender and gender relationships, as they do ours. The women Freud treated and analysed came from the Viennese upper class, and Freud himself was fully embedded in the culture and sexual politics and understandings of his time.⁴²

In his book *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*⁴³ German academic Winfried Menninghaus draws out Freud's findings and comprehension of the differences between men and women's responses to feelings of disgust in relation to sex. I would suggest this has a close relation to humour, jokes and smut, a connection Menninghaus himself makes:

The "vital sensation" of disgust might well be considered a property no less characteristic of humanity than the capacity to laugh – a property, in fact, that represents the negative complement of laughter. The

³⁹ Simon, *The Labyrinth of the Comic: Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud*. 230

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ In 2007 Christopher Hitchens wrote an article for the magazine *Vanity Fair* titled "Why Women Aren't Funny", followed up by "Why Women Still Don't Get it" in 2008, reprinted in his 2011 book *Arguably*, in which he claims women don't need to be funny because men find them attractive anyway, and that men use humour in order to attract women, a very Freudian understanding of humour. *Christopher Hitchens, Arguably (Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2011)*.

⁴² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Second edition, first printed by Penguin 1965 ed. (Great Britain: Penguin, 1968). See Chapter 5 *The Solipsism of Sigmund Freud* in which Friedan, while praising Freud also presents a case for him being "a prisoner in his own culture" p93.

⁴³ Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, Intersections. (Albany; Great Britain: State University of New York Press, 2003).

sudden discharge of tension achieved in laughter, as in vomiting, an overcoming of disgust, a contact with the “abject” that does not lead to a lasting contamination or defilement. On the other hand, laughing *at* something, as an act of expulsion, resembles in itself the act of rejecting, of vomiting in disgust. Disgust, which undergoes a counteracthesis (or a sublimation), and laughter are complementary ways of admitting an alterity that otherwise would overpower our system of perception and consciousness.⁴⁴

Where Simon draws the analogy of laughter to sexual release, Menninghaus draws it to vomiting wherein the threshold between laughter as expulsion and laughter as pleasure overlap and interfold. In the Freudian reading, laughter signifies the ego overcoming a threat of annihilation. Similarly vomiting, whether induced through biological (for example food poisoning) or psychological (perhaps a smell that abruptly brings to mind a vomiting episode) disturbance, brings us to a moment of repulsion and ejection. The space between disgust and laughter is an oscillation between the two sensations. It is when they merge and intertwine that is of key interest to the research and will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter on disgust.

For Freud, the smutty tendentious joke is an overlapping of disgust with humour, through sexuality. Freud however omits women from this understanding except as passive recipients of the dirty joke. Analysis undertaken in 2014 by Rod A. Martin into gender and humour found that there is little difference in enjoyment of the varieties of humour between men and women, apart from jokes that demean women.⁴⁵ The different uses of humour varied according to social situations, and mixed or single gender situations also altered the types of humour used, as a study done of gay men⁴⁶ and humour also showed. Martin’s overall conclusion, drawn from a wide

⁴⁴ Ibid. 10-11

⁴⁵ Rod A. Martin, “Humor and Gender an Overview of Psychological Research,” in *Gender and Humor: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*, ed. Delia Chiaro and Raffaella Baccolini, Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies (New York and London: Routledge, 2014).

⁴⁶ No corresponding research was done in relation to how lesbians use humour, though anecdotes in a paper from the same book “Humorless Lesbians” by Don Kulick describe the ‘hilarity’ that erupted when he went into bookshops and asked for books on lesbian humour. Don Kulick, “Humorless Lesbians,” *ibid.* 90

range of studies into the relationships between gender and humour (self-admittedly using primarily white, middle class subjects), is that there is little to distinguish the genders in how they enjoy and express humour. And yet, the book this essay is drawn from is titled *Gender and Humor*, suggesting this subject is not yet agreed upon.

Academic Joanne R. Gilbert's main argument is that women, like other marginalised groups in the US such as Jews and Afro-Americans, use the oppressive stereotyping of their marginality as a transgression against that oppression:

Their [marginal comics'] social critique is potent and, because it is offered in a comedic context, safe from retribution as well. In this sense, female comics, like so many others, perform their marginality in an act simultaneously oppressive (by using demeaning stereotypes) and transgressive (by interrogating those very stereotypes through humorous discourse).⁴⁷

Gilbert claims that women comics, similarly to other marginalised groups, use marginalised humour. For women, their marginality is their gender and it becomes the subject both overtly and covertly of their performance: "By performing in a public space, the comic is exposed, made vulnerable before the audience. With every action, every utterance, she calls attention to herself—as art, as entertainment, as commodity."⁴⁸ With this statement Gilbert can be connected with feminist art practices since the 1970s, where female artists have consistently, over the past decades, made evident the social positions of the female body and persona: art, entertainment, commodity. "Regardless of the label, however, at the core of all strategic self-presentation in the performance of female comics is the manner in which "woman" is constructed by each comic."⁴⁹

There are various ways contemporary comedians continue to negotiate gender, and in particular the performance of "woman." US comedian/singer Bridget Everett is tall, somewhat overweight with huge breasts, all of which she uses to hilarious effect in

⁴⁷ Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. 136

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 154

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 130

her cabaret/comedy. Wearing cocktail dresses with very plunging necklines and no bra, middle-aged, Everett inevitably and self-knowingly exposes her large drooping breasts as she sings with incredible power and gusto, usually about sex and her “big fucking pussy.” Owning the stage, her body, and the audience, Everett is paradoxically endearing and menacing, pulling off her muumuu, and sitting on the face of a spectator.⁵⁰



Figure 10: Bridget Everett (photo: Kevin Yatarola), The Broadway Blog.
https://thenypost.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/rock_bottom-3.jpg

Similarly to the feminist writings of French theorist Hélène Cixous, Gilbert acknowledges that female experience has to force its way into discourse *always* through the lens of gender. Cixous argued in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”⁵¹ that Freud’s work applies only to male behaviour and that in fact it is constituted in opposition to the female and the feminine. “For, if psychoanalysis was constituted from woman, to repress femininity (and not so successful a repression at

⁵⁰ Watch a video of Bridget Everett performing Rihanna’s *S and M* at Our Hit Parade at Joe’s Pub at The Public Theater on February 23rd, 2011 on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Lg1Hp_JCRY

⁵¹ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *The Signs Reader Women, Gender and Scholarship*, ed. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

that – men have made it clear), its account of masculine sexuality is now hardly refutable; as with all the “human” sciences, it reproduces the masculine view, of which it is one of the effects.”⁵²

Cixous’ essay is a powerful rallying point for women to write, to author, to intervene and overthrow phallogocentric tradition and begin re-making the world and relationships through writing, as it is “... precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as the springboard for subversive thought ...”⁵³ She refers to Freud both directly and indirectly throughout the essay, in particular in the title “The Laugh of the Medusa”. Freud’s own reading of the Medusa myth “Medusa’s Head” (1922) makes the claim that Medusa’s head represents castration.⁵⁴ By turning to stone, the man who looks upon the Medusa literally becomes erect, an erection, with the Medusa’s head representing both the castrated penis and a vagina, with the head surrounded by snakes. Cixous claims the Medusa is laughing, and undermines Freud’s phallogocentric interpretation and simultaneously laughs at his rendering of the male fear of castration. Undoing, refuting and going beyond Freud’s gendered analysis of human psychology, Cixous’ essay tells women to cease being concerned about men and their responses to and analysis of women: “Too bad if they fall apart discovering that women aren’t men, or that mother doesn’t have one.”⁵⁵

Cixous calls on women to laugh, write and create, and to be joyful in sexual difference rather than repressed, to wilfully forge new cultures, new connections, new understandings, to rupture non-violently, “blow up the law, break up the “truth” with laughter”⁵⁶. Cixous therefore looks to humour and laughter for its subversive, and pleasurable aspects, its ability to expose and disrupt power relations, and to act as kind of shield against the world⁵⁷ (though this is a Freudian perspective), as we saw above in the cabaret persona of Bridget Everett.

⁵² Ibid. 288

⁵³ Ibid. 289

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, Neil Hertz, *Writings on Art and Literature*, Meridian, Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997). 264-265

⁵⁵ Ibid. 13

⁵⁶ Cixous. 292

⁵⁷ Interestingly in Greek mythology the head of Medusa was used on Athena’s shield for protection. Isabelle Loring Wallace and Jennie Hirsh, *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011). 224

Another illustration of this in action can be seen in the 1981 film *A Question of Silence*, written and directed in the Netherlands by Marleen Gorris. In the film three women silently collude in the murder of a male boutique manager as several other women silently watch. The female psychiatrist reporting on their state of mind comes to understand how the women bring themselves to murder the shopkeeper through interviewing them. In the final scene set in the court room (pictured above) the three women and their silent female witnesses burst into uncontrollable laughter when the prosecutor states that three women killing a man is the same as three men killing a woman.



Figure 11: *A Question of Silence (De Stille Rond Christine M.)*. Directed by Marleen Gorris, The Netherlands, 1982, 92 mins.

In a non-didactic fashion, the laughter of the women acknowledges the law's lack of comprehension of gender differences, even when it is stated that the social and psychological backgrounds (but not gender) of the accused is taken into account. The women's laughter is an act of solidarity, subversion and recognition of the power the

court has over them. Banished from the court, the trial and the law continue without the women's presence.

With apparently little difference in the ways that genders experience and generate humour, socially it seems there are still significant differences.⁵⁸ The continued marginalisation of the feminine culturally in the developed world⁵⁹ results in what Joanne Gilbert calls the “rhetoric of victimage.”⁶⁰ Marginalisation becomes that through which humour operates, and is therefore always foregrounded in relation to the feminine. The signs and indicators of gender are essential to the function of humour itself.

The US comedian Amy Schumer has increasingly explored feminist discourses in her Comedy Network Show *Inside Amy Schumer*. In one skit called “Focus Group” a group of very ordinary looking men are asked questions about Schumer's show. The responses to questions such as “Did you like the balance between stand-up and skits?” immediately collapses into a discussion on her appearance and her ‘fuckability,’ with one man saying he would prefer less face and more side boob. Behind the mirror Schumer responds with “A couple of them said they would bang me?”⁶¹

Throughout her show Schumer uses humour to expose and critique attitudes towards gender, often revealing women's internalised misogyny as well as men's sexist attitudes. Schumer exposes systemic operations of sexism from video games (“A Very Realistic Video Game”⁶² in which Schumer chooses a female character in a military *Call of Duty* style game, is promptly raped, and her attempts to get the rapist charged result in her sitting in rooms and being ignored), through to women ageing in

⁵⁸ Martin, “Humor and Gender an Overview of Psychological Research.”

⁵⁹ If we look to pay differences, poverty rates, participation in politics and media, women, and indeed all marginalised groups remain that-marginalised. Male heterosexuals dominate in most measurable aspects. See the World Economic Forum's 2014 report on the Gender gap for more information. Accessed 22 June, 2015 <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2014> information. Accessed 22 June, 2015 <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2014>

⁶⁰ Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. 135

⁶¹ “Inside Amy Schumer – Focus Group” from 2014, can be seen on Comedy Central's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oe6rsOZ2NP0>

⁶² “Inside Amy Schumer – A Very Realistic Video Game”, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXGJGuH59qw>

Hollywood (“The Last Fuckable Day”⁶³ in which Amy Schumer comes across Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Patricia Arquette and Tina Fey celebrating the last day that the media has deemed Louis-Dreyfus’ “fuckable”).

In the song “Milk Milk Lemonade” Schumer lampoons the contemporary obsession with big arses. The video clip starts with the chant “Milk, milk, lemonade, ‘round the corner fudge is made” as Schumer and dancers writhe suggestively grabbing first their breasts (milk), then their crotch (lemonade).⁶⁴ The song is filled with euphemisms for the gluteus maximus: turd cutter, loaf pitcher, dookie maker, fudge machine, cheektastic, booty mastiff, giant tuchus, with the chorus refrain, repeated four times “This is where my poo comes out, Talkin’ ‘bout my fudge machine.”



Figure 12: Amy Schumer, “Milk, Milk, Lemonade”, video stills, *Inside Amy Schumer*, Season 3, episode 1, 2015. <https://vimeo.com/132024195>

Using a variety of scatological imagery, Schumer constantly refers to the function of the bowels and anus. This counters the trend in many current music video clips of the so-called sexy “booty dance” where women’s (only ever women’s!) arses suggestively wave, dance and hump anything from the ground to the air to each other.

⁶³ “Inside Amy Schumer – Last Fuckable Day”, 2014,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPpsl8mWKmg>

⁶⁴ “Inside Amy Schumer – Milk Milk, Lemonade”, 2014. <https://vimeo.com/132024195>

Schumer, in a carnivalesque operation, disrupts and inverts the booty desirability, reducing it to its biological function of shitting. What's interesting is that even though the clip is a parody and infantile, it is kind of sexy.

Through the work of comedian Amy Schumer, the "rhetoric of victimage" becomes a form of ridiculing contemporary sexism. She reveals the operation of gender bias in a range of social and cultural moments, clearly demonstrating that though there may not be a distinctly 'feminine' sensibility when it comes to humour, the exploration of gendered attitudes and bias can be both funny and critical, and that sexual and gender differences remain central to the operations of culture and discourse.

Funny art

There is a synthesis between humour and art that is of a different order to humour *in* art. Humour and art utilise form as well as content. Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is the culmination of much previous thought and writing on the comic - a fusion of the medical, aesthetic, psychological, psycho-analytical, and scientific into a broad ranging comprehensive analytical and theoretical taxonomy of jokes. Richard Keller Simon condenses much of Freud's theory on jokes to the tension between form and content through which jokes function. Once the joke is reduced to content, that is to say explained, it disappears, demonstrating the essence of the joke therefore lies in its form.

Like jokes, art too is this fusion and tension between form and content, between NOT-art and art. Simon discusses Friedrich Schiller's analysis of the Kantian antinomy between reason and nature where he suggested all art is this opposition between form and content, where form controls unruly content, where the content is nothing, and where even the most frivolous or absurd subject is treated with absolute seriousness so that it can be overlooked or passed through to the form. Jokes are also this triumph of form over content,⁶⁵ where the suppressed unconscious gets to impose its filth, fury and sexuality in the acceptable form of humour. Humour and art therefore share aesthetic commonality. The operation of comic distance is comparable to Kant's conception of aesthetics as distanced, removed, disinterested, from that

⁶⁵ Simon, *The Labyrinth of the Comic: Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud*. 224

being contemplated. Something said in jest is not objective fact, in the same way that an artwork is not its subject matter.⁶⁶

Simon argues that Freud's notions on civilization and its repressions have its origins in *Jokes* as humour permits individuals' release, momentarily, from these demands.⁶⁷ The comic, under this weight of meaning, is absolutely vital for human psychological wellbeing, an intrinsic element for coping with civilisation, repression, sexuality, pleasure and oppression. The correlation between jokes and art would therefore argue for the importance of art as another mechanism for allowing the repressed to have form. Is art that uses the comic and humour therefore a doubling of this effect of pushing against the repressiveness of civilization, of culture, or instead a cancelling out? There is an increasing integration of art and comedy particularly via performance. In 2015 it was the theme for an exhibition at MCASD *Laugh-In: Art, Comedy, Performance*,⁶⁸ the June 2015 edition of *Art in America* took "Senses of Humor" as its theme, and art writer Chloe Wyma's August 2015 article in US magazine *Artspace* posited that stand up was the new performance art.⁶⁹ Art accommodates all forms including comedy. This current tendency of art/comedy/performance, however, is more akin to US artist and writer David Robbins' concept of "High Entertainment":

High Entertainment applies the principle of form-discovery to the creation of entertainment. Every last one of the conventions and tropes of mainstream entertainment product — genre, plot, story arc, character, acting, the "star," length, format, the relation between editorial and advertising, everything — may be pried open and subjected to experiments. [...] While there's no rule against using the conventions of entertainment (sometimes they're entertaining!), they

⁶⁶ Marcus Verhaegh, "The Truth of the Beautiful in the Critique of Judgement," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41, no. 4 (2001). 373

⁶⁷ Simon, *The Labyrinth of the Comic: Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud*. 221

⁶⁸ *Laugh-In: Art, Comedy, Performance*, Jan 23, 2015 - Sunday, Apr 19, 2015 at MCASD La Jolla <http://www.mcasd.org/exhibitions/laugh-art-comedy-performance>

⁶⁹ Chloe Wyma, "Marina Abramovic, Meet Chelsea Handler? How Standup Comedy Became the New Performance Art," *Artspace* 2015.

can also be disregarded completely, as if they'd never existed, so long as the new form discovered is entertaining.⁷⁰

The purpose of entertainment (in its many mediums) is to entertain, to attract and maintain audiences' attention, to generate pleasure. Pleasure is gained as much through the form of tragedy in theatre, as dancing in a club, or watching your favourite team play. Aristotle was one of the first to comment upon the pleasure we experience through aesthetics granted to us by the mimetic aspect of art, and I would suggest entertainment might broadly fall under this definition of mimesis:⁷¹

Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity [...] Thus the reason they [men] enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning and inferring.⁷²

Aristotle reflected on the mimetic simulation of representation that occurs through art. This we can also link to Freud's analysis of jokes through his idea of ideational mimetics, which has often been applied to the work of art and artists.⁷³ Ideational mimetics describes how a person making a joke conceives the joke and apprehends the response it will get from a person hearing the joke. The joke teller has to understand the sensation of laughter being generated, has to comprehend that corporeally as well as perceiving/conceiving the joke intellectually. Similarly an artist might suspect how an artwork will be received and perceived by a viewer, audience, participant or spectator. The aesthetic apprehension of an artwork and the understanding of a joke require a similar intellectual skill set in the recipient: abstract thinking, a strong sense of the symbolic and metaphoric, and a sensitivity to form.

Artists using humour often play the role of the fool or buffoon, acting as a conduit for social critique sneaking in to consciousness through the pleasure of laughter and humour. US artists Cindy Sherman, Bruce Nauman and Paul McCarthy have used

⁷⁰ David Robbins, "High Entertainment," 2009. <http://www.high-entertainment.com>.

⁷¹ I am also thinking here of the adage that sport is metaphoric war.

⁷² Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*. 15

⁷³ Freud, Richards, and Strachey, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

clowning in their work through costumes, masks, prosthetics, slapstick, nonsense and stylised violence. McCarthy's 1995 video, performance and installation *Painter* contains many of these characteristics. The figure of the painter, played by McCarthy, is particularly clown-like, with prosthetic limbs, bulbous nose, and huge feet. The character is unhappy, muttering and whining insensibly, grunting and groaning, as he fists paint tubes, cuts off his own (rubber) hand, and has patrons sniff his arse as if savouring a fine wine.



Figure 13: Paul McCarthy, *Painter*, 1995, video tape, performance, and installation in Los Angeles with Brian Butler, Sabina Hornig, Paul McCarthy, Fredrik Nilsen, and Barbara Smith. Collection of the Rubell Family, Miami, Florida. © Paul McCarthy Courtesy Hauser & Wirth, Zürich London

Painter parodies and critiques the myth of the male genius artist, particularly those associated with Abstract Expressionism. As theorist Hal Foster pointed out in *The Return of the Real*, 1996, much of this impetus appeared to be an “abject testing of the symbolic order” with women working through the maternal body (Kiki Smith, Rona Pondick etc) while male artists take an infantile position to “mock the paternal law” (Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy etc).⁷⁴ While Foster links abject art to trauma, I suggest that humour is also implicit in the movement.

⁷⁴ Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. 159

Feminists since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s have frequently been accused of having no sense of humour. Yet much self-consciously feminist artwork from the time is funny and has humour embedded within it. Lynda Benglis 'played' with gender in many aspects of her practice, but most noticeably in the promotional cards and invitations she designed in the 1970s. Her notorious *Art Forum* double page advertisement from 1974 functions in a variety of ways: as parody in using eroticised feminine representation to promote Benglis' exhibition; as pornography—in the image she wields a double ended dildo, appearing to both have a cock and to be fucking the dildo; as fashion in her highly styled pose, sunglasses, tan and hair; and as critique of the use of the eroticised feminine in advertising, fashion, and pornography. This image is better known than many of her artworks, even though other works by Benglis of this era addressed these matters though less overtly.



Figure 14: Centrefold by Lynda Benglis. Originally published in *Artforum* November 1974. Photo: Arthur Gordon Image: Courtesy the artist and Cheim & Read, New York.

As is well-known and documented, Benglis' ad was considered so provocative it caused editors to resign, while the ad by Robert Morris⁷⁵ that had provoked her response barely raised a ripple. It too was surely created as a provocation as Morris is shirtless, and possibly pantless, with a large chain wrapped around his neck and fist, aviator sunglasses hiding his eyes, and a Nazi helmet on his head. Morris overtly

⁷⁵ Kriston Capps, "Lynda Benglis/Robert Morris: 1973/1974, New York City, at Susan Inglett Gallery," <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/lynda-benglisrobert-morris-19731974/> Accessed 31 May 2015

referenced sado-masochism and male homo-erotica, and we can clearly see how Benglis' image is modelled on Morris'.



Figure 15: Robert Morris. Advertisement for Castelli-Sonnabend exhibition, April 6-27, 1974

Benglis had previously displayed a penchant for humorous self-reflection and promotion in her exhibition invitations, including an androgynous image posing in reflective aviator sunglasses and a suit jacket over an open-necked shirt leaning on a Porsche, suggestive of a rich playboy. Benglis demonstrates that at the heights of second wave feminism, when central core imagery and essentialist debates were raging, there was also a reflective and playful understanding of representation by self-identified women artists that ran counter to the on-going discussion around humour and the feminine, humour and feminism, and sexuality and humour.⁷⁶ This use of humour in art falls into that described by Joanne Gilbert in relation to women comedians: woman presents herself through the frame of gender, gender frames the artwork and the artist.

⁷⁶ Don Kulick's essay "Humorless Lesbians" analyses the clichés and stereotypes of the humorless lesbian as dangerous stereotyping that may have something to do with butch lesbians not needing or wanting masculine acknowledgement or approval refusing to give all the "correct" feminine responses in conversation such as nodding, smiling and laughing at jokes about women. 96

In his 2008 book *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art*⁷⁷ Jörg Heiser identifies slapstick as the method artists from Duchamp onwards have used to undermine the rigid seriousness of discourse played out through art. Slapstick, Heiser argues, is a key technique, approach or attitude⁷⁸ that reveals something about the nature of art itself: “Both slapstick and art, then, have a tendency toward the anti-narrative, and both aim to use the mechanisms of the media in which they are situated to achieve something that would not be possible without them.”⁷⁹

Heiser marks out the peculiarly conservative nature of laughter in a manner similar to Gilbert’s analysis of the comedic, as an anti-rhetoric where the subversive nature of comedy is dismissed at the end of the show: “Laughter is an ambivalent reaction: relief at deviation from the norm but also a mocking reprimand to return to it.”⁸⁰ Laughter’s indication of a psychological movement backwards and forwards between the status-quo and its subversion reinforces its mercurial nature and the difficulties in forming analysis. Heiser draws the correlation between the rise of slapstick as cinematic form through people like Chaplin, Buster Keaton and slapstick cartoons like Mutt and Jeff with the concurrent emergence of modern art through Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, the Dadaists and the cultural and technological tumult of the early twentieth century:

Thanks to the principle of industrial production and technical duplication, art as a realistic medium of representation has been rendered nostalgic. In this situation, rather than invoking the artist’s privileged access to visuality, vitality, beauty, and good taste, “salvation” lies in accepting the challenge and appropriating the forms of industrial culture oneself, turning them against the implacable logic of utility value—as demonstrated by the best slapstick in comics and movies.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Jörg Heiser, *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art* (New York, N.Y.: Sternberg Press, 2008).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 17

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 19

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 24

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 31

Heiser outlines a situation where, apart from a few key figures such as Mae West and Lucille Ball, women have been largely absent from slapstick and the comedic in the broader culture, and in art, until the 1960s when the second wave of feminism wrought societal changes. Using American author Barry Sanders' ideas around the historical socialisation of women and the restrictions on them in regards to public speaking, performance and education⁸² up until the mid twentieth century, Heiser writes that women's humour was informal and therefore absent from history: "... the quick-wittedness of informal speech, and infiltration by word of mouth—the female equivalent of the male dominated genre of formal joke-telling. This is the source of the traditional male denunciation of female speech as idle talk—the proverbial “washer-woman's gossip” ...”⁸³.

Citing a handful of women artists and a tiny smattering of their works—Eleanor Antin's *100 Boots*, Lynda Benglis' 1974 *Artforum* ad, Martha Rosler's video *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Lee Lozano's works, and Rosemarie Trockel's *Die Legendary I-Ronny*—Heiser marks out a distinct feminist use of humour and slapstick in three pages from a book of 291 pages which he sees as beginning from the late 1960s. Heiser, in identifying slapstick as a method in art, goes over some of the territory that Hélène Cixous, Joanne R. Gilbert, and Jo-Anne Isaak make for women's creative practices. Heiser however does not name slapstick as a particularly feminist methodology, although in its ability to disrupt, surprise, startle and ridicule, slapstick shares feminist approaches to participating creatively in culture:

It [the slapstick method in art] needs to repeatedly ask itself what the unpredictability, the doubt, the improvisation, and the finding of surprising solutions can consist of when it inevitably forms its own order, its own “school.” It must, in other words, tear down what it has built up, again and again, but without just looking like an immature child. It must preserve its playfulness and take it to a refined level, without allowing itself to be misused for superficial goals.⁸⁴

⁸² Ibid. 48 Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, Boston 1995

⁸³ Ibid. 50

⁸⁴ Ibid. 92

This quote reads like an instruction from Cixous in relation to patriarchy, a call for intervention and invention that is pleasurable and playful. It is also an acknowledgement of the failures of current modes of thought at any particular time, an acknowledgement that demands change, a different approach, another way of interpreting and understanding, which also brings to mind Bakhtin's concept of the carnival, subversion, inversion and regeneration.

Heiser identifies slapstick methodology as operating in a "fragile" oscillating and wobbling space that, should it become fixed and rigid, loses its power.⁸⁵ He promotes slapstick as the very method by which art remains a site of renewal of ideas, materials and practices. This is different to the way that creativity and ideas around the creative class⁸⁶ and the creative city are promoted as proof of a happy society, good urban planning and an integration of capitalism with creativity. Instead slapstick is the means through which creative practices and art can interrupt the mainstreaming and ossification of ideas:

... slapstick is the method that saves art from becoming frozen in dogmas and schools, including the dogmas and schools of slapstick itself; the slapstick method addresses the fantasy of an automated, flexible, and accelerated life by making it halt and stumble.⁸⁷

In his book *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy*, artist and writer David Robbins explores comedy's utilisation of failure as success. Using the notion of the "unassailability of success" and contemporary western culture's "mania" for it, Robbins looks to the figure of the fool as exemplifying the usage of failure in comedy, wherein the fool's role is to fail. "Based to a significant degree on human folly, on getting things wrong, or at least "not right," comedy is very much about incorporating the potential for failure into one's plans and actions."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid. 94

⁸⁶ Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2004).

⁸⁷ Heiser, *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art*. 273

⁸⁸ David Robbins, *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy* (Denmark: Author and Pork Salad Press, 2011). 291

Robbins believes failure is integral to comedy (this is further considered in Chapter Three).

Robbins posits the body itself as central to failure, as the body retains, despite our attempts to disguise it, fallibility and a lack of concern with success. This is played out through the comedian's "self-conscious animality [...] a failed version of animality,"⁸⁹ where the body is acknowledged both for its animality freed from the self-consciousness of being human and for its failure to be fully animal. Similarly to Heiser's notion of slapstick, art disrupts the automata-like existence forced upon us by modernity.

Robbins however is less sure of the role of humour in art. "A comedic sensibility is a tricky thing to negotiate in the art world, which prefers weightier social, phenomenological, or philosophical subject matter—"importance.""⁹⁰ He instead looks to operating outside of the context through the concept mentioned earlier of 'high entertainment'. "High Entertainment will combine entertainment's accessibility with art's experimentalism and bent toward form-discovery."⁹¹

Art functions like humour in that it is often a form of critique and subversion, permitting a consideration of subjects, themes, and representations that might in other contexts be considered too much, in poor taste, or too unsettling. When artists use humour they are often using it to critique art itself. Paul McCarthy's *Painter* for instance, is a thinly veiled critique of the abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning. Humour in art utilises pleasure and amusement as means of gaining attention, getting a viewer to see, and to comprehend the work, in the manner through which we might comprehend a joke. However some artworks are considered 'one-liners,' they are naught but their punch line. This suggests we require something more from art than jokework. The satisfaction in apprehending an artwork is different from the pleasure we experience when laughing at a joke. An artwork that is no more than its 'joke' is unsatisfying. Art must please us in additional ways.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 294

⁹⁰ Thomas Evans, "An Interview with David Robbins About Concrete Comedy," 2011. <http://www.artbook.com/blog-interview-robbins.html>.

⁹¹ Robbins, "High Entertainment"

Laughter at work

The formation and presence of humour is key to the development of new works through a process wherein ideas and forms are tested for their ability to amuse me in some way. In the studio I am the audience. Though amusing myself, I am always self-critical, thinking of the work in the world. This self-testing operates through my sense of humour, ‘playing’ out in the studio research as embodied and bodily. The human form and its functions are frequently the site of comedy, in particular slapstick and gross-out comedy. A particularly vulgar Australian sensibility, fixated on the debased body, operates in the research and in my artworks. In bringing humour ‘down’ to its bodily functions and appearance, this Australian sensibility is on the one hand especially coarse, yet suggests a peculiar kind of egalitarianism. As Fran De Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick, editors of the 2009 book *Serious Frolic: Essays on Australian Humour*, suggest, modern Australia’s origins as penal colony has made us especially sensitive to social distinctions.⁹²

I do not use the humour of wit, or jokes or even puns (apart from the occasional visual pun). Rather the humour is generated through a reflection on embodiment, culture and representation. I use my body within the practice as it relies on my physical presence and appearance to investigate how the self encounters representation. Of particular interest is working with the various forms of photo media and film/video within popular culture.⁹³ Using my self-image is a strategy for generating artworks in order to examine subjectivity as it responds to culture. I am interrogating how the self encounters and responds to the ubiquity of ridiculous representation that sells everything from tampons to meat pies and Holden cars through to the parody of popular culture forms, and as self-parody.

The absurd nature of most popular culture is already laughable—it parodies itself through a reliance on cliché and a combination of overwrought imagery and audio. I understand cliché as a form of “ground” through which popular representation

⁹² Fran De Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick, *Serious Frolic: Essays on Australian Humour* (St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 2009). xxiv-xxv

⁹³ Popular culture broadly speaking I define as counter to the refinements of high culture, in that it doesn’t require specialist knowledge or education to understand. It is expressed in celebrity magazines and websites, films with box office success, pop music and the accompanying videos, advertising across all mediums, the occasional bestselling book, and of course television, that homey device in our living rooms.

operates in its reliance on stereotyping, sentimentality, cuteness, beauty, the banality of the everyday, and hackneyed comprehensions of difference.⁹⁴ This is not say there are not sophisticated techniques being used. However for this research I have no interest in the “clever” aspects of popular culture: television shows, books and magazines, musicians and actors that generate sustained and complex emotional resonance. Instead, I explore the overblown, the overwrought—the excesses of sensation and the clichés of representation rather than their more subtle elucidation, which has characterised recent contemporary television with the rise of complex multi-narrative forms. Film’s restricted screening time limits some of the more complex story and character arcs television bring us, and therefore frequently relies on the shorthand of stereotyping and cliché.

My intention is to erupt that container of cliché using humour to reveal the operation of formulaic representations. Playing parody against cliché has its pitfalls (think of those endless series of terrible parody films⁹⁵). However in using myself I also push forward subjectivity in order to reveal the sadness, pathos and horror we *can* experience encountering the endless onslaught of representation. All we can do is laugh in the face of it: laugh and respond through making. This reflection on representation through humour is the crux of the research, for it is in the ‘making of something’ that new knowledge appears. David Robbins in his online publication *High Entertainment* argues that artists utilise contemporary popular entertainment forms while working with and through experimentation in form and subject associated with art.

No punch line

Taking a feminist trajectory, I have used Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnivalesque, Jörg Heiser’s theory of slapstick, Sigmund Freud’s complex analysis of jokes among other conceptual frameworks to explore how humour and gender

⁹⁴ “The cliché, an established cultural concept or icon that can be reproduced and recognized without any effort, is a double-edged affair. It safeguards communication and also the feeling of community, because understanding clichés is, like understanding jokes, a sign of successful participation in a cultural sphere.” Rainer Emig, “Queer Humor: Gay Comedy between Camp and Diversity,” in *Gender and Humor: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*, Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies (New York and London: Routledge). 277

⁹⁵ Titles that quickly come to mind include the *Scary Movie* franchise, *Airplane*, *Austin Powers* series, and the *Carry On* films.

intersect (although that subject alone deserves a thesis in its own right!). According to recent research⁹⁶ there is little distinction between genders in their enjoyment, response and experience of humour. However, clear cultural expectations in relation to gender are still very evident in contemporary life. Gender as a subject and the initiator of the humour are deemed significant; that old chestnut, the belief that “women aren’t funny” continues to hold sway.

I have further argued that humour and art share a number of commonalities. Both operate through the valuing of form over function that is the hallmark of aesthetic considerations. Humour and art require distance from their subject to be discernable and even to be categorised as humour or art. After all, one person’s slapstick is someone else’s fractured skull, and similarly an artwork is not the thing it represents. The production of humour in art has a number of distinct aspects: humour as a critique of art; using entertainment forms as a mode of critique of art *and* entertainment; condensation of form operating in jokes and art; and, the combining of other forms (performance and comedy) within the framework of art.

This chapter has characterised humour as a complex operation fusing an aesthetic dimension with the embodied response of laughter. Its generation requires something that disrupts in surprising and amusing ways. Humour allows us to contemplate horrible things (consider the bad taste jokes that arise after any disaster) in a form that gives pleasure rather than only pain and suffering. As such, humour is connected with tragedy, and therefore with aesthetic considerations. The operation of humour in art, and humour as a form of aesthetics was further explored, and connected back to the studio research. The associations between humour and disgust have been foregrounded through Freud’s analysis of the tendentious joke and Winfried Menninghaus’ drawing to our attention the similarities humour and disgust share. This connection between aesthetics and humour connects leads to the next chapter’s investigation of disgust and its relationship with aesthetics.

⁹⁶ Martin, “Humor and Gender an Overview of Psychological Research.”

2. Discussing the Disgusting

Here we have the most embodied and visceral of emotions, and yet even when it is operating in and around the body, its orifices and excreta, a world of meaning explodes, coloring, vivifying, and contaminating political, social, and moral meanings. Disgust for all its visceralness turns out to be one of our more aggressive culture-creating passions. **William Ian Miller**¹

The similarities in function and affect of disgust, humour, and failure suggest a common function, psychically and culturally. However disgust stands a little aside from humour and failure (which is discussed in the next chapter). It does not merely operate “in tandem” with humour and failure, but is a central force in aesthetic research as an absence, refusal, or denial. My consideration of disgust is tied to its function as an indicator of transgression, primarily as it operates subjectively rather than culturally, although of course the two are tied. It is disgust’s corporeal aspects, the modes in which it overwhelms or more quietly disrupts us—bodily, emotionally, psychologically—its undeniable, forceful, even painful qualities, that bring me to its contemplation. I am a squeamish person, gagging at the faintest whiff of decomposition. I can barely bring myself to look upon the corpse of most animals (yes, even insects) without experiencing intense discomfort. The memory of a disgusting moment is enough to evoke vague nausea.

A few years ago I had to ‘clean up a corpse’, the decomposed body of a possum that had been trapped inside a holiday house. Its body had melded with the carpet so that its fur appeared to be an outgrowth of the carpet itself. Approaching the dead animal with a shovel to scrape it off the carpet I was frozen. I could not do it. Instead my much less squeamish partner shovelled up the body and flung it into the bush. Once the body was gone I was able to clean up the aftermath. I cut out the maggoty patch of wool and sponged the darkened spot of decay. Later that morning I discovered a bag

¹ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).
xii

of rotten potatoes that had turned into a blackish soupy slop in a ceramic container. Before I knew it I was retching, gagging, and heaving, utterly in the sway of disgust, its physicality overriding my efforts to suppress it and control it. The contemplation of a very dead possum followed shortly by the discovery of putrid vegetables was too much. I was disturbed utterly for the remainder of the day. To this day, recalling the moment delivers a faint nausea.

As with most people my familiarity with disgust goes beyond the usual suspects of excrement and blood, snot and rot, vomit and slime. We each have our particularities and specificities when it comes to disgust. Much of mine is concerned with gender and sexuality. As a woman and a lesbian with first hand experience of the social and cultural imperatives around those two states, the contempt in which the feminine is held, and then inversely the abject cultural position of the lesbian, had much to do with my slow experiencing of sexuality. The horror and revulsion I felt when I started menstruating as an 11-year-old tomboy has been followed by three decades of monstrously heavy menstruation loaded with clots, overflows and pain. This, combined with the decision as a teenager to retain my body hair, has meant I persistently experience and confront societal disgust (disgust directed at me) and self-disgust (disgust I feel about myself).

The regular proximity to disgust, being so potent and unavoidable, has carried across to my art practice. Its pervasiveness, its intensity, how it forces us into corporeality closing the distancing of aesthetics, disgust's lack of artifice has been significant to my work. However this experience does remain aesthetic and subtler than the experience of being brought to the threshold of expulsion described above in my dead possum/rotten potato encounter. Disgust's power is compelling, and I 'enjoy' its evocation in art. Although 'enjoy' might not quite capture the combination of the pleasure of transgression and the ruffling of beauty, the force of returning me to my body, forcing aesthetic distancing closer and closer towards me, but always maintaining just a little space that permits appreciation and apprehension. Creative practices allow investigations of topics, themes, subjects and experiences that in daily life we strive to avoid. Consider the horror film, the action/thriller, Halloween and shit in art.

Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca Professional* 2010, exemplifies this combination of heightened aesthetic appreciation through disgust. Ostensibly Delvoye's series of cloacas are machines for making shit through replicating the human digestive tract from mouth to anus.² Visiting *Cloaca Professional* 2010 at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, reveals the perverse fascination that disgust has on humans. Apparently the most hated work at MONA,³ *Cloaca Professional* nonetheless has plenty of visitors who turn up to watch it feed and defecate.

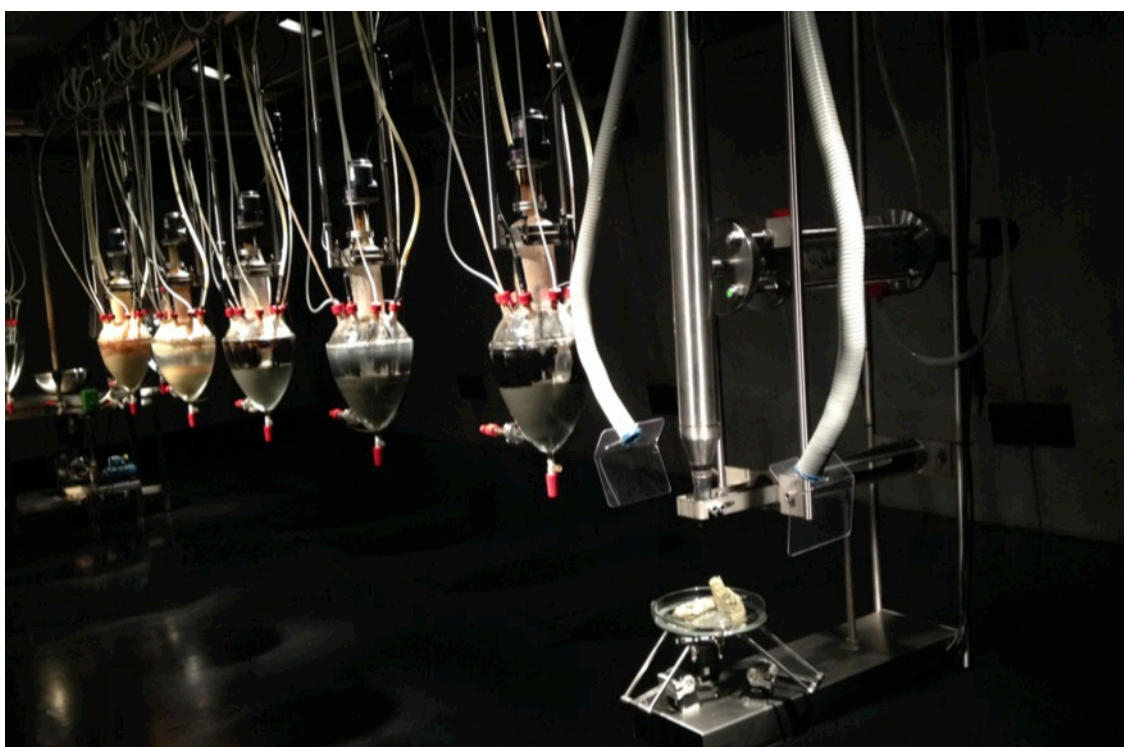


Figure 16: Wim Delvoye *Cloaca Professional*, 2010. Mixed media. MONA, Hobart, Australia. Photograph: Jane Polkinghorne

Many people soon leave, unable to withstand the stench. Smell is one of the more difficult aspects of disgust in being invisible yet pervasive. We can close our eyes to block out the horrors, but without breathing, without ingesting air, we die. The smell associated with *Cloaca Professional* has a peculiar edge that is not quite organic, something akin to the smells that waft around in hospitals. The machine's appearance is shiny and laboratory-like with a series of glass 'stomachs' containing variously

² By late 2015 Delvoye had produced 10 versions of the cloaca, ranging from "Mini" to "Super" in size, each with an associated logo based on well known corporate identities such as Ford, Coca Cola, Chanel No.5 and Durex.

³ Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore, "Australia's Temple of Weird," 20 February, 2015. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/roads/2015/02/mona_tasmania_s_biggest_tourist_draw_is_a_controversial_museum_featuring.html Accessed 6 November, 2015

coloured decaying organic material and enzymes, bacteria and acids as it is forced through the constructed digestive system.

The machine fascinates and repulses through its replication of a function common to all humans, and of course animals. However, like a giant baby, the machine must be fed and toileted. *Cloaca Professional* can be read as a critique of capitalism's ability to monetise and mechanise everything, even a machine that does a much less efficient job of shitting than the human body. Interestingly, periodically the cloaca shit is freeze dried and can be purchased. Usually it is flushed down the toilet.⁴ Visiting the machine is an uncanny valley⁵ experience linked to the perversity of a machine performing the biological product of animal life, shitting. Defecating is a biological process necessary in maintaining the body's ability to ingest food, remove waste and function. In turning the process of defecation into a machine that is also art, Delvoye's project is more concerned with representation than the base materialism of Bataille. Shit is not specific to any gender, culture, race, or indeed, animal. In making a shitting machine Delvoye attempts something universal. US academic Isabelle Loring Wallace examines Delvoye's machines through various psychoanalytical understandings of shit, from Freud's anal phase, to Kristeva's concept of the abject, and the myths of Narcissus and Pygmalion.⁶ The fascination the *Cloacas* hold over us as spectators is:

At once temporal and spatial, the gap that separates us from these objects and our long-standing aspirations is, as well, the gap between the spectator and his ideal, reality and its representation, the original and its perfect duplication. It is also the ultimate subject of the Cloaca

⁴ On a visit to *Cloaca Professional* I was told that MONA was entitled to freeze dry a few stools a year to sell as editions. Generally the faeces were flushed down the toilet. In 2010 Christies auctioned a freeze dried *Cloaca Faeces* for €7500. <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/wim-delvoye-cloaca-5326539-details.aspx>

⁵ 'Uncanny Valley' is the sensation humans experience when encountering lifelike objects such as puppets and robots that mimic human appearance. It was first described by Japanese robotics engineer and designer Masahiro Mori as on a scale somewhere between revulsion and delight. James R. Hamilton, "The 'Uncanny Valley' and Spectating Animated Objects," *Performance Research* 20, no. 2 (2015). 60-61

⁶ Wallace and Hirsh, *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*. 223-224

project, and, likewise, the ultimate subject of the myths it conjures, confuses, and conjoins.⁷

Through this brief analysis of Delvoye's works, the complexity of any project that attends to those subjects and things that revolt and disgust is glimpsed. This chapter is an exploration of historical understandings and theories of disgust, particularly the connections between art and disgust, and taste and aesthetics. I seek here to understand the association of disgust with gender and sexuality culturally and socially and as they manifest in representation. The modes through which disgust and humour, disgust and the comic, interact to generate laughter, are examined in order to understand their function and operation. This inquiry considers the use of disgust in creative practices and its role in aesthetics. An analysis of some recent texts and ideas that elucidate the complexities of disgust lead to an investigation of artworks and films that use disgust, with a particular focus on disgust's relationship to aesthetics, humour and failure. The complexities of disgust's function, appearance, and sensation, and the manner in which historically it has been set aside from serious consideration, are intrinsic to the new knowledge contributed by this thesis.

I exploit the effectiveness of disgust's affect, relying on its more compulsive aspects to demand affective response. In this way the research clearly connects with exploitation cinema, and the reliance in the B-grade/Z-grade realm of filmmaking on generating visceral responses from the audience. In cinema the use of disgust might be perceived as an easy or simplistic way of affecting audiences. But if disgust is so abhorrent one would think it would drive viewers away. Instead the opposite is true, with extreme cinema and television remaining popular viewing.⁸ Broader viewing audiences appear to find disgust as compelling as I do, suggesting that it is as central to the experience of spectatorship as desire. We can see this through the popularity of YouTube videos with titles such as "The 20 Disgusting Foods That People Actually

⁷ Ibid. 236

⁸ Television shows like *Survivor* (a number of challenges were particularly revolting including the one where the participants had to rip meat off a pig with their mouths and pass it on to the next person), *Man Vs Wild* (Bear Grylls eats all kinds of vile things and infamously drank his own urine), and *Body Bizarre* demonstrate audiences on-going fascination with seeing other people deal with revolting and repulsive situations, objects and actions.

Eat”⁹ and “10 Disgusting Medical Treatments That Could Save Your Life”¹⁰, “Hilarious Diarrhea Compilation”¹¹ and websites that host lists of the 10 most disgusting videos,¹² usually replete with maggots, pus and snot, certainly a list of which Julia Kristeva and Mary Douglas would approve.

What is disgust?

Dirty by nature, it took disgust to force us to invent civilization as an antidote. **Colin McGinn**¹³

Disgust is a discomfiting and compelled sensation that ranges from physical nausea through to a quiet internalised “yuck.” Frequently considered a singularly repellent experience – gagging, vomiting, nausea and so on – disgust has nuances, levels, categories and appeals that are perhaps not evident on initial apprehension, indicating the fascinations attached to it. Disgust operates across a range of experiences and emotions: from physical disgust brought on by illness often experienced as nausea through to moral disgust and aesthetic disgust. Its biological function is obvious: to stop us ingesting something that will make us sick, and this is an aspect of disgust that operates in other species. I had a dog with kidney failure whose disease would cause her to throw up her food, yet she would happily re-eat it, slime, bile and all. While it has been considered an affect,¹⁴ disgust is also obviously somewhat other than an emotion as it has components that are learnt, that is to say, socially compelled. Disgust is felt by all people and in all cultures. However, its triggers can vary considerably; for instance, in one culture the eating of dog is considered barely

⁹ “The 20 Disgusting Food that People Actually Eat” YouTube video has had over 2 million hits: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oceyc9vxJHg> Accessed 30 October, 2015

¹⁰ And this video has over 5 million hits when viewed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CVIPHtaouM>. Accessed 30 October, 2015

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UesvHN3qq4> Only 1.5 million hits. Accessed 6 November, 2015.

¹² For example in 2012 the website *Heavy* posted a series of YouTube videos that included wounds full of maggots, snot eating infants, pus filled wounds, blackheads being squeezed, and a toe nail being removed with pliers. <http://heavy.com/action/2012/10/the-10-most-disgusting-videos-ever-made/> Accessed 30 October, 2015.

¹³ Colin McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). 223

¹⁴ Silvan S. Tomkins and E. Virginia Demos, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction (Cambridge England; New York; Paris: Cambridge University Press; Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1995). 84-85

different from eating chicken, while another cultural group feels that the consumption of dog is morally abhorrent and revolting.¹⁵

Contemporary debate amongst psychologists and theorists about the differences (if any) between affect and emotion is ongoing. Ruth Leys, an historian of psychoanalysis, psychiatry and psychology, in a 2011 article “The Turn to Affect: A Critique”¹⁶ summarises contemporary anti-intentionalist ideas on affect:

What the new affect theorists and the neuroscientists share is a commitment to the idea that there is a gap between the subject’s affects and its cognition or appraisal of the affective situation or object, such that cognition or thinking comes “too late” for reasons, beliefs, intentions, and meanings to play the role in action and behavior usually accorded to them. The result is that action and behavior are held to be determined by affective dispositions that are independent of consciousness and the mind’s control.¹⁷

Leys claims in her essay that proponents of affect theory separate emotions and affect from cognition and intention, and attempt to differentiate affect from emotion, something she finds problematic and impossible to prove, but has come about as a response to theoretical, scientific and philosophical turns away from our “corporeal affective dispositions.”¹⁸ Affect theory proponents suggest that the body and aspects of our brain know and function prior to conscious thought. Our will and our intentions come in as a justification after the emotional and affective experience.

Eric Shouse writes in an essay on Deleuze and Guattari’s explorations of affect that “Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects

¹⁵ Comedian, writer and actor Ricky Gervais’ 2015 campaign to halt a dog eating festival in Yunin, China is an example of the cultural specificity of food taboos. Humane Society International, last modified June 15, 2015, http://www.hsi.org/news/press_releases/2015/06/ricky-gervais-hsi-dog-meat-061515.html?referrer=https://www.google.com.au/

¹⁶ Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 37, no. No. 3 (Spring 2011).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 443

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 436

are prepersonal.”¹⁹ One of the first to work in affect theory, Silvan Tomkins lists disgust, and the associated ‘dissmell’, as one of the nine affects all fully cognisant humans are born with; he suggests we spend our lives maximising positive affects and minimising the negative: “The affect system provides the primary blueprints for cognition, decision, and action”²⁰ In-depth analysis and critique of affect theory is beyond the scope of this thesis, however with the contemporary interest in affect theory the debate needs acknowledgment, particularly in gaining an understanding of disgust. With affect theory in mind, disgust then is a hard-wired, biological imperative developed to stop us from eating putrescent meat and vegetables and therefore becoming ill. Disgust, however has developed into more than a reflexive, automatic response to certain stimulus, certain objects. Beyond its biological aspect in many species that stops the ingestion of pathogens, disgust in its other forms (moral, cultural, social), and its relationship to memory, is apparently felt only by humans. Tomkins considered disgust, dissmell (smelling something that evokes disgust) and nausea as “... signals and motives to others, as well as to the self, of feelings of rejection [...] responses appropriate to a hierarchically ordered society.”²¹

As we can see then, disgust is in part a reflex, a physiological response, yet in humans it also is culturally and socially determined. Disgust is a complex of sensations that in its milder forms may appear as slight queasiness. It can be that feeling wherein an aesthetic sensibility has been offended, where the object or subject being contemplated and experienced is considered revolting, horrible and ugly. In its more aggressive forms, it appears as bodily rejection, an overwhelming nausea resulting in vomit (a sensation that is both a relief of nausea and simultaneously revolting). Disgust can be “aroused” through a range of experiences: through witnessing something horrific—a body eviscerated or blown apart for instance; or by seeing and smelling another person vomit or defecate. We often consider disgust as an all or nothing affect. However its use and role in aesthetics, philosophy, cinema, art and design, sexuality and gastronomy suggests it has much variety in intensity and function and this therefore invites further analysis.

¹⁹ Eric Shouse. (Dec. 2005) “Feeling, Emotion, Affect,” *M/C Journal*, 8(6). Retrieved 14 Feb. 2015 from <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>

²⁰ Silvan Tomkins, “Affect as Amplification: Some Modifications in Theory,” in *Theories of Emotion*. Robert Plutchik and Henry Kellerman, ed. (Burlington: Elsevier Science., 2013).142

²¹ Tomkins and Demos, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*. 399-400

Disgust is associated with taste in all of its forms - the consideration of a person's taste is a judgement on social class, aesthetics, knowledge and power. Disgust is one of the forms through which distinctions are acknowledged, perceived and demonstrated.²² The physical sensation of taste, and its associated sense smell, is essential to the formation of disgust. Repugnance and food, as Kristeva argued in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*,²³ are inherently connected. Kristeva used the example of the "skin of the milk" to exemplify how something harmless can be experienced as revolting. The complex of operations that trigger the sensation simply on apprehending that which disgusts includes memory, taste (in all senses of flavour/smell and aesthetics), associations, empathy and mimesis.

The allure of disgust

Disgust has one foot in the vital and living and the other in the dead and dying: not the dead or the living, but the "living dead." [...] It is a kind of metaphysical emotion, spanning the divide between (roughly) mind and matter. **Colin McGinn**²⁴

The manner in which disgust compels yet repels is one of its more intriguing aspects. Most of us are fascinated by the disgusting and the horrible, especially when experienced at a distance, vicariously, aesthetically even. Our own bodies and their excretions and functions are in the most part fascinating to us, while the same functions in other people are repulsive and revolting. The attractions of disgust are not easily resisted, though it is also something experienced uniquely. Disgust compels each of us in different ways, from the most obvious (car crashes, corpses, shit) to the individually particular (the smell of jasmine flowering in spring revolts me as it reminds me of cat shit).

Though disgust is learnt it is also innate, with each culture experiencing disgust but not necessarily for the same things or from the same experiences. As already

²² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

²³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.

²⁴ McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*. 93-95

mentioned, in one culture different social groups may have distinct and separate triggers for disgust, perhaps in relation to one another's social standing, or sexual preferences and practices, or perhaps a person's gender (non) identification. Disgust manifests in many zones of our lives, most obviously those located around the various categories of bodily products (snot, excrement, menstrual blood, pus, vomit), food (contaminated or the eating of something deemed inedible), particular animals (rodents and vermin, slugs and leeches for example), disruptions of the body's surface (evisceration, wounds), sexual perversions, death, decay and the rotting corpse, and hygiene, social, ethical and moral violations.²⁵ In this list we can see some of the complexities the sensation faces when we attempt to comprehend what disgust does, and what it is. But we also see what occurs when we consider disgust—we end up with a series of actions, objects, and processes without much further insight into the feeling.

Within philosophy disgust has made some small appearances usually, but not only, in relation to aesthetics. The first in-depth analysis of disgust was written in 1929 by phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai in the essay "Disgust".²⁶ His writing laid the groundwork for other writers on the subject, such as Winfried Menninghaus, William Ian Miller, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Colin McGinn and Eugenie Brinkema, although Freud too had much to say on disgust particularly in relation to desire, pleasure and civilization. These few writers demonstrate the limited history at this point on disgust. Kristeva's 1982 text *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* is perhaps the single most influential text in theorising around the abject (disgust obviously has correlations with/to the abject). Mary Douglas' 1969 book from *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* pre-dates Kristeva's but is written from an anthropological perspective and has not garnered the same level of response in the realm of creative practices. French writer Georges Bataille has also played a key role in considering disgust in culture through his concept of 'informe', usually translated as "formless." In Bataille's writings the *informe* is anti-subject, anti-object, it is alterity, non-matter, the reused, beneath contempt, and disgusting: "... the

²⁵ Condensed from a list quoted by Korsmeyer, Jonathan Haidt, Clark MCAuley, and Paul Rozin, "Individual Differences in Sensitivity to Disgust: A Scale Sampling Seven Domains of Disgust Elicitors," *Personality and Individual Differences* 16, no.5 (1994): 701-13. Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. 32

²⁶ Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust* (Chicago: Open Court, 1929).

formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative, like obscene words”.²⁷ Kristeva draws on Bataille and Douglas in her attempt to theorise through the abject, an operation that is boundless, beyond description, and destabilising. In his 1997 book *The Anatomy of Disgust*²⁸ philosopher William Ian Miller reads disgust for its energising affects. Miller examines our fascination with the disgusting, how culturally the mere consideration of the disgusting is frequently adequate to generate the sensation of disgust or its associated sensation, nausea. For instance the contemplation of coprophagia for most people generates an immediate feeling of disgust and revulsion. Miller analyses disgust through an economic reading, that of surfeit and scarcity.²⁹ The relationship between disgust and pleasure, where one is constructed through and in response to the other, reveals some of the paradox of disgust. Used to erect boundaries, to stake a claim for that which is out of bounds, to indicate a limit, disgust also occurs with the overwhelming, the too much, the excessive. It exists at the centre of culture creation, delineating differences, marking out social practices, indicating hierarchy, power and social stratification. Paradoxically disgust is often a matter of degrees of intensity, as Miller notes, when sweetness shifts from a positive sensation to one that is cloying, that may be rotting or the onset of putrefaction.³⁰

The pleasures of eating shifts into that of revulsion, as we cram more and more in: Christmas time, childhood birthday parties, binge drinking, an obsession with plenitude, the overstocked shelves at the supermarket, \$40,000 cocktails,³¹ are indicators of the contemporary obsession with surfeit. Our compulsion to stuff it all in, to want more, to have more, leads inexorably towards excess and overindulgence. British philosopher Colin McGinn in his 2011 book *The Meaning of Disgust* posits that this very tendency towards excess is what has given rise to disgust in humans as a mechanism for curbing and limiting our rampant desires. “The very freedom of the human mind, abetted by imagination and an awareness of possibility, enables us to

²⁷ Yve-Alain Bois, “The Use Value of “Formless”,” in *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York, Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books; Distributed by MIT Press, 1997). 18

²⁸ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*.

²⁹ Ibid. 114

³⁰ Ibid. 87

³¹ One of most expensive cocktail in the world is “The Winston” and available at Club 23 in Melbourne for \$12,500. Accessed July 7, 2015. <https://transferwise.com/blog/2014-04/where-to-find-the-worlds-10-most-expensive-cocktails/>

form desires of kinds undreamt of by other animals. What animal wants to become a billionaire, or a rock star, or a serial killer?" McGinn suggests that through the cultural and social formations and the prohibitions of disgust humans have managed to find some means of limiting the worst excesses, from over-eating to sexual activities.³²

Carolyn Korsmeyer in her book *Savoring Disgust: The Fair and Foul in Aesthetics*,³³ notes the role of surfeit in disgust's generation, especially in the activity of eating as where the sensation shifts from delicious to disgusting, or inversely from disgusting to the heights of cuisine (ripe cheeses, ripe meats, desserts that nauseate with sweetness). As a child we were warned of the dangers of eating raw meats, unripe fruit, cat and dog shit. That first mouthful of raw fish, oysters or a very ripe cheese was both disgusting and delicious as the conflict between the sensation and my knowledge intermingled in a sensorial and mindful manner. Korsmeyer explicates how the sensation of the pleasure of eating is so frequently tinged with disgust where foods may start out disgusting and abhorrent and become the height of a cuisine. From "high meat" to the Japanese use of the poisonous puffer fish, Korsmeyer reflects on the "enigma of disgust, which despite the power of its aversive recoil often contains elements of attraction even at the sensory level."³⁴ Reflecting on the relationship between food and aesthetics, for Korsmeyer the development of a sophisticated palate brings to our experience of food symbolic significance. Tasting forces us to contemplate meaning, origin, and memory through a highly compressed experience that goes well beyond the sensuous and relatively obvious satisfaction of hunger.

McGinn points to our conflicted nature: we are minds capable of refined and abstract thought, yet we are also bodies that must eat and shit, fuck and eat, "an ontological oxymoron."³⁵ Humans differ from other animals in finding ourselves, our bodily functions and excretions, mired in prohibitions, rules and regulations. We disgust ourselves in the way that other species do not, and cannot:

³² McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*. 131. McGinn notes that children have to learn not to eat shit. He discusses necrophilia as another action where disgust formed in order to limit our desires.

³³ Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*.

³⁴ Ibid. 68

³⁵ McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*. 139

Social life is not hedged about with fraught prohibitions designed to protect others from one's less pleasing aspects. The affective life of animals is thus quite different from ours, which is saturated with disgust and its accompanying anxieties and strategies. Animal consciousness is not a filth consciousness (it is apt to be more a fear consciousness).³⁶

Humour and disgust

Humour is often tied to the disgusting. Miller points out how obvious the idea of humour as a transgression and misrule is, and the means by which something deemed disgusting is then used to generate humour. We can see this in children, wherein farts, shit and snot are not funny until the child realises the effect it has on a parent, or on adults generally. More broadly Miller looks to disgust as functioning to demarcate the body and its boundaries, and how this feeds into cultural morality. He articulates disgust as allowing us to “play at violating norms” in a way that shame does not. Disgust can be vicarious, pointed or directed towards something, while shame is always our own experience, its acuteness intensely subjective. Miller explores the ‘playfulness’ of disgust, and the mechanisms through which it permits us to experience authorised transgression. The stranglehold of cultural norms, Miller claims, are so powerful that “playing at transgression” is enough to provoke and stimulate pleasure, laughter, and the vicarious joy of playing at rule breaking.³⁷ Here we see how humour and disgust operate through one another, and with a similar function: demarcation of rules, limits, boundaries and then their transgressions, usurping and overwhelming.

German academic Winfried Menninghaus in his 2003 book *Disgust: The History and Theory of a Strong Sensation* analyses the connections theorists and writers have made between laughter in disgust:

[...] the openly comical use of disgusting phenomena, [...] does not live up to the “tragic” implications of overcoming disgust in laughter,

³⁶ Ibid. 154

³⁷ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. 116-117

as theorized in Nietzsche, Bataille, and Kristeva; for this use suspends, from the outset, the seriousness of the conflict enacted in the feeling of disgust and turns it into something ridiculous. But even this particular type of the comical points to the close relation of disgust and laughter.³⁸

The relationship of disgust and laughter is therefore both a serious and stupid subject. Disgust rises up and overwhelms the body. It can take the form of vomiting or gagging, the whole body violently repulsed, even though the trigger for this sensation may only be a memory or the mere suggestion of a smell. Bodily sensation overwhelms even though disgust is something we learn intellectually. As Freud pointed out, toilet training becomes the site of a conflict that is retained through to adulthood as the infant's control of its faeces, or lack of, becomes central to their relationship with their parents. The infant's relationship to its body is no longer one of pleasure, as cultural forces are thrust upon it. Pleasure becomes tied up with control—control over its own body, control over its parents. Laughter too can overwhelm the body similarly to disgust. Most people would have experienced an uncontrollable fit of giggling, usually when a child, and usually together with another person.

Menninghaus draws out Freud's findings and comprehension of the differences between men and women's responses to feelings of disgust, particularly in relation to sex. I would suggest this has a close relation to humour, jokes and smut, a connection Menninghaus himself makes. Humour is an indicator of the subject refusing to be overwhelmed by an experience. We use humour to put a self-reflexive distance between the experience and ourselves. Laughter is an indicator of our ego overriding or shrugging off discomfort, similar to vomiting being both sign and relief of an overwhelming nausea, as already noted in the previous chapter by Winfried Menninghaus.³⁹ Inversely laughter can become so overwhelming it causes distress, (usually in children) to the point of vomiting, and in both adults and children in

³⁸ Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*. 11

³⁹ Ibid. "Disgust, which undergoes a counterathesis (or a sublimation), and laughter are complementary ways of admitting an alterity that otherwise would overpower our system of perception and consciousness." 10-11

uncontrolled urinating, hence the slang “I pissed myself”. Disgust and laughter are therefore sensations on contagious trajectories.

William Ian Miller analyses the association of disgust with contempt through humour, through the sneering of the high for the low, and for those in the social hierarchy underneath the powerful for using a disgusted, dismissive and contempt-filled laughter at their social superiors. This sniggering at one’s superiors is however dangerous and only to be done behind their backs, in the servant quarters or the kitchen. While this understanding of contempt and humour might be construed historically, it is still necessarily evident, though laughing at one’s superiors in most contemporary first world countries does not necessarily mean severe punishment such as a flogging or even death as it once did. Although, the attack in January 2015 on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, as a response to cartoons depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad, suggests that humour made by one group of people can be considered murderously offensive by another group.

In this scenario the operation of laughter is connected to power rather than necessarily pleasure, though of course there is pleasure to be gained, as Miller noted earlier, in transgressing boundaries, particularly social boundaries, where strong sensations are generated. *Charlie Hebdo* is known to have a broad approach to mockery, with no quarter spared their satirist’s gaze. A graph compiled by French newspaper *Le Monde* analysed the themes on *Charlie Hebdo*’s 523 front pages from 2005 to 2015: religion was mocked 38 times, with Islam 7 of those.⁴⁰ It was shown that the magazine was offensive towards everyone and anyone in the French social sphere, but not Islam in particular. The magazine represents a Rabelaisian mode of satire, wherein all are brought down to the same debased level. The attack on *Charlie Hebdo* by French citizens of North African descent shows their disenfranchisement and demonstrates the potential power of insult.⁴¹ Africans, Arabs and Muslims in France have experienced discrimination along religious, racial and cultural grounds for

⁴⁰ Jean-François Mignot and Céline Goffette, “No, “Charlie Hebdo” Is Not Obsessed with Islam,” *Le Monde*, 25 February 2015.

⁴¹ Didier Fassin, “In the Name of the Republic: Untimely Meditations on the Aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo Attack,” *Anthropology Today* 31, no. 2 (2015). 4

generations.⁴² The attacks came from those without cultural power or access to the French way of life as exemplified in the country's motto liberty, equality and fraternity.

According to McGinn we use humour as a method of repressing and glossing over disgust, for if we were to allow our disgustingness to always be foregrounded we would be unable to function,⁴³ as the experience of disgust is usually highly offensive. Yet disgust is transgressive, and on occasion this is experienced as relief or pleasure, primarily when paired with humour, as humour can operate through distancing and self-reflexivity. McGinn speculates that disgust is used to repress our excessive desires; repression in turn weakens the force of disgust as it tampers down the full force of disgust.⁴⁴ For McGinn it is disgust at our corporeal selves that forms the basis for repressions rather than Freud's belief that it was the sexual drives. He also draws the affinity of humour with disgust through their kinship in repression:

In jokes, [...] we can then laugh at what would otherwise merely repel. Jokes, then, are also a means of repression: they enable us to neutralize our feelings of disgust, because of their amusement value. Laughter takes the place of vomiting.⁴⁵

Disgust, gender and sexuality

The close relationship of pleasure, sexuality and disgust is fruitful ground for an investigation in relation to art, and Menninghaus too draws this conclusion. He connects disgust to taste, where the quest for stronger and stronger sensations has barely changed in the past two hundred years from art to fashion to the point where the word "disgusting" is now frequently used as a hyperbolic or exaggerated expression of dislike for something as innocuous as the weather:

⁴² Didier Fassin's article notes the discrimination comes from all quarters: access to education, housing, employment, and to places of worship and high imprisonment rates. *Ibid.* 6

⁴³ McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*. 164

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 171

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 211

For, in the world of taste, everything, even the smallest distinction, is literally decisive. And, in informal communication, no judgment is more decisive than that of disgust. [...] It [Ekel]⁴⁶ stands with almost equal prerogatives, side by side with that other sphere of the disgusting that is rude, obscene, and sexually “perverse”, and hence an offense to “good taste” – which, however, it still presupposes in the very act of transgressing it.⁴⁷

Miller focuses on a Freudian and self-admitting masculine reading of sexuality and disgust, where again, disgust is crucial in the formation of sexual desire and sensuality as understood and theorised by Freud. While not utterly in thrall to Freud’s classist and masculine-centric analysis of sexuality, Miller concedes the potency of disgust in sexual life, but as with Freud, this is located strictly around the white male heterosexual body of the Viennese middle and upper class. Miller makes some small argument for a more nuanced reading, and acknowledges the cultural and male-centric specificity of the Freudian analysis of sexuality in which a man looks to lower class women to satisfy his sexual desire. More broadly Miller writes that it is love rather than sex that operates as the place where disgust, if not suspended, is accommodated through the familiarity of the everyday. Rather than suspending disgust, sex instead indulges it.⁴⁸

Menninghaus delves more deeply into the role of class in Freud’s analysis of female responses to sexuality than Miller. Menninghaus makes overt Freud’s analysis of how a man’s response to sex with his wife differs from sex with the maid, servant or prostitute. A man must conceal his perversities from his wife in order to obey the cultural imperative to respect his wife, while satisfying them with the hired help or with a prostitute. Women, meanwhile, Freud claims, expend their energies in attempting to deny and repress their desires to be prostitutes.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ ‘Ekel’ is the German word for disgust

⁴⁷ Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*. 5

⁴⁸ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. 138

⁴⁹ Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*. 200-202

In going over Freud's analysis of disgust, in particular in relation to perversion, Menninghaus points out Freud's belief that to be happy in love (sexually) a person must acknowledge their perversion(s) and be free from the inhibitions of disgust.⁵⁰ To be content with disgust, to acknowledge one's perversions is therefore normal. Embracing and acknowledging disgust is the pathway to both happiness (which Freud says is the acceptance of one's perversions) and functional adulthood. Menninghaus states for Freud "[...] overcoming the barrier of incest and the pleasure-sapping "respect for women" is precisely what enables "sexual" happiness amidst cultural repression".⁵¹ Menninghaus unravels Freud's meaning stating that men (one would have to assume he means a certain class of men in Vienna in the early twentieth century) by abiding with cultural rules of respect for their own wives have reduced sexual pleasures, and can only be fully happy in the company of debased women (prostitutes, housemaids, servant girls and so on). Menninghaus reveals Freud's own feelings of disgust and despair at the debasement of contemporary life that is in a state of constant agitation between the pressures of civilization and the perversity needed to overcome the disgust that allows humans to be happy sexually. Perversion could be understood via Freud as 'normal,' yet disgust's role in sexuality is unexplored by Freud.

Menninghaus is particularly critical of Kristeva's conclusions in *The Powers of Horror*, claiming Kristeva uses the idea of the abject maternal as a central conceit in relation to abjection, as everyone, within Kristeva's ideas, must reject the maternal in order to become their own subject and to enter the paternal world. Menninghaus is critical of "Kristeva's central opposition between maternal body and paternal symbolic order"⁵² claiming she reduces language to a strictly paternal function, that totally repudiates the maternal in order that the paternal can be subverted and invaded by the maternal:

Language thus appears as noncorporeal, indeed anti-corporeal and anti-affective, sharply cut off from all "drive representations". In a word, language is radically divested, at the first from all mimetic, "poetic,"

⁵⁰ Ibid. 200

⁵¹ Ibid. 200

⁵² Ibid. 387

and “maternal” dimensions, in order then to be invaded by these dimensions from without in the mode of a subversion and even destruction of “the symbolic.” But what if *all* language has a “rhythm,” and rhythm is not alone the poetic negativity and anal-sadistic dissolution of signifiers? What if “affect” is not the absolute other of the symbolic realm but rather—in keeping with the language theory of the eighteenth century—the “origin” of all linguistic behaviour?⁵³

Menninghaus here posits the possibility that rejection of the maternal (and therefore the feminine more broadly in culture) and affect is not as totalising as Kristeva suggests. Instead there is the potential for embodied recuperation in language, and that alienation (for those of us who identify with/as feminine) from discourse, from subjectivity, is not necessarily solely constructed through ‘otherness.’ The ambivalent status of the feminine in culture is related to the abject—the feminine fascinates, and yet it is abhorrent to patriarchal discourse.⁵⁴

Disgust and aesthetics

One should not make too much of the gross-out, which is a pretty crude experience, speculation about its aesthetic power leads to deeper and more important territory: the realization that there is something made available by means of disgust that lies beneath the surface of both the recoil of revolt and the loathsome presentational qualities of objects. [...] At least part of the enticing nature of disgust is the impression that it possesses an elusive significance.

Carolyn Korsmeyer⁵⁵

In her 2011 book *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*⁵⁶ US academic Carolyn Korsmeyer elucidates the use of disgust within the aesthetic realm,

⁵³ Ibid. 388

⁵⁴ In November 2015 the ABC screened a two-part documentary on domestic violence in Australia *Hitting Home*. The statistics cited 20% of women over 15 had suffered some form of violence, abuse or sexual assault. This reveals a deep-seated misogyny in Australian culture.

⁵⁵ Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. 121

⁵⁶ Ibid. 121

in particular within art, focusing on film, literature and theatre, and providing useful insights for this research. Korsmeyer does a close reading of the presence of disgust, and the on-going fascination with using it within art practices through an historical overview of emotion theories, affect theories and the history of western aesthetics. She distinguishes and yet associates disgust with other sensations and emotions such as horror, the sublime, and fear: “The important thing to stress is that the experience gives rise to an apprehension, a grasp of an idea that is so imbedded in affective response to the work that provokes it as to be virtually inseparable.”⁵⁷ How my artwork might utilise the force of this feeling, and to what purpose, is a central question running through the research. In endeavouring to trigger that particular response, just disgusting enough to cause an embodied response, but not so overwhelming it utterly repels, I desire a compelled reaction, an embodied cognition.

Korsmeyer suggests disgust is an experience of complex meaning, not simply or only of repulsion, revulsion, nausea and abjection. In associating disgust with the sublime and with fear, she begins to reveal the potency of the sensation. She discusses “the paradox of beauty”, as more than mere prettiness, but containing something that demands we look again: “The conversion of pretty to beautiful requires a dose of something difficult that arrests attention and causes it to linger.”⁵⁸ Disgust has some of this as a characteristic as well—it lingers, compelling *and* repellent. Korsmeyer draws the conclusion that disgust, because of its ties to bodily sensation, has been excised from the traditions of modern philosophy that focuses on the subject and will, differentiated from pure contemplation that is divorced or separated from embodiment.⁵⁹ However, as Korsmeyer points out, disgust does not operate outside contemplation and reflection. Rather, disgust relies on imagination. Disgust in the arts is rendered almost always as representation, and therefore is apprehended through those senses most closely associated with aesthetics—vision and hearing. Most artworks are not able to function in any on-going manner with the senses we most closely associate with disgust: smell and taste. In artworks that generate disgust the imagination is in operation.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 134

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 171

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 49

Korsmeyer reflects on the historical rejection of disgust as worthy of philosophical contemplation, and comes to a different conclusion than those she quotes such as Kant, Lessing and Mendelssohn. In a reflection on Menninghaus' reappraisal of the German philosophical treatment of disgust [ekel] Korsmeyer demonstrates that disgust rather than sitting outside a philosophy of aesthetics acts as a "containment of the beautiful, that which keeps beauty itself from overreaching its own value and revolting us with a surfeit of pleasure."⁶⁰ The manner in which disgust contains and demarcates and limits the beautiful Korsmeyer connects with the sublime's containment or surpassing and overwhelming of beauty.

Korsmeyer notes how in food and art the "paradox of aversion"⁶¹ has acted as a provocation to philosophers and is of course central to our contemporary understanding of the sublime. However we can also associate it with spectatorship in all its forms, such as para-cinema film fans' love of extreme "mondo" films and the search for elusive, perhaps mythical, snuff and scat films. The continuing popularity of horror films and our love of tragedy in music, theatre, television and film demonstrates that aversive sensations are central to creative forms. Through aesthetic distancing we see the transformation of aversion into pleasure, or if not strictly 'pleasure' then surely a satisfaction of a desire. On the rollercoaster this is the transformation of terror and fear into exhilaration, and in the apprehension of something that is repellent⁶² (the rotting possum) the horror and revulsion might transform into contemplation and knowledge.

In art, however, Korsmeyer believes this transformation never completely occurs, and that many works rely on remaining repugnant, the force of disgust being an inherent element of the work's aesthetic resonance.⁶³ She does note the difference between those works, or more adequately, those spectators, readers or audience who find a work so disgusting they are repelled, in what she calls "nonappreciative disgust."⁶⁴ Korsmeyer contends that most artists endeavour to "alter our mentality" and that

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. 72

⁶² So often we read news where a person is forced to witness the defilement of a loved one.

Knowledge of the act is not enough; the witness must suffer the experience as well as the victim.

⁶³ Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. 87

⁶⁴ Ibid. 88

disgust used aesthetically for this end, because of its ability to disturb and disrupt mind and body, is particularly effective.

Disgust is used by both high art and mass entertainment; it is used powerfully in conjunction with a range of other emotions and affects, from pathos and tragedy to comedy and satire, from eroticism to horror, from mild discomfort to revulsion for all kinds of purposes and to evoke a vast range of responses.⁶⁵ Korsmeyer argues for the complexity of disgust “as a means to further another aesthetic emotion”⁶⁶.

Paradoxically in using this thought process, disgust becomes a delivery mechanism that adds to the complexity of sensation and depth of meaning to many other emotions. Disgust, rather than being, as generally considered, a singular abhorrent sensation, instead intensifies apprehension. It complicates meaning through its heterogeneous aspects, rather than as a simplistic, biological reflex.

The “paradox of aversion”, which connects with Aristotle’s writing on the paradox of tragedy in *Poetics* and Kant’s notion of the sublime, both demonstrate a desire for aversive and overwhelming experiences and emotions. Korsmeyer calls for an acknowledgement of the varieties of pleasure while looking to the various theories of pleasure and aesthetics, from Aristotle to Freud, and in doing so recognises the theoretical differences between the ideals of the Enlightenment in the efforts to isolate aesthetics from desire and pleasure, versus the Freudian and psychoanalytically driven comprehension of the will for pleasure, and the fundamental underlying role of desire(s) for all of us:

The object of disgust is prone to be connected with something which is concealed, secretive, multilayered, uncanny, sinister, as well as with something which is shameless, obtrusive, and alluring; that is, in sum, to be something which is taunting. Everything that is disgusting has in it something which is at one and the same time both striking and veiled, as is, say, a poisonous red berry or a garishly made-up face.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid. 90-91

⁶⁶ Ibid. 112

⁶⁷ Ibid. 122 Aurel Kolnai quoted in *Savouring Disgust*, quoted from *On Disgust*. 1929. Ed. Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer. Chicago: Open Court, 2004. 47

Korsmeyer connects our fascination with things that are disgusting to death, and its aftermath –the putrefying and rotting corpse, the waste products of our bodies and the animals, bacteria and processes associated with them, from worms and maggots to shit-eating animals and behaviours. After the death of a subject the corpse teems with other life forms (as do our many of other wastes: faeces, blood, and snot) that take over the processes once death has occurred. In this way disgust brings us closer to contemplating the disintegration of subjective selves into the stateless energy of the universe. Korsmeyer mentions Nietzsche’s “Dionysian impulse” in relation to the blurring of self as it merges into “orgiastic flux”⁶⁸, and the similar knowledge disgust embodies. Disgust reminds us of our own end and dissolution. Its affect does not fill us with joy or ‘orgiastic flux,’ yet it is fascinating, perhaps explaining the pull it has on our attention. Disgust is generated out of an acknowledgement of death and decay’s ambiguity as both “life-generating and death-dealing.”⁶⁹ The complexity of the experience goes beyond the ability to easily describe it with language, but still it is a cognitive one: “An aesthetic idea leads the mind towards the ineffable.”⁷⁰

Korsmeyer argues for a more complex reading of disgust than a “cognitive reading”, where we gain pleasure through reflecting on and contemplating our disgust, gaining knowledge through the experience. She looks to “classic conversion”, where in the hands of skilled artists tragedy becomes beautiful. Through reflecting on the relationship of fear to the sublime as the “pinnacle of aesthetic value,”⁷¹ Korsmeyer develops the term “sublate” to describe the effect disgust has as an aesthetic value, a term she borrows from alchemy and chemistry to describe the change from a gas to a solid. Korsmeyer links sublate to Hegel’s term “sublation” wherein a concept is negated or altered in order to become something of a different order. “Just as the experience of sublimity is likened to the elevation and expansion of the spirit–free from earthly weight–so the sublate signals aesthetic insight in a bodily, visceral response.”⁷² However the sublate differs from the sublime in that its moments might be miniscule, such as the worm in the fruit, Kristeva’s skin on the a cup of hot milk, a

⁶⁸ Ibid. 123

⁶⁹ Ibid. 128

⁷⁰ Ibid. 126

⁷¹ Ibid. 130

⁷² Ibid. 131

skid mark in underpants, greenish snot oozing out of a child's nose. Disgust and the sublate need not be an overwhelming sensation like the sublime. It might just as well be present in a quiet moment: a shudder of revulsion as one skids in dog shit, the memory of a foul odour, a small "ew" uttered in recognition of the decay and putrefaction always around us.

The aesthetic operation of disgust understood through Korsmeyer's concept of the sublate is applicable to many aspects of this research, particularly works made within The Twilight Girls collaboration. The collaboration takes as given McGinn's notion of the self-disgust inherent to mature adulthood, though he refutes even the possibility that art can be disgusting in material or form.⁷³ The Twilight Girls use McGinn's speculation in connection to gender, using an enculturated understanding that the feminine is disgusting. In much of The Twilight Girls' work the unflattering appearance and presence of our bodies is usually apparent, sometimes explicitly, sometime implicitly.

For the 2013 photographic work *The Twilight Girl* (Figure 2) Helen Hyatt-Johnston and I become one, merged together at the points at which our bodies overlap in the image. Grotesquely conjoined, hairy middle-aged women, saggy breasted, make-up free, we appear as if documented scientifically. Looking directly at the viewer, printed life size, the work reflects on the giving-up of agency associated with collaboration, where the singular subjectivity that is central to being an artist is put aside for the collaboration.

⁷³ McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*. 199-201



Figure 17: *The Twilight Girls, The Twilight Girl*, 2013. Inkjet on photo paper, 1.2m w x 1.8m h

We are merged into a heterogeneous figure with four eyes, four breasts, four hands, two mouths, yet a singular outline, an abomination that has managed to live long enough to age. Confronting our bodily shame, *The Twilight Girl* is digitally manipulated to reveal rather than conceal blemishes. The work enhances the uglier aspects of the middle-aged female body, rather than glossing over or concealing them. Operating through the skills usually used for product enhancement in advertising, this artwork continues *The Twilight Girls*' exploration of digital manipulation to 'de-enhance' images.

Violence, beauty and disgust

Within literature and mythology, the heart has frequently been used for its visceral and symbolic power: ripped out by jealous spouses and fathers, disguised and eaten as punishment, eaten consciously for its power, its evisceration from the body acting as

an emotional metaphor and for the expressively horrific violence of such actions. Considered literally, the ripping out of a human heart is a horrific action. However this is violence we recognise in the daily news: a jealous husband stabs his estranged wife with scissors;⁷⁴ videos posted by Islamic State of the beheadings of journalists are meant to inspire terror, but also revulsion.⁷⁵ More inane we see revolting images and videos as part of the stream of “clickbait” most media websites use to ramp up their view rate.⁷⁶ Korsmeyer connects the power of these stories with:

[...] the aesthetic affect [that] gains intensity from the hallmark visceral repulsion of disgust, which registers the inescapable, dolorous frailty of material existence [...] The sublate aspect of aesthetic disgust permits a moment of sustained recognition, providing a time to dwell upon mortality from a particularly intimate and fragile perspective.⁷⁷

Korsmeyer correlates beauty with disgust through a discursive analysis of “terrible beauty.” The transformation of difficult and aversive emotions give tragedy, for instance, its particular depth of sensation, a kind of difficult pleasure (though Korsmeyer believes the “pleasure/pain” dichotomy is too reductive, and containing, limiting “the nuances of real aesthetic valuation”⁷⁸). Beauty is not singular, cannot be broken down into components on which we will all agree: “After all if there were a formula for beauty, its production would be routine.”⁷⁹ It must contain something that arrests us, requiring us to look and consider longer than the “mere” acknowledgment of prettiness. Korsmeyer concludes “[...] beauty begins to move away from the simpler and easier varieties of aesthetic pleasure. [...] it nears territories of taxing appreciation for qualities that might also seem to qualify as opposites to beauty: that which is grotesque, harsh, sublime, or even ugly.”⁸⁰

⁷⁴ <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/slain-woman-had-tried-to-support-abusive-husband-20150118-12sr6q.html> Accessed 20 January 2015.

⁷⁵ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-03/islamic-state-release-video-showing-beheading-of-us-journalist/5714778> Accessed 20 January 2015.

⁷⁶ Recent examples of viral video includes a man pulling out an extremely long in-grown hair: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1147589/Man-removes-extremely-large-ingrown-hair-face.html> Accessed 20 January 2015.

⁷⁷ Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. 158

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 163. This is reminiscent of Aristotle’s “tragic pleasure” discussed earlier in this paper.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 161

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 168

William Ian Miller uses Shakespeare's phrase from *Macbeth* "The fair is foul, and the foul is fair" to illuminate the relationship of disgust to its opposite. Disgust must repel, but in doing so its very function is to analyse that which is repulsive, to distinguish the disgusting from everything else. Therefore it has elements of fascination and curiosity; these aspects of disgust make us gawp at traffic accidents and approach public toilets with alert apprehension.⁸¹ US academic Sianne Ngai in her 2005 book *Ugly Feelings* considers disgust and its relationship to desire in contemporary critical theory. She argues for disgust being the "true Kantian sublime," that in its irresistibility, disgust makes "outrageous claims for desirability."⁸² Ngai makes the point that disgust is never vague, unlike desire, which can be amorphous and eccentric. "Disgust is urgent and specific; desire can be ambivalent and vague."⁸³

Korsmeyer looks to the sublime as a concept created to contain beauty, or perhaps more importantly to surpass and overwhelm it. The sublime is powerful and unbounded, where beauty is contained and lovely. And here she makes a reference (at last!) to the problems of the gendered theorising of aesthetics, where the sublime has been understood to as suited more to the "robust" male temperament, and that beautiful things are, in comparison, feminine.⁸⁴ The gendered aspects of aesthetics is a long standing belief first posited by Kant, and further explored by Wendy Steiner in her 2001 book *Venus in Exile*. Steiner argues that within modernism the feminine vanished, and was put aside because of beauty's association with the feminine.⁸⁵

Contemporaneously we see this in the gendered readings of spectatorship wherein the more difficult-to-like extreme horror films are praised by the masculine para-cinema fan, while the less extreme, less "unlikeable" films are rendered feminine, and can be seen as a continuation of the denigration of the feminine. Look to the vampire genre, now thoroughly feminised through films such as the *Twilight* series, and television shows *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries* as examples of this operation, or, perhaps gentrification of the genre.

⁸¹ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. 111-114

⁸² Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). 334-335

⁸³ Ibid. 337

⁸⁴ Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. 169

⁸⁵ Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). 1-31

Korsmeyer argues for the complexity of averse beauty, where it may hover on the edges of horror and grotesquery, but the varying sensations of disgust accompany and are a part of understanding and appreciation of the works: “The discovery that disgust can perform such divergent intellectual tasks—that it can either illuminate the meaninglessness of the universe or present a deftly expressed insight that approaches beauty—demonstrates that this emotion can also propel philosophical commitments.”⁸⁶ Korsmeyer argues for disgust, and the sublime, as deeply meaningful experiences that allow us to comprehend our mortality and recognise the truth of our inevitable death and decay (not necessarily in that order). The experience opens us to the profound and terrible beauty that is occasionally revealed in the aesthetic use of disgust.

Film and media studies academic Eugenie Brinkema in her 2014 book *The Forms of the Affects*⁸⁷ stakes a claim for the radical potentiality of disgust. Its effect in making itself apparent physically and psychologically in wild fluctuations, erupting and in flux, suggests ways disgust may signify renewal and possibility rather than, as it is generally considered, for its nullifying affect.⁸⁸ Since Plato, disgust has been “[...] part of a much broader philosophical forgetting of the materiality of the body and simultaneous forgetting (or disembodiment or making metaphorical) of disgust and the disgusting.”⁸⁹

In Brinkema’s reading of disgust, the experience and the process of vomiting is foregrounded through a re-reading of philosophy from Plato’s account in *Symposium* of Aristophanes’ hiccups to Derrida’s re-evaluation in “Economimesis” of “the negatively-privileged role of disgust in Kant’s aesthetic philosophy.”⁹⁰ The linguistic relationship between taste (aesthetics) and tasting is located at the mouth, the site of consumption (eating), and of production (speaking) where Brinkema states “the mouth becomes a double fold.”⁹¹ Vomit and its relationship to disgust, as Brinkema interprets Derrida’s reading of Kant, is not excessive, or an overwhelming, or the

⁸⁶ Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. 177

⁸⁷ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 117

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 119

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 126

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

negative or “opposite of the aesthetic, but that which never ceases to be expelled from it (it can only *cause itself to be vomited*.) It is not sick’s content that is at stake but its supplementary form.”⁹² Through an association with the French term *jouissance* Brinkema forces an acknowledgement of the sensation of vomiting, not necessarily as an experience or bodily function in the negative, but for the relief it brings. “This is the particular perversion of disgust: in giving far too much enjoyment, it eats the conditions for the possibility of pleasure—in other words, and in a formulation horrible to Kant if acceptable to Nietzsche, disgust “makes one desire to vomit.”⁹³

However, the “problem” with vomit, in Brinkema’s thinking via Derrida, and much associated writing around disgust, is a tendency to position disgust in and through objects rather than as an affect. We can see this when considering what we find disgusting, which would usually appear as descriptions of things, moving us away from considering disgust as an affect, and instead towards an iconography of disgust.⁹⁴ This tendency to materialise disgust allows us to push actual disgust away from comprehension, in what Brinkema calls “*the worse than the worst*” (her italics). And again, in a further rejection of the positioning of disgust’s operation as a negative, an “anti”, Brinkema writes:

[...] disgust’s emesis compels a reversal of metaphorical energies: less the black hole vacuum of meaning that its zero-point function as the excluded of philosophy might suggest, disgust is far more like the hypothetical white hole, an emissive, productive horizon ejecting matter in place of absorbing it.”⁹⁵

Miller, Brinkma, Korsmeyer, Ngai and Menninghaus comprehend disgust as a complex cultural, social and biological force, as a generative, productive force, not simply or necessarily a negative, or a refusal or a rejection. “Disgust [...] operates in a

⁹² Ibid. 127

⁹³ Ibid. 128 Brinkema quotes Jacques Derrida, translated by R. Klein, *Diacritics*, Vol. 11, No. 2, “The Ghost of Theology: Readings of Kant and Hegel”. (Summer, 1981), 23.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 130

⁹⁵ Ibid. 132

kind of miasmic gloom, in the realm of horror, in regions of dark unbelievability, and never too far away from the body's and, by extension, the self's interiors."⁹⁶

This rumination on disgust suggests it is a foundational force in aesthetics and taste, and if McGinn is correct, perhaps *the* civilising sensation. Used to repel and compel, it is surprising that so few have made it a point of inquiry. Like humour and laughter, its physiological aspect and its continual evolution and mutating nature make it difficult to apprehend. However its forcefulness is a key to my strange attraction for the 'yuck' factor in the research, but also generally means it is central to making my way through the world. A soft threshold that I am ever approaching, the potency of disgust once it's got a hold is irrevocable, and it is what makes it a compelling aspect in art.

Disgusting art

For art to be disgusting Colin McGinn states it must be made from disgusting material or its content must be disgusting. Many artists have used "disgusting" material in their works, and there are many who have been deemed to have broken social codes and have been labelled disgusting through the content of their work. Recent Australian examples include Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's labelling Bill Henson's work "revolting" in a television interview in May 2008,⁹⁷ and the Melbourne artist Paul Yore being charged with child pornography offences in 2013, charges that were ultimately dismissed.⁹⁸ Historically we can look to the Nazis' "Degenerate Art" exhibition, the Viennese Actionists with their use of symbolic slaughter, torture, coprophilia and sacrifice,⁹⁹ Carolee Schneemann's disruption and integration of performance with pornography in her 1965 film *Fuses*, Judy Chicago's 1971

⁹⁶ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. 36

⁹⁷ Karl Stefanovic from Channel Nine's Today Show asked Kevin Rudd about an exhibition of photographs by Bill Henson at Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Paddington. The police had closed the exhibition to the public in May 2008. Cited on 5th December 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/henson-exhibition-shut-down/2008/05/22/1211182997068.html>

⁹⁸ The charges against Paul Yore were dismissed in October 2014. <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/blog/arts-desk/Artist-Paul-Yore-acquitted-of-pornography-charges-141001/default.htm> Accessed 15 July, 2015.

⁹⁹ Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body*, Abridged, rev. and updated. ed. (London; New York, NY: Phaidon, 2012). Tracey Warr, "Preface," 12

photolithograph *Red Flag*, as artists who have negotiated disgust within in the material of the work and in its reception.



Figure 18: Judy Chicago, *Red Flag*, 1971. Photolithograph (51/94), 20"x 24," printed from aluminium plates by Sam Francis

In *Red Flag* Chicago aspired to a feminist iconography by using an image of an action most women experience – the removal of a tampon. Surprisingly, it is one of the first images associated with menstruation in western art. Removing a tampon is a banal act, yet the work, with its title suggestive of left-wing political agitation (a red flag is associated with communism and socialism, with China, Vietnam and the former USSR sporting red flags), can be read as a call for women to lose the shame and secrecy that surrounds a biological function so closely identified with the female sex. Joanna Frueh says “offensiveness” was Chicago’s intention, connecting *Red Flag* to Germaine Greer’s suggestion in *The Female Eunuch* that women should overcome their disgust of menstruation through tasting their blood.¹⁰⁰

Australian artists who work with disgust through laughter as a form of cultural and social exploration include Mark Shorter (a recent collaborating partner with *The Twilight Girls*), Trevor Fry, Hannah Raisin and, *some* works by *some* artists. Mark

¹⁰⁰ Joanna Frueh quoted from “The Body Through Women’s Eyes”, 1994, Peggy Phelan and Helena Reckitt, *Art and Feminism*, Themes and Movements. (London: Phaidon, 2006). 97

Shorter's performance persona Renny Kodgers is a ridiculously masculinised caricature. Wielding a giant flaky latex penis with silvery-pubed merkin, Kodgers, with his fake tan and delusional self-belief, is a raconteur in filthy double entendre. Shorter uses his body as a disruptive entity. As a model in a life drawing class, Renny Kodgers came up behind students and rubbed himself inappropriately on them as he offered assistance. Trevor Fry aims for provocation in works that are scatologically phallogentric. He riffs on the shitty material of clay while constructing penises that become turds, turds with erections, tentacles that become penises, and turds that become tentacles, while referencing ancient rites and cults in an overblown and faked archaeology of filth. Melbourne artist Hannah Raisin meanwhile uses herself in video and photo works that mock the limits and constraints of socially acceptable standards of behaviour and beauty. In an early video work *My Cunt Smoking Without Me*, 2009, Raisin's cunt lights up while sitting on a toilet. These artists and works are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Critical disgust

In my practice, a self-reflexive, gendered disgust is bounced back through the artworks in an attempt to acknowledge the deep-held disgust in which the feminine is held in Australian culture. Through our physicality, *The Twilight Girls*, in using the spectacular, tabloid and tawdry aspects of contemporary Australian gendered representation, aim to critique from within. The power of the negative and abjected feminine is used *because* it is potent, meaningful and disruptive—and exploits revolting representations. Disrupting the finesse of representation informs *The Twilight Girls*, and my solo practice. The highly aestheticised and refined, beautiful, slim, young, retouched, smooth and hairless form becomes “alter”-aestheticised, and manipulated for a different purpose. This is not necessarily for positive affirmation, a reclaiming and re-working of Barbara Creed's “monstrous feminine”¹⁰¹, or even revaluation of it. Instead, a refinement of technique is used to “polish a turd”, to maximise a gloss with the slime of vulgarity rather than finessing for beauty. The sheen of finish is mucosal not polish. Extreme efforts are made in using disgust as a form of self-reflexive self-loathing turned into comic revulsion. This is combined

¹⁰¹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Popular Fiction Series. (London; New York: Routledge, 1993).

with a self-reflexive understanding of internalised hatred of the feminine that stems from deeply embedded cultural loathing.

In disgusting myself (and ourselves in *The Twilight Girls*) I devise momentary spaces to apprehend, through the reflection of aesthetics, the forces of culture in operation. Self-disgust is used as critique to avoid the morally repellent aspects of disgust. I do not differentiate myself as subject and object in representation, although this won't stop audiences objectifying. There is pleasure and unease in this process. Without pleasure in the doing and making, the discussions and arguments in the collaboration become laborious. Through provocation, arguing, accepting and teasing, the social process of thinking and making is pleasurable. These processes infiltrate the outcome, so that we have 'refined' the vulgarity, finessed the revulsion, by the completion of each project (ideally).

However in utilising disgust through aesthetics there is great potential for failure. The disruption of experience caused by revulsion might overwhelm with disgust, or worse, contempt. In evoking disgust, the failing of badness is lurking—the risk of doing something shitful is that it will only ever be shitful. How can one operate along a cusp where revulsion lies on one side, and badness and stupidity on the other, while humour (or its failure, the unfunny) overlaps it all?

In placing the feminine body, my own body, in this position, I am possibly reiterating a cultural positioning where the feminine is either utterly aestheticized or utterly repugnant. Ongoing feminist debates, by artists such as Mary Kelly,¹⁰² that any use of the female body plays into the objectification of the feminine implies feminine representation remains at the core of representational modes. From advertising to pornography, film and television to art, the aestheticized feminine form is the message. This research positions the body, our bodies, my body, at the centre of the experience of representation. Here theories are explored viscerally as I work through self-representations, my body/myself and yet I also remove myself and experience the work as a vicarious spectator. I attempt an ethical methodology. I do not use others as fodder for this exploitation, but only subject my own representation to the humiliation

¹⁰² Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (Boston, USA: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).

of being awful, vulgar and horrible. The creative work risks failure in being too revolting and disgusting. Alternatively it risks being pathetic and affectless, not funny, just stupid or worse, boring.

3. Styled Failings

[...] far from failure being no success at all, in its very visceral intensity, it is perhaps the only success there is. **Will Self**¹

Dropping out isn't the answer; fucking up is. **Valerie Solanas**²

Failure is complex, with subtleties that on initial contemplation are not clearly evident. At one level, it is a state under which the majority of us toil most of the time through our insufficiencies and inadequacies—not rich, not happy, not sexy, not beautiful, not clever, not special and so on. At another, its unexpected outcomes and sudden appearance (think of slapstick here) has the potential to disrupt the status quo and generate surprisingly authentic experiences. Paradoxically the risk of failing gives success its meaning. Just as elation is felt when a success is achieved, there is a certain pleasure in wallowing in personal failure and the self-pitying delicious/awful experience of intensified internalised subjectivity.

The use of failure as subject, medium and method through intention and accident are crucial aspects of many creative practices. Correspondingly, the notions of experimentation, risk, novelty, originality, and innovation are perceived to be key to practices of artists. This research investigates when failure collides and intersects with the notions of novelty that are used in discussions on creative practices. What happens when risk becomes a cliché, innovation is banal, and experimentation is silly? What happens when failure corrupts those unspoken modes of creative practice? What if failure is strived for or becomes an intended aspect of a work? Does intentionality corrupt failure? What forms and functions might disrupted failure have?

Performance (I include in this term live art, body art, theatre, and any form that requires a person to do something in front of other people under the broad frame of

¹ Will Self, "Falling Short: Seven Writers Reflect on Failure", 2 June, 2013.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/22/falling-short-writers-reflect-failure>

² Valerie Solanas, *Scum Manifesto* (San Francisco: AK Press, 1996). 44

art/creative practice) is the medium through which failure is often explored in (de)generative ways, as the on-going belief in the ontological significance of the form shows. The word ‘performance,’ in its suggestion that what is occurring is something other than daily affairs, implies the potential of witnessing and experiencing alterations of the usual. The experience of performing differs from that of the witness, though this is an area that has undergone considerable exploration since the 1960s, with the development of performance art, body art, happenings, situations, experiences, relational aesthetics, live art and so on. This research is interested in the experience of failure in performance for performers, participants and audiences and/or witnesses.

Failing to perform

Watching a performance fall apart, or for it to be incoherent, or excessively clichéd or for it to have been a stupid concept from the outset (most of us have experienced some unintentionally awful performance art), can be genuinely excruciating and fascinating, at times hilarious. For the performers it may have the added sensations of embarrassment, mortification and shame. If the performer is oblivious, the ignominy lies in the witnessing of the sincerity of effort that creates such “sublime clunkiness”.³ However, failing to perform to a pre-determined standard is never prescriptive or singular. Rather, failure is multivalent. It can occur at any moment, it is non-determinative and messy, permissive and inclusive with most of us having experienced it in some form or another.

Each new work or action or concept an artist undertakes contains within it the risk of failure. The risk of the new is that it may not be recognised as worthy of consideration. We can see this in the lives of many artists, to such an extent that we could say failing in life only to be feted in death is perhaps a central cliché in the modernist myth of the artist from Juliet Margaret Cameron to Vincent Van Gogh and Jeffrey Darger. The artist Claude Cahun, for example, was associated with the Surrealists in the 1920s, and died in obscurity in the 1950s. In the 1980s and 1990s her photographic work was recuperated as a precursor to notions of the malleable and

³ Geoffrey O’Brien, quoted in Robbins, *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy*. 296

fluid subject of the post-modern era, a precursor to Judith Butler's concepts of the performativity of gender.⁴ Largely forgotten in her own lifetime, a marginal figure at best, Cahun and her collaborator Marcel Moore have been elevated posthumously.

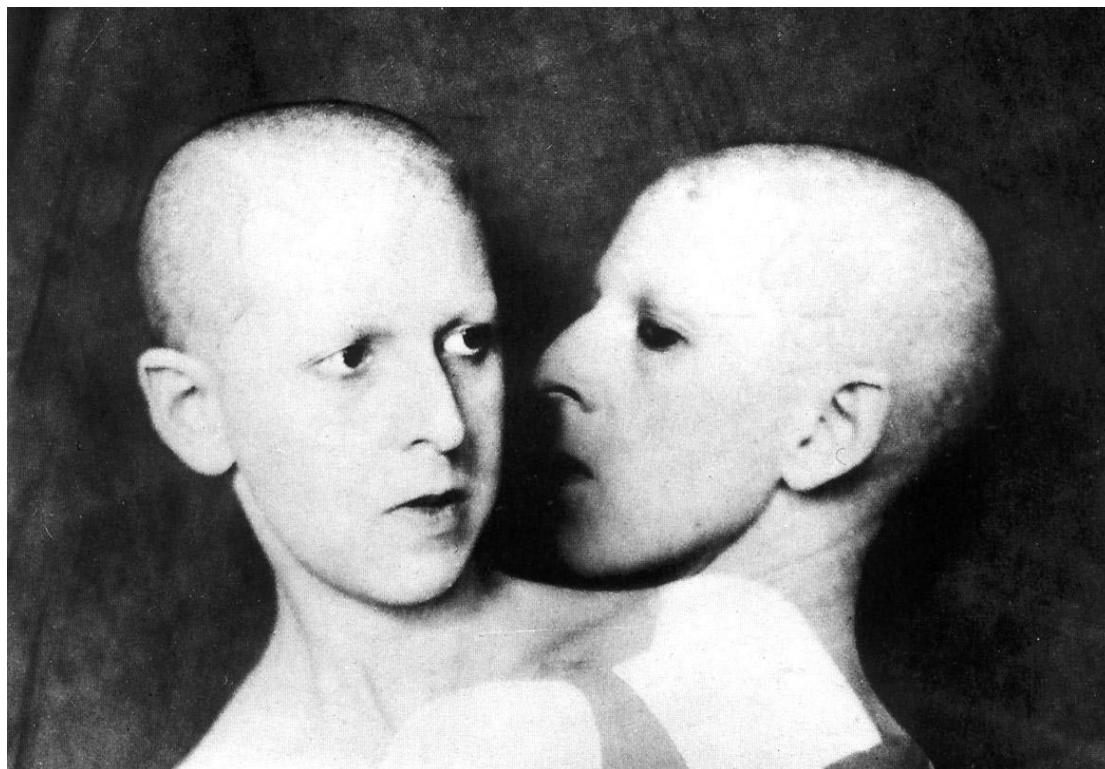


Figure 19: Claude Cahun, *Que me veux-tu?* (*What do you want from me?*), double self-portrait, 1929. Vintage gelatin-silver print, 18 x 23 cm Private collection © Estate of Claude Cahun. Photo: Philippe Migéat

The authenticity of the experience of failure intrigues, and is perhaps not dissimilar from the sensations discussed in the preceding chapters on disgust and humour in its intensity. More specifically my interest in failure here is in how humour, disgust, and gender operate and intersect through failure. Failure is a disruption, a break, a negative, a movement away rather than towards clarification and knowledge. *The Macquarie Dictionary* defines failure variously as an inadequacy, to run short, insufficiency, a person or an action that is unsuccessful, an action that is not realised, and non-performance.⁵ Failure dirties, muddies and stinks up. Failure can be, but is not necessarily, stupid or the result of stupid decisions, and as academic Avital Ronell points out stupidity shows itself variously in a lack of distinction and

⁴ Whitney Chadwick "An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors: Women, Surrealism and Self Representation," in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self Representation*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The MIT Press, 1998).

⁵ "The Macquarie Dictionary," (McMahons Point, Australia: Macquarie Library 1982). 639

indeterminacy, just as well as through blind belief or false mastery,⁶ which most of us have witnessed in creative practices. Artists must have delusions of mastery and self-belief as necessary aspects of creative actions, in the assumption their creative act is significant and worthy enough to leave the privacy of the artist's consideration, and enter the public realm. Though, for artists, the public realm has many hierarchies with some realms much more public than others,⁷ and some with much higher cultural capital than others.

In its most basic operations I suggest humour occurs with a disruption or failure of expectations. Slapstick perhaps most readily exemplifies this, where we laugh when a person fails, for instance, to walk (they fall over, the audience laughs). However wordplay, jokes, puns, and visual jokes also operate on a disruption of an anticipated outcome. Within the context of comedy, failure is funny, and even failed comedy can generate its own excruciating humour. Disgust too can be understood as a form of failure wherein our sensibilities fail to withstand the overwhelming of a bodily boundary, or an overwhelming of taste and discretion, manners and even aesthetics. Disgust arises when we fail to keep out that which disgusts us. Attempts to repress disgust are often counterproductive as it frequently extends and exacerbates the sensation. Paradoxically giving in to nausea is both relieving and revolting, as demonstrated in the act of vomiting. It is a relief to be expelling and submitting to the nausea, and revolting in the burn and taste of the vomit, its sudden appearance abhorrent to gaze upon, its odour alone able to cause others to vomit.

What then is failure?

Failure is the opposite of success. To fail is to not succeed, to break, to not perform, to be bankrupt.⁸ For most people failure is considered negative rather than positive, although in the push for success in the contemporary world, failure is currently perceived as a necessary step along the path to success, particularly in the realms of

⁶ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002). 69

⁷ I consider this in relation to my practice. Occasionally works have been shown in places and spaces where the audience has been quite broad (for instance MCA Sydney, MOCASD San Diego). Usually work is seen by peers, family and friends in artist-run spaces, and resultantly is contained within a fairly limited arena.

⁸ George Ostler, *The Little Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 4th ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press; Clarendon Press, 1975). 192

business and technology.⁹ To understand failure is to understand success, particularly now, at this moment in time, where the drive for ‘success’ has become a cultural imperative. The contemporary cultural will to succeed has embraced failure as a step on the path to success, taking on Samuel Beckett’s piece of prose from *Worstword Ho* “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better”¹⁰ as mantra.¹¹ Beckett’s piece reflects on the struggle of action, of creativity and of continuation within a state of perpetual and abject failure. Rather than improving on failure, “Fail better” is to fail more, again and again, over and over, not for betterment, but as a state in which to live. However Beckett’s “Fail again. Fail better” has been smoothly incorporated into entrepreneurial and start-up company mottos, his gloomy, pessimistic comprehension of human life somehow inverted into an aphorism on the path to multi-millionairehood.

Success is never absolute or final, but leaves us wanting (more success). Success is penultimate. Once achieved dissatisfaction is almost immediate. Success fails at the moment it is achieved, it is fleeting and in this sense unobtainable. Failure is the more common state, as it is ever-present. The insistent urgings for success, from TED Talks to the professionalising of art, imply constant failure. Success is promoted as a matter of thought, of willpower and, naturally the pathway to great riches (financial wealth being the clearest marker of success in this age).¹² The currency of aspirational capitalism aligns with the notions of progress and victory pedalled through recent history. Success tends to be conventionally defined according to fairly narrow criteria; it tends to be prescriptive and exclusive in its appeal to normative definitions and conditions, and hence conservative.

⁹ Mark O’Connell, “The Stunning Success of “Fail Better”: How Samuel Beckett Became Silicon Valley’s Life Coach,” The Slate Group, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/01/samuel_beckett_s_quote_fail_better_becomes_the_mantra_of_silicon_valley.html.

¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: Calder, 1983). 8

¹¹ Ned Beaman, “Fail Worse,” *The New Inquiry*, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/fail-worse/>

¹² “ [...] what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities and pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange?” Karl Marx quoted in Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service*, Routledge Advances in Theatre and Performance Studies (London: Routledge, 2011). 73

Failure however is multivalent. It can occur at any moment, it is messy, permissive and inclusive. “Failure *works*” is how performance theorist Sara Jane Bailes puts it in her 2011 book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*.¹³ Looking to Samuel Beckett, as so many have when considering failure, Bailes writes that success levels out difference, where failure “[...] opens up a fruitful, tragicomic ground where subversion and resistance can be tried and rehearsed.”¹⁴ Bailes’ concept of ‘failure works’ suggests a reconsideration of failure as an operation or process with no pre-determined outcome, a function not requiring functionality.

US artist David Robbins’ 2011 book *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy* posits a similar understanding of failure, particularly in relation to the comic. Robbins foregrounds how failure is a necessary component of the comedic through illuminating how an artist might consider working with failure in looking to the figure of the fool, whose function (or “project” as Robbins calls it) is to fail. Therefore the fool can only fail when he (usually a he!) does NOT fail. As Robbins states “... for the fool, failure... isn’t.”¹⁵ ‘Failure isn’t’ proposes a speculative attitude one might take on as a refusal of the negativity of failure. Denying or refusing failure can take us back to stupidity, where the fool does not know when they have failed.

Consider the word “loser.” Linguistically it comes from the verb to lose, meaning to not win, to be an unsuccessful person. However it has taken on a subtly different tone in vernacular language. In Australia we might associate it with “dag”, which the *Macquarie Dictionary* states is an odd, eccentric and amusing person, *or* and untidy or slovenly person, *or* a neat and tidy person but with no panache or style.¹⁶ “Dag” in Australia however is often used with affection; it is not a totalising ‘putdown’ in the way “loser” is.

With the proposition ‘failure isn’t’ in mind, what kinds of failure don’t work or function? Failure is potentially harder to locate than success. Success is obvious - it is

¹³ *Ibid.* 2

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 3

¹⁵ Robbins, *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy*. 292

¹⁶ “The Macquarie Dictionary.” 468

feted, glorified, trumpeted, promoted, advertised. We know the successes, and the successful, but the failures and the failed are, if not concealed, then certainly out of view and out of awareness. Failure has little presence, is unnoticed—we conceal our failures from ourselves and from others. Many of us know our own failures. Sometimes we privately acknowledge, comprehend, and move on from failure. Other times the failures are so gross, overwhelming and shaming we wallow and debase ourselves in it, mulling it over and over in a Freudian loop of the returned of the repressed.

The very particular shame and disappointment of failing in public is explored in Tracey Moffatt's 2001 photo series *Fourth*, in which she focused on athletes who came fourth during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. The work demonstrates a very particular aspect of failure—the not quite good enough, in an exceptionally poetic manner. Moffatt compares the abject failure of coming last with that of just missing out: “Fourth means that you are almost good. Not the worst (which has its own perverted glamour) but almost. Almost a star!”¹⁷

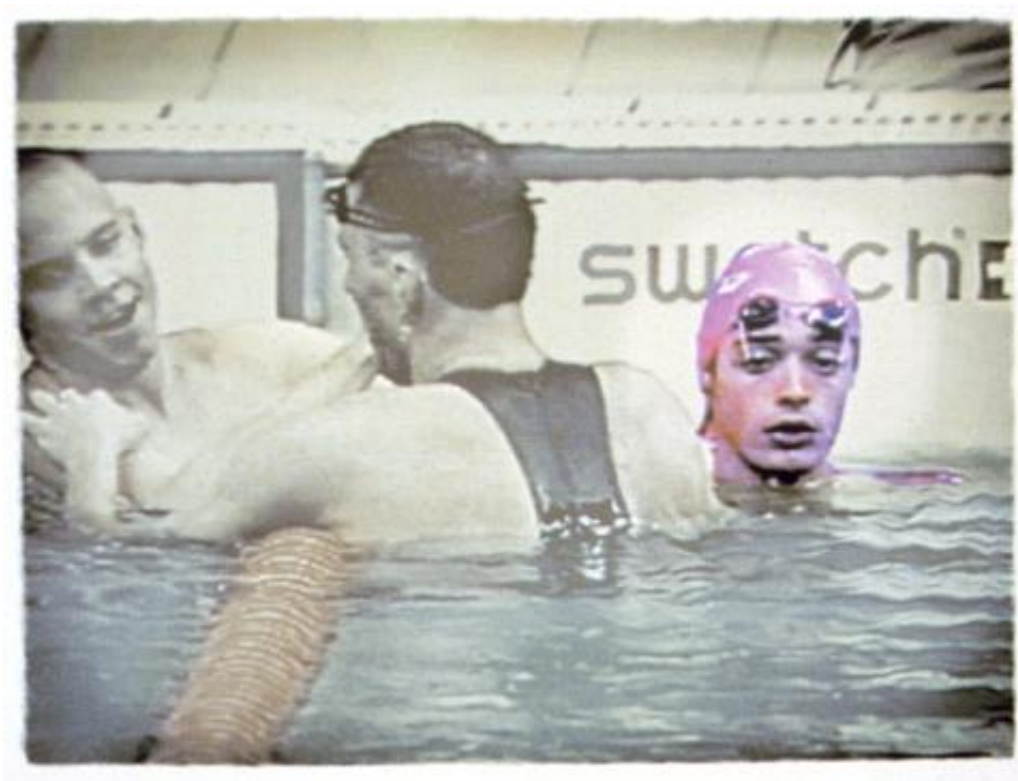


Figure 20: Tracey Moffatt, *Fourth* #2, 2001. Colour print on canvas. 36 × 46cm

¹⁷ Tracey Moffatt, *Tracey Moffatt* (Wellington, NZ: City Gallery Wellington, 2002). 73

In *Fourth* Moffatt explores the emotional tragedy of failure, but worse, failure when one is performing at an exceptional level-Olympic “gold” standard—and yet this is not quite exceptional enough. The superhuman level of effort and training, the desire, will and ability to compete at an elite level falls just short. We believe in the sincerity and authenticity of the elite athlete; even the occasional, yet not uncommon, story on drug use cannot undermine the sheer will to succeed. In fact we could say drug cheats illustrate the triumph of the will to win over ethics in their efforts to get to the podium.

J. J. Halberstam in her 2011 book *The Queer Art of Failure* makes a counterintuitive argument for the potential of failure as a potent negativity for resisting the capitalist imperative for success: “... we might read *failure*, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing.”¹⁸ “Practising failure”¹⁹ becomes in Halberstam’s model a detour from the tyranny of success and achievement, and instead calls on us to experience distraction, to find a limit, avoid mastery, to get lost, and to lose. Through this obscure ontology Halberstam suspects there is the possibility of an undermining of the contemporary culture of/ for success. However it would be impossible to know as surely one of the indicators of practising failure would be to refuse to claim it as another affirmation in the manner that “Fail better” in becoming a slogan for tech start-ups ironically inverses Beckett’s meaning. Moffatt’s work subtly explores the ambiguity of failing, revealing the emotional commitment required and the self-belief necessary for any endeavour, even the failed ones.

Failure and art

In 2015 in Australia the television station SBS screened *Struggle Street*, a three-part documentary about people living in public housing in western Sydney. Dubbed ‘poverty porn’ by the mayor of Blacktown Stephen Bali, the documentary showed the difficulties of people struggling with poverty, drug addiction, dysfunctional families,

¹⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. 12

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 120

unemployment, mental and physical health problems in western Sydney.²⁰ The program revealed some Australian social inequities in showing the extreme difficulties of people's lives. However it also demonstrates that the arguments and ideas posited in this research on failure are idealised. When I 'fail', in the studio, or if I fail within this doctorate I won't end up in jail or homeless, or in hospital. The failure discussed here is esoteric and philosophical in nature. In discussing art, the failure is concerned with representation, with form, material and context. It cannot be concerned with everyday failure as it would interrupt the 'success' or completion of the research.

Herein lies the paradox of the use of failure in contemporary creative practice: it is productive and generative rather than necessarily negative. Perhaps the only absolute failure in art is to stop doing it. But even then there are a number of examples where this decision has been incorporated into a consideration of art and art making. Examples of this that come to mind are Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance 1985–1986* (No Art Piece) and his *1986–1999* (Thirteen Year Plan) in which he made art but did not show it. After 1999 Hsieh declared he was no longer an artist although he still exhibits his works and talks to art audiences.

US artist Lee Lozano's work *General Strike Piece*, begun in 1969, was essentially a decision to withdraw from the art world, which she achieved by moving from New York to Texas in 1972. Lozano began *General Strike Piece* at the same time as her other 'refusal' work *Boycott Women*, which she had intended to do for a month. However it is understood that Lozano maintained both refusals for the remainder of her life, not talking to women and not participating in art. US curator Helen Molesworth writes that Lozano's works are intertwined rejections of patriarchy and capitalism: "The strategy of rejection is a powerful one, perhaps more so today than ever before, as the logic of late-capitalism is almost exclusively affirmative."²¹

²⁰ ABC website, updated 6 May, 2015. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-06/garbage-truck-protest-again-sbs-reality-tv-struggle-street/6448012>

²¹ Helen Molesworth, "Tune in, Turn on, Drop Out: The Rejection of Lee Lozano," *Art Journal* Winter, 2002, 61, no. 4 (2002).

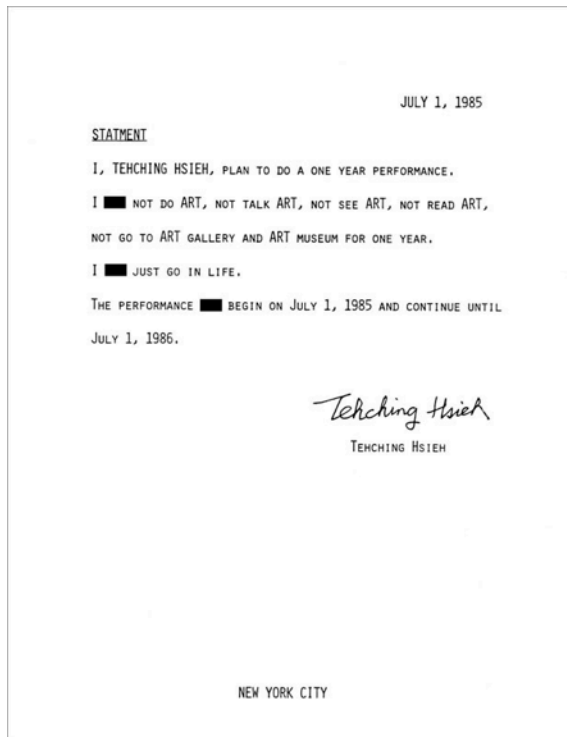


Figure 21: Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance*, 1985-1986. Performance.

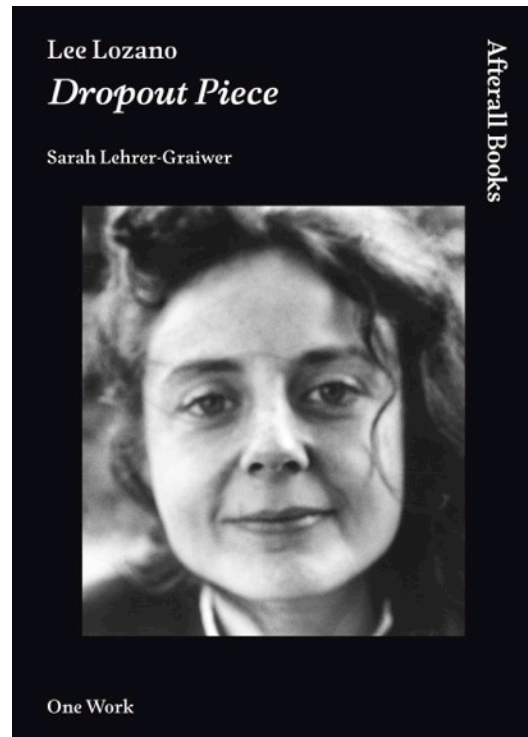


Figure 22: Book cover, *Lee Lozano Dropout Piece*, MIT Press, 2014. Written by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer.

Hsieh and Lozano defined and constructed their decisions through framing them as art. In this sense their works are about the labour of art—Lozano’s piece is called *General Strike Piece* after all. An alternative rejection of art is the general belief that Marcel Duchamp had stopped making art in the late 1940s to focus on chess. This was subterfuge. It was revealed on his death that Duchamp built his final piece *Étant donnés* over the last twenty years of his life in a concealed space in his apartment in New York.²²

²² Janis Mink, *Marcel Duchamp, 1887-1968: Art as Anti-Art* (Cologne: Taschen, 2004). 86-90



Figure 23: Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés*, 1946-1966. Mixed media, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photograph: Jane Polkinghorne

Lozano and Hsieh's decisions to stop art are different to the non-making and non-doing space that occurs before an art project unfolds. Their works are a refusal, an absolute stop. In making, thinking and creating work there are many states of boredom through which one must pass, where nothing much seemingly happens. The artist sits waiting, Beckett-like, for something, anything to happen, a thought to come, an idea to spring forth. This non-time allows for materials, ideas, readings, thoughts, and previous works to decay, putrefy and conglomerate into (de)generative forms. This active/inactive state of not-doing is ambivalent, a formless process (Bataille), but nonetheless necessary as the composting of thoughts through rotting and decomposing becomes a knowing of a different kind. The putrefaction of thought spawns differing materials (ideas, thoughts, feelings, words). Correspondingly, doing is also a necessity in the making of work. To choose to do nothing becomes an action.

J. J. Halberstam's 'Practising failure' and David Robbins' 'Failure isn't' both recall the art-making process, wherein much must fail before a project can be realised. The realisation itself may fail, but in not succeeding an end is delineated or there is finitude rather than outright success. The processes of making therefore are not necessarily locations of failure for artists, as failure is inherent to creative processes:

the absurdity of striving and failing, striving and failing, over and over with no necessary finality. The artist's project is one that unfolds over the stages of their practice. But we can differentiate between the inbuilt mechanism of failure in the art project and failure as a subject or theme artists may choose to explore.

The absurdity of failure within creative practices is clearly evident in the anthology *Failure* (2010) as those authors and artists writing or written about are, in the most part, very successful and well known within the art canon. There is a deep irony in asking well-known, "successful" artists to make work about failure, a contradiction that lies within the method or style of failure-in-art, a contradiction that lies at the heart of the book *Failure*, and probably at the centre of any art-as-failure. Gender discrepancies overwhelm with roughly a quarter of the book written about or by women. This seems to suggest women fail at failure, and fail at art about failure.

The editor of *Failure*²³ Lisa Le Feuvre in her introduction to the book explains artists' fascination with and usage of failure:

Uncertainty and instability characterise these times. Nonetheless, success and progress endure as a condition to strive for, even though there is little faith in either. All individuals and societies know failure better than they might care to admit – failed romance, failed careers, failed politics, failed humanity, failed failures. Even if one sets out to fail, the possibility of success is never eradicated, and failure is once again ushered in.²⁴

Le Feuvre goes on to broadly define failure as "the gap between realization and intention"²⁵. Artists who use failure as a methodology are therefore working outside this definition, as their intent is to fail in the realisation of the work. The book contains writing on or by some of the more obvious practices that investigate failure: John Baldessari, Martin Kippenberger, abject art, Fischli and Weiss, Francis Alÿs and

²³ Lisa Le Feuvre, *Failure*, Documents of Contemporary Art. (Cambridge, Mass. London: MIT Press; Whitechapel Gallery, 2010).

²⁴ *Ibid.* 13

²⁵ *Ibid.*

so on. What it doesn't write about are those artists whose works are so awful they are never written about, or academics whose writing is so poorly executed and misconceived they are never published. Badness and failure are, within this book, considered as conceptual modes rather than judgements on particular artists and artworks. (Though I must confess the only 'book'²⁶ published on my work is self-published.)

Taken in its entirety *Failure* therefore suggests that in looking to failure as a methodology within creative practices we can assume that certain types of failure are what we might call 'attractive.' Artists and creative practitioners want to fail in a manner that 'succeeds,' as mentioned before, as a conceptual operation and consideration. In this context then failure doesn't mean what we think it does—which we could loosely categorise as the opposite of success, the negative of achievement. Instead, failure (certain kinds of failure) becomes another form of succeeding. Failure is used, in the context of *Failure*, as a methodology or a style or approach to thinking about art making, and its paradoxical position in art where failure is a state to achieve for the work, but not for the artist, who might succeed through failing generatively.

In his essay in *Failure*, "Judgement and Purpose" (1987), Joel Fisher draws to our attention how failure operates as shifting boundaries or frontiers of possibility where insecurity, uncertainty and acceptability overlap in fraught, unexpected and ambivalent relationships.²⁷ He looks to Christianity's valorising of imperfection through the centrality of the sick, the afflicted and the poor, and how this was a counter to the Greek correlation of success with perfection. Interestingly Fisher believes both these worldviews are operating simultaneously within contemporary western culture, in a contradictory relationship Fisher calls "radical ambivalence."²⁸ Success, Fisher claims, is about intention, and therefore failure cannot be intentional as it becomes "[...] an unwholesome, nihilistic form of success."²⁹ Christianity's founding story of Jesus the man/god whose failure (his very human death through

²⁶ 'Book' overstates the photocopied and stapled A6 *The Twilight Girls* pamphlet self-published in 1999 by Helen Hyatt-Johnston and myself as The Twilight Girls.

²⁷ Joel Fisher, "Judgement and Purpose," in *Failure*, ed. Lisa Le Feuvre (Cambridge, Mass. London: MIT Press; Whitechapel Gallery, 2010). P118

²⁸ *Ibid.* 116

²⁹ *Ibid.* 118

crucifixion)³⁰ created the Christian faith still forms a basis for contemporary ethics in nominally western democratic countries (including Australia). However many Pentecostal churches have increasingly embraced material prosperity as equivalent to spiritual wealth,³¹ another indicator of the capitalisation of all aspects of life, and an indicator of Fisher's notion of radical ambivalence.

Sara Jane Bailes, discussing performance, theatre and live art, writes that failure “haunts” art throughout the twentieth century as a way of generating authenticity in the struggle between “the real and the represented.”³² Failure's appearance in creative forms risks becoming *about* failure—failure becomes the subject and the work moves into representation rather than demonstration of failure. This is an ambivalent operation wherein the artwork fails, or the artwork comes to *represent* failure. Citing Peggy Phelan, Bailes writes “That chasm between (R)real and represented, between “thing” and “a thing about a thing” frequently concealed but at other times crudely exposed, describes the territory where performances that fail, performance *as* failure, and the failure of performance gain their ground.”³³ Under this argument intentionality disrupts failure. David Robbins counters this, suggesting failure is a state that does not require judgement. Instead the disruptive nature of failing is an end in and of itself, particularly within the framework of comedy.³⁴

In the contemplation of creative practices we should consider that many works fail under the laser beam of contemporary critical discourses. Undertaken in a deluded spirit of mastery, once a work is finished, exhibited, show over, in the aftermath I generally consider most exhibitions a failure. Works appear stupid to me once they are completed, and I will usually feel stupid reflecting on a work's failings, in

³⁰ Pope Francis recently said in a sermon in New York “The cross shows us a different way of measuring success. Ours is to plant the seeds. God sees to the fruits of our labors. And if at times our efforts and works seem to fail and not produce fruit, we need to remember that we are followers of Jesus Christ and his life, humanly speaking, ended in failure, the failure of the cross.” Emily Shapiro, “Read What Pope Francis Said at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral,” September 24, 2015. <http://abcnews.go.com/US/read-pope-francis-yorks-st-patricks-cathedral/story?id=34023376>

³¹ Kate Bowler, “Daily Grind: The Spiritual Workday of the American Prosperity Gospel,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 8, no. 5 (2015).

³² Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service*. 12

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Robbins, *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy*. 291-292

considering that I once thought the work was ever going to succeed. Stupidity and failure are connected within my research, and in fact there are many projects that never made it past a concept because they seemed too stupid. An aspect of this is the ‘style’ I work through; works are often rendered through an excessive and ridiculous aesthetic. Obviously constructed, ‘faked’ and manipulated, the works nonetheless maintain a pretence, a delusion even, of the seamless ‘real’, much like the absurd contrivances we are deluged with by advertising. However the obviousness of the fakery draws attention to itself, its inauthenticity exposed in the pantomime style of acting and low-budget effects. Working with the ridiculousness of mediated representation, it is ironically difficult to operate on a threshold of stupidity and clever re-interpretation.

In the presentation “Failing to Perform: When Performance Art Isn’t” in the 2015 symposium Next To Nothing: Art And Performance I endeavoured to articulate and enact a performance that dissolved into failure both authentic and contrived, sometimes simultaneously in order to explore the nature of posing, presenting and performing. The presentation discussed some of those notions that seem to cohere around performance art such as presence, authenticity, and duration, with my addition of failure. Structured as an academic giving a symposium paper, it was written in a faux-academic style or mode. A PowerPoint presentation was used to show images of various iconic performance art and artists (Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, VALIE EXPORT, Carolee Schneemann) interspersed with photographs of my re-imagining of some iconic Marina Abramović’s works, including *The Artist is Present (Drinking)*, and *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, and the performance with Ulay *Relation in Time*. There were images of Tony Abbott (at that point he had been dumped from the Prime Ministership for Malcolm Turnbull two weeks earlier) as I discussed some definitions of failure in relation to various understandings of performance.

As I spoke/read I did not refer specifically to the projected images, but used them to punctuate the banality of presenting at a conference. Around seven minutes into the presentation I took off my trousers and underpants and using an electric shaver I shaved off the right side of my pubic hair as I continued talking and reading for the remainder of the presentation. The spoken aspect was primarily concerned with the

notion of presence, authenticity, reenactment and failure in relation to performance art, with a focus on Abramović's work and words. I finished the presentation with a brief explanation of my actions in connection to the spoken words summarised here as an exploration of parody, presence and performance, and through harnessing humour and failure to disrupt meaning, intention and trajectory.

I do not consider myself a performance artist in the mode of Marina Abramović, Chris Burden or Mike Parr. I do not want to endure an action until I can no longer physically stand it, nor do I consider my presence and actions as necessarily interesting or enlightening for an audience. This recent work "Failing to Perform" (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5) slides around expectations and myths of embodied performance and the authentic and real encounter.

Sara Jane Bailes writes "The *formlessness* and weakness of amateur performance can illuminate the ideological re-enforcement mastery performs, whilst work that fails below certain standards and criteria can indicate alternative visions of the world that do not re-enforce the dominant image of the world."³⁵ When I do art that requires a live performative aspect it hovers somewhere between performing a fictional enactment and being present as/enacting myself, often slipping between the states, failing to maintain my 'enacted' aspect or my 'me-ness'. It's a mess, I'm an amateur, but one who asks where and what is the performance, how under-performed does it have to be before it's not performance, but just being. This might seem a disingenuous response to making bad performance, but as Bailes has pointed out, there is something in the failure of performance that is particularly affecting, and surely affect is central to our experience of the performative.

Gender fails

The stringencies of gender are difficult to maintain, and are therefore regularly overwhelmed, transgressed, underwhelmed, and fail to be upheld. The regulation of gender in culture is rigorously controlled and operates within strict limits, and yet its operation is seemingly invisible or "natural," even after some decades of discourse

³⁵ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service*. 35

around the appearance and performance of gender and its relations. Take body hair as an example where there are clear culturally determined delineations between men and women. Research in Australia estimates that over 90% of women remove body hair including unwanted facial hair (eyebrows, upper lip and chin).³⁶ This staggering statistic indicates that in Australia women's hairlessness is overwhelmingly culturally desirable, bordering on mandatory. The imperative for hairlessness has become an invisible operation of gender. However the sheer volume of those attending to their body hair means people identifying as women experience failure to maintain or upkeep the smooth appearance of a hairless woman. Women's failure to control the production of body hair means constant self-vigilance for sneaky chin hairs, rampant bikini lines, and eyebrows becoming one.



Figure 24: BIC Soleil advertisement at Marrickville Metro, 2012. Photo: Jane Polkinghorne

The workload of personal grooming is piled onto other commitments of contemporary Australian life: work, family, study, mortgage, car, and fancy food (or choose your own). The maintenance required for this particular way of living (known as aspirational), is associated with high capitalism's requirement that every aspect of life

³⁶ Marika Tiggemann and Sarah J. Kenyon, (1998). "The hairlessness norm: The removal of body hair in women". *Sex Roles*, 39, 873 – 885. Cited in Merran Toerien and Sue Wilkinson "Gender and Body Hair: Constructing the Feminine Woman," *Women's Studies International Forum* 26, no. 4 (2003). 333

be commodified in order for it to be capitalised. Refusal is difficult, but also necessary in order to claim something of life for oneself. Here lies failure, for it is as impossible for most to succeed in achieving capitalism's imperatives as it is to resist. We are not all entrepreneurial or mercantile, home and business owners. Sidestepping or cherry-picking what aspects of contemporary life to engage with allows moments of agency, although often circumstances force themselves upon us—redundancy, governmental policy changes, accidents, or a personal tragedy can quickly unsettle an assumed trajectory. Accidents will happen and in that sudden and sometimes shocking alteration of circumstances other possibilities arise.

The connections between failure and disgust, humour and gender require further analysis, as does the association of failure with ambivalence. While success might appear an easier state to define, it too needs analysis and critique. What do creative practices have to offer within Australia when they appear to have so little place in the culture? If we consider art as a method of cultural self-reflection, its lack of cultural presence, broadly speaking, suggests a failure to reflect upon ourselves in any meaningful and sustained fashion.

My “Failing to Perform”/ failure to perform a performance has something to do with my general failure to perform gender. Using props (wigs, make-up, clothes) to signify and perform modes of femininity I do not usually ‘do’, the work points to the dualistic and simplistic limits of gender which are so strictly patrolled they are bound to fail. Throwing or running like a girl, being seen to be a boy/girl or man/woman when gendered otherwise, sit like a lady, man-up, grow a luxurious beard, remove all body hair: the dichotomies of these cultural distinctions disavows any gradation between or beyond the feminine and the masculine. Hetero-normative coupling is an extension of this dichotomy, and while in contemporary times there is greater acceptance of other genders and gender relations, still the heterosexual couple and the nuclear family unit occupy the centre of discourse and representation.

To be identifiably “non-hetero” is to signify difference. Heterosexuality is the invisible background against which all relations occur.³⁷ To resist it requires an enormous disruption of what Sara Ahmed calls “compulsory heterosexuality” in her 2006 book *Queer Phenomenology Orientations, Objects, Others*.³⁸ For Ahmed “compulsory heterosexuality” functions as the normative field of the social, “delimiting who is available to love [...] the contingency of heterosexuality is forgotten in the very “sensuous certainty” of the heterosexual couple.”³⁹ Ahmed continues:

Hence, the failure to orient oneself “toward” the ideal sexual object affects how we live in the world; such a failure is read as refusal to reproduce and therefore as a threat to the social ordering of life itself. The queer child can only, in this way wish for the straight line, be read as the source of the injury: a sign of the failure to repay the debt of life itself by becoming straight.⁴⁰

In describing heterosexuality, Ahmed uses spatial descriptions where bodies are oriented towards one another, and towards certain objects producing “straight tendencies” which allows the heterosexual couple to exist and act in the world and therefore occupy and be present in time and space.⁴¹ “The queer body becomes from this viewing point a “failed orientation”; [...] The queer couple in straight space hence look as if they are “slanting” or are oblique.”⁴² We can widen this thinking to other differences. To be visibly queer, to be other than heterosexual, or not clearly gendered as feminine or masculine, to have distinctly masculine and feminine attributes simultaneously, is provocation and disruption in space, place and time, and a dislocation if you are the subject of this sudden objectification. To be from a different culture, or to be physically different or to sound different, to dress differently, from others in Australia, is a provocation. Ask anyone born in Australia

³⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). 87

³⁸ Ibid. 91

³⁹ Ibid. 95

⁴⁰ Ibid. 91

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. 92

not of obviously European/Anglo-Saxon/Celtic heritage. They are constantly asked where they are from, and if they respond with “Here, Australia,” the next question inevitably is “But where are you *really* from?” Alternatively the child on the train asking their mother “Why has that lady got a beard?” signifies how subtle and limiting our cultural understanding of the appearance and enactment of gender is. For Sara Ahmed whiteness and heterosexuality are the (invisible, natural, normal) background against which all else is foregrounded as difference.⁴³ To feel the difference is to fail to maintain subjectivity and to be objectified. Ahmed writes, the body shifts “... from an active body, which extends itself through objects, to one that’s negated or “stopped in its tracks.”⁴⁴

J. J. Halberstam makes grander claims for those who fail to be easily located within hetero-normative discourse as being inherently resistant to the capitalist system we are operating within. Although in positing homosexual inversion and queer aversion as *necessarily* subversive Halberstam fails to recognise the normalisation and mainstreaming of homosexuality in many places, including Australia:

Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity and critique.⁴⁵

Personally I do not know many/any non-heterosexuals who are engaged in distinctly “anticapitalist practices”, though the idealism of this mode of thinking is appealing. However, Halberstam’s description of the flipside to familial, generational and capitalist common sense is a better description of the lives of many Australian artists. “An association of failure with nonconformity” well describes many artists’ unique personal styling and interior decorating skills. “Anticapitalist practices” might describe both our low incomes and our use of what few resources we do have to make

⁴³ Ibid. 109-156

⁴⁴ Ibid. 110

⁴⁵ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. 89

art that has no use or purpose outside of the purpose(s) of art and makes us no or little money or generates much, if any, capital. “Nonreproductive life styles”—if you are a woman artist you think carefully about having children because we all know who will be the prime carer, whose career is most likely to be set aside while the children mature. “Negativity and critique”—is something we are all engaged with right here, right now; thinking critically, offering counter arguments to prevailing thought, tearing each other down, ripping other artist’s works apart, analysing and probing for no reason other than being critical is a key trait of being a contemporary artist.

Through her/his person and experience, Judith/Jack/Jude Halberstam as masculine yet gendered as woman, suggests queer culture has the potential to be a refusal of “adulthood where adulthood rhymes with heterosexual parenting”⁴⁶. Within this context a ‘failure’ to grow up, take on family responsibilities becomes a forgetting of the expectations of ‘normal’ relationships and societal duty. Halberstam’s argument runs counter to the rise over the past decades of the use in Australia of the phrase “family friendly” and its association with conservative Christian values. With this rise we have seen artists in strife as their work has drifted from the art realm and entered the public realm only to run into that very limitation “family friendly.”⁴⁷ Alternatively, Sara Ahmed ‘reads’ the term queer through the peculiarity of disorientation, of not following the conventions of white heteronormativity. She suggests this does not necessarily mean deviation/deviance, but “Disorientation, then, would not be a politics of the will but an effect of how we do politics, which in turn is shaped by the prior matter of simply how we live.”⁴⁸

Halberstam identifies the cranky lesbian feminist as a cogent representation of failure: the failure to be feminine, the failure to be normal, the failure to be passive, the failure to find men sexually attractive (a test gay men don’t fail). The failure of the butch lesbian suggests much about the culture we are operating within, and also suggests the possibilities in reclaiming this particular form of failure. Ahmed as well writes on the

⁴⁶ Ibid. 73

⁴⁷ Refer back to the previous chapter on disgust, and artists Bill Henson and Paul Yore’s run-ins with Australian law courts over child pornography charges.

⁴⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. 177

disruptive figures of “contingent lesbians,”⁴⁹ suggesting that rather than “overcome[ing] the disorientation of the queer moment ... [we should] instead inhabit the intensity of its moment.”⁵⁰

For Halberstam and Ahmed the masculine, and/or butch, lesbian represents the queerest, most disruptive form of heterosexual normativity. However heterosexuality is reliant on the non-normative subject for its production, particularly in representation such as cinema and photography. Representation is central to comprehending gender, difference and the failure of gender. We learn how to enact and perform our gender through representation and enculturation. With this knowledge acquired through media and culture, we also learn to recognise when gender wobbles and deviates, when gender is indeterminate, or alternatively when gender is over-determined.

Failure and the cinematic

Cinema gives us many examples of wobbly genders: hetero male actor Johnny Depp’s various roles as drag queens, transvestites and camp pirates; the ridiculous performance of hypermasculinity offered to us in *The Expendables* franchise and most other action films; femininity as erotic spectacle in just about every movie ever made; and even with the recent emergence of transgender and non-gender conforming actors and storylines in the media.⁵¹ There are broader representations of gender, more nuanced, and varied, increasingly within popular representations, but generally we have to look harder to find them, and often outside the mainstream.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 92

⁵⁰ Ibid. 107

⁵¹ See the US television shows *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent*. Both shows feature trans and non-gender conforming storylines and actors. Although of course exploitation cinema went there first, in Doris Wishman’s incredible 1978 semi-documentary *Let Me Die a Woman* and Edward D. Wood’s 1953 semi-autobiographical documentary *Glen or Glenda*. Both films are exploitative, educational, terrible and incredible in equal measure.



Figure 25: *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*, 2011. Directed by Rob Marshall. Starring Johnny Depp



Figure 26: *The Expendables 3*, 2014. Directed by Sylvester Stallone. Starring Sylvester Stallone, Jason Statham, Antonio Banderas, Jet Li, Wesley Snipes, Dolph Lundgren, Kelsey Grammer, Randy Couture, Terry Crews, Kellan Lutz, Ronda Rousey, Glen Powell, Victor Ortiz, Robert Davi, Mel Gibson, Harrison Ford, and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The absurd plotlines, excessive bodies, failed special effects, bad acting and terrible plot lines in B-grade and trash cinema, (and let's not forget television) cohere into a melange of disruptive dreadfulness. Meanwhile mainstream films and television, with intelligible (if not necessarily interesting) narratives, convincing and/or attractive actors, conceals its inauthenticity behind its invisible and seamless construction. The trash film instead suggests intriguing and at times incomprehensible alternatives in narrative, editing, mise-en-scène and many other components that go into making narrative film and television. In this sense bad film and television are a “queering” of representation and demonstrate the possibilities of cinematic representation that exceeds the mainstream. This is why what US academic Jeffrey Sconce's broad category para-cinema⁵² (and I would include television in this) remains watched and watchable years afterwards. The strangeness, the peculiarities of cast and plot, editing and art direction, remain perplexing and suggest other ways of forming meaning in moving image. As Baile suggests, the gap between the real and representation narrows when failure, genuine, unasked for failure, bursts through the fourth wall of representation.

With figures (auteurs even) like Ed Wood (director of a number of incredibly awful films like *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and *Glen or Glenda*), Tommy Wiseau (director

⁵² Jeffrey Sconce, “Trashing” the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style,” *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995). Sconce uses “para-cinema” as an overall description for films that sit outside or alongside mainstream cinema, and includes everything from, Elvis movies to exploitation flicks, and education films to pornography reels.

of the more recent cult classic from 2003 *The Room*), my personal favourite Doris Wishman, (director of *Double Agent 73*, *Deadly Weapons* and the transgender documentary *Let Me Die a Woman*), or Andy Warhol and his early attempts to make melodramas, the effect on representation of their cinematic styles has yet to be realised. This cinema of failure, of a disrupted and queer interior, exists within the cinematic, yet remains askance to, under or outside or even alongside, contemporary moving image culture.

It is not only filmmakers and the audience who draw on this common language and knowledge of moving image. Artists too incorporate televisual styles into their works, reflect and critique both consciously, and as with language, intuitively. In my practice as an artist I use exploitation and B-grade codes because of the oscillation we experience when watching exploitation cinema—a movement to and fro between our suspension of disbelief and actual disbelief. This rupturing, or failure, of the viewing experience awakens us to the spectacle of representation, and through its ruptures it allows artists to both make stuff up and yet be located within a critical discourse that engages with what it means to operate within representation.

Although I find cinematic failure fascinating I have come to the realisation that with my own work I am a perfectionist. This immediately suggests failure, as perfection (like success) is unattainable. Most artists are, I assume, idealists and perfectionists within their pursuits, which means most of us are also automatically failures. I am forever failing, as my work rarely manages to either scale the heights of my ambitions, or alternatively achieve the depths of failure in the manner that make Ed Wood's and Doris Wishman's oeuvre so compelling. Looking to the example of those filmmakers I have cited, whose films are known for their peculiar awfulness, it does not appear so peculiar to look to Italian zombie movies, sexploitation, nudie cuties, Elvis movies, pornography, horror films and old advertisements to suggest alternative representations of gender, and of being, as well as alternative modes operating counter to mainstream cinema.

A feminist reading can be extracted from what overtly would seem to suggest depths of misogyny in exploitation cinema. In her 2003 essay "Sexploitation as Feminine

Territory: the films of Doris Wishman”⁵³ academic Moya Luckett repositions sexploitation cinema to reveal a latent femininity in the genre. She rejects what she calls Jeffrey Sconce’s “ironic masculinization”⁵⁴ and instead argues “femininity emerges as arguably *the* structuring force in cult films, and in the process, recasts cinematic interventions into sexual difference.”⁵⁵



Figure 27: *Deadly Weapons*, 1973. Directed by Doris Wishman, starring Chesty Morgan



Figure 28: *Double Agent 73*, 1974. Directed by Doris Wishman, starring Chesty Morgan

The focus on female agency, breasts, fashion and a prioritising of female desire in the films of Doris Wishman, and other sexploitation filmmakers reveals the centrality of the feminine to this particular genre of film, though we could draw this same conclusion to representation more generally. Luckett associates female power with breast size, where the breast is not fetishized but instead “represents the dominance of the female body. If fetishism exists anywhere, it is in the disavowal of, the look away

⁵³ Moya Luckett, “Sexpolitation as Feminine Territory: The Films of Doris Wishman,” in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Antonio Lázaro-Reboll, Mark Jancovich, Julian Stringer, Andy Wills, Inside Popular Film (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 142

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 142

from, the straight male body, a figure unable to withstand any non-ironic gendered gaze.”⁵⁶

Lockett positions the feminine as the key structural element in sexploitation, however it can readily be applied to all cinema, and indeed film spectatorship more broadly, wherein it allows a place for women to enjoy and engage with the feminine on-screen through cinema’s reliance on representations of the feminine. The failure of the films become their strengths, offering a way of working with the spectacle of feminine in overtly sexualised yet strangely unnerving disruptions, failures even, of representation.



Figure 29: *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, 1962. Directed by Robert Aldrich. Starring Bette Davis and Joan Crawford

What is seemingly the eternal excessive and explicit exploitation of feminine representation is reclaimed or reread, demonstrating Wishman’s cinema of difference. Similarly film theorist Vivian Sobchack identifies the middle-aged woman in cinema – scared and scary, neither lover nor mother–she is the un-ideal woman, who

⁵⁶ *ibid.* 151

“becomes excessive by virtue of her being regarded as excess.”⁵⁷ Consider Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*: a grotesque thing, mutton dressed as lamb in her girlish petticoats, terrifying as she clings to her past youthful glories.

Failing femininity

Interestingly Lockett’s re-positioning of the feminine as central to representation is reflected in a much earlier piece of writing by Virginia Woolf quoted in the 1975 book *Feminist Literary Criticism Explorations in Theory*:

[...] if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater.”⁵⁸

Woolf too realised the centrality of the feminine to western culture, and how power has been attributed to the feminine throughout the history of fiction, yet “in real life” female agency is (or was more so in Woolf’s lifetime) not a given. J. J. Halberstam too reclaims the power of the feminine through an analysis of Valerie Solanas’ writing and personification and generation of the model of the hairy-legged feminist lesbian as man-hating, virulent and forcefully negative.

Solanas’ iconic piece of writing *SCUM Manifesto* was first self-published in 1967 as a mimeograph. The booklet predates other radical feminist writings from the period and established a kind of caricature of the man-hating lesbian as an “anti-icon” of the feminist movement. There was much debate amongst second wave feminists about Solanas’ text, whether it should be seen as satirical or an actual blueprint for a complete reordering of culture through the destruction of men. Solanas herself existed very much on the margins. Throughout most of her adult life she was homeless, living through panhandling and prostitution, at one point selling dirty words to people on the

⁵⁷ Vivian Sobchack, “Revenge of the Leech Woman,” in *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture*, ed. Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994). 80

⁵⁸ Cheri Register, “American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Biographical Introduction,” in *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, ed. Josephine Donovan (Kentucky, USA: University Press of Kentucky, 1975). 5

street. The recent biography *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman Who Wrote SCUM (and Shot Andy Warhol)* by Breanne Fahs⁵⁹ outlines a life in which Solanas maintained a peculiar purity of vision and belief, yet lived in abject poverty for her entire adult life. She was in and out of psychiatric institutions throughout the 1970s, and died alone in 1988, a prostitute and drug addict in San Francisco.



Figure 30: Valerie Solanas at the Village Voice offices, February 1967. Photo: Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images.

Solanas appears to have lived her own mantra of SCUM, not as the much-quoted Society for Cutting Up Men (a title she rejected, claiming publisher Maurice Girodias made up the acronym), but as a refusal of everything deemed worthwhile. Solanas, in a Bahktian inversion of how western capitalism operates, calls for a gutter revolution. “SCUM will become members of the unwork force, the fuck-up force,”⁶⁰ “SCUM will conduct Turd Sessions [...] “I am a turd, a lowly, abject turd,”⁶¹ “Dropping out is

⁵⁹ Breanne Fahs, *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman Who Wrote Scum (and Shot Andy Warhol)* (New York: Feminist Press, 2014).

⁶⁰ Solanas, *Scum Manifesto*. 40

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 42

not the answer, fucking-up is.”⁶² Solanas extols a manifesto of absolute refusal and failure as the only possible response to the world:

[...] the least nice, those crass and simple souls who reduce fucking to fucking; who are too childish for the grown-up world of suburbs, mortgages, mops and baby shit; too selfish to raise kids and husbands; too uncivilised to give a shit for anyone’s opinion of them; too arrogant to respect Daddy, the “Greats” or the deep wisdom of the ancients; who trust only their animal gutter instincts; who equate Culture with chicks; whose sole diversion is prowling for emotional thrills and excitement; who are given to disgusting, nasty, upsetting “scenes;” hateful, violent bitches given to slamming those who unduly irritate them in the teeth; who’d sink a shiv into a man’s chest or ram an icepick up his asshole as soon as look at him, if they knew they could get away with it, in short, those who, by the standards of our “culture” are SCUM. [...] these females are cool and relatively cerebral and skirting sexuality.⁶³

Solanas by most accounts was an extremely difficult person who managed to upset almost everyone who had contact with her, particularly in the radical feminist movement of the early 1970s. Refusing to become a spokesperson for radical feminism and refusing help from feminists when she was imprisoned for shooting Andy Warhol, Solanas managed to offend nearly all those who knew her.⁶⁴ Yet her failure and refusal have been co-opted by culture. There is the film about her life *I Shot Andy Warhol*, and the recent aforementioned biography by Breanne Fahs. Although Solanas died in obscurity, *SCUM Manifesto* is one of the few feminist writings from the 1960s to have never gone out of print. Solanas lived Samuel Beckett’s aphorism “Fail again. Fail better” not as steps on the road to success, but as a genuine refusal to be in the world as it is, in an embodied lived experience not so unlike Lee Lozano’s refusal art works.

⁶² Ibid. 44

⁶³ Ibid. 29

⁶⁴ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman Who Wrote Scum (and Shot Andy Warhol)*. All biographical information on Solanas mentioned here comes from this book.

Solanas' life is not a pleasant read. However her disruptive temperament and rejection of any efforts to appease or assist her are strangely admirable. Her absolute refusal to modify her behaviour and thinking is reflected in the on-going influence and popularity of *SCUM Manifesto*. Solanas' commitment to her position, her uncompromising belief in failure as resistance "Dropping out is not the answer; fucking up is"⁶⁵ as the expressive means to counter and disrupt patriarchy and capitalism was peculiarly idealistic. Her powerful use of language parodies the manifesto form while making at times revoltingly hilarious critiques on patriarchal US culture. "[...] he'll swim through a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit, if he thinks there'll be a friendly pussy awaiting him."⁶⁶

If only I had the guts to live my own words of disruption, to walk the discourse of disruption, rather than the 'slacktivism' through which I primarily perform my politics. There are aspects of Solanas as a model for encountering the problems of the world that are appealing such as her totalising position and refusal to alter herself to better fit in to culture. However the dark anger that lies at the core of *SCUM Manifesto* while giving it immense force, like most manifestos, its serious and single-minded purpose, is too singular, and ultimately self-destructive.

Failure and humour

For Sara Jane Bailes and David Robbins, failure within the comedic is vital for its disruptive and generative qualities. Without failure, comedy itself fails. With this in mind, failure can be reconsidered other than as the inversion of success and lack of achievement. For Bailes, via playwrights Brecht and Beckett, failure becomes a route to authenticity within the artifice of creative responses.⁶⁷ Failure disrupts the smooth and continuous experience of good performance that conceals its 'performedness.' The seamless way in which an audience experiences well-structured and performed works hides its artifice. If an agent forgets a line or an action, it jolts us back into remembering we are watching the world through a presentation, through performance.

⁶⁵ Solanas, *Scum Manifesto*. 45

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 3

⁶⁷ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service*. xv-xvii

Bailes explores the generative and disruptive processes of failure particularly through slapstick in film. Using the term “Alogic” she understands slapstick for its concrete effects and for its lack of intellectualisation, symbolism and allusion.⁶⁸ The “gag” in slapstick evolved from vaudeville, but has played a major role in the development of narrative cinema. In cinema the gag allows narrative to re-set and restructure through interruption and subversion of order and hierarchy: “The economy of the gag, [...] is emblematic of the thwarted attempt and functions as a mode of disruptive continuity wherein excess and uncertainty prevail over a cohesive outcome.”⁶⁹

This is reminiscent of Jörg Heiser’s argument discussed earlier in the chapter on humour where he states that slapstick has been a primary mode for creative practices, particularly art, since the rise of modernism. “[...] slapstick is the method that saves art from becoming frozen in dogma and schools, including the dogma and schools of slapstick itself; the slapstick method addresses the fantasy of an automated, flexible, and accelerated life by making it halt and stumble.”⁷⁰ The sudden alteration in direction or meaning, the halting of one meaning, and the insertion or beginning of another or its utter dissolution tells, us the important functions of failure in the narratives of culture.

David Robbins also critiques contemporary western culture’s “mania” for the “unassailability of success.” For Robbins the figure of the fool exemplifies a usage of failure, wherein the fool’s role *is* to fail. Robbins writes that we sense the “ideology of success” as a diminishment of our selves, and that most of us have an understanding that ideology is always a narrowing of possibilities, or the “forced march”⁷¹ of the zealot, which explains our sneaking suspicions of success. Robbins claims we are sceptical of the boosterism of success, and that comedy allows us to acknowledge this without having to necessarily experience failure for ourselves. Robbins posits the body itself as central to this, as the body retains, despite our attempts to disguise it, fallibility and a lack of concern with success, what he calls “unselfconscious animality”. This is played out through the comedian’s “self-conscious animality [...]

⁶⁸ Ibid. 40

⁶⁹ Ibid. 49

⁷⁰ Heiser, *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art*. 273

⁷¹ Robbins, *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy*. 292

a failed version of animality,”⁷² where the body is acknowledged both for its animality freed from the self-consciousness of being human and for its failure to be fully animal:

Based to a significant degree on human folly, on getting things wrong, or at least “not right,” comedy is very much about incorporating the potential for failure into one’s plans and actions.⁷³

Using Robbins’ ideas, comedy, failure, and wrongness can be considered for how other modes of thinking are generated in the experience of ‘failed’ actions, events and artworks. Failure is generative, it disrupts and breaks the smooth progression of assumption altering the future unexpectedly. Accidents will happen, and sometimes that’s pretty funny.

Future failure

These considerations of failure demonstrate the centrality it plays in my research. In making works that toy with obvious indicators of failure in art through cultivating aesthetics, subject matter, form, and use that might not always be visible as art, I want to risk failing. Parody, advertising, pooh, play-acting, bad fakes are not generally considered good art. Taking on failure, through challenging myself to fail, to make bad art, to wallow in awfulness, is some attempt to take up Solanas’ call to fuck-up. The experience of failure, the sensation of its spectacularly acute specificity, has an allure, stronger than success. There is a certain pleasure in never quite hitting the mark, in being not quite good enough, although this is strictly a subjective positioning. You might think I am amazing. My failures might seem successes to others.

⁷² *Ibid.* 294

⁷³ *Ibid.* 291

4. The Foul and the Funny

This chapter analyses artworks and a film that demonstrate the fusion of disgust, humour and failure in generative ways. As discussed in the preceding chapters, humour and disgust have a number of commonalities. Both humour and disgust are complex operations that fuse aesthetics and subjectivity, even though each of us may respond to different stimuli and sensibilities. Humour is an operation that requires some distance (not necessarily spatial but psychological) from the subject, as we see in slapstick. Take World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Formerly known as World Wrestling Federation (WWF), the name change alone signifies its differentiation from a sporting contest. When watching we laugh because we understand the violence – the eye-gouging, head stomping, chair smashing, back-snapping – is mockery, a form of acting done for our entertainment. When watching genuine violence, boxing or mixed martial arts for instance, rarely does the crowd laugh, cheer, wave placards and jeer as they do at the wrestling. Actual violence is distanced through acting, and through the representation of violence in wrestling.



Figure 31: WWE wrestling team, Los Matadores, with their 'pet' bull El Torito. Photograph: WWE

Disgust, meanwhile, functions through intensities that result in anything from a minor internal squeamishness to projectile vomiting. As already discussed, disgust is

powerfully aesthetic, and our tastes and sensibilities can be altered through exposure, knowledge and contemplation. Shit and the act of shitting, for example, when it is one's own, can be pleasurable and satisfying. When we are forced to consider someone else's, particularly someone we have no relationship to, the material of the shit is disgusting. Witnessing a stranger shitting, or coming across an unknown shit can be equally stomach turning. And yet most overcome the gag response when the shit is our child's or perhaps our partner's. Our relationship to the act, and its by-product, changes in correlation with our relationship to the emitter, and as William Ian Miller stated, our relationships are proven through our ability to put up with the disgusting nature of other people.¹



Figure 32: Bush Poo Flag. In Germany in 2005 someone repeatedly stuck miniature flags of George W. Bush into dog shit at a park. Deutsche Welle, <http://www.dw.com/en/doggy-doo-as-political-statement/a-1463250>

When humour and disgust are activated by and within creative works, their seemingly contradictory operations (humour as overtly pleasurable, disgust usually ... disgusting) generate a particularly potent and acute experience. As already discussed, I do not see their operations as necessarily oppositional. Humour utilises condensation of meaning, it disrupts a trajectory or narrative or expected outcome in ways that surprise us pleurably. Disgust meanwhile can be horribly disruptive, and yet it is strangely compelling. I cut my finger. The same day I went to the beach and was helping my niece get into a wetsuit. This was a peculiarly difficult operation and in the struggle to get her feet through the legs of the wetsuit I ripped the plaster off my finger and reopened the cut. It was a quite a blunt wound, less a cut more a gash, and

¹ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. 140-142

as result it was bleeding nicely. A young child nearby was fascinated. Between three and four years old he insisted on seeing it, wanted to know what it was, why and how I had done it. His parents had to drag him away from my bloody dripping finger.

As art is nearly always² re-presentation it allows us that aesthetic distance to contemplate the disgusting which is most often bodily in nature. Humour meanwhile, if we agree with the Freudian reading, permits us that distance to deny the damage to our ego, of that at which we laugh. In that instance there can be a doubling and intensifying of affect with the contemplation of dissolution and denial in the same instance. Pleasure and discomfort are intertwined, with failure hovering as a possibility in this tentative state that slips, slides or skids into disgust, failure, stupidity or the comic. This balancing act makes creative works that function in this way particularly affective: pleasurable yet contemplative as the tensions between humour, disgust and failure wobble and vibrate.

Works that 'work'

Laura Parnes and Sue de Beer's collaborative video installation from 1999-2000 *Heidi 2* is generally considered a kind of sequel to Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy's 1992 video *Heidi*.³ The original Swiss children's book by Johanna Spyri, first published in 1880, has the gruff grandfather coming to love his orphaned granddaughter Heidi over the course of the early years of Heidi's life. The Kelley/McCarthy version places the grandfather as the central sordid patriarchal abuser of those around him, including Heidi and Peter. Parnes and de Beer's version two-channel video installation version casts Heidi 1 as mother to Heidi 2, while the grandfather is a pathetic figure hunkered down in a couch. Peter is played by 'Leonardo DiCaprio,' an actor wearing a DiCaprio mask. Both Heidi and Heidi 2 wear the inadequate faces of Linus and Pig-Pen, characters from *Peanuts* as the story

² Performance art has a reputation for collapsing the distinction between representation and the 'real' through concepts such as presence and real time. However, with re-enactment now a major 'thing' in contemporary performance, and the historical understanding of performance through representational modes (photographs, moving image, written descriptions and so on), the notion of performance as genuine, authentic and/or present is somewhat ambivalent.

³ Gregory Williams, "Sue De Beer and Laura Parnes," *Frieze* Issue 52 (2000).

is recast as an investigation of matrilineal enculturation.⁴ At one point Heidi 1 teaches Heidi 2 the correct way to vomit. For some minutes the pair repeatedly vomit on each other with Heidi teaching Heidi 2 the correct way to spew, repeatedly saying “No, that’s too self-conscious, try it like this” in response to Heidi 2’s querying “Like this?” while on the other screen Grandfather giggles and repeatedly climbs on/ molests Peter/Leonardo DiCaprio.



Figure 33: Laura Parnes and Sue de Beer, *Heidi 2*, 1999-2000. Two-channel Video Installation, Mixed Media, 1999-2000, 30 min.

Heidi 2 functions through the horrors, terrors and banalities of family life, exploring the grotesquery of the development of feminine subjectivity. Heidi 1 assists Heidi 2 in becoming ‘woman’ through teaching her how to correctly vomit. In one scene Heidi 1 assists Heidi 2 to self-abort, mutilating herself with a knife as her mother cheers her on. The aborted foetus is then replaced with a television. This scene parodies Canadian director David Cronenberg’s 1983 film *Videodrome*. In visualising the feminine as constructed Heidi 1 literally inserts the televisual into Heidi 2, showing the violence of cultural constructions of the feminine. The mother is complicit in making Heidi 2 a ‘woman.’ And yet *Heidi 2* parodies these very same ideas. Vomiting as a key signifier of the bulimic feminine (and a revolting experience in its own right as already discussed in Chapter 2) becomes in *Heidi 2* a cliché of the construction of ‘woman.’ Parnes and de Beer expose the circular operation wherein self-disgust is used to construct the feminine through the disgusting action of vomiting. And they laugh at it.

⁴ Marisa White-Hartman, “A Feminist Inheritance? Questions of Subjectivity and Ambivalence in Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley and Robert Gober” (City University of New York, 2014).

The work of Australian/New Zealand artist Trevor Fry fixates on transgressive and ridiculous themes. The scatological phallus is a recurring motif: a turd that is/becomes a penis that is a shit that is a cock covered in faeces. Various using video, ceramics, installation, found objects and performance, Fry has systematically aimed for an excess of filth and sexuality. From fellating a dog turd to fucking one of his ceramic pots, how is the humour and failure communicated? Fry foregrounds a degraded and filthy humour in an overt inversion of “high” art to “low.” Perversely the artist has exceptional skills in drawing, painting and ceramics. Rather than foreground his skill and refinement of technique, Fry instead forces us to see his art through the disruptive lens of sex, failure and bodily functions. A beautiful pot is utilised as an orifice to fuck, a drawing is done with the artist’s freshly ‘minted’ turd, a video goes tediously on and on as he wanks but never ejaculates, the scatological, the homo, and the dirty is foregrounded, never completely subsumed in his filthy, yet refined aesthetic.



Figure 34: Trevor Fry, *Mud Slut*, 2013. Video.

In recent years Fry’s ceramic works have transgressed through a self-reflective regressive turn to carefully constructed large ceramic figures that are seemingly amalgamations of Indian Hindu deities, Mesoamerican figures, homo-erotica and naïve folk art. In Fry’s 2012 installation *Evil Flowers* as part of *Sexes* at Carriageworks in Sydney a crumbling ziggurat/temple stages his ceramic works,

variously phallic, vaginal, anal, scatological and archaeological. The works lay or stood on piles of dirt, ceramic fragments and dust, while in a video underneath Fry pleased himself, quite literally, through and with his works. Fry's combining of ceramics with mixed media installations disrupts the 'craft' of ceramics through making it overtly sexual and yet drawing connections to its use to construct objects of magic and power in many traditional cultures in the form of statues of deities. Simultaneously he maintains the connection of clay to shit, with the scatological a consistent theme.

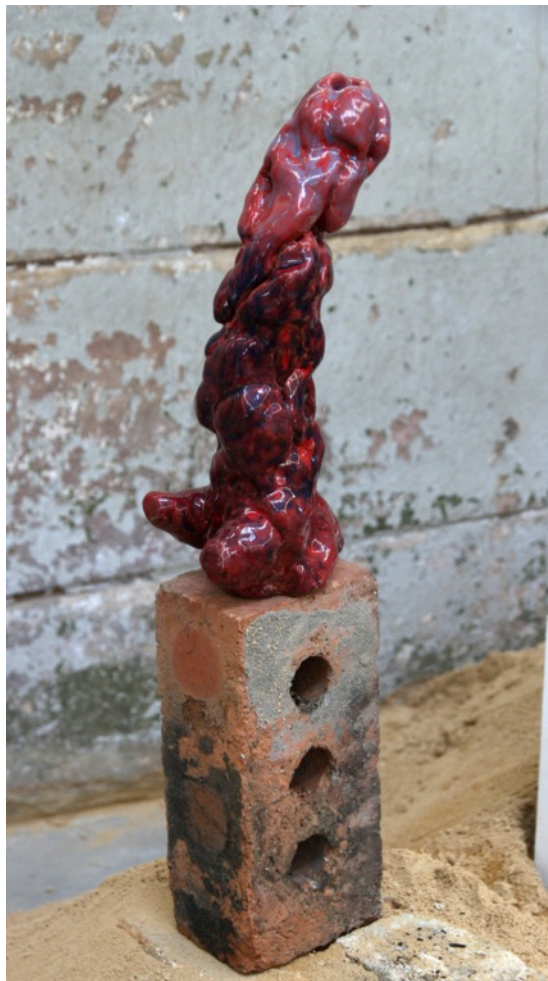


Figure 35: Trevor Fry, *Valley of the Dings*, 2011-2015. Installation with ceramics, video, mixed media



Figure 36: Trevor Fry, *Valley of the Dings*, 2011-2015. Installation with ceramics, video, mixed media

Australian performance group Brown Council, while usually taking a considered and conceptual approach to their works, on occasion have combined excess and humour to some interesting effect. *Big Show*, 2009 mixes conceptual art with performance art utilising a vaudevillian approach to costuming. It adheres to some of the strategies

deployed by the 1970s conceptual and performance artists: the setting is the studio, dirty marked walls, but cleared of any obvious extraneous materials; durational tasks that exceed the point of absurdity: causing bananas to disappear (eating them), face slapping, Houdini style (or not) escapes. Costumed to reference the dunce and a combination of the Bauhaus and the Dada Cabaret Voltaire, the work is theatrical and yet real. The banana eater ends up vomiting, the face slappers wince as their faces become increasingly purple from the repeated strikes, the escape artist rolls witlessly around the floor, in the end, not escaping just rolling off-screen. Similarly to John Baldessari's *Singing Sol LeWitt*, Brown Council's *Big Show* references and parodies the canons of conceptual and performance art, and adds overt connections with feminist body art practices, club performances and slapstick comedy.

Mikala Dwyer's 2013 exhibition *Goldene Bend'er* combined costume, performance, installation and shitting. A group dressed and hidden in elaborate hooded golden costumes alternatively danced around and sat on clear plexiglass tubes/stools in which periodically one of them would shit. Seemingly a combination of ritual and play, the group shitting experience is an attempt to disrupt and break the codes of control enculturation produces.



Figure 37: Mikala Dwyer, *Goldene Bend'er*, 2013, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

In its ritualistic undertones generated through costumes, masks, and a figure who appears to direct the proceedings, *Goldene Bend'er* conjures potty time at the kindergarten as it ridicules unspoken rules of control. For Dwyer, the act of shitting, that private function we all do, is the subject of the work rather than the material(ism) of shit. Without the shitting, *Goldene Bend'er* might appear a faux Druid rite. The shitting materialises the concealed yet hyper-regulatory aspects of our lives. Throughout the exhibition we see the Freudian consideration of the conflation of shit with gold. Does the title *Goldene Bend'er* conflate gold with booze or is it with being queer, or is it the U bend on a toilet? Most likely all three as booze, sex and the toilet are sites of pleasure that mix excess and materialism. In *Goldene Bend'er* the pleasures of baseness are tied to the enjoyment of the highly aestheticized and artificial; without one we cannot have the other. Shit and gold are tied to one another, and as Freud told us, the trajectory from shit nuggets to gold nuggets is a short one.⁵

Hannah Raisin ridicules the feminine body as a site of idealisation. Her early video work *My Cunt Smoking Without Me*, 2007, is titled descriptively. A person, visible from the waist to the knees, sits on a toilet wearing underpants that do not quite contain the pubic hair which lurks around the sides. A cigarette hangs out of a cunt-like slit in the underwear, a hand lights up the cigarette, and we watch as the cunt smokes, the cigarette moving slightly, as smoke rises from its tip. The underpants conceal the genitals yet there is a representation of labia on the crotch, masking the real with a symbol of itself. Genuine pubic hairs are visible at the sides of the underpants.

The site of the work, a toilet, has a similar reveal/conceal purpose. Toilets are usually used for urination, defecation or menstruation. Toilets have long been the sites for a sneaky cigarette (think of all those film and television high school scenarios). In this instance Raisin's cunt has snuck off for a fag, somehow, without her. The lips of the labia stand in for (like a joke) the lips of the mouth. The work is ridiculous, funny and a little gross. Low-fi in its aesthetic, it is on one level flippant, and yet it compels through its all too 'realness' that is both hidden and revealed.

⁵ "Shit comes back and takes the place of that which is engendered by its return, but in a transfigured, incorruptible form. Once eliminated, waste is reinscribed in the cycle of production as gold." Laporte, *History of Shit*. 15-16



Figure 38: Hannah Raisin, *My Cunt Smoking Without Me*, 2007. Video

In the video *My Flowing Locks* Raisin embraces the mask of representation as represented in the underpants above. She wears a nude body suit with long threads of hair attached under the arms and on the pubes. Mimicking ballet poses, she dances sensuously and ridiculously on the red roof of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne. Wind blasts the microphone, as does the occasional passing vehicle and the long red hair dances in the wind. The flesh coloured suit has holes under the arms and over the pubes disrupting the seamlessness of the covering, and also exposing body parts usually concealed.

Revelling in her lovely long underarm and pubic hair, and seemingly self-engrossed, the artist has rejected the current fad for total depilation. And yet she hides her skin and her eyes from view; she doesn't acknowledge the camera, and seems to be humming a tune, her attention turned inwards. Using humour for its disruptive qualities, the works described here also needs the disturbances of disgust in order to be more than funny. In *Flowing Locks* Raisin makes a virtue out of hair that is usually removed from armpits and crotches, a Bakhtian inversion that shows us the ridiculous and oppressive nature of conventional femininity.



Figure 39: Hannah Raisin, *Flowing Locks*, 2007, Performance, Single Channel Video, Photography

In Doris Wishman's extraordinary ficto-documentary *Let Me Die a Woman*, 1978, the spectacle of the gendered body and the subjective experiences of people transitioning is variously presented in an exploitative manner and at times with great sensitivity. Through its use of 'expert' narration from Dr Leo Wollman M.D,⁶ (a gynaecologist, hypnotist and sexologist who was involved in many people's transitions), non-actors, graphic scenes of a vaginoplasty surgery, apparently genuine group therapy sessions, and interviews with very articulate transsexuals, the film is grounded in the real, and is believably a documentary. That is until the horrific castration re-enactment, and various soft-porn sex scenes. Wishman utilises her propensity for exploitation, for using shock and ambivalence to jolt the audience. The confusion and blurring of documentary with exploitation is reminiscent of educational medical films ('little Timmy' learning about child birth as a way of using a loophole in many censorship laws that allowed filmmakers to show sex from conception through to childbirth), but also of Sarah Jane Bailes' notions around failure.

⁶ Wollman was apparently a figure of some ambiguity in the trans community in New York in the 1970s. Zagria, "A Gender Variance Who's Who," <http://zagria.blogspot.com.au/2013/10/leo-wollman-1914-1998-gynecologist.html#.VkQEFGQrly4>.



Figure 40: *Let Me Die A Woman*, 1974. Directed by Doris Wishman

In Wishman's oeuvre the fictive, filmic space is constantly disturbed by the world, which makes her work strangely compelling. In *Let Me Die A Woman* the artifice is busted in a manoeuvre reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's theory of defamiliarisation. The audience is constantly jolted from a complacent spectatorial position through scenes such as a ghastly re-enactment of a man's attempt to castrate himself with hammer and chisel; however, the blood is obviously nice thick red paint, and the penis remains attached.

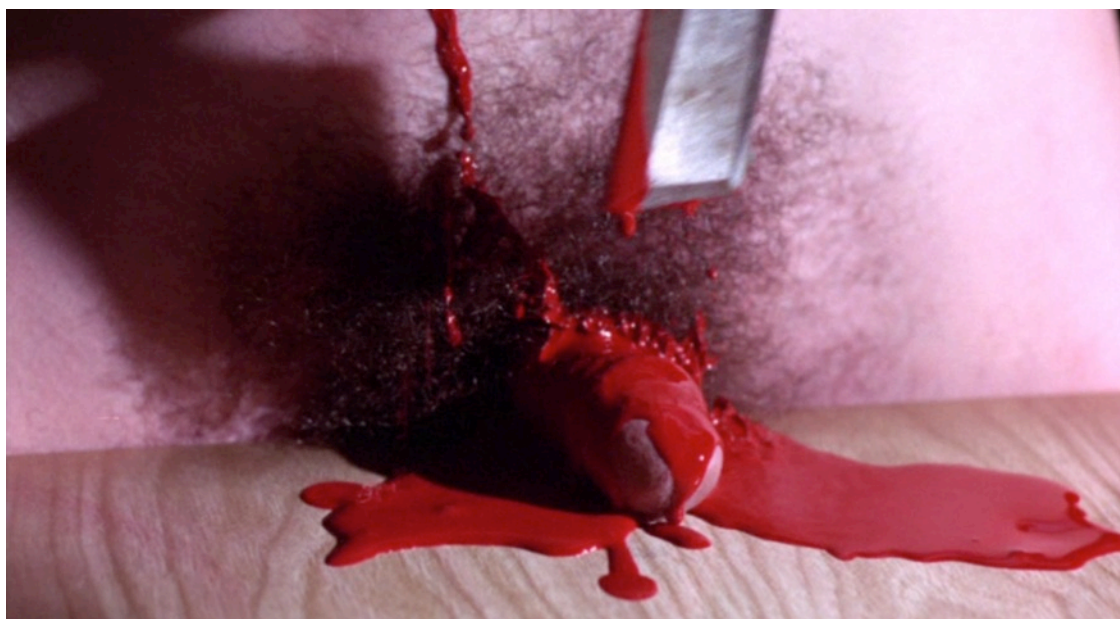


Figure 41: *Let Me Die A Woman*, 1974. Directed by Doris Wishman

Let Me Die a Woman is quasi-documentary in which the subjects address the camera, narrate their lives, and willingly participate in a series of degrading sex scenes. Their pre or post-operative bodies are pointed and probed by Dr. Leo Wollman with something resembling a car antenna. At one point he inserts his finger into a post-operative vagina. The camera zooms in so close the image becomes on fleshly abstract. These are ‘traditional’ exploitation cinema techniques. However they are undermined throughout by very heartfelt and articulate comments from the various subjects. The film confusingly jumps between out-right horror, grotesque realism, comedic soft-porn and back to sympathetic documentary.



Figure 42: *Let Me Die A Woman*, 1974. Directed by Doris Wishman

The spectator lurches from one response to the other. At times this oscillation between humour, disgust and failure whips up such a maelstrom of sensation it is difficult to know how to react. This feeling is so potent it freezes the viewer in a fascinated moment where laughter, horror and revulsion mingle. The paucity of the film’s production enhances this sensation as it is not a style, but an effect of the film’s budget. This co-mingles with the absurd re-enactments, but then falters in a sex scene with an utter lack of eroticism. Two people writhe and pretend at intercourse while Dr Leo Wollman stands in front of them (yes, in the same room) and intones, “This is an actual sex scene.”

The works discussed here operate through the distinctive fusion of humour, disgust and failure. However they exemplify the different trajectories possible in working with these sensations. Artists are mostly self-reflexive in working through this particular operation, or at least, not afraid of it. They understand the power of transgression, the risk and pay-off of failure, the pleasure in humour, and the potent synthesis of this triumvirate. However, in the films and career of Doris Wishman, failure is so much more than style or method. The tragic awfulness of *Let Me Die a Woman* has nothing to do with the magic of Hollywood, and everything to do with the everyday horrors of embodiment. The people in *Let Me Die a Woman* experience the embodied gap of misrepresentation at an extreme. And yet, this film reveals to us it is the gap that awaits us all in the contemporary spectacle.

5. Ideal Failure

This paper has so far investigated the operations of humour, disgust and failure, with a focus on their operations in creative practices. The previous chapter used examples of works where these operations fuse to generate powerful aesthetic experiences that bring us to contemplative moments where we are made aware of our embodied subjectivity. With contemporary living enmeshed in spectacle and representation, analysis of works that provoke these sensations is surprisingly rare. Therefore the new knowledge in this thesis is in defining this operation. And it is, however, generating the fusion of humour, disgust and failure that has been the groundwork in my studio practice.

My focus on humour, disgust and failure has developed across particular strains and methodologies towards the final studio project. Modes of practice include performance and entertainment, sculpture, photography and image manipulation, video and special effects. These different approaches have been built on, blended and extended to make new forms that better generate and communicate the ideas developed within the written research. Each strain situates representational forms at the centre of this inquiry into the melding of humour, disgust and failure.

A number of works operate through disgust to make overt particular ideas connected to gender, specifically feminine ties to decorum: in rupturing decorum through the mechanism of disgust, laughter is provoked. Disgust is the force through which I fail to perform the contrivances of bodily decorum. However the works themselves are contrived—functioning through the high artifice discourse of art. Provoking laughter is significant in order for me to evaluate whether the art has ‘worked.’ A laugh can denote many things: derision, superiority, nervousness, aggression, sexuality, recognition, familiarity, pleasure, transgression, uneasiness and so on. Disgust, and occasionally horror, is often present as provocations for the laughter. Failure, or the threat of failure and the overt use of failure in a particular work (not necessarily self-conscious failure) might also cause laughter. The conscious use and usurping of cliché is continually returned to as a way of quickly communicating ideas that question and

interrogate those clichés through humour. The studio research has primarily concerned televisual representation, using the camera as a means of capturing an image (still and moving) as material for further making, manipulating and constructing. However, performance/live work has become increasingly pertinent to the research as performance has the greatest scope for failure. With performance there is only pre-production, not post-production.

The following categories Photographic/Cinematic, Video/Art and Performance/Parody cover the various threads of studio research within the thesis. Categorised through form rather than chronology, the works discussed below show the development and increasing integration of methodology and material, culminating in a new work *Orificial*. The final work combines the various strands, proving the innovative effectiveness when the peculiar fusion of sensations humour, failure and disgust occurs.

In the beginning was... failure

An early experiment in the research was *Volcano Smoke Study*. Using wood fired ceramic volcanos made during a residency at the Belmore ITCH¹, my aim was for them to smoke and flash internally with coloured lights. The work was installed on a series of cardboard boxes with plywood tops with the volcanoes sitting on top. Holes were cut through the plywood and rope lights sat coiled inside the boxes so that the volcanoes would be lit up from within. Initially the boxes contained dry ice with the intention that it would make the volcanoes ‘smoke’. However, one of the ‘findings’ from this experiment is that dry ice vapour does not rise, it falls, meaning the smoke came out of the bottom of the boxes, and not out of the mouth of the volcanoes.

The work then took on a performative element as the dry ice (now sitting in small plastic containers and disposable cups inside the mouths of the two larger pieces) now had to be constantly topped up with warm water, emptied and then filled again in order to get the vapour working at the consistency of smoke. When this new approach

¹ Belmore ITCH (Institute for Try-hard Ceramicists and Handicrafters) is residency and research environment for people to explore ceramics through cultural, and /or material. It is run by Josie Cavallaro and Somchai Charoen in the western Sydney suburb of Belmore.
<http://belmoreitch.com/>

did work, it worked well, but only for a few minutes at a time. Visually it was effective, with the water bubbling as well as smoke/vapour pouring out of the volcano mouth and the lights underneath flashing through.



Figure 43: Jane Polkinghorne, *Volcano Smoke Study*, 2013. Mixed media with smoke machine



Figure 44: Jane Polkinghorne, *Volcano Smoke Study*, 2013. Mixed media with smoke machine

On a purely spectacular level *Volcano Smoke Study* was a farce. For a few moments, and looked at from a certain angle, some level of theatricality was achieved. The effect was immediately undermined as I hovered with barbeque tongs and hot water to replace the dry ice. The dissipation of spectacle in this context hovers on the line between failure and comedy, and is therefore relevant to this research. The oscillation between failure and success, artifice and reality, theatre and the everyday, became increasingly evident throughout the studio research. Performance is an area where this can work effectively: a character who slips in and out of being, the performer slipping in and out of character, transformative make-up and a transformative performance that crosses back into the mundane and everyday. Utilising some of the surprising disruptions that failure can generate becomes of increasing interest in the studio.

The performance in *Volcano Smoke Study* was an ad-hoc response to the failure of a number of technical problems. If I had tested the dry ice in the studio before the event I would have known dry ice mist doesn't rise but falls. However the casualness of this mode of performance does have a benefit—it is low on artifice. The genuine failure both assisted and hindered as the audience witnessed the work failing and how the work worked, or how it failed. The combination of high artifice and failure, became

increasingly an area of exploration in the studio research that followed on from *Volcano Smoke Study*.

Photographic/cinematic

Working with manipulated photographic images has been a central aspect of the collaborative project with Helen Hyatt-Johnston, *The Twilight Girls*. The collaboration functions through fictive characters developed from our shared interest in bad cinema, B-Grade films, trash magazines and awful television. Even when working in installation, the collaboration maintains a connection to excessive imagery usually seen in bad films. We use ourselves in the works as a means of toying with representation and with our desire to be *in* representation. Perhaps a little narcissistic, the images themselves are rarely, if ever, flattering. Instead we enhance the image at the expense of our appearance.

Smotherlode brings together a number of aspects of the studio research—consciously using negative and repulsive representations of the feminine in the form of a large movie poster constructed from manipulated photographs, text and low-grade illustration. In *Smotherlode* we aimed to invert the usual ways in which breasts are represented and to instead invest them with a perverse and parodying horror. We were motivated by the science fiction/horror storyline of a world without men, both as parody but again for the genuine cultural horrors that matriarchy appears to hold in science-fiction/fantasy/mythic representations of women living without men.

The title *Smotherlode* operates similarly, working from the phrase mother lode (aside from its mining etymology), which is generally used metaphorically to indicate something of abundance or great value. Here it is parodied in relation to the idea of the ‘smother mother,’ a negative term associated with an extremely over-protective mother. The ‘smother mother’ and the ‘phallic mother’ have become hackneyed phrases used to undermine women where it hurts: motherhood. In an attempt to reveal some of the more ridiculous aspects of those phrases and to mess with them as the clichés they have become, *The Twilight Girls* generate artwork that acknowledges the negativity surrounding feminine representation, and uses negative connotations for their genuine power and affect.



Figure 45: The Twilight Girls, *Smotherlode*, 2013. Inkjet on vinyl. 3m w x 4m h

The so-called smother mother, the ‘she’ of the title, is overloaded with a grotesque version of the female breast, each breast topped with a gaping mouth rather than a life giving nipple. Any representation of breasts, female breasts, is fairly predictable: breasts as givers of life/feeders of children, places of comfort; sexual organs; sites of desire, erotica and pornography; the youthful breasts as signifiers of beauty and feminine desirability. The rare occasions where breasts are given another context and purpose absolutely stand out for their rarity. For instance shlock film director Doris Wishman in her films *Deadly Weapons* and *Double Agent 73* uses the enormity of Chesty Morgan’s gigantic breasts. In the 1973 film *Deadly Weapons* Chesty Morgan uses her breasts to knock out and then suffocate, and in *Double Agent 73* one of her breasts is implanted with a camera.

In *Smotherlode* The Twilight Girls consciously alter breasts' usual functions in representation in horrific ways—we used our own breasts, multiplied asymmetrically and polyp-like, replacing the nipple with mouths. The breasts become ingesters, eaters and consumers, signs of an excess of female desire, rapaciousness and abjection. This is a self-consciously excessive representation of the monstrous-feminine as theorised by Australian film academic Barbara Creed in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*.² Creed uses Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror*³ to explore how the feminine is referenced in horror films for its monstrousness—the 'gash' as a wound but also a sign and slang for female genitalia.

Through visual excess, our intention is to overload forms so as to reveal the power of what is being parodied. By invoking the monstrous-feminine, The Twilight Girls are delving into the dread and ridiculousness of feminine representation in B-grade horror films. *Smotherlode* overtly references exploitation and B-grade cinema in taking the form of a mock billposter for the non-existent film *She Came First*. The title of the film references both pornography and Darwin's theory of evolution. Considering pornography is a conscious decision due to its ambivalent relationship with feminine representations—female empowerment, objectification, supplication, repression, mortification, desire, enactment, the faking and mocking of desire, and aesthetics and art in post modernity.⁴

Smotherlode posits itself as an unequivocal abjection of the feminine. Rather than this being negative or powerless, the abject is reconsidered as a deep well through which powerful imagery can be accessed, parodied, replayed and subverted. The power of the abject is in its ability to upset, dislodge and unsettle us as subjects. This shows connections with humour's operation in giving voice and form to thoughts otherwise too dangerous, ugly, cruel and upsetting to acknowledge. Abject forms of feminine representation have become clichés. The Twilight Girls redress this by acknowledging the cliché and then pulverising it through over-determined imagery.

² Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*.

³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.

⁴ David Bennett, "The Postmodern Ends of Obscenity: Pornography, Self-Parody and Aesthetics," *Southern Review: Communication, Politics & Culture* 37, no. 1 (2004).

In another obvious poke at feminine representation, *The Twilight Girls* construct a parody of the ‘phallic mother’ in *Smotherlode* through turning the hands of the central figure into phallic breasts. The smothering mother with the bosomed hands modelled (accidentally) into phalluses rises up from a maw of mud and slime, coming first, the first of her kind, the origin of her species, to again overwhelm the viewer with an overproduction of signs invoking negative representations of the feminine.

For the initial showing of *Smotherlode* in the exhibition of Re:Cinema, we used the scale of the exhibition space to our advantage with a print 3 metres wide by 4 metres high. We overdetermined and to some extent overwhelmed the gallery with scale, monstrous in our ambition for the work in concurrence with being monstrous within the work. With this match between scale and subject, the work achieved its aims. Perhaps the only improvement would be to make the film the poster presumably promotes. In the ‘real’ world advertising campaigns frequently eclipse the finished film in sophistication and enjoyment—all the best bits are in the previews. This fact is magnified in exploitation films that are often credited with having better marketing than finished product.⁵ This is a conscious decision *The Twilight Girls* made in producing a poster; we can control a still image. In moving image the same level of control is elusive, disruptive, the actual world always ready to make itself known in the fictional world of moving image.

The Twilight Girl was made for the exhibition *Odd Fellows* at 55 Sydenham Road, Sydney, 2013. Another photographic work, this image was printed to match the actual heights of *The Twilight Girls*. We photographed one another in the same space, at the same time, with the same lighting and distance from the camera. The two figures were then combined and blended digitally to make a single figure. Wherever the two figures crossed over, their figures were combined to make a conjoined *Twilight Girl*. Using only what was within the image, this figure combining Helen Hyatt-Johnston and I, has two sets of eyes, hands and feet. In blending our two different physiques, postures and skin tones *The Twilight Girl* responded to the exhibition’s thematic of ‘*Odd Fellows*’ in a format developed from other works, and, is another “monstrous” interpretation of *The Twilight Girls*’ personas and physiques.

⁵ Eric Schaefer, "*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*" *A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). 103-119



Figure 46: *The Twilight Girls, The Twilight Girl*, 2013. 1.2m w x 1.8m h. Inkjet on photo paper

The monstrosity in this work is not a fiction in the manner of *Smotherlode* and the next work discussed, *Consider Her Ways*. In using the banal everyday ‘horrors’ of the naked middle-aged woman—no make-up, sagging breasts, overweight, bad hair, blotchy skin—*The Twilight Girl* is almost too grotesque and too repulsive to look at, and has little of the humour and parody in *Smotherlode* and similar works. No additions or retouching to idealise the figure was made. It was constructed using solely the visual material of the two bodies from the original two photographs.

The strength of this work comes from its deployment of the real. However it still reflects The Twilight Girls' project of investigating cultural revulsion of and with the feminine. *The Twilight Girl* suggests the potentiality of bringing seamless image manipulation (as is all pervasive in mainstream media) to bear upon an idea or concept. It is cohesive conceptually and aesthetically, and attains levels of repulsion and discomfort without reverting to the deflections and obviousness of parody as seen in *Smotherlode* and *Consider Her Ways*. This work is grotesque but not especially funny. It is horrible, and disgusting in its lack of idealising. These elements might provoke uncomfortable laughter from the audience, however The Twilight Girls usually have the first laugh. This work lacks that humorous self-reflection; instead there is pathos and shame rather than the deflection of laughter through revealing self-disgust and our failure to be even close to an idealised feminine.

Conceptually, these works reflect on collaboration as a mish-mash of identity that is difficult and grotesque rather than idealised.⁶ *Consider Her Ways* in the exhibition curated by C. Moore Hardy *We Are Family* at the Australian Centre for Photography, continued The Twilight Girls' exploration of the excessive female, similarly to *Smotherlode*, 2013, in the form of a large vinyl poster. We built on the iconography developed in *Smotherlode*, of the female body as fleshy, wobbly, dirty, gigantic and over-whelming, rather than controlled, contrived, pared-back and idealised. Instead of using digital manipulation to massage the image into an ideal form, *Consider Her Ways* shows a conglomeration of grease-painted breasts, whited-out and smeared with mud becoming metastasised mountains of mammary, with the occasional head forming out of a breast.

A mass of flesh, singular and yet polyp-like in its repetition of form, was developed to reflect on the hysteria that periodically hits the media when lesbians use IVF to have children without the involvement of men (apart from the obvious use of sperm to fertilise eggs). The exhibition *We Are Family* was more broadly a reflection by lesbian artists and photographers on family. In the context of the other work *Consider*

⁶ For instance performance artists Ulay and Marina Abramović's relationship was so close they named it "the third". "We used to feel as if we were three: one woman and one man together generating something we called the third. Our work was the third." Alessandro Cassin, "In Conversation: Ulay with Alessandro Cassin," *The Brooklyn Rail* (2011). <http://brooklynrail.org/2011/05/art/ulay-with-alessandro-cassin>

Her Ways was peculiar, with most of the other artists using photography in documentary and quasi-documentary forms to celebrate non-normative, un-hetero family.



Figure 47: The Twilight Girls, *Consider Her Ways*, 2014. 3m w x 2m h, inkjet on vinyl

Consider Her Ways suggests how the collaboration could move away from The Twilight Girls as characters. This image would have worked as well, possibly better, without the heads, as a mountain of white breasts. In using the whiteout, greasepaint, the figures of The Twilight Girls lose individuality, to be one yet many. In leaving the heads out of the image, the work would be less obvious, less representational. Although of course The Twilight Girls pride themselves on working with the overblown, the overstated and the excessive; working with subtlety has never been a part of the project.

50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers, 2014, is a single channel video work comprised of fifteen discrete narrative video sequences in which the figure of Renny Kodgers is killed by The Twilight Girls. Although based firmly in the trash cinema genres of schlock/horror/comedy, this work also utilises conceptual art techniques such as repetition, a clear statement of intent and a repeated action. The collaboration between the art personas Renny Kodgers (an impersonation of US country singer Kenny

Rodgers by artist Mark Shorter) and *The Twilight Girls* coincides with the fictional cinematic narrative device. Working within narrative cinema allowed for the appearance of reality, a failure all too common in trash and B-grade cinema. Failure in this context is when the fictional world is interrupted by the ‘real’ world—those moments when an actor glances at the camera, a microphone slips into view, or the special effects reveal themselves to be not so special after all, just tomato sauce squeezed out of a bottle.



Figure 48: *The Twilight Girls* and Renny Kodgers, *50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers*, 2014. 23 min video. Production still by Paul Borderi

The work immerses itself into this operation self-reflexively. *The Twilight Girls*' project of feminine grotesquery collides with Renny Kodgers as the supremely confident male. Differently grotesque in his self-confidence and gigantic, yet flaky, fake penis and fake tan, Kodgers is played as buffoon rather than with his usual lascivious nastiness and wit. Throughout the 23-minute film, Kodgers is the only one who speaks, and yet it is the *Twilight Girls* who have agency. Their silence supplies no reason for their desire to repeatedly kill Renny Kodgers.

Our silence says something about the suppression of the feminine voice in video nasties, as usually it is the female characters that scream, beg for mercy, and are eviscerated and assaulted.⁷ Through this lens *50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers* could be understood as a revenge movie, with Renny Kodgers standing in for patriarchy and masculinity, blithe in the confidence of his bodily integrity, knowing he will be killed, but also that he (patriarchy) will not die. The Twilight Girls in this reading are feminist warriors, unstinting in their willingness to complete the task.

The film however is simultaneously a parody, a critique even, of these ideas, and certainly it relies on the strict conventions of the cinematic apparatus to work, playing with and through the clichés inherent to narrative within trash cinema. It uses the spectacle of the kill as its raison d'être, as well as parodying our pleasure in watching death in representation. The deaths are ridiculous and technically barely credible. However the intention is to disrupt and encounter the cinematic apparatus. Renny reappears though, similarly to how an actor may be killed on-screen many times through their career yet they are never truly dead. Even when an actor has died, entombed, buried or cremated, their life continues on in cinema, in representation.



Figure 49: The Twilight Girls and Renny Kodgers, *50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers*, 2014. 23 min video. Production still by Paul Borderi

⁷ The lack of feminine speaking roles is not confined to the margins. The New York magazine made a video compilation, of women's dialogue, excluding Princess Leia, from the Star Wars trilogy. It came to 1 minute, 23 seconds. "Women Don't Talk Much in "Star Wars"," posted 1 December 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODgwL7DJ9dY> Star Wars clearly fails the The Bechdel Test, a set of criteria applied to moving image work: **1.** Has to have at least two women in it **2.** Who talk to each other **3.** About something other than a man. *Pass The Bechdel Test* <http://www.passthebechdeltest.com/>

In the context of other works, *50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers* technically deals with the cinematic—it was scripted, filmed and constructed for narrative editing, it uses the ability of screen imagery to conceal *and* reveal faults of representation. It uses both analogue and digital post-production effects, as have most of the other works discussed here. In its ambition to be cinematic and also art, *50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers* develops ideas around ‘badness’ in representation. It attempts to rub the faked against the real, and to operate through tensions between the fictive represented world and the world experienced bodily.

In its generation of certain responses (laughter, disgust, boredom?), this work operates similarly to other works I have been involved in producing over the past few years. And yet it also lacks some of the intentionality and depth of thought and action I would hope to bring to making. The very short production time played a part in this, with the work being scripted and videoed without sufficient time for development, re-writing and critique. The failure (not a complete failure, but it could have been a more honed work conceptually) is an aspect of collaboration, with the relationship in itself being constantly negotiated in this work across three people, within such a strict time frame.

The personas of Renny Kodgers and The Twilight Girls’ are used by the artists to explore gendered representations as cliché and as monstrous, as failures of taste without restraints of taste or decorum. The personas utilise discomfit with the gendered body—Renny Kodgers as the oblivious, lascivious male full of his own sense of self worth and entitlement, while the on-going The Twilight Girls project explores the ridiculousness and power that surrounds the ‘monstrous feminine’. The Twilight Girls’ femininity in this work, as in most of The Twilight Girls works, overflows, breaks the boundaries of decorum and the body itself. The feminine body here is fertile, not with reproductive qualities but with murderous intent. Unfortunately Renny is un-killable, resilient to dismemberment, and all other ways he is murdered, failing to acknowledge or recognise his death.

While this work took the best part of 6 months to make, it fails in a number of unintended ways. One of its main failings is the taking on of failure as a style. The badness of the special effects, the obviousness of the mini-narratives, the poor

syncing of sound, were, in the most part, decisions made consciously. This gives the work a high parody style but leaves little room for some of the genuine affect it is possible to experience in Ed Wood and Doris Wishman films. Even John Waters' films, which might be the most obvious reference point, have genuine elements of authentic grotesquery. Our grotesquery is almost entirely manufactured and hence artifice rather than authentic. The work fails because it is too well made, and yet it is also not good enough. The repetitive structure, which we might liken to a conceptual art work, is set up in the title. However unlike most conceptual art works, that pedantically reflect their titles, this work lies and only kills Renny 15 times, not the declared 50 times.

The video operates within an art/narrative film framework that is, by now, well trodden. As noted by Jörg Heiser, art rarely succeeds when it attempts narrative. We expect art to break from narrative and from the limitations of meaning that narrative enforces. Heiser identifies art as being in essence anti-narrative, and that when art attempts to use narrative media such as film, video, music, text, and comics for example, if placed within those disciplines it generally comes off poorly. Even though much art contains what Heiser calls "art lore"⁸—the biography of artists through anecdote that elevates the artist to some kind of hero or anti-hero engaged in any number of outrageous acts or asceticism—art itself remains apart from a story and is rather the disruption of narrative, the point and reason for and of a story.

50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers suffers from being not quite a narrative film and not quite an art film, and therefore fails to be either. It reveals problems in using personas in art. Renny Kodgers and *The Twilight Girls* are inherently theatrical in this work. Rather than problematizing this failure, *50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers* puts it aside, pretending it's a narrative film. The pretence fails equivocally, and this ambivalent failure makes the work difficult to analyse. This work does not have a sense of the *risk* of failure. The video is in the most part funny, but is inauthentic in signposting its failures, requiring them in order to function in the trash aesthetic. It mostly lacks the authenticity and disruption of actual failure, and is most obviously a comedy, rarely occupying the discomfiting zone where failure, disgust and humour collide. However,

⁸ Heiser, *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art*. 16

in the scene where The Twilight Girls asphyxiate Renny Kodgers with green farts a blend of humour, disgust and failure is in operation. Situated in the bedroom, it tilts its hat to 1970s pornos, with Renny Kodgers sandwiched between The Twilight Girls. After a lewd Renny innuendo, The Twilight Girls spring into action. Our nudity is barely concealed by gold body paint, blonde wigs and silvery merkins, as we writhe, fart and galumph inelegantly around the bed.



Figure 50: The Twilight Girls and Renny Kodgers, *50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers*, 2014. 23 min video

This scene caused the most debate amongst the collaborators as it was viewed as being ‘too’ bad. However I was convinced that its failure was its success; in being genuinely bad in execution and revolting in concept it succeeded. It is one of the most discomfiting scenes to watch because of The Twilight Girls’ non-idealised forms, barely contained laughter and sneaky looks to camera. Huge breasts swing, sweat dribbles, green gas oozes, and the scene goes on and on, creating an atmospheric repugnancy of the olfactory in representation. The mere visual suggestion of stench is enough to appal. This one scene, the worst of them all, projects the tensions between humour, disgust and failure that are mostly absent elsewhere in *50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers*. The scene teeters on the edge of collapsing into the bad performances and terrible effects, yet this was genuinely the very best we could manage. This failure ‘works’ because of the authentic effort applied to a stupid idea, poorly executed.

A further equivocal failure is *Bush Regeneration*. Having not shaved my underarms, legs or bikini line in over twenty years, I “groomed” half of my body to current cultural ideals of the feminine as a self-portrait. I had half my hair cut and styled, I shaved off half of my pubic hair, removed the hair from one leg and shaved under one arm, plucked one nipple and had half of my face waxed (this included forehead, eyebrows, upper lip, and nose!). I then proceeded to photograph myself for 65 days until full growth had returned.

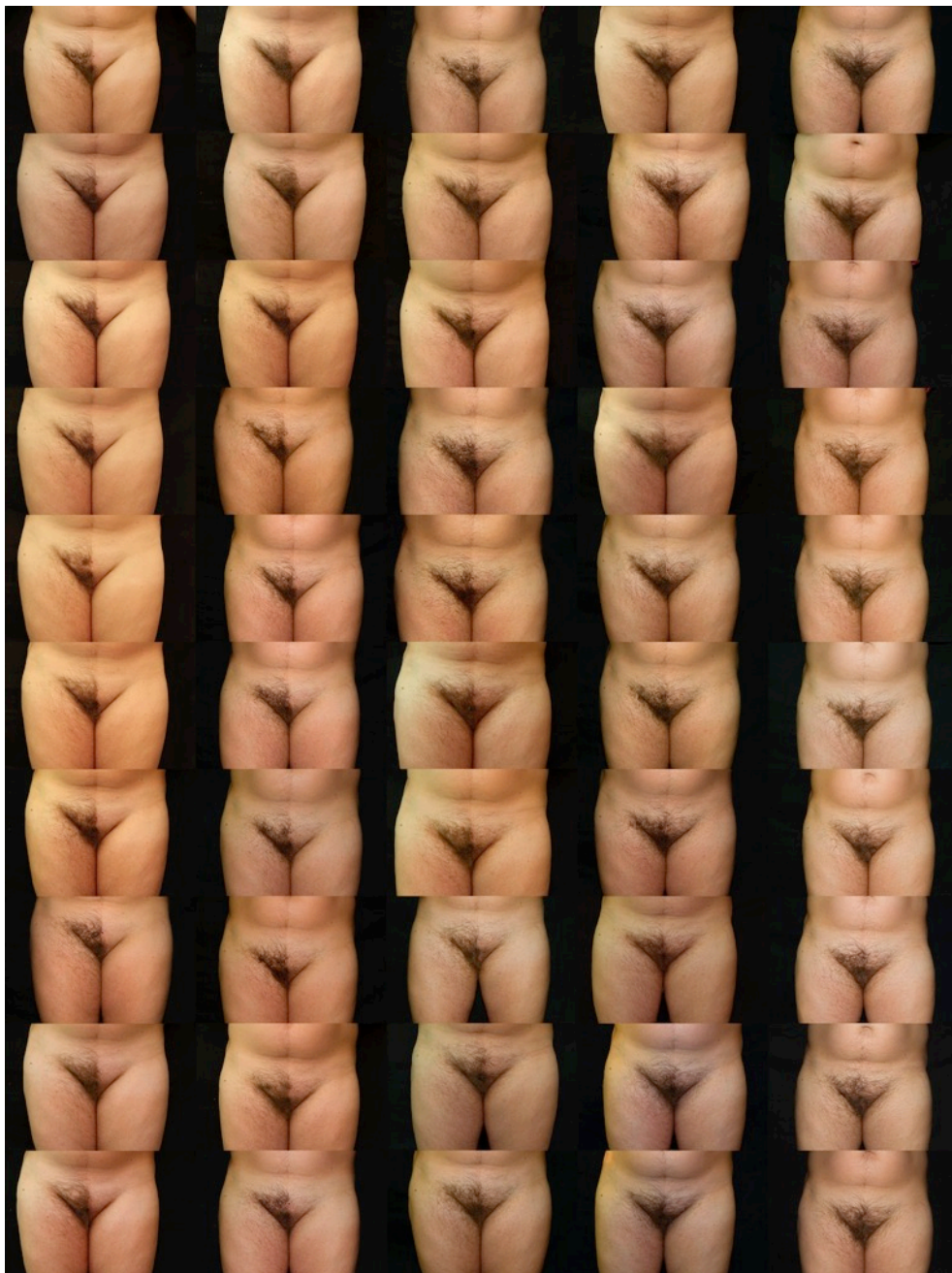


Figure 51: Jane Polkinghorne, *Bush Regeneration*, 2014. Digital image, size variable.

Unfortunately I am quite fair-haired (“bronde” as the L’Oreal hair product company has named it⁹) and the initial photographs of my entire body did not reveal anything notable except for the removal of half of my pubic hair. I then decided to take a photograph daily of the pubic area for the next month or so until the hair completely re-grew. The work takes its lead from Eleanor Antin’s 1972 black and white photographic series *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, and to a lesser extent, Tehching Hsieh’s documentation of his durational performances such as *One Year Performance 1980 -1981* in which he punched a time clock every day every hour for a year. However, as usual, this work is operating through humour and a kind of grotesquery—is having pubic hair more, or less, grotesque than having none at all?

Initially I made the work into A1 print of the series of photographs as thumbnails. Unfortunately it did not have the impact I had hoped, instead looking like a series of fleshy totems; it is difficult to ‘see’ the point of the image, that is, the pubic hair regenerating. I consider the work a failure in its current form. Re-evaluating how to present the images, or whether the work remains unrealised, is the dilemma here. The concept was interesting, the material and process appropriate, and yet the outcome was unsatisfactory. I reworked *Bush Regeneration* into a performance /lecture in 2015 called “Failing to Perform: when Performance Art Isn’t” as part of the symposium Next To Nothing at The Lock-Up in Newcastle. It is discussed in detail in the Performance/Parody category later in this chapter.

Video/Art

Through the research period I experimented with video in a sculptural setting in allowing the forms of the monitors to have presence in the work. The intention was to consider the television form as an object alongside the video as a material. While this harks back to the work of a pioneer of video art, Nam June Paik, I was considering the disappearance of the screen as object. Artists increasingly use flat panel televisions and projections, and the mechanisms of the production of the image are vanishing. Domestically this has also occurred as Cathode Ray televisions are/were being

⁹ On the L’Oreal website ‘bronde’ is defined as “Sexier than a blonde. Spicier than a brunette.” <http://www.loreal-paris.co.uk/hair-colour/brondes> Accessed 5 October 2015.

dumped on the street often in good working order as they are being replaced with flat panel televisions—a free material readily available to experiment with!

The video sculpture *Big Head* in the exhibition *The Queer Body...to be confirmed* (yes, this was the title of the exhibition), at Sydney College of the Arts, was a testing ground for technique, material and installation. Referencing René Magritte's 1945 painting *Le Viol (The Rape)* as ironic inspiration, I used localised video of body segments to stand in for the 'face' of *Le Viol* and constructed a totemic tower of televisions, with each screen a piece of the body-as-face. Periodically a real mouth would emerge from amongst the pubic hair mouth smiling, giggling and sniggering as the breasts/eyes wobbled and the navel/nose shifted. Standing over three metres in height and a one metre wide, constructed from bulky discarded flat-screen tube televisions, this head became more figure or totem than head as it loomed vertically over the room.

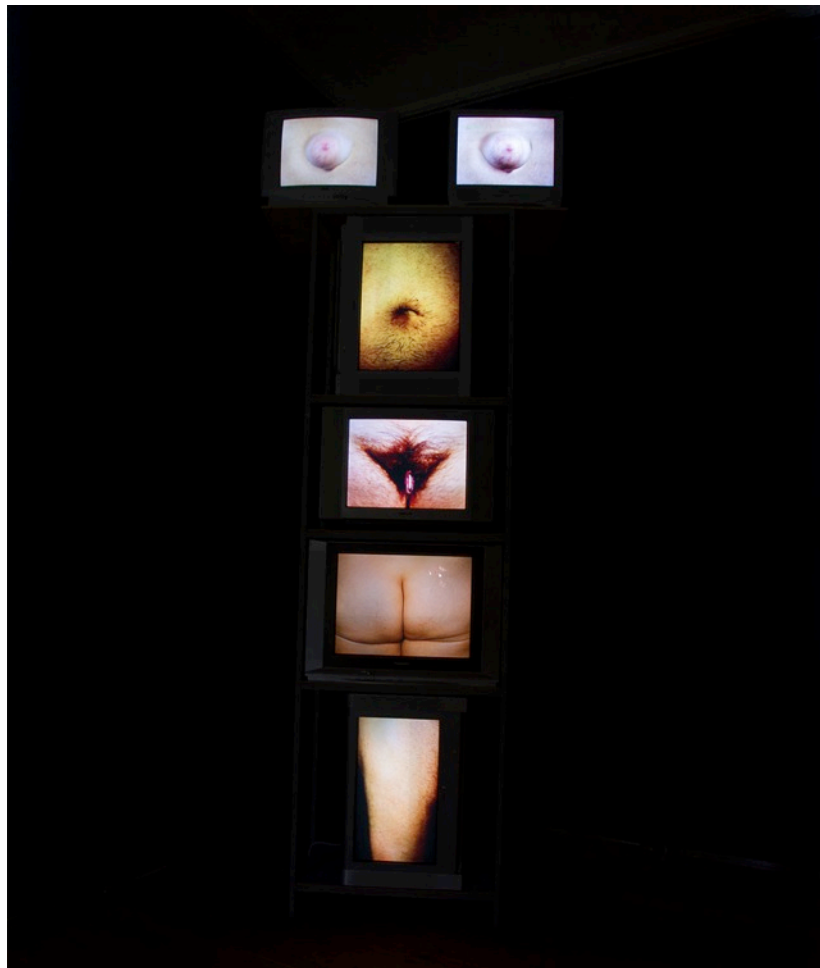


Figure 52: Jane Polkinghorne, *Big Head*, 2013. Video sculpture. 3m h x 1m w x .9m d

René Magritte's painting can be analysed as a reflection on the violent erotics of an implied masculine vision theorised by Laura Mulvey in her highly influential 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."¹⁰ *Big Head* is intended to deflect the gaze back at the viewer and give agency to the much mediated, sexualised and represented form of the female body. In problematising the desire of spectatorship, rather than frozen by, or manufactured for the scrutiny of spectatorship, *Big Head* through self-activation suggests interiority as it giggles and sniggers. Why does it laugh? Who is it laughing at? What does the laughter signify?

Materially *Big Head* was a video installation work that had physical presence—a video sculpture. Physically the work's presence is not as unified as I intended, appearing more a piece of industrial shelving than a stack of CRT televisions. However as the work was part of an exhibition with two other artists, the space was dimmed and the glorified shelving of *Big Head* was not so apparent. Under cover of darkness, its faults were (mostly) concealed. *Big Head* however does point towards working with video sculpturally through incorporating the apparatus of viewing into the work. Rather than the screen acting as portal into the cinematic, potentially the screen/object acts as skin or body or surface of an object or construction.

Big Head combined humour, disgust and failure surprisingly effectively. Magritte's violent gaze is subverted and parodied, as the bushy sniggering mouth/ vagina reminds us. It laughs at the implied passivity in being looked at, reasserting agency. In its formal fragmentation, the work fails to replicate the visual coherence of Magritte's painting, which further disrupts the concept of a totalising spectatorial position that is implicitly masculine and heterosexual.

In the next work discussed, a degree of restraint and discretion comes into play. Rather than the excess that is so overt in works such as *Smotherlode*, this work uses elements of excess in an extremely contained and highly aestheticized manner. The 5 minute video work *Foam Rainbow* 2013, was made as a further development of working with the screen as object.

¹⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed., Language, Discourse, Society. (Basingstoke England; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

The video shows me spitting different coloured foam onto a sheet of glass through which the video was shot, in the shape and colours of a rainbow. After the rainbow is 'completed' the foam fizzes and blends together over a few minutes, with the colours gradually bleeding into one another before fading entirely to black. It was exhibited twice, firstly on a large flat panel television that was on a stand in the exhibition Play With Colour. The second installation of *Foam Rainbow* was in the exhibition Daisy Chain at Marrickville Garage, utilising the object of the television as a video sculpture.



Figure 53: Jane Polkinghorne, *Foam Rainbow version 1*, 2013. 5 minute HD video.

This work parodies painting and performance and, to a lesser extent, the rainbow flag as a sign of positivity in relation to gay rights and the use of the freedom flag by Greenpeace. Initially it is quite visceral but dissolves into a painterly, beautiful even, video. It was a self-conscious investigation and parody of painting as performance through referencing the iconic film and photographs taken by Hans Namuth in 1950 in which Jackson Pollack 'action' paints on glass.¹¹

¹¹ Kent Mintum, "Digitally-Enhanced Evidence: Moma's Reconfiguration of Namuth's Pollock," *Visual Resources*, 17, no. 1 (2001).

I combined the motifs of action painting, the disgusting acts of foaming from the mouth and spitting, the kitsch of the rainbow and the politics of the freedom flag. I paradoxically engaged with and undermined the premise for the show, which was written about in the most banal terms and of course, with the broadest possible brush, as a means of uniting the works of a disparate group of artists. As the work was playing on a constant loop on a screen, the audience would often start watching when the foam rainbow was softly bubbling and dissolving into itself. It is only by seeing the work from the beginning that the method through which the rainbow was constructed becomes clear. This is enhanced through the original recorded sounds of the spitting. The act of spitting is turned from a revolting public act into a method of painting, connecting the work back to action painting. Chewing Alka Selzer tablets until they foamed, then adding a few drops of food colouring before spitting it out onto the glass sheet contained in a blacked out box, references the current obsession in popular culture with zombies. It connects to other works' use of B-grade cinematic techniques (I used this same mouth-foaming technique in *Headless*, 1997 a Polk-a-Polk zombie film made with my brother.)



Figure 54: Jane Polkinghorne, *Foam Rainbow, version 2*, 2014. 5 minute HD video, television, expanding foam.

From a slight idea for a slight exhibition *Foam Rainbow* developed into a surprisingly effective and well-resolved artwork. Unexpectedly the work is highly aesthetic and quite beautiful. Disgust is used laughably in the act of spitting and foaming from the mouth—a sign of contagion in the zombie world. It references painting in both its highly colourful final form and through the action in which it is created. Through the kitsch and ridiculous form of a rainbow, the seriousness of the act of painting is undermined, while the colours of the rainbow simultaneously refer to the on-going campaigns for gay and lesbian equality, and the rainbow flag’s alignment with activists, peace and leftist movements. *Foam Rainbow* was an unexpectedly effective fusion of humour, disgust and failure in not being over-determined materially and formally, and via its subtle parody in name and referent. It is visceral and sculptural, pretty and revolting, and therefore evocative.

Performance/Parody

Throughout the research I developed an interest in live performance as a means of developing a keener sense of risk in representation than in the digital photographic manipulations, which had reached the endgame phase. The manipulated image is ubiquitous in contemporary culture, and the Internet is full of Photoshop memes that are not so different from The Twilight Girls’ works. However, my interest in the theatrical and cinematic, the ridiculous and the disruptive continues, and I bring a love of trash aesthetics to all creative endeavours.

Appin Labyrinth was a one-day, one-off event organised by Lisa Andrew and Bronia Iwanczak at the Appin Motel in 2012. The organisers invited eleven artists to use one of eleven motel rooms for the night in a site-specific multi-media event. Using this as an opportunity to explore performance, parody and installation I transformed a caravan/ motel room into the public toilet for the event, and myself into its hostess, in the work *Restroom Revival*.

The Appin Motel is an especially dire motel used by itinerant workers. Each room had its own special misery and unfortunate odour, which in my room was the curious positioning of the toilet in the middle of a thoroughfare. As host of the public toilet/restroom for the event, I took on the appearance of a resident of the Appin

Motel as an idealised piece of aging trailer trash. This figure was not a persona, but an atmosphere enhancer, to counteract the intense grimness of The Appin Motel. Rather than further disturb¹² the audience, I provided a space and persona the audience wanted to be with, while retaining the miserable glory of the Appin Motel. The event ran from 3pm to 8pm, spanning the afternoon into the evening. I provided drinks and snacks, played records and occasionally sang along and made public announcements. *Restroom Revival* was offered as a sanctuary, a hub, a safe place and a musical.¹³



Figure 55: Jane Polkinghorne, *Restroom Revival*, 2012. Performance/ installation. Dimensions and materials variable.

¹² There were a number of rooms occupied by ‘real’ customers who had spent the day sitting in the sun with their shirts off drinking cans of Jim Beam. To have modelled myself on them would have not only been rude and arrogant but have given Room 9 the edge of reality that already threatened throughout the event

¹³ The work’s title plays on the idea of a revival being restorative, a renewing of something old (the Appin Motel sorely needing a revival), a production of an old song, play or practice. “The Macquarie Dictionary,” 1458

I wanted to avoid drag or pantomime, and put forward a persona more real, familiar, and personable, yet quietly tragic. This aspect of the work was not quite achieved. In not defining a distinct character to wear the outfit, the performance had little distinct presence, although the installation aspects of the work were effective. The work foregrounds the problem of irony and parody in persona based performance. It is ethically problematic for me as middle class artist to mock the bleak reality of The Appin Motel. Operating on a threshold of parody and entertainment is a risk, and in this instance it failed.

Negotiating liveness while maintaining and continuing a kind of ‘play acting’ and consciousness in relation to performing and presenting increasingly became a concern through the research, and was a process initiated in *Restroom Revival*. My interest in trash and kitsch aesthetics (as epitomised by the Appin Motel) was evident, but was increasingly sidelined through the research period in order to negate nostalgia and more thoughtfully address the pretence of performance. *Restroom Revival* combined humour, disgust and failure in unexpected ways. The abject state of The Appin Motel was foregrounded in my pathetic and impossible attempts to make the site homey. The performance, in its paucity, was bad and funny but similarly to *50 Ways to Kill Renny Kodgers* it lacked authenticity in its failure. By taking on failure as an aesthetic I was left with failure as pantomime, and therefore a failed attempt at failing.

I attempted to address the problems of play-acting in *Restroom Revival*, in the performance *Jane Polkinghorne: Photographer* at Artspace, Sydney as part of 2014 Performance Month. I occupied a space by the street entrance to the gallery operating it as a modified photographer’s studio. I lured people into the studio by offering drinks, snacks and alcohol, and asked them to pose for portraits, performing similarly to my posing and performing as a photographer. I drank beer throughout the afternoon to soften my social boundaries, and to loosen up my performance, disrupt my intentions and add the risk of failure.¹⁴

¹⁴ Gillian Wearing’s 1997-99 artwork *Drunk* based around a group of alcoholics explicitly used alcohol for its ability to remove social inhibition. “I was interested in capturing the elements of psychological behaviour of the uninhibited... Alcohol is an obvious tool in freeing inhibition. It takes away a lot of rational thought leaving us much more physical and emotional. I was drawn to the idea of emotional swings with a cyclical pattern to them.” (Wearing 2000, unpaginated). Quoted in Jemima Montagu, “Gillian Wearing OBE: Theresa and Ben 1998,” Tate,

Photographer succeeded on the most obvious level: I took some reasonably interesting portraits of approximately 40 people in a 4 hour time frame while getting drunk. Exploring the collision between representation and the real, the pose and the unguarded moment was the aim of *Jane Polkinghorne: Photographer*, with alcohol the mechanism by which I attempted to disrupt the affectation of being photographed.



Figure 56: Jane Polkinghorne, *Jane Polkinghorne Photographer*, 2014. Digital photographs. Pictured: (clockwise from top left) Sach Catts, Deborah Vaughn, Elizabeth Pulie, Boris Baggatini.

There were a number of photographer personas considered for this performance: David Hemmings in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up*, Michael Powell's 1960 film *Peeping Tom* and the photographers Diane Arbus and Cindy Sherman. The

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wearing-theresa-and-ben-p78341/text-summary>. Cited 13/04/2015.

four referents suggest differences in the relationship of the photographer to the photographed. David Hemmings' character Thomas in *Blow-Up* is a fashion photographer in 1960s "swinging" London. Thomas is bored by the passivity of his models, and only seems interested when he seemingly and accidentally photographs a murder. In *Blow-Up* photography as a production of spectacle and a technology of the presentation of the real are played out.



Figure 57: *Blow-Up*, 1966. Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni. Featured: David Hemmings and Verushka. Photo: Arthur Evans/Turner Entertainment

In the 1960 film *Peeping Tom* the protagonist is a soft-porn photographer and murdering voyeur, who films his victims as they die in order to watch their terror at their own impending death. The victims see themselves being killed via the reflection in a mirror mounted above his camera. The role of the camera (film and photo) in *Peeping Tom* is one of violent exploitation, violating personhood to feed the spectatorship and desire of the voyeur, audience, and viewer. While my work was not explicitly violent, it is exploitative in the sense that I needed the audience to participate; there is no work without them.



Figure 58: *Peeping Tom*, 1960. Directed by Michael Powell.

Photographer as persona is apparent when considering Diane Arbus and Cindy Sherman. Arbus, renowned for her ability to get people to agree to be photographed often in the most unflattering manner, casts a long shadow over photography. Her ability to form on-going relationships with her subjects, their willingness to be photographed by her, as well as some of the more prurient aspects of her life, intermingle to generate a particular persona: the depressive suicidal genius and invasive, exploitative photographer. Sherman is absent both as persona and as self (noted many times in relation to Sherman's work and self-portraiture¹⁵), or perhaps her persona as photographer/artist is this lack. Sherman's work has been a long investigation into the problem of presenting to the camera, the photographic portrait as presence through pose, that there is nothing but how we present for the camera, for representation. As writer Sven Lütticken noted "In a spectacular culture, everybody is a performer forever re-presenting him/herself in an attractive way."¹⁶

¹⁵ "For Sherman feminine identity is expressed by its disguise, by its retreat from the gaze of the other. That retreat, however, guarantees the lure of looking in general and the erotic allure which is an integral aspect of visual desire." Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 2005). 66

¹⁶ Sven Lütticken and Jennifer Allen, *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam; New York, NY: Witte de With, 2005). 17



Figure 59: Diane Arbus, Love-In, Central Park, New York City, 1969, by Garry Winogrand



Figure 60: Cindy Sherman in her studio. Photography by Oberto Gili, 2015.

Jane Polkinghorne, Photographer did not fully explore the depths of disgust, humour and failure. I was not drunk enough to blur the line between persona, performance and failure, and the photographs are too stylised to ever look disgusting. Posing for the camera, however, is amusing. All the participants willingly engaged in the act of making themselves into an image, and were aware of the performance required for the camera. Facilitating complex uses and interpretations of photography and the performance of and for the camera, were increasingly of interest to this research. The failure of performance, the disruption of the pose, the moment it slips and another pose (or not) is brought forward, the pose of performance art, the signs and suggestions that allow an audience to comprehend affectation and artifice have become key, as explicitly explored in the following work.

Relocating Marina Abramović's iconic performance artwork *The Artist is Present* to the social field hovering between the suburban fence and the footpath, with an esky and beer to lubricate the interaction, I performed *The Artist is Present (Drinking)*, for *Second Comings* at Marrickville Garage, in March 2015. The work interrogated and illustrated failure and parody, and the risks involved in working within these themes.



Figure 61: Jane Polkinghorne, *The Artist is Present (Drinking)*, 2015. Performance, social interaction

In full Abramović drag, I wanted to disturb the aura of Marina Abramović's potent silent presence. Instead of intense silent staring, I chatted over the fence inviting the audience to engage with other Abramović works in a manner that simultaneously operated as greatest hits, performance art, karaoke, homage and parody. Using the Australian social lubricator of alcohol the audience felt obliged or willing to participate. Sitting across the fence from the artist the audience sat on a matching garden chair in the street, re-enacting perhaps that most neighbourly of interactions, the across-fence-chat.

I re-performed the Ulay and Abramović work *Relation in Space 1976*. In the original performance Ulay and Abramović sat back-to-back for 16 hours with their hair intertwined. Every hour a photograph was taken, and for the final hour an audience was invited to watch. In my version *Relation in Space (with Wigs)*, long blonde wigs

were joined together via plaits allowing various people to experience this work, usually for a period of 10 minutes. The work was very popular with the audience wanting to wear the ludicrous, entwined polyester wigs, and actively participate in the stupidity performed across the suburban metal driveway gate. Perhaps in facing away from the performer they too were safe from the Abramović-like gaze. Using the simplest of methods, the original is evoked, and yet the intensity of the 16-hour performance of *Relation in Space 1976* drained away, and that to an extent was the point of these particular Abramović re-performances.

I also re-performed Abramović's 50-minute performance of hair brushing while making the statement *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful*, 1975. My version *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful (Wigged)* was done in a series of short bursts. The performance disinterested the audience, with most people drifting away after a minute or so. Wearing a wig had its difficulties as I had to hold it in place as I brushed. Abramović's original video becomes increasingly tense and menacing as the brushing becomes rougher and rougher, which I was unable to do in any genuine fashion as the wig would have been pulled off.

Using a few key signifiers—brunette wig, white outfit/uniform, chairs directly opposite one another—Abramović's *The Artist is Present* is the clear referent. In re-siting it outside (outdoors and outside the gallery situation) in a suburban driveway this re-performance aimed to develop an Australian performance language while reflecting on what could be called 'classic' performance art in the figure of Marina Abramović, the so-called "grandmother of performance art."¹⁷ Using beer, the piss-take, and situated in the suburbs, this performance is not intended to be 'endured,' as such, but rather experienced as an engagement with the idea of performance art and the notion of the performance artist.

The absolute seriousness of Abramović, and her commitment to her work are easily parodied, as a quick search on the Internet shows.¹⁸ She consistently demonstrates her

¹⁷ Emma Brockes, "Performance artist Marina Abramović: 'I was ready to die'", May 13, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/may/12/marina-abramovic-ready-to-die-serpentine-gallery-512-hours>

¹⁸ One of the more ridiculous parodies is "Marina Abramopug" in which a pug dog in a wig re-enacts, much like I do, Abramović's works. <http://marinaabramopug.tumblr.com/>

earnestness. For instance in an interview with academic Amelia Jones, Abramović states performance art must not be “[...] slapstick art, or making very funny Acconci, or funny this funny that.”¹⁹ While my work was a parody, it was also a performance, the artist *was* present, however not always as myself, and not always as Marina, but as a signifier of a performance artist, performance art, and of Marina Abramović.

The Artist is Present (Drinking) functioned primarily through parody and failure. I had thought that self-disgust would arise with some unruly and unexpected drunken behaviour. This never happened. Instead I got a headache from sitting in the sun drinking beer all day. The performance was a little pathetic in a mode not dissimilar to *Restroom Revival*. It was contempt rather than disgust that was generated. It was a pathetic parody of performance. It is neither “true” as Abramović understands her work—authentic, *present*—but neither is it strictly artifice. The persona slips and I am present in an oscillation of effect in which the acknowledgement of the artifice of performance collides with the performance and the continuing assertion and unavoidability of myself-ness. I fail to perform, over and over.

The slippage between artifice and presence, representation and the real I further explored in a lecture/performance in 2015. Continuing on from *The Artist is Present (Drinking)* I attempted to fuse performance with an academic presentation in an effort to demonstrate some of the problems and complexities of performance art such as presence, duration, authenticity, failure and humour for the symposium Next To Nothing: Performance Stripped To The Bone at The Lock-Up, in Newcastle NSW. My aim was to examine performance, what it isn't, and how as an early career academic, I could fuse academia with performance, perhaps failing at both. What happens when performance fails, or when it disappears or corrupts, or goes unnoticed? In a pretend pseudo-academic, genuine, fake presentation/paper/performance, I investigated presence, pretence, the inauthentic, the genuine, badness, the amateur, the professional, the academic, the artist, practice, inter-subjectivity, entertainment and boredom.

¹⁹ Amelia Jones and Marina Abramović, “The Live Artist as Archeologist,” in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol; Chicago: Intellect, 2012). 554

Using the clichéd trappings of academia, tweed jacket, plaid trousers, striped shirt, horn-rimmed glasses, and PowerPoint (of course), I defined failure and performance. I then attempted fusing together the definitions through notions of authenticity, presence, entertainment and ‘the real.’ About 5 minutes into the presentation I dropped my trousers and after a few hiccups²⁰ I began shaving off the right side of my pubic hair. I continued shaving, and talking/reading without explanation until I reached the conclusion of the presentation with quotes from Valerie Solanas “Dropping out isn’t the answer; fucking up is,”²¹ and Samuel Beckett “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”²²



Figure 62: Jane Polkinghorne, *Failing to Perform: When Performance Art Isn't*, 2015. Performance/ presentation

²⁰ I dropped the electric clippers, and the head flew off. Luckily I had a backup pair supplied by one of the organisers Dr Sean Lowry, which I also managed to do something strange to, and which Lowry had to fix. This was unplanned, though afterwards an audience member had asked if I had contrived the ‘fuck-ups.’

²¹ Solanas, *Scum Manifesto*. 44

²² Beckett, *Worstward Ho*. 8

I contextualised my action (shaving) with the images shown earlier in the presentation from *Bush Regeneration* and *The Artist is Present (Drinking)* as re-enactment and failure, parody, presence, and humour as short-circuit and excess. I then finished with two quotes, one from John Baldessari “I am Making Art”²³ and the other a paraphrasing of Andrea Fraser “I’m not a person today. I’m an object in an artwork. It’s about hairiness.”²⁴ I then gathered my clothes and exited the stage, leaving the gallery assistant to vacuum up my pubic hair.

This work addressed the ridiculousness and stupidity of the Abramović re-enactments and the ambivalence of parody as a comic form while aiming for authenticity, and risking failure. The actions of dropping my trousers, and clipping off my pubic hair were disruptions of the academic mode of symposiums, often tedious to distraction. Simultaneously I considered the performance of academia itself: the use of language, the disembodiment of criticality, the self-importance and self-belief, and the ridiculous stupidity²⁵ of the reductive focus required in exploring subjects within academic models.

In shaving off half of my pubic hair, I re-made *Bush Regeneration* from 2014 in an attempt to reproduce that work in a different, more effective form. The first version was performed privately, in my studio, with photographs taken each day using a self-timer as the shaved half regrew. The ‘redo’ in *Failing to Perform* was public,²⁶ with a friend taking a few photographs, and at some stage the videoed entirety will presumably appear on The Lock-Up website. Obviously in choosing to publically do a generally private act (or at least privatised in the beauty salon) I was bringing into the performance those oft cited notions of authenticity, presence and experience. At the same time I was alluding to what happens in private when we prepare to perform ourselves to the world.

²³ John Baldessari, “I Am Making Art,” 1971, 00:18:46, United States, B&W, Mono, Video

²⁴ Andrea Fraser, “Official Welcome”, in Andrea Fraser and Alexander Alberro, *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, The MIT Press Writing Art Series (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005). 220

²⁵ Ronell, *Stupidity*. On Kant, “... stupid has a larger capacity for absorption but will misconstrue what has been absorbed...” 300

²⁶ The symposium was open to the public, with about 40 people attending my presentation, though there was a “Warning: Adult Content” note with it, and yes, a child had to leave.

This work operated through a layering of forms and the combining of parody and presence. The audience responded through laughing, yet there were those who were affronted by me ‘taking the piss.’ Each presenter responded both to general questions from the audience and to responses from a panel of four philosophers and one artist. The performance/presentation provoked one of the other presenters, who seemed appalled I had parodied Marina Abramović without having seen or experienced her work ‘really.’ Parody, however, is a more complex and ambivalent task than it might initially seem. Academic and anthropologist João Ferreira Duarte writes:

“[...] the particular relationship the parodic text establishes with the parodied text [is] a relationship at the same time of inclusion and exclusion, dependence and independence, where the latter is taken simultaneously as a victim to hunt down and a model to imitate.”²⁷

Parody in allowing exploration without commitment and repetition without sameness relies upon a knowing witness or audience. Of course it can fail, the parody so overdone, so often repeated that there is no efficacy in iteration. And that is the risk.

Failing to Perform is a work that situated itself in the oscillations between humour, disgust and failure. Bringing pubic hair into the symposium situation was revolting. It transgressed the public/private spheres. In being barely a performance, the paper/performance failed to be either. Working with disgust and failure, in this case generated laughter through disruption and transgression. The work held these three sensations in a tension that for some was obviously more to do with failure than perhaps humour, and for others it was genuinely funny. For me as the performer it was a genuine risk, I had little conception of its effect on the symposium audience. However the variety of reactions, from appalled to outright laughter, suggests the potency of working in this way.

²⁷ João Ferreira Duarte, “A Dangerous Stroke of Art: Parody as Transgression,” *European Journal of English Studies* 3, no. 1 (1999). 73

In the end

Through the studio research I have increasingly used live performance to explore failure, humour and disgust. Failure, or the risk of failure, shows itself as a necessary component in the unmediated performance. However, in using failure and humour in tandem the risk is doubled. Failed humour is the worst, especially when unintended. Similarly disgust bears the risk of overwhelming any countervailing sensations. This zone of operation has increasingly been of interest, as I work towards a means of integrating the various threads and modes of the practice. My body as the material is a necessary aspect of any consideration of themes employed throughout: posing, presence, authenticity, play, parody, and revulsion. The ridiculous yet seamlessly manufactured images by The Twilight Girls and toying with authenticity, presence and pose in performed works, the materiality of the body is foregrounded as the arena on and through which humour, disgust and failure operate. I am pushing through and playing with the shitty self-regard that any consideration of subjectivity, and especially feminine subjectivity, in representation generates. Working with internalised self-disgust is a means of approaching transgressive subjects and actions in one of the few arenas in culture where such subjects, themes and aesthetics can be considered, art.

The final works bring together the various areas of the studio research: video, sculpture, photography and performance. Included will be an expanded version of *Foam Rainbow*, re-made as a large video sculpture, and a number of the large format posters made with Helen Hyatt-Johnston as The Twilight Girls. A new work, *Orificial* is a combination of music video, doctoral theme song and manifesto.

Using myself as material in the video, three heads perched on top of puppet like 'handles' sing and dance to the lyrics and music I wrote, with the chorus a chant of "It's official, I'm orificial!" Fragmented segments of my body become the face and head, with three versions of my mouth in different lipsticks of natural, bright red and pink, composited onto the heads.



Figure: 63: Jane Polkinghorne, *Orificial*, 2016. Video/ installation.

Orificial is a culmination of forms, materials and themes combined from the various modes of practice throughout the research, and is the theme song for the research. *Orificial* operates through some of the tropes of the cinematic and entertainment, such as pleasure aroused through laughter, the use of a theme song, and the suggestion of characters. However, with a voice like mine it is difficult to hide behind a song,, the work is a collision course between the real and the represented, the live and the projected. Failure, humour and disgust jammed together, jamming together, all jammed up.

Foaming Thresholds

In this thesis I have researched the confluences of disgust, humour and failure to demonstrate how their concurrent operations allows for particularly affective aesthetic experiences. Working against the Kantian model of aesthetics as disinterested, disembodied and purely intellectual, this paper argues for the particularity of embodied aesthetics. As explored throughout the paper, humour and disgust function through aesthetic modes. Rippling through our subjectivity, the sensations are felt as much as they are thought. As William Miller pointed out, transgression delights so much that even contemplating transgression (for example in jokes) is energising.¹

Disgust brings particular acuity to aesthetic distinctions. Colin McGinn suggested it is crucial in the formation of culture.² Used throughout modernity to distinguish art movements from one another, disgust through taste and style is peculiarly fixated on and through creative endeavours. However its outright acknowledgement is rare in the aesthetic realm, where beauty has reigned. Perhaps it is because, as Carolyn Korsmeyer reminds us: “Disgust profoundly recognizes—intimately and personally—that it is our mortal nature to die and to rot.”³ Keeping the discomfits of disgust at a remove allows us to continue in the face of our own dissolution and decay.

Similarly to disgust, humour operates through transgressions, breaks and ruptures but in forms that deliver amusement rather than the nausea of disgust. Humour, like disgust, can be used to discriminate and to exclude. When humour is used to laugh at rather than with, its normalising social function is laid bare. However, in considering the relationship of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque to contemporary inversions, the impulse for returning to the materiality of life is not simply a sign of immaturity. Instead, I would argue that the denial of our material baseness has fused with high-end capitalism to forge a world in which we can buy bacon flavoured toothpaste⁴ and a

¹ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. 117-118

² McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust*.

³ Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics*. 178

⁴ Bacon Toothpaste. Available now at Ali Baba. http://www.alibaba.com/product-detail/white-toothpaste-2013-new-products-on_1163648689.html?spm=a2700.7724838.38.8.kjBR1K

device to hold toilet paper so as to avoid the possibility of touching shit when wiping.⁵

Art, through its contemplation, is the space in which consideration of any subject is possible. Kant believed that disgust was outside the aesthetic realm. However writers such as Carolyn Korsmeyer, Winfried Menninghaus and Ian William Miller show the peculiarly rich dimensions of disgust, particularly around taste, and in relation to surfeit. Siane Ngai wrote of disgust as a sensation at the very limits of aesthetic consideration. She sees the complex interplay of those lesser emotions and sensations, her “ugly feelings” as allowing a discomfit and bewilderment that, rather than being meaningless, instead foregrounds a space of indeterminacy that forces contemplation: “[...] noncathartic feelings [...] could be said to give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic experience: art produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of “suspended action”) and does so as a kind of politics.”⁶

The complex and confusing interplay between humour, disgust and failure creates possibilities of an expansion into a space of critical pleasure: a foaming of sensation that barely holds its weight before collapsing or spilling into a more determined experience of failure or disgust. In creative practices the tension between the three sensations triggers a kind of apprehension, a suspended cloud, in which we wonder will it fail, will it revolt, or will it amuse? But there is no “it” for these sensations must be triggered by and in embodied understandings of aesthetics and cannot be situated in the improbable Kantian mode of disinterested, disembodied aesthetic apprehension. Representation itself lies at the core of this peculiar conjunction. Whoever heard of disgusting and/or funny abstract art, except when it uses worldly referents?⁷ Failure too is primarily a human consideration associated with the derailing of actions and agency, connected with the feeling of shame and inadequacy. However as we found in Chapters One and Three, failure is an implicit aspect of

⁵ Known as the Freedom Wand. <https://www.activeforever.com/freedomwand-toilet-tissue-aid>

⁶ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*. 11

⁷ In 2014 an experiment was conducted in order to find if people distinguished between photographs framed as documentation of disgusting things and disgusting images framed as art. It concluded with “[...] framing effects are among the factors that might offer a psychological explanation of why aesthetic enjoyment and negative emotions do not exclude each other.” V. Wagner, W. Menninghaus, J. Hanich, and T. Jacobsen, “Art Schema Effects on Affective Experience: The Case of Disgusting Images,;” *Psychology of Aesthetics Creativity and the Arts* 8, no. 2 (2014).

humour and art throughout the modern and post-modern eras. Without the possibility of failure, art and comedy lose acuity, becoming formulaic and restricted within aesthetic limits.

Humour, disgust and failure are three different disruptive forces. When operating together within the framework of art their fusion generates a very particular aesthetic experience. The aesthetic distancing that occurs in art allows for the contemplation and experience of not only the horrors, but the irresolution of life. When mingled with humour this anterior experience shifts into the ambivalent territory first identified as “tragic pleasure” by Aristotle. However, disgust, with its particular embodied and subjective affects delivers an extra frisson of unease. Risking failure, this operation intensifies the experience of art through a trajectory where entertainment meets its inversion.

Throughout this thesis my studio practice has further developed in order to integrate more effectively these three thresholds of sensation. Bringing the acuteness of live work into the practice heightens the risk of failure, but also the pay-off. In the studio the tensions between disgust, humour and failure push into ambivalent thresholds through complex interplays of shitness, intention, artifice and authenticity. Suspended or sometimes collapsing into dissipating foam of failure, I am aiming for a precarious threshold wherein I utilise subjectivity through gender and its representation.

Gender remains integral to representation, with the feminine, 40 years after the second wave of feminism, continuing its role of fetish and erotic spectacle in high capitalism. As understandings of the variety of performances and embodiments of gender develop and expand, the feminine remains pivotal as an indicator of differences in the contemporary world. I chose not to disregard gender, or to pretend it doesn't matter, or pretend I'm not gendered. Why exclude gender from my work when it is absolutely key to contemporary spectatorial representation? Working with humour, disgust and failure therefore unfolds multiplicity and disrupts the limits and clichés of gendered representations. The intertwining of these sensations cracks open the ambivalence of subjectivity in representation. This thesis claims that confronting and toying with embodiment, flailing around the murky borders of acceptable behaviour and actions, and transgressing because it is pleasurable, are vital and

ridiculous functions of art. And contemporary art continues to be a fairly open frame within which the fluctuations of humour, disgust and failure can be investigated and briefly illuminated. There on the threshold of dissolution into laughter, abjection or revulsion we might catch a glimpse of the foam rainbow, refracting and dispersing the ambiguity of contemporary human life.

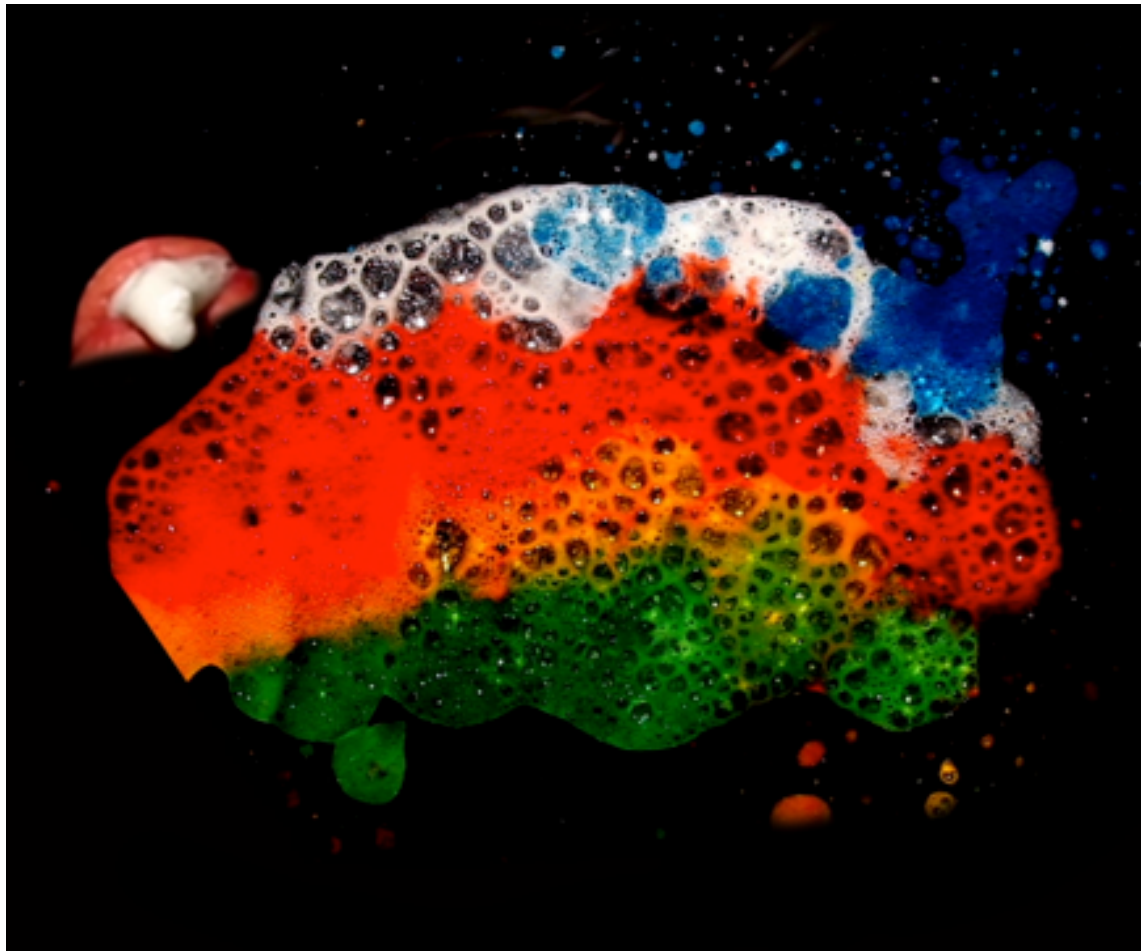


Figure 64: Jane Polkinghorne, *Foam Rainbow*, 2012. Video sculpture

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