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Brevity, Disruption, Art and Comedy

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RESUMO

Este artigo aborda a relação entre arte e comédia aludindo a conceitos como brevidade, disrupção e sagacidade. A nossa explanação inclui: o neon de Maurice Doherty *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show* (2016), a apresentação de insinuações, piadas verbais e calão através das fotografias de Sarah Lucas, o envolvimento nas palhaçadas de David Sherry e as *One Minute Sculptures* (1988–) de Erwin Wurm.

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the relationship between art and comedy in terms of brevity, disruption and wit. Our discussion will include: Maurice Doherty's neon *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show* (2016), Sarah Lucas' use of deadpan and innuendo in delivering verbal jokes and slang sayings through photographs, David Sherry's engagement with slapstick and Erwin Wurm's *One minute Sculptures* (1988–).

Fig. 1 Brevity, Disruption, Art and Comedy, Maurice Doherty, 2016. David Campbell and Mark Durden.

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

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

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

1 The exhibitions took place at The Bluecoat, Liverpool, April 9th until June 19th and The MAC, Belfast, 6th May until 31st July, 2016. The book Double Act: Art And Comedy was published by The Bluecoat in 2016.

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

The focus of the joke is the curator, the figure who adjudicates who is, or is not, included in an exhibition. To this extent the frankness of the neon declaration serves to unsettle the legitimacy and ethics of a group of often self-regarding art world professionals whose ranks have massively expanded to dangerous and unsustainable levels in recent years thanks to the proliferation of a host of postgraduate Curating Contemporary Art courses. But the luridly bold statement also announces the unapologetic complicity of the ruthless careerist artists prepared to do whatever it takes to be included in a show. The comedy of the neon piece relates to the brazen manner of its declaration of sexual transaction and corruption. The art world is probably no different from other situations where the toxic mix of power, money and celebrity are involved, but the frankness and unapologetic tone of the handwritten neon sign seems to capture something of the boastful mock scandal of 'kiss and tell' confessions of wannabe celebrities paraded in the popular press. Such overt, confessional indiscretion illuminated in *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show* also hints at an attitudinal shift within contemporary art centred on the strategy of propagating minor scandal as a means to generate notoriety, media attention and celebrity status in order to acquire market interest and commercial success. It also seems to answer and confirm the view, voiced from outside the art world's inner circle in the popular press, that contemporary art is controlled by an elite, overseeing values in art unrecognized by the general public, and that getting on depends upon who you know and playing their game. So the notion of sleeping with someone to get on in a system that is corrupt, just confirms what everyone thinks.

The inclusion of Doherty's neon-sign will forever tar every curator, every show and every other artist exhibiting alongside it with the insinuating smear of corruption. The irony of *I Slept With The Curator To Get This Show* is that it both announces publically the existence of a corrupt system and shamelessly acknowledges its own willingness to participate in it. Doherty's neon will always function like a joke in the company of other art: a disruptive, rebellious intervention, a comic 'whistle-blower' casting doubt on the ethical integrity of the system in which it operates.

Wit and deadpan characterise Sarah Lucas' art, which revels in innuendo as she translates verbal jokes and slang sayings in photographs and sculpture. The comedy stems not just from the original joke itself, which very often carries a specific set of references, and defines a particular working-class and often misogynistic British humour, but from how it is formally translated, a translation that often involves everyday objects – fruit, vegetables, fried eggs, kebabs and buckets become props weighted with innuendo.

Her two versions of *Got a Salmon On*, play against and with London slang for an erection. In one, *Got A Salmon On #3* (1997), Lucas is photographed outside seedy-looking pub toilets, a cue to the dirty humour of the sexual associations being made. The context is also replete with associations of British realist documentary

photography, but its seriousness is scuppered by her knowing deployment of the slipperiness of vernacular slang. With deadpan impassivity and in mock ceremony, Lucas carries a large salmon, held against her upper body. This comic presentation conflates the often-absurd phallic display in trophy photographs of fisherman holding their catch, with the sexual slur that associates the smell of fish with female genitalia.

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

Slapstick is a physical and boisterous comedy in which the body of the performer is often at odds with his or her mind. Stunts, pain and violence are standard features of slapstick, the term itself based upon the loud sound made by a wooden paddle, originally primed with a pinch of gunpowder and used in pantomime to strike a blow.

Slapstick is most familiar to us through early silent comedy films and the scenes of industrialized life that were often the context of the action. Characterized by scenes of alienation, exploitation, repetition, banality, goal-orientated action (Laurel and Hardy delivering a piano, Chaplin in the factory etc.), slapstick can be seen as a comedy of industrialized experience. It has a frustrating, banal, relentlessness about it and it often gains its comedic charge through the presentation of human fallibility set to work in some form of regulated system of industrialization. Often this becomes the setting for the manifestation of a repetitive banal activity, frustrating both the protagonist and the audience, only for the predictable outcome to be confirmed through the resigned acknowledgement of defeat by the central character or through the defiant conquest of the task. Either way the worker is at war with his relations of production and it is the body that suffers the abuse.

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

His video *Red Sauce/Brown Sauce Mania* (2013) presents the artist lying prone on the floor, filmed with his upper body in frame and facing a camera positioned on the floor next to his head. As if suffering a catastrophic collapse of cognitive and motor

Fig. 2 Red Sauce / Brown Sauce Mania, video screengrab, 2014

co-ordination skills, Sherry systematically squeezes and empties, first a bottle of red, and then brown sauce, over his face. Accompanying this basic miss-use of familiar condiments and the chronically poor hand-eye co-ordination of their delivery, Sherry talks continuously. The stream of viscous fluid projected onto the side of his face, slowly sliding down into his eyes, nostrils and mouth, is mirrored by and interferes with, the incessant stream of chatter emerging from the artist's mouth. Sherry is garrulous, he cannot be shut up and the video sets up an unexpected link between language and this viscous liquid. Sauce over the face also offers a variation on the classic 'pie in the face' gesture of slapstick comedy. Tomato ketchup is a cheap clichéd theatrical proxy for blood and in this context carries with it an allusion to the performance art of Paul McCarthy, who uses such products to suggest unruly bodily fluids.

In Sherry's video the erratic and unfocused nature of the use of the sauces, combined with his incessant babble, suggest a body out of control and, as the title of the work suggests, something manic. The effect of this bizarre behavior is unsettling and worryingly comic. Although there is no telephone to be seen in the video, the type of mundane dialogue we witness is reminiscent of phone conversations we all have with family or friends. The content of this dialogue is familiar enough, a performed sociability whereby arrangements to "meet up for a coffee, on the weekend, or during the week, or on Monday, or any time that's good for you" belie the difficulty of arranging such acts of affability and the unwillingness to fulfill them. Throughout the video the sense of anxiety created by the constant revision of suggestions as to how, where and why to meet, is accompanied by the visual tension created by Sherry squirting sauce into his face. The application of pressure, both literal through the act of squeezing the sauce out of the bottle, and social, in the sense of having to behave in a gregarious manner, create the conditions in which controlled behavior seems to collapse into chaos. Our recognition of the unease faced when confronted with expected sociability is compounded in the video in the sequence where we see the artist trying to extricate himself from such demanding social contact through a series of all too familiar lies and excuses. His guilty narrative, accompanied by his squirting

of brown sauce into his face, with all of its abject connotations, leaves Sherry on the floor in the dysfunctional mess he has created for himself.

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

Conventionally, familiar objects, the physicality of which is often overlooked by habitual use, are acknowledged only for the function they perform: a pen to write with or a bucket to carry liquid. In *One Minute Sculptures*, the sculptural potential of the object's physical characteristics take precedent over their function and are released from their normal use to create new and unexpected relationships: so a pen becomes something to plug a nostril, a bucket a test of balance or something to wear as a hat. In this work the temporary suspension of the object's normal use and meaning is achieved through the willingness of each performer to submit to Wurm's invitation to behave in a manner that appears foolish, abandoning the rules governing an object's conventional use. This action offers not only the potential to shape new sculptural form, it also sanctions new forms of behavior where play is valued over utility, and participants in effect become 'One Minute Artists'. Such moments of controlled revolt, however brief, stand in sharp contrast to the stifling conformity of daily life and illuminate the social order whose rules and codes are so habituated that we are no longer conscious of their operation, so 'natural' have they become.
Plato describes one of the first pratfalls in his account of the astrologer Thales who falls into a pit when looking up at the stars. So eager to know what was going on in heaven he could not see what was under his own feet.

There is then a gravitational pull to comedy. It can bring us down to earth, literally. Some of the artists in the show visually play with this gravitational pull, reworking the familiar slapstick gag of the pratfall and in the process of reworking it, give it added symbolic importance. The pratfall is about the body and can be seen to convey the sense of the person not being in control of the world around them. The fall is a great means of undercutting pretensions. The body lets us down. So comedy can both bring us down to earth and also take us out of ourselves, make us see the comedy of our absurd human situation and condition.

Nearly half of Bas Jan Ader's total artistic production, tragically cut short by his disappearance at sea, had falling as its central theme. His falling films record performances and events he did in Los Angeles and later in Amsterdam: deliberately falling from a chair balanced on the roof of his house in America, steering his bicycle

into one of Amsterdam's canals or positioning himself to fall from a high branch. Of the few statements he made about his art, the most often cited is this: "I do not make body sculptures, body art or body works. When I fell off the roof of my house, or into a canal, it was because gravity made itself master over me." (2013, p. 5). While the absolute force of gravity can be seen as a way of signifying his lack of control, all of the falls are a result of a conscious decision and manipulation of the action.
Broken Fall (organic) (1971) was filmed on the outskirts of Amsterdam, in open parkland, crisscrossed with canals. The brief black and white 16mm film, lasting a mere 1 minute 36 seconds, begins with Ader swinging from a branch of a tree that extends over a canal, some 15–20 feet above the ground. He then moves his hands down the branch so he is positioned more fully over the canal, waits for his body to become stable, keeping his body vertical. After a short while, one hand releases, then the other and he falls into the canal.

His work has invited some commentators to give it a theological significance and aura. For Alexander Dumbadze, "If one infers Ader's engagement with falling bears a direct relationship with his Dutch Reform background, then these ephemeral pieces speak to the fall of man." (2013, p. 21). It is ironic that commentators fascinated with the physical act of falling enacted by Bas Jan Ader, rather than let the work fall into pragmatic reading, prefer instead to seek its gravity-defying suspension by recourse to spiritual and metaphysical elevation.

Ader's films tend to be shrouded in mystery and myth as a result of his disappearance and assumed death in his final tragic act, *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975) in which he attempted to cross the Atlantic in a small sailboat. Disappearance can be seen to characterize his fall films, since none show us the consequences of the actions he presents, no physical harm or outcome. They always feature an abrupt cut that marks the end of the film. As a result it is difficult to see the fall as humiliation, rather it retains its status as a demonstration of physical law and a force integral to the vocabulary of sculpture. In the presence of Richard Serra's propped large-scale heavy metal sculptures, for example, it is an acknowledgement of the consequences of gravity that creates the real anxiety and fear.

When making his videos involving him falling, Peter Land has said how he took his cue from Bas Jan Ader's Fall films. His response is parodic. He shows us what is missing in Ader's work by introducing the consequences of the fall and its interpretation as an act of humiliation and stupidity. In this respect Land is much more of a clown figure, a fall guy in the full sense. Land situates his falls in plausible contexts – falling off a bike when going around a bend, falling off a ladder when decorating and rolling down the stairs. And Land introduces repetition into his actions, picking upon the comic effect of automated behaviour in slapstick. As the artist notes during an interview, the very first ideas behind such videos come from the influence of slapstick comedy in silent cinema, pointing out an example of a comic scene in Laurel and Hardy: "And I started thinking... what if the entire film had only been about people throwing cakes into each other's faces? What about 100 scenes only with that, would it stay funny or would it turn into something else?" (Burugorri, 2014).

In Land's video *Pink Space* (1995) we shift from the everyday to the world of entertainment. The artist plays the role of a nightclub performer, wearing a blue tuxedo jacket and holding a drink, a prop that provides a clue to the cause of his antics. The film shows his repeated attempts to sit on a stool placed on the stage. This simple task appears beyond Land's capabilities as he constantly misjudges what's required. This theatrical and excessive presentation of incompetency carries on throughout the film. It is frustrating, irritating yet able to produce a comic pleasure. There is a *Groundhog Day* comedy of entrapment to the looped video, which underscore the relentlessness and exhaustion of a comic routine. It is also a comic updating of the "futile and hopeless labour" (Camus, 1977, p. 107) attached to the Sisyphus myth, punished by the Gods to perpetually roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only for the stone to fall back of its own weight.

Land's falls are relatively short falls and always ridiculously comic. In contrast, Bas Jan Ader falls from a height; they are edged by a sense of potential tragedy or folly. With his films it is a gallows humour, laughing in the face of death, the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, the ultimate gamble, the taunt, which he eventually lost.

> From 2005–2006 I shot more than 30 movie scene reenactments alone in my apartment using whatever costumes and props were on hand. These crude reenactments are my effort to degrade and venerate the heroics of Hollywood movies. By working completely alone and utilizing the techniques of cinema in the simplest possible ways I hope to recreate narratives that are stripped of everything but the pathos inherent in consuming the medium. (Hearn, 2016)

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

Hearn's videos start with recognizable films of high production value which are then subject to a depletion of that quality, but at the same time there is an attempt to preserve the intensity of the emotional effect, this is something she strives for. She has also re-enacted a series of death scenes from well-known films, tragic climaxes that are now replayed for laughs. The emotional roller coaster ride the original films can take us on entails a departure and escape from our day-to-day lives and worries. Hearn's absurdist little theatres pull us back into the domestic and quotidian realm of the artist's everyday.

There is a comic disjuncture between the seriousness by which she performs and invites empathy and imaginative identification and the props and domestic apartment setting. It is the pathetic core of films that she tries to convey in her re-enactments, which suggest the extent of her desire to emotionally occupy stock roles. Pathos is consumed as it is commodified in film and this is the exchange that takes place in her work.

Fig. 3 Hearn, E.T., video still.

Fig. 4 Hearn, Gladiator, video still.

As a variant of Karaoke, Hearn taps into the culture of fandom and its excesses, of people living their lives through imaginary identifications with movie characters. One thinks of how the domestic space becomes a theatre for unrealized heroism, inner-worlds and fantasy identifications: a situation also made famous in film in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) when Robert De Niro's psychotic Travis Bickle character stands in front of his bedroom mirror and rehearses his response to an imagined confrontation: "You talking to me?"

The joke with Hearn's work is the collision between two worlds. In borrowing and trying out a vocabulary of dramatic responses, the work is not emotionally denuded. The shortfall is due to her not being a professional actor and that these are domestic reiterations. They rely upon the fact we know the references. They are cathartic, intense dramatic moments that are copied, but the production values are depleted. In this respect it is a comedy of the fall, from the economically and emotionally charged Hollywood blockbusters to the mini-dramas performed in her bedroom.

Jokes for Peter L. Berger are said to involve "transcendence in a lower key" (2014, p. 190). Borrowing terminology from the philosopher Alfred Schutz, Berger says how "the comic breaks into the consciousness of the paramount reality, which is that ordinary, everyday world in which we exist most of the time... This reality is dense, heavy, compelling" (2014, p. 190). In contrast, "the reality of the comic is thin, effervescent" and "the comic posits another reality that is inserted like an island into the ocean of everyday experience" (2014, p. 190).

This provides a useful way of thinking both about Kara Hearn's work and Richard Wentworth's ongoing photographs *Making Do and Getting By*, an epic series, spanning four decades, made in response to often small and overlooked arrangements of things observed on the street. At the outset the pictures tended to concentrate on London's Caledonian Road but have since then expanded to include cities and places all over the world. In Wentworth's photographs objects are charged with comic potential by the unexpected way they have been discarded, repaired or re-used in creative new ways. He has said how lots of the photographs are about "people trying to make the world do what they want it to do" (2015, p. 8). His photography is indebted to the inventive improvisations of strangers, embraced as unconscious

collaborators. It is primarily a sculptural language of things that he is drawing attention to in his photographs, a formally inventive and creative use of everyday stuff that he goes so far as to say entails a "public humiliation of the history of sculpture and for all three-dimensional enterprise" (2015, p. 11). The world throws up daily amusements, conjunctions and relationships and habitually overlooked incongruities. Wentworth's "speedy reportage" creates a new comic lexicon from out of the thrown away, the crap on the streets, ad hoc repairs and the chance meeting of objects (2015, p. 10). The urban environment depicted is often marked by a certain economic reality, few clean streets or manicured neighborhoods, but instead places that are run-down, messy and disorganized, places where people leave furniture out on the street or hang abandoned clothing on railings. Wentworth's art might well acknowledge the readymade, but it takes the pretense out of Marcel Duchamp's aristocratic gaze – the work is always grounded. And since their identity is as photographs the extraordinary and unexpected is always located within a familiar and day-to-day real.

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