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# The Use of Tactical Absurdity in (Post-)Conceptual Art Practice

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Abstract

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The ‘tactical absurdity’ forwarded in this research emerged out of my own practice. I, like many other artists working in a conceptual tradition, was producing work that appeared to operate through some sort of absurdity, and with some sort of intentionality. There was, however, almost nothing in the literature that could account for this approach.

The term ‘absurdity’ is deployed by artists, critics, and curators alike with little precision or consistency; usages borrowed from literature or existential philosophy sit alongside everyday understandings, and frequently fail to discriminate between absurdity as a formal device and absurdity as a subject-matter. Its meaning is treated as self-evident.

Adopting an emergent and autoethnographic practice-based methodology, this research furnishes a practical and theoretical understanding of the operation of tactical absurdity deployed as a device in (post-)conceptual art practice. Over the course of the research, five objectives are achieved: (i) to define the concept of absurdity; (ii) to establish a context for the use of tactical absurdity in contemporary (post-)conceptual art practice; (iii) to develop a body of work that operates through tactical absurdity; (iv) to account for its emergence within a practice; and (v) to forward a theoretical analysis of its functionality and value modelled through notions of relativity, generativity, and criticality.

Three case studies address these issues via their own thematically distinct contexts, exploring practically the forms that a tactically absurd approach might take, and the ways it might function as a tool of engagement. Drawing upon a number of forays into theory, and aligning itself with eight variants of tactical absurdity identified within (post-)conceptual art practice, the analysis of the works produced offers an understanding of tactical absurdity that sees it as valuable through its generativity, its criticality, and its opposition to preexisting interpretative and discursive frameworks.

The tactical absurdity accounted for in the research distances itself from a more familiar ‘mannerist’ absurdity, which is seen to have relinquished its potency. The research provides a platform for further work on the use of tactical absurdity as a tool of engagement with specific contemporary issues.



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# Details of Practical Work

This practice-based research project consists of a body of artwork divided into three case studies, accompanied by a written thesis. Documentation of all the practical work referred to in this thesis can be found (with links to the respective works) at:

**[www.daveballartist.co.uk/phd](http://www.daveballartist.co.uk/phd)**

## CASE STUDY ONE: SEARCHING FOR THE WELSH LANDSCAPE

- Documentation of exhibition at Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Wales
- *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales*, series of 60 drawings (pencil on paper, each 420 x 297 mm) and 60 museum-style wall texts (dimensions variable)
- *Hill Walking*, performance for video, 11 minutes
- *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany*, video, 20 minutes
- *Arms Reaching, Smiling Sweetly*, installation of seven unfired clay sculptures (each c. 150 x 110 x 100 cm) on makeshift plinths and video (11 minutes, silent)

## CASE STUDY TWO: A TO Z

- Documentation of exhibition at Gallery Oldham, Manchester
- *A to Z: From Aardvark to Axle*, 461 drawings, various media on paper, dimensions from 240 x 170 mm to 420 x 297 mm
- *A to Z: Babble to Byte (From Memory)*, 479 drawings, various media on paper, 297 x 210 mm. Drawings are produced without the use of any visual source material (i.e. made entirely from memory)
- *A to Z: All the Cs (Through the Lens of My Camera)*, 831 photographic prints, dimensions variable
- *A to Z: The Ds (Blind Drawings)*, drawings, coloured pencil on paper, 297 x 420 mm. Drawings are executed “blindly” (i.e. without looking at the paper)

## CASE STUDY THREE: INTERRUPTIONS IN THE FLOW OF SENSE

- *I Think That's Best for Both of Us (Lance and Oprah)*, video, 8 minutes
- *Road Signs (Proposal for a Hypothetical Intervention)*, series of drawings, pencil and gouache on paper, dimensions variable
- *Gemäldegalerie Hands*, series of drawings, pencil on paper, 400 x 300 mm
- *Theresa*, text work, laser-print on paper, dimensions variable
- *I Did It for the Reasons I Said I Did It*, video, 13 minutes
- *Referendum Night*, video, 36 minutes
- *Untitled (Dagger)*, text work, laser-print on paper, dimensions variable
- *How Flat Is It It's Really Flat (Alice)*, video, 4 minutes

# Academic Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

I, Dave Ball

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

*The Use of Tactical Absurdity in (Post-)Conceptual Art Practice*

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signed:

Date: 6/9/2020

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

## 1 I know what absurdity is, and it's not that!

I'd already been warned not to prepare "too tightly" for the talk, and that I should expect the audience to interrupt and ask questions. But even so, the response to what I'd envisaged would be a gentle conceptual discussion with a sympathetic and sophisticated group of peers about the fittingness of the label "absurd" to a variety of examples of contemporary art took me somewhat by surprise. The presentation took place one late November evening in Berlin as part of *Conversas*, a series of thematically-diverse talks that brought together artists, scientists, and thinkers, with the aim of creating discussion and dialogue around the speakers' own particular fields of interest. Given the interactive nature of the event, I'd decided, rather than present my ongoing PhD research into tactical absurdity with any degree of finality, to treat the evening as a public testing-ground for a series of eight variants of absurdity that I'd recently (and tentatively) proposed as observable in works of contemporary art (see ch.2 section 3.2). Since those categorisations relied upon my own intuitive judgements about what would or wouldn't constitute "absurdity", I was keen to test them out publicly – and was ready to be challenged, up to a point, on their taxonomic robustness and validity.

What I hadn't anticipated, however, was the level of fervour with which the audience would respond to my proposals. The talk began with a short screening of one of my own video works, *Hill Walking*; essentially a video-diary charting my attempt to climb to the summit of a hill in the Brecon Beacons without looking at it, the work belongs to the larger and more complex project *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* (see ch.3), but is nevertheless able to function as a self-contained video in its own right – the immediacy of its humour and the intimacy of its delivery requiring little prior contextualisation. Succinctly setting up what I was about to introduce as "tactical absurdity", the work was greeted appreciatively. The screening was followed by a few general remarks on my PhD research, and an outline of the structure of the evening's presentation, which would begin with my first proposed category of absurdity: "immediately discernible (comic) incongruity". Everything up to that point had proceeded more or less according to plan; however, as soon as the first slide was revealed, the atmosphere in the room immediately became heated. The slide in question was an early photograph by Thomas Ruff entitled *The Emperor* (1982) (fig. 1), which depicted the artist, legs flailing in the air, attempting a somewhat inelegant handstand on a brown leather office chair. Almost immediately an incredulous rebuttal shot out from the front row of the audience: "Why shouldn't we do handstands on chairs?!" demanded the speaker, a woman, perhaps in her late 30s, "Why is that absurd? That's so conservative!"



Figure 1. Thomas Ruff (1982) *The Emperor*

Perhaps, I thought to myself as I stood there slightly taken aback by the force of the objection, it hadn't been the strongest candidate for an opening slide; perhaps it was too old and the gesture now too familiar, perhaps in the intervening years it had lost its potency, having become rather too generic an interaction with an environment now typical of any number of contemporary photographers concerned with subversive bodily inhabitations of place.<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps the problem was that it was simply too easily recognisable and unchallenging an example of absurdity (although its immediacy was precisely what I was trying to illustrate). It quickly became apparent, however, that the issue lay not with this particular photograph by Ruff at all. In fact, with almost every subsequent slide shown, the pattern repeated itself; Erwin Wurm's *Misconceivable* (2010), for instance, a small sailing boat perched upon a river bank bending down into the water as if melting in the sun, was immediately declared worthless by another vocal audience member with a dismissive "but this kind of thing already exists! How can that be absurd?!" Jimmie Durham's *Stoning the Refrigerator* (1996), meanwhile, a performance in which the artist repeatedly hurls rocks at a fridge in the courtyard of a 16th century Jesuit college in Reims, led one disgusted onlooker to wonder why, in the face of huge global inequality, scarcity of resources, and consumerist greed, the artist was wasting everyone's time "just breaking things".<sup>2</sup> As each image was revealed, some tirade or other would be unleashed on what audience members variously seemed to consider an affront to their intelligence, their outlook on life, their conception of art, or their own particular understanding of what absurdity actually meant. By the time Francis Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) appeared,<sup>3</sup> together with

an explanation of its premise that 500 economically disadvantaged Peruvian labourers had been invited to spend an hour shovelling a sand dune in unison so that it could be moved by ten centimetres, the audience seemed only able to respond with cynical laughter. The thoughtful and diligent discussion about the subtleties and variants of tactical absurdity I'd anticipated never really materialised: instead, my earnest enquiries about whether or not individual artworks could legitimately be classified according to particular categories of absurd art practice were met, again and again, with a series of impassioned and resounding "NOs!"

Clearly something had gone wrong here, and I was fairly sure that what had riled this particular audience had little to do with any particular weaknesses in my presentation skills or lack of clarity in my categorisations. Rather, it was as if the very act of attempting to rethink a concept as familiar as absurdity was taken as an incendiary provocation. *We already understand absurdity*, the audience seemed to yell back at me, *and what you're telling us does not fit with that understanding!*<sup>4</sup> What surprised me more than anything else was that large parts of the discussion had seemed to take place in a realm completely outside of the detached, scholarly engagement with the subject I'd been expecting: the overriding level of passion, conviction, emotion, and sheer rage with which the comments were delivered was astonishing. Absurdity, as was repeatedly made clear over the course of the discussion, *really matters* – and not just to this particular PhD researcher. *What absurdity is, how it can be used, and what the value of that usage might be* were the questions that I'd been endeavouring to answer; until that point, the impetus behind them had largely stemmed from my own practice. But now, suddenly, a public and visceral demand to have those questions addressed had been articulated. Any lingering doubts I might have had at the beginning of the evening about the urgency and relevance of my field of research and the necessity for its investigation had been thoroughly assuaged by the very real passion and commitment to absurdity shown by this particular audience.

## **2 Context: absurdity deployed within a (post-)conceptual art practice**

My interest in what is forwarded in this research as "tactical absurdity" was forged during a period of some fifteen years of professional artistic practice since completing my first degree in Fine Art in 2001. From the outset I understood my work as being situated within a lineage of (post-)conceptual art practice, and my explorations of the potential of humour, playfulness, and absurdity took place within that frame.<sup>5</sup> The 'postconceptual' (which has alternatively been theorised as the "post-medium" (Krauss 1999)) is, according to Peter Osborne, less a 'traditional art-historical or art-critical concept at the level of medium, form or style,' than a manifestation of the 'critical legacy' of the 'fundamental mutation in the ontology of the artwork' brought



about by 1960s conceptual art (2013: 48). Postconceptual art thus embodies a series of assumptions that, for Osborne, include: a 'necessary conceptuality' (since art is 'constituted by concepts'); an 'ineliminable – but radically insufficient – aesthetic dimension' (since all art must be somehow materially presented); an 'anti-aestheticist' positioning (a rejection of the idea that art is primarily concerned with aesthetics); and an 'expansion to infinity of the possible material forms of art' (*ibid.*).

Key points of reference (and, indeed, formative influences) that situate my own practice within this conceptual tradition include artists such as Bas Jan Ader, whose *Broken Fall (Organic)* (1971), a short film in which the artist is seen hanging from the branch of a tree for some time before dropping down into a stream below him, can be seen as exemplifying a kind of 'conceptual melodrama' concerned with 'treating the unsystematic systematically' (Heiser 2007: 137–39). Displaying a similarly deadpan conceptuality is my own *Things to do with Biscuits* (2006), a performance for video developed in response to an invitation to show an earlier found-object based installation made up of a 15 by 15 grid of Rich Tea biscuits, in which I walked around the village of Kirkby Stephen in Cumbria and the surrounding countryside performing a unique action with each of the 225 biscuits. Through its playfully subversive yet narratively inexplicable disturbance of the "natural" usage of an everyday object, the work gestures towards an overcoming of the status of passive consumer, which, following Michel de Certeau, represents a refusal to be a 'dominated element in society' (1984: xi–xii).



Figure 2. Dave Ball (2013) *The Museum of Uninteresting Experience*

Particularly salient is a strand of conceptual art practice that operates through the carrying-out of an “instruction”, or, more broadly, through the (attempted) realisation of some predetermined conceptual premise. Douglas Huebler’s *Variable Piece #70* (1971-97) – a durational project presented in various configurations of media – is emblematic, proceeding according to its stated aim of photographically documenting everyone alive.<sup>6</sup> A similarly arbitrary imposition of structure is evident in my video *Being Somewhere* (2009), a work that arose during a residency at Künstlerhäuser Worpswede through the act of making daily visits to the same, largely unchanging area of landscape in north-west Germany; initially motivated by a sense of novelty at discovering a new environment, the activity gradually loses all sense of purpose as the location steadfastly refuses to support the weight of my expectations. I am seen performing a series of bizarre actions within the vast flat moorland, the arbitrariness of my behaviour only reinforced by my increasingly desperate attempts to project meaning into the activities, communicated in the form of a spoken narrative.

Contemporary practitioners such as Pilvi Takala and Francis Alÿs can also be seen as situated in the same (post-)conceptual lineage. Takala’s *The Trainee* (2008), for example, is a month-long performative intervention in which the artist, having secured a traineeship in a finance firm, proceeds not to do any work there; whilst Alÿs’s *Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997) features the artist pushing a large block of ice around the streets of Mexico City for several hours until it has completely melted away. Both works, crucially, play out in social space, relying on a real-world context for their functionality and meaning.<sup>7</sup> Similarly positioned is my own project *The Museum of Uninteresting Experience* (2013) (fig. 2), which was developed in the village of Saint-Jean-Port-Joli in Quebec, Canada.<sup>8</sup> Based on the paradoxical logic of seeking out anything that held no interest during a series of walks in and around the village, the work explores the psychological condition of boredom, expectations of artistic activity, and village life. The work was realised as a “museum” situated in a small boutique-like house on the village high-street, filled with photographs, objects and mock-informative wall-texts, taking its place alongside numerous other boutiques run by local craftspeople. Absurdly intervening in a particular cultural and touristic economy, the work, like the equally absurd activities of Takala and Alÿs, emerges squarely from within a lineage of (post-)conceptual practice – which provides the context for the exploration of tactical absurdity pursued in this research.

The scope of this practice-based research, then, is established by the specific field of enquiry within which my own works – and those practices that have actively influenced them – are understood to operate. Accordingly, this written thesis, since it orbits around my own practice, will limit itself to a discussion of those artists and discourses that bear directly upon it. Countless

contemporary practitioners whose works utilise absurdity will, therefore, not be discussed if their practices are deemed to operate outside of this (post-)conceptual context. The works of Erwin Wurm, for instance, which include the aforementioned *Misconceivable* (see section 1) or the celebrated series *One Minute Sculptures* (1996-ongoing) (in which the artist or others pose with everyday objects), will not be considered, since they have emerged largely within an object-based or sculptural tradition.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the works of John Bock, such as his B-movie car-chase video installation *Escape* (2013), which construct uncanny and inexplicable worlds, are understood, despite their self-evident absurdity, to have severed their relationship with the real to such an extent that they are no longer directly relevant to the research. Both artists, moreover, display an insufficient level of, in Osborne's terms, "anti-aestheticism" to be truly considered (post-)conceptual; practices such as theirs therefore fall outside the scope of this research.

### 3 Methodological reflections

Emerging from my own professional practice as an artist, this practice-based PhD project can be considered a form of what Janneke Wesseling describes as 'research *in and through* art,' a mode of operation in which 'practical action (the making) and theoretical reflection (the thinking) go hand in hand. The one cannot exist without the other, in the same way action and thought are inextricably linked in artistic practice' (2011: 2, original emphasis). Much of the methodology that underpins the project, in fact, stems precisely from its origins in (post-)conceptual practice, for, as Wesseling notes, '[t]he idea of art-as-research flows from *art itself*, in particular from the conceptual art of the 1960s onwards. Conceptual artists oppose the view that art can be viewed in isolation from history and politics, and they assert that art is necessarily cognitive' (3, original emphasis). My own work, even before the commencement of the PhD, was already characterised by its sense of enquiry, self-reflexivity, and criticality, and already understood itself as contributing some form of knowledge (whether artistic or extra-artistic) that was situated within a wider intellectual context. What makes this doctoral research project distinct, and what speaks to a distinction between *art-as-such* and *art-as-research*, is simply the means by which that pursuit of knowledge is accounted for and framed. Indeed, its outcome as an exhibition (presented in combination with this written thesis) illustrates precisely the tension between a body of work presented in a professional context and a body of work serving the needs of an academic research project.<sup>10</sup> The term "exposition" has been proposed as more appropriate to a PhD context by, amongst others, Carole Gray and Julian Malins, since its 'suggestion of exposure and explication matches very well the key characteristics of good research – accessibility, transparency, transferability' (2004: 168). The 'research exposition,' they argue, 'is didactic/heuristic in that it encourages interaction, critical exchange, understanding and

learning for all concerned,’ whereas ‘in a classic exhibition, probably these features would remain tacit and implicit’ – even if, that is, ‘[r]esolved pieces may visualise or embody some of the research concepts and findings’ and provide ‘compelling evidence of an active pursuit of the research questions and the researcher’s response to those questions’ (169). The issue of whether or not artistic practice – particularly in its (post-)conceptual mode – is already a form of “research” is revealed, perhaps, to be more a matter of framing than of qualitative difference.

The particular methodological frame through which this research is viewed, then, is that of the *autoethnographic*. Emerging as part of a “narrative turn” in social research in the 1990s, autoethnography distances itself from claims to objectivity, externality, or the privileging of authoritative knowledge; as Carolyn Ellis *et al.* note, autoethnography ‘acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research’ (2011: 3). Given the centrality of the artist in artistic practice, the applicability of autoethnography to artistic research is clear (for all its ironic distance and playful self-reflexivity, I remain, as will become abundantly clear, a ubiquitous presence in my own work). Indeed, if the artist is understood as engaged in a phenomenological project of making sense of the world through their own subjective encounter with it (which certainly holds for my own practice), then Ellis *et al.*’s definition of autoethnography as ‘an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)’ certainly indicates its usefulness (1). Part of the role of this written thesis will be to chart my own journey into *making sense of the phenomenon* of tactically absurd art practice – precisely through my own attempts at *producing* a tactically absurd art practice; the apparent circularity of which is fitting, since, in Tessa Muncey’s words, the ‘autoethnographer is both the researcher and the researched’ (2010: 3).

The concept of “tactical absurdity” forwarded in this research did not, of course, exist fully-formed at its outset. Writing this introduction after having more or less completed the project, I am able to draw on the considerable benefits of hindsight and forge a series of neat assertions about the way its topic “will be” (that is, *has been*) dealt with. This apparent sleight of hand, which, at least according to Derrida, is an inescapable consequence of the act of writing itself,<sup>11</sup> can be seen to have a direct methodological bearing on the way the project plays (or rather, *has played*) out. Whilst Brad Haseman may be overstating the case when he asserts that ‘many practice-led researchers do not commence a research project with a sense of “a problem”,’ his suggestion that artistic research is often impelled by an ‘enthusiasm of practice’ that ‘eschew[s] the constraints of narrow problem-setting and rigid methodological requirements’ provides a fitting description of those moments in this PhD project when the production of work appears to race ahead of any research-based imperatives, only to then be accommodated retrospectively

(2006: 100). Such a methodological approach might thus be described as *emergent*, which, for Henk Slager, means that its trajectory ‘cannot be decided *a priori*, as it can in one-dimensional scientific research’ (2009: 54), since it is built upon a set of ‘operational strategies that cannot be legitimised beforehand’ (55). What might now appear as a logically and coherently conceived research undertaking only takes on that character through its (re-)presentation as a written thesis and exhibition, a move which, in Derrida’s terms, ‘recreates an intention-to-say after the fact’ (1981: 7). Moreover, if artistic research is aimed at, as Slager has it, ‘exploring novel forms of knowledge and experience,’ then its emergent character can be seen to bear directly upon the problematic at the heart of this particular research project: namely, the opposition of absurdity to determinate meaning (2009: 49). By resisting a ‘dogmatic art historical hermeneutics’ that strives towards ‘iconographically exact ... meaning’ (*ibid.*), its methodological openness will thus prove highly appropriate to the ‘indefinability, heterogeneity, contingency, and relativity’ that characterise its topic of enquiry (53).

Practically speaking, the autoethnographic impulse of the research proceeds through three successive “case studies”, which, presented as they are here in the written thesis, construct a chronological narrative that invites – without ever insisting upon it – conclusions to be drawn from the research as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Each case study is themed around a single project or constellation of works, conforming to James McKernan’s characterisation of a case study as a ‘formal collection of evidence presented as an interpretative position of a unique case ... [that] reports on a project or innovation or event over a prolonged period of time by telling a tale or story as it has evolved’ (1996: 74). The first case study (ch.3) adheres most closely to a model of qualitative socio-cultural enquiry, adopting at its outset – albeit with a certain ironic distance – a number of established methods of “data-collection”, such as visiting, observing, photographing, videoing, reading, transcribing, watching, and listening to relevant material and places (in this case, the Welsh landscape and its cultural representations); many of these activities are pursued with a marked subjectivity that emphasises the personal, the introspective, the intuitive, and the idiosyncratic. The ends to which this “data” is actually put, however, particularly in light of the absurdity of the practice, remain undetermined; it is therefore part of the task of the written chapter of the thesis to account for this, however inconclusively. The second case study (ch.4) returns metaphorically to the studio, inhabiting the role of the artist (myself) engaged in a pursuit of an absurd lifelong project (of visualising every word in the dictionary); the written account thus shifts registers between first-person ruminations on the uncertainties of studio-practice and more theoretical attempts to contextualise and make sense of that activity. Finally, the third case study (ch.5) continues in an autoethnographic mode, this time imagined from the perspective of an artist (again, myself) as an individual exposed to media culture and to language

more generally; again, the written chapter navigates the unfolding of the project through a combination of personal anecdotes and theoretical explorations.

What the various approaches deployed within these three distinct case studies amount to for the research as a whole might be best modelled through a notion of “montage”, which, for Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, ‘invites viewers to construct interpretations that build on one another as a scene unfolds ... The viewer puts the sequences together into a meaningful emotional whole, as if at a glance, all at once’ (2011: 5). Entirely appropriately, perhaps, given the subject matter, the case studies act as ‘texts that refuse [...] to be read in simplistic, linear, incontrovertible terms’ – an approach that also extends to the incorporation of theory into the research, which is similarly heterogeneous, and, indeed, not always free of contradiction (3).<sup>13</sup> Such an approach, finally, might best be characterised as a kind of ‘poetic making do,’ the definition given by Michel de Certeau for the concept of “bricolage” (1984: xv), which, in the context of artistic research, functions, in the words of Robyn Stewart, as ‘a pieced together, close-knit set of practices providing solutions to a problem in a concrete situation,’ in which ‘the bricoleur appropriates available methods, strategies and empirical materials or invents or pieces together new tools as necessary’ (2007: 127). If all this “poetic making do” starts to sound a bit like *making it up as you go along*, then perhaps that is not entirely inappropriate, given the methodological basis of the research in authentic artistic practice.

## 4 Terminology: absurdity, tactics, and tactical absurdity

The research sets out from an understanding of absurdity that distances itself from familiar existential or literary usages (see ch.2 sections 2.1 and 2.2). The “absurdity” appealed to in the research is in keeping with a more general, everyday sense of the word, variously defined as ‘ridiculous’ (Chambers Dictionary), ‘ludicrous’ (Collins English Dictionary), or ‘wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate’ (Oxford English Dictionary) – and is understood etymologically through the Latin *absurdus* (out of tune, discordant), and its root *surdus* (dull, deaf, mute), as the condition of being manifestly “out of harmony” with a given context, however that context comes to be defined (see ch.2 section 4.1). Absurdity is understood as applicable to a wide variety of contexts and in a wide range of intensities; thus, having emerged in a historically specific philosophical and cultural moment, the characteristic tenor of “absurdity” felt, for example, in the plays of Eugène Ionesco or by the characters in the novels of Albert Camus, is largely of a different order from that of the works produced and discussed in this research. The focus is on the *mechanics* of absurdity, rather than any resultant *tenor*.

Absurdity is therefore proposed as a “device”: a particular mode of operation that forms part of the toolkit of the artist. Deployed at a pivotal moment in the process of developing a work, it is modelled as a disruptive form of engagement with a given context. In a (perhaps quixotic) attempt to pin down more precisely its mode of operation, eight distinct varieties of absurdity will be posited within the field of contemporary (post-)conceptual artistic practice, representing a diverse range of contexts, approaches, and motivations (see ch.2 section 3.2). As will become clear both from my own practice and in the works cited from other artists, the operation of absurdity as it is understood in this research does not necessarily result in artworks that fit with what is conventionally characterised as “absurd”. Indeed, one of the questions explored is whether an all-too-easily recognisable “absurdity” may, in fact, have already ceded its generative and critical potential and retreated into mannerism.

“Tactics”, drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, are understood as a ‘devious’ set of procedures aimed at negotiating, disrupting, or hijacking a given system of power (1984: xii). Operating as a covertly disruptive form of ‘wit’ (38), tactical artistic practice is modelled as an intervention into a given site of prevailing order that serves to police thought, communication, and action (Thompson 2004). “Tactical absurdity” is thus proposed as a gesture of resistance against the sovereignty of common sense, a symbolic intervention into the conventions and orthodoxies of behaviour, language and representation, and (insofar as it is possible within the realm of artistic practice) a departure from the ‘frameset’ of legibility that obtains at any given moment (Metahaven 2013: 14).

The apparent oxymoron in the coupling of the “tactical” with the “absurd” is acknowledged, and will be embraced within this research as a productive tension. The term “tactical absurdity” is coined precisely to draw attention to an irresolvable tension inherent in the use of absurdity as a device, particularly in an artistic frame. It is the *deliberateness* of its deployment – that is, its “tactical” orientation towards some predetermined and knowable end – that presupposes a condition of meaningfulness. However, given that absurdity itself comes into being precisely through its *opposition* to contextually-determined meaning, sense, and logic, the meaningfulness of the tactic would appear to have been ruled out. Suspended between meaning and its absence, “tactical absurdity”, deployed as an artistic device, is proposed as operating through a paradoxical unknowability, which, following Donald Barthelme (1997), is understood as the very condition for its generativity.

## 5 Forays into theory

Part of the role of this written thesis will be to approach the topic of the research from a theoretical perspective. Theory is deployed not in order to manufacture any kind of coolly reflective distance on the practice, but as, in Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge's words, a 'stepping stone in the process of analysing and constructing visual propositions' (2006: 2). The research is thus mindful of Deleuze's verdict that '[p]hilosophical theory is itself a practice, just as much as its object. It is no more abstract than its object. It is a practice of concepts, and it must be judged in the light of the other practices with which it interferes' (1989b: 280). Given both the emergent nature of the research and the dialogical interaction between the practical artwork and the written text that underpins it, it seems appropriate to position its philosophical content within a similar methodological frame. In the spirit of autoethnography, then, three "theoretical excursions" are posited, none of which claim any theoretical ascendancy over the others, but are presented as distinct approaches to a philosophical modelling of tactical absurdity that have been encountered and embraced over the course of the project, and which, at various points, support the analysis and development of work carried out in the case studies. Any theoretical incompatibilities that may arise can be understood as a consequence of the methodological approach of the project.<sup>14</sup>

The first foray into theory approaches absurdity as a relative concept, negotiating the issue of what it is *not*. Defined as the condition of some thing (an image, action, behaviour, thought, utterance) that is out of harmony with a given context, absurdity is modelled as a clash between realms of meaning. Thus, when implemented as a device, it is understood to trigger *an irresolvable discord at the level of understanding*: the absurd object appears nonsensical from the point of view of "common sense", whilst from the point of view of the absurd object's own interior logic, common sense itself is made to appear nonsensical. The realms of sense and nonsense therefore exist in an irreconcilably oppositional relationship with each other. This account draws on the work of phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz, with his positing of "finite provinces of meaning" to describe the stratification of the world we inhabit and act within, where everyday, common-sense "reality" is encountered as distinct from the realities of, for example, the dream, play, or religious experience (Schutz & Luckmann 1973). The provisional nature of common-sense, together with its ongoing imposition of order and coherence on the world, is also emphasised in Susan Stewart's (1978) account of nonsense. Stressing their mutual interdependence, sense and nonsense are modelled as fluid and permeable categories, the organisational work done by common-sense countered by the liberating force of nonsense ('an activity by which the world is disorganised and reorganised' (1978: vii)). Also premised on a Schutzian model of finite provinces of meaning is Peter L



Berger's (2014) account of humour as occupying its own "island" within a "paramount reality", incidences of which are experienced as unexpected "intrusions" into that reality. Whilst Schutz remains, in the words of one recent commentator, 'absent to a point of near non-existence from histories of visual art and modern aesthetic theory,' his social-constructionist theories allow a modelling of absurdity that remains useful for this research (Thomas 2018: 27).

The second theoretical foray models absurdity through a notion of generativity that sees its indeterminacy and unaccountability as productive forces. Rather than a distinct and pre-existing realm waiting to be exploited by the artwork through an operation analogous to the use of humorous incongruity in a joke, absurdity is imagined as that which stands outside of signification. Gilles Deleuze's (1989a) distinction between vertical irony and "horizontal" humour (which stems from his rejection of stable points of view above and beyond life), extended by Candace D Lang (1988) in her differentiation between a vertical (rhetorical), and a horizontal (non-rhetorical) irony, leads to an affirmative theorisation of absurdity as capable of departing a given symbolic order altogether (O'Sullivan 2006). Following Barthelme's positing of the creative writer as operating within the realm of the not-yet-known and the 'as-yet-unspeakable' (1997: 15), the deployment of tactical absurdity is thus proposed as a form of creative practice that, precisely by virtue of its deliberate circumvention of preexisting frameworks of meaning, is inherently generative and geared towards the new. Key attributes of absurdity such as contradiction, equivocation, and ambiguity – which, for Martin Herbert, constitute a contemporary art of "uncertainty" – are understood, in reacting against a 'rationalist and comprehensible model of art,' as embodiments of the productive potential of unknowability (2014: 9). The temptation amongst critics to neuter this capacity by "recuperating sense" from the nonsensical or absurd object (Rothwell 2011), is deemed to be not only misplaced, but actively deleterious, overlooking the potential for new insights afforded by absurdity in favour of the comforting conventionality of preexisting (and limiting) frameworks of meaning.

Finally, in a third theoretical foray that aligns absurdity with criticality, absurd practice is modelled as an "other" to a dominant and pervasive discourse whose authority is maintained through a highly conventionalised architecture of meaning. Departing from an earlier, agitational model of criticality, tactical absurdity is understood in accordance with Jacques Rancière's identification of contemporary forms of artistic critique that 'play on the fluctuating boundary between critical provocation and the undecidability of its meaning' (2009a: 56). Absurd art practice is thus imagined as a non-rhetorical form of critique that rejects any straightforward relationship between political aims and artistic means, offering instead a kind of covert disruption of a given 'representational continuity' (2009b: 75). As a destabilising force within a symbolic order that is presented as inevitable and inescapable, absurdity, following

Metahaven's analysis of online humour, is understood as able to 'resist and overturn the frame of reference imposed by any political status quo' (2013: 21). In a contemporary context of what we are continually assured are 'serious times,' the refusal to make sense and the ostensible *lack* of seriousness of tactical absurdity means that instances of its deployment are likely to be received as 'unwelcome guests' (54) – which renders its critique all the more prescient.

## 6 Research objectives

This research aims, within its autoethnographic frame, to forward a practical and theoretical understanding of the operation of tactical absurdity in (post-)conceptual art practice. Whilst the specific terms of this central objective have only become identifiable retrospectively (due to the emergent nature of the research outlined in section 3 above), it nevertheless serves as an accurate description of the direction of travel of the research. Over the course of its journey, a number of questions and problematics can be seen to have emerged, which, at least if they are imagined as having been posed at its outset, can be understood as having structured and impelled the research forward, and, by its conclusion, having been addressed. Notwithstanding the artifice of this construct, and the oversimplified research narrative that it implies, the following five research objectives can be usefully identified:

*(i) To establish a precise critical and theoretical definition of the concept of “absurdity”*

The concept of absurdity is wielded to various ends and in various contexts, which are not always particularly well-defined or differentiated. The research therefore sets out by distinguishing between usages established in, respectively, existential philosophy, literature, and everyday discourse. Etymologically understood as a manifest disharmony between an object and its context, absurdity will be proposed as arising from a disjunction that is entirely context-specific. The metaphysical overtones of existential absurdity, as with the specific generic transgressions of early- to mid-twentieth-century literary or dramatic absurdism, will be deemed to be of limited use in accounting for absurdity as it is deployed as a device in contemporary art practice. As a consequence, a new framework for an understanding of absurdity as an artistic tool will need to be established, which will necessitate pushing the notion beyond its current usage into genuinely new territory.

*(ii) To establish a context for the use of tactical absurdity in contemporary (post-)conceptual art*

There is an almost complete lack of analysis of absurdity in the literature around contemporary art. Although the term is frequently invoked, its usage remains largely ill-defined and imprecise, making little distinction between the everyday sense of the word and those usages originating in philosophy or pertaining to literature. With a few notable exceptions, the concept of “absurdity”

is employed unreflectively by curators and critics, its meaning and functionality treated as self-evident. A detailed typology of absurd operations will therefore be laid out: eight key variants of absurdity observable in a number of emblematic (post-)conceptual artworks will be identified in order to establish a practical and theoretical vocabulary of absurdity aimed at contextualising and providing a platform for the understanding of its various modes of operation developed in the case studies.

*(iii) To develop a body of work that operates through tactical absurdity*

Absurdity, deployed as a device in the development of an artwork, is understood as a moment where an element of disharmony is brought into play. Its use is “tactical” in the sense that it operates through a deliberately implemented disruption of a given context. The notion of “tactics”, that is, implies an intentionality: a conviction that an absurd intervention in the context will, through its disruption, give rise to something of value (even if the nature of that value cannot be anticipated, or, in some cases, accounted for at all). The deployment of tactical absurdity will underpin the development of a body of work making up the three case studies through which this research unfolds. In the context of those case studies, the works produced will endeavour to engage with their own specific thematics deliberately and decisively, bringing into being a variety of practical instantiations of a tactically absurd mode of operation.

*(iv) To account for the ways in which tactical absurdity emerges within a practice*

As a deliberately implemented tool of engagement, tactical absurdity operates through an indeterminacy that lends it a distinctly paradoxical air. Its deployment within my own practice, as well as its reception by its audiences when it is exhibited, is therefore fraught with uncertainty and ambivalence. The written accounts of its usage in the three case studies will seek to give voice to this tension between the assuredness and intentionality of its design and the doubts that stem from its unaccountability. The incorporation of the personal and the anecdotal within the overall narrative of the thesis will attempt to situate the use of tactical absurdity within a specific and authentic artistic practice.

*(v) To forward a theoretical analysis of the functionality and value of tactically absurd practice, modelled through notions of relativity, generativity, and criticality*

Absurdity is all-too-rarely conceived of as a specific object of critical attention: its complex relationship with meaning distances it from discursivity and the attribution of determinable value. Despite, or perhaps because of their unaccountability according to given protocols of legibility, the works produced in the case studies will invite reflection on how their value and functionality might be accounted for theoretically. The research will therefore pursue a series of theoretical excursions that propose distinct ways of modelling absurdity and its tactical

implementation within artistic practice. None of these theoretical models will be considered as definitive, but each will, with respect to specific aspects of the works produced within the research, enable productive analyses that offer insight and understanding into their functionality, as well as their generative and critical capacities.

## 7 Structure of thesis

This practice-based PhD research project comprises a body of work divided into three case studies, together with a written thesis accounting for and contextualising that body of work. Documentation of all the practical work making up the case studies can be found online (see *Details of Practical Work* above); the work was also presented as a “viva” exhibition at Winchester Gallery in early 2020.<sup>15</sup>

The written thesis is divided into six chapters, the first of which is this introduction. Chapter 2 is a literature review, which explores the current state of knowledge on the topic, approaching it from a series of perspectives engaged with as the research unfolded. The first, section two, distinguishes the everyday concept of absurdity from usages established in literature and existential philosophy. The sparse literature that exists on absurdity in a contemporary art context is reviewed in section three, where eight variants of absurdity are proposed as identifiable within emblematic works of (post-)conceptual art. Sections four, five, and six take a more theoretical turn, modelling artistic absurdity from three distinct perspectives. Section four explores absurdity as a relative concept defined by what it is not, which occupies its own realm of sense and operates through a humorous incongruity; section five focuses on a generative understanding of tactical absurdity established via its non-discursive, non-rhetorical, and as-yet-unspeakable mode of operation; whilst section six proposes an understanding of tactical absurdity modelled as a critical tool. Finally, section seven reflects on tensions arising from the framing of tactical absurdity as artistic practice.

Chapter 3 presents the first case study, *Searching for the Welsh Landscape*. Made up of four main component works presented as a solo exhibition at Aberystwyth Arts Centre in 2016–17, the project sets out to deal with the relationship between landscape and national identity, utilising tactical absurdity to engage with a self-evidently “serious” subject-matter. A series of pivotal moments are isolated in order to reflect on the nature of the tactical absurdity deployed, with the final section speculating on its capacity for critical and generative disruption, as well as some possible limitations to its effectiveness.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the second case study, *A to Z*, which inhabits a temporal hiatus in the development of the project provided by a large solo exhibition at Gallery Oldham in 2018–19 of

some 1,771 drawings and photographs representing the letters A, B, and C. A thirty-five year project seeking to visualise every word in the dictionary in alphabetical order, *A to Z* is explored through a number of thematic avenues that seek to draw out the implications of its tactically absurd premise. Sections are devoted to its gag-like promise of an act of endurance, its links to an irrational rule-based conceptual art, its tactically ambiguous relationship with order, its knowingly misguided encyclopedism, and the artificiality of its retrospective rationalisation.

Chapter 5 is the final case study, *Interruptions in the Flow of Sense*, which takes as its point of departure the role of language within the construction of meaning. A constellation of works in video, drawing, and text are united through their deployment of the tactically absurd device of “silencing” language. The videos are based on a subtractive process of editing applied to existing footage that removes its spoken content, whilst the drawings remove either information or context from their subject-matter, rendering it discursively void. Sections explore issues including genre violation and a non-convergent humour, an enforced defamiliarisation and an untethering of signification, the notion of a political silence as an escape from the terms of the debate, and finally a “pregnant pause” of absurdity wherein meaning is generated precisely through its having been removed.

Finally, Chapter 6 offers a summary of the research, addressing the objectives that emerged over the course of the project via a consideration of the insights gained and conclusions drawn from the case studies and the written thesis. A statement on the project’s contribution to knowledge is also included, as well as a discussion of its limitations and recommendations for further research, which reflect upon the necessity for a reimagining of the notion of absurdity that avoids mannerism and maintains its relevance and urgency within a contemporary context.

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1 The photograph had come to my attention through its inclusion in the artist’s retrospective running at the time *Thomas Ruff: Photographs 1979-2017*, curated by Iwona Blazwick at the Whitechapel Gallery, London (Sep 2017–Jan 2018); included in the exhibition as an illustration of Ruff’s career development, it is not representative of his better-known work.

2 Another of Durham’s works, *Smashing* (2004), is discussed in ch.2 section 3.2.2 in relation to a variant of absurdity defined through its “complete absence of logic or sense, bizarreness, inexplicableness”.

3 The work is discussed in ch.2 section 3.2.3 as an example of an absurdity that arises through its “fallacious reasoning”.

4 This account does, of course, deliberately overstate the case; a wide range of comments were, in fact, received – some of which led to productive and reasoned discussions, prompted detailed clarifications of concepts, and unearthed genuinely fertile grounds for further investigation. The overall tenor of the interactions, however, was as described.

5 As a student at the University of Derby I was involved in setting up the conceptual art collective Disco (active 2000–04), and later its London-based sister-group Discotheque (active 2003–2007), which were both formed in response to a perceived self-indulgence, commercialism, lack of engagement with society, and general lack of “conceptual rigour” visible in the practices of a number of high-profile artists

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active in the UK in the late-1990s and early-2000s. The groups staged a series of site-specific and gallery-based collaborative projects, as well as publishing a series of manifestos and texts promoting the use of an “ideas-driven” approach to artistic practice. Discotheque’s website is currently [2/5/20] archived at <http://daveballartist.co.uk/discotheque/about.htm>.

6 The Sisyphean nature of Sol LeWitt’s carrying-out of instructions is discussed in ch.2 section 3.1, and its irrationalism in ch.4 section 3; the comically overreaching scope of Douglas Huebler’s work is discussed in ch.4 section 2.

7 The work of Pilvi Takala will be discussed in ch.2 sections 3.2.4 and 3.2.7 in relation to, respectively, its breaching of norms of social behavior and its undermining of the serious; Francis Alÿs’s work and writings will be discussed further in ch.2 sections 3.2.3 and 6.3 in relation to, respectively, its deployment of fallacious reasoning and its critical potential, and in ch.3 section 3.2.1 in relation to the concept of futility.

8 The work was commissioned as part of *Fabriquer l’improbable/To Make the Improbable*, a project curated by Dominique Allard and Véronique Leblanc for Est-Nord-Est that took place at various sites in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli from Aug to Sep 2013. The other artists included were Thomas Bégin, Emi Honda & Jordan McKenzie, Karina Pawlikowski, Steve Topping, Mathieu Valade, Jonathan Villeneuve & Thierry Marceau, and Paul Wiersbinski.

9 The primary concern of (post-)conceptual art, at least as it is understood through my own practice, is not with any particular artistic media; although the works produced in this research are realised in video, performance, drawing, text, objects, and photography, the examination or “furthering” of the specific languages of those media is secondary. Rather, the works set out to engage with their particular theme, employing whatever medium proves most germane to do so. Over the course of their development, the specificity of the medium becomes in some cases foregrounded, leading to a formal self-reflexivity, but the medium is nevertheless conceived of conceptually, as a tool of engagement for the given subject-matter. The sought-after formal integrity of the final, resolved artworks arises not through any isolated medium-specific properties, but through a relationship between the form and the given framework of ideas.

10 The final “viva” exhibition *Tactically Absurd* was presented publically at Winchester Gallery, Winchester School of Art from 14 Feb to 4 Mar 2020. Indeed, all of the practical work making up this research is understood as having a potential existence outside of its academic context, being exhibited wherever possible as part of my continuing professional practice as an artist. For example, *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* (Case Study One), was shown as a solo exhibition at Aberystwyth Arts Centre in Wales from Nov 2016 to Jan 2017; whilst *A to Z* (Case Study Two), was shown as a solo exhibition at Gallery Oldham from Nov 2018 to Feb 2019, and in an exhibition at Galerie Art Claims Impulse, Berlin in July 2020. Part of Case Study Three, the video *I Think That’s Best for Both of Us (Lance and Oprah)*, was also screened at an exhibition in Tel Aviv in Dec 2016.

11 As Derrida puts it in the opening section ‘Outwork, prefacing’ of his *Dissemination*: ‘From the viewpoint of the fore-word, which recreates an intention-to-say after the fact, the text exists as something written – a past – which, under the false appearance of a present, a hidden omnipotent author (in full mastery of his product) is presenting to the reader as his future’ (1981: 6).

12 The second case study in particular offers some resistance to this chronological narrative, since the notion of temporality is problematised within the work itself, given its exceptional duration (see ch.4, especially section 6).

13 See section 5 below and ch.2 section 1 for further discussions of the theoretical excursions pursued in the research.

14 As Denzin and Lincoln note in relation to the methodological use of “bricolage” that underpins this research: ‘The theoretical bricoleur reads widely and is knowledgeable about the many interpretive paradigms ... that can be brought to any particular problem. He or she may not, however, feel that paradigms can be mingled or synthesised. If paradigms are overarching philosophical systems denoting particular ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies, one cannot move easily from one to the other’ (2011: 5).

15 See note 10 above.

# Chapter 2

## Literature Review

# 1 Surveying the field, or, trying to make sense of absurdity

Wading out into the waters of such a familiar, yet undertheorised – even undertheorisable – field of enquiry as artistic absurdity means accepting from the outset a certain selectivity in the examples and theoretical perspectives chosen to account for it. The “review of literature” presented in this chapter will, therefore, in accordance with what Jeroen Boomgaard describes as the ‘non-solution-focussed’ approach of artistic research, remain ‘emphatically incomplete’ (2011: 68). The autoethnographic impulse of the research project as a whole (see ch.1 section 3) lends what follows a subjective, partial, and emergent character, with the sequencing of the sections broadly reflecting the chronological unfolding of the research.

The first, section 2, deals with what was a pressing concern at the outset of the research: the need for an orientation towards (and against) certain existing understandings of the concept of absurdity itself; briefly reviewed, therefore, are accounts from everyday, existential, and literary perspectives. Section 3 then turns towards absurdity as it appears within (post-)conceptual art practice and theory – either as a device employed by artists or as a theme in critical and curatorial discourse. A significant step forward in the development of the research was the laying out of eight “variants” of absurd practice identified in a number of emblematic works of (post-)conceptual art. Ultimately the variants prove useful less as final typological destinations than as a means of testing out different ways of accounting for absurdity. The review of the artworks and the critical commentaries that surround them lays out the grounds for the analysis of my own works pursued in the case studies, as well as reinforcing the (post-)conceptual context established in ch.1 section 2.

The chapter then takes a more theoretical turn, with sections 4, 5, and 6 exploring three distinct modellings of absurdity and absurd art practice that, without ever attempting a synthesis, establish a number of theoretical threads that are picked up intermittently throughout the remainder of the research. Acknowledging that works of art themselves are, as Boomgaard puts it, ‘always open in character’ and ‘never conclusive,’ the three theoretical “excursions” are pursued in a similar spirit; the attributions of “meaning” to absurdity they enable are understood as tentative and provisional, inviting analyses that both *lead* and *are led by* the practice in unforeseen directions (2011: 70). Furthermore, the excursions are pursued without regard for consistency, which, again, is appropriate to an understanding of artistic research that, in Boomgaard’s words, operates as ‘a game in which different systems can be played off against each other,’ whose practical outcome as art ‘causes the conclusions that were apparently drawn in the text to be suspended again’ (71). Finally, section 7 reflects (again, inconclusively) on the implications of the framing of absurd practice as “art”, and asks whether the concept of



absurdity can withstand that relativisation – whether, that is, it makes sense to speak of “absurdity” as an artistic tactic.

## 2 Absurdity as a concept

The terms “absurd” and “absurdity” deployed throughout this research are aligned primarily with their general, everyday sense – defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate;’ in the Chambers Dictionary as ‘not at all suitable or appropriate; ridiculous, silly;’ in the Collins English Dictionary as ‘at variance with reason; manifestly false; ludicrous;’ and in the Macmillan English Dictionary as ‘completely stupid, unreasonable, or impossible to believe; talking or behaving in a silly or extreme way; deliberately emphasising what is silly or stupid about people or society.’ Despite the frequency of its invocation in everyday discourse, it appears that, as a *concept*, absurdity remains elusive, definable only inversely as a manifest lack of any one of a number of related qualities: reason, logic, appropriateness, suitability, truth, wisdom, plausibility, or seriousness. Such a state of affairs results in a certain ‘anarchy’ in its application in scholarly contexts (Zarhy-Levy 2001: 87), with attempts at clarification proving only partially successful.<sup>1</sup> Lacking any precise antonym in English and other modern languages, scholars have turned to its etymological basis in the Latin *absurdus* (out of tune, discordant) and its root *surdus* (dull, deaf, mute) for elucidation. Peter L Berger, for instance, in his book *Redeeming Laughter*, reads the absurd etymologically as ‘deaf to reason,’ implying ‘a view of reality that comes out of deafness itself – that is, an observation of actions that are no longer accompanied by language,’ in which ‘[s]uch actions are, precisely, meaningless’ (2014: 162). Similarly, Joanna Gavins begins her monograph on literary absurdity with an etymological discussion of the absurd as ‘contrary to reason or inharmonious,’ noting that although the term is routinely employed to ‘identify and describe illogicality or incongruity in everyday life,’ it remains ‘ill-defined’ and ‘highly nebulous’ as a concept (2013: 1) (see also Fotiade 2001, Georgeson 2019).<sup>2</sup> An etymologically-informed definition of absurdity will, however, form a point of departure for this research: regardless of its context, tone, character, or intensity, “absurdity” will be understood as that which is “out of harmony” with a given context.

### 2.1 Existential absurdity

Distinct from the familiar, everyday understanding of absurdity are two additional senses belonging to more specialised contexts. The first (frequently signalled through the use of a definite article, *the absurd*) is associated with existential philosophy, whilst the second refers to a

stylistic and/or thematic development in literature. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines the absurd as '[a]ny belief that is obviously untenable... In existentialism, a term for the pointless or meaningless nature of human life and action' (Blackburn 2016) – an apparently derisory definition that once again positions the absurd as a lack (in this case, of a tenability achieved through reasoning, of purposefulness, and of meaning). In the work of Albert Camus, however – whose writings offer the most sustained and celebrated treatment of existential absurdity – the individual's sense that life is "meaningless" does not result from any inherent lack of meaning in the world, but rather from an incompatibility between the individual's own demands for meaning and, as he puts it in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 'the unreasonable silence of the world' (2005: 26). His verdict that '[t]he Absurd is not in man ... nor in the world, but in their presence together' highlights precisely the genesis of the concept in disharmony, rather than lack (29). In a strictly philosophical sense, the notion of absurdity has largely been discredited (Cooper 1999; Cornwell 2006), such that, as John Foley notes in a 2008 monograph on Camus, it 'rarely now makes an appearance in academic discourse, even academic discourse on existentialist philosophy' (2008: 5). Gavins, too, observes that "the absurd" was only ever 'sketched out somewhat impressionistically' by Camus, resulting in a 'problematic status for the concept within philosophy' (2013: 3). Recent attempts to revive the concept, such as Matthew H Bowker's *Rethinking the Politics of Absurdity*, have found it necessary to 'relinquish the metaphysical pretensions associated with Albert Camus's definitions' (2014: xv). This research will do the same, acknowledging the formal basis of philosophical absurdity in disharmony (and occasionally making use of specific motifs in the writings of Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre), whilst steering clear of any existentially-laden thematisation of "man's confrontation with the universe".<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 Literary absurdity

Whilst never having been 'fully accredited' as a philosophical category, the absurd, as Neil Cornwell points out in his wide-ranging 2006 survey of the topic, enjoys 'far more currency' in literature (2006: 2). Particularly influential has been Martin Esslin's 1961 *The Theatre of the Absurd*,<sup>4</sup> which brought together a number of playwrights including Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco,<sup>4</sup> introducing their work as 'an expression ... of the present situation of Western man' (1961: xii). The plays are posited as expressions of an existential absurdity, in which 'the irrationality of the human condition' is taken to be their 'subject-matter' (xix). But since this analysis is equally applicable to Camus's or Sartre's own plays, which are presented 'in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning' (*ibid.*), Esslin asserts that what distinguishes the Theatre of the Absurd is that it 'strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human

condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought' (xix–xx); it has, he continues, 'renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images' (xx, original emphasis). Critical in the context of this research is Esslin's distinction between absurdity as a philosophical "theme" and absurdity as a formal, dramatic device (the ways in which the plays defy the conventions of "traditional" realist theatre).<sup>5</sup>

Understanding the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd according to some catch-all notion of "absurdity" – without, that is, upholding a distinction between absurdity as form and absurdity as subject-matter – risks perpetuating what Michael Y Bennett describes in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd* as a 'confusion' that has arisen through Esslin's conflating of 'two, almost simultaneous "movements":' the post-WWII dramatic writings of Beckett, Ionesco *et al*, and philosophical existentialism (2015: 2). Bennett places his own emphasis squarely on the 'techniques and aesthetic forms' of the works, rather than their 'themes;' this way, he argues, it is possible to group disparate writers, without having to 'impose a straightjacket on what these texts mean or are saying to the reader/audience member' (3).

Similarly, Gavins lambasts contemporary literary criticism for its 'almost complete neglect of the stylistic features which might characterise the literary absurd,' arguing that a reluctance to delineate the stylistic from the thematic has led to a state of affairs 'in which almost anything goes' (2013: 5). There is, then, a certain haziness about the concept of "absurdity" in literature, which Cornwell's *The Absurd in Literature* (2006) valiantly attempts to address, approaching absurdity both as a literary and philosophical designation, examining its manifestations in prose, poetry, and drama, as well as in nonsense and comedy. Citing examples spanning from Aristophanes (via Rabelais, Shakespeare, Gogol, Lewis Carroll, Kafka, Beckett, and others) to Donald Barthelme, Cornwell concludes by delineating three basic uses of the term "absurd" in literature: (i) 'a prominent period style' from around 1925 to 1975 'and a little beyond;' (ii) a 'timeless disposition or quality' with 'philosophical (latterly usually Existentialist) implications;' and, more narrowly, (iii) a theatrical 'school' identified by Esslin (2006: 310–11).

This research will, at its outset, hold all three of these specifically literary definitions at arm's length, understanding absurdity neither as a stylistic attribute, a thematic concern, nor a tonal quality redolent of a theatrical movement, but rather as a tactical *device* implemented as part of an artistic engagement with a given context. The opening move, then, in this journey towards a novel understanding of absurdity as a tool in contemporary art practice, is to dispense with some of the intellectual and artistic baggage that clings to existential and literary absurdity. The plays of Beckett or Ionesco, however, will not be cast aside completely, since they frequently exploit what Bennett refers to as a quality of 'ridiculousness' (2015: 10).<sup>6</sup> If the literary absurd is,

as Edward Albee has it, an expression of ‘man’s attempts to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense,’ then it remains useful in modelling the productive tension between meaning and meaninglessness explored through this research (quoted in Cornwell 2006: 116). This struggle for meaning need not take place in an atmosphere of existential gloom; it can also be performed with levity, playfulness, and a generative humour. After all, as Ionesco concluded in 1953, when ‘all reality and all language appear to lose their articulation, to disintegrate and collapse, ... what possible reaction is there left, when everything has ceased to matter, but to laugh at it all?’ (quoted in Cornwell 2006: 129).

### 3 Absurdity in contemporary art

#### 3.1 Overview

“Nebulous” in literary criticism, absurdity appears to be even less well-defined in visual art. There is a conspicuous lack of literature on the subject, and what analysis there is largely borrows from usages established in philosophy or literature.<sup>7</sup> For the most part, absurdity – whether as a generative tool or a descriptive term – has been left undefined, its meaning and functionality treated as self-evident. Jennifer Higgie, for example, in a 2016 editorial ‘These Foolish Things: Dada’s Centenary and the Importance of Absurdity,’ written as part of Frieze magazine’s regular ‘State of the Art’ series, sought to make the case for the ‘enduring influence’ of Dadaist ‘absurdity’ (2016: 17). The names of fourteen contemporary artists are cited as evidence,<sup>8</sup> without any attempt at defining what this notion of “absurdity” actually entails, aside from an unelaborated assertion that the works of the Dadaists ‘embod[ied] absurdity’ through their ‘reflection’ of an ‘irrational’ and ‘unreasonable’ world (*ibid.*). Higgie’s lack of analysis is, of course, understandable in a text of such brevity, but the confidence and certainty of her characterisation of her present-day proponents (‘all of whom use varying degrees of absurdity to reflect on ... the challenges faced by the inhabitants of this planet every day’ (*ibid.*)) is nevertheless indicative of a wider assumption that the meaning of absurdity is already understood and does not require further clarification. A recent exhibition of lens-based work *Routinised Absurdity* at Kindl, Berlin in 2018–19 focussing on ‘the absurdity inherent in mechanised behaviours’ is a case in point, indicative both of the currency of the concept in contemporary art (and its continued appeal to an emerging generation of curators), and a lack of clarity in its deployment (*Absurde Routinen* 2018: n.p., my translation).<sup>9</sup> At times referring to the peculiarities of our everyday routines, “absurdity” is also used to characterise the ‘surreal’ imagery and activities of the artists, which are framed as ‘moments of liberation’ from the ‘rigidity’ that ‘constrains everyday life and suppresses our engagement with it’ (*ibid.*). Absurdity

as a concept, in other words, is deployed promiscuously, inconsistently referring both to the subject-matter and form of the work.<sup>10</sup>

Scholarly research fares little better; a search of recent UK doctoral theses on the British Library's EthOS repository reveals a distinct unruliness in the handling of the topic. Mikey Georgeson's (2019) 'The Vision of the Absurd: Aesthetic Machines, Entanglement and Affect,' for example, drawing heavily on Camus, initially understands absurdity as an affective condition, a 'sense of disconnection from life' (2019: 7), before redefining it a few pages later, in relation to a popular British tradition of comic nonsense, as 'something outside of logical sense' (16).<sup>11</sup> Micheál O'Connell is more consistent, focussing in his (2016) 'Art as Artificial "Stupidity"' on the 'apparent absurdity' of foolish or 'pointless' performative actions, whose 'worth' is accounted for through a distinction between 'aesthetic and non-aesthetic reason' (2016: 76–78). Only Oliver Palmer, in his (2017) 'Scripted performances: Designing Performative Architectures Through Digital and Absurd Machines,' finds it necessary to distinguish between what he terms a 'ridiculous' and a 'Camusian' absurdity (2017: 29–30),<sup>12</sup> thus setting himself apart from researchers such as Matthew Crookes, who, in his existentially-themed (2014) 'The Purpose of the Absurd in Contemporary and Recent Fine Art Practices,' fails even to acknowledge any competing sense of absurdity.<sup>13</sup>

A notable corrective to this imprecision is offered by Emma Cocker's essay 'Over and Over, Again and Again,' which describes a realignment of the trope of Sisyphus from one paradigm of absurdity to another. Moving away from the familiar Camusian invocation of 'mankind's futile and exhausted search for meaning or purpose in an unintelligible world,' in which Sisyphus represents 'the futility of human existence locked into a framework of unrelenting and aimless action' (2010: 267), conceptual artists since the 1960s have, she argues, produced Sisyphean works 'that play out according to a model of purposeless reiteration ... in relentless obligation to a rule or order that seems absurd, arbitrary, or somehow undeclared' (265). In this view, artists such as Sol LeWitt, whose well-known manifesto for a machine-like artistic production includes the often overlooked statement that 'irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically' (1969: 222), are seen to employ 'an absurdist or Sisyphean logic' (Cocker 2010: 265).<sup>14</sup> From the 1960s onwards, 'the literary (and often existential) treatment of the myth begins to collide or become inflected with the influence of conceptual and also ludic concerns' (266–67); such works, for Cocker, are characterised by a 'sense of ambivalence ..., humour, ridiculousness' that effects a 'shifting of position between investment and indifference, seriousness and non-seriousness, gravity and levity' (272). Crucial for this research is the superseding of the motif of the "absurdity of existence" with a 'playful or ludic strategy' in which an absurd adherence to

arbitrary rules ‘disrupts normative expectations and value that refuses their rules in favour of another logic’ (282).<sup>15</sup>

Whilst not focussing directly on absurdity, a large survey exhibition *Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950–1980* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 2017–18 – described by curator Kelly Baum as exploring ‘the undercurrent of irrationality in postwar art, specifically in serial and conceptual art,’ and ‘the parallel investment in absurdity among artists and writers, particularly Samuel Beckett’ (2017a: 9) – provides a useful historical contextualisation for the emergence of many of the models of absurd artistic practice that inform this research. The artists in question, according to Baum, did

strange things to unfamiliar materials. They also challenged good form, disobeyed the rules of grammar, performed bizarre tasks for the camera, indulged in excessive repetition, destabilised space and perception, and generally embraced all things ludicrous, nonsensical, and eccentric. Theirs was a moment when rules were routinely broken (2017b: 19).

Whether or not the exhibition’s wider hypothesis holds about the relationship between the works of these artists (many of whom, such as Hanne Darboven, Philip Guston, Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt, Ana Mendieta, Bruce Nauman, Hélio Oiticica, Claes Oldenburg, and Robert Smithson, are familiar from the art-historical canon) and the ‘irrational times’ in which they were living (*ibid.*),<sup>16</sup> valuable attention is paid to the formally absurd operation of their works, which, for Baum, amounts to ‘an exercise in calculated lunacy’ (20).

A related field of enquiry that has emerged over the past twenty years with obvious overlaps with absurdity is that of humour. The curators of the 2005 US-Canadian touring exhibition *Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art*, for example, speculated that, since it was ‘turn[ing] up with increasing frequency in contemporary art,’ humour was ‘satisfying an urgent need among artists and audiences alike to reflect upon the absurdity of daily existence’ (Molon & Rooks 2005: para.1).<sup>17</sup> Humour-themed group exhibitions have since proliferated in Europe and North America; amongst the most frequently cited being *When Humour Becomes Painful* at the Migros Museum, Zurich (whose artworks were brought together around a humour that ‘briefly annuls the order of things and allows us to experience a momentary liberating blow’ (Lunn & Munder 2005: 11)), *Laughing in a Foreign Language* at the Hayward Gallery, London (which observed that ‘an increasing number of artists from across the globe are making humour a critical and indispensable part of their work’ (Rugoff 2008: 6)), and, most recently, *Knock Knock: Humour in Contemporary Art* at the South London Gallery (a response to ‘the enduring use of humour as a device in contemporary art’ (Heller 2018: 1)).<sup>18</sup> A growing body of critical literature on humorous art has also emerged, including Sheri Klein’s (2006) *Art and Laughter*, Jennifer Higbie’s (2007) *The Artist’s Joke*, Annie Gérin’s (2013) ‘A Second Look at Laughter: Humor in the Visual Arts,’ and Livia Páldi and Olaf Westphalen’s (2016) *Dysfunctional Comedy*. This

critical and curatorial attention has, as Klein points out, begun to loosen the long-standing belief that art is ‘no laughing matter’ and that galleries ought to be ‘serious places for art viewing’ (2006: 1).<sup>19</sup> The specific role of absurdity within humorous art practice, however, has been largely left unexamined; except where it refers specifically to Dada, the Theatre of the Absurd (particularly Beckett), or the slapstick of silent cinema, the concept is generally used unreflectively, covering everything from the surreal to the grotesque, the nonsensical and the fantastical.<sup>20</sup> A recent symposium *On the Fluidity of Humour and Absurdity* at Nida Art Colony, Lithuania in 2019 set out to address some of these imprecisions, promising to explore ‘absurd humour’ as one of many distinct ‘mechanisms’ of humorous art practice (Páldi & Michelkevičius 2019: n.p.); in practice, however, the concept of absurdity was hardly touched upon by any of the delegates at the event, despite its clear parallels with the operation of incongruous humour (see section 4.2 below).<sup>21</sup>

Finally, a sustained treatment of absurdity as a distinct mode of operation in contemporary art comes in the form of Jörg Heiser's *All of a Sudden: Things that Matter in Contemporary Art* – an overview of recent practice divided into four ‘central relationships’, one of which is dubbed ‘pathos versus ridiculousness’ (2008: 10). “Ridiculousness” here can be understood as a workable synonym for the sense of absurdity that drives this research, since, like the word used in the original German text, *Lächerlichkeit*, it conveys an everyday sense of absurdity as “preposterousness” or “farcicality”, together with its association with the comic (the clear reference being to the common coupling of comedy and pathos) – whilst leaving aside any specifically literary or existential connotations. Beginning in 1913 – the year of Charlie Chaplin’s signing to Keystone Studios and Marcel Duchamp’s first readymade *Bicycle Wheel* – a lineage is traced through Dada, Fluxus, and Conceptual Art up to the present day, featuring proponents such as John Baldessari, Bas Jan Ader, Bruce Nauman, Martin Kippenberger, Fischli & Weiss, Franz West, Erwin Wurm, Sarah Lucas, Peter Land, Kirsten Pieroth, William Pope.L, and John Bock. Such artists are seen as deploying a kind of ‘slapstick’ – a ‘method’ that, for Heiser, can be understood broadly as a ‘technique, attitude, or approach’ (17). Acting as a ‘central triggering mechanism,’ “slapstick” is ‘responsible for bringing art into being and making it go somewhere,’ effecting, in the process, ‘a sudden jolt in a smooth sequence, an absurd attack of hiccoughs in everyday life and world events’ (*ibid.*). Most instructive is Heiser’s enumeration of the constitutive elements of slapstick/ridiculousness in Fischli & Weiss’s installation *Suddenly this Overview* (1981–2012),<sup>22</sup> which hints at the possibility of a more complete and detailed analysis of the operation of absurdity as a tool in contemporary art than has as yet been carried out:

firstly, encyclopaedic collecting, based on coincidence and memory rather than systematic research ... Secondly, ... disrupting the hierarchies connected with “serious” scientific and artistic collecting, by sheer weight of numbers, by the media used (major events as crummy clay models), by equalisation (major and minor events in the same scale), or

inversion (the trivial as important, etc.). Thirdly, ... the stretching, compressing, or “wasting” of time ... Fourthly, ... the wilfully clumsy subversion, highlighting, and exaggeration of the first three methods: evoking an overview where no overview is possible; making a markedly sober approach and markedly neurotic craziness collide; linking banal anonymity with idiosyncratic stubbornness; and deliberately including errors or inconsistencies’ (77–78).

## 3.2 Characteristics and variants

How, then, might the operation of absurdity *as it is actually encountered in works of (post-)conceptual art* be accounted for? Given the paucity of work done on the topic, and the lack of consensus about what “absurdity” in contemporary visual art practice actually refers to, this section will be necessarily speculative. The selected artists are familiar names within the artworld, whose works have attracted a degree of critical attention; the intention, therefore, is not to draw attention to underappreciated practices, but rather to identify traits within specific works as a means of furthering the understanding of tactical absurdity. The works are selected according to the degree to which they bear upon my own practice, whether as formative influences, or (in the case of the younger artists) as contemporaries pursuing comparable ends through comparable means and in comparable contexts. There is a sense, in other words, at least in principle, that I could have made all of these works myself.

The works are divided into eight categories, proposed as distinct “variants” of absurdity; in reality, however, individual works span several categories, their “absurdity” accountable according to multiple models. The typological exactitude, in other words, is knowingly over-performed, and is done so in a spirit of experimentation that is, if not exactly ironic, then at least playful. The aim of such taxonomical excess has less to do with a desire for interpretative finality (which, in any case, will prove unsustainable) than with a laying out of a field of provisional coordinates against which this research into tactical absurdity can begin to orient itself. The “absurdity” of what follows, in other words, is not without value.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2.1 Immediately discernible (comic) incongruity

Christian Jankowski’s *The Matrix Effect* (2000) is a video featuring a series of children aged between seven and ten speaking about “their” past exhibitions at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut. The words mouthed by the children are, in reality, those of artists (including John Baldessari, Sol Lewitt, and Adrian Piper) who had taken part in the museum’s “Matrix” programme over the previous 25 years. There is a clear disjunction between the jargon-laden discourse of the artworld and our expectations of young children, which, for critic James Trainor, creates an ‘incongruous scenario’ in which the children’s



endearing mistakes (“curators” becomes “critters” and “historical” becomes “hysterical”) ‘open up new levels of meaning and augment a candid emotional freshness that runs against the grain of our expectations’ (2000: 73). The presence of an immediately discernible – and often very funny – incongruity is a recurrent motif in Jankowski’s work; the project’s commissioner Nicholas Baume, referring to an earlier performance for video *The Hunt* (1992/97) (fig. 3), in which the artist can be seen shopping in accordance with his own directive that ‘[f]or the duration of one week all products for daily consumption (e.g. groceries, toilet paper, etc.) are to be hunted with a bow and arrow in supermarkets,’ observes that ‘[t]his absurd instruction, followed rigorously, yielded often comical results. Much of this humour derives from the anachronistic combination of incompatible systems; the hunter-gatherer in the age of consumer capitalism’ (Baume 2000: n.p.). The absurdity inherent in the work’s premise is delivered via an immediately recognisable incongruity, and if that incongruity is humorous (which it frequently is), then that is due to its “punchline”-like immediacy and unexpectedness – which is certainly a characteristic of *The Matrix Effect*, where, in Trainor’s words, ‘[t]he viewer has the sudden giddy sensation of watching words quickly jettison one set of meanings for another’ (2000: 72–73).<sup>24</sup> Arising out of an insertion of a disharmonious element within a context, some form of incongruity would appear to be essential to any form of tactical absurdity, and can be traced through all of the following categories, whether or not they display Jankowski’s overt humour.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 3. Christian Jankowski (1992/97) *The Hunt*

### 3.2.2 Complete absence of logic or sense, bizarreness, inexplicableness

Fischli and Weiss's *The Right Way* (1983) is a 55-minute film set in the Swiss Alps featuring the artists dressed up in rat and bear costumes. The film begins with the bear stumbling upon the rat in a cave relaxing next to a fire with his pet goat, after which they become friends and go for a swim together in a lake; the animals find themselves inadvertently washed down a waterfall before ending up in a second lake, after which the bear becomes sick. The rat looks after him, bringing him food and keeping him warm with moss and leaves. Returning from a food gathering foray into the forest, he witnesses the apparently gravely ill bear performing cartwheels in a clearing, whereupon they argue and separate. Eventually they encounter each other again and continue with what now appears to have become a journey into the mountains; the film ends with the rat and bear sitting on a hilltop beating out a rhythm with sticks and humming loudly into an echoing, misty expanse. Whilst this rather flimsy narrative succeeds for the most part in sustaining our interest in the exploits of the rat and the bear, a combination of the characters' banal dialogue, hammy costumes, and physical mannerisms that clearly belong to the untrained artist-actors underneath, frequently undermines the plausibility and coherence of the fictional world called forth. The overall effect of the film is to present a bizarre and inexplicable spectacle that is neither convincing nor, in any ordinary sense, meaningful.

For Heiser, it is precisely this 'anti-narrative' undercurrent that distinguishes art from (conventional) literature, theatre and film (2008: 15): 'instead of constantly emphasising its unity, its inapproachability, its autonomy ... [,] interesting art does the exact opposite and throws itself without restraint into the arms of my perception. It leaves me with the joyous dirty work of thinking and criticising' (21). *The Right Way*, then, is exemplary, for 'when Fischli/Weiss tell a story, they do so as a way of making fun of storytelling itself' (74). Not only is the work faltering in terms of its narrative efficacy, but it is also characterised by an inexplicable humour that adds to the effect of thwarting any stability of meaning. Echoing this analysis, the collector Ingvild Goetz spells out the work's paradoxical appeal for her:

I own films by artists from around the world, films that depict all imaginable social issues or other problems... And here, two adult men take a trip through a Swiss nature preserve dressed as a rat and a bear. The video ... has absolutely no relationship to the world and its major themes. Those who look for hidden meaning in it will be disappointed. (2010: 28)

Critics, too, have commented on the work's circuitous relationship with meaning; Renate Goldmann dedicates a chapter of her thematic study of Fischli and Weiss's oeuvre to what she describes as "secrets", observing that the artists' 'questioning and parodying of life operates at the limits of understanding, where only questions and symbols remain' (2006: 75, my translation). Martin Herbert, in his *The Uncertainty Principle*, a book dedicated to 'art that is

captivating yet uncommonly oblique' (2014: 177), cites Fischli and Weiss as examples of artists who engage in a 'privileging of incertitude' and a 'pronounced not knowing' (10), echoing Donald Barthelme's imperative that writers 'reach a realm of meaning that is not quite sayable' (quoted in Herbert 2014: 7).<sup>26</sup> Finally, Randy Kennedy in the New York Times, referring to an earlier version of the rat and bear work, is somewhat more laconic in his description, stating simply that it 'looks like a home movie made under the influence of a stupendous amount of marijuana' (2016, para.10).

If this category of absurdity functions through a conspicuous absence of logic, motivation or sense, then Jimmie Durham's performance for video *Smashing* (2004) provides another fitting example. Critic Herbert Wright, after describing it as a 'seminal absurdist film,' is unable to offer anything other than a sparse inventory of the work's components: 'Formally dressed, Durham sits deadpan at a nondescript desk as people present objects which he smashes with a stone, then with understated flourish, he signs, stamps and issues each a certification document' (2014: para.5). Nothing else, it seems, can be said about such deeply inexplicable works, which, as Peter Fischli himself has indicated, drawing attention to the paradoxical nature of tactical absurdity's deliberate embrace of meaninglessness, is precisely the intention: 'There are good neighbourhoods and bad neighbourhoods that [our works] can get into, you see – the bad neighbourhoods are where they go and try to create too much meaning. Very sneaky! You always have to be on guard' (quoted in Kennedy 2016: para.21).

### 3.2.3 Fallacious reasoning

In contrast to an absurdity that arises by virtue of an absence of any logic, the next category is made up of artworks that operate according to a *manifestly illogical* logic. Kirsten Pieroth's *Twenty-Seven Minutes* (2004) arose in response to an invitation to collaborate with the Copenhagen-based furniture design company Montana Møbler; preferring not to take the anticipated approach of working with the firm's designers to produce, say, a new item of furniture, the artist opted instead to nominate its director as her "collaborator" in stealing the minute-hand from a nearby public clock tower. The work's title refers to the amount of time it took to undertake the theft, which is also documented through a series of photographs displayed alongside the clock-hand in the gallery installation. Taking as its point of departure a deliberate misconstrual of the sense in which the artist had been invited to "collaborate", the work unfolds with what Jan Verwoert describes as a 'completely stringent logic,' which, moreover, 'defeats all expectations of what could or should be achieved through purposeful actions' (2008: n.p.). Jens Hoffmann goes further, describing Pieroth as a 'conceptual irrationalist' who 'starts with a seemingly logical point of departure only to turn it round to create highly absurd works of art;'

her use of ‘irrationality,’ he argues, is a means of ‘question[ing] reason and logic’ (2008: para.2). The “logic” referred to in both cases represents a kind of pragmatic reasoning; what is overturned in Pieroth’s work, in other words, is a way of thinking that places a value on the straightforwardness, efficiency, and productiveness of a given effort. In *Untitled (Trophy)* (2008), for example, an urban bicycle courier is employed by the artist to deliver a package across the Pennine Mountains from Manchester to Sheffield; upon completing the arduous 50km journey, the rider is then awarded the package, which contains a bicycle pump housed in a wooden presentation box engraved with details of the journey – which, for Hoffmann, ‘makes his trip seem even more absurd, as it culminated with him as the protagonist in the creation of a work of art that had nothing to do with delivering an urgent package’ (para.5). Pieroth has described her difficulties in finding a bicycle messenger company in Manchester willing to take on the assignment, since most of them considered it too ‘inefficient and too strenuous,’ and wondered ‘why she didn’t just hire a car messenger for the trip’ (Fabricius 2009: 126).

Another celebrated work that proceeds according to an apparently absurd logic that, considered entirely on its own terms, appears to make complete sense, is Francis Alÿs’s *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002). Comprised of a collective effort involving 500 volunteers armed with shovels to move a sand dune on the outskirts of Lima in Peru by 10cm, the work is documented through a video showing a long line of human diggers making their slow, choreographed advance from the bottom of the hill to the top. Despite its ostensibly quantifiable goal, the work, for Cocker, is the embodiment of a Sisyphean absurdity, since it results from a ‘protracted action’ that ‘fails to produce any sense of measurable outcome’ (2010: 281). Made against a backdrop of political upheaval in Peru that demanded, in Alÿs’s words, ‘an “epic response”, at once futile and heroic, absurd and urgent,’ the work plays out according to its own logic, independent of any need for pragmatism, coherence, or plausibility (quoted in Godfrey 2010: 19). ‘Perhaps because of its ridiculous or absurd quality,’ the artist has suggested, the spuriousness of such a gesture ‘becomes excusable’ (Alÿs 2010: 37); indeed, for Alÿs’s collaborator, Cuauhtémoc Medina, this ‘ineluctably absurdist act’ represents ‘a miracle of sorts, valuable for its own sake, independent of the result’ (Alÿs & Medina 2010: 129).<sup>27</sup>

### 3.2.4 Breaching norms of social behaviour

If Alÿs’s work opens out into the social realm, the next category of works can be seen to deploy an absurdity that operates directly through its social situatedness. *Tompkins Square Crawl* (1991) was an early edition of William Pope.L’s long-running series of performances in which the artist (and, latterly, members of the public) painstakingly crawl the streets of New York City. Wearing on this occasion a smart business suit and determinedly clutching a flower-pot, Pope.L



Figure 4. Pilvi Takala (2018) *The Stroker*

can be seen in the video documentation dragging himself along the gutter past a row of parked cars. Concerned with issues around the consumption of racial identities in America, Pope.L's practice has obvious critical intent, yet it frequently employs, in Kristina Stile's words, a 'black humour,' in which the 'insensitivity, paradox, and cruelty of experience and existence' are mobilised into a form that is 'morbidly and absurdly exaggerated far beyond the limits of normal satire or irony' (2002: 39).<sup>28</sup> The result is an 'extreme and ludicrous' humour (*ibid.*) whose origin lies in its breaching of norms of behaviour in social space, and which, in the case of *Tomkins Square Crawl*, is realised through the provocative gesture of a black male performer deliberately lowering himself to the level of his homeless "brothers" (Pope.L's own brother, in fact, spent a period in the 1980s sleeping rough). The performance was brought to a premature end when a local black resident confronted Pope.L, initially enquiring, 'You OK, brother?,' before turning to the (white) cameraman and angrily demanding: 'What are you doing? You're shooting him lying in the street with a flowerpot? You're showing black people like this? Is that what you're doing? *Is that what you're doing?*' (quoted in Carr 2002: 48) – at which point the artist was forced to intervene and explain that he had in fact hired the cameraman to document his performance. Thus, as C Carr puts it, correctly drawing attention to the work's seemingly incidental prop: 'By exposing racial dynamics so nakedly, Pope.L creates a kind of discomfort zone, always leavened with a dollop of humour or absurdity. (The flowerpot, for example)' (2002: 48).<sup>29</sup>

Infringing upon social behavioural norms in a more subtle register is Pilvi Takala's *The Stroker* (2018) (fig. 4), a work that arose out of a two-week intervention performed by the artist in a

trendy co-working space in East London. In a video Takala can be seen wandering through the shared spaces of the building and, on encountering her co-workers, greeting them with a smile, a brief exchange of pleasantries, and – significantly – touching them on the arm or body. Innocuous in itself, the gesture becomes increasingly conspicuous to its recipients through the insistency of its repetition, provoking perplexed looks, embarrassment, attempts to swerve past Takala's outreached hand in corridors, and expressions of disapproval expressed via email or whispered between desks. When questioned, Takala explains simply that she has been employed by the space as a "wellness consultant" with the aim of providing "touching services".<sup>30</sup> As Elena Filipovic observes, the 'rules' that are broken in the artist's works are 'not actually clearly inscribed in a society's codes of conduct;' they are 'enforced but not necessarily written down or even discussed,' and 'perhaps not even known as "rules" until she exposes them' (2011: 94). For Anna Gritz, meanwhile, the consequent uncertainty gives rise to an 'absurdist situational humour' in a series of 'farcical fables about social conditioning' (2012: para.2).<sup>31</sup>

### 3.2.5 Inverting and subverting norms of social representation

Expectations of social behaviour are, as Pope.L's work vividly demonstrates, strongly bound up with particular social groupings, which are at least partly defined through their representations. When these representations are overplayed, upended, or used ironically, a particular kind of absurdity can result – for example in Pope.L's performance *The Egg Eating Contest* (1990), in which a white man in the audience calling himself "Mr Cau-Causian" asks the artist to "please show the audience your instrument;" whereupon Pope.L's crotch lights up with a 25W bulb under his trousers, which, for Mark HC Bessire in an essay entitled 'The Friendliest Black Artist in America,' represents 'the American desire to accept and consume packaged ideas and products that mask more volatile and discomfoting realities' (2002: 25).

Employing a similarly pointed humour is Bedwyr Williams's photographic work *Bard Attitude* (2005), which depicts the artist dressed as a bearded Celtic bard defiantly plucking a harp whilst straddling a rocky hillside. The work arose from an invitation by Mostyn Gallery to nominate a piece of work from the collection of the National Museum of Wales that had 'influenced or inspired' him; however, as Williams recalls, 'I didn't find a piece that satisfied those criteria but I did find a painting of an etching of a Welsh Bard<sup>32</sup> about to top himself whilst Edward I's soldiers are in hottish pursuit. I was curious to see what the reality of balancing on a crag with a beard and a harp would be' (Williams 2006: 26). 'Like Quebec or the Basque region,' notes Kim Dhillon, 'Wales prides itself on its sense of nationhood, its own language' (Dhillon 2006: 169), yet the approach of *Bard Attitude* is rather less reverent, knowingly wrestling with 'a cliché of Welsh heritage and identity' (*ibid.*), ambivalently described by Williams as a 'celebration of

Welsh dungeons and dragons heritage' (Williams 2006: 26).<sup>33</sup> For Jonathan P Watts, the effect is strategic, since the artist 'dons his Welshness like an accessory' (2016: para.8), deploying it against those derisive stereotypes with which his audience are understood to be familiar. The critic Raymond Williams is cited in this regard, urging the people of Wales to:

Admit and exaggerate your weaknesses before they have time to point it out. Or play the larger-than-life exile, your local colour deepening with every mile to Paddington or across the Severn Bridge up the M4. Be what they expect you to be, and be it more. Tell the jokes against yourself before they do (quoted in Watts 2016: para.12).

'With uncanny precision,' concludes Watts, '[Raymond] Williams characterises what [Bedwyr] Williams has referred to as his "Bard attitude"' (2016: para.12). The result is an absurd overperformance of a representational trope, which the artist relates to instances where 'Welshness interfaces with the modern world. It's like when you're in a queue, and you see and old Welsh lady in front of you and Snoop Dogg is playing on the radio' (Williams 2006: 10).

### 3.2.6 Violating generic expectations (in art, or other cultural forms)

A self-reflexive form of absurdity can arise when an artwork plays with its own formal conventions. Although, as curator of *When Humour Becomes Painful* Heike Munder argues, the 'protestant attitude' of the conceptual artists of the 1960s and 70s 'had some difficulties with humour and sublimated it in homeopathic doses' (2005: 14), John Baldessari is a notable exception. In his video *I am Making Art* (1971), the artist can be seen, with neither grace nor, apparently, much enthusiasm, performing repeated movements of his arms, hands and body – each time followed by the deadpan announcement that "I am making art". The statement accompanying the indecipherably insistent sequence of gestures,<sup>34</sup> according to Baldessari himself, 'hovers between assertion and belief' (quoted in Tucker 1981: 11), and it is this very evident equivocality that leads Maria Tucker to conclude that the performance 'spoofs the work of artists who, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, explored the use of their own bodies and gestures as an art medium;' Baldessari, she continues, 'create[s] a synthesis of gestural and linguistic modes which is both innovative (in the same way that the more "serious" work of his peers is innovative) and absurdly self-evident' (1981: pp.11–12). Clearly, the discernment of the work's ambiguity requires in us as viewers a familiarity with a certain mode of conceptually-oriented performance and video art practice: the work knowingly takes a form provocatively close to the thing it ostensibly critiques, and cannot satisfactorily be read as satire. *Tactically* absurd, the work is delicately balanced between meaning and meaninglessness, employing, in Baldessari's words, a 'serious unseriousness,' since, as he puts it, 'the only way to make sense out of the world is to do nonsense' (quoted in Roth 2005: n.p.).<sup>35</sup>

Generic absurdity is not limited to transgressions of art's own genres; it is also witnessed in

tactical inhabitations of other cultural forms. Peter Land's *Pink Space* (1995), for example, is a video featuring the artist dressed in a glittery showbiz jacket repeatedly getting up on stage, attempting to sit down on a small stool in front of the microphone, and then falling off – to the accompaniment of lounge-style piano music. As “entertainment” Land's performance of perpetual forestalment obviously falls short; as he points out, ‘[t]he entertainer is expected to handle the situation, to tell jokes or sing and dance within a given set-up ... In this video the attempt of the entertainer (me) to fulfil this function ... is made impossible by the fact that he constantly falls down from the barstool he's supposed to sit on’ (2000: n.p.). The work's absurdity, however, resides less in the failure of its performer to entertain us, than in its violation of the norms of the genre it inhabits; our attention, as a consequence, is turned back to the work's status as *art*, which, for Land, brings with it an expectation that the artist will ‘say or do something meaningful’ (*ibid.*).<sup>36</sup>

### 3.2.7 Undermining the serious, the respected, and the authoritative

As Heiser points out above, Fischli and Weiss's *Suddenly This Overview* (1981–2012) (fig. 5) owes its quality of absurdity in no small part to its confrontation with the notion of the encyclopedic. A collection of over 350 small sculptures in unfired clay with accompanying captions, the work attempts to chronicle the whole of human history. The subject-matter of the individual tableaux range from moments in cultural history (“Brunelleschi invents perspective” features a man standing before three bottles of diminishing size on a table), science (a model of two figures lying under the covers in separate twin beds is labelled “Herr and Frau Einstein shortly after the conception of their son, the genius Albert”), to popular culture (two crudely sculpted men walking along a street carrying guitars becomes “Mick Jagger and Brian Jones going home satisfied after composing ‘I can't get no satisfaction’”). The work's absurdity, for Heiser, stems from its unsystematic approach, its deliberate inclusion of errors and inconsistencies, the lack of distinction between the trivial and the important, and the overall flippancy with which the “serious” project of cataloguing knowledge is handled (2008); the optimistic triumphalism of the work's title, too, can surely be added to this list.<sup>37</sup> By ‘undercutting grandiose ambition with absurd humour,’ the work, argues Mark Godfrey, highlights ‘the ludicrous nature of all totalising projects’ (2013: 15); the viewer, he adds, is ‘continually jolted by the disorder of presentation,’ since there is ‘no suggestion of a chronology or hierarchy, and the register shifts wildly from the banal to the monumental’ (16). Renate Goldmann, for her part, describes the work as a ‘memorable image of postmodern complexity’ in which the artists, as ‘private encyclopedists and playful universalists, break down hierarchies in order to upend systems of value’ (2006: 132, my translation).<sup>38</sup> Through its resolute lack of





Figure 5. Fischli & Weiss (1981–2012) *Suddenly This Overview* [detail: “Mick Jagger and Brian Jones going home satisfied after composing ‘I can’t get no satisfaction’”]

seriousness in tone, the tactically absurd approach of the artists is able both to inhabit and undermine the systematic authority, respectability, and diligence of the encyclopedic endeavour; thus, as Randy Kennedy notes after observing the installation process at the Guggenheim in New York, ‘Fischli wandered along the plinths as through a kind of minimalist forest, checking the locations of the countless tiny sculptures to make sure they came together in just the *right* way – in other words, in a way that should be a little bit *wrong*’ (2016: para.20, my emphasis).

A similar example of an absurdity arising through a tactical undermining of a given system of value is observable in Pilvi Takala’s *The Trainee* (2008), a work in which the artist gained employment in the marketing department of the Helsinki branch of the finance firm Deloitte. During a month-long traineeship she refrained from doing any work, idly sitting at an empty desk, endlessly going up and down in a lift, and responding non-committally when questioned by colleagues. Like a ‘modern-day Bartleby,’ writes Christy Lange, Takala’s performance ‘brush[es] up against the unwritten laws of capitalism’ (2012: 202). The video documentation reveals ‘how disarmed her colleagues are by her refusal to conform to the rules of the corporate workforce,’ and, at the same time, ‘how difficult it is for them to break out of their own habits to openly confront her’ (*ibid.*). Entering the lift to find Takala once again leaning contentedly against one of its walls, a colleague enquires as to why she is spending all day there, prompting the simple reply, “it helps me to see things from a different perspective;” as viewers, concludes

Lange, hinting at the generative potential of tactical absurdity, we are also being invited to do the same (*ibid.*).

### 3.2.8 Pointedly purposeless play and gratuitous ingenuity

Sometimes absurdity is manifested as a playful inventiveness with materials, a common characteristic of the “actions” of Roman Signer. In his *Cap with Rocket* (1983), for instance, the artist is seen standing on a snowy hillside besides a firework attached to his woolly hat via a long piece of string; he lights the rocket, which, after a short wait, fires off up into the sky, pulling the hat clean off the impassive Signer’s head as it takes off. For Jeremy Millar, such a work employs objects in ways that are ‘useless,’ embodying what Jean Baudrillard has called “functional transcendence”: ‘Even though,’ argues Millar, ‘an object may only have one function which might be relatively narrowly defined, its “conceptual” or we might even say “poetic” functionality is virtually unlimited;’ Signer’s project represents an ‘attempt to engage with these other functionalities,’ frequently displaying the ‘imaginative play of a child’ (2002: n.p.). Rachel Withers, too, discerns an imaginative ‘bendiness of childhood’ behind his installation *Slow Movement* (2015) at the Barbican’s Curve gallery in London, describing the work, which consists of a kayak pulled along the exhibition floor at walking pace by ropes suspended from the ceiling, as ‘a simple proposition [that] serves as a springboard for humour, philosophical speculation and poetic play’ (2015: 13). When Withers describes another of Signer’s kayak works as ‘a bit ridiculous’ (15) she is tapping into his work’s wholly unwarranted ingenuity.

In an illuminating comparison of Signer’s *Falling Through Ice* (1985) with Buster Keaton’s falling house scene in the film *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), Harald Welzer makes the point that it is ‘the complete absence of verbal communication [that] most strongly underscores the fact that the protagonists do not act according to the parameters and conditions of the ordinary world, in which actions must be explained and justified’ (2014: 134/36). The video begins with Signer tentatively pacing out onto the frozen surface of a lake; first he stumbles slightly on some unstable ground, and then the ice gives way completely and he falls in; after a few unsuccessful attempts to climb out of the freezing water, he looks back at the camera with a mixture of amusement and fear, whereupon the video ends. ‘Things don’t need reasons,’ concludes Welzer, and certainly none are offered by this work (136). Like in Keaton’s film, the inevitability of what occurs is cemented by an ‘irritating ambivalence’ shown by the protagonist: ‘Things take their course, but neither in Signer’s work nor Keaton’s would the actors ever call for help. That would be absurd. After all, they are the ones who created the situations in which they get into danger’ (132). For Welzer, moreover, Signer’s work displays a ‘provocative autonomy’ that ‘puts aside the constraints and influences of the social and cultural conditions ... and treats them as non-

existent;’ it is a form of absurdity that is ‘utterly uninvolved with society’ and for which ‘the existing social world is of no concern’ (134).<sup>39</sup>

Signer’s own joy in his brand of gratuitous playfulness is perhaps best illustrated by his own on-camera reaction after setting in motion the action in *Suitcase on the Bridge* (1985): in a grainy super-8 film we see the artist drop a weight attached to a rope down over the side of a high bridge; over the next few seconds the remaining rope is pulled over with it, before finally a suitcase tied to the end flips over the wall after it – at which point Signer peers down over the edge, grins towards the camera and slaps his hand on the wall in glee at his carefully engineered moment of absurd perfection. ‘For an instant,’ writes Gerhard Mack, ‘the viewer’s perceptive faculties are paralysed, confronted in the intensest possible way with a strangeness that can scarcely be resolved semantically’ (2004: 19). That Signer’s work remains compelling – even after departing from the world of pragmatic accountability or determinable meaning altogether – suggests it deploys an absurdity that plays by its own rules, and operates according to its own kind of sense.

## 4 Theoretical excursion I: absurdity as a relative concept

### 4.1 What absurdity is not

If, as was proposed in section 2, absurdity is constituted through a *manifest lack* of something else, or, in the case of its deployment by artists, writers, or comedians, through a *deliberate wielding of a disharmonious element*, then the question arises as to how that “something else” might be modelled, and what that deliberately wielded element can be said to be disharmonious *with*. What, in other words, is absurdity “absurd” in relation *to*? Four distinct ways of modelling this “other” to absurdity will be considered in this section, each of which supports a relativist conception of absurdity that sees it as wholly dependent upon context.

A first backdrop against which absurdity can be conceptualised is the *everyday, taken-for-granted social world*. In a series of “breaching experiments” conducted in the 1960s that required participants to, amongst other things, push in to the front of queues in the New York subway, or spend a week speaking to their family in a formal register, the sociologist Harold Garfinkel set about examining what he described as the ‘socially standardised and standardising, “seen but unnoticed”, expected, background features of everyday scenes’ (1964: 226). His ethnomethodological approach aimed to highlight the constructed (and precarious) nature of consensually-maintained “rules” governing social behaviour, focussing on situations where a ‘person assumes, assumes the other person assumes as well, and assumes that as he assumes it of the other person the other person assumes the same for him’ (237). The precarity of this

constructed reality is, ordinarily, of no concern to the social actor, who engages in what Kenneth Allan describes as a ‘wilful suspension of doubt,’ the cumulative effect of which is to lend the social world an inevitability and a ‘taken-for-granted character’ (2005: 312). Whilst the ontological status of that social reality has been, and continues to be, debated in sociology (Elder-Vass 2012), what is important in this context is Garfinkel’s theorisation of ‘background expectancies’ (1964: 226) as a key component in the production and maintenance of an ‘obstinately familiar world’ (227). Ethnomethodological experimentation, moreover, in its breaching of taken-for-granted social norms, functions as a quasi-artistic intervention. Indeed, Garfinkel’s express desire to ‘start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble’ anticipates the absurd performative practices of artists such as Pope.L or Takala (see section 3.2.4), whose interventions in social spaces are equally designed to ‘multiply the senseless features of perceived environments; to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation, and confusion; to produce the socially structured affects of anxiety, shame, guilt, and indignation; and to produce disorganised interaction’ (227). If Garfinkel’s studies were, by his own admission, not strictly “experiments” at all, but rather ‘demonstrations’ aimed at bringing into focus an unexamined substratum of (constructed) order upon which shared notions of social appropriateness depend, then their usefulness for a theorisation of an artistically absurd breaching of social norms is clear (*ibid.*).

A second concept in relation to which absurdity can be modelled is *common-sense*, a notion whose stability, like that of the taken-for-grantedness of the everyday world, depends on its continual reproduction. Susan Stewart takes up the theme in her *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, focussing on the dynamic relationship between what is commonly perceived as “sense” and its converse, “nonsense” – ‘common sense’ being defined as ‘an organisation of the world, as a model of order, integrity, and coherence accomplished in social life,’ and ‘nonsense’ as an ‘activity by which the world is disorganised and reorganised’ (1978: vii). The two, she stresses, are mutually dependent, since ‘acts of common sense will shape acts of nonsense and acts of nonsense will shape acts of common sense’ (*ibid.*).

Particularly relevant to a relativistic modelling of absurdity is Stewart’s interest in ‘the nature of the *not* that stands between the domain of common sense and the domain that takes its identity as “not common sense”,’ which, for Stewart, is more complex than it might at first appear, since the concept of “nonsense” ‘always refers back to a sense that itself cannot be assumed’ (4–5). In everyday discourse, nonsense refers to that which is ‘socially purposeless;’ it is ‘the language of an experience that does not count in the eyes of common-sense discourse... Nonsense wastes our time. It trips us up. It gets in the way. It makes a mess of things’ (5). Whether the discrepancy between sense and nonsense is viewed positively or negatively, however, depends entirely on the frame of reference. From the perspective of “common sense”, the disorderliness,

chaos, and incomprehensibility of nonsense is encountered as a threat, and attempts are consequently made to accommodate it within the strictures of sense-making.<sup>40</sup> Viewed more generously, however, nonsense – deployed, for example, as a literary device – can be judged on its own terms (and with its own aesthetic), becoming an active, disorganising, and liberating force capable of undoing the work done by sense.<sup>41</sup> Crucially in Stewart’s account, in which ‘[p]rinciples of sense and rationality are ongoing accomplishments of social life’ (8), neither sense nor its corollary, nonsense, are *a priori* categories; they are understood, rather, as fluid, permeable, and, above all, ‘contextually determined’ (9). If absurdity is to be modelled through an oppositional relationship to “common-sense”, then the origins of that common-sense in what Stewart describes as a consensually-agreed ‘horizon’ of pragmatic needs – ‘an agreement regarding what is relevant or appropriate to the situation in light of this horizon’ – must be taken into account (*ibid.*).

The social performativity at work in both Stewart’s understanding of common-sense and Garfinkel’s account of social behavioural norms is indebted to the work of the phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz, whose constructionist theorisation of (inter-)subjective experience introduces a third concept against which absurdity can be defined: *meaningfulness*. Schutz’s enquiries depart from the question of how, as individuals, we are able to experience the social world as meaningful, and how, more generally, meaning is attributed to objects and experiences. Since, in the constructionist view, meaning does not exist prior to social interaction, Schutz considers what Jochen Dreher describes as a ‘pre-theoretical world of experience,’ a “life-world” that is ‘previous to the socio-historical world’ (2011: 494–95). For Schutz, this “life-world” represents a brute materiality out of which meaning – and a sense of “reality” – is constructed. Most relevant to a conceptualisation of absurdity in relation to meaning is Schutz’s positing in his unfinished *The Structures of the Life-World* of “finite provinces of meaning” to describe what he understands as the stratification of the world we inhabit and act within (Schutz & Luckmann 1973). These provinces – which, for Schutz, include ‘the world of dreams, of imageries and phantasms, ... the world of art, the world of religious experience, the world of scientific contemplation, the play world of the child, and the world of the insane’ – are all marked by a particular ‘cognitive style’ (2003: 229). Crucially, he adds, ‘all experiences within each of these worlds are, with respect to this cognitive style, consistent in themselves,’ in other words, each of those worlds is encountered as a reality in itself – and what happens within those realities is, on its own terms, *meaningful* (*ibid.*). The most dominant amongst these multiple variants of reality is the “pragmatic everyday life-world” – which is not surprising, since it is here that intersubjective communication and action most frequently take place; indeed, as Schutz points out, the ‘world of working in daily life is the archetype of our experience of reality. All the other provinces of meaning may be considered as its modifications’

(230). If, then, artistic absurdity can also be thought of as a province, a deliberate “modification” of a pragmatic everyday reality, then the characteristic meaninglessness it so often appears to display need not be viewed as a deficiency, but rather a refusal, in Schutz’s words, of a ‘specific accent of reality’ (229). The meaningfulness that absurdity defines itself in opposition to, in other words, is itself highly contingent, and perhaps even arbitrary.

One of the criticisms of the Schutz’s phenomenological approach is that it effectively reduces ‘supra-individual phenomena’ like state, people, economy or class to ‘mental concepts,’ and hence ‘lacks a potential of critique’ (Dreher 2011: 505). Pierre Bourdieu, for example, finds Schutz’s ‘subjectivism’ incapable of properly accounting for institutionalised structures of order and normative power relations (quoted in Dreher 2011: 506). Bourdieu’s own analysis rests upon a notion of *doxa*, which represents the fourth and final means by which absurdity will be conceptualised in opposition to what it is not. In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu argues – not dissimilarly to Garfinkel, Stewart, and Schutz – that ‘[e]very established order tends to produce ... the naturalisation of its own arbitrariness’ (1977: 164). Drawing attention to the sense of inevitability that obtains, he continues:

when there is a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organisation ... the natural and social world appears as self-evident. This experience we shall call *doxa*, so as to distinguish it from an orthodox or heterodox belief implying awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs (*ibid.*).

Doxa, that is, belongs to the ‘universe of the undiscussed (undisputed),’ whereas orthodoxy or heterodoxy, representing either conformism or non-conformism, ultimately belong to the ‘universe of discourse (of argument)’ (168). In short, the self-evidentiality of the ‘commonsense world’ of doxa ‘goes without saying because it comes without saying’ (167). Where Bourdieu’s project departs from Schutz’s subject-centred phenomenology is in its adoption of a Foucauldian analysis of power as embedded within discursive formations and other apparatuses of knowledge (as Foucault puts it in *Discipline and Punish*, ‘there is no ... knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations’ (quoted in Dreher 2016: 67)). Bourdieu’s concern with “habitus”, or what Dreher describes as the ‘forgotten fields of power’ – those historically- and contextually-situated conditions that structure and, indeed, limit what can be thought – certainly lend his work a more political edge (2016: 62). More significant here, however, for a conceptualisation of absurdity as *that which does not conform to doxa*, is the centrality of *discourse* in Bourdieu’s (and Foucault’s) analysis. For if doxa is that ‘tradition’ which has become so naturalised as to appear beyond question, or, in Bourdieu’s formulation, ‘silent,’ then perhaps it is absurdity – modelled in opposition to doxa – that is uniquely capable of dragging that tradition back into the realm of discursivity (1977: 167). If, in other words, as Bourdieu insists, the ‘truth of doxa is only ever fully revealed when negatively constituted,’ then

tactical absurdity might well be that ‘critique which brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation’ (168); for it is only ‘when the social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon that the question of the natural or conventional character ... of social facts can be raised’ (169).

## 4.2 Comic and non-comic incongruity

Whilst modelling absurdity in opposition to social behavioural norms, common-sense, meaningfulness, or doxa provides a useful grounding, it does not, in itself, fully account for its character; for, in addition to its respective qualities of social deviance, nonsensicality, meaninglessness, or nonconformity, absurdity is also frequently funny. The *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* defines ‘absurdist humour’ as ‘humour concerned with the absence or refusal of meaning;’ like ‘nonsense,’ it suggests, absurdist humour is ‘opposed to conventional or serious discourse’ – crucially, however, we are reminded that ‘[n]ot all humour is absurd, and not all absurdity is funny’ (Noonan 2014: 1). Of the many theories of humour in existence, the most resilient – and certainly the most germane to a relativistic conception of absurdity – is that which sees humour as arising from a ‘perceived incongruity’ (Carroll 2014: 28). An influential elaboration of the theory appears in Arthur Koestler’s *The Act of Creation*, which forwards the notion of “bisociation” to account for instances when a situation, event, or idea is simultaneously perceived from two internally consistent yet incompatible perspectives; such events, as Koestler puts it, are ‘made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths’ (1964: 35). Humour, according to the theory, results from a recognition of a mismatch between those disparate frames of reference, its intensity, moreover, dependent on the extent of the incongruity.<sup>42</sup> A scene in Charlie Chaplin’s film *The Gold Rush* (1925), in which two of the central characters sit down at a dining table to eat a leather boot, is singled out by Jonathan Miller as an instance of a ‘jarring discrepancy in which an object is suddenly forcefully reclassified by being taken out of the category of the radically inedible and placed into the category of the finely, wonderfully edible;’ the scene, he argues, in its violation of the ‘rules of thumb’ that ordinarily allow us to make sense of, and behave appropriately in our everyday world, ‘rejuvenates our sense of what everyday categories are,’ stopping us, moreover, becoming ‘slaves’ to them (1988: 68).<sup>43</sup> The incongruity, in this case, is both absurd *and* funny.

One significant objection levelled at the theory, however, is that although, as Noël Carroll notes, ‘many surrealist images, such as Dali’s melting timepieces, intrigue us by means of their incongruity,’ such works ‘do not prompt comic amusement. They are far too ominous’ (2014: 52). The intentionally ‘unsettling’ quality brought about by such surrealist mismatching of realities hints at a crucial difference between humorous incongruity and incongruity per se:

Unlike jokes, [surrealist incongruities] do not even counterfeit a patina of intelligibility. They defy intelligible explanation, and they do not support even faux intelligible explanations. They are designed to disturb – to elicit a haunting sense of enigma or mystery (*ibid.*).

Similarly, Annie Gérin, in an essay ‘A Second Look at Laughter: Humor in the Visual Arts,’ notes that humour in visual art frequently lacks the ‘resolution’ associated with its verbal counterpart, operating instead through a ‘polyphony’ of meaning (2013: 168). Steering clear of ‘punchlines,’ the absurd incongruities deployed within Dadaist and Surrealist artworks, for instance, argues Gérin, leave their viewers indefinitely ‘suspended,’ not so much laughing as struggling to make sense of their ‘complex, multilayered and often contradictory sign systems’ (*ibid.*). Meret Oppenheim’s (1936) *Object (Lunch in Fur)*, a sculpture comprising a cup, saucer, and spoon lined with Chinese gazelle fur, is cited as a precursor to a burgeoning interest amongst artists ‘[s]ince the 1990s’ in exploiting the ‘processes’ of humour such as ‘the absurd,’ and ‘harnessing them for artistic purposes’ (155).

The view that absurd incongruities are deployed to specific ends – whether comic or artistic – raises the issue of the “frame” in which they are encountered. Elliot Oring, in his book *Engaging Humor*, observing that incongruities are not always ‘in themselves humorous’ (2003: 3), forwards a theory of “appropriate incongruity” that rests upon a ‘perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous’ (1). The incongruities found in verbal jokes, he argues, are of a ‘spurious’ rather than a ‘genuine’ type, which is to say that they are neither intended nor understood to function in the same way that they might in “ordinary” life (5). Their incongruity, that is, is deemed acceptable within the relativising frame of the joke, and if it is funny, moreover, then it has served its purpose “appropriately”, forging a ‘psychologically valid’ (as opposed to a ‘logically valid’) relationship between its incongruous elements (2). Whilst Oring acknowledges that ‘[e]very joke is in some sense *absurd* in that it rests upon a violation of logic, sense, reality, or practicable action’ (14, my emphasis), his underlying argument is that this absurdity can only be funny if it is lent ‘a certain sense’ by being nestled safely within the frame of “a joke” (23). ‘With utter nonsense,’ he concludes, ‘no conceptual frame is grasped that lends the necessary appropriateness to the absurdity. The result is not amusement but puzzlement’ (20). Whilst the degree to which absurd incongruities make for funny jokes is an issue perhaps best left to humour theorists, the importance of Oring’s “conceptual frame” to an artistic deployment of absurdity is clear; for it is only within the frame of “art” that the aforementioned ominousness, mystery, irresolution and multilayered complexity can be appreciated – if not exactly made “sense” of.<sup>44</sup>



### 4.3 An “island” of absurdity?

Henri Bergson’s oft-cited observation that ‘[t]he comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart’ and that its ‘appeal is to intelligence pure and simple’ is interpreted by Peter L Berger in his book *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* as evidence that humour takes place in a Schutzian finite province of meaning (quoted in Berger 2014: 28). Relying on a kind of phenomenological “bracketing” off of everyday real-world concerns for its functionality, the comic, for Berger, ‘conjures up a separate world, different from the world of ordinary reality, operating by different rules’ (2014: xiv). In ‘ordinary, everyday life,’ he suggests, humour ‘typically appears as an *intrusion*. It intrudes, very often unexpectedly, into other sectors of reality. These other sectors are colloquially referred to as serious’ (6, original emphasis). As an illustration, we are invited to imagine the sober proceedings of a business meeting suddenly interrupted by a joke, after which the statement, “but now, seriously” signals an end to the humorous intervention, returning the meeting to a realm of pragmatic reality. The joke, then, demands a momentary reframing of experience, giving rise to an alternative world that, for Berger, exists as an “island” within what Schutz refers to as the “paramount reality” of everyday life (7).

Such an analysis invites comparisons with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorisation of the carnivalesque as a ‘world “turned inside out”,’ a liberation from ordinary reality in which rules and hierarchies are cast aside (1984: 370).<sup>45</sup> Bakhtin’s claims of revolutionary transgressiveness, however, at least according to Umberto Eco in his essay ‘The Frames of Comic “Freedom”,’ are ‘unfortunately false’ (1984: 3), precisely because carnivals, by their nature, are temporally and spatially limited, and therefore ‘only exist as an *authorised* transgression’ (6, original emphasis). The ‘moment of carnivalisation must be very short, and allowed only once a year,’ he reasons; ‘an everlasting carnival does not work: an entire year of ritual observance is needed in order to make the transgression enjoyable’ (*ibid.*). Carnival, moreover, cautions Eco, railing against what he saw as a “mannerist” carnivalesque emergent in popular culture at the time, is ‘limited in space: it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or framed by the television screen;’ the “freedoms” promised by the world of the carnival simply ‘remind us of the existence of the rule’ (*ibid.*). Hinting perhaps at the limitations of his own framing of non-dominant realms of experience as “islands”, Berger is similarly sceptical of Bakhtin’s claims towards an overthrowing of a sovereign order, preferring to develop his argument for the value of humour through comparison with another “island” within the paramount reality: folly. The work of sociologist Anton C Zijderveld is cited, for whom fools ‘operate in this world. They interact, they communicate, they play social roles ... They are in a social reality but, in a strange way, they do not belong to it – in this world, but not of it’ (1982: 4). Taking up the theme, Berger, in a chapter

of his book entitled “The eternal return of folly”, situates the historical fool within an ongoing tradition of absurd practice that includes Alfred Jarry, the Theatre of the Absurd, Dada, and Surrealism: ‘Over and beyond the movement that gave itself the name, all expressions of the absurd are surreal – that is, they literally transcend what is taken for granted as real in normal, everyday life’ (2014: 163), constructing ‘a counterworld by means of a counterlanguage and a counterlogic’ (166). Whilst the world of folly and the world of the absurd are ‘not coterminous,’ they do, argues Berger, ‘overlap;’ and ‘where they do overlap they reveal the most profound aspect of the comic – namely, a magical transformation of reality’ (168).

It is precisely within this potential for a “transformative” operation that the key lies; for if absurdity (or comedy, or carnival, or folly) is considered not as an entirely separate realm – not, that is, as a clearly demarcated “island” within a sea of pragmatic normality – but instead as a field of practice with a capacity for transformation that resonates beyond its own boundaries, then the “frames” that Eco speaks of need not be thought of as quite so watertight. Indeed, Berger’s own analysis suggests a certain porousness to his use of Schutzian provinces of meaning; he notes, for example, that paramount reality is continually threatened by ‘other realities lurking behind its facades’ (2014: 12), and that the ‘conventional distinction’ between the serious and the non-serious is less clear-cut than might at first appear (illustrated, for Berger, in instances where an assurance that “it was only a joke” is only ‘grudgingly’ accepted) (6).<sup>46</sup> In contrast to the ‘self-enclosed’ world of dreams – where the passage between sleep and wakefulness is experienced as a categorical ‘leap’ back into paramount reality – jokes are ‘more fugitive, more vulnerable’ (9). The transition from the world of the joke back into the world of the serious is not always felt with such clarity, the “meaning” of the two provinces not always so “finite”. In addition, observes Berger, ‘the dream is a passive experience [that] “happens” to the individual,’ whereas ‘joke-telling is a deliberate act; the individual “makes it happen”’ (*ibid.*). Absurdity, understood in this research as a formal artistic device rather than a thematic condition, is precisely such a transformative operation that can be *made to happen*. If, in light of such agility, an absurdity defined relativistically – in opposition to some other realm of meaning it is categorically excluded from – starts to look a little inflexible, then it might perhaps be more germane to replace Schutz’s somewhat laden metaphor of a “leap” between realms with a more dynamic picture that allows for mutability and change.<sup>47</sup> When Stewart argues that ‘the idea of “domains of meaning” allows us to control contradiction in that it provides a set of universes that in some way are mutually exclusive,’ and that this separation of realms ‘can “smooth over” the troublesome facet of the contradiction,’ her conclusion starts to feel a little too neat (1978: 15). Perhaps absurdity might instead be thought of as useful precisely because it does *not* smooth over contradictions – but rather embraces them and puts them to work as potential tools of generativity and criticality.

## 5 Theoretical excursion II: absurdity and generativity

### 5.1 Non-discursive practice and the emergence of the new

One of the central conundrums in the handling of absurdity is whether, and to what extent, it can be assimilated within preexisting frameworks of meaning. Faced with an absurd object, the art critic is tasked with accounting for its manifestly non-discursive mode of operation *discursively* – a tension that animates much recent Dada scholarship. The title of Andrew Rothwell's essay “‘Je détruis les tiroirs du cerveau’: Reading Incoherence in Picabia and Automating Writing,’ for instance, cites Tzara's demand in his 1918 Dada Manifesto to “destroy the drawers of the brain”, which, for Rothwell, represents a desire to break the ‘distorting chains of logic’ that ‘shackle’ the Dadaist to ‘society's false teleologies,’ to ‘reject “common sense” and produce individualistic works which defy understanding and defeat “recuperation”’ (2011: 217). Tzara himself speaks of an approach that is ‘forever unintelligible,’ and which shuns logic (which, he insists, is ‘always false’) (2001: 300),<sup>48</sup> so it is perhaps not surprising that attempts to attribute meaning to Dadaist absurdity become problematic. Confronted with the verbal incoherence of, for example, Francis Picabia's Dada poetry, critics are, in Rothwell's view, almost overwhelmed by an urge to “recuperate” sense:

Our education leads us to extract meaning from utilitarian and cultural artefacts that we encounter and the coherence-building drive that this imposes on us is very strong. ... [W]e hypothesise narrative and referential frames into which the concepts, relationships and events brought to our attention in the course of reading can be fitted, and which condition our (teleological) expectations of where the text is heading’ (2011: 217).

What is vital in an encounter with a Dadaist object – or, indeed, any similarly “unintelligible” artwork – is to acknowledge its absurd incoherence, which means, in effect, to accede to its resistance to the “shackles” of meaning.<sup>49</sup> Stephen Forcer, likewise, argues that the deliberate nonsensicality of the absurd Dada object expresses precisely its critical stance towards ‘conventional discourse’ (2012: 268). What was being attacked, he argues in ‘The Importance of Talking Nonsense: Tzara, Ideology and Dada in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,’ was a ‘well behaved institution of conventional language’ understood as

‘complicit with and intrinsic to government, industry, the middle classes and other human systems that had not only failed to prevent the particular idiocy of the First World War but in many ways actively encouraged it and profited from it economically’ (*ibid.*).

The Dadaist mode of operation, in other words, is premised precisely on its antagonistic relationship towards discourse – an opposition that is twofold, relating both to its historical moment, and to a contemporary project of criticism that continually seeks to “make sense” of it. Dada's overt opposition to meaning ought, therefore, not to be sanitised and explained away as an (entirely reasonable) response to a particular crisis-point in twentieth-century history, but

encountered for what it is: an extra-discursive practice that renders any attribution of meaning by critics speculative and provisional. Dada's absurdity and unaccountability – then as now – acts, in Forcer's words, as a 'call to critical thinking,' a demand for new forms of thought that cannot, as yet, be accommodated within any existing frameworks of meaning (272).

Echoing Adorno's verdict that the new is 'monstrous by virtue of its incommensurability' (quoted in Brill 2010: 86), Dorothée Brill notes that works of Dada, like those of Fluxus, are 'received as senseless by appearing disconnected from any established system of constructing and revealing meaning' (2010: 87). However, whilst the Dadaists were intent on manufacturing senselessness as an end in itself – witnessed in Picabia's call in his 1920 manifesto for a nonplussed public to conclude that the Dadaists 'understand nothing, nothing, nothing' (quoted in Brill 2010: 155) – within Fluxus, senselessness is understood to play a transitory role. Citing Nam June Paik's *One for Violin Solo* (1962) as an example – a performance in which the artist picks up a violin from a table on a stage in front of a tense audience, and, holding the instrument by its neck like a sword, raises it very slowly above his head, before smashing it down onto the table – Brill makes the point that the act would have appeared to its audience as 'utterly senseless, nonartistic, stupid, and ridiculous' (2010: 153). 'Received within the parameters of discursive knowledge,' she continues, the work provokes a shocking 'confrontation with what is senseless' (*ibid.*): 'Fluxus's use of shock can be understood not only as set off by senselessness but also as a strategy *toward* senselessness, that is, toward a changed understanding of meaning' (154). What Brill refers to as "shock" – but which could just as easily be modelled as a tactical insertion of absurdity – becomes 'the interface, or the point of transition, from one level of senselessness onto the next, marking the shift from one concept of meaning to another' (*ibid.*). Tactical absurdity, understood as such, operates as an instrument in a reconsideration of a preexisting worldview, a reconfiguration of sense itself – and thus opens itself up to a production of the new.

## 5.2 Rhetorical irony and non-rhetorical humour

'In order to speak at all,' writes Claire Colebrook in her introduction to irony, 'we have to share conventions and assumptions. A word does not have a meaning independent of its social exchange. We know a word is being used ironically when it seems out of place or unconventional' (2004: 16). The deployment of irony within an act of communication thus appears structurally remarkably similar to that of absurdity: in both, a communicative context or norm is presupposed, which is then violated. Once an absurd or ironic violation has been registered by its recipient, a process of recuperative meaning-making commences, which approaches the ironic or absurd utterance in one of two distinct ways. Candace D Lang, in her

book *Irony/Humour: Critical Paradigms*, pitches two opposing concepts of irony squarely against one another. The first, “vertical” irony, sees the meaning of a given text as ‘concealed under the language’ (1988: 2): although the ironist transmits their intended message indirectly (via the rhetorical device of saying the opposite of what they really mean), the “true” meaning of the text remains legible and unambiguous. Language is thus employed to ‘transmit a message,’ effectively functioning as ‘a medium ... whose sole function is to represent a preexistent idea or concept’ (5).

In contrast, non-rhetorical, or “horizontally” ironic texts ‘resist decipherment’ by virtue of their linguistic ambiguity, polyvalence, and inconclusive or aporetic closure; such cases of irony (or “humour”, as Lang also labels it) cannot be accounted for, since there is no underlying “message” (6). Unlike the recipient of vertical irony, who replaces the ‘illogical or unacceptable utterance’ they encounter with an ‘acceptable, logical one,’ appealing, in effect, to ‘an original intention that unifies all parts of the text by subordinating them to a central core of meaning’ (43), the recipient of a horizontal irony is left in a state of productive uncertainty, unconstrained by any preordained meaningfulness, and free to generate their own. An error frequently made by critics, in Lang’s view, is to fail to distinguish between these two ‘fundamentally irreconcilable’ conceptions of irony and approach all texts as if they operated through the same relationship to meaning (37). An ill-advised process of “reconstruction” (of the intended meaning of the text), she argues, is ‘actually the result of a destruction’ (43) – witnessed, for example, in certain critical treatments of Beckett, whose works are inappropriately reduced to single, coherent meanings, such as “there is no truth” or “life is meaningless”.<sup>50</sup> The multivalency, the aporia, the playfulness, not to mention the humour of his work – the very elements that contribute towards its absurdity – are discarded, leaving ‘an immense residue of text unaccounted for’ (5). A far less deleterious response to a work of absurdity is to approach it as a non-rhetorical form of irony, and recognise that whatever meanings can be extracted from it are produced only in the moment of its encounter.

Lang’s analysis is indebted to the critique of representation forwarded in the work of Gilles Deleuze, who writes in *Difference and Repetition* that:

Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. ... [I]ts primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed. In this sense it is opposed to recognition. In recognition, the sensible is not at all that which can only be sensed, but that which bears directly upon the senses in an object which can be recalled, imagined or conceived’ (2004: 176, original emphasis).

Only the notion of the encounter, it follows, can attend to those objects of humour or absurdity that cannot be accommodated within already-existing structures of thought – objects, in other words, which do not *re-present* anything that can be *re-cognised*. What is produced in such cases, for Deleuze, is a ‘new,’ which ‘calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of

recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognised and unrecognisable terra incognita' (172). Applying such an insight to a thinking of art "beyond representation", Simon O'Sullivan is led to conclude that it is in fact 'common sense' that 'predetermines, and we might say limits, typical experience' (2006: 158). More productive, in O'Sullivan's view, is an approach to art-making that operates through a 'short-circuiting ... of our cognitive and conceptual capacities' (2010: 196), whose irreducibility to *that which can be understood* gives rise to a 'moment of affirmation, the affirmation of a new world, in fact a way of seeing and thinking this world differently,' which is the 'creative moment of the encounter that obliges us to think otherwise' (2006: 1).

Exploring artistic absurdity from a similar perspective is Robert Garnett's essay 'Abstract Humour, Humorous Abstraction,' which also builds upon the work of Deleuze, in particular his (1989a) verdict that whereas 'irony is always prepared in advance for the encounter,' humour is the act of being open to that encounter, in which case 'the intelligence comes after' the sense-event; the 'non-sense' of humour, that is, does not constitute thought as such, but is 'food for thought' (quoted in Garnett 2010: 177). Garnett is critical of what he refers to as "post-postmodern" irony,' which 'always subordinates the saying to the said, always misses the event of the joke, never really gets it, remains detached from the gesture;' '[w]hen a first-order "critical" content can be read straight off the surface of a work,' he concludes, 'it is time to go elsewhere, to create new problems' (2010: 179).<sup>51</sup> Absurdity, in contrast, modelled as a form of Deleuzian humour, is able, for Garnett, 'to stop the "good conversation" in its tracks, to confound it in favour of producing new questions' (*ibid.*). Martin Kippenberger is cited as an example, since 'his work never arrived at some dissipative and cathartic punchline, was never aligned on a vertical axis, rising and critically subverting;' his *Disco Bomb* (1989), consisting of a spotlighted disco ball placed on top of a fluorescent party wig on the floor, 'revels in its superficiality,' and does 'no more and no less than harness a surface effect' – there is, for Garnett, 'no allegory to decipher' (180). Similarly, in *The Hotel Drawings* (1987–97), a series of drawings produced on hotel notepaper that appear to lack any stylistic or thematic coherence, 'there is nothing critically to reconstruct; all one can do ... is go with the flow of absurd and nonsensical juxtapositions of recurring motifs and phrases' (182). We are, as Deleuze has it in *The Logic of Sense*, 'led back to the surface, where there is no longer anything to denote or even to signify;' this is the place 'where pure sense is produced' (1990: 140; quoted in Garnett 2010: 182). It is precisely through its lack of rhetorical content, in other words, that absurdity becomes a generative force.<sup>52</sup>

### 5.3 The as-yet-unspeakable

One potential consequence of a modelling of absurdity as extra-discursive or non-rhetorical is that, since the meanings generated through its deployment are situated outside of any preexisting frameworks of discourse and absent until the moment of its encounter, they must also, necessarily, elude the artist. The artist, then, is effectively rendered as working “blindly”, or at least without any prior or determinate knowledge of where their deployment of tactical absurdity might lead, or what meanings it might generate. Donald Barthelme’s essay ‘Not-Knowing’ offers an eloquent articulation of precisely this position, figuring the creative writer as someone who, lacking prior knowledge about what their writing will reveal, avoids the strategy of going out into the real world to “find out” – which would, in any case, be to enter ‘the realm of journalism or sociology’ (1997: 12). ‘The not-knowing,’ he argues, ‘is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention’ (*ibid.*). Writing, in other words, is posited as the process of making things known; in his or her pursuit of the ‘as-yet-unspeakable, the as yet-unspeakable’ (15), suggests Barthelme, the writer’s knowledge only ‘comes into being at the instant it’s inscribed’ (12).<sup>53</sup>



Figure 6. Paola Pivi (2003) *Untitled (Donkey)*

The central thrust of Martin Herbert's book *The Uncertainty Principle* sets out similarly from Barthelme's insistence that artists 'reach a realm of meaning that is not quite sayable' (quoted in Herbert 2014: 7). Contradiction, equivocation, and the 'leveraging of ambiguation' form, for Herbert, a repertoire of tactics adopted by artists in defiance of a 'rationalist and comprehensible model of art' (9). Paola Pivi is cited as an example: the artist's frequently 'inexplicable' works, according to Herbert, 'roll toward, but never quite reach, the cognitive shore;' in *Untitled (Donkey)* (2003) (fig. 6), for example – a photograph of a donkey standing in a small boat drifting alone in the sea – 'creaky symbolic systems' are 'almost effortlessly overwhelmed' (104). Pivi's 'funny, silly, sad' images, moreover, 'strategise to short circuit pat readings,' operating through an absurdly 'wordless state,' their 'endless aversion to designation's shores' suggests an artist wholly reconciled with the as-yet-unspeakable nature of her undertaking (110–12). Herbert's focus on an operational "uncertainty" that offers a 'resistance' to 'sense' reverberates with the notion of a tactically absurd turning away from an easy discursivity that 'not only narrows experience but can also be actively deleterious' (176).<sup>54</sup> If tactical absurdity means working without knowing – operating, that is, through Deleuze's "unrecognised and unrecognisable terra incognita" – then that, it would seem reasonable to conclude, is a price worth paying for replacing deleteriousness with pure creation.

## 6 Theoretical excursion III: absurdity and criticality

### 6.1 Agitation: from provocative shock to undecidable critique

For Stephen Forcer, Dada occupies a 'privileged place' as a 'particularly pure form' of nonsensical practice 'in which absurdity was not simply an element or entertaining fancy but rather an overarching anti-principle in an outpouring of cultural provocation and bewilderment' (2009: 191). Its 'basic origins,' he argues, lie in a desire to fabricate 'an absurd response to an absurd war' (194) – to deploy absurdity, that is, as a form of invective, a pointed rebuke at the state of the world. Andrew Rothwell, similarly, describes Dada's founding manifesto as aimed at 'breaking down ... the patterns of thought that had led to the obscenity of World War,' its target 'not just a set of abstract, hypocritical moral values, but European society's whole system of concepts and assumed relations between them' (2011: 215–216). Whilst for Rudolf Kuenzli, the Dadaists 'attempted to convince their audiences of the arbitrary nature of signs, and thereby liberate them from their oppressive, murderous social order;' they hoped, that is, through the nonsensicality of their productions, to 'change society's interpretation of the world' (2006: 17).<sup>55</sup> Modelled as such, the absurdity wielded by Dada becomes as an unambiguous tool of critique; indeed, observes Kuenzli, it is precisely Dada's



‘strategies of critiquing the dominant order’ that appeal to ‘today’s culture jammers and disputers of life as usual’ (14–15).

Operating through the ‘provocative shock’ of its absurdity, Dada, according to Jacques Rancière in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, is emblematic of a form of ‘contestatory art’ whose ‘polemical’ modality dominated politically-minded practice until the 1960s (2009a: 51–52). Such a model of agitational practice – defined as ‘a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation’ (45) – has, however, been displaced in a move observable in contemporary art away from ‘yesterday’s dialectical provocations’ (53) towards a new form of “agitation” that operates on a (no less political) ‘ludic register’ (54).<sup>56</sup> The inclusion in a 2000 exhibition *Let’s Entertain: Life’s Guilty Pleasures* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis of Maurizio Cattelan’s *Stadium* (1991) – an oversized table-football game designed by the artist to accommodate a contest between a team of eleven North African immigrants and a team of eleven all-white northern Italians – is cited as an example.<sup>57</sup> Although the work was framed within the exhibition as, in Rancière’s words, a ‘radical critique of the alienated consumption of leisure activities,’ it is unclear whether or how the work itself is capable of achieving that critique, for ‘the play invoked here marks [a] suspension of the signification,’ with the result that the ‘value of [its] polemical revelation has become undecidable’ (53–54). Cattelan’s playfully provocative incorporation of a set of markers of unmistakably “serious” concerns to do with immigration and racial confrontation lend the work an indeterminately political character. The work’s absurd colliding of heterogeneous modalities – the playful and the critical, the sensical and the nonsensical – means that it proceeds along what Rancière describes as a ‘line of indiscernibility between sense’s legibility and the force of non-sense’s strangeness’ (47).<sup>58</sup> Having departed from any Dadaist pretence of, in Kuenzli’s words, ‘bringing about a change not just in art and literature, but in the whole social system’ (2006: 17), such works of contemporary absurdity, for Rancière, ‘play on the fluctuating boundary between critical provocation and the undecidability of its meaning’ (2009a: 56).

## 6.2 Criticality, uselessness, and the disruptive power of absurdity

‘Nestled at the core of most conversations about contemporary art,’ suggests Olaf Westphalen in a recent essay about humour, ‘lies a blurry idea of its usefulness. Art educates, addresses, investigates, engages, critiques, all in the service of a better world’ (2016: 20); its ‘importance,’ moreover, is increasingly equated with its ‘contribution to society’ – contemporary art, he concludes wryly, ‘is here to help’ (21). Whilst Westphalen’s argument is geared towards defending humour against attempts to ‘instrumentalise’ it ‘for some greater good’ (an undertaking which ‘destroys the very thing that attracts us to its funniness’), his portrayal draws

attention to the value placed on “criticality” within contemporary art discourse (20). Rancière’s diagnosis of a ‘critical tradition’ in the artworld today, in which artworks are held up as a ‘general reflection on the state of the world’ (2009b: 25–26), for example, also underpins Hal Foster’s account of the ascendancy of the “critical” as a frame of understanding and evaluative criterion for artworks. For Foster, art audiences since the 1980s have become increasingly ‘attuned to the critical dimension in aesthetic experience,’ as well as to ‘the capacity of the aesthetic to resist ideology’ (2015: 122); such a development, he argues, can be witnessed in an evolution of terms of merit: from post-war judgements of *quality* towards a less ‘elitist’ preoccupation in the 1960s with *interest*, and finally, the latter falling out of favour as ‘not political enough,’ towards a present period in which *criticality* has become ‘a value in its own right’ (173–74).<sup>59</sup>

Whilst contemporary “critical” art ‘does not pretend that it can break absolutely with an old order or found a new one,’ it is, argues Foster, able to ‘trace fractures that already exist in the given order, to pressure them further, even to activate them somehow’ (4). Absurdity, then, like any tool of critique within contemporary artistic practice, may indeed be “useless” in its capacity to create a “better world”; yet, understood as a disruptive force within a symbolic order that is presented to us as natural, its potential becomes clear. Metahaven, in their book *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics*, pursue precisely such an analysis of the ‘untapped power’ of humour to ‘disrupt’ (2013: 21). ‘The joke,’ they argue, ‘has the capacity to resist and overturn the frame of reference imposed by any political status quo’ (*ibid.*), and it is precisely this ‘disruption of an existing order of “sense-making”’ that makes jokes such ‘unwelcome guests’ in what we are continually assured are the ‘serious times’ through which we are living (54). The dominance of the (capitalist) ‘discourse’ that obtains (‘a system ... of “making sense” of the world’) means, for Metahaven, that ‘any alternative (by the oppressed) must first be rendered into the language and protocol of the oppressor’ (14). The consequent impotence of ‘principled announcement[s] of resistance’ has, they argue, led to a ‘bankruptcy of conventional tactics’ (16), which is what lends the apparently juvenile absurdity of online memes such as the “LOLcat” or the “rickroll” critical potency as a strategic device.<sup>60</sup> Embodying this ‘dadaist troll mentality’ (58) are, for example, the Deterritorial Support Group (DSG), a left-wing activist collective who, in a 2011 interview about meme culture, declared that:

When asked by liberals “Do you condone or condemn the violence of the Black Bloc?” we can only reply in unison “This cat is pushing a watermelon out of a lake. Your premise is invalid” (quoted in Metahaven 2013: 58).

Politically useless in every conventional sense, it is the absurdity of the statement that, for Metahaven, is precisely its point.

### 6.3 Tactics, wit, and non-militant criticality

Such an aversion, then, towards what one critic describes as the ‘dry and didactic’ approaches traditionally favoured by artists in addressing the ‘urgent political and economic crises of contemporary life’ (Godfrey 2010: 9), has led to the emergence of a “tactical” understanding of critical practice. When Annie Gérin refers to the ‘humouristic strategies’ deployed by contemporary artists ‘as a means of delegitimation and as a cultural weapon meant to attack complacency in politics, identities and cultural practices’ (2013: 155), she is drawing attention precisely to a tactical use of humour that operates through, in Rancière’s words, ‘a minimal, all too easy to miss, hijacking or deflection’ (2009a: 54; quoted in Gérin 2013: 155). For Nato Thompson, curator of the exhibition *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* at Mass MoCA in 2004–05 (a ‘survey ... of tactical practices in contemporary visual culture beginning in the late 1980s’), “tactics” is defined as ‘a manoeuvre within a game,’ which, for the artists in the exhibition, ‘is almost always the real world;’ their projects, he adds, ‘are made to operate within and upon systems of power and trade using the techniques of art’ (2004: 13). The exhibition, according to Thompson, highlighted ‘an increasing emphasis on the tactics of intervention’ since the 1990s amongst ‘political artists,’ who, instead of ‘representing politics,’ were choosing to ‘place their work into the heart of the political situation itself’ (*ibid.*). Given, then, that the ‘symbolically charged image or overtly political text no longer feels adequate as a communicative device’ (14), the absurd antics of groups such as the Biotic Baking Brigade – whose practice of custard pie throwing has targeted public figures such as Bill Gates, Milton Freedman, and Ann Widdicombe – are positioned as offering a more appropriate response, described by Thompson as a tactically disruptive ‘manipulation of visual codes in a specific time and in a specific place that produce[s] a critical result’ (16).

In defining ‘[t]actics’ as a ‘set of tools ... for building and deconstructing a given situation,’ and an ‘assemblage of methods’ that ‘appeal to a viewer who is confronted by an increasingly privatised and controlled visual world’ (14), Thompson is drawing upon the theories of Michel de Certeau, who, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, seeks to bring to light what he sees as an ‘operational logic’ that has been ‘concealed by the form of rationality currently dominant in Western culture’ (1984: xi). Central to his theory is a distinction between the “strategic” manoeuvres of those with power and ownership aimed at maintaining and reproducing their dominance, and the “tactical” activities of the dominated “other”, whose task is to ‘use, manipulate and divert’ those structures of domination (30). Tactics, for Certeau, can be thought of as a practice of introducing ‘artistic tricks’ into a system, witnessed, for example, in the surreptitious use of company time by employees for their own ends (a secretary writing a love letter, a carpenter borrowing a lathe to make a table for his home) known in French as



Figure 7. Francis Alÿs (2004) *The Green Line*

*“la perruque”*: ‘Although they remain dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstances, these transverse tactics do not obey the law of the place, for they are not defined or identified by it’ (29). ‘Cross-cuts, fragments, cracks and lucky hits in the framework of a system,’ such ways of operating, for Certeau, ‘are the practical equivalents of wit’ (38).<sup>61</sup>

Francis Alÿs’s *The Green Line* (2004) (fig. 7) – a work in which the artist walked the route of the 1949 Armistice border in Jerusalem (the so-called “green line” that until 1967 marked the edge of the Israeli territory) with a leaking can of green paint, trailing a line as he went – might be modelled according to such a notion of “wit”. Subtitled “sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic”, the work inserts itself into a highly politicised discursive context, yet steers clear of what Alÿs describes as a ‘militant attitude’ (2010: 37). For Mark Godfrey, such a tactical approach ‘disrupts existing ways of visualising or understanding the situation, and creates new ways of making it visible. Thus poetics and politics are one’ (2010: 25). Alÿs’s ‘absurd act’ (24) achieves its disruption, in the words of Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ‘without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle;’ it is able, moreover, to ‘transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations’ (quoted in Godfrey 2010: 25). For Alÿs himself, the critical efficacy of his work is ultimately posed as a series of open-ended questions:

Can an absurd act provoke a transgression ... ? Can [such] artistic acts bring about the possibility of change? In any case, how can art remain politically significant without assuming a doctrinal standpoint or aspiring to become social activism? (Alÿs 2010: 39).

Even if such questions remain unanswerable, the centrality of absurdity as a critical tactic in Alÿs's practice is clear, with the artist concluding that:

Through the gratuity or the absurdity of the poetic act, art provokes a moment of suspension of meaning, a brief sensation of senselessness that reveals the absurdity of the situation and, through this act of transgression, makes you step back or step out and revise your prior assumptions about this reality (*ibid.*).

It is precisely according to this model of a suspension of meaning that tactical absurdity, in whatever specific context it is wielded, becomes thinkable as a critical tool.

## 7 When absurdity becomes meaningful?

Finally, then, after marking out the terrain over which this research will range in the subsequent chapters – and acknowledging that the literature that has been reviewed is in places patchy, provisional, and not always coherent – there remains one potential contradiction that ought at least to be acknowledged, if not exactly resolved. Namely, that the novel understanding of absurd art practice that has been set up here (and will be substantiated in the case studies) centres around a notion of “tactical absurdity” that is distinctly oxymoronic. For if, as has been variously theorised in this chapter, absurdity is held to be nonsensical, non-(re)cognisable, non-discursive, and, indeed, *meaningless*, then it becomes somewhat contradictory to conceive of it as a device that can be wielded tactically as part of a conceptual art practice – a field of activity that is centred around the production, reception, and play of the very thing that absurdity seeks to absent itself of: *meaning*. The “frame” of (conceptual) art, in other words, appears to mitigate against the meaninglessness upon which tactical absurdity is premised.

Are we left, then, with an impotent absurdity that loses its absurd credentials as soon as it is brought into the relativising frame of artistic practice? Both Umberto Eco's dismissal of the liberatory force of the carnivalesque due to its temporal and spatial limitations, and Elliot Oring's sanitisation of absurd incongruities through a notion of their “appropriateness” to joking would attend to such a view, as too would Micheál O'Connell's salvaging of the stupidity and “pointlessness” of absurd performances via a distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic reason. Susan Stewart's observation that ‘the arts’ involve a ‘transformation of the here and now of common-sense reality,’ also appears to promote an understanding that the meaninglessness of absurdity flips over into meaningfulness as soon as it ‘steps into ... the reality of the work of art’ (1978: 23). Accepting that, as she puts it, ‘[t]he frame makes the artistic text an artistic text,’ it might simply be concluded that this artistic frame, precisely through its

eliminating of everyday pragmatic reasoning, ends up eliminating the absurdity itself (*ibid.*).

Such a conclusion, however, seems a little premature; for, however much we accept that art is art and life is life, and however much we agree with Rancière that the former has no determinate impact on the latter, it can hardly be denied that some form of absurdity can indeed exist in the work of art, and that we recognise it when we see it (as the examples cited in this chapter surely demonstrate). More fitting, perhaps, is to acknowledge its elusivity and accept that it must be approached, in Peter L Berger's words, 'both circumspectly and circuitously' (2014: xix), as witnessed in Mika Hannula's halting description of an encounter with a work by Pilvi Takala:

And then something else comes ... It is the moment, not of truth or of illumination, but of waking up, just a little. Not too much, but a little. It is the moment of recognition and recollection ... All of a sudden, we see and recognise more than we did before ... Something has taken place. Something has happened (2012: 129).

The absurdity is there, and it has been put there by the artist; it appears, moreover, to have changed something. Perhaps, then, all that can be done is to bear witness to that effect – even if it cannot quite be made sense of, and even if the claim that absurdity can be deployed within the frame of art to some tactical end remains more than a little contradictory. It will be the task of the next three chapters to do just that, and to try to account for just what it is that can happen when tactical absurdity is put to use.

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1 Ollie Palmer, for example, in a recent doctoral thesis 'Scripted Performances: Designing Performative Architectures Through Digital and Absurd Machines,' identifies as "absurd<sub>a</sub>" the 'commonly-used adjective form of the word' in order to contrast it with its weightier 'philosophical' cousin, "absurd<sub>b</sub>" (2017: 28–29). Whilst the distinction between an everyday and a philosophical absurdity is undoubtedly useful, Palmer's analysis of "absurd<sub>a</sub>" falls frustratingly short, concluding simply that, after citing the OED definition and discussing briefly the 'ludicrous logic, non-sequiturs, slapstick gags, and vaudeville stage directions' in Samuel Beckett's 1952 play *Waiting for Godot*, it is 'easily identifiable' (29). See also section 3.1 below.

2 Susan Stewart, in her work on *Nonsense* (1978) (see section 4.1), offers a note of caution: citing Wittgenstein's (2009) assertion that in most cases the meaning of a word derives from its use in language, Stewart warns against the decontextualisation of etymological proof, arguing that it artificially attempts to uphold a historically stable and transcendent meaning.

3 A recent account of artistic practice pursued through the lens of existential absurdity is Matthew Crookes's doctoral thesis 'The Purpose of the Absurd in Contemporary and Recent Fine Art Practices.' Crookes's research hinges around the theories of Kierkegaard, defining 'the absurd' as a 'subjective state of being, centred on the individual' (2014: 4). His approach to the work of Francis Alÿs, for example, shares little with that pursued in this research, focussing on the 'subjective' (31) and the artist's own 'imagination and memory' (16). See also section 3.1 below.

4 Esslin's account of an unexpectedly well-received performance of Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin Prison in 1957 will be discussed in ch.5 section 2 in relation to Beckett's subversion of genre. Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* will be discussed in ch.5 section 3 in terms of its defamiliarisation of everyday language.

5 See ch.5 section 2 for a discussion of what Jonathan Boulter (2008) refers to as a generic "decomposition" in the work of Samuel Beckett.

6 In fact, Bennett suggests that the literary sense of absurdity may not be so far removed from its everyday counterpart: 'Though Esslin was quick to point out that "absurd" should not be understood in

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terms of its common usage, “ridiculous”, there is clearly an assumption among the general reader that the word “absurd,” is, in fact, used in this way;’ indeed, observes Bennett, the plots of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* or Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* ‘surely sound ... quite *ridiculous*’ (2015: 10, original emphasis). Moreover, he adds, ‘[t]he ridiculousness of absurd literature should not be entirely ignored in order to make these texts simply more philosophical or carry more intellectual weight,’ for that would be to overlook their lineage stemming from nonsense and comedy’ (*ibid.*).

7 The exchange is anything but reciprocal: Cornwell, for example, after a brief account of Dada and Surrealism, devotes just a single paragraph of his 354-page study of literary absurdity to what he terms ‘modern art;’ acknowledging that what constitutes absurdity in ‘serious artistic terms’ remains ‘open to wide discussion,’ he concludes in a somewhat derisive aside that ‘[t]here would seem ... to be little possible doubt over the absurdist credentials of the following art transaction ... (reported in *The Guardian*, 28 June 2003): “Merde d’Artiste, a tin of 30 grams of human excrement produced by Piero Manzoni, an Italian conceptual artist, was sold for £17,925 at Christie’s in London”’ (2006: 301).

8 Although, as Higgle claims, ‘the list is endless,’ the following artists are specifically mentioned: Mike Kelley, Kara Walker, the Guerilla Girls, Jimmie Durham, Tamara Henderson, Sanya Kantarovsky, Ahmet Öğüt, Amalia Pica, Dana Schutz, Jim Shaw, Frances Stark, Martine Syms, Annika Ström, and Bedwyr Williams (2016: 17). The work of Durham will be discussed in section 3.2.2, as will that of Williams in section 3.2.5 and ch.3 section 1.2; Ström’s work was included in my own curated humour-themed exhibition *Ha Ha Road*.

9 *Absurde Routinen/Routinised Absurdity* ran from 30 Sep 2018 to 3 Feb 2019 at Kindl – Zentrum für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Berlin, and was organised by the curatorial collective CUCO (which was set up in 2016 in Berlin by Hanne Dölle, Katherina Perlongo & Annika Turkowski). The exhibition featured ten artists working in photography and video: Louis De Belle, Juno Calypso, Brooke DiDonato, Christoph Grill, Aleksey Kondratyev, Elisa Larvego, Sandra Lazzarini, Pierrick Sorin, Sebastian Stumpf, and Ben Zank.

10 In fact, Annika Turkowski from CUCO curatorial concepts Berlin (the collective behind the exhibition), when I interviewed her on 15 Nov 2018 in Berlin, appeared to find little significance in the distinction between the *observation* of absurdity in some of the works and the *construction* of absurdity in others, despite my repeated probing. For her, Christoph Grill’s video *Katharsis* (2010) (which documents a man encountered by the artist engaged in a perpetual cycle of climbing up onto a rock, diving into the sea, swimming back to the rock, climbing it, and then diving again) and Sebastian Stumpf’s video *Water Basins* (2018) (in which the artist records himself entering architectural water features in city spaces and lying motionlessly in them, submersed by the water) were both, apparently indistinguishably, “absurd”.

11 Georgeson’s own work, interestingly, was included in a film programme *100 Years of Dada: Dada in Dialogue with the Present* at the ICA in London in 2016. The event, which aimed to bring together contemporary filmmakers whose works ‘evoke the spirit’ of Dada, posed the question of whether ‘their films simply exhibit formal similarities or [whether] they come from kindred spirits,’ alluding in so doing to the distinction between a formal and a thematic absurdity (Canciani & Juchler 2016: para.2).

12 See footnote 1 above.

13 See footnote 3 above.

14 The “irrationalism” (Krauss 1978) of LeWitt’s rule-based practice is explored in ch.4 section 3 in relation to the *A to Z* project.

15 The Sisyphean undertaking attempted in Francis Alÿs’s *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) is discussed in ch.2 section 3.2.3 in relation to the variant of absurdity identified through its “fallacious reasoning”; the theme of a pursuit of the unattainable is explored in ch.3 section 3.2.1 in relation to my search for a perfect Welsh hill in *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales*.

16 As Baum puts it: ‘The irrational times in which artists were working undoubtedly precipitated their engagement, conscious or not, with irrationality. Delirium was one of the defining experiences of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and it gave rise to delirious forms of art’ (2017b: 19). She also draws parallels with the ‘widespread social and political mania in the present’ (20), suggesting in a footnote that: ‘Mania, nonsense, and irrationality have all acquired new, more urgent connotations in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, which installed Donald J Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States’ (217).

17 The exhibition was curated by Dominic Molon and Michael Rooks in association with the New York-based ICI (Independent Curators International) and toured The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, HI (9 Sep–31 Dec 2005), Chicago Cultural Center (4 Feb–9 Apr 2006), Winnipeg Art Gallery, MB, Canada (10 Jun–10 Sep 2006), MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, SK, Canada (7 Oct 2006–1 Jan 2007), and Salina Art Center, KS (26 Jan–22 Apr 2007). The artists included were: Stephanie Brooks, Elmgreen & Dragset, Luis

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Gispert, Felix Gmelin, Tom Friedman, Rodney Graham, Christian Jankowski, Martin Kersels, Alexej Koschkarow, Peter Land, Kelly Mark, Cary Leibowitz, Dave Muller, William Pope.L, David Shrigley, David Robbins, Laura Nova, Kay Rosen, Dana Schutz, Erika Rothenberg, Richard Prince, Michael Smith, Tony Tasset, Lawrence Seward, Bob and Roberta Smith, Susan Smith-Pinelo, Olav Westphalen, Erwin Wurm, and John Waters.

18 *When Humour Becomes Painful* at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich (27 Aug–30 Oct 2005) was curated by Heike Munder and Felicity Lunn and featured Vito Acconci, Alex Bag, Blume, Aidas Bareikis, Chapman, Beagles & Ramsay, Joseph Beuys, John Bock, Olaf Breuning, Jan Fabre, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Knopp Ferro, Fischli & Weiss, Rachel Harrison, Martin Kippenberger, Jürgen Klauke, Peter Land, Klara Lidén, Lutz & Guggisberg, George Maciunas, Piero Manzoni, John Miller, Bruce Nauman, Martin Parr, Sigmar Polke, Jean-Frédéric Schnyder, Mark Wallinger, Boyd Webb, and Thomas Zipp.

*Laughing in a Foreign Language* at the Hayward Gallery, London (25 Jan–13 Apr 2008) was curated Mami Kataoka and featured Makoto Aida, Kutlug Ataman, Azorro, Guy Ben-Ner, John Bock, Candice Breitz, Olaf Breuning, Cao Fei, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Marcus Coates, Harry Dodge and Stanya Khan, Doug Fishbone, Ghazel, Gimhongsok, Matthew Griffin, Nina Jan Beier and Marie Jan Lund, Taiyo Kimura, Peter Land, Janne Lehtinen, Kalup Linzy, Yoshua Okon, Ugo Rondinone, Julian Rosefeldt, Shimabuku, David Shrigley, Nedko Solakov, Barthélémy Toguo, Roi Vaara, Martin Walde, and Jun Yang.

*Knock Knock: Humour in Contemporary Art* at South London Gallery (22 Sep–18 Nov 2018) was curated by Margot Heller and Ryan Gander and featured Eleanor Antin, Simeon Barclay, Chila Kumari Burman, Maurizio Cattelan, Heman Chong, Martin Creed, Danielle Dean, Ceal Floyer, Tom Friedman, Ryan Gander, Gelitin, Rodney Graham, Lucy Gunning, Matthew Higgs, Judith Hopf, Jamie Isenstein, Christian Jankowski, Barbara Kruger, Lynn Herschman Leeson, Roy Lichtenstein, Sarah Lucas, Basim Magdy, Suds McKenna, Jill McKnight, Jayson Musson, Harold Offeh, Hardeep Pandhal, Joyce Pensato, Ugo Rondinone, Lily van der Stokker, Pilvi Takala, Rosemarie Trockel, Yonatan Vinitzky, Rebecca Warren, Bedwyr Williams, and Amelie von Wulffen.

19 Westphalen goes as far as to suggest that ‘many of the most consequential acts of the avant-garde could be read as comical manoeuvres, even jokes, with established art serving as the setup and each subsequent avant-garde move as the latest punch line. You’re in a sculpture show? Send a urinal. Give a piano concert, but don’t make a sound!... More often than not, these operations were carried out with an attitude of utter seriousness. What little of the artists’ wit still shone through has been subsequently sanctified, sanitised, academised. There is a history of comedy in art, and it is buried under a mountain of portentousness’ (2016: 13).

20 The 2010 exhibition *Rude Britannia: British Comic Art* at Tate Britain, for example, was divided into a number of thematic rooms, one of which was labelled “Absurd”. Co-curated by the television comedian Harry Hill (whose own work might loosely be described as “surreal”), the section included such diverse material as John Tenniel’s *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations, David Shrigley’s *I’m Dead* (2007) (a stuffed cat in a vitrine holding a placard saying “I’m dead”), and Angus Fairhurst’s abstrusely-titled resin banana skin sculpture *The Problem with Banana Skins Divided / Inverted* (1998). As one critic noted, the deployment of such a ‘catchall concept’ as absurdity results in a presentation of work that ‘feels rather pointless’ (Coxhead 2010: para.2).

*The World Turned Upside Down: Buster Keaton, Sculpture and the Absurd*, on the other hand (an exhibition curated by Simon Faithfull and Ben Roberts at Mead Gallery, Coventry in 2013), understood absurdity via Keaton’s slapstick as embodied within ‘processes of failure, risk and repetition’ (Faithfull & Roberts 2013: para.2), and sought to ‘track a lineage from the melancholic and at times anarchic comedy of Keaton to the dry wit of conceptual practice’ (para.1).

21 *On the Fluidity of Humour and Absurdity* was a symposium curated by Livia Páldi & Vytautas Michelkevicius at Nida Art Colony, Nida, Lithuania (28–30 Jun 2019) that, through a series of lectures, discussions, and performances, aimed to ‘reflect on how [artists] employ humour as a medium to ponder social, ecological, (cultural)-political complexities as well as the absurd situations they generate’ (Páldi & Michelkevicius 2019: n.p.).

22 *Suddenly this Overview* will be discussed in more detail in section 3.2.7, and in ch.4 section 5 in relation to the *A to Z* project.

23 A similar spirit of self-defeating exactitude can also be witnessed in the field of academic humour studies. Salvatore Attardo, for example, in his book *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*, cites 27 variants of incongruity that have been identified in verbal jokes, whilst noting at the same that the cognitive theory upon which the analysis is based is ‘impossibly vague’ (2001: 3); the variants (or “logical mechanisms”) are listed as follows: role-reversals, vacuous reversal, garden-path, almost situations, inferring consequences, coincidence, proportion, exaggeration, meta-humour, role



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exchanges, juxtaposition, figure-ground reversal, analogy, reasoning from false premises, parallelism, ignoring the obvious, field restriction, vicious circle, potency mappings, chiasmus, faulty reasoning, self-undermining, missing link, implicit parallelism, false analogy, cratylism, and referential ambiguity (27).

24 Trainor also observes that in Jankowski's approach, 'art and humour are not necessarily mutually exclusive', describing *The Hunt* as unfolding with the 'slapstick spontaneity and matter-of-fact economy of a prankish home movie;' the work, he adds, is 'all over in less than a minute, with no preamble or explanation' (2000: 72). Drawing similar conclusions about the deadpan nature of the work's humour, Harald Falckenberg describes as a 'punchline' the moment when, in *The Hunt*, 'the cashier, completely unfazed, carefully lifts the items out of the trolley on the arrow and pushes them past the barcode reader' (2008: 77).

25 See section 4.2 on "comic and non-comic incongruity".

26 See section 5.3 for a discussion of the generative capacity of indeterminacy.

27 Analogous to such deployment of an internally consistent yet fallacious reasoning is the operation of verbal jokes, described by humour theorist Salvatore Attardo as 'a distorted, playful logic that does not necessarily hold outside of the world of the joke. Speakers are well aware of the limits of local logic and "go along with it" in the spirit of "willing suspension of belief"' (2001: 25).

28 The notion of absurdity as a non-rhetorical form of irony is discussed in section 5.2.

29 James Trainor sees Pope.L as 'a sort of neo-Dadaist agent provocateur shaping and magnifying the social unease of the city's passing throng,' whose use of the body is 'uncomfortable, buffoonishly comic and traumatic,' but whose methods are 'always derived from the greater social absurdities and ritual indignities of the street' (2004: 61). Pope.L's crawling is socially subversive not only through its very evident antagonism to the 'mythos of verticality,' but also, in an echo of nineteenth century flaneurism, its rejection of the city's 'purposeful time-is-money stride' (*ibid.*). Illustrating precisely the extent to which Pope.L's brand of absurdity is reliant on social context, Trainor also cites two other Manhattan-based performances: *Member (Schlong Journey)* (1996), in which the artist wandered along Harlem's main shopping street wearing a white suit with a rubber glove on his head and a large cardboard tube affixed to his crotch; and *ATM Piece* (1992), where, chained to the outside of a bank in Mid-town, Pope.L wore a hula skirt made of dollar bills, offering them to people going into the bank. Whereas in the latter performance, onlookers quickly became apprehensive and the police arrived within minutes, in the former, Pope.L was able to freely walk amongst a largely indifferent crowd – leading Trainor to ask whether, 'if Pope.L can so easily change how he is publicly defined by simply taking a short subway ride, other signifiers of identity are equally arbitrary' (2004: 62).

30 In an interview I conducted with Takala on 20 Jan 2019 at Kiasma in Helsinki (where the work was being shown as part of her solo exhibition *Second Shift*), the artist spoke of her insistence that the various characters played in her works "have a logic". It was necessary, that is, for the roles taken on to be as "realistic" as possible – so that even if the people she encounters "don't really get it", they at least accept that she has a "reason" for behaving as she does, and is not simply, as Takala put it, a "hospital case". In the case of *The Stroker*, there was already in place at the venue an institutionalised embrace of bodily well-being and mindfulness, as well as a lack of conventional hierarchies (revealed, in Takala's view, through the pressure felt amongst the workers to continually drink smoothies, even though there was no explicit requirement to do so). It was thus entirely plausible that a touching consultant might be hired by the organisation, whereupon each worker would then have to negotiate their own individual ways of dealing with this subtle invasion of their valuable personal space.

31 See section 4.1 for a discussion of the "breaching experiments" of sociologist Harold Garfinkel, which explore social norms of behaviour from a constructionist perspective, and which give this section its title.

32 The painting in question is *The Bard* (1843) by John Harrison (after Philip James de Loutherbourg).

33 The specific role of landscape within Williams's work and its parallels with my own critical engagement with the Welsh landscape will be discussed in ch.3 section 1.2.

34 My own work *Gemäldegalerie Hands* (see ch.5 section 3) exploits a similarly absurd disjunction between the anticipated meaningfulness of a gesture and the failure of any legible meaning to materialise.

35 Without a sufficiently generous attitude towards the intention of the artist, the work can only be read as weakly ironic, or, as critic Jonathan Jones has it, an ill-conceived attempt at humour in 'a performance so pathetic, so ludicrous, you want to pat him on the back and say, yes, you're an artist, now please go away ... It would be funny for a couple of seconds as a TV sketch, but there's no let-up. It

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goes on, becoming more and more desperate. You feel you are intruding on someone's despair' (2001: para.2).

36 The violation of genre will be discussed further (in ch.5 section 2) in relation to my own tactically absurd editing of found video footage of various broadcast genres; it will also be seen (in ch.3 section 2.3) to underpin the critical engagement with representations of landscape performed by my video *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany*.

37 Although the work's original German title *Plötzlich diese Übersicht* is now generally translated into English somewhat literally as *Suddenly This Overview*, it has also been shown using the artists' own suggested translation, *Suddenly It All Makes Sense* (Ratcliff: 2016). The latter retains the more playful connotations associated with its origin in a conversation between the artists' Rat and Bear characters in their film *The Least Resistance* (1981), in which they gleefully celebrate a moment of epiphanic wisdom: 'Bear: What joy, what clarity! / Rat: Suddenly it all makes sense! / Bear: How simple everything is!' (quoted in Schumacher 2010: 51, my translation).

38 Drawing attention to a theme picked up on in ch.4 section 4 in relation to my *A to Z* project, Rainald Schumacher sees the work as embodying a 'philosophical dilemma,' a kind of Borgesian paradox in which it is 'impossible to obtain an overview of visual reality and history;' in order to develop such an overview, argues Schumacher, archetypal examples would need to be selected 'out of the endless chain of images and events' – but without having access to a complete overview of all history, no criterion can be available to judge whether or not a selected example is indeed archetypal. 'Seen in this light,' he continues, the 'capriciousness' of the selection of objects in *Suddenly This Overview* 'reveals that all systems of order are arbitrary and that they must simply ignore part of the complexity of reality and history' (2010: 88–89).

39 Welzer's analysis will be seen (in section 4.1) to correlate closely with Alfred Schutz's theorisation of distinct realms of sense.

40 Indeed, for Stewart, in situations where we are engaged in a concerted effort to "make sense" of a phenomenon and yet are confronted with an irreconcilable chaos or disorder, nonsense functions as an 'aid to sense making,' giving us 'a place to store any mysterious gaps in our systems of order,' thus maintaining and preserving their (precarious) legitimacy (1978: 5). Cited as an example is an experiment by the sociologist Richard Hilbert in which a class were asked to find out what had really happened based on five accounts of an event. The accounts had, in fact, been randomly selected and bore no relation to any real event, leading to the students eventually giving up and classifying the assignment as "nonsense". 'The legitimacy and rationality of sense-making,' concludes Stewart, 'was left uncontaminated, unthreatened, since there was no actual nonsense event,' proving, in this case at least, that 'nonsense rescues common sense by providing a residual category for storing disorder' (6).

41 The use of nonsensicality as a means of escaping the restricting frame of a critical debate will be explored in ch.5 section 4 with reference to Metahaven's theorisation of the online phenomenon of "rickrolling".

42 Rod A Martin cites experiments undertaken in the 1970s that have led to incongruity being defined dynamically through its degree of 'divergence from expectation' (2007: 68). Participants in the studies, he writes, 'were asked to compare a series of identical-looking weights with a standard reference weight. A number of very similar weights (averaging 500 +/- 50 g) were evaluated first, and then one that was much lighter or heavier than the standard (50 g or 3000 g) was presented. Interestingly, when participants lifted this greatly discrepant weight, they frequently smiled, chuckled, or even laughed aloud, and [it was] found that the more discrepant this weight was from the mean of the other comparisons, the more the subjects displayed such expressions of mirth. Thus, then size of the incongruity (the discrepancy in weight) was directly related to the amount of smiling and laughter evoked' (68–69).

43 This ability of humour to, as one commentator puts it, 'disrupt the heuristics we deploy in everyday life' (Carroll 2014: 70) will be returned to in ch.5 section 2 in relation to tactically absurd violations of genre, drawing upon "schema" theories of humour.

44 The theme of a non-comic form of comedic artistic practice is explored through Livia Páldi and Olaf Westphalen's notion of "dysfunctional" comedy, which, in addition to jokes, encompasses 'dysfunctional poetry or nonsense or accidents or tragedies or ruminations of the demented,' and is, as Westphalen puts it, 'rarely as entertaining as functional comedy' (2016: 20). Freed of the obligation to be funny, that is, the absurd incongruities deployed in such practices are opened up to a much broader field of signification, in which '[m]eaning oscillates and fluctuates across [them] eternally, or at least for a long time' (*ibid.*).

45 The carnivalesque, according to Bakhtin, is able to 'liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally

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accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things' (1984: 34).

46 That the realms of the humorous and the non-humorous (or, indeed, the absurd and the non-absurd) are not always so clear-cut is a point that will be returned to in ch.4 section 2 in relation to the initially perceived gag-like quality of the premise of my *A to Z* project.

47 An alternative theoretical perspective is offered by Paolo Virno, whose (2008) modelling of jokes as "diagrammatic" of the potential for innovation in any form of life will be discussed in ch.3 section 3.2.2.

48 The full passage reads as follows: 'We must have strong, upright works, precise, and forever unintelligible. Logic is a complication. Logic is always false. It draws the strings of ideas, words, along their formal exterior, toward illusory extremes and centres. Its chains kill, like an enormous centipede stifling independence. Married to logic, art would live in incest, swallowing, devouring its own tail still attached, fornicating with itself...' (Tzara 2001: 300).

49 Michael White makes a similar point in an essay on the nonsense poems and collages of Kurt Schwitters, noting that '[to] interpret Schwitters' work is to engage in a ... process of sense making ... The viewer/reader is often vexed by the question of whether to take a particular absurdity seriously or not, to invest it with great significance or disregard it as accident' (2010: 203). A clear choice appears to be presented: either 'dismiss the whole thing as deranged,' or, more generously, decide that its absurdity is not, in fact, 'mere foolery' and does indeed merit attention (204). Yet, even in opting for the latter (which this research clearly does), we are still not necessarily able to respond entirely adequately to the nonsensical or absurd characteristics of the works. The issue, for White, lies at the heart of the interpretative act: all too often Schwitters' text-works and collages are approached as riddles to be "solved", wherein favourable elements are seized upon and put to work at the service of meaning. Within such selective acts of 'decoding,' he continues, 'a problematic excess is left unconsidered' – and those features of the work that are less propitious to sense-making are rendered 'rather irrelevant' (205). Absurdity, it would seem, does not yield easily to attempts at explication.

50 See also ch.4 section 2 for a discussion of the way in which the work of Douglas Huebler has suffered from an overly narrow reading as rhetorical irony.

51 Whilst not exactly "ironic", the socially-engaged and conceptually-sophisticated practice of Liam Gillick is singled out by Garnett for criticism; his work, which 'directly appeals to an existing discursive formation' and 'ticks all the right curatorial boxes,' is condemned as a 'contemporary Biennale academicism, an always timely artworld professionalism perfectly reconciled with its epoch' (2010: 180).

52 Also citing the usefulness of a Deleuzian understanding of nonsense in 'grasping the machinery of absurdity' is Isabel de Sena's essay 'Peanut-Butter and Aspirin.' Writing about the 'widespread indignation' brought about by the Museum Boijmans van Beunigen's acquisition in 2010 of Wim T Schippers' *Peanut Butter Platform* (1962) at a cost of 30,001 Euros – a 56 m<sup>2</sup> "floor" of peanut butter installed in the gallery – de Sena interprets the negative reaction as emblematic of a belief that art is 'meaningless for society at large' (2015: 65). The response, she argues, was 'ultimately born from a chronic frustration at not being able to determine and understand what this artwork was about' (*ibid.*). Curators and critics alike appear unable to resist the temptation to judge such works solely according to their 'benevolence to society,' however tangential or speculative that reading may be, overlooking the fact that absurdity is 'insubordinate to this desire' (66). Ultimately, for de Sena, absurdity operates through 'an endless postponement and impossibility to arrive at "a single fixed meaning":' it cannot be accounted for reductively, essentially, or teleologically; like Deleuze's nonsense, absurdity remains an 'equivocal and evasive form of expression' (*ibid.*).

53 Adopting a similar position, Emma Cocker, in her essay 'Tactics for Not Knowing: Preparing for the Unexpected,' argues for an art practice that aspires to 'retain something of the unknown within what is produced' (2013: 127). In her view, art offers a valuable space for reconciliation with the 'blurry and indeterminate realm of flows and forces in which we spend our early days' that are left behind in a process of enculturation (126); placing a value on not-knowing, she suggests, goes 'against the tide of certain teleological thought, which imagines progress as a one-way passage, the move from what is known towards the goal of knowing more and more' (127).

54 The favouring of open-endedness over determinate meaning does, however, give rise to its own problems, visible, for Herbert, in the increasingly commonplace acceptance in contemporary art of the intrinsic value of the 'incomplete' (2014: 10): 'When uncertainty becomes an aim in itself,' he cautions, 'achieved by merely limiting information and jumbling an artwork's parts, the notion of resisting closure becomes a point of closure' (12). Offering a similarly cautionary note, Sally O'Reilly, in an essay 'Unhinged,' warns against the uncritical valuation of indeterminacy. Writing on the topic of humour in contemporary art, she notes that both humour and art are mobilised by 'unstable status, meaning or perception,' presenting 'propositions of a world differently configured, with ambiguity playing a vital role

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in this' (2016: 105); whilst a widespread assumption exists today that ambiguity automatically represents 'vitality' and 'subversion' – a legacy, perhaps, of Dadaism's demand for a 'release from the tyranny of logic and received meaning' – when poorly handled, it can quickly morph into "vagueness" (107). If artists, she concludes, are to 'persist in pursuing ambiguity, indeterminacy, [and] illogicality,' it must at least be acknowledged that the approach 'no longer guarantees a carnivalesque escape from the rational everyday' (108).

55 Exploring Dadaist critique from a more textual perspective is Anna Katharina Schaffner's essay 'Dissecting the Order of Signs: On the Textual Politics of Dada Poetics,' which stresses a desire within the absurd practices of Dada for a 'transformation of the value and thought structure of [its] recipients,' the aim being to 'shock them out of their complacency and accepted cognitive frameworks' (2011: 39). Crucially, for Schaffner, this is achieved not through any explicit political content, but by 'cutting deeply into the textual fabric of linguistic order' – a 'semiotic' operation that undermines the 'representational and instrumental function' of symbolic discourse (*ibid.*): by 'dismantling a given order of signs,' that is, the Dadaists were able to 'probe deeply into the realms of cultural agreement and politics' (44). Dadaist subversion is witnessed in a rejection of 'semantic compatibility and logical coherence ... and the abandonment of the message-oriented deployment of language' – a mode of praxis that renders its critique all the more provocative and difficult to assimilate (46); it is not, concludes Schaffner, 'the proclamations of heretic and offensive propositions or outrageous political messages which caused the outbreaks of rage at the Dada soirées, but rather the absence of any tangible messages at all. It was the zero message, the empty signifiers, the indeterminacy and the ultimate ambivalence which the audiences found unbearable (46–47).

56 That such a shift has occurred, according to Rancière's analysis, is not surprising, since 'understanding does not, in and of itself, help to transform intellectual attitudes and situations,' for the 'exploited rarely require an explanation of the laws of exploitation' (2009a: 45); as he puts it in *The Emancipated Spectator*, there is no 'straightforward relationship between political aims and artistic means' (2009b: 74).

57 Curated by Phillippe Vergne, the exhibition ran from 12 Feb to 30 Apr 2000, before touring to the Pompidou Centre in Paris, Miami Art Museum, Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City, and Portland Art Museum.

58 The theme of an indeterminable criticality that arises through an absurd handing of an overtly "political" subject matter will be returned to in ch.5 section 4.

59 Brian Dillon, discussing the routine attribution of criticality to the work of Francis Alÿs, is less charitable: 'the imbrication of aesthetics and politics seems so generalised an artistic and curatorial ambition as to have lost much of its charge. It has become the horizon of cliché behind which we all operate' (2010: para. 1).

60 The practice of "rickrolling" – wherein a seemingly legitimate hyperlink promising to direct the user towards a useful location leads instead to a video of Rick Astley's (1987) pop hit *Never Gonna Give You Up* – will be explored further in ch.5 section 4.

61 "Wit" is understood by Certeau here with reference to Freud's (2002) idea that jokes, through their 'double meanings, misinterpretations, displacements' or 'multiple uses of the same material,' represent a 'return of the repressed within the field of an order' (Certeau 1984: 39).

## Chapter 3

### Case Study One:

### Searching for the Welsh Landscape

# 1 Genesis

## 1.1 Overview of project

*Searching for the Welsh Landscape* is a series of interrelated works in various media developed for a solo exhibition at Aberystwyth Arts Centre that took place from November 2016 to January 2017 exploring the problematic notion that national identity subsists in the landscape of a particular region. The origins of the project lay in a residency undertaken at Aberystwyth Arts Centre in 2014, which was the first time I had spent any significant amount of time in Wales since my childhood (I was born and grew up in a village in the Swansea Valley). Those initial first hand encounters with the landscape that took place during the residency led to an engagement with a set of notions including belonging, place, and national identity. A subsequent production grant from the Arts Council of Wales – which coincided with the beginning of this PhD – supported the development of those preliminary ideas through an extended series of visits to different parts of Wales, the production of a new body of work, and an eventual realisation of the project as a solo exhibition at Aberystwyth Arts Centre. This first case study therefore offered an opportunity to test out of the form, operation, and potential value (generative and critical) of a tactically absurd approach to a given (non-absurd) subject-matter, presented publicly at one of Wales's highest-profile institutions.

## 1.2 Context and development

During the residency I had embarked on a series of walks around the countryside surrounding Aberystwyth; initially, these were undertaken without any defined objectives, the intention being simply to see what would draw my attention, and to allow an unforced relationship with the landscape to develop. It quickly became clear, however, that what was colouring this experience was a certain sense of “attachment” I felt towards that landscape, together with an impression that it was somehow “meaningful”. I found I was becoming more specifically interested in the hills, and, initially without forethought, had begun a process of weighing up particular hills in terms of how “Welsh” they were. This would later be framed as the first tactically absurd move in the project: an initially quite undeliberate and intuitive means of responding to a specific environment, formalised and rationalised as an intentionally absurd search for a “perfect, archetypal Welsh hill”.

Although it was not explicitly acknowledged until well into the project's development, the search can be understood as having been informed and shaped by two major influences. Firstly, representations of the Welsh landscape that have appeared in painting (and latterly, photography and cinema) over the last 300 years – particularly during the romantic period, as



Figure 8. Thomas Jones (1774) *The Bard*

well as subsequent portrayals that have fallen under its sphere of influence. Thomas Jones's (1774) painting *The Bard* (fig. 8) is emblematic: romantic in its incorporation of a dramatically lit sky and silhouetted tree branches, the work is ostensibly a history painting depicting a Welsh bard dressed as a Celtic druid driven to a cliff edge by English invaders. Aside from the specific role the narrative plays in creating and reinforcing national identity, the painting's action can be said to take place in a (now) instantly recognisable "Welsh landscape", featuring dramatically shaped yet modestly scaled mountains, sheep-shorn grassy uplands punctuated by occasional exposed rocks, rolling farmland pastures falling away into the distance below, and a sense of remoteness from urban settlements. Paintings such as *The Bard* have led to a certain notion of "Welshness" being attributed to particular land formations, features and usages – a cumulative process that, having been established through a genealogy of representations, has become naturalised and uncritically accepted, regardless of its actual correspondence to any historically or topographically specific land formation. Indeed, the appropriation of an environment as an index of cultural identity, as Prys Gruffydd, David T Herbert, and Angela Piccini point out in an essay on travel writing in Wales, is a necessarily transformative process of meaning-making:

[the] specific construction of landscape as subject, as artefact, marks a translation, informed by continuous processes of translation through time, of the *experienced* world into the considered world whereby our surroundings become subsumed within the contingent uses of things, meaningful only and always as translation (2000: 590, my emphasis).

In other words, those painterly, photographic, or cinematic "Welsh landscapes" that appear in the cultural imagination are examples of physical landforms that have become "translated"

through a largely unseen and unacknowledged process of codification into meaningful and legible representations of “Welshness”.<sup>1</sup>

Adopting a critical (and absurd) approach towards clichéd representations of Welshness is Bedwyr Williams’s photographic work *Bard Attitude* (2005), which (as was established in ch.2 section 3.2.5) incorporates various tropes of Welsh identity, including, crucially, the landscape. Consisting in this case of a craggy stream emerging from a woodlands overlooked by distant hills, the landscape functions as a kind of prerequisite – or an inescapable backdrop – to Williams’s performative engagement with his own cultural heritage. Similarly, in *Kyffin and Bala* (2000) – a series of drawings alluding to the Welsh painters Kyffin Williams and Iwan Bala – the landscape plays a integral role. According to the artist, the work depicts:

a fantasy battle between two pairs of shoes, one called Kyffin and one called Bala. These were loafer versions of the two artists that I perceived as being the titans of the Welsh Art Scene. Set in Tolkienesque landscapes, these were storyboards for a non-existent movie (Williams 2006: 8).

The irreverence of Williams’s accumulation of signifiers of the cultural identity of Wales can thus be seen in part to stem from its embrace of stereotypical images of the Welsh landscape – which, in the case of *Kyffin and Bala*, ultimately stem from the imagination of an English fantasy writer, and from the Hollywood adaptations of his novels that were shot in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>

The “Welsh landscape” that my own project sets out to find, then, is inextricably bound up with a representational context that can be seen to have already made the topography of Wales meaningful. Sceptical from the outset, my encounters with this physical environment betray an ambivalence towards its assumed legibility. Standing on the top of a hill looking out at the magnificent sweeping vista of what I could not help identifying as the emblematically “Welsh” landscape that lay before me, there were certainly moments when I felt moved by it. My objections towards the notion that national identity could somehow inhere in a particular land formation had clearly been sidestepped. Intellectual critique defeated by affective impact, I began to wonder whether the landscape really did *mean* something – whether, that is, my response to it was being shaped by something more than an arbitrarily appended codification. Nevertheless, these moments where I was able to, in a sense, “read” the landscape as Welsh were fleeting and intermittent, with much of my time also spent underwhelmed, disappointed, distracted or bored. Crucially, however, the genealogy of representations I had been exposed to, directly or indirectly, was unmistakably present in my mind; it had led to a sense that the landscape was legible, and that it somehow *stood for something*. Indeed, it was the frequent failure of my own experiences of the landscape to tally with those tropes of signification that fostered a productive discrepancy – which was seized upon and formulated through what would



later be identified as a tactically absurd “inversion and subversion of norms of social representation” (see ch.2 section 3.2.5).

The second main influence was autobiographical.<sup>3</sup> Although it was not conceived of as a topic of enquiry in itself, my own personal history – growing up in a former mining village in South Wales overlooked by a prominent hill (whose presence was revealed every morning as the curtains were drawn) – gave weight to what I was pursuing and coloured my experiences. Indeed, as the project unfolded, an increasing awareness emerged of the potency of the memory of that childhood hill. As the search drew on, it became clear that – alongside a generalised image of a “Welsh hill” forged through exposure to existing cultural representations – I was also being drawn to hills that in some way resembled the remembered hill of my childhood. Given that the plan had been to visit five distinct hilly regions in Wales, I opted, therefore, to leave until last the visit to my home area in order to help draw out that autobiographical narrative.

During the visits I undertook a series of long walks over hills and mountains, through valleys, villages, farmland – sometimes seeking out places of recognised interest, and sometimes seeking out “ordinariness” in places without any conventional appeal. The walks were planned accordingly with the help of maps and guidebooks, although they were also open to spontaneous changes of plan. Reaching the summit of hills, for example, although interesting and rewarding, was never the sole objective; spending time on the side of a hill, being “overlooked” by a hill, even getting lost en route to a hill, also proved valuable. A range of different kinds of experiences were thus accounted for, beyond those more conventionally associated with encounters with

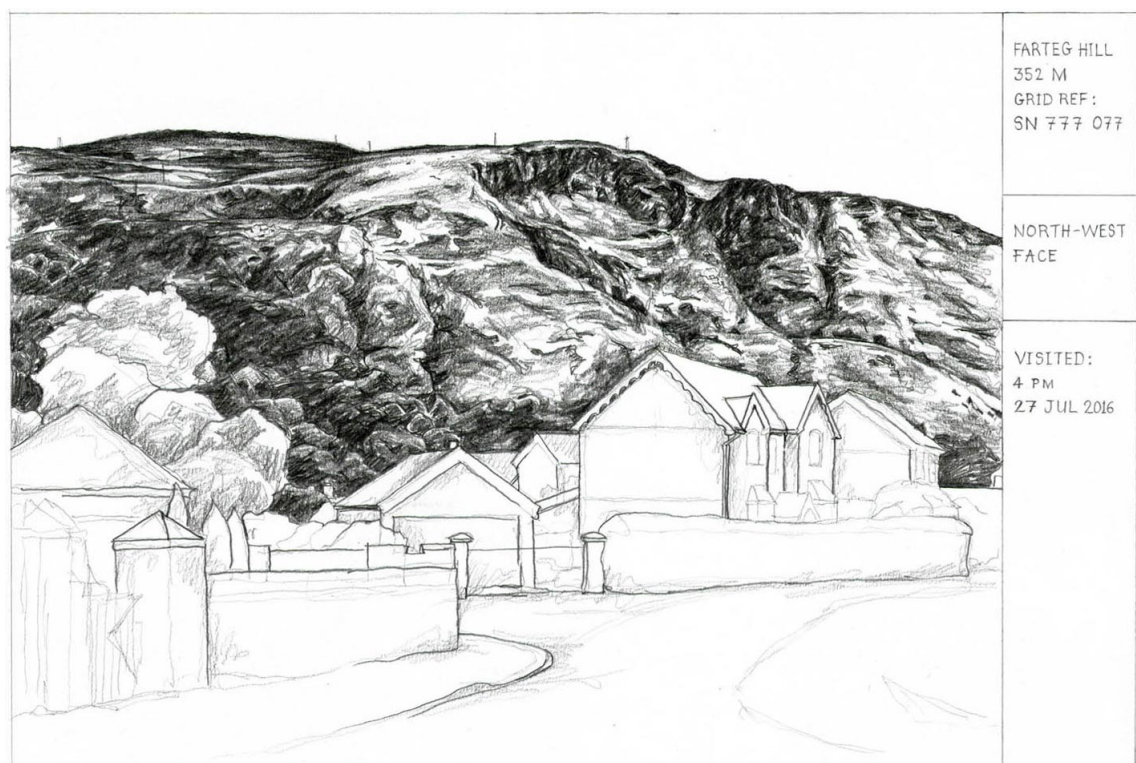


Figure 9. *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* [detail]

sublime scenery, or with one's "homeland". Although I undertook a considerable amount of research into the geology, history, and culture of Wales, the working processes put into play generally steered clear of any direct engagement with those pre-existing discourses. Despite being framed by critical questions about the nature of the relationship between landscape and national identity, my approach was characterised by its oblique relationship with conventional forms of engagement with the landscape – whether scientific, cultural, leisure-based, or touristic – ultimately cohering into a pointedly non-discursive form of practice that, it will be argued, is emblematic of tactical absurdity.

## 2 Description of works

### 2.1 The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales

A series of 60 drawings and texts, *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* was the most direct realisation of the search to find a single archetypal hill that perfectly embodies the idea of "Wales". Objectively unanswerable and comically overreaching in its ambition, the premise was from the outset understood to be absurd in its formulation; it was also, however, designed to be specific, intelligible, and ostensibly coherent in what it sought to achieve, mimicking the character of a critical intellectual enquiry.<sup>4</sup> The premise, that is, can be aligned with the form of absurdity defined in ch.2 section 3.2.3 as "fallacious reasoning". Needless to

So I walked up to the top of the hill,  
and on the top of the hill there were  
no sheep, but a pack of horses – about  
thirty of them – which, er, was quite  
unexpected. And I spent a long time, um,  
kind of following the horses around,  
photographing them, even though I have  
no interest whatsoever in horses.

Figure 10. *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* [detail]

say, I did not believe that the hill existed, and was fully cognisant of the consequent futility of the search. The circularity of the work's title reflects this, referencing the apparently paradoxical Zen dictum that holds that first one sees mountains and rivers as what they are, then, having begun the study of Zen, one gains the insight that they are not what they are – before finally, having reached the highest level of wisdom, one again sees them as what they are.<sup>5</sup> The drawings (fig. 9) are presented as if they are architectural blueprints developed in response to an imagined “Welsh mountain” brief, incorporating textual information on the elevation of the hill, its Ordnance Survey grid reference, and the time and date it was visited. The drawings are all A3-sized, and were produced in the studio based on extensive photographs (some 5,000 in total) taken during the thirty or so walks conducted around five different areas in Wales. In the exhibition they were mounted and displayed in museum frames. Each drawing is accompanied by a short text, presented alongside the image in the form of a printed museum-style information label. The texts (fig. 10) transcribe very literally (complete with hesitations, repetitions, “um”s and “er”s) spoken recollections of the process of walking, describing erratic and inconsistent states of mind; a series of banal and fragmentary anecdotes, along with descriptions of humorous incidents or physical discomfort, take their place alongside stuttering and inarticulate attempts to describe the landscape, and reflections on the search itself. The authority granted by the museum presentation and the naturalistic style of the drawings, then, destabilised by the capriciousness of the texts, can be characterised according to an absurdity defined in ch.2 section 3.2.7 as “undermining the serious, the respected, and the authoritative”.

## 2.2 Hill Walking

Taking the form of a video-diary, *Hill Walking* (fig. 11) charts my attempt to climb one of the highest peaks in the Brecon Beacons national park, Fan-y-Big, without looking at the mountain itself. The work developed spontaneously during an unplanned walk: a lack of Sunday bus services to the area I had been intending to survey meant that I was forced on that particular day to walk in the “wrong” area. Consequently, I had decided to focus on recording sound in the hilly uplands near where I was staying rather than taking photographs, which had been my customary activity. As the walk got underway and the visual beauty of the national park became more and more pronounced, I began to experience my self-imposed ban on looking as increasingly absurd. Having arisen through a contingent set of circumstances, the activity of earnestly trying not to look proved compelling enough to formalise as a conceptual premise for a performative work. Recorded intermittently as I approached and then ascended the hill, the video diary documents various strategies including walking backwards so as not to face the mountain ahead; looking at the floor as I walk; blocking the view ahead of me with my map;



Figure 11. *Hill Walking* [still from video]

and, finally, in a denouement of sorts at the summit, closing my eyes. The absurdity of the work's premise, then, derives not so much from any *fallacious reasoning* as from a “complete absence of logic or sense” (see ch.2 section 3.2.2), a characteristic heightened by the manifest failure of its implementation, since the mountain backdrop I attempt to avoid looking at is continuously and overwhelmingly present and visible throughout the video. The work, in this sense, can also be said to enact a form of tactical absurdity identifiable through its “immediately discernible (comic) incongruity” (ch.2 section 3.2.1), which, presented as a mock-video diary, also succeeds in “violating generic expectations” (ch.2 section 3.2.6). In addition, insofar as the activity of hill walking exists in a social space, the work performs an absurdity that arises through its “breaching of norms of social behaviour” (ch.2 section 3.2.4).

## 2.3 An Artist in Search of an Epiphany

The video *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany* (figs. 12 & 13) stages a collision between what was felt to be “proper” and “improper” responses to landscape. The work comprises a series of carefully composed scenes of often spectacular scenery shot over a five-day period in Snowdonia; in each I can be seen walking into the picture and adopting a stance reminiscent of the protagonist in Caspar David Friedrich's much reproduced (1818) painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. Accompanying the imagery is a voiceover soundtrack suggestive of my own stream of consciousness; although scripted, recorded and edited for the video, the inner monologue was essentially based on genuine trains of thought that had occurred during the



Figure 12. *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany* [still from video]

walks, shaped by what was in front of me. At times appreciative and attentive towards the landscape, more often than not the thoughts become sceptical or distracted, or betray an erraticism and a lack of interest in what is at hand, frequently drifting off into entirely different realms of experience.<sup>6</sup> Moments of engagement with the landscape that conform to romantic or nationalistic narratives certainly do occur, but only within a broader spectrum of other, more everyday and banal mental activity; the bulk of the thoughts do not belong to any conventional (or “proper”) landscape discourse. The stream of consciousness presented is thus both authentic (in that it bears witness to mental activity as it is actually experienced during an encounter with a physical environment)<sup>7</sup> and “improper” (in that it deviates from the kind of thoughts commonly expected of a certain mould of landscape artist). The conspicuous absence in the video of any artistic “epiphany” can therefore be modelled as both a tactically absurd “violation of generic expectations” and an “immediately discernible (comic) incongruity” (see, respectively, ch.2 sections 3.2.6 and 3.2.1).

## 2.4 Arms Reaching, Smiling Sweetly

Finally, *Arms Reaching, Smiling Sweetly* is a work consisting of a large video projection showing the fashioning of a sculpture from a lump of clay, along with a series of seven clay sculptures displayed on nearby makeshift plinths. The work is based on my repeated attempts to sculpt from memory the hill overlooking the village of my childhood. The installation is presented such that the video, which was projected in the exhibition large enough for the viewer to be

dwarfed by its scale, is encountered first; this sense of impressiveness is then punctured by the diminutive clay sculptures – which are deliberately unspectacular, having been made quickly in unfired clay with little technical expertise and retaining something of the obsessive quality of the amateur model-railway enthusiast. Such a disjunction can thus be modelled both as a tactically absurd “violation of generic expectations” and an “immediately discernible (comic) incongruity” (see, respectively, ch.2 section 3.2.1 and section 3.2.6): the intention being to set up a contrast between the anticipated significance of the hill – which occupies a prominent position within the autobiographical narrative – and the reality of it being physically unremarkable and unable to sustain its emotional resonance. The work’s title is taken from the lyrics of the Curly Putnam song *Green, Green Grass of Home*, which aims further to reinforce its sense of equivocality; made famous through a recording by Tom Jones, the song is popularly understood as a straightforwardly sentimental evocation of “home”, despite the lyrics describing the bittersweet wish of a man on death row to be returned to, and buried in, an oak meadow in his home town.<sup>8</sup>

### 3 Tactically absurd practice

#### 3.1 General intentions: disrupting the limitations of convention

The project as a whole, then, was developed in large part as a means of addressing the failure of culturally clichéd forms of representation to account for the reality and complexity of actual encounters with particular landscapes. Veering away from over-simplified romantic or nationalistic relationships with the landscape, the works present instead forms of representation that have been rendered ambiguous, erratic, contradictory, banal, or nonsensical. Conventional paths into meaningfulness are subjected to, and undermined by, a range of operations that will, in what follows, be modelled as instances of tactical absurdity. The works are in this sense self-reflexive in that they employ familiar forms and languages of both visual art practice and cultural practice more generally (naturalistic drawings, lens-based imagery, narrative videos, museum texts, grid-like presentations), only to then incorporate additional elements or perform strategic acts that deliberately disrupt their own legibility; by refusing to deliver their promised content, the artworks aim to problematise the capacity of the representational forms they adopt to communicate reliably, authentically, and, indeed, meaningfully.

Such deployment of what might be termed a *tactically absurd critical disruption* can be seen in, for example, the video *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany*, whose use of imagery was intended to evoke a tendency in contemporary television travel and nature documentaries to rely on what has been termed “landscape porn”;<sup>9</sup> unlike in those populist cultural forms, however, any sense of gratuitous pleasure afforded by the imagery in the video is purposefully undermined by its

dissenting soundtrack. Similarly, the texts accompanying the drawings in *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* – although they are presented as informative museum labels – are stripped of their customary functionality. Any concrete information or articulated opinion included in the texts, that is, is continuously relativised by the lack of certainty and high degree of subjectivity in its delivery. In both cases, the critical disruption is parodic in form, operating less, in Linda Hutcheon's words, as a 'biting ridicule' than as a 'playful, genial mockery of codifiable forms' (1985: 15–16).

The rationale behind the choice of specific locations visited during the project can also be understood as a form of disruption. Motivated initially by a desire simply to avoid the over-familiar, the walks later became strategically planned – both as a means of avoiding visiting sites where predetermined tropes of intelligibility might impose themselves too strongly, and as an opening up of the project to a certain inconsistency of experience and yet-to-be-determined significance. Although certain recognised touristic, historical, and culturally-significant areas were included in the survey, the approach in those cases is typically more circuitous than celebratory; Snowdonia National Park, for example, is an unquestionably rich and impressive natural environment, but there is also a sense that, due to its carefully controlled and managed status as a tourist destination (particularly at the more popular sites such as Snowdon itself), the experience of visiting it has become sanitised and risk-free – and, crucially, already saturated with meanings and expectations. Similarly, symbolic markers of Welsh nationalism such as the area around Nant-y-Moch reservoir in the Cambrian Mountains – where the celebrated Welsh freedom-fighter Owain Glyndwr is said to have led an uprising against the nation's English oppressors in 1401 – were also judged to be too bound up with pre-existing discourse; as too were sites of interest to art history such as the view from Llanberis of Dolbadarn Castle, famously painted by JMW Turner (1800) following a tour of Snowdonia in 1798-99. Less conventionally attractive landscapes such as that of the post-industrial valleys in South Wales often proved more fertile, and were, accordingly, granted significant space within the project as a whole.

A circular walk undertaken around Ebbw Vale – one of the famous sequence of north-south running glacial valleys that range across the South-Wales coalfield – is a stand-out example. Though acknowledged for the importance of its industrial heritage, the region is not frequented by tourists, and, as such, there are few orthodox points of entry into appreciating it. The walk took me initially along the top of a long ridge that separates the valley from the next one; from this high vantage-point the former mining village of Cwm could be seen, its rows of terraced housing stretched out along the flat valley-bottom, surrounded by steep green valley sides. Descending down onto the valley floor, the spectacular hilltop views gave way to fly-tips, shabby

warehouse buildings, and finally Cwm itself. The walk was designed to embrace such contradictions; I knew the region to be poor, with high unemployment, low educational attainment and poor health, blighted by the scars of industry, and still struggling to revive itself after the demise of the coal mines.<sup>10</sup> However, I was also familiar with the region's unique geological setting, which has given rise to a landscape that, although in places still bearing the scars of the coal-mining industry, has in large part returned to a pre-industrial lushness and unspoilt natural beauty. The experience of walking around the area brought with it contrasting impressions of urban deprivation, industrial blight, and hostility to outsiders,<sup>11</sup> paired up with frequent encounters with a surprisingly serene and seemingly untouched natural environment imbued with a sense of wilderness. Devised precisely in order to embrace such contradictions, the walk was particularly effective in revealing an image of Wales in all its complexity.

Given that any attempt to account for such a multifaceted and contradictory set of encounters as a coherent whole is, particularly in relation to a notion of "Welshness", bound to be conflicted, the motivation behind the decision to disrupt conventional routes into meaning and allow new ones to emerge becomes clear. In essence, the project was premised on an assumption that the meanings that arise through any form of representation of lived experience are necessarily limiting and reductive, masking over an underlying indeterminacy, complexity, and irresolvability (that, as will be seen in section 4.1 below, audiences can be reluctant to accept). It is precisely in this light that the absurd forms of disruption enacted by the works can be understood as "tactical".

### 3.2 Specific instances of implementation

The tactical absurdity that is revealed as operative within the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project will be examined in three specific instances. The unfolding of the individual works is accounted for via a series of pivotal decision-making moments – made during an ongoing process of engaging with the question of whether there is such a thing as a "Welsh landscape" – in which a tactically absurd operation is understood to have been implemented. The first instance was to frame the activity of walking through the landscape as a "search for the perfect Welsh hill"; the second, occurring later during the process of video editing, was the decision to juxtapose a series of composed landscape shots with a spoken soundtrack expressing ideas contradictory to the notion of appreciative reflection; the third, which occurred spontaneously during a walk, was the decision to formalise into a conceptual premise the activity of "climbing a hill whilst not looking at it".



### 3.2.1 I know it doesn't exist, but I'm going to look for it anyway: pursuing the unattainable

The particular character of the absurdity employed in the first decisive moment recalls Emma Cocker's reading of the Sisyphean act of absurdly adhering to an arbitrary rule. Framing the act of walking through the Welsh landscape as a *search for the perfect, archetypal Welsh hill*, the directive in this case emerged out of a momentary speculation that such a hill might indeed exist. At face value, the premise appears plausible and coherent: it sets up a pursuit of a goal that is, in principle, attainable, and would seem, moreover, to support the investigative approach of the project as a whole. The validity of the premise, however, is immediately undermined by an open acknowledgment of its impossibility: at no stage beyond the initial moment of inception of the idea, that is, is there ever any realistic expectation of a "perfect Welsh hill" being found, or even that such a thing could exist at all. Nevertheless, the directive is strictly adhered to, and the search – despite its hopelessness and conceptual misguidedness – is carried out in all earnestness and seriousness for the duration of the project.

As outlined in ch.2 section 3.1, Cocker, in her essay 'Over and Over, Again and Again,' reimagines the myth of Sisyphus according to a model of (post-)conceptual art practice that, through a 'relentless obligation' to an 'absurd' or 'arbitrary' rule (2010: 265), gives rise to an activity characterised by a 'humour' and 'ridiculousness' (272).<sup>12</sup> The work of Francis Alÿs is cited as an example, in which 'a single protagonist often appears locked into a process of protracted action that invariably fails to produce any sense of measurable outcome' (281), with particular attention paid to *Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997) – a performance documented on video in which the artist pushes a large block of ice around the streets of Mexico City for nine hours until it has completely melted away. In practical terms, the activity achieves nothing: the inevitable, slow disappearance of the ice amounts only to an immense waste of time and effort. In its staging of a 'resolutely unproductive' gesture, however, the work hints at an opposition to the 'logic and authority of dominant goal-oriented or progressive-driven cultural economies' (283). Whilst there may be a critical impetus behind the work, it can hardly be said to be legible within the Sisyphean act itself – for, as Cocker points out, in contrast to the artist's 'intentions *for*' it, 'the actions *within* Alÿs's work ... remain ambiguous or undetermined' (282, original emphasis). Similarly, through its implementation of an arbitrarily conceived and knowingly futile search for a "perfect" Welsh mountain in the context of a serious-minded enquiry into the relationship between landscape and identity, *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* brings into being a 'critical inconsistency' characterised by a 'shifting of position between investment and indifference, seriousness and non-seriousness, gravity and levity' (272). A critical attitude towards the notion

that national identity subsists within a landscape may well have been present at the moment the activity was conceived (it was, after all, a *tactic*), yet the absurdity of the premise continually undermines the legibility and stability of its critique. By carrying out a rationally indefensible premise *as if it were rational*, a ‘non-teleological performativity’ is thus enacted, in which it is never clear how seriously the search for a perfect Welsh hill is being taken (265). The “tactical” and the “absurd”, at this point, appear to be pulling in different directions.

### 3.2.2 Soggy trousers and the sublime: incongruity as a destabilisation of meaning

A second decisive moment that brought a quality of absurdity into play occurred during the development of what would eventually become the video *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany*. The decision to overlay the video footage shot in Snowdonia with an unorthodox soundtrack arose initially out of a formal concern that the original imagery lacked tension: a recognition, in other words, that its clichéd conventionality needed to be disrupted. This deliberately inserted incongruity, manufactured through a clashing juxtaposition of elements that operate according to different registers of meaning, can be seen to resemble the mechanism of a joke.<sup>13</sup> The operational absurdity at work in the video can therefore be modelled according to Paolo Virno’s analysis of the transformative power of wordplay in his (2008) essay ‘Jokes and Innovative Action: For a Logic of Change.’ Jokes, for Virno, through their employment of paralogism, simultaneously draw upon and subvert linguistic customs, thus highlighting the function of those customs as implicit presuppositions that underpin the sense-making systems of a given community. The joke’s ‘point of honour,’ as he puts it,

lies in illustrating the questionable nature of the opinions lying beneath discourses and actions. In order to hit its target, the joke pushes one single belief to the limit, to the point of extracting absurd and ridiculous consequences from it. Or it maliciously places in contrast two fundamental principles, each of which, if considered separately, seemed incontrovertible (2008: 94).

More than simply a harmless catalyst for a transition between mutually incompatible domains of meaning, then, the joke becomes a potentially destabilising force, capable of undermining what Virno refers to as the ‘grammar of a life-form’ – that hidden yet contingent substratum upon which all reasoning is dependent (155). The applicability of this analysis to an absurd destabilisation of clichéd norms of representation is clear: those overly conventional utterances, behaviours and visualisations that form the raw material for the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project can be understood precisely as the kind of orthodoxy that, in Virno’s view, supports, delimits, and even makes possible, a given discourse – in this case around the assumed relationship between landscape and national identity. Embedded in a whole host of cultural

forms, this conventional discourse has become sufficiently naturalised as to require the disruptive mechanism of humour to un-embed it, and to render it un-reasonable.

Incongruous humour, by its nature, represents a divergence from consensual ways of thinking; incomprehensible according to the conventions of the grammar it disrupts, the sense it produces is unresolved, and ‘seem[s] always insufficient’ (97). In the case of *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany*, the juxtaposition of conflicting imagery and sound divests the landscape of its customary signification and legibility, leaving in its wake only an ‘oblique path’ into meaningfulness that ‘links together heterogeneous semantic contents previously unrelated’ (*ibid.*). The joke-like incongruity deployed in the work has the effect of unfixing the stability of meaning of its clichéd imagery, rendering it malleable, and opening it up to new and unforeseen significances. Jokes, moreover, in Virno’s view, exploit discrepancies ‘between the semiotic system and the universe of discourse’ by employing ambiguous language that operates on both levels simultaneously: the semiotic (sign) is effectively decoupled from the semantic (discourse) (106). Whereas signs – words and sentences, in the case of verbal jokes – *mean* according to general grammatical rules, discourse requires particular (and conventional) contexts of usage to produce *sense*. The disjunction in the video between image and sound can thus be seen as analogous in its operation: whilst the familiar representational tropes deployed in the work operate as a kind of vocabulary (a visual “grammar” of landscape), the sense they are understood to convey arises through the conventions of their usage (which, as was noted in section 1.2 above, was largely laid out in the Romantic period). However, when that visual grammar is deployed unconventionally, no stable sense is allowed to emerge, and the work becomes discursively indeterminate (and, at times, funny). For Virno, the joke ‘boldly emphasises, with impudence,’ that ‘unbridgeable distance’ between sign and discourse – and it is precisely because this distance must be continuously overlooked for ordinary, unambiguous communication to take place, that jokes are able, in Virno’s view, to reveal the contingency and transformability of a given form of life (*ibid.*). The tactically absurd juxtaposition of imagery and soundtrack in the video can, therefore, by analogy, be viewed as an attempt to draw attention to, undermine, and destabilise the orthodox interpretative contexts for (clichéd) representations of the landscape.

### 3.2.3 Critical failure

Finally, the tactically absurd decision in *Hill Walking* to formalise into a conceptual premise the activity of “not looking at the hill whilst climbing it” forms a third pivotal moment. As part of a project framed as a critical enquiry into the relationship between landscape and national identity,<sup>14</sup> the mode of operation of this particular work would appear at best tangential, its arbitrary and nonsensical premise apparently serving no discernible ends whatsoever. The

activity can hardly be said to deal with its theme discursively, nor does it produce much in the way of “knowledge” about it. The work, in fact, performs a threefold failure: firstly, by virtue of its basic premise (the requirement of which is to walk up a hill and fail to appreciate the surrounding landscape); secondly, through the realisation of that premise (it is clear from the video that my efforts to avoid looking at the hill are unsuccessful); and thirdly, in terms of its critical efficacy (which appears to have been abandoned altogether, given that the work’s premise bears little relation to the theme of the project as a whole). It might, then, be tempting to conclude that the work, simply, *is* a failure.

That judgement, however, would be to overlook the value of failure within the frame of artistic practice, its centrality to the creative process, and its capacity to shed light on the tacit assumptions that underpin its inverse, success. Christy Lange, in an essay ‘Bound to Fail,’ draws attention to a number of works by artists who have embraced failure as a performative strategy, citing Bruce Nauman’s *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966) as an example. In a double-exposed photograph documenting his action, Nauman can be seen lying rigidly outstretched between two chairs; superimposed is a second image in which the lower part of his body, unable to defy gravity, has crashed down onto the floor, his head remaining awkwardly in place on one of the chairs. ‘Despite his best effort,’ writes Lange, imagining a bruised Nauman getting back to his feet, ‘he had not succeeded in accomplishing the kind of metaphysical or transcendental feat that we expect to transpire in the artist’s studio’ (2005: para. 7). As with much of his output of this period, the work responds to what Nauman felt were the norms of artistic activity at the time: the “failure” he enacts is simply a failure to conform to those expectations. Similarly, the tactically absurd “failure” performed by *Hill Walking* can also be understood as a failure to comply with certain normative expectations of artistic practice in our own time – that is, to perform a serious-minded critical engagement that operates intelligibly within a given discursive framework.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the work’s biggest failing, from such a standpoint, is its refusal to make sense.

As another of Lange’s examples, Walter de Maria’s *Boxes for Meaningless Work* (1961), makes clear, however, setting out to be meaningless is not quite the same as *being* meaningless. The work is comprised of two simple wooden boxes, together with an instruction to: “Transfer things from one box to the next box, back and forth, back and forth, etc. Be aware that what you are doing is meaningless.” For Lange, anyone who accepts this invitation to participate does so ‘knowing that the process will serve no purpose other than to exhaust the person performing it. He will eventually have to stop, and therefore fail to complete his task’ (para. 1). Although the activity prompted by the work is, in practical terms, ‘futile’ and ‘functionless’ (*ibid.*), the artist’s own statement that ‘[b]y meaningless work I simply mean work which does not make money or

accomplish a conventional purpose’ makes clear the irony of the title, and points towards an alternative, less pragmatic model of meaning (quoted in Lange 2005: para. 2). ‘Why,’ wonders Lange, did artists such as Nauman or de Maria ‘not set themselves [or their participants] a task they could deftly and triumphantly complete? Perhaps they sensed that if their systems functioned efficiently or successfully, they would be indistinguishable from “ordinary work”, and could no longer be called art’ (2005: para. 10). Perhaps, that is, such tactically deployed “failure” can be understood as a means of distancing the performative act from the goal-oriented requirements of both ordinary everyday life (with its craving for the quantifiable) and a model of artistic practice premised upon the production of an unambiguous (and legible) criticality.

The tactically absurd decision in *Hill Walking*, then, to perform an action that (apparently) fails to deliver on the discursive promise set up by the project as a whole renders that promise problematic: the relationship of the work to the critical discourse around landscape and nationhood with which it purports to engage remains uncertain and unresolved. In intentionally failing to engage with its subject-matter on any straightforwardly meaningful level, the work, in effect, operates extra-discursively. This approach, however, may not necessarily constitute a withdrawal from the issues at hand; for if stepping out of a discourse only constitutes a “failure” according to the very terms of the discourse it steps out of, then the act of walking up a hill without looking at it – like the act of failing to levitate, or of pointlessly transferring things from one box to another – may simply point towards a shifting the terms of the debate.<sup>16</sup> It is at this point that the tension between the “tactical” and the “absurd” is revealed less as a contradiction, than as an outcome of the linking of two mutually incompatible frameworks of meaning, which, perhaps, is the means by which new meanings might ultimately be allowed to emerge.

## 4 Reflections

### 4.1 Holes in the safety-net of absurdity?

Within days of the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* exhibition opening at Aberystwyth Arts Centre a number of complaints had been received by the gallery from visitors relating specifically to a text that formed part of *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales*. The text in question accompanied a drawing of an unnamed hill protruding out of the western ridge of the Ebbw valley, and read as follows:

*I'd seen Cwm from high up, when I'd had these amazing, spectacular views of the Ebbw valley – really, from that distance it looked sensational. But here I was in Cwm, and it had a lot of very–, um, you know, council estate-type people: you know, teenage mothers, very cheap prams, and, er, tracksuit bottoms, and a man standing outside the off-licence with dirty trousers drinking a can of lager.*

One visitor, evidently finding the portrayal offensive, claimed in the gallery's comments book to be 'truly upset' about my characterisation of Cwm 'and its people;' another, 'brought up on a council estate,' apparently 'took great objection;' whilst a third, more dispassionate, stated simply: 'Inspirational drawings. The comments for Cwm do not take into consideration the economic hardship suffered in the valleys.' Given the teasingly provocative nature of some of the juxtapositions of drawings and texts in the work, it did not surprise me that it would be met with some resistance. The way in which the work was constructed meant that it did not lend itself to straightforward decipherment; misunderstandings were almost inevitable, particularly amongst an audience less familiar with the aesthetic sleights of hand characteristic of (post-)conceptual art practice.<sup>17</sup> My intention to, for example, point out the discrepancy between conventional artistic representations of Wales, and other, no more or less "accurate" or "objective", portrayals had clearly been missed. Nevertheless, I did not feel able to dismiss the comments so lightly: they remained in my thoughts long afterwards, and seemed to raise some fundamental questions about the appropriateness and functionality of the tactically absurd approach employed by the work.

My initial response was to try to construct a theoretical argument about why the comments were misplaced in the context of an approach that I was by now identifying as tactically absurd. They appeared to be based, I reasoned, on an assumption that the work expressed a determinately critical point of view – which, in the case of the offending text, had been interpreted as an expression of the artist's damning judgement on the inhabitants of the village of Cwm. The stance of the drawing hung alongside it, likewise, had been presumed to be legible – positively interpreted in this case, the sentiments behind it striking the viewer as 'inspirational.' The issue, however, seemed to go beyond particular (mis)readings,<sup>18</sup> and speak instead of a larger failure to grasp the functionality of the work at a structural level. My conception of the operation of tactical absurdity within the work was based on an assumption that the work could not be read as articulating any determinate position. According to this understanding, *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* ought to be legible neither positively nor negatively, since it was not designed to express any meaningful opinion about any part of Wales. In deploying the devices of nonsensical logic, futility, irrelevance, incongruity, failure, and inconclusiveness within the works, the project had attempted to address the question of the relationship between landscape and national identity *absurdly* – which meant, I wanted to conclude, that it situated itself categorically outside the realm of discursivity, coherence, and meaning. My argument, in other words, rested on an assumption that no individual element of the work, taken at face value, could be read as anything else but "meaningless".

This defence, however, rings somehow hollow, since it overlooks the very resonant real-world content of the criticisms. Partly, no doubt, the reason I was so troubled by the comments had to do with my own personal relationship with the South Wales Valleys: I did, after all, grow up in a post-industrial valley community very similar to Ebbw Vale. There is something personally insulting about any such accusation of insensitivity or condescension towards what are, in effect, my “own people” (albeit a people that I have long ago left behind in my own flight to university and marked class transition that has followed). If the comments represent a criticism of the perceived tendency amongst contemporary artists to manufacture voyeuristic representations of disenfranchised working-class lives for presentation within a predominantly middle-class artworld, then they are, potentially at least, entirely legitimate. Given, then, the quite explicit engagement with the socially and economically problematic aspects of some of the regions visited during the project, perhaps my initial theorisation of the “meaninglessness” of a tactically absurd approach was inadequate. Perhaps there were certain aspects of the project that simply refused to submit to the operation of absurdity as I had understood it.<sup>19</sup>

Might it be concluded, then, that absurdity is only appropriate to subject-matters that are not truly “serious”; that it must inevitably fall short when something is really at stake, politically or psychologically?<sup>20</sup> Or is it, rather, that the relationship between absurdity and meaning is more complex and lot less binary than I had hitherto assumed? Looking back at the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project as a whole, there appears to be little correlation between the degree of absurdity employed in the individual works and the seriousness of their engagement with their subject matter. Although there are no doubt aspects of the works that are stronger than others, their overall success or failure as critical undertakings cannot be accounted for on any hypothetical scale of engagement that runs from “absurd” to “meaningful”, since neither concept is stable, or even, for that matter, mutually exclusive. The value of a tactically absurd operation might, perhaps, be better attributed to its ability to animate a tension between meaning and its absence, between an *expectation of sense* and the failure of that sense to materialise. Sometimes, indeed, the tension flips over: in a project where an attitude of nonsensicality has become the norm, a sudden intrusion of emotional sincerity or political conviction produces its own sense of unaccountability, confusion, or, indeed, absurdity. Perhaps, then, the verdict that certain subject matters cannot be contained within a “safety net” of absurdity arises out of an unhelpfully reductive and static modelling of the concept. For if, as was suggested in ch.2 section 4.3, the oppositional model of absurdity that defines it by what it is not is abandoned in favour of something more fluid and emergent, then its operation need not be restricted to any predefined realms of “sense” or “nonsense”. As the works demonstrate, an absence or rejection of clear interpretative frames can lead to discomfort, frustration, boredom, irritation, or even offence; but if the alternative means to linger in a state of unthinking and

sedate conventionality – to be resigned, that is, to watching the mannerist “absurdity” of mainstream television comedy, to taking self-congratulatory pleasure in attending revivals of half-century-old “absurdist” plays, or to standing on the top of a mountain in Wales and witnessing the same “sublime” vision as everyone else over the last 300 years – then perhaps it is a step worth taking. This absurdity of *unease* is precisely what is sought by the works in the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project, even if, sometimes, that condition means leaving the safe confines of the island of absurdity altogether.

## 4.2 Generative disruption and the deleteriousness of certainty

One of the central aims of the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project – to address the failure of culturally clichéd forms of representation to account for the reality and complexity of actual encounters with landscapes – was (as was noted in section 3.1 above) frequently implemented through a strategy of disruption. Arising in each case through the introduction of some absurd disharmony within a given context, the various disruptive tactics deployed in the works can be seen as operating through a process that is simultaneously *destructive* and (as was proposed in ch.2 section 5) *generative*. Understood destructively, those tactics were aimed at undermining the intelligibility and legitimacy of conventional forms of representation, exposing clichés, contesting or satirising the authority of artistic and cultural forms of communication, and unpicking the presumed relationship between landscape and national identity. Considered in isolation, such manoeuvres might be characterised as “negative” in the sense that they appropriate modes of representation that are initially perceived as coherent and stable, before progressively disputing, disarming, and dismantling their underlying assumptions, construction, and functionality. The overlaying of an often flippant interior monologue on shots of sublime landscape in *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany*, for example, sought to destabilise the reliability, fixity, and legibility of “the sublime” as a representational model for actual encounters with physical environments, whilst the juxtaposition of deliberately uninformative museum texts with the drawings in *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* was aimed at undermining the authority, authenticity, and legibility of both.

To understand absurd disruption purely in terms of its destructive capacity, however, would be to overlook its “positive” corollary – that is, its generativity. Viewed as a disturbance of the presumed fixity of the relationship between signs and their sense,<sup>21</sup> disruption can be thought of as a productive tool, capable of opening up spaces for the creation of potential new meanings. It is here that absurdity’s association with indeterminacy and not-knowing (see ch.2 section 5.3) is key, and where the playful, open-ended ambiguities that feature throughout the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project become positive attributes. By dismantling the edifices of conventional





Figure 13. *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany* [still from video]

and clichéd forms of landscape representation, the disruption performed within the works effectively wipes the slate clean, giving rise to a profound uncertainty that, following Donald Barthelme, represents the very condition for creation (‘without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention’ (1997: 12)). If, for example, in the face of the absurd juxtaposition of sublimity and flippancy in *An Artist in Search of Epiphany* (figs. 12 & 13), the viewer is unable to locate any straightforwardly determinable meaning, they are consequently in a much better position to attempt to create their own. Which is not to imply that the works adopt any sort of negligent or fatalistic “eye of the beholder” attitude towards their own capacity to generate meaning; their aim, on the contrary, is to be contextually precise in their operation, and fully in control of the choreography of the absurd clashes of meaning they perform. The critical point is to allow to the works to operate extra-discursively, to let them play out in the realm of the not-yet-known, and steer clear of the assumption that the meanings they engender will necessarily be legible according to any pre-existing interpretative framework. For the new, as the Dadaists reminded us, cares little for its accountability.<sup>22</sup>

Tactically absurd disruption can be seen as generative, moreover, precisely in the sense that it departs from the “deleteriousness” of certainty (see ch.2 section 5.3). Part of the impetus behind the texts accompanying the drawings in *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* was to account for a broader spectrum of experience associated with encounters with landscapes, which stems from a recognition that orthodox representations of those encounters speak (and are received) with a certainty that overlooks ambiguities, failures, contractions, moments of boredom, and chance meetings with slugs. This selectivity of experience is, in

Virno's terms, precisely due to the delimiting grammar of conventional discourse; when a drawing of a hill is absurdly disrupted by a text relating an anecdote about an encounter with a slug, that grammar is, as in a joke, exceeded, and a new and as-yet-unaccountable form of discourse is the result. Although the representational forms deployed within the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project might (at times) give the impression that they are articulating meanings that are already legible, the "sense" of what they appear to be saying remains, in Virno's words, "insufficient" – since, in his formulation, it is built upon a plain of sense that has not yet been determined through habitual usage. The tactically absurd disruption performed by the works renders them resistant to full determination, their mode of operation unable to be assimilated within those conventional (and delimiting) discourses of landscape and national identity to which they initially appear to adhere. As Claire Pickard put it in her review of *Searching for the Welsh Landscape*, picking up on the project's efforts to overcome the deleteriousness of certainty: 'what Ball's journey reveals most strongly is his objections to all attempts to claim the landscape and *impose meaning* upon it' (2016: para.3, my emphasis). This "objection" is manifested through the implementation of a critically-oriented absurdity that is destructive of preordained meaningfulness; its tactical approach, however, refuses to offer in its place any legible alternative: it simply presents an incongruous image of a slug. As an embodiment of, to borrow Martin Herbert's words, an 'endless aversion to designation's shores,' the slug never reaches the condition of determinate meaning (2014: 112). It just slides unhurriedly along, leaving behind its trail of slime – content, perhaps, in the knowledge that certainty is not a place to be approached with undue haste. For to reach this destination prematurely is to close down the generative space of absurdity.

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1 Whilst Gruffudd et al. (2000) focus on the role of travel writing in the construction of Welshness, examples are plentiful in visual culture. In cinema, John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) (which was shot in a replica of an idealised Welsh valley town built in California), Christopher Monger's *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain* (1995), and, more recently, Matthew Warchus's *Pride* (2014), all employ indexically "Welsh" landscape imagery to their own narrative, thematic, or emotional ends. Countless examples of environmental codification can be seen, too, in amateur landscape photography, for example those included in the BBC website's long running open submission feature *Your Pictures in Wales*. Begun in 2008, the stated aim of the website is to build up a 'record of life around the nation,' by inviting 'anyone with a camera to send in their digital pictures to turn into a picture gallery every week;' although there is no thematic restriction, landscape photography has indeed tended to dominate the galleries (*Your Pictures: Your Wales* 2008: n.p.). In painting, celebrated landscape artists such as Kyffin Williams can also be understood as producing and reproducing imagery of an environment codified as "Welsh"; Williams' works were included in the 2013-14 exhibition *Welsh Landscapes* at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth (whose run coincided with my residency there), and are also included in the collection of the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff.

2 JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* fantasy novel trilogy (2005) was adapted for film (2001–03) by Peter Jackson, and shot in various locations in New Zealand. Links between the Middle Earth setting of Tolkien's novels and locations in Wales have recently been highlighted in an article 'JRR Tolkien's Wales: Ten Places to Explore Tolkien's Wales' on the Visit Wales website (Gregg 2019).

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3        Autobiographical elements are seldom the focus in my work, and when they are incorporated, it is to support or delineate other subject matters or enable other generative processes – their role as psychologically formative influences is generally of secondary interest. Specific autobiographical narratives are incorporated factually, but are typically treated with a sense of contingency, and even arbitrariness (X, Y or Z happened, but they might just as easily have happened differently).

4        The work in this sense bears the influence of Douglas Huebler, whose playful appropriations of the techniques of sociological research are discussed in ch.4 section 2.

5        The saying is attributed to the T'ang dynasty Ch'an master Ch'ing-yüan Wei-hsin, who wrote that: 'Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, "Mountains are mountains, waters are waters." After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, I said, "Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters." But after having attained the abode of final rest, I say, "Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters"' (quoted in Abe 1985: 4).

6        TJ Clark draws attention to the fluctuating nature of attention in his analogous account of repeatedly looking at the same two paintings by Poussin, *The Sight of Death*, describing his own sense of intermittent disengagement as being 'difficult (disagreeable) to write about, but ... a recurrent and maybe necessary part of looking at paintings [that] shouldn't simply be passed over, waiting for proper enthusiasm to return. Paintings in a sense ought to disappoint us – disappoint our wish to have them be more than they are, to be fully and endlessly discursive' (2006: 27).

7        The use of the word "authentic" here should be qualified through a distinction (made, for example, in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*) between, on the one hand, the psychological notion of a "stream of consciousness" as a metaphor for the continuously flowing nature of mental activity and, on the other, the "interior monologue" as a literary device for the presentation of the flow of a character's mental activity (Baldick 2009: 212). The use of introspection as the (sole) means of accounting for the contents of mind has, in fact, been largely abandoned in psychology (Schwitzgebel 2016); psychologically speaking, therefore, my efforts at verbally reporting the contents of my consciousness during my walks could hardly be claimed as wholly accurate or objective. Understood as a formal means of presentation, however, the interior monologue does at least allow for a broader and less coherent picture of mental life than other representative modes, relying less on implicit hierarchies of significance or pertinence and on the acts of selection and censorship they entail. So whilst it is debatable whether my use of stream of consciousness "authentically" represents the actual contents of my mind during my encounters with the landscape, it does at least facilitate a presentation of an experience that does not conform to any predetermined expectations.

8        The lyrics begin: '*The old home town looks the same as I step down from the train, and there to meet me is my Mama and Papa. / Down the road I look and there runs Mary, hair of gold and lips like cherries. / It's good to touch the green, green grass of home. / Yes, they'll all come to meet me, arms reaching, smiling sweetly.*' The final verse, however, takes on a different tone: '*Then I awake and look around me, at the four grey walls that surround me / and I realise, yes, I was only dreaming. / For there's a guard and there's a sad old padre – arm in arm we'll walk at daybreak. / Again I touch the green, green grass of home. / Yes, they'll all come to see me in the shade of that old oak tree / as they lay me 'neath the green, green grass of home*' (Putnam 1965). Tom Jones himself has acknowledged the misreading in an interview: 'The story of it is about a man that's in jail, and he's just dreaming of home – and they're going to hang him. But people don't really listen to the last part, I don't think. They just think about their home' (*Green, Green Grass of Home* 1997).

9        During his speech at the opening of my exhibition at Aberystwyth Arts Centre, the travel writer and broadcaster Mike Parker claimed to have coined the phrase "landscape porn". Whilst the veracity of his assertion may be difficult to prove, Parker has certainly used the term to describe a tendency for English tourists to overlook the humorous and the political in Welsh culture in favour of anodyne imagery of the landscape (Parker 2007), and has been critical of the tendency for recent television documentaries celebrating the British countryside to discourage any real engagement with the landscape in favour of a passive consumption of endless sweeping aerial shots and time-lapse sunrises and sunsets (Hamburgh 2007).

10        Although the 2016 Brexit referendum on the UK's continuing membership of the EU had not taken place at the time of my visit, Ebbw Vale (whose conurbation includes the village of Cwm) would become renowned for its high percentage (62%) of "Leave" voters – this, despite the fact that, as a town suffering from the effects of deindustrialization, it had been a net EU beneficiary. See, for example, Carole Cadwalladr in *The Observer*, who notes that 'Ebbw Vale, left devastated when the steelworks closed, has had more European money pumped into it than perhaps any other small town in Britain' and struggles with the 'highest unemployment in Wales' (2016: n.p.).

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- 11 An incident which took place in the nearby village of Abertysswg during one of my walks, although in no way representative of my general interactions with the local population, certainly contributed to this particular impression of hostility – and also formed the subject of one of the texts in the exhibition. The text describes how the owner of a somewhat decrepit ice-cream van objected to its being photographed; demanding to know the reasons for my taking such a photograph, the man became aggressive, apparently dissatisfied by my explanation that it was because I “quite liked it”; the situation was only resolved when I finally offered to delete the photograph from my camera in front of him, and swiftly continued upon my journey.
- 12 The “irrationality” that has been attributed to rule-based conceptual art practices of the 1960s and 1970s (particularly that of Sol LeWitt) is examined in ch.4 section 3 in relation to the tactically absurd incorporation of rules in the *A to Z* project.
- 13 See ch.2 section 4.2 for a discussion of the relationship between humorous incongruity and absurdity.
- 14 The wording of Aberystwyth Arts Centre’s promotional text for the exhibition stressed that the works in the show ‘engage critically with nationalistic appropriations of landscape’ (*Dave Ball: Searching for the Welsh Landscape* 2016: n.p., my emphasis).
- 15 See ch.2 section 6.2 for a discussion of the valuing of “criticality” in contemporary art.
- 16 This last point will be returned to in ch.5 section 4 in a discussion of the political efficacy of tactically absurd practice.
- 17 Other opinions expressed in the gallery’s comments book would appear to confirm a certain resistance to contemporary art in general: ‘Very good drawings and some good commentary,’ wrote one visitor, ‘pity about the art \*\*x%x. It seems we have to have dreary videos to make it art!’ And another, apparently subscribing to a nineteenth-century *plein-air* notion of landscape painting, commented: ‘Nice sketches – pity he didn’t do them at the time.’
- 18 It is tempting at this point (though perhaps not particularly charitable) to consider the authors of the comments through the lens of Harold Garfinkel’s concept of “cultural dopes” – individuals who, embodying ‘common sense rationalities,’ abide by the very rules that are demonstratively breached in his experiments (1964: 244). The ‘cultural dope,’ for Garfinkel, is the ‘man-in-the-sociologist’s-society who produces the stable features of the society by acting in compliance with pre-established and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides’ (*ibid.*). Just as Garfinkel’s unwitting subjects were not party to his intentions for the experiments, the commenters in my exhibition displayed an apparent unawareness of my own playful parody of the “pre-established” languages of contemporary art.
- 19 Similarly, the whole “going home” narrative – which became increasingly prominent as the project progressed – lent aspects of the project a character that seems only nominally to have much connection with absurdity at all. There are resonances in the project that quite clearly communicate a straightforward engagement with the notion of an artist trying to make sense of his relation to his “home”, very little about which can be convincingly said to operate outside the realm of meaning. *Arms Reaching, Smiling Sweetly*, for example, although it employs elements of incongruous humour in its play with scale, together with a Sisyphean absurdity in its use of groundless repetition, can hardly be said to be fully accounted for through those attributes alone. The initially unconscious longing to find a hill that matches the one of my own childhood memory is articulated at times entirely unambiguously and frequently without irony or contradiction. The genuine psychological resonance of the autobiographical narrative – as with the seriousness and weight of the engagement with social and economic deprivation in Wales – appears to resist full assimilation within the safety-net of absurdity.
- 20 The relationship between tactical absurdity and politics will be returned to in ch.5 section 4.
- 21 The semiotic machinations of tactical absurdity will be discussed in ch.5 section 3, drawing upon a Derridean understanding of “deconstruction”, together with an appeal to the notion of a “play of signification”.
- 22 See ch.2 section 5.1.

# Chapter 4

## Case Study Two:

### A to Z

# 1 Introduction

My solo exhibition *A to Z: The First Seven Years* at Gallery Oldham (fig. 14) had barely reached the end of its first week<sup>1</sup> when I received notice that two of the drawings on display had been vandalised. The curator sent me an apologetic email explaining what had happened: after being told off by a gallery invigilator for touching some of the works, two teenagers had run to the other end of the gallery and smeared their fingers across the surface of two soft pencil drawings, leaving several long smudge marks on the previously pristine white paper. I was assured by the curator that the damage was not severe, and could be rectified with “some gentle eraser work”, but since she was not a conservationist, she would prefer not to attempt any repair herself, and would instead leave it to me to judge the best course of action when I next visited in person. My initial sense of annoyance at the mindless defacement of my artwork by a pair of juveniles with no regard for the labour that had gone into its production soon gave way to a more positive view. There was something inherently pleasing about the fact that the work could be seen by *anybody*, no matter how badly behaved: this was the gritty and complex reality of showing work in public made manifest. What the teenagers had done to the work was certainly regrettable, but it was great that they had been in the gallery in the first place. The more pressing issue of what to do about the vandalised drawings, however, led me to reflect on the nature of project as a whole. The dilemma, specifically, was whether or not any repair should be carried out at all; in order to make a judgement on this, it would be necessary to reflect upon the *A to Z* project in terms of its temporality and determinate aims, and to consider, moreover, what kind of an absurd undertaking it actually was.

Succinctly defined, *A to Z* is an ongoing project initiated in 2011 that seeks (by some time around 2046) to visualise every word listed in the Concise Oxford English dictionary in alphabetical order. It is not, however, as this one-line description might suggest, a single uniform work; it is, rather, devised as a series of 26 successive semi-independent projects defined by a particular letter of the alphabet. Each iteration introduces some new conceptual parameter or media specification, whilst adhering to the basic parameters of the overall work. The As, for example, are defined simply as “drawings”, the Bs as “drawings produced without any visual reference material (i.e. entirely from memory)”, and the Cs as photographs taken “through the lens of my camera”. The exhibition at Gallery Oldham allowed the first three instalments of the *A to Z* project to be shown together in their entirety for the first time<sup>2</sup>; in its presentation in an institutional space of the cumulative output of seven years of artistic production, the three-month long exhibition acted as a temporal, productive, and conceptual hiatus in the development of the project. This interval simultaneously offered an opportunity for a *retrospective* analysis of the work produced so far, a momentary space *in the present* for free



Figure 14. *A to Z* [installation view at Gallery Oldham]

and playful experimentation with approaches and conceptualisations without regard for whether or how they might concretely be integrated into the project, and finally, a chance to imagine how the project might develop *in the future* as it continues to evolve. This chapter, then, will occupy that temporal hiatus, drawing out a number of themes operative within the work in order to consolidate, refine, and advance the understanding of the functionality and value of tactical absurdity put forward in the previous chapter.

### { Interlude }

*I can barely even remember what I was thinking about when I drew “abacus”. It was only the second drawing I’d done, one of those words on the first page of the dictionary. I probably liked that it was a real thing, an object, as opposed to an abstract concept like the next word, “abandonment”. It would also have given me an early warning that the project was going to test the limits of my patience and stretch the powers of my curiosity to breaking-point: I had, I would have quite quickly realised, absolutely no interest in abacuses. I wanted only to get the drawing done, and move on to the next one. In fact, I vaguely recall losing interest in the drawing even as I was doing it: staring at those joyless pencil spheres I was perfunctorily sketching out one after another to represent beads on an abacus, I was already beginning to wonder what I’d let myself in for...*

## 2 The premise, the gag, and endurance art

*A to Z* is a manifestly durational project: at the current rate of progress (seven years to complete the As, Bs and Cs, which together account for 19% of the dictionary), the goal of visualising every word will take approximately 35 years to achieve. The length of the project, whilst extreme, is nevertheless a calculated part of its design: certain limitations have been incorporated in order to make it realisable within a working lifetime. The choice of an abridged dictionary, the *Concise Oxford*, whose 95,000 entries are additionally filtered through my own selection criteria (see section 3 below), will result in around 10,000 words to be visualised. That number is large enough to establish the project's absurd scale, yet small enough that the undertaking might conceivably be achieved by a sufficiently motivated and dedicated individual in their lifetime. The project thus falls somewhere between a fantastical conceit and an entirely plausible, if unusually lengthy, proposal for a piece of endurance art. Considered alone, the basic one-line premise of the project functions rather like a gag: it begins with a concise and pithy setup (an artist pitching an idea for a project) and then delivers its punchline, which flouts the expectations established by the setup (the systematic and apparently foolhardy immensity of the proposed project far exceeds the norm). There is thus, already in the relaying of the work's basic premise, an "immediately discernible (comic) incongruity" (see ch.2 section 3.2.1). Unlike in a more conventional encounter with humour, however, the "island" upon which we momentarily find ourselves has no clear borders; there is, returning to Peter L Berger's account (see ch.2 section 4.3), no 'paramount reality' to which we are able to return following some implied signal of "but now, seriously..." (2014: 6). After we have finished laughing (if indeed we did find the premise amusing), we are still in the same place, slowly coming to terms with the fact that, yes, the artist really *is* going to visualise every word in the dictionary in alphabetical order, and yes, it will take him 35 years to do it. The premise of the project, to extend Berger's metaphor, remains stranded on the shores of its own island of humour.

Indeed, as we have seen, Berger himself is intent on challenging the notion that there can be no 'simultaneity' of the serious and the funny (xviii). The fact of their 'operating by different rules' does not, he argues, preclude their coexistence (xiv); for, in contrast to the 'enclosed reality' of other provinces of meaning, humour is 'more interwoven with the fabric of everyday life' (13). Such interweaving of the funny and the serious is also operative within certain practices of endurance art that appear to undermine the austerity frequently associated with the genre. Douglas Huebler's *Variable Piece #70* (1971-97) sets a high bar with its professed intention to 'photographically document ... the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner' (quoted in Osborne 2002: 30); comically overreaching in its ambition, Huebler pursued



this quixotic task until the end of his life, periodically displaying the results in varying configurations that included photographs of groups of people in public, close-ups of individual faces, and textual descriptions of the precise times and locations of the encounters. The work has been read as ironic, positioned within a 1960s field of conceptual art that ‘mimicked’ and ‘parodied’ the techniques of sociologists and behavioural psychologists in order to point out the limits of photographic documentation (Godfrey 1998: 306). It seems unlikely, however, that Huebler would have pursued such a project for the remaining 26 years of his life purely as a means of driving home such an academic rhetorical point. Returning for a moment to Candace D Lang’s rejection of “vertical irony” as a model for the interpretation of Samuel Beckett (see ch.2, section 5.2), we can see that the ‘multivalency, the aporia, the playfulness, not to mention the humour’ of Huebler’s work are similarly lost in such a deterministic reading (1988: 5).<sup>3</sup>

The playful absurdity underpinning *Variable Piece #70* is notably absent in other, more solemn examples of endurance practice such as that of Roman Opalka. Opalka’s series of paintings of sequential numbers *1965/1-∞* (1965-2011) began with the artist neatly painting a “1” at the top left corner of his first canvas, followed by a “2”, then a “3”, and continuing until the whole surface was covered with sequential numbers; the sequence was then continued onto another identically-sized canvas; Opalka continued to work in this way until his death in 2011, by which time he had painted over five-and-a-half million numbers. The self-evident patience, single-mindedness, and ceaseless dedication of the act have left critics such as Peter Osborne with little alternative but to soberly acknowledge its qualities as a ‘meditation on time, repetition, individuality, and mortality’ (2002: 24). The sombre tone of the artist’s own writings, too, reinforces the seriousness of his intentions: ‘Time as we live it and create it,’ he wrote, ‘embodies our progressive disappearance. We are at the same time alive and in the face of death – that is the mystery of all living beings. The problem is that we are, and are about not to be’ (quoted in Davison 2011: para.8).<sup>4</sup>

The grandiose ambitions of Huebler’s project, in contrast, are expressed flatly in the form of a statement of intent. This textually-articulated “idea” occupies a prominent place within the work, and indeed, at least according to the most vocal conceptual artists at the time, *is* the work; witness, for example, Sol LeWitt’s assertion that ‘[i]deas alone can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that *may* eventually find some form’ (1969: 222, my emphasis). The realisation of the premise is secondary, and perhaps not even necessary at all – which sets it in stark contrast to Opalka’s feat of endurance. Whilst it may be possible to express the latter’s activity as a verbal proposition, such a statement of intent would have little substance considered apart from the reality of his carrying it out. Huebler’s premise, on the other hand, exists – at least partially – as an autonomous verbal proposition that, to the extent that it

displays an incongruous humour, operates in the manner of a gag: “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do as my next art project: I’m going to photograph everyone alive in the world!” Thus, we readily accept the failure of Huebler to literally achieve his aims, whereas for the likes of Opalka the validity of the work is entirely dependent on its realisation. These, then, are the twin poles within which the *A to Z* project is situated: its premise, that is, is both a wittily absurd conceit *and* a promise of a genuine feat of endurance. It is precisely the tactical absurdity of its conception that gives rise to a lifelong project that is both unaccountably nonsensical and – in terms of material output and expenditure of time – entirely accountable.

### { Interlude }

*“Adversity”: it was one of those words that didn’t immediately lend itself to visualisation. Somehow it resisted being distilled into a single image. It had, simply, no archetypal visual equivalent. Words like that are like riddles that have to be solved; they require a leap of imagination and a not inconsiderable amount of mental effort. I don’t like them much: they exhaust me. But sooner or later an idea emerges, triggered by something I’ve seen or read, or by pinning down the very first association that pops into my head. Adversity... adversity... adversity... There were a lot of instances of bad luck in the world; how on earth could a single one of them stand for the general “condition of adverse fortune”, as the dictionary had it? In the end I drew a cartoon of a sheep that had accidentally slipped over the edge of a cliff. I was quite pleased with that one, actually.*

## 3 Absurdity and rules: the spinning gears of a machine disconnected from reason

Whenever the *A to Z* project is exhibited it is accompanied by a list of rules that specify how its directive to “visualise every word listed in the Concise Oxford English dictionary in alphabetical order” is to be understood (see *Appendix 1*). Some of those are clarifications of what is implicit in the basic premise (for example, that “one visualisation should be made of each word”), whilst others add detail (the dictionary to be used is the “seventh edition, 1982”); the largest category of rules, however, is concerned with the interpretation of the modifier “every”. Much of this relates to the vexed issue of what exactly constitutes a distinct word, which is brought to the surface whenever the question of “how many words are there in a language?” is posed. Complications arise due to technical distinctions between words and *their senses, inflections, classes, or compounds*, and the issue is only partially resolved by adhering to dictionaries’ own divisions between “headwords” and “derivatives”.<sup>5</sup> The rules in the *A to Z* project concerning the

definition of a “word” (“compound words should be discarded, unless they are written without spaces or hyphens” or “only one sense of words with multiple senses listed under one headword should be chosen”), are, if not exactly foundationless, then at least based on a singular interpretation of the classificatory principles used by dictionaries. Two further rules relating to the modifier “every”, however, as well as a third establishing aspects of the project that are not constrained by rules, are more arbitrary in character, having less to do with clarification than with a decisive shaping of the project.

The first rule, stating that “only nouns should be visualised”, can be seen in part to contribute to a reduction in scale necessary for the project to be realisable (nouns account for around 50% of words, thus reducing the size of the project by half). More importantly, however, the foregrounding of nouns emphasises the project’s goal of accounting for *things in the world* (see section 5 below). The second rule is perhaps even more consequential, specifying that “unfamiliar words (i.e. words outside the vocabulary of the artist) should be discarded”. Once again, the directive can be accounted for pragmatically, as a means of shaping the project into an achievable form by dramatically reducing the number of eligible words; but it also, crucially, orients the project as a subjective endeavour, dependent on the accidents of circumstance (knowledge, life experience, education, geopolitical situatedness) of the artist. The third rule, whose impact bears on the means of visualisation itself rather than the choice of word, states that “except where specified for a given letter, there is no restriction on approach, style, size,



Figure 15. *A to Z* [detail: “boy”]

media, or interpretation”. This final directive acts as an opening-out: a reminder of the space for play in the project that remains between and beyond (or perhaps because of) its specified rules. It also, moreover, anchors the work in the present moment, ensuring that its conceptual premise is continually rearticulated with each successive realisation.

Taken literally, LeWitt’s declarative statement that ‘[t]he idea becomes a machine that makes the art’ (1967: 214) has historically led to a somewhat narrowly rational understanding of the modality of conceptual art. Despite his own insistence that ‘irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically’ (1969: 222), LeWitt’s work has been subject to a certain overlooking of what Rosalind Krauss described as its ‘mad obstinacy’ (1978: 54). Writing in the late 1970s, Krauss protested against what she saw as a misplaced characterisation of conceptual art as a ‘triumphant illustration of the powers of human reason’ (46). Critics, she argued, were erroneously conflating LeWitt’s machinic deployment of ideas with a kind of Cartesianism, a mathematical ‘centring of thought – the discovery of a root principle, an axiom by which all the variables of a given system might be accounted for’ (51); in reality, however, LeWitt’s ‘math is far too simple; his solutions are far too inelegant; the formal conditions of his work are far too scattered and obsessional to produce anything like the diagram of human reason these writers seem to call for’ (53). In a work such as *Wall Drawing 46* (1970) – one of the artist’s long-running series of wall-drawings designed to be realised by assistants – the sparseness of the textual instruction (“vertical lines, not straight, not touching, covering the wall evenly”) could hardly be described as “axiomatic”. Indeed, when the work is encountered in its realised form, its studiously executed lines spreading out more-or-less vertically and more-or-less evenly across the gallery wall, replete with the imperfections, idiosyncrasies, and expressiveness of the human hand, the interpretative work required for its implementation is plain to see. LeWitt’s own insistence that ‘when an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair’ begins to ring a little hollow (1967: 213-14).<sup>6</sup>

The tactically absurd deployment of rules in the *A to Z* project plays upon a similar undecidability, namely, that it is never clear whether its rules exist as future-oriented instructions aimed at the realisation of an idealised concept (LeWitt’s “irrational thought”), or whether they are, in fact, attempts at a retrospective rationalisation of an (irrational) activity.<sup>7</sup> In other words, do the rules tend *towards* the irrational, or are they attempts at its rationalisation? Or again, returning to the theorisation of generativity forwarded in ch.2 section 5, can their incorporation in the project’s tactically absurd design be understood as a production of the as-yet-unspeakable, or is it merely an instrument in a recuperation of sense? In practical terms, the answer is straightforward, since I can of course remember (more or less) the moment at which I

drew up the rules: it would have occurred somewhere between the initial spurt of ten or so drawings I made fairly unreflectively at the beginning of the project and the subsequent, slower and more self-conscious advance through the next two or three pages of the dictionary. Specifically, I would have been unsure as to whether or not I ought to visualise a word such as “abetment” (whose meaning I barely knew), and then, having chosen *not* to draw it, I would have sought some means of making that fairly arbitrary decision hold for the entire project. In theoretical terms, however, the role played by the rules remains something of a conceptual conundrum. In any case, their practical execution remains far from “perfunctory” (due to the considerable degree of interpretation and imaginative effort required for their implementation). Indeed, it is precisely the clash between the pseudo-axiomatic concision of the rules and the demented scale and “mad obstinacy” of their 35-year long realisation that can be aligned with an absurdity of “fallacious reasoning” (see ch.2 section 3.2.3). Like LeWitt’s exalted machinic “ideas”, the rules deployed in *A to Z* lead to an absurd ‘babble’ that, for Krauss, ‘has the loquaciousness of the speech of children or of the very old, in that its refusal to summarise, to use the single example that would imply the whole, is like those feverish accounts of events composed of a string of almost identical details, connected by “and”’ (1978: 55); what we are left with, she concludes, are the ‘spinning gears of a machine disconnected from reason’ (57).

### { Interlude }

*It seemed like it wasn’t enough any more to just draw the words. I’d finished the As in something of a flurry in time for an exhibition – where they went down quite well, all things considered. People liked the drawings: they kept saying I had a real talent for it. Indeed, one drunken artist raged at me after watching some videos I’d screened alongside them: “just stick to drawing!” she said; “that’s what you’re good at!” But I didn’t want the drawings to be objectified like this: I wanted people to think about how and why I was making them, not how “good” they were. So when I started the Bs I banned myself from looking at any visual source material. One of the first words was “baboon”. I’ve never been able to draw animals, and since I couldn’t remember what a baboon looked like anyway, that drawing turned out to be pretty awful in almost every way. This was more like it!*

## 4 Tactical (dis)order

Alphabetical order as a means of organising knowledge may have already been consigned to history. Sitting at my desk in 2019 writing this chapter of my PhD on a laptop, it is obvious how minimal a role it plays. Every book or journal I need to consult is called up through a digital

library catalogue by entering its name into a search field, which then, through some algorithmic process beyond my comprehension, produces a list of results together with information on where the items are located and what library catalogue numbers they will be shelved under (if, indeed, a physical version is required at all). At no point do I need to know that “Barthelme” comes before “Borges” in the alphabet. And when I just thought about the concept of algorithms and was unsure if the correct adjective was “algorithmic” or “algorithmical”, I looked it up on my Dictionary app, which again, merely involved typing the word into a search field and letting the computer do the rest. I, like almost everyone else, have long since stopped looking up words in physical dictionaries: the process is too slow and cumbersome, the results too limited or out of date.

The initial idea for the *A to Z* project was sparked by my research into chance procedures, and in particular, the use of randomness as a means of fostering creativity. I became fascinated by the similarities between my own performative works such as *Things to Do With Biscuits* (see ch.1 section 2) and classic 1960s psychometric tests of divergent thinking such as those developed by JP Guilford, whose methods for assessing creativity required participants to, amongst other things, list as many different uses for a brick as possible (Mayer 1999). Edward de Bono’s writings on lateral thinking were also instructive: one of his techniques for breaking free from the ‘restricting patterns’ of ‘vertical thinking’ involved choosing a random word on a random page of a dictionary and applying that word to whatever problem was at hand (1970: 10–11). Such use of ‘random stimulation,’ was, in de Bono’s view, ‘fundamentally different from vertical thinking. With vertical thinking one deals only with what is relevant ... With random stimulation one uses any information whatsoever;’ in fact, ‘[t]he more irrelevant the information the more useful it may be’ (169).

Reaching for the dictionary that happened to be on my shelf at the time (the seventh, 1982 edition of the Concise Oxford), I tried out the technique; whilst the words I chanced upon led to little of practical value, the process itself of selecting a random word and being confronted by its determined irrelevancy was nonetheless compelling. For de Bono, writing in the early 1970s, the use of a physical dictionary as a tool would have been a pragmatic choice, based on its familiarity and readiness-to-hand as a prop: his random-stimulation technique was, after all, a means to an end, a ‘deliberate process’ that facilitated a creative approach to problem-solving (9). For me, on the other hand, the use of a dusty, seldom-used, and out-of-date printed volume of words was an anachronistic gesture that operated symbolically, as a step towards an absurd intervention into a given order of things. By working through its contents in strict sequential order, the organising principle of the dictionary was turned against itself, its alphabetical logic followed, *ad absurdum*, to the letter. Whilst de Bono’s aid to lateral thinking takes advantage of

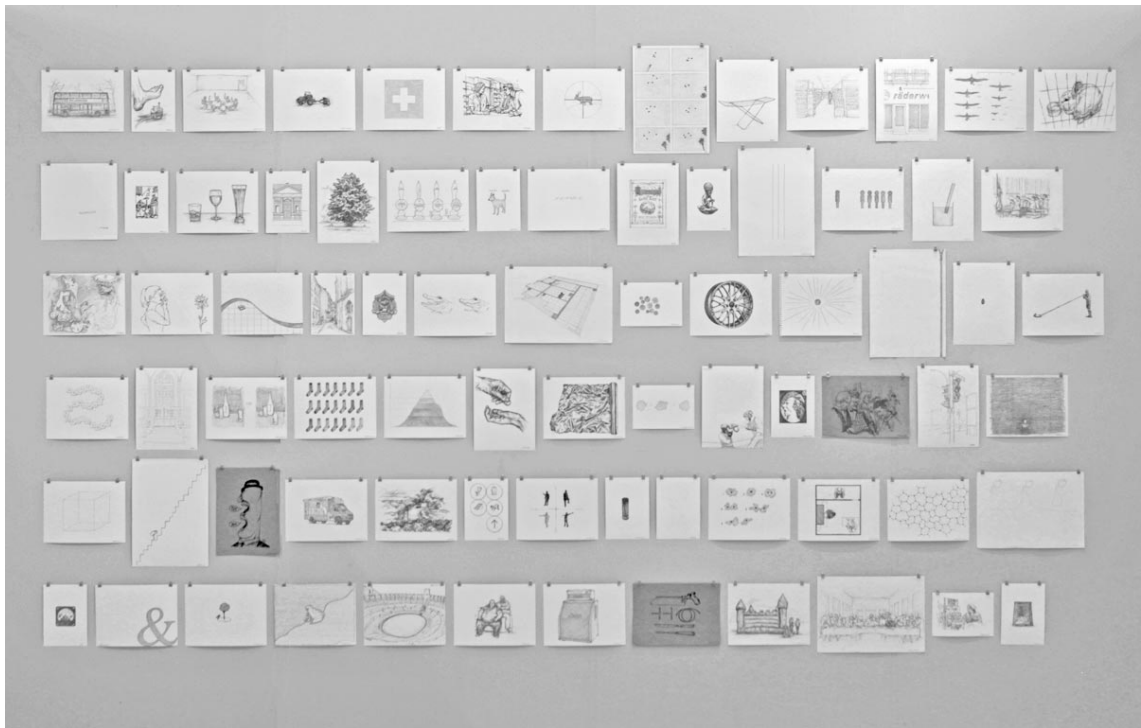


Figure 16. A to Z [installation view at Gallery Oldham]

randomness to bypass what he saw as the mind's unhelpful tendency to process its surroundings according to established structures of relevance, coherence and sense, it does so only temporarily, for whatever insight the randomly-selected word allows, it ultimately serves a *sensible* end (as de Bono puts it, 'if an idea is tenable at all then it must be possible *in hindsight* to see how it could have been arrived at by logical means' (174, my emphasis)). If, however, the technique is pushed to its limits, where all that is left is the lateral thought itself, then it never serves any goal-oriented and retrospectively "useful" end. Indeed, the only "sense" that can be salvaged from it is the suggestion that alphabetical order is, at heart, an entirely arbitrary way of imposing structure on the chaos of the world.

Foucault famously prefaces his *The Order of Things* (originally published in French, it is worth noting, as *Le mots et les choses*, "Words and Things") with a discussion of Jorge Luis Borges' citing of a long-forgotten Chinese encyclopedist who divided up the animal kingdom into the following series of bizarre categories:

(a) those that belong to the emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) suckling pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's-hair brush; (l) etcetera; (m) those that have just broken the flower vase; (n) those that at a distance resemble flies. (Borges 1999: 231)

The passage is taken from Borges' essay 'John Wilkins' Analytical Language,' where it is used as a counterpoint to a seventeenth-century philosopher's attempt to create a new, logical language capable of describing the universe using words where 'every letter is meaningful' – which,

ultimately, collapses under the weight of its own rigidity (230).<sup>8</sup> Foucault describes his encounter with the passage as provoking a

laughter that shattered ... all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things (1970: xvi).

The ‘quality of monstrosity’ he is struck by has less to do with the inclusion within the taxonomy of animals of the fantastical (“mermaids”, “fabulous ones”) than with their juxtaposition with the ordinary (“stray dogs”, “those that are trained”) (xvii). It is the fact of their equivalence that he finds impossible: that they have found through their orderly enumeration a ‘feasible lodging, a roof under which to coexist’ (xviii). The ‘[a]bsurdity’ of the classification, continues Foucault, goes beyond the ‘poetic confrontation’ of Lautréamont’s feted ‘operating table’ (upon which an umbrella and a sewing machine could meet by chance), for the former is a space that, by virtue of Borges’ ‘vanishing trick,’ has become unthinkable (*ibid.*). To think, for Foucault, is precisely to appeal to ‘a table, a *tabula* that enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world, to put them into order’ (xix). The absurd impossibility of the Chinese encyclopedist’s classification system is, finally, the same absurdity that accompanies *any* attempt at imposing order on the world: ‘Order,’ concludes Foucault, ‘has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language’ (xxi). Borges, meanwhile, observes simply that ‘there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and speculative’ (1999: 231).

Aside from the “poetic” incongruities it repeatedly throws up through its juxtaposition of sequential words in a dictionary, the tactically absurd premise underpinning the *A to Z* project can be seen to operate at a deeper level – performing an overidentification with, and a consequent unmasking of, the dictionary’s own imposition of orderliness. This latter absurdity, aligned perhaps with an “undermining of the serious, the respected, and the authoritative” (see ch.2 section 3.2.7), represents precisely the kind of “shattering” of the grounds of organisational logic that gives rise to a Foucauldian “laughter”. Order, however, is not rejected outright by the work; it is, rather, tactically inhabited – exhibited as an excessive and ambivalent investment in structure and system that simultaneously seeks to master the misbehaving chaos of the world whilst refusing to accept the absolute legitimacy of any given approach to its mastery.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, by tactically pushing the alphabetical logic of the dictionary to its limits, *A to Z* performs what might be modelled, in Michel de Certeau’s terms, as a ‘devious’ form of consumption (1984: xii). Certeau (see ch.2 section 6.3) was at pains to stress that ‘technocratically constructed, written and functionalised space[s]’ could be traversed by ‘consumers’ according to their own ‘interests and desires,’ and that although these ‘trajectories’ are ‘composed with the vocabularies of established languages,’ they are, crucially, ‘neither



determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop' (xviii).<sup>10</sup> "Functionalised" through its alphabetisation, the space of the dictionary might thus be imagined as a kind of sovereign order, a model of 'scientific rationality' in which every word has its 'proper' place (xix). The project's appropriation of the dictionary's own organising system represents an absurd traversal of this space, an undermining of order through order. Whilst alphabetical order *in itself* remains a fairly innocuous target (the project forwards no critique of its particular way of sequencing letters), its tactical deployment reveals a duality inherent in *any* form of order. For as de Bono's utilisation of the dictionary demonstrates, the act of *ordering* is always already an act of *disordering*: it is, after all, precisely the "orderliness" of linear thinking that his technique seeks to break down – just as, in Foucault's case, it is the apparent "orderliness" of our own systems of thought that, he felt, had been destabilised through his encounter with the monstrous incompatibility of the Chinese Encyclopedia. Through its tactically absurd approach, then, *A to Z* does not seek to abandon the orderliness of the dictionary in favour of chaos (we are a long way from Tristan Tzara's feverish demands to 'destroy the drawers of the brain and of social institutions,' which would, in the context, seem somewhat misplaced (2001: 298)); rather, it seeks to exploit an inherent disorderliness within order.

### { Interlude }

*By the time I reached the word "cirrus", I'd already been doing the Cs for two years. I'd decided for that letter to switch to photography, partly to establish that the project wasn't only about drawing, but partly also to speed up the process, since I knew there were a lot of C-words in the dictionary. This, I soon realised, was hopelessly naïve, since photographing things involved going out into the world and finding them. Which is why I had to spend days gazing up at the sky waiting for an appropriately thin streak of wispy cloud. Next was "cistern", which was much more straightforward: my only slight concern being that one of my studio-mates might find me snapping away in the toilet. And then, a few days later, "civility", which I decided would be best encapsulated by an image of someone politely holding open a door in a public building. After almost half an hour poised near the entrance of my local shopping centre waiting for a display of common decency, I was finally able to photograph – in what proved to be a rare exception to the growling-faced indifference of the Berlin public that afternoon – a father and son ceremoniously holding open a pair of double doors for a wheelchair user. This was hard work, and it would continue relentlessly for four years, knitting together a strange kind of thread through my life – of banality, chance encounter and (to the obvious delight of my children) repeated trips to the zoo in pursuit of camels, cobras, and chimpanzees.*

## 5 Encyclopedic absurdity

The playful attempt at an “encyclopedic” comprehensiveness of Fischli and Weiss’s *Suddenly This Overview* (see ch.2 section 3.2.7) can be read as an ambiguous engagement with an attitude towards knowledge forged in the Enlightenment that still obtains despite sustained philosophical critique.<sup>11</sup> The sheer range of subject-matter depicted in its vast array of lumpen clay tableaux – a visit to the dentist, a two-year-old Lacan recognising himself for the first time in a mirror, Spock peering longingly out a spaceship window at the planet Vulcan and feeling “a bit sad that he can’t have any feelings” – prompts Arthur C Danto to respond to the work with an appeal to WV Quine’s famous opening lines of his essay ‘On What There Is,’ in which he remarks:

A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: “What is there?” It can be answered, moreover, in a word – “Everything” – and everyone will accept this answer as true. However, this is merely to say that there is what there is’ (quoted in Danto 1996: 107).

Fischli and Weiss, of course, are not thinkers engaged with the definitional nuances of mid-twentieth-century analytical philosophy, concerned with manoeuvring around the pitfalls of tautology; their work, rather, manifests a kind of innocent play that offers, as Danto puts it, ‘the answer a child might give to the Ontological Question’ (1996: 108). Echoing Freud’s formulation of the creativity inherent in children’s play, Danto sees the artists’ activities as an attempt to ‘rearrange the things of their world in a deliberate effort to please them’ (95).<sup>12</sup> Yet, like children engaged in ‘food-and-table play,’ there is, in *Suddenly This Overview*, not only an innocence, but a ‘tacit impudence,’ for if children’s enjoyment lies in no small part in provoking their parents, then Fischli and Weiss, too, have, in Danto’s words, ‘one eye cocked to see if anyone in a position of authority is annoyed’ (98). The target in the artists’ case is the viewer’s inherited faith in the reliability, objectivity, and seriousness of the encyclopedic endeavour.

When Fischli himself describes the project as a ‘very subjective encyclopedia’ he is drawing attention precisely to the kind of disruptiveness it enacts (Fischli & Weiss 2005: 8). Initially titled *The World We Live In*, the work sets out to document, in Weiss’s words, ‘various important and unimportant events in the history of mankind and of the planet’ (*ibid.*); such an undertaking is not achieved, however, through scholarly research or the consultation of history books, but rather, as Fischli explains, by ‘working with whatever knowledge we’d retained about each of these topics’ – the capriciousness of the artists’ ‘fragmented memories’ thus giving rise to an arbitrary and often comic selectivity, ensuring, moreover, that ‘mistakes were made’ (*ibid.*). If, indeed, the work does seek to account for “the world we live in”, then its all-too-evident contingency renders Quine’s dismissiveness towards the verdict that “there is what there is” somewhat premature. For, to answer the question of “what there is” *concretely* requires, in effect,

a reformulation of the question as “what, *as far as I know*, is there?” Despite its ostensibly encyclopedic form, Fischli & Weiss’s project thus makes no real claim to extra-subjective knowledge – its professed appeal to objectivity is performed merely as a form of, in Weiss’s words, ‘deception’ (22). The premise of the *A to Z* project invokes a similarly “objective” authority – that of the dictionary, whose lexicographical logic, although now more often *descriptive* than *prescriptive* in its approach (more concerned, that is, with accounting for ‘norms of usage’ than with imposing preconceived ‘language attitudes’ (Mugglestone 2011: 14)), proceeds with a tenor of dispassionate scholarly neutrality. My own attempt at dictionary-making, however, by virtue of the often solipsistic particularity of its visualisations of words (“asbestos”, for example, being a sketch of the garage of my childhood home, whose roof, I learnt at some point after years of climbing over it to access the field next door, was made of a potentially carcinogenic material), continually reasserts its own subjectivity. Both works, then, answer the ontological question with a wryly circumlocutory retort that “there is what *I* think there is”.

There was a time, however, at least from a postmodern revisionist’s perspective, when encyclopedists and dictionary-makers really did think that they could objectively and definitively account for all of the things and the words that make up the world. The achievements of eighteenth-century Enlightenment heroes such as the French encyclopedist Denis Diderot or the English lexicographer Samuel Johnson, whose celebrated *Dictionary* was

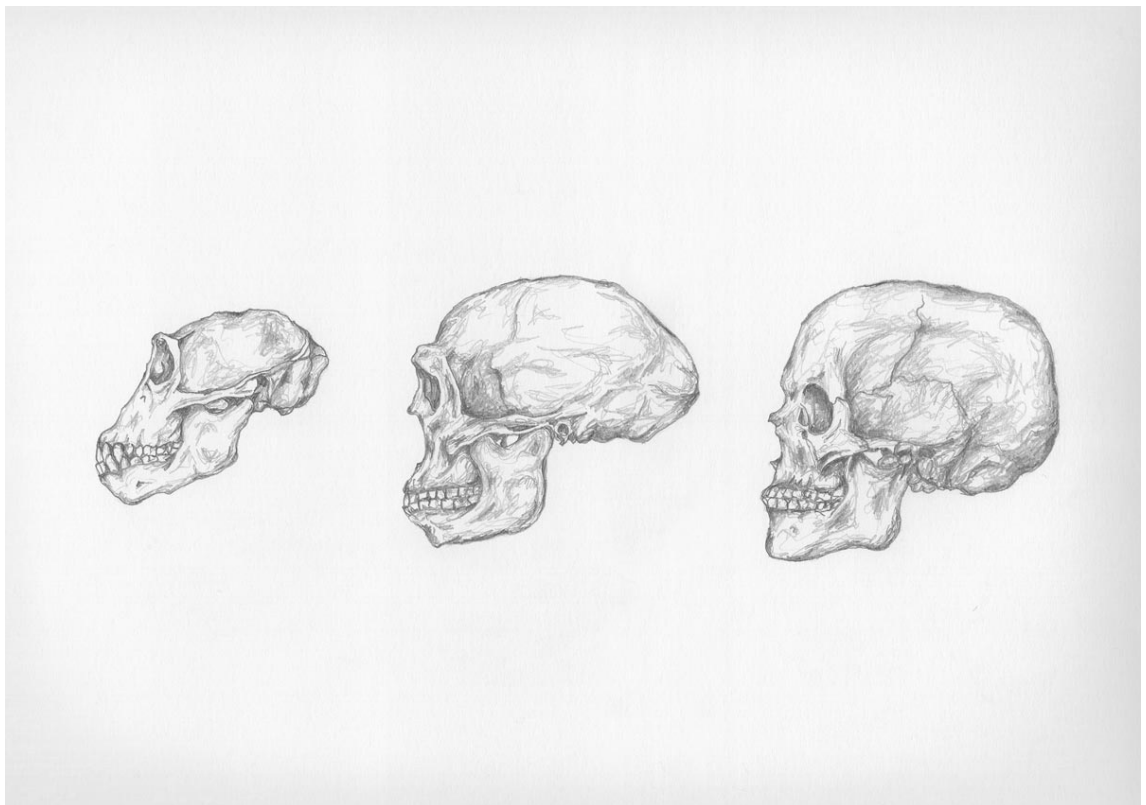


Figure 17. *A to Z* [detail: “ape”]

painstakingly written alone over the course of nine years, strike us as monuments to an unshakable belief in rational endeavour. The inherent ludicrousness of this commitment to systematised knowledge, however, soon emerges,<sup>13</sup> with Johnson himself apparently accepting defeat in his definition of the verb “to fall” (in its sixty-fifth and final sense) as ‘one of those general words of which it is very difficult to ascertain or detail the full signification’ (quoted in Hitchings 2005: 87), and including within his dictionary such gratuitous witticisms as his definition of “oats” as ‘a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people’ (140). Such “lapses” in objectivity in the works of Johnson<sup>14</sup> and his eighteenth-century contemporaries<sup>15</sup> were not, indeed, unprecedented, and point towards a perhaps surprising tradition of embracing – or at least acknowledging – the unaccountability of the world and of the language that we use to negotiate it. In an essay ‘Encyclopedias Before L’Encyclopédie,’ William N West notes that whilst ‘[c]ompleteness and absoluteness’ have, since the time of the Enlightenment, become established as the ‘defining fantasies of the encyclopedia,’ earlier compendiums of knowledge seemed ‘more at ease with their own impossibility’ (2018: 78). Citing Joachim Fortius Ringelbergius’s 1541 *Cyclopedia* as an example, which includes a section entitled “Chaos” for all the things the writer was unable to incorporate elsewhere, West hints that a relinquishing of aspirations towards systematic completeness might well serve as a liberation. Such works, he writes:

dutifully record their internal contradictions, their precisian distinctions, their numbing trivialities – sometimes almost with glee. Perhaps they serve not only to present readers with knowledge, but to reassure them that absolute knowledge is not, in the end, possible; that we can be forgiven for not knowing everything. Their failures are a kind of relief (*ibid.*).

Undermined by its own partiality and contingency, the encyclopedist’s sought-after goal of objectivity and comprehensiveness is thus seen to be illusory, or at least unattainable.

*A to Z* operates according to a similarly misguided aspiration towards completeness, knowingly giving shape to the “fantasy” that, by the end of the project’s 35-year duration, “everything” – or at least, every *thing or concept within a language* – will have been accounted for and visualised. Like Fischli and Weiss’s “subjective encyclopedia”, its tactically absurd inhabitation of a familiar form of systematic authority (the dictionary) is as implausible as it is seductive. Both works stage a collision between the ideal of an objectively ordered knowledge and the necessarily compromised attempts of an individual to become reconciled with it. Such a device is employed by Jean-Paul Sartre in his 1938 novel *Nausea*, expressed through the perplexing reading habits of the character of the Autodidact. ‘All of a sudden,’ recounts the novel’s narrator, sitting in the library one afternoon observing his industrious acquaintance, ‘the names of the last authors whose works he has consulted come back to my mind: Lambert, Langlois, Larbalétrier, Lastex, Lavergne. It is a revelation; I have understood the Autodidact’s method: he is teaching himself in

alphabetical order' (2000: 48). If, for Sartre, the activity embodies the folly of a naïve humanist faith in self-betterment through learning, it does hold a curious appeal, at least to the narrator:

I contemplate him with a sort of admiration. What will-power he must have to carry out, slowly, stubbornly, a plan on such a vast scale! One day, seven years ago (he told me once that he has been studying for seven years) he came ceremoniously into this reading room. He looked round at the countless books lining the walls, and he must have said ... : "It is between the two of us, Human Knowledge." Then he went and took the first book from the first shelf on the far right; he opened it at the first page, with a feeling of respect and fear combined with unshakeable determination. Today he has reached "L" (48-49).

The Autodidact is portrayed in the novel as something of a stooge to the all-too-painful intellectual clear-sightedness of the narrator; the latter's increasingly debilitating existential nausea sits in stark contrast to his counterpart's well-intentioned – if deluded – retreat into the comforts of systematic learning. The narrator's speculations on what will happen to the Autodidact 'when, closing the last book on the last shelf on the far left, he will say to himself: "And now what?"', are, for now at least, of no concern to the Autodidact himself, who is too busy pursuing his absurd task to be concerned with its ultimate purpose (49). The absurdity felt by the narrator can thus be seen to arise from his perception of an irreconcilability between his own demands for meaning and the "meaninglessness" of the activities performed by the Autodidact and those around him. Although neither *Suddenly This Overview* nor *A to Z* are framed in such existential terms (the philosophical moment of which, as was noted in ch.2 section 2.1, has passed), the absurdity inherent in their subjectively articulated confrontations with the "fiction" of objectively accountable knowledge certainly still holds.<sup>16</sup>

### { Interlude }

*So now, here I am, sitting in my studio, dictionary in hand, perusing the first few pages of the "D" section. What on earth am I going to do now? The entire sequence of As, Bs and Cs are neatly hanging on the walls of the gallery, testament to seven years' efforts at visualising the world. People have started asking what I'm going to do next, and whether now might be a good time to stop, since "A, B, C" has a nice ring to it, a certain completeness. But this has never been about "finishing". The end is so far away that it seems absurd to even think about it. The point is always the next word, and the one after that: "dab", then "dabbler", "dad", then "daffodil". I think again about the idea I once had for drawing the words without looking at them. It seemed to say something about visualisation. I can't remember what it said, but it said something. Didn't Derrida curate an exhibition about blindness once? Anyway, I get some paper, close my eyes and try to draw a painter making a "dab" on a canvas. It's a bit disjointed, but it works. And then I draw someone at a desk, getting up, playing a guitar, then returning to their work (a "dabbler").*

*By the time I've got to "dagger" I don't care any more if the drawings' lines don't join up, if they go off the edge of the paper, or if they're just incomprehensible marks on a page. It doesn't seem to matter; I quite like them, and, more to the point, I've just churned out twenty in an afternoon. The wheels of the project are turning again, and I've stopped trying to make sense of where it's going.*



Figure 18. *A to Z* [detail: "daffodil"]

## 6 Do now and mean later: retrospective rationalisation

Whether because of its unaccountably long duration, its incorporation of arbitrary rules, its overidentification with alphabetical order, or its knowingly misguided pursuit of completeness, *A to Z* is a project that, it might be concluded, resolutely refuses to make sense. The multiple levels of absurdity through which it has been seen to operate ensure its distance from determinable aims and resolute meaning. Renate Goldmann's comment that the contradictions and paradoxes employed in Fischli and Weiss's work, whilst precluding any 'decisive meaning,' allow 'new knowledge to emerge in a continuous process of decoding,' describes a similarly

generative irresolution brought about through the use of absurdity (2006: 46, my translation). Whilst Goldmann's primary focus is on issues of legibility and interpretation at the level of a work's reception, an irresolute generativity can also be located at the level of the work's design. As has already been established (in ch.2 section 5.3 and ch.3 section 4.2), it may well be a requirement of the creative process to work "blindly", without knowing what lies ahead; Donald Barthelme's figure of the 'as-yet-unspeakable' would appear to correlate precisely with the indeterminate absurdity through which the *A to Z* project operates, and around which legible meanings only cohere retrospectively, if at all (1997: 15).

Artists, however, even those who rely on tactically absurd procedures, are continually invited to speak about their work – and this very often means adopting the stance of someone who *knew what they were trying to do at the time they were doing it*.<sup>17</sup> It is in precisely this spirit of a somewhat artificial distance and a somewhat disingenuous authority that this chapter, taking full advantage of the "hiatus" offered by the exhibition at Gallery Oldham, has afforded an opportunity to reflect upon the *A to Z* project. Despite its contrivance, a useful interpretative space has been opened up in which to reflect on the nature of the project, to elucidate its rationale, to speculate on its contemporary relevance, to situate it within philosophical discourse, and, above all, to account for its use of tactical absurdity. If what is written in this chapter therefore benefits a little too much from the fabricated clarity of hindsight, then the various "interludes" included within it serve as a counterpoint: a reminder of Barthelme's verdict that the knowledge yielded in the creative process only 'comes into being at the instant it's inscribed' (1997: 12). For in the moment of the creation of the visualisations that make up the *A to Z* project, there is no articulable "meaning" behind the activity – only doubt, confusion and play (manifested, at various times, as boredom, struggle, surprise, satisfaction, exhaustion, frustration, annoyance, and pleasure).

As an emblematic work of tactical absurdity, *A to Z* always comes back to the present moment, in which the only questions that need to be posed are: *What is the next word?* and *How is it going to be visualised?* It is the process of doing those endless visualisations (which, by the time of the exhibition, numbered 1,771) that sustains the project, and perpetually defers the question of what any of it actually *means* and what it is trying to achieve. Precisely through its tactically absurd mode of operation, the determinate meaningfulness of the *A to Z* project can only be reconstructed retrospectively, by looking back at what has been produced and imagining that the nonsensical premise that underpinned it somehow made sense from the beginning.

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1 *A to Z: The First Seven Years* was a solo exhibition at Gallery Oldham in Manchester, UK that ran from Nov 2018 to Mar 2019.

2 Previous, smaller-scale *A to Z* exhibitions have included *Media Ambages* at HilbertRaum, Berlin in 2014 (which featured several sequences of B-drawings); *Picaresque* at Ha Gamle Prestegard, Naerbo, Norway in 2014 (a group exhibition that included a sequence of 100 A-drawings); and, perhaps most significantly, *A to Z: From Aardvark to Axle* at Galerie Art Claims Impulse, Berlin in 2013 (a solo exhibition comprised of the complete sequence of 461 A-drawings).

3 Dan Graham has also identified similar tendencies in his own work, as well as that of Sol LeWitt and other conceptual artists of the 1960s, who, he writes, 'often based their work on humour, especially deadpan, banal dumbness, which turned out to be very intelligent' (2009: 51).

4 Marina Abramović's iconic performance *The Artist is Present* (2010), too, in which the artist sat silently for seven and a half hours every day for three months without food or water in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York whilst visitors were invited to take a seat opposite her and gaze into her eyes, points towards a model of endurance art that is resolutely austere in tone. Indeed, certain critics have reacted against its 'uncomfortably pious aspect,' Dan Fox, for example, notes that the 'solemn register' and 'demonstrative gravitas' of the work 'admits little levity, which seems sad to me, since our bodies and how people interact can be pretty funny – a key part of being human' (2010: para.6). The physical and mental severity of the performance, as well as the emotion with which members of the audience respond to it, cement in it a tenor of unambiguous seriousness. Christina Zück, writing about the photographic portraits made of the sitters during the performance that were posted on the museum's website, draws attention to a further adverse reaction to the 'unbearable' seriousness of the performance (2012: para.17). After one visitor launched the blog *Marina Abramović Made Me Cry* (which featured selected photographs of herself and other participants in tears), the 'satirical meme' *Marina Abramović Made Me High* soon emerged, followed by another blogger's 'collected attractive faces' entitled *Marina Abramović Hotties* (para.16).

5 Perhaps acknowledging the limitations of their own endeavour, lexicographers appear content to point out the senselessness of the question, with John Simpson, for example, in his preface to the third edition of the OED, stating simply that the issue of how many words there are 'cannot be answered by recourse to a dictionary' (2000: n.p.). The *Oxford Dictionaries* website, however, acknowledging the public interest in the question, features a short article 'How many words are there in the English language?' dedicated to the topic. 'There is no single sensible answer to this question,' it begins, declaring that it is 'impossible to count the number of words in a language, because it's so hard to decide what actually counts as a word;' herein, it transpires, lies the lexicographical problem: 'Is dog one word, or two (a noun meaning "a kind of animal", and a verb meaning "to follow persistently")? If we count it as two, then do we count inflections separately too (e.g. dogs = plural noun, dogs = present tense of the verb). Is dog-tired a word, or just two other words joined together? Is hot dog really two words, since it might also be written as hot-dog or even hotdog?' (*How many words are there in the English language?* n.d.: para.1). Having established the misguidedness of the question, the anonymous writer finally and somewhat tortuously gives us the number we had been looking for: if all 'medical and scientific terms,' foreign words used in 'law,' 'cooking,' 'academic writing,' or 'martial arts,' 'obsolete words,' 'derivative words,' inflections, 'technical and regional vocabulary not covered by the OED' and new words were included, in all their 'distinct senses,' the total 'would probably approach three quarters of a million' (paras 2-4).

6 Bold statements of machinic conceptualism aside, LeWitt was clearly in possession of a more nuanced understanding of the process, acknowledging in 1971 that although the 'artist conceives and plans the wall drawing,' each execution is 'unique', for when the 'draftsman perceives the artist's plan, [he] reorders it to his own experience and understanding' (1971: 376). It is also worth noting that *Wall Drawing 46* was originally executed by LeWitt himself immediately after learning of the death of his friend, the sculptor Eva Hesse, to whom it acts, in the words of curator Andrea Miller-Keller, as a 'silent tribute' (2009: 82).

7 LeWitt's own writings in 'Doing Wall Drawings' are instructive here, recognising that '[e]ven if the same draftsman followed the same plan twice, there would be two different works of art. No one can do the same thing twice' (1971: 376). Furthermore, seemingly refuting his own widely-quoted assertions of the preexisting sovereignty of the idea, he adds that the 'plan exists as an idea but needs to be put into its optimum form. Ideas of wall drawings alone are contradictions of the idea of wall drawings' (*ibid.*).

8 The word "deba", for example, explains Borges, could be broken down into its root "de", one of Wilkins' 40 basic 'categories' (in this case, "elements"), which could, in turn, be subdivided into 'differences' ("deb" representing the first element, "fire"), and further subdivided into 'species' ("deba" being a part of the element of fire, the "flame") (1999: 230). The logic of Wilkins' systematisation, however, is saturated with 'ambiguities, redundancies, and deficiencies,' which are already apparent in the eighth category, "stones", which is divided into 'common (flint, gravel, slate); moderate (marble,



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amber, coal); precious (pearl, opal); transparent (amethyst, sapphire); and insoluble (coal, fuller's earth, and arsenic)' (230–31). The line between fact and fiction in Borges' story of an 'apocryphal' Chinese encyclopedia (231) thus becomes indistinct: is it an absurdist fable, we are left to wonder, or is it a historical account of a mode of understanding the world that just happens to no longer coincide with our own?

9       Precedents for such equivocation have been noted in the work of Lewis Carroll, whose celebrated flights into nonsensicality are, if nothing else, systematic; Michael Holquist, for example, goes as far as to claim that the whole career of the writer he refers to as 'Dodgson/Carroll' ("Lewis Carroll" being a pseudonym donned by the academic mathematician and logician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) 'can be best understood as a quest for order' (1969: 147). Holquist, moreover, stresses that nonsense 'is not chaos, not gibberish; unlike in gibberish the system in nonsense can be learned. Thus the elements of the system can be perceived relationally, and therefore meaningfully, within it. Gibberish, on the other hand, is unsystematic' (151). Nonsense, moreover, 'achieves its effects not from contrasting order and confusion, but rather by contrasting one system of order against another system of order, each of which is logical in itself, but which cannot find a place in the other' (152).

10       Employing an evocative visual metaphor, Certeau holds that as 'unrecognised producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices something that might be considered similar to the "wandering lines" drawn by the autistic children studied by Fernand Deligny: "indirect" or "errant" trajectories obeying their own logic' (1984: xviii). The marks of those children, he continues, 'trace "indeterminate trajectories" that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move. They are sentences that remain unpredictable within the space ordered by the organising techniques of systems' (34).

11       In an essay 'What's Wrong With the Enlightenment?', Phil Badger summarises thus: 'For Nietzsche, and later, his postmodernist disciples, the failure of the Enlightenment was a failure of philosophical courage. Once it had undermined the pretensions of earlier dogmatic beliefs, the field should have been open for a liberation of thought and morality from the notion of certainty itself. However, philosophers such as Kant failed to go the extra mile, instead constructing systems which would replace old repressive certainties with new ones, this time sanctified by reason rather than faith or the authority of the ancients. In time, these new systems of thought themselves became ossified myths (in postmodernist terms, "metanarratives") acting to restrict the capacities of human beings to define their own identities and realities' (2010: para.11).

12       In his 1908 essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,' Freud suggests that 'every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him' (quoted in Danto 1996: 95).

13       The absurdity of an individual embarking on a project of defining every word in a language was wittily illustrated in an episode of Richard Curtis and Ben Elton's 1980s sitcom *Blackadder*, in which the title character is forced to sit down at his desk and attempt to rewrite the entire dictionary word by word in a single night after his hapless assistant Baldrick has thrown Johnson's original manuscript into the fire (*Ink and Incapability* 1987). Not surprisingly, Blackadder's attempt fails spectacularly, managing only to define the words "a" ('impersonal pronoun; doesn't really mean anything'), "aardvark" ('medium-sized insectivore with protruding nasal implement'), and – at the suggestion of Baldrick – "dog" ('not a cat'), before eventually having to accept defeat and await his fate at the hands of Johnson and his murderous companions (*ibid.*).

14       Citing Humpty Dumpty's insistence in *Through the Looking Glass* that "[w]hen I use a word ... it means just what I choose it to mean," Henry Hitchings, in his monograph on Johnson's Dictionary, notes that 'Johnson could be Humptyish. His definitions are usually dispassionate, but there are times when the bright colours of subjectivity burst in, and some entries are tinged with prejudice, or even tainted by it' (2005: 139).

15       Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, according to one commentator, 'the most significant event in the entire intellectual history of the Enlightenment,' is not without its own playfulness (Blom 2004: xiii). The first volume in particular contains such entries as a one-and-a-half line description of a little-known fish called an "Aco" that concludes with an invitation to: 'Now go and find out what an aco is' (91). Even more sardonic is the entry for "Aguaxima", which reads: 'a plant growing in Brazil and the islands of middle America. This is all that we are told; and I would like to ask for whom such descriptions like this are made at all. It cannot be for the natives of the country, who obviously know more characteristics of the *aguaxima* than this description contains and who have no need of being informed that it grows in their own country; it would be like saying that the pear tree grows in France and in Germany. It is also not made for us; for what does it matter if there is in Brazil a tree that is called *aguaxima* of which we know nothing but the name? ...' (*ibid.*).

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16 More recently, a similar device – albeit one employed to comic, as opposed to philosophical, ends – can also be seen to underpin AJ Jacobs’s *The Know It All: One Man’s Humble Quest to Become the Smartest Person in the World*, an account of the author’s attempt to read all 32 volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in which he admits early on that: ‘I know my quest is a bit of a lark. I know it’s got a whiff – or maybe more than a whiff – of the absurd’ (2004: 19).

17 As part of my *A to Z* exhibition at Gallery Oldham, for example, I was invited to give an artist’s talk at the gallery. Aware of the difficulties of coherently presenting such a large and thematically diverse collection of imagery, as well as the necessarily arbitrary process of selection it would entail, I chose to structure the talk with the help of an online random word generator. On the day of the talk, therefore, in front of the gathered audience, I would prompt the program to select random words between “A” and “C”, take the group to the corresponding drawing or photograph in the gallery, speak about the process of making that particular image and any related issues it threw up, before repeating the exercise as many times as required. Somewhat surprisingly, the presentation did not differ significantly in content or tone from other, more conventionally planned PowerPoint-style talks I had previously given based on selected sequences of images.

## Chapter 5

### Case Study Three:

### Interruptions in the Flow of Sense

## 1 A world without language

It was not until much later that I began to think of it as a “tactic”. What would eventually emerge as a strategic erasure of the signifier that leads to a simultaneous opening up and closing down of sense – a formal device, that is, aimed at displacing over-familiar narratives of meaning and disturbing their certainty and all-too-straightforward legibility – was initially conceived of as a remedy for a much more prosaic problem of language and translatability. The absurd tactic of silencing *that which was understandable* came into being because I had begun to work in a non-native English-speaking context where it was becoming increasingly evident that not everything that was understandable to me was understandable to everyone else. I had, as a consequence of this banal and (it must be conceded) theoretically unsophisticated observation, begun to wonder whether there might simply be *too much language* in my work. It was the readings, voiceovers, captions, texts – all those words and sentences painstakingly formulated in English in order to initiate a finely-tuned dialogue between text, image, and context – that were, I felt, increasingly bearing the weight of *meaning* in my work, and I had come to realise that, having relocated to Germany, many of the subtleties of the use of language in my work were being lost on an international audience whose command of English was markedly less expert than I had once believed (naively, I now understood, my preconceptions having been largely based upon my interactions with an entirely unrepresentative set of over-educated and cosmopolitan internationals with whom I had lived, worked, studied – even dated – in the UK).

An early indication of this occurred during a screening of my video *Being Somewhere* (see ch.1 section 2) at the end of a three-month residency in Wörpswede, Germany in 2009. I had spent my time there crafting a circular, allusive, and frequently punning script that relayed my experiences of feeling “trapped” within an absurdly self-imposed pursuit of significance within the surrounding landscape. The modest gathering of people attending the screening, however, did not appear to respond at all to the wryly humorous tone of the narration; the only real laughter that occurred during the video’s 39-minute duration came from the single native English-speaker present – an American. Aside from occasional, stifled yawns, the only other audible reactions were comments on familiar locations in the film, and a brief cry of delight at the call of a cuckoo that featured in the soundtrack. The video was, admittedly, designed to be playfully nonsensical, but nevertheless I was surprised by the general lack of engagement on the part of the audience, which, I later discovered, was due in no small part to their generally poor level of understanding of the English voiceover.<sup>1</sup>

Several years later, during a performative lecture given in Berlin in 2013, a rather more vocal response to a similarly textually-heavy presentation of work was provided by my own, then one-year-old daughter, Emma – which, touchingly, highlighted what I suspected might be an

unnecessary deference to language in my work that positioned it rather too centrally as the primary bearer of meaning. I had recently spent a period of time developing a project in Canada, composing a playfully meandering script to accompany a series of photographs intended to illustrate my paradoxical attempts at experiencing the condition of boredom. The result had been the site-specific installation *The Museum of Uninteresting Experience* (see ch.1 section 2), which I had decided to rework as a slide-lecture entitled *A Curiously Unremarkable Journey* for an absurdity-themed event in Berlin.<sup>2</sup> The slides chosen for the lecture were pointedly banal; with the addition of a spoken narration, however, the nondescript slides would come – with a certain playful irony – to life. Almost as soon as I started the presentation, however, my daughter began responding to them with unremitting delight. “Aaaah!” she shrieked at an image of a field. “Ooooh!” she cooed at the sight of a parked car, “aaaah!” at an empty street, “ooooh!” at a photograph of a cloud against a blue sky. And so it continued; the studied seriousness and deadpan delivery of my verbal ruminations on the interrelation of boredom and interest were completely undermined by a toddler’s exclamations of pure joy at a series of projected images of everyday objects. The linguistic complexity of the narrative and the play of meanings it set out to orchestrate through its dialogue with the visuals were – naturally – not accessible to a one-year-old; in the absence of language, however, a different kind of legibility had emerged, Emma’s responses inadvertently demonstrating a common feature of all of the work discussed in this chapter. For if words are taken away – however jarringly and abruptly – what remains is not *nothing* (as my rather naïve understanding of their communicative functionality might have assumed), but a fertile space ready to be filled with all manner of alternative forms of meaning and any number of affective responses. For my daughter, the world had not yet become a place where meaning was presided over by language; she, like any child of her age, was engaged in the thrilling daily task of making meaningful everything that she encountered. The extent to which language can be said to condition the intelligibility of the world was an issue that would, in her case, have to wait; for the moment at least, she could not respond to a picture of a cloud with anything but unalloyed wonder.

In his book *Redeeming Laughter* (as was noted in ch.2 section 2), Peter L Berger, seizes on the etymological root of the word “absurd” in the Latin *surdus* (dull, deaf, mute), leading to a notion of absurdity as ‘deafness’ to reason (2014: 162). *Deafness*, argues Berger, is a condition characterised through the ‘observation of actions that are no longer accompanied by language;’ those of us with ‘normal hearing,’ he suggests, ‘can easily replicate this experience by turning off the sound on the television: the actors on the screen now go on busily as before, but much of the time it is impossible to say what their actions *mean*’ (*ibid.*, my emphasis). If Berger’s primary concern is with exploring the origins of the resultant ‘comic’ effect, his illustration nevertheless draws attention to the close relationship between meaning, language, and absurdity – for, as he

points out, ‘actions that had self-evident meaning when accompanied by language suddenly appear to be problematic. Deafness *problematizes*’ (*ibid.*, original emphasis). Absurdity can thus be imagined as a kind of tactically enforced deafness, which, in performing an ‘assault on language,’ displaces the taken-for-grantedness of the meanings that words are ordinarily understood to convey (163).

The editing technique employed in the video *I Think That’s Best For Both of Us* (*Lance and Oprah*) (fig. 19) can be understood as performing precisely such a “problematization” of language. The video uses found footage from a 2013 television interview between former Tour de France-winning cyclist Lance Armstrong and presenter Oprah Winfrey. Armstrong, whose glittering career as a professional cyclist had come to an ignoble end when his sustained (and strenuously denied) use of performance-enhancing drugs was exposed, appeared on the show in order to publicly confess his wrongdoings. The original interview footage thus makes for dramatic viewing, the detailed and fraught accounts of his conduct compelling both on a sporting and a human level. Almost as soon as it was broadcast, the original interview was subject to detailed analysis by a number of “body language experts”, who called into question Armstrong’s professed contriteness on the basis of a series of identifiable discrepancies between his words and his gestures and “micro-expressions” (which included his crossed legs, jaw-tightening, curling upwards of one side of his lip, and habit of shaking his head whilst giving affirmative answers) (Branagh 2013; Van Edwards 2013). Indeed, one such expert, Robert Phipps, concluded simply that the interview was revealing ‘not ... in terms of what he said verbally but ... what he said non-verbally’ (quoted in Branagh 2013: para.23); whilst another, Judi James, inadvertently echoed Berger in her comment that ‘[i]f you turned the sound down, it was hard to tell who was interviewing who’ (para.7). There is, in other words, already an army of pop-psychologists on hand, ready to reveal the “truth behind the words” uttered in media appearances. Such attempts to access a deeper level of meaning are almost invariably characterised by their unflinching certainty; little attention is paid to the relationship of their techniques to theories of the unconscious, or to the complexity and contingency of the interpretative act of making-legible they perform.

In contrast, *Lance and Oprah* sets out not to reach any facile conclusions about what Armstrong was “really thinking” as he was confessing, but seeks instead – through the editing technique it employs – to deliberately embrace an extra-discursive indeterminacy. The spoken content is removed almost entirely from the original footage: through a subtractive process of editing, the words of both Armstrong and Winfrey are cut out, leaving only silences, hesitations, non-verbal gestures, and occasional fragments of decontextualised speech. Whilst Armstrong’s discomfort is at times unmistakably visible in his body language, the grounds for his unease is never



Figure 19. *I Think That's Best For Both of Us (Lance and Oprah)* [still from video]

disclosed in the edited video – which omits virtually all the verbal content. Similarly, although a recognisably conversational interaction between Armstrong and Winfrey remains (signalled by the back-and-forth cross-cutting structure of the footage), the substance of their dialogue has been removed, leaving only the gaps between their words and a stutteringly suggestive silence. It is, then, this foregrounding of silence that becomes the decisive move performed by the work – a tactically absurd shutting down of the *sense that is articulated through language*, which gives rise to an irresolvable play of meaning and meaninglessness.

That my initial conception of language as a “vehicle” for the conveyance of a stable, determinate, and fully legible meaning was overly simplistic – and, more to the point, hardly representative of the way meanings circulate around artworks – is borne out by the removal of language in *Lance and Oprah* and, indeed, in all of the other works featured in this chapter. In none of these cases does the erasure of the signifier lead to an erasure of the artwork’s own capacity to signify; it leads, rather, to a flourishing of new meanings that occurs (as was argued in ch.2 section 5.1) precisely at the point when the artwork departs the realm of intelligibility. Indeed, as Simon O’Sullivan and Stephen Zepke point out, taking their cue from Deleuze and Guattari’s verdict in *What is Philosophy?* that ‘[w]e lack creation. *We lack resistance to the present*’ (quoted in O’Sullivan & Zepke 2008: 2, original emphasis), the construction of a ‘new’ in the world is frequently dependent ‘as a first moment’ on a ‘subtraction’ from it (O’Sullivan & Zepke 2008: 2). For if, as O’Sullivan argues, it is ‘[l]anguage’ that ‘produce[s] our dominant sense of the world,’ and if the interpretative frames through which we attribute words with meaning are seen to have stagnated through over-familiarity and taken-for-grantedness, then perhaps it is time to put up some resistance, and to “subtract” those words altogether (2010: 203).

The remaining sections of this chapter, then, will set out to explore the implications of a constellation of works in video, drawing, and text that intervene in a diverse set of contexts through the tactically absurd device of a removal of language. Through a disharmonious imposition of silence, the normal flow of sense is, in each case, absurdly disrupted, its meaningfulness opened out into a space of play that, it will be argued, can be both generative and critical.

## 2 “George knows this story”: Genre violation and non-convergent humour

Despite the removal of its verbal content, the footage that is appropriated in *Lance and Oprah* remains identifiable as a confessional television interview, which, in Philip Bell and Theo van Leeuwen’s analysis, is a highly formulaic genre (1994). Many of the operational markers of the genre are retained: the studio set up in which the interviewer and interviewee are seated alone in front of the cameras, partially facing each other and partially facing the audience, leading to a form of interaction characterised by its ‘curious mixture of public and private’ (10); the mixed tenor of the interactions, which, striking a balance between ‘cooperation and contestation,’ range from the good-humoured to the confrontational (137); the narrative arc of the interview, which begins by establishing what is already known, builds up towards the sought-after confession of wrongdoing, before finally ending on a conciliatory note, allowing the interviewee to ‘fly out of the trap without inflicting mortal injury’ (157); and the presence of a well-known presenter of ‘high professional prestige,’ whose performance of surprise and disapproval maintains a sense of theatre (10).<sup>3</sup> The editing of the interview thus corresponds to an absurdity of “violating generic expectations” (see ch.2 section 3.2.6), since it plays directly upon our recognition of, and familiarity with, the confessional interview genre. Although they are presented within the frame of an appropriating artwork, the intercutting images of a silent Armstrong and a silent Winfrey remain apprehensible as fragments of a familiar televisual form of exchange. The protagonists in the video, in other words, are not encountered simply as *not saying anything*, but as *not saying anything in a context in which we fully expect them to be saying something*.

Martin Esslin begins his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (see ch.2 section 2.2) with a discussion of a 1957 performance of Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin Prison in California. Although there had been considerable nervousness about how this ‘esoteric avant-garde’ play would be received (it was the first theatre performance at the prison in over forty years), the inmates’ response was overwhelmingly positive; in contrast to the ‘incomprehension’ and ‘bewilderment’ felt by the critics and theatre-going public of the time, the prisoners had no



difficulty in extracting meaning and significance from the play (1961: xvii). As Esslin acknowledges, this is no doubt partly due to the clear analogies between the fate of the play's two central protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, and the convicts themselves – both of whom are, in some sense, “trapped” within a situation. More significant here, however, is his observation that the prisoners were unlikely to have had much exposure to the conventions of theatre, and were consequently:

unsophisticated enough to come to the theatre without any preconceived notions and ready-made expectations, so they avoided the mistake that trapped so many established critics who condemned the play for its lack of plot, development, characterisation, suspense, or plain common sense (*ibid.*).

The prisoners, in other words, were not sufficiently well-versed in the “language” of theatre to be troubled by its violation; instead of struggling with the play's unconventional (that is, *absurd*) dramatic form, they were able, simply, to recognise it as an embodiment of their own predicament. Although, as has been noted, Esslin distinguishes between *absurd subject-matter* and *absurd form* in the Theatre of the Absurd, his overriding concern is to account for what he describes as the ‘meaning’ of the plays (xii), which he sees as arising through their integration of subject-matter and form. *Waiting for Godot* remains, for Esslin, a treatise on man's existentially absurd plight – albeit one that is formulated absurdly, using what he identifies, tellingly, as a ‘new *convention*’ of theatre (xvii, my emphasis).

More recent critics, however (following a general trend noted in ch.2 section 2.1 towards a non-metaphysical appraisal of absurdity), have distanced themselves from overly existential readings of Beckett, preferring to focus instead on his repertoire of formal devices, not least his foregrounding of, and play with, genre. Jonathan Boulter, for instance, referring to a ‘generic “decomposition”,’ notes that Beckett's work ‘defies our notions of what a play or a novel should be doing,’ which results in a ‘problematising of interpretative protocols’ (2008: 7). The absurdities that emerge in his plays and novels can thus be seen to be inseparable from their transgressions of the conventions of the very literary genres they inhabit, perhaps most famously expressed in the self-cancelling rhetoric of the narrator of the final lines of *Molloy*:

Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining (Beckett 2009: 184–85).

The relevance to *Lance and Oprah* of such generic decomposition lies less in Esslin's preoccupation with the status of “avant-garde” artworks that breach the conventions of their genre as *art*, than in the nature of the *meanings* that are allowed to emerge when the expectations of the genre that the work appropriates are absurdly violated. For an audience familiar with the contextual sleights of hand and playful repurposing of found footage common to contemporary video art, *Lance and Oprah* could hardly be said to trigger any real

“bewilderment” regarding its status as a work of art. Within that artistic frame, however, the question of how the material appropriated by the video can actually be read is less easily determined. The work, if not exactly *inhabiting* the confessional interview genre, adopts its syntax and grammar, visually and verbally luring its audience into apparently familiar territory, before disassembling its preordained meaningfulness and knowability through a subtractive process of editing that removes virtually all of the discursive content. How reliant are we, we are led to wonder, on the interpretative protocols of genre – those conventional and learnt routes into meaningfulness – for the condition of legibility? And what kind of sense emerges when they are violated?<sup>4</sup>

Legible or not, the work is frequently funny; indeed, its production, like that of all the works in the series, involves a continual balancing act that aims to incorporate an appropriate level of humorous juxtaposition and incongruity without heavy-handedly engendering a tenor of gratuitous comedy. At one point in *Lance and Oprah*, for example, Armstrong is seen, after an extended sequence of fragmented silences, ums, and ahs, finally uttering a single word: “things;” at which point the video cuts to Winfrey, who is seen, with acute comic timing, pausing momentarily before casting an exaggeratedly quizzical glance back at Armstrong. Standing in contrast to the more intrinsic (and, in the sense outlined in ch.2 section 5.2, Deleuzian) humour that arises as a result of the basic conceptual move of removing the spoken content, such incidences of deliberately crafted comedy remain exceptions, and are intended to function as “hooks” that maintain the viewers’ attention – changes of mood and pace that break up what might otherwise appear as a monotonous procession of near-identical clips. A similarly decisive approach to the shaping of the original material that emerged during the process of editing was the departure from the original plan to remove *all* the verbal content in favour of allowing selected fragments of speech that communicate no discursive meaning in themselves to be preserved. Armstrong’s sudden utterance of the word “things”, for example, or his isolated statement at the conclusion of the video that “George knows this story”, remain, without any supporting context, opaque or indeterminately suggestive: viewers can only speculate as to what “things” he might be referring to, who “George” might be, or what “story” is being told. The viewers’ familiarity both with the material (the awareness that Lance Armstrong was somehow connected with a doping scandal) and with the confessional-interview genre itself (which is premised upon the disclosure of some dishonourable activity by the interviewee) provides enough of a framework to ensure that those isolated remarks – as well as the silences and non-verbal gestures that accompany them – are directed towards a suggestive play of meaning-making, much of which runs counter to the “message” of the original source material. The discrepancy between the meanings associated with the original context and those that arise by virtue of the subtractive editing applied to the footage results in a Deleuzian humour, a

“horizontal irony” that, for Candace D Lang, represents ‘a divergence from the truth, with no subsequent moment of convergence’ (1988: 42).

Whether or not a divergent incongruity need be followed by a convergent “resolution” for it to be perceived as funny is the subject of continued debate in the field of humour studies (see ch.2 section 4.2), with some analysts basing their theories on a model of conflicting “scripts” or *schemas*. Schemas, according to Rod A Martin in *The Psychology of Humour: An Integrative Approach*, are ‘mental models of the world’ that allow us to make sense of objects, scenes or events based on past experiences (2007: 85). They function as heuristics, describing a set of ‘general characteristics,’ whilst containing ‘variables or slots that can assume different values in particular instances;’ a schema for “birds”, for example, is comprised of such variables as ‘types of wings, feet, beaks, tails, and bodies’ that ‘may be instantiated in a number of ways in individual birds’ (86). Thus, if we catch a glimpse of a bird in the sky or hear about one in a story, the schema for birds is activated, and we are able to fill in any gaps in the information we have received and apprehend what we encounter as “a bird”. If, however, information is received that does not fit with the particular schema brought into play, a discrepancy is felt, and the schema is violated – and humour is often the result.<sup>5</sup> Such simultaneous activation of mutually contradictory schemas offers a useful diagram<sup>6</sup> of the operation of absurdity as generic violation. Thus, when Lance Armstrong is encountered within the frame of a confessional interview suddenly and for no discernible reason announcing the word “things” to Oprah Winfrey, or when Beckett ends his novel with the narrator assuring us that it is both raining and *not* raining, we are left in a state of undecidability that stems from some anticipated discursive operation – activated through a particular schema – having been absurdly interrupted.

### 3 Enforced defamiliarisation and the untethering of signification

It is rarely possible to locate the precise moment at which an idea for an artwork comes into being, and the series of drawings *Road Signs (Proposal for a Hypothetical Intervention)* (fig. 20) is no exception. It does, however, seem fitting – even if it is not, in the strictest sense, *true* – to imagine that it was conceived whilst gazing out of the side window of a coach speeding along the motorway at 60 mph. The drawings themselves are schematic depictions of road signs with parts of their textual or pictographic information removed: one blue motorway sign, for example, reads simply “The NORTH”, without any indication of direction or distance, accompanied by an empty set of brackets “( )” suggesting (but not revealing) some further useful information, perhaps a road number. The moment of the work’s inception – to continue the conceit – would have occurred whilst travelling by coach along the Autobahn in Germany somewhere between Berlin and Bremen, which is significant for two reasons: firstly, that I was a *passenger*, and was

thus unconcerned with the information conveyed by the signs (the bus driver alone was responsible for the driving and navigating); and secondly, that the journey in question was in a country in which I had never driven (I therefore lacked the instinctive familiarity that arises from a lifelong exposure to a particular country's system of road signage). The signs that whizzed past, in other words, would have been encountered at a distance borne both of a lack of practical interest in their communicative content and of an inherent "foreignness" perceived in their visual language. If road signage is designed to function as clearly and unambiguously as possible,<sup>7</sup> then it could only have been in these particular set of circumstances that the idea to absurdly intervene in its chain of signification would have seemed reasonable.

Whether or not the idea for the work arrived fully-formed on that particular bus journey, it is certainly true that the notion of *defamiliarisation* is central to its functionality. In his discussion of absurd humour, Berger refers to Eugène Ionesco's account of setting out to learn English at the age of 36, an experience that afforded him such 'startling insights as that there are seven days in a week, or that the floor is down and the ceiling up;' for Berger, the effect of such an enforced reacquaintance with the familiar is 'a sudden shift in the sense of reality' in which what has 'previously [been] taken for granted is now, through the medium of a foreign language, made problematic' (2014: 166). Written shortly afterwards, Ionesco's play *The Bald Soprano* stages what Berger sees as a comparable 'loss of confidence in the reliability of language' in the form of

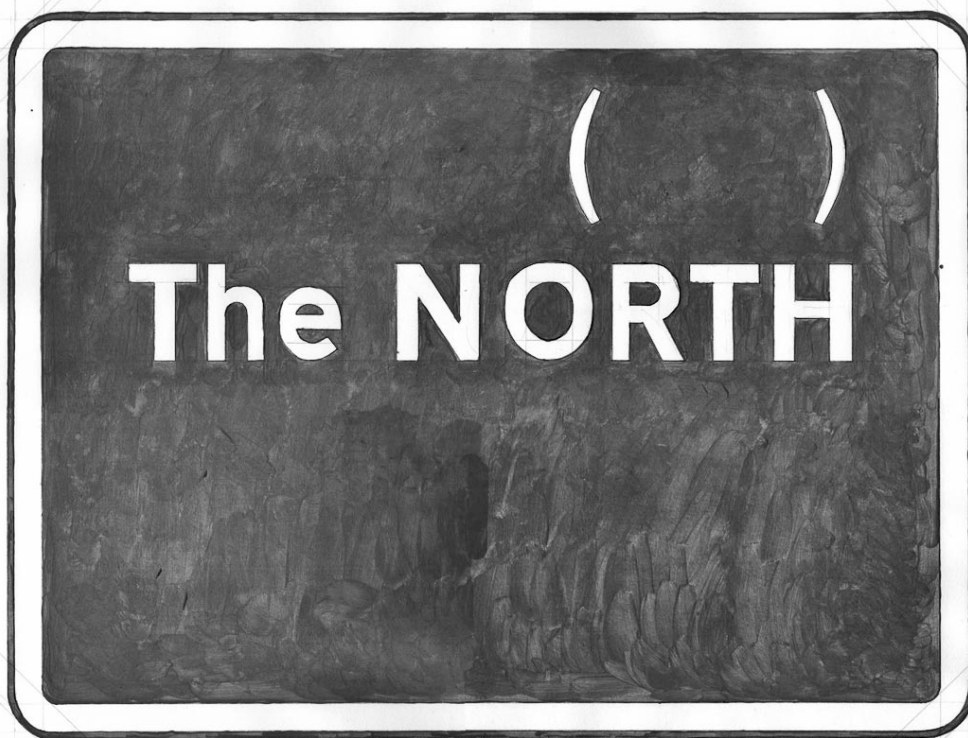


Figure 20. *Road Signs (Proposal for a Hypothetical Intervention)* [detail]

an extended interaction between a male and a female guest who, striking up a conversation whilst awaiting the arrival of their host, suspect that they have previously met; over the course of their exchange a sequence of coincidental facts are established, before it eventually transpires that they are, in fact, married to each other (*ibid.*). The dialogue enacts:

a kind of demented Cartesian logic, elaborately demonstrating what was obvious to begin with. This, of course, is comic. Yet at the same time a doubt is introduced as to whether the obvious is all that obvious after all (167).

It is the inconspicuousness and unassumingness of everyday language that is exploited by the absurd dialogue, an operation that Ionesco in his own analysis refers to as '*dépaysement*' – literally, the sense of detachment or disorientation felt in a foreign country, or, more poetically, 'a waking to a world unknown' (quoted in Berger 2014: 168). Similarly, the *Road Signs* series, in staging a "hypothetical intervention" into a manifestly mundane system of communication designed to transmit meaning in the most straightforward manner possible, capitalises precisely upon its overfamiliarity and lack of scope for interpretation; for, as Ionesco insisted, 'nothing seems more surprising to me than that which is banal; the surreal is here, within [the] grasp of our hands, in our everyday conversation' (*ibid.*). The work's tactical absurdity, then, operating through a stealthy insertion of *dépaysement*, introduces an uncertainty into that which is ordinarily certain.

In Berger's account (see ch.2 section 4.3), the transformative potential of the comic and the absurd arises by virtue of a process in which 'ordinary reality' is, as he terms it, 'deconstructed' (2014: 168):

Just as language constructs the order of reality, so it can be used to tear down this construction, or minimally to breach it. Non-sense actions and non-sense language are thus vehicles to induce a different perception of the world (*ibid.*).

According to this analysis, the removal of useful information in the *Road Signs* drawings effects a "deconstruction" (that is, a dismantling) of a normally stable chain of signification. If, in semiotic terms, a motorway road sign becomes meaningful through a conventionalised relationship between *signifier* (a number positioned alongside letters spelling out a place-name, written in white on a blue background in a sans serif typeface) and *signified* (the concept of the place being a certain distance away along the route of the motorway), then, following the subtractive intervention performed by the work, the signifier is decoupled from the signified, with the consequence that the (road) sign *no longer means what it used to mean*. A hitherto unproblematic system of communication has thus been broken down, its functionality replaced by dysfunctionality, its sense with nonsense. If, however, absurdity is to be modelled in less reductively binary terms, then the "deconstruction" enacted by the work's removal of visual and textual elements might be more gainfully viewed through a poststructuralist lens.

Highlighting a shift in Derridean thought away from the structuralist privileging of a stable referent, Martin McQuillan, in an essay ‘Five Strategies for Deconstruction,’ notes that whilst ‘[f]or Saussure, the concept is fixed as the signified and has priority over its arbitrary and conventional mode of expression as a signifier,’ for Derrida, ‘the concept is only meaningful through its expression as a signifier,’ which, crucially, means that ‘because the signifier is arbitrary and conventional the concept itself is unstable’ (2000: 18). Accordingly, the analysis of *Road Signs* moves from a model of a negatively conceived deconstruction (in effect, a “destruction”, as described in ch.3 section 4.2) of the transmission of meaning by the road signs, towards a deconstruction of the idea of the transmission of meaning itself, in which meaning is not simply nullified, but is opened up to a play of signification. For, as Derrida maintains, it is not the concept as such that is at stake in deconstruction; it is, rather, ‘the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general’ (quoted in McQuillan 2000: 18). Although the banality of road signage might render such an analysis superfluous (the insights to be gained in considering the motorway exit sign as a “discursive formation” remain somewhat limited), deconstruction nevertheless offers an important corrective to any tendency to dichotomise sense and nonsense in accounting for an absurd disruption of sign-systems. It is, perhaps, sufficient to note the presence of, in Paul de Man’s formulation, a “defective cornerstone” – a foundational element upon which the construction of sense rests that is at the same time also its undoing. Understood in this light, tactical absurdity becomes, simply, an act of zeroing in on that cornerstone, since, as Derrida insists, ‘deconstruction ... is always already at work in the work’ (quoted in McQuillan 2000: 29).

Approaching the issue of a deconstruction of sign-systems from a different perspective is the series of drawings *Gemäldegalerie Hands* (fig. 21), which emerged through repeated visits to the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, a museum housing an extensive collection of European paintings from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. A fairly banal, though perhaps not uncommon, observation made during those trips was that many of the hand gestures depicted in the paintings, particularly those of the late Gothic period, appeared incomprehensible, or even comic. One of the first in the series, subtitled *There’s No Expiry Date on My Museum Pass* (Hans Multscher, ‘*The Wurzach Altarpiece*’), consists of a single, isolated pencil rendering of a hand centred on a sheet of A3 paper, which was drawn in situ in the museum in front of Multscher’s fifteenth-century altarpiece. Taken from a panel depicting the Resurrection, the hand in question belongs to the figure of Christ, who is seen raising his hand with thumb, index-, and middle fingers extended together in (what I would later identify as) a gesture of benediction. This particular hand gesture, and indeed all of those featured in the 25 or so drawings making up the series, was selected on the basis of an initial judgement that it looked “meaningful”, even if its specific symbolism or thematic significance remained elusive. The hands, aside from a



Figure 21. *Gemäldegalerie Hands* [detail: "If I Were Their Age Would I Look at Me and Think I Was Authoritative (Lucas Cranach the Elder, 'Venus and Cupid the Honey Thief'")]

reference in their titles to the paintings from which they are taken, are left entirely decontextualised; isolated from their original setting within a pictorial composition, and presented without any religious, mythological or historical context, they function as untethered vessels of communication. The addition of subtitles alluding to the experience of being in the museum surrounded by other visitors and gallery staff, or to my own drifting inner thoughts, further extends the scope of their potential signification.

After each visit to the museum, research was made into the paintings from which the hands drawn that day had been selected. In other words, I informed myself *post hoc* on the biographies of the artists, the biblical or mythological scenes they depicted, their art historical significance, and whatever information about the iconographic significance of the hand gestures I could find. My initially rather hazy knowledge of the story of the resurrection of Christ, for example, was replaced by a more detailed awareness of what was going on in the Multscher panel, and in particular, how the gesture of the raised hand might have been understood by a fifteenth-century audience of churchgoers. I was informed, for example, of the origin of the gesture in Roman oratory, and that by the fourth century the raised right arm had become a sign of blessing widely used in Christian worship. According to the *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography*, this 'gesture of benediction' is

characterised by the placement of the fingers: thumb, index, and middle fingers are outstretched, while the two remaining (ring and little finger) are flexed against the palm of the hand (*benedictio latina*) or held with the little finger also raised (*benedictio graeca*) (Hazzikostas 1998: 54).

I thus acquired a sufficient enough understanding of Christian iconography for my original interpretation of the hand gesture – which amounted to little more than a droll speculation (recorded in a diary kept during the visits) that the hand ‘seems to be about counting, rather half-heartedly’ – to be revealed as laughably ill-informed. This deliberate – and at times absurd – disjunction between my initial, naïve apprehension of the hand gestures, and the subsequent, more “accurate” readings I was able to develop, was aimed at inserting a tactical space of uncertainty into a highly codified iconographic system in which the meanings of the gestures have already been decreed, and all that remains for the viewer to do is passively decode them.

Thus, through their tactical interventions into the chains of signification that they appropriate, the *Road Signs* works and the *Gemäldegalerie Hands* can be seen to open up a generative space of meaning-making. The sign-systems they disrupt they no longer function according to any stable frameworks of legibility; what remains in the artworks, rather, is a set of signifiers that hang in a state of undecidability: a motorway sign that fails to convey any information at all about the place it names, or a hand that gestures incomprehensibly, divorced from any context. This *untethering of signification* can also be seen in the linguistic fragmentation that underlies the final work discussed in this section, *Theresa* (see *Appendix 2*) – a kind of “poem” constructed out of the fragmentary remains of a speech made by the then UK Prime Minister Theresa May on 20 March 2019 regarding the UK’s pending exit from the European Union. All of the specific content of the speech has been removed, such that what remains, although recognisable as a political speech (through references to stock themes such as “knife crime”, repeated and emphatic usage of the personal pronouns “you”, “we” and “I”, as well as emotive expressions such as “the way forward”), gives no indication as to the context or meaning of her words. The final lines,

I don’t believe that is what you want –  
and it is not what I want.  
The question, your answer.  
Now you want[.]

whilst suggesting an imminent statement of definitive intent, end only in irresolution with the single words:

And  
what[.]

The effect is a simultaneous closing down of intelligible content and opening up of language to interpretative play – the discursivity of the original speech having been erased and supplanted



by a performance of signifiers unhindered by any restricting context.<sup>8</sup> The work thus draws attention to a paradoxical generativity inherent in the operation of tactical absurdity: for it is precisely through its taking of meaning away that meaning is allowed to flourish.

#### 4 Political silence

Extending the subtractive editing technique of *Lance and Oprah* is the video *I Did It for the Reasons I Said I Did It* (fig. 22), which applies a similar editing process to footage broadcast by Sky News of a press conference given by former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair on 6 July 2016 after the publication of the Chilcot Report into the 2003 Iraq War. The original footage consisted of a single, largely unmoving medium camera shot of Blair, initially delivering a 45-minute speech addressing the report and accounting for his (and his government's) actions, before spending an additional hour fielding questions from journalists (who are heard but not seen). Throughout the broadcast Sky News's on-screen graphics display the time, live financial market updates, and a continually updating "news ticker" displaying headlines relating to Blair's statements. What remains after the editing are 13 minutes of jump-cutting shots of Blair, silent apart from occasional utterances of decontextualised fragments of speech, frequently pausing for thought, looking down at his notes or at the journalists around the room, and gesturing with his face and body; in addition, the on-screen graphics are modified such that any specific references to the content of the press conference are blacked-out.

At a formal level, then, the video, like all the works discussed in this chapter, appropriates and disrupts a specific discursive event. Its tactically absurd operation can therefore be modelled, at



Figure 22. *I Did It for the Reasons I Said I Did It* [still from video]

least in part, as a staging of a violation of the generic conventions of the material it appropriates – in this case a political speech and press conference, our understanding of which leads to an expectation that the speech-giver will draw upon their professional oratorical skills to present their case and respond to critical questioning by journalists.<sup>9</sup> In the edited video, however, Blair is presented as neither articulate, convincing, nor coherent, and singularly fails to formulate any arguments whatsoever: his incongruous remark after an extended silence that “I dealt with that, didn’t I?”, as well as his abrupt final statement before leaving the podium that “I think that’s enough” serve only to emphasise the complete absence of any verbal reasoning – which, in Blair’s case, is particularly conspicuous given his reputation as a highly-effective and persuasive speaker.<sup>10</sup> The subtractive editing of the footage, therefore, having given rise to the spectacle of a non-communicating act of communication, can be understood as an “immediately discernible (comic) incongruity” (see ch.2 section 3.2.1), a tactically absurd move that ensures that the anticipated transmission of sense, information, and meaning fails to materialise. The work thus functions abstractly, as a non-specific gesture towards a disturbance of the meaningfulness of the world – a speculative imagining, that is, of a world that has been made to look different, or, in Schutzian terms, has veered into the realm of nonsense.

To think *I Did It for the Reasons I Said I Did It* purely in such terms, however, would be to somewhat disingenuously overlook its *critical* – if not overtly *political* – field of operation, which, at least at the level of the work’s reception, can be accounted for in two ways. Firstly, purely in terms of its content (Tony Blair speaking at a press conference in connection with his role in the Iraq War), the work appears almost inescapably to become aligned with some sort of a “position”; given the divisiveness of Blair as a public figure, and the degree of partisanship his appearance can be assumed to elicit in an audience,<sup>11</sup> it seems unlikely that the work could ever be read solely as an apolitical exercise in semiotic play.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, a default attribution of positionality to the work can also be understood simply as a symptom of what has been identified as a drift in contemporary art towards the “critical” becoming the dominant frame of reference for the interpretation of artworks (see ch.2 section 6.2).

Leaving aside the issue of its reception, however, the work itself, considered as a formally devised and edited video, can be understood to function far less determinately. A useful point of reference here is Gary Hill’s (1981–83) video *Primarily Speaking*, which consists of a continually evolving sequence of thematically disconnected video images shown side by side of objects, places, bodies and words, accompanied by a soundtrack of the artist reciting a text made up of idiomatic expressions, whose syllabic structure defines the rhythm of the cutting. Hill has spoken of his interest in allowing the work to operate both at a ‘moment approaching meaning’ and a ‘moment when meaning begins to fade;’ his intention, as he puts it, is to ‘suppress the

dualism of sense and nonsense, and see what happens inside the experience of language as meaning is taking root or being uprooted' (quoted in Machado 2000: 159). Such a work deliberately impedes any determinable routes into legibility, operating instead dynamically through a fragmentary form that initiates a necessarily provisional and contingent process of meaning-making. In an essay on *Primarily Speaking*, Willem van Weelden argues that, precisely as a result of the disruptive fragmentation performed by the video, the spectator is 'freed' from any 'uniform reference to reality,' and is thus left with the task of 'unravelling whatever meaning can be discovered in the work' (2000: 96). In the case of *I Did It for the Reasons I Said I Did It*, a work whose editing-out of verbal content effects a similar "uprooting" of meaning, any "uniform reference to reality" required for a coherent expression of an identifiable (critical) position is also ruled out. Where it differs from *Primarily Speaking*, however, is that the overwhelming presence in the video of the signifier "Tony Blair" ensures that the work – despite its indeterminacy – remains anchored in the realm of the political. Consequently, Hill's "moment approaching meaning" (which is at the same time the moment of its fading away) represents in this case a provisional (and necessarily unstable) formation of a specific political orientation. The tactically absurd construction of the work thus engenders a characteristic undecidability – strongly suggestive of a critical disposition and yet resolutely failing to make critical sense, the work operates as a simultaneously meaningful and meaningless critique.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most explicitly addressing the capacity of a tactically absurd silencing of discourse to address a (discursive) political issue, is the video *Referendum Night* (fig. 23). Applying the same editing technique to the BBC's live coverage of the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership ("Brexit") referendum, the intervention reduces the original



Figure 23. *Referendum Night* [still from video]

eleven hours of broadcast footage to a sequence of 36 minutes. Comprised of rolling coverage and analysis of the results, as well as interviews with politicians and journalists, the broadcast begins at 10 pm at the close of the polls, announces the earliest regional results around midnight, continues to report on incoming results over the next few hours, declares the “Leave” side the winner at around 4.30 am, before finally, at 8 am, relaying the resignation speech of Prime Minister David Cameron. The original election night broadcast represents what Gerda Eva Lauerbach describes as a ‘highly ritualised’ media event that features both ‘scripted’ and ‘unscripted yet routinised discourse practices’ (2007: 316). Its format, moreover, acts as an arena in which politicians, experts, and representatives of the powerful social institutions can engage, under the direction of the presenters, in the conflictual negotiation over what the results of the election mean. [It] provide[s] a stage on which (and stage directions according to which) the participants involved can transform the numerical election results into social facts ... [and] offer a multitude of explanations ... (317).

The election night programme, in other words, is engaged in a process of making the raw data of the election results *meaningful*. It is precisely this emphasis on meaning-making – achieved discursively through various strategies of summarisation and explanation, interpretation and analysis, argumentation and the giving of opinions – that the subtractive editing process seeks to disrupt.<sup>14</sup>

The footage used in *Referendum Night* remains identifiable both as part of its genre and as a broadcast dedicated specifically to the 2016 Brexit referendum. Brexit, having attained the status of an ‘omnipresent and inescapable news item’ (Koller, Kopf & Miglbauer 2019: 1), was, for the entire duration of this PhD project, a ubiquitous discussion-topic in broadcast and social media, as well as in academic, cultural, and everyday discourse.<sup>15</sup> It can thus be reasonably assumed that a viewer of the work will not only be familiar with the result of the referendum, but also, crucially, will have had some exposure to the debates surrounding it – and, indeed (at least in a UK context), will have already formed their own opinions about it. *Referendum Night*, then, through its decisive move of shutting down the verbal acts of meaning-making conventionally performed within the election-night broadcast genre, can be seen as committing itself to a pointedly and uncommonly non-discursive approach to a widely-debated political theme. One of the motivations behind the removal of the spoken content of the original broadcast is to forcibly introduce a moment of “silence” into what would become a relentless, polarising, and seemingly interminable debate over the rights, wrongs, and paths towards the UK’s exit from the EU. To the extent that *Referendum Night* articulates a “position”, then, it is directed against the representation of that debate as it is mediated through various discursive channels. Although my own views on Brexit are clear (as a university-educated British citizen living in the cosmopolitan capital of Germany, they hardly need clarification here), the work is in no way intended as an expression of any anti-Brexit “Remainer” stance. Its tactically absurd approach is driven, rather,

by a desire to displace an existing, highly conventionalised and entrenched discourse with an open-ended and indeterminately critical silence. As a consequence, advocates of both sides of the debate are presented in the video – via a carefully-balanced process of editing – as equally inarticulate and confused, as too are the presenters, reporters and analysts, whose attempts to make sense of the story as it unfolds result only in nonsense.

A similar dissatisfaction with a prevailing (political) discourse underpins Metahaven's analysis (see ch.2 section 6.2) of the capitalist 'frameset' that requires all political agents – regardless of their degree of opposition – to 'speak the same language' (2013: 14). The disruption enacted through the tactically absurd bypassing of language in *Referendum Night* can, accordingly, be modelled as an overturning of a frame of reference – comparable with the online practice of "rickrolling", wherein a seemingly legitimate hyperlink promising to direct the user towards a useful location leads instead to a video of Rick Astley's 1987 pop hit *Never Gonna Give You Up*. Referring to Susan Stewart's theorisation of the mutual interdependence of sense and nonsense (and in particular the reinforcement of prevailing models of sense through the accommodation of anomalies via the concept of *non-sense*) (see ch.2 section 4.1), Metahaven argue that the rickroll enacts a radical departure from the sense-nonsense binary:

instead of merely entrapment in a false choice, the rickroll transports the user to what Susan Stewart called "another domain of reality." Instead of some parallel dream world, this is more of a conceptual overhaul in which all prior sense-making is erased (40).

The rickroll, that is, functions neither as *sense* nor as its corollary, *non-sense*, for it leaves the discursivity of the original context entirely behind. The tactically absurd "erasure" performed in *Referendum Night* functions in precisely the same way: its imposition of silence within an arena of political meaning-making represents a leap into an entirely different realm, an outright rejection, in other words, of a given set of discursive protocols.

The "politics" of both *I Did It for the Reasons I Said I Did It* and *Referendum Night*, then, can be aligned with that mode of criticality that, in Rancière's analysis, has ceded its polemicism and determinate positionality in favour of a playful undecidability and suspension of signification (see ch.2 section 6.1). For, as he elaborates in *The Emancipated Spectator*, what makes art "political" – its shaking up of identification, its hollowing-out of words of their deterministic messages – is precisely what stops it from being "politicised". This 'tension,' argues Rancière, has all too often been overlooked since the emergence of a paradigm of "critical art" that attempts to 'plug the gap by defining a straightforward relationship between political aims and artistic means' (2009b: 74). Tactical absurdity, in contrast, assumes no such relationship: its operation remains squarely bounded within the realms of the aesthetic; as a tool of political engagement, therefore, it is excluded from strategies of 'rhetorical persuasion' (72). By staging what Rancière

refers to as a ‘shift from a given sensible world to another sensible world,’ the works discussed here operate through a non-rhetorical form of criticality that absurdly disrupts a given ‘representational continuity’ (75). They gain their critical power, it would appear, precisely through their silencing of a preexisting “sensible world” of critical discourse that holds any alternative to be complete nonsense.

## 5 Absent meanings and meaningful absences: the pregnant pause of absurdity

In conclusion, then, returning to the theme that opened this chapter, it is perhaps worth reflecting on why it is that *language* is silenced in each of the works discussed – and why *words* are singled out for removal. Part of the motivation, perhaps counter-intuitively, lies in a fascination with words themselves, and specifically, in their at times tortuous relationship with the ideas, feelings, and things that they are tasked with standing in for. The contingency of the relationship between words and their referents is, of course, one of the central themes of the *A to Z* project (see ch.4), and is, indeed, one of the driving forces behind the ‘tampering in practice’ with normative models of communication that, for Neil Cornwell at least, remains a ‘staple of humour, nonsense, and the absurd’ (2006: 25); the use of stream-of-consciousness verbalisations in *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* and *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany* (see ch.3), too, points towards an interest in exposing the inadequacy – even deleteriousness – of language as a means of accounting for experience. Building upon these concerns is a project based on a series of walk-and-talk interviews conducted during a residency in rural Northumbria in 2019,<sup>16</sup> which resulted in a text work *Untitled (Dagger)*. During a series of short walks through the countryside, participants were prompted to speak spontaneously about a sequence of words beginning with “d” (the project had initially been conceived as research for a forthcoming iteration of *A to Z*), with no other specific instruction given. My role as interviewer was to supply the (same fifteen or so) words to the participants at appropriate intervals and ask follow-up questions where necessary to ensure a continuous flow of words. Having been audio-recorded, the participants’ responses were then transcribed, with their musings on the word “dagger” later selected and (with only minor editing) combined into a wall-based text work.

The transcriptions of the responses, like those in the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project, are extremely literal, and include all the hesitations, repetitions, “um”s and “er”s. The content, too, is markedly erratic, frequently shifting in register from the personal to the analytical, the anecdotal to the funny, and at times drifting off-topic entirely. Arising out of an interview-setup designed to divest the interviewees of any responsibility to make coherent sense at all, their

meandering verbalisations make tangible the work done in the process of putting-into-words. Cast adrift from any clear discursive end, the participants' utterances allude, perhaps, to what Cornwell describes as the 'much-vaunted inadequacy or deception of language' – the distance, that is, and, indeed, the provisionality of the relationship, between words and the meanings they attempt to convey (2006: 27).<sup>17</sup> Uniquely amongst the works described in this chapter, *Untitled (Dagger)* functions through an *overabundance* of words – whose meaningfulness, moreover, collapses under the weight of its own superfluity. Operating through a tactically absurd randomness, the interview process throws up an incoherent babble of verbalisations, with the word “dagger” eliciting a range of responses from feelings of detachment from news stories about knife-crime in London brought about by living in a “nice” part of the city, to a date who had once tried (unsuccessfully) to impress with stories of how he had learnt to throw daggers at acting school, to a much-loved brother who had been spoilt as a child on account of his being the youngest of four siblings. Despite the faltering language with which these themes are articulated – and, indeed, the arbitrariness of their being spoken about at all – the real-world resonance and subjective authenticity of the responses is evidence of an absurdly meaningless exercise that despite (or perhaps because of) the absurdity of its premise has become loaded with meaning.

A final work, which also appears to attract meaning through its removal of its customary means of delivery, is the video *How Flat Is It It's Really Flat (Alice)* (fig. 24). Once again deploying the editing technique developed in *Lance and Oprah*, the video is constructed out of footage from an interview conducted during a residency at Nottingham Trent University in 2016. The interview, one of a series initially undertaken as research for the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project, features an individual speaking about her relationship with the landscape of her childhood home on the Norfolk-Suffolk border, the questions posed relating directly to concerns underpinning my own critical examinations of landscape in that project (see ch.3). This particular interview stood out in that its theme appeared to resonate particularly strongly with its interviewee, Alice, who spoke eloquently of her formative experiences of growing up in the (extremely flat) East Anglian countryside, and of its continued presence in her adult encounters with other landscapes. Ultimately, however, the interview footage was not used in any of the works that make up that project.

One of the motivations behind the subsequent editing of the footage was an (at first sight, perverse) desire to remove all of the interesting and affecting content from her answers.

*How Flat Is It* thus disrupts the norms of interview-practice itself, which, in Bell & Leeuwen's definition, is a form of public dialogic interaction premised upon 'exchanges of knowledge and experience' (1995: 2).<sup>18</sup> As well as concealing both the context and the aims of the interview,



Figure 24. *How Flat Is It It's Really Flat (Alice)* [still from video]

therefore, the tactically absurd editing of footage ensures that no meaningful verbal exchange of knowledge or experience is seen to take place. A sufficient number of referentially unspecific, fragmentary, and incomplete utterances are, however, preserved in the video, the effect of which is to cement an impression that both interviewer and interviewee are engaged in a mutual (and earnest) effort at articulating meaning through words:

*A: So we didn't-, we didn't...*

*D: Do, um... did-, did... ?*

*A: No.*

*D: Right.*

*A: It's a bit... um, you know.*

*D: Yeah. It's just-, ... it doesn't matter... [laughter]*

*A: Yeah.*

*[...]*

*D: So would you say that you, um... ?*

*A: Sometimes, yeah.*

*D: Do you think about it... often?*

*A: I do think about it quite a lot, actually. Um, yeah, I guess... [long pause]. It does get into my head every now and then, yeah.*

The resultant impression of hesitancy on the part of the speakers points towards a certain distrust of the notion that putting thoughts into words can ever lead to any stable and reliable meanings. What the subtractive editing problematises, then, is an insufficiently dynamic understanding of meaning, and the logocentric assumption that meaning is out there ready to be communicated if only the right words can be found to convey it. Whilst removing all the



discursive content from an interview ought to result in an interaction entirely lacking in meaning or sense, what is produced in the void of determinate language in *How Flat Is It* is anything but nonsense or meaninglessness; it is, rather, a space – an extended *pregnant pause* – that demands to be filled with new meaning. For if, following Paolo Virno (see ch.3 section 3.2.2), every meaning articulated by a word has the effect of suppressing every other potential meaning that is not articulated, then the device of removing words functions, in effect, as a liberation. In resisting the deleteriousness of certainty (see ch.2 section 5.3), the tactically absurd denial of straightforward discursivity does not, therefore, constitute an erasure of sense, but rather, its opening up to new possibility. As all of the works discussed in this chapter have demonstrated, the tactic of absurdly obliterating signifiers from any given “text” – whatever its context – can be seen to have the paradoxical effect of increasing the scope of its signification. Tactical absurdity, once again, is revealed as a generative force.

A: *Er, it's sort of...* [waves hand in an indistinct circular motion].

D: *Yeah. Yeah, that's...*

A: [Pauses] ...yeah. That... bit. Um... and I think it's awful, because it's all spiky – it all, kind of, wants to hurt you [gestures vaguely].

D: *Yeah... What do you mean, exactly, by that?*

A: *I guess I mean...* [pauses]. Um... [looks around thoughtfully]. *I guess...* [trails off].

D: *Yeah.*

A: ...probably [long pause, sighs].

D: *Yeah, I think that's-, ... that makes sense.*

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1 In subsequent conversations, several members of the audience told me explicitly of their struggles with the complexity of the language of the narration; a later version of the video, this time subtitled in German, presented at a group exhibition *The Art of Nature is the Nature of Art* at Künstlerverein Walkmühle in Wiesbaden, Germany, seemed to fare much better.

2 The event, entitled *Sense and Nonsense: A Festival of Absurdity*, was held at Centrum in Berlin, and also featured contributions by Matthew Crookes, Hannah Murgatroyd, Christina Read, and Kate Squires.

3 Indeed, Bell and Leeuwen cite the film editor and writer Dai Vaughan's concern with what he felt was the increasing mannerism of 1970s television production, lamenting (in an analysis that remains valid today) that 'every director knows exactly where he is expected to cut ... This principle applies not only to action footage but even to talking heads. The interviewee must not be seen to hesitate, grope for words, or add qualifying clauses that would disrupt the crisp pacing of the programme ... The doctrine of "signposting" ... has now swollen into a grotesque insistence that everything should be explained. The viewer must be told what a talking head is about to say, for fear he may presume to draw his own inferences from what is said' (quoted in Bell & Leeuwen 1994: 57).

4 A subsequent, and less successful, work in the series, *Have You Seen Her Heels (Pobol y Cwm)*, engages with a similar set of questions, this time taking an episode of a popular Welsh-language soap opera as its material. Originally broadcast on 20 January 2017 on S4C, the episode was chosen simply by virtue of its being the most recent edition available on the channel's website when the work was begun. Once again, the editing process removes the bulk of the spoken dialogue, leaving only silences, non-verbal gestures, occasional fragments of language devoid of context, and frequent shots of characters entering and leaving rooms. If, as the literary theorist Rosemary Huisman observes, the 'main vehicle of the soap opera narrative' is 'talk between characters,' and 'dialogue, rather than action' is its

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predominant 'subject matter,' then the removal of the verbal content from an episode ought to function particularly effectively as an absurd disruption (2005: 183–184). However, what makes the incongruity of the editing procedure perhaps less decisive here than in *Lance and Oprah* is that episodes of soap operas are generally not encountered in isolation; in the words of narratologist Robyn R Warhol, an 'experienced' (that is, long-term) viewer of a soap opera is able to 'interpret the unspoken aspects of the soap opera narrative: the long looks and enigmatic remarks exchanged between characters, the double-takes, the pauses in dialogue' (quoted in Huisman 2005: 183). For a viewer already devoted to the melodramatic charms of soap opera, that is, the intervention is more likely to come across as irritatingly obstructive than absurd; conversely, for a viewer immune to those pleasures, the source material is liable to be perceived as already too absurd, inconsequential, and removed from reality to exist as anything other than an easy target for satire. Perhaps, then, the relative failure of *Pobol y Cwm* stems from its origins in a soap opera genre that, in Schutzian terms, remains buffered from our own pragmatic everyday life-world, playing out within its own autonomous realm of sense-making.

5 'In the case of a verbal joke,' writes Martin, 'when we hear the setup, a schema ... is activated to enable us to make sense of the incoming information. However, information in the joke punch line does not fit with the schema, causing us to search for another schema that will make better sense. This second schema typically gives an altogether different (and even contradictory) interpretation of the situation, rather than just a slightly modified perspective' (2007: 86–87). The humour that arises does so precisely because 'the second script does not completely replace the first one' and 'the two are activated simultaneously' (87).

6 The word is used here in reference to Paolo Virno's verdict that '[t]he joke, in its role as a diagram of innovative action ... posits explicitly the theme of the contingency of all situations...' (2008: 97). See ch.3 section 3.2.2 for a discussion of Virno in relation to my video *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany*.

7 As Margaret Rhodes points out in an article about an exhibition *50 Years of British Road Signs* at the Design Museum in London, 'traffic signs should be invisible ... ; if they work like they're supposed to, you won't even realise you're using them' (2015: para.1).

8 An additional work based on a (more wholesale) process of subtractive editing is the text-work *First Lines of Books*, which is comprised of a series of collages that spell out initial sentences or part-sentences from novels (for example, from Graham Greene's 1938 *Brighton Rock*: "Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him") using letters cut out from unrelated books meticulously laid out on a page as if to suggest that the story-telling has come to a halt before it has had time to develop. Some of the sentences feature the names of well-known literary characters, some set up the entire premise of the novels from which they are taken, whilst others are celebrated as first lines of novels in their own right. Regardless of the degree of recognition they engender, the sentences draw attention to the vast amount of text that has been left out, triggering a speculative process of "filling-in" freed of any linguistic determination.

9 An additional video in the series, which was deemed less successful than either *Lance and Oprah* or *I Did It for the Reasons I Said I Did It*, is *You've Done It Again Haven't You*. The work, which applies the same subtractive editing technique to found footage of a 2015 BBC interview between then Prime Minister of the UK David Cameron and political journalist Evan Dando, attempted to draw out the performative aspects of the genre of the political interview. Cameron and Dando are indeed frequently seen smiling jovially at each other in the footage, as if the content of the interview were secondary to their apparent friendship and commitment to maintaining a mutually beneficial media relationship. What the original interview lacked, however, aside from any psychological drama, was a sense of a broader relevance as a political or media event, particularly given the subsequent dramatic upheavals in UK politics triggered by the Brexit Referendum of 2016. As one British observer commented at a private screening of the video in Berlin later that year: "This is a boring interview with the man who fucked up my country."

10 In an article 'The Art of Persuasion: Lessons in Tony Blair's Presentation Style,' for example, Sam Leith notes that over the course of his career Blair has attracted the label – 'first marvellously and in later years sarcastically' – as 'The Great Persuader' (2017: para. 2); John Rentoul, likewise, reporting on the Chilcot press conference, describes him simply as 'one of the most gifted televisual communicators British politics has known' (2016: para. 5).

11 This assumption is, of course, dependent upon the audience's familiarity with British politics, and, perhaps more pertinently – at least according to John Rentoul – upon their exposure to the 'rage' expressed by the British media towards Blair (2016: para. 15); Rentoul, in fact, points out that Blair is 'still ... admired abroad,' especially in Kurdistan, Kosovo and Sierra Leone, and that in the US and Australia the 'intensity and duration of [the UK's] Iraq War introspection is viewed with bemusement' (para. 18).

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12 The potential shortcomings of an apolitical framing of absurdity are discussed in ch.3 section 4.1.

13 An additional work in the series that is also, due to its incorporation of an overtly political signifier, strongly suggestive of a critical positioning despite its overt nonsensicality is the sound installation *Again Great America*. The work consists of a cardboard box placed on the floor from within which the sound of a computer-generated voice reminiscent of the US President Donald Trump can be heard. The voice reads a text consisting of the words of Trump's inauguration speech of 20 January 2017 arranged in reverse order. It begins as follows: "America bless God. You thank. America bless God and you bless God. You thank again great America. Make will we together, yes. And again, safe America. Make will we again, proud America. Make will we again, wealthy America. Make will we again, strong America. Make will we, together [...]"

14 Much of the non-linguistic character of the broadcast, however, is retained – albeit in a fragmented and not always coherent form. In line with Raimund Schieß's (2007) analysis of election night television programmes, four main visual elements can be identified: (i) the *title sequence*, which features computer animated graphics and dramatic theme music, appearing at regular intervals throughout the original broadcast; (ii) the *television studio*, the central component of which is a desk at which anchor David Dimbleby is seated alongside a shifting rota of politicians and experts, flanked in other areas of the studio by various co-presenters and analysts; (iii) *graphic displays*, in this case a series of immersive CGI environments around which political analyst Jeremy Vine walks and talks; and (iv) *outside broadcasts*, in which live reports are relayed from countless regional counting stations and campaign headquarters, the reporters engaging in dialogue with Dimbleby. Present throughout the edited video, these visual elements contribute towards a recognisable sense of 'authority and reliability' sought by the producers of the original broadcast (308). This sense of familiarity with the genre sits in contrast with the loss of the 'mystery-element' ordinarily associated with it (*ibid.*), since the viewer of the edited video will almost certainly be aware of the outcome of the referendum. All the visual apparatus described by Schieß, which, in tandem with the linguistic content, helps construct a 'whowonit' election night programme 'full of suspense' (*ibid.*), is thus rendered redundant; since no new information is being conveyed, its function is reduced to one of constructing and performing a 'media ritual' (276).

15 The commencement of the PhD coincided with the Conservative party's legislating for the referendum following their May 2015 general election win, spanned the vote itself on 23 Jun 2016, the invoking of the "Article 50" mechanism for leaving the EU on 29 Mar 2017, the initially scheduled exit of 29 March 2019, the subsequent extension until 31 Oct 2019, before reaching a conclusion around the time of the eventual exit from the EU on 31 Jan 2020.

16 The residency was part of a programme of week-long residential workshops entitled *Retreat*. Organised by Michael Whitby and taking place every year in a different rural location in the UK, the events focus on communal living as a platform for artistic debate; the 2019 edition, which featured ten participants, was located in Ninebanks, Northumberland.

17 It is worth recalling in this context Nietzsche's aphoristic account of the uneasy relationship between words and ideas, formulated as follows in *The Gay Science*: 'Sigh. – I caught this insight on the wing and quickly took the nearest shoddy words to fasten it lest it fly away from me. And now it has died of these barren words and hangs and flaps in them – and I hardly know any more, when I look at it, how I could have felt so happy when I caught this bird' (2001: 169, §298).

18 For Bell & Leeuwen, the interview relies, moreover, upon an 'obligation to answer ... instilled in us when we are young children;' an example is cited of a conversation with a child aged 18–24 months, in which the goal is not merely to acquire information, nor even to teach the child to say words, but to 'teach it to engage in verbal exchange, in producing shared meanings together with its mother:

Mother: What did you have for tea?

Child: (silence)

Mother: What did you have for tea, darling?

Child: Tea.

Mother: Yes, what did you have for tea?

Child: (silence)

Mother: Did you have an egg?

Child: Egg.

Mother: And some toast?

Child: (silence)' (1995: 8–9).



# Chapter 6

## Conclusion

# 1 Summary of research

The central objective of this research has been to furnish a practical and theoretical understanding of the operation of tactical absurdity in (post-)conceptual art practice. The extent to which this aim has been achieved will be considered here with respect to the five constituent objectives that emerged as the project unfolded.

*(i) To establish a precise critical and theoretical definition of the concept of “absurdity”*

In order to address the concept of “absurdity” itself, the opening move made (in ch.2 section 2) was to distinguish between three senses of the word in current usage. Thus, a decisive line was drawn between an everyday sense of the word (based on its dictionary definition as a manifest lack of reason, logic, appropriateness, plausibility, or seriousness) and two other, more contextually specific usages relating to literature (particularly the Theatre of the Absurd) and existential philosophy. The “nebulosity” of the concept was attributed in part to a lack of differentiation between absurdity as a *subject-matter* and absurdity as a *formal device* (a distinction noted but frequently overlooked in the field of literature), with this research appealing exclusively to the latter. An etymologically-informed definition of absurdity as *that which is out of harmony with a given context* proved effective and robust throughout the research, emphasising its distance from specific literary or existential associations, and making it amenable to its modelling as an artistic tool.

As part of an initial foray into theory, absurdity was modelled (in ch.2 section 4.1) through its interrelationship with its “other”, variously understood through notions of social convention, common sense, meaningfulness, or doxa. Following Alfred Schutz’s theory of provinces of meaning, absurdity was proposed not as an isolated category with fixed characteristics or tenor, but as a relativistically defined (and socially constructed) realm of sense that plays on an irresolvable discord between an (anticipated) meaning and a (consequent) meaninglessness. An understanding of absurdity as an *operation* rather than a *tenor* also led to a consideration of its overlaps with the mechanism of humorous incongruity, which is similarly accounted for as a violation of a set of conventions for how things ordinarily function in the world. Absurd incongruities, it was noted, however, are not necessarily funny.

The notion that absurdity can be defined as an innate quality or tenor was also challenged within the case studies themselves. Aside from the fact that many of the conventional hallmarks of absurdity were missing in the works produced (see section 2 below), it was also observed (in ch.3 section 4.1) that the line between the absurd and the non-absurd is fluid and contingent, resulting at times in artworks that are characterised less through any recognisable “absurdity” as through their sense of “unease”.

*(ii) To establish a context for the use of tactical absurdity in contemporary (post-)conceptual art*

The usage of absurdity in contemporary art was addressed both through an appraisal of its handling in critical and curatorial discourse (in ch.2 section 3.1), and through an analysis of a series of individual artworks (in section 3.2). A review of the literature revealed a conspicuous lack of serious attention paid to absurdity in contemporary art: its deployment by critics and curators was seen as promiscuous, with little distinction made between absurdity as form and absurdity as subject-matter, or between its everyday, literary, and existential senses. In the absence of almost any proper analysis of its functionality, a typology of absurd operations identifiable within existing works of (post-)conceptual art was proposed, consisting of the following eight categories:

- *Immediately discernible (comic) incongruity*
- *Complete absence of logic or sense, bizarreness, inexplicableness*
- *Fallacious reasoning*
- *Breaching norms of social behaviour*
- *Inverting and subverting norms of social representation*
- *Violating generic expectations (in art, or other cultural forms)*
- *Undermining the serious, the respected, and the authoritative*
- *Pointedly purposeless play and gratuitous ingenuity*

This typology provided a practical and theoretical vocabulary through which the works produced in my own case studies could begin to be positioned, and was particularly instructive (in ch.3 section 2) in developing an account of the functionality of the works making up the first case study. Later on in the research, the typology was referred to less frequently – partly, no doubt, as a result of its tendency towards neatness and oversimplification, but also, more significantly, due to a turning away from an absurdity of knowable ends and accountability.

*(iii) To develop a body of work that operates through tactical absurdity*

Within their own thematically distinct contexts, the works produced in the three case studies explored practically the forms that a tactically absurd approach might take, and the ways it might function as a tool of engagement. Deployed at a pivotal moment in the development of an artwork, tactical absurdity was understood as a device that engaged disruptively with a context. The “tactical” nature of its operation was imagined (in ch.2 section 6.3), following Michel de Certeau, as a manoeuvre within a game: a devious form of intervention that used, manipulated, or diverted a dominant order. Deployed with the intention of triggering a suspension of meaning, tactical absurdity was understood as a symbolic gesture of resistance against the

sovereignty of common sense. Its apparent ill-suitedness as a tool of engagement with “serious” subject-matters was embraced as a paradoxical strength in many of the works produced.

In the first case study, *Searching for the Welsh Landscape*, tactical absurdity was deployed as a tool in addressing the failure of clichéd representations of the Welsh landscape in accounting for the complexity of actual encounters with it. The critical intentions behind the project – its problematisation of the appropriation of landscape within narratives of national identity – were not articulated discursively or didactically, but rather through a set of approaches that were deliberately ambiguous, erratic, contradictory, banal, or nonsensical. The deployment of tactical absurdity within the development of the individual artworks was accounted for (in ch.3 section 3) through an analysis of a series of pivotal “decisive moments”, which were understood to lead to an entirely distinctive (if, at times, unaccountable) form of engagement with the thematic concerns of the project. The first moment (the decision to conduct a two-year search for a knowingly non-existent perfect Welsh hill) was framed as a pursuit of the irrational conducted as if it were rational; thus, the question arose as to whether the *tactical* intentionality of the premise and its inherent *absurdity* might, in fact, be pulling in different directions. And whilst the second decisive moment (the decision to juxtapose a sequence of video images of sublime landscape with a contradictory soundtrack) was easily accounted for through its destabilisation of the “grammar” of conventional landscape representation, the third moment (the decision to climb a hill without looking at it) remained almost entirely unaccountable – an observation that led to the conclusion that the simultaneity of the tactical and the absurd in this particular deployment of tactical absurdity was not, in fact, a contradiction, but rather an outcome of having brought together two mutually incompatible realms of meaning.

In the second case study, the *A to Z* project was positioned as operating through a number of tactical absurdities that were identifiable less through their implementation at pivotal moments in its development (unlike in *Searching for the Welsh Landscape*, there could never have been a “non-absurd” version of this work), but rather as a series of deliberately embraced contradictions that were only legible retrospectively. These were identified, variously, as: the simultaneous accountability and unaccountability of the work’s gag-like promise of a genuine feat of endurance (in ch.4 section 2); the undecidable temporality of the work’s deployment of rules, in which it was never clear whether they acted as irrational directives that defined what was to be produced, or whether they were attempts at a rationalisation of what had already (irrationally) been produced (in section 3); the simultaneous performance of orderliness and disorderliness enacted in the work’s overidentification with (or, in Certeau’s terms, “devious consumption” of) the alphabetical logic of the dictionary (in section 4); and the ambiguous



embrace of the “encyclopedic”, embodied within the project’s deliberately misguided and self-defeating aspiration towards objectivity and systematic comprehensiveness (in section 5).

In the final case study, *Interruptions in the Flow of Sense*, tactical absurdity was once again deployed as a tool of engagement in a series of specific contexts, driven in each case by a concern with the role of language in the construction of meaning. The contexts included generic forms of television such as the confessional interview (in ch.5 sections 1 and 2), everyday systems of communication such as motorway road signage (in section 3), culturally codified hand gestures in painting (also in section 3), media representations of politics in the form of a televised press conference and a live election night broadcast (in section 4), and attempts by individuals to verbalise meaning during interviews about specific topics (in section 5). The tactic in each case was a “silencing” of language: a removal of that which was understandable – which led to a breaking down of easy discursivity. Many of these contexts appeared to demand a discursive form of engagement; thus, through its turning away from discursivity, the tactical absurdity deployed was understood as a decisive intervention in a context. Its implementation was seen to give rise in each case to an irresolvable tension between meaning and meaninglessness, which was often suggestive of a criticality, whilst at the same time intentionally failing to make sense.

*(iv) To account for the ways in which tactical absurdity emerges within a practice*

In light of the autoethnographic framing of the research, certain tensions were acknowledged in the case studies between the presumption of intentionality and accountability underpinning the tactically absurd approaches pursued and the often accidental, contingent, or psychologically-inflected realities of the way the works took shape in practice. In the first case study, for example, the emergence of the project as a whole was seen (in ch.3 section 1.2) to have resulted from an unanticipated experience on the top of a hill, in which I experienced what I felt was an “absurd” moment of national pride. The development of individual works was also acknowledged (in sections 1.2 and 2.2) as unplanned or circumstantial: the search for the perfect mountain in *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales*, for example, was based on an activity that I had already been unconsciously pursuing, whilst the development of *Hill Walking* was triggered by an attempt to salvage a day’s work jeopardised by a public transport issue. The specifically autobiographical and political aspects of the project were also acknowledged (in section 4.1) to have limited bearing on the pursuit of tactically absurd practice per se, an insight triggered in part by a comment from a visitor to the exhibition.

In the second case study, a series of “interludes” (throughout ch.4) attempted to draw attention precisely to the discrepancies between a reflective and theoretical understanding of tactically absurd practice and the frequently banal realities of its practical implementation. This tension was attributed (in ch.4 section 6) to a “retrospective rationalization” pursued throughout this

research, but most explicitly in the *A to Z* project, whose extreme duration was seen to rule out any stable or reliable attribution of prior intentionality, determinate aims, or interpretable meaning. The “fabricated clarity of hindsight” evident in the work’s analysis was acknowledged to run counter to what was theorised (in ch.2 section 5) as the indeterminate and as-yet-unspeakable generativity of tactically absurd practice. Finally, in the third case study, the emergence of works was attributed to a number of contingent factors, such as (in ch.5 section 1) the response of my one-year-old daughter to a performative lecture or the bafflement of a group of non-English-speaking viewers of a video, and (in section 4) a desire to “silence” what I had come to think of as an interminable and insufferable debate on the rights and wrongs of Brexit; such originary impulses were only tangentially related to the intentions behind the deployment of tactical absurdity forwarded elsewhere in the research. Hinting, perhaps, at an inherent resistance of absurd practice to accountability, the origins of the *Road Signs* series of drawings is attributed (in section 3) to a bus journey that is acknowledged to have never actually taken place.

*(v) To forward a theoretical analysis of the functionality and value of tactically absurd practice, modelled through notions of relativity, generativity, and criticality*

The oxymoron inherent in the notion of a “tactical absurdity” (that its *tactical* deployment presupposes some meaningful outcome, whilst the *absurdity* of its operation simultaneously rules it out) was embraced in all three case studies as an essential part of its paradoxical functionality. The value attributed to its deployment thus took into account an irresolvable tension within its operation, which leads to its being suspended between legibility and illegibility. Its indeterminacy, unaccountability, and unknowability were theorised, variously (in the theoretical excursions pursued in ch.2 sections 4, 5, and 6), as products of its relativistic relationship with given frameworks of meaning, and as the source of its generativity and criticality.

In the first case study, which proceeded through a series of tactically absurd disruptions of the norms of representation of the landscape in Wales, the meaningfulness of those representations was undermined. Characterised (in ch.3 section 4.2) as, on the one hand, a set of “negative” procedures that disputed, disarmed, and dismantled the assumptions, construction, and functionality of a given representational context, such tactically absurd disruption was seen to enact a critique: exposing clichés, satirising pretensions, parodying artistic forms, and ridiculing cultural appropriations of landscape within narratives of national identity. The inherent nonsensicality of those tactics was seen (in section 3.2.1), however, to give rise to a “critical inconsistency”, which served to undermine the legibility and stability of that critique.

*Hill Walking* was understood (in section 3.2.3) as particularly dysfunctional in this regard:

manifestly avoiding any discursive engagement with the themes of the project, it appeared resigned to its critical failure. However, the identification of value within the extra-discursive “meaninglessness” of the work acted as a pivotal moment in the research, enabling a theorisation of a form of criticality that was understood not as a rhetorical didacticism, but, following Rancière (in ch.2 section 6.3), as a rupture in the logic of a meaningful situation. Through its dismantling of the edifices of conventional discourse, the tactically absurd disruption performed by this and other works in the project was attributed (in ch.3 section 4.2) with a “positive” corollary: an opening up of discourse to the creation of new meanings. By turning its back on “sense”, the tactical absurdity deployed in the project was seen not only to have forwarded an implicit critique of unthinking conventionality, but also to have given birth to a generative space of possibility, freed from the limitations and certainties of predetermined meaning.

In the second case study, too, various forms of criticality were identified within the tactically absurd premise of the *A to Z* project. The work’s pushing of the ordering principle of the dictionary to (and beyond) its limits was proposed (in ch.4 section 4) as revealing the dictionary’s (and, by implication, any) ordering principle as an arbitrary imposition of structure on the chaos of the world. The project’s ambiguous embrace of an “encyclopedic” comprehensiveness, too, was interpreted (in section 5) as a gesture of impudence towards the viewer’s inherited faith in the reliability and objectivity of the scholarly pursuit of knowledge. However, such attributions of determinate criticality, were (as was noted above) only possible in retrospect: at the moment of its deployment, the work’s tactical absurdity remained necessarily unaware of the specific critical ends it might serve and the value that might arise from them. The work’s exploitation of the disorderly orderliness of the dictionary, although it had been partly inspired by a technique to encourage lateral thinking, was seen (in section 4) to have abandoned those original aims; for although Edward de Bono’s use of random words had been designed to break free from the “restricting patterns” of thought, it had ultimately been devised as a tool with a determinate end (to foster creative solutions to concrete problems). Deployed as a tool of tactical absurdity, however, the value of such an approach was aligned squarely with its generativity: there was no foreseeable “use” to what it may (or may not) eventually give rise to.

Finally, in the third case study, the question of the value of tactical absurdity took centre stage. The works in the series were united through their desire to open up a fertile space for meaning by silencing the language through which it is ordinarily communicated. Whilst the tactic of removing the spoken content in *I Think That’s Best for Both of Us* (*Lance and Oprah*) was understood (in ch.5 section 2) on one level as a critical response to the inauthenticity and formulaic banality of the confessional television interview genre, its functionality could hardly

be equated with the unflinching certainty of satire. Rather, the tactically absurd removal of intelligible content, such as that performed in the *Road Signs* series, was modelled (in section 3) as an untethering of signification that opened up a given site of communication to a play of interpretation. Exploring the value of tactical absurdity most explicitly as a tool of critical (and political) engagement were the videos *I Did It For the Reasons I Said I Did It* and *Referendum Night*, both of which performed a disruptive intervention in a widely debated and highly discursive context. In neither case did the removal of language aspire to any legible (political) critique, but rather, following Metahaven's analysis (in ch.2 section 6.2 and ch.5 section 4), an overturning of a frame of reference. In rejecting a given set of discursive protocols, the works were theorised as operating through a playful undecidability, an open-ended critical silence. The value of such a tactical absurd criticality, it was argued, lies not in *what it already knows and happens to have found a novel way to tell you it*, but in *what it does not yet know and which cannot yet be put into words* – for to do so would be to close down the possibility of the new. The value of tactical absurdity as a *critical* tool, in other words, lies precisely in its value as a *generative* tool: for both were seen to operate via the pregnant pause of absurdity, defined (in ch.5 section 5) as a space of meaninglessness demanding to be filled with meaning.

## 2 Contribution to knowledge

Long before I began this research, and, indeed, long before I had begun to make any connections between absurdity and art, I had been familiar with a book of illustrations by Jacques Carelman called *Catalogue of Extraordinary Objects* (1971). It was my father's book, actually; he must have bought it some time in the late 1970s, and then filed it away amongst his small collection of art books. I had often picked it off the shelf and browsed through it as a teenager, marvelling at the nonsensical ingenuity of, for example, the *Umbrella-Protector*, whose double-decker construction was elucidated by the caption: 'Place this immediately above your own. Saves getting it wet' (1971: 102). It was this kind of thing that, for many years afterwards, would, in my mind, define "absurdity". Now, however, leafing through the pages of my own copy after having just concluded this research project on the very same topic, I am struck by how little of it resembles any of the work produced and discussed here. But perhaps that is the point.

For this research has been undertaken with the conviction that absurdity is far too important a concept to be left to a 1970s coffee-table book to define. It has, therefore, set about providing a rigorous and much-needed (re-)definition of absurdity as a specific device within (post-)conceptual art – an absurdity, in other words, that has shed its associations with the literary and the existential, as well as its resemblances to Dada and Surrealism (and their popular manifestations in comedy). Accordingly, the tactical absurdity that is forwarded here avoids any

kind of mannerism. In fact, much of the work produced in the case studies does not “look” absurd at all; at first glance, its viewers could be forgiven for thinking that a categorical mistake has been made in its use as a term of description. Beyond their superficially “non-absurd” appearance, however, the works can all be seen to function through what has been proposed in this research as a set of tactically absurd procedures: their absurdity, that is, lies in their *operation*, not in the *results* of that operation. As Jörg Heiser points out in relation to Dada, as soon as absurdity becomes a style, an *absurdism*, a ‘routine that forgets itself in its own gesture,’ its potency is lost (2008: 34); absurdity, he warns, ‘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 “school”’ (92). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that tactical absurdity is not always immediately recognisable as absurdity, for it is at its most effective when it is deployed within some unexpected context and in some hitherto unrecognisable form. Many of the absurdisms that we have over the years learnt to recognise belong to contexts far-removed from our own, and exist now as little more than charming mannerisms. When absurdity becomes too easy – when, that is, it has already become a style – it is perhaps time to stop calling it absurdity.

To the extent that the objectives of this research have been fulfilled, then – and accepting what was described (in ch.2 section 1) as the ‘non-solution focussed’ and ‘emphatically incomplete’ methodological approach underpinning the project (Boomgaard 2011: 68) – the research can be understood as having contributed to the practical and theoretical knowledge of its field of enquiry in five distinct ways. Firstly, by entering into an under-researched area (the use of absurdity in contemporary art), the project has been able to reinterpret and redefine the concept of absurdity itself, avoiding mannerism and steering it away from dominant existential and literary understandings that have limited applicability in a contemporary visual art context. The research has, moreover, addressed a lack of precision in its current usage amongst artists, critics, and curators by introducing the novel concept of “tactical absurdity”, a coinage that allows absurdity to be modelled as part of the toolkit of the (post-)conceptual artist. Secondly, by offering an overview of the current state of practical, critical, and curatorial knowledge on the topic, the research has forwarded a more precise vocabulary with which to speak about the operation and value of (tactical) absurdity; accordingly, the typology of usages identified in the works of a number of well-known (post-)conceptual artists succeeds in throwing critical light upon aspects of their practices that have been overlooked in favour of what is more conventionally regarded as “serious”. Thirdly, a body of practical work has been developed that offers sustained new evidence for the viability of artistic absurdity as a tool in (post-)conceptual practice; through a series of practical implementations deployed to various ends in the three case studies, tactical absurdity is demonstrated to be a flexible, coherent, and responsive mode of

practice. Fourthly, insofar as it has been undertaken self-reflexively, the research further cements the viability of an autoethnographic and emergent practice-based methodology as a means of uncovering new practical and theoretical knowledge. Finally, in exploring a number of theoretical perspectives through which the operation of absurdity can be understood in the context of (post-)conceptual art practice, the research forges novel connections between concepts of absurdity, convention, sense, meaning, generativity, and criticality. Whilst no definitive theoretical conclusion has been attempted, the trajectory of the research can be seen as having built towards its final presentation as an exhibition of artwork, which, together with the written thesis that describes, analyses, and reflects upon its development, offers in itself a distinct contribution to knowledge.

### **3 Implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research**

As Michael Y Bennett points out, definitions of absurdity are inescapably contingent, since ‘much depends upon who you ask, what decade you asked in, and in what region of the world you pose these questions’ (2015: 1–2). It should thus be acknowledged that having emerged from within my own professional practice as an artist, this research has been pursued within the limitations of a certain culturally specific framework. The field of operation of my work, that is, is anchored within a predominantly (Western) European and North American tradition of (post-)conceptual art practice. The research has made no attempt to adopt a more global perspective; research into the potential for diversity and variability in tactically absurd practice in other traditions of conceptual art, such as that of Latin America, East Asia, or Eastern Europe, remains to be pursued. Similarly, no attempt has been made to examine any temporal or historical shifts in the use and efficacy of tactically absurdity. The research has been pursued through the lens of my own contemporary practice, which understands the operational value of its post-1960s precedents simply in terms of their applicability to today’s social and artistic context; further research attending to shifting socio-cultural historical contexts of usage would represent a fruitful line of enquiry.

From a theoretical perspective, the avenues explored in this research make no claim to definitiveness, and are, indeed, acknowledged (in ch.1 section 5 and ch.2 section 1) as partial and selective; numerous other theoretical frameworks might offer equally legitimate grounds for exploration. Particularly useful, for example, might be an analysis of tactical absurdity pursued through affect theory, an approach which would allow an exploration of some of the more experiential or embodied qualities that have surfaced over the course of this research, such as the unease, discomfort, pleasure, or laughter associated with absurdity. Psychoanalytic theory,

likewise, might offer a productive means of modelling the operation of artistic absurdity, which would compliment and move beyond the structural, linguistic, and socially-situated approaches pursued here. Equally profitable would be an exploration of tactical absurdity pursued through the lens of identity politics, which, aside from a brief discussion of William Pope.L (in ch.2 sections 3.2.4 and 3.2.5) has largely been omitted; issues such as gender, class, and ethnicity remain to be addressed – both in terms of an analysis of the artists and their tactically absurd artworks, as well as a problematising of the socially constructed norms of sense against which absurdity is conceived. Finally, in relation to practice, the research limits itself to three case studies, which, conceived of as emblematic applications of tactical absurdity to specific subject-matters, is self-evidently limited in scope; the potential for further work on alternative themes is vast. A perhaps more significant limitation, however, is brought about by the presence of the relativising frame of art. As has been intimated (in ch.2 sections 4.2, 4.3 and 7, and ch.5 section 2), none of the works produced in this research are particularly transgressive or subversive *as art*: they have, after all, been designed to function in a contemporary art context that has no trouble accommodating “disruptive” forms of (post-)conceptual practice. Whilst this admission certainly relativises some of the conclusions drawn in the research, it is not understood to invalidate the premise of a disruptive absurdity, and the research has not sought to resolve that tension. Further research would be required to explore the potential of a more properly subversive or transgressive tactical absurdity, which, in pushing the boundaries of artistic practice, might well result in a form of practice that is unrecognisable as art.

I will conclude with a few observations about where the specific use of tactical absurdity as it has been presented in this research fits into a contemporary socio-cultural context. For even if we are living in ‘serious times’ (Metahaven 2013: 54), and even if we cannot help perceiving absurdity’s ostensible lack of seriousness as an ‘insufficient’ response (Virno 2008: 97), numerous resonances and engagements with the pressing issues of today can nevertheless be seen to have emerged. They have included: (in the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project) the reinforcement of stereotypical representations of landscape caused by the explosion in image-making and sharing in the age of social media; the influence of Hollywood clichés and television “landscape porn” in breeding a passive and uncritical relationship with the natural environment; a questioning of attitudes towards neglected and deprived post-industrial communities in Wales and further afield; (in the *A to Z* project) the continuing move towards a digitalisation of knowledge and a surrendering of responsibility for how it is organised and negotiated; the role of the artist as image-maker in the context of an exponential growth in the production of images by everyone else with a digital phone camera; and (in *Interruptions in the Flow of Sense*) our relationship with rolling news, non-stop political analysis, and the ubiquity and polarisation of opinion-making and debate on social-media. Added to this are the

numerous contemporary concerns dealt with in work by other artists employing a tactically absurd approach cited in this research, which include Pilvi Takala's engagement with shifting patterns and expectations of work in *The Trainee* and *The Stroker*; William Pope.L's examination of the representation of ethnic minorities in US society in *Tompkins Square Crawl*; Maurizio Cattelan's intervention into debates around immigration in *Stadium*; Kirsten Pieroth's allusions to the meaninglessness of zero-hour contract labour in her *Untitled (Trophy)*; Francis Alÿs's exploration of politically divisive borders in *The Green Line*; and Bedwyr Williams's ambiguous parading of national(ist) pride in *Bard Attitude*. All of these themes demonstrate the continued relevance, scope, and potential for the use of tactical absurdity as a tool of engagement with some of the most urgent issues of today. This research has limited itself to a general analysis of the operation and value of tactical absurdity as a critical and generative tool in (post-)conceptual art practice; further and more specific research into its use in exploring contemporary concerns such as these will be required to build upon the platform provided here.



# Appendix 1

## A to Z: Rules

1. Words should be visualised in alphabetical order, starting at “a”.
2. One visualisation should be made of each word.
3. Every word listed in the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (7th edition, 1982) should be visualised, with the following restrictions:
  - (i) Unfamiliar words (i.e. words outside the vocabulary of the artist) should be discarded.
  - (ii) Only nouns should be visualised.
  - (iii) Proper nouns should be discarded, unless they are listed without capitalisation (e.g. “aboriginal” should be visualised, but not “Apollo”).
  - (iv) Obscure, technical, specialist, or scientific words should be discarded (unless they are in general usage).
  - (v) Only one visualisation should be made per word listed (i.e. per headword). Only one sense of words with multiple senses should therefore be chosen (e.g. “boot” should be visualised either as “a tough leather shoe”, or as “the luggage compartment of a car”).
  - (vi) Only one of a group of closely-related derivatives listed as separate headwords (e.g. “critic”, “criticality”, “criticism”) should be visualised. Orthographically similar words whose meanings are distinct (e.g. “affect”, “affectation”, “affection”) should, however, be visualised separately.
  - (vii) Compound words should be discarded, unless they are written without spaces or hyphens (e.g. “courtyard” should be visualised, but not “court martial” or “court-house”).
  - (viii) Synonyms should be treated as separate words (e.g. “achievement” and “accomplishment” should both be visualised).
  - (ix) Only one visualisation should be made of words listed separately under alternative spellings, according to preference (e.g. “cipher” and “cypher”).
  - (x) Foreign words which have not been naturalised into English (i.e. those with headwords in italics) should be discarded (e.g. “aperitif” should be visualised, but not “*aficionado*”).
4. Except where specified for a given letter, there is no restriction on approach, style, size, media, or interpretation.

# Appendix 2

*Theresa*

Nearly three years have passed.  
It was the biggest –  
Our

I came  
a promise, a way.  
We will now not –  
and of this I am absolutely sure.

You are tired, you are tired.  
Tired.

Knife crime

You want  
I agree. I am on your side. It is now time.  
A short  
a final  
a deal

Our money.  
Our

Do they want to? Or do they not?  
Our  
It is high time. So far, everything, a choice. Motion after motion and –  
after, ever,  
what it wants. What they do not want.

I passionately hope  
A way, a deal,  
the  
the  
the

I will continue to work night and day.  
And others. But I am not –  
I am making, I should ask  
beyond

Time

The way forward.

That would mean asking  
What kind of message would that send?  
Bitter, desperately,  
together,  
second.

I don't believe that is what you want –  
and it is not what I want.  
The question, your answer.  
Now you want

And  
what



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