

IT WAS

GOING

STRAIGHT

ARD

IT WAS NEVER
GOING TO BE
STRAIGHTFORWARD

LAUGH?

Artists Dave Ball and Mel Brimfield have both been involved in the creation and critique of art that hops over the border into the world of comedy, while at the same time comedians have been doing the same in reverse. Anthony Shapland asked them why they think this is.

Dave Ball: For me, this is a question of definition – I'm not at all convinced that the border between art and comedy is so clearly defined. Of course, there are comedy clubs and there are art galleries, and a lot of what goes on inside one wouldn't sit very easily inside the other – but nevertheless there is a lot of overlap. I think it's far more interesting to focus on the inherent quality of the thing, rather than troubling over which camp it falls into.

I recently heard an interview with Ken Dodd; for him humour is the material, the stuff out of which laughter is generated; whilst comedy can be categorised as the performance of humour to elicit laughter. In this definition, my own work focuses almost entirely on humour. It's the slippery nature of what generates the laughter that interests me. I guess this is the freedom the artist has over the comedian. Whereas the comedian absolutely has to be funny, an artwork is allowed to be affecting on any number of levels: emotionally, intellectually, formally, and so on. If an artwork is funny, then that adds another dimension, an attractive entry-point into the subject matter – but there's never any obligation to provoke laughter, and certainly no sense that that is its ultimate point. Defining something as art certainly gives it a little breathing space.

Mel Brimfield: I think that one of the most significant factors is that writing is becoming more important in art again, and that's

partly to do with a shift in sensibility in live art, and lately video. For a long time in the UK, there's been a continual emphasis placed on body, gender and identity politics in both institutional accounts of performance history and the commissioning of new live work. It feels like there are the beginnings of an expansion towards strands of more theatrical, narrative based work that draw on TV, literary fiction, film, theatre and comedy genres and formats – artists like Bedwyr Williams, Tai Shan, Robin Deacon and myself all share that approach, although the content is really diverse, of course. The rise of alternative cabaret is significant too, and its recent inclusion in academic programmes of research. There are a clump of really superb comedians who, like artists, are interested in self-reflexivity (Stewart Lee and Simon Munnery for instance) but to me it reads more like a deconstruction of comedy quite rightly positioned firmly within its field. If you're an artist in the audience, there's something about the experience of how you arrive at the sparsely distributed laughs that feels familiar, but it's the real situation of deliberately not being funny specifically in front of a comedy audience that gives it teeth. In fact, Munnery used to do a bit with a Venn diagram about how he's often referred to as the closest comedy gets to art, which sounds like a compliment, until you think that that means you're way out on the edge of what might be considered proper comedy, and

similarly out on the edge of what might be considered proper art – so crap at both, essentially. See, that's what happens when an artist paraphrases a comedian's joke – it isn't funny anymore ... but there's a truth to it for me.

AS: Comedy or humour can often be a comfort in contemporary art because laughter is often involuntary as opposed to considered, but it hardly ever feels ok to guffaw in a gallery. When art takes on humour does laughter need to be put aside?

MB: It often is, but I don't think it's necessarily intentional quite often! To my mind, there's absolutely nothing standing in the way of an artwork being hilarious and packed to the brim with dazzling conceptual content. There's an obvious similarity to the way that the meaning of some art clunks into place so that you get it, and the way that a joke operates on a mechanical level that makes it plausible. An art audience doesn't want empty laughs though, there has to be some sort of tension between the form and content. There's a tradition of failure linked to abjection that's a fallback for a lot of art performance that co-opts comedic/theatrical forms, but it's much more exciting to see virtuoso technical skill put to weird and inappropriate uses (Ian Saville the Socialist Magician springs to mind – his *Vanish of the Military Industrial Complex* has to be seen to be believed). I find it's more disjunctive and potentially innovative to make

I COULD HAVE CRIED.

something that appropriates comedic and theatrical devices wholeheartedly to deliver what you might call 'art content'. It's the position I've always worked from – humour for me is definitely an essential part of economically hanging a lot of complicated ideas and references together. Using mainstream entertainment formats and recognisable types of generic writing helps audiences to make sense of the massive pile of references I squeeze into my work. So I suppose it's a bonus if people laugh, but not the main impetus.

DB: I think there's been a shift in expectations of contemporary art in the last thirty years or so: there's less of a sense now that art is only about providing profound or moving experiences. Laughter is now seen as a legitimate response, and artists routinely embrace and utilise its power. The way I think it works is like this: first the humorous artwork triggers laughter, but when you've stopped laughing, you're left with a residue. This after-effect is often complex: in a sense you're trying to piece together the thoughts that were exploded in the moment of laughter. So it's not really a case of having to choose between laughing and having some other *proper* form of contemplative experience – in the humorous artwork they're both part of the same response.

AS: Are there any comedians that should be considered artists?

MB: Most people would say Andy Kaufman, wouldn't they? His *I'm From Hollywood* film seems to point towards the kind of performance art I wish there was more of. It's a spoof documentary charting his brief career as a wrestling champion – he

invents an evil wrestling character in Memphis – his main schtick is that he'll only fight women, and that he's more intelligent than Southerners because he's from Hollywood and they have poor hygiene. There's a whole series of films made to enrage women, challenging them to take him on – whilst pounding a fat woman into a mat poolside at his luxurious beachouse, he explains that if any female should beat him in 'wrassle', he'll marry them, and then demonstrates how to use soap and toilet paper. There's a series of staged interviews on high-profile chat shows where he builds up a fake rivalry with apparently appalled wrestler Jerry Lawler. By the time he gets to the ring 10,000 grapple-fans are baying for blood. Of course, he's entirely apeing the way that wrestling's fictions are played out, but in a subversive way. It's a performance completed by the media reaction and audience reception. In the filmed interviews only some of the people seem to be in on the joke.

AS: Which has a longer lifespan, art or comedy?

DB: We tend to approach art with a more generous attitude: we know that we should be prepared to do a little bit of work to understand it, and so are more likely to overlook its anachronisms. An interesting example here is Shakespeare's comedies – we don't dismiss them for their lack of recognisable humour, precisely because we approach them as art and not as comedy.

MB: I agree – so much comedy depends on context to operate. Art is often more ambiguous and open to contemporary re-readings.

AS: In the late 1960s Keith Arnatt

screened *Self-Burial* (Television Interference Project) through the Tate. With hindsight it has clear slapstick/ Python references but it is subsequently referred to with po-faced solemnity. How does re-evaluating the past impact on what you do?

MB: All of my practice is involved in re-evaluation of the past in one way or another – one strand is a kind of active research into performance histories based on directly appropriating its documentation for skewed remakes of varying kinds. I staged a 're-do' of that Arnatt piece with Tony Hart's Morph disappearing into a terracotta pot of earth – the photographs were interspersed throughout the first episode of my spoof landmark arts broadcasting documentary *This Is Performance Art – Part One: Performed Sculpture and Dance*. It's become a way of devising collaboratively with various performers for me, so in effect making a live work backwards by staging its documentation, and critical and historical context. The notoriously gaseous and patchy historiography of performance art lends itself quite neatly to fiction – after all, it's a medium whose ontology is in part defined by its disappearance. A lot of my recent work comes from thinking about how history and biography, no matter how well-meaning, necessarily have to fill in gaps and smooth out inconsistencies to make a legible story. What's privileged in these accounts and why?

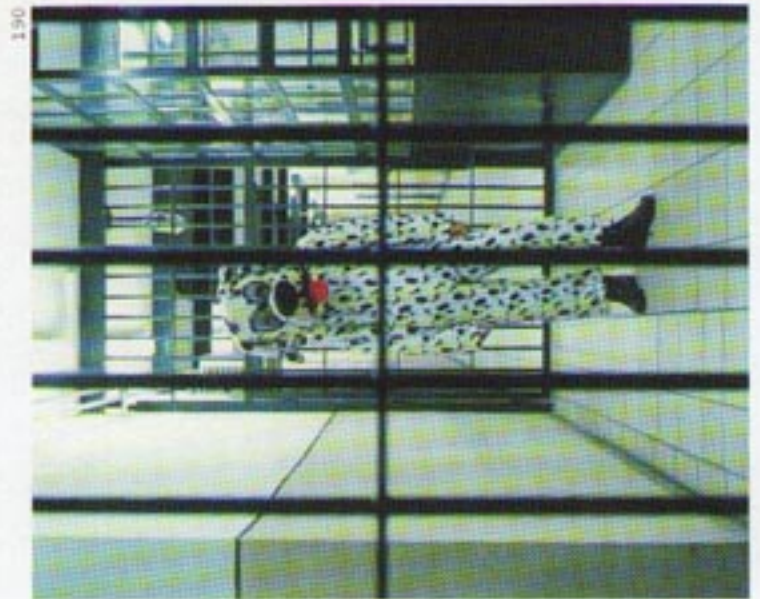
DB: I think it's easy to forget that what's now authorised as important in art history was in its time experimental, playful and perhaps not entirely sure of its own value. I find it highly unlikely that Keith Arnatt would have approached >>



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188. Dave Marchant,
Reclamation of Identity, 2007

189. Marcos Cheves, *Dying of Laughter*, 2002

Photo: Michael Wesely

190. Igor Grubic,
from Velvet Underground series, 2002

Self-Burial entirely without humour – I can't help picturing him in the pub afterwards laughing about it. That's not to say that his intentions lacked rigour or seriousness – just that he must have also had a sense of the ridiculousness of his act. If we're now unable to appreciate the humour in such work, then I think we're missing out on something important, and showing a lack of confidence in the absurd as meaningful. There's a rich history of ridiculous art out there – Dada being a prominent example – but it still seems occupy an uneasy position within the canon. The non-serious shouldn't be equated with a lack of sense; it's just a different kind of sense – which I'm sure is at least partly what's behind Arnatt's gesture.

AS: In a recent talk on humour and art Nathaniel Mellors referred to Duchamp's quote: "There's a humour that is black which doesn't aspire to laughter and doesn't please at all. It is a thing in itself, a new feeling so to speak, which follows from all sorts of things that we can't analyse with words". The Mark Twain quote is also frequently rolled out: "Explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog: you understand it better, but the frog dies in the process." What do you think gets lost in comedy and/ or art in explanation?

DB: When I was researching for my MA dissertation on art and humour I was having to plough through a lot of very dry, technical, and often extremely dull accounts of the functioning of humour. It became clear to me that by pulling humour into the realm of words and theory, it became a different thing altogether; it certainly wasn't operating as humour any more. The analogy I'd make is with aesthetics or the philosophy of

beauty. Reading Kant on this is enlightening on many levels, but isn't a beautiful experience in itself. Humour and beauty have a lot in common; they share a *beyond-words* character, a *before-thought* character, which is exactly what makes them so utterly compelling and enjoyable as experiences.

MB: That's a difficult question – I can only really say that I lately quite often prefer the slightly ambiguous approach of performative writing as a guide to unpacking meaning in the face of the implacable certainty of a lot of critical theory. With the odd exception, I find it fairly intolerable to read academic studies of comedy, which is odd, because I wade through a lot of similarly pitched writing around theatre. Perhaps it feels more like stating the obvious, as either something is funny or it isn't on quite a basic level. Analysis strips away the pleasure of personal revelation resulting from meaning clunking into place that happens at the best moments in both comedy and art. I don't like the idea of anything being excused analysis on any grounds, though!

AS: People are often asked for their favourite joke, only to stumble through it. I always keep one up my sleeve for unexpected requests. Do you have one?

MB: For brevity and haiku-like existential poignancy, you can't beat: 'A seal walked into a club.' And a few weeks ago, a Tim Vine one-liner made me snort on the Tube: 'Crime in multi-storey car parks. That is wrong on so many different levels.' I do like a re-worked generic format.

DB: What do you call a fish without an eye? A fsh.



AS: A man takes his Rottweiler to the vet. "My dog's crosseyed, is there anything you can do?" "Well," says the vet, "let's have a look." So he picks the dog up and examines him. Finally he says, "I'm going to have to put him down." "What? Because he's crosseyed?" "No, because he's really heavy."

191. Dave Ball, *Tin Anagrams*, 2007-9

192. Mel Brinfield, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, 2008

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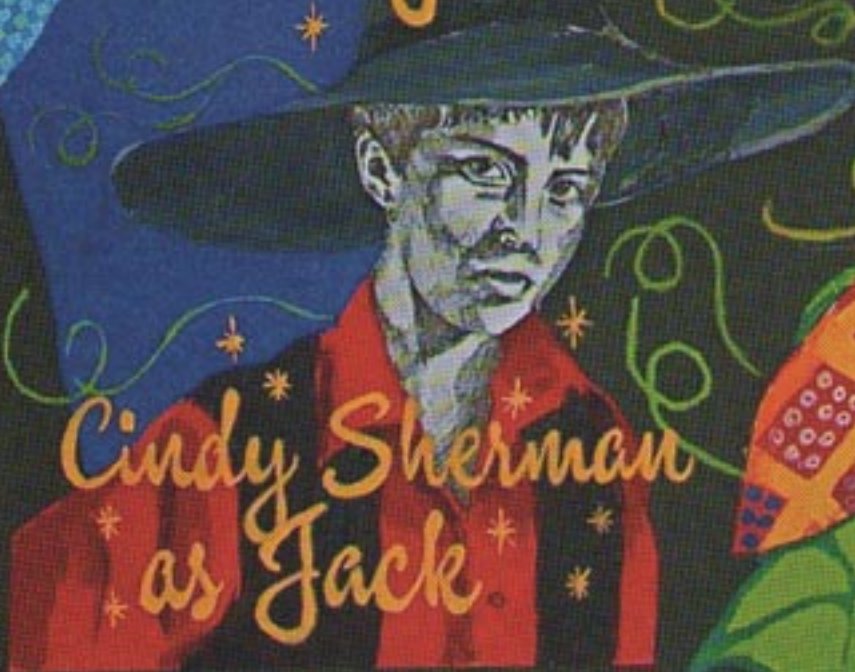
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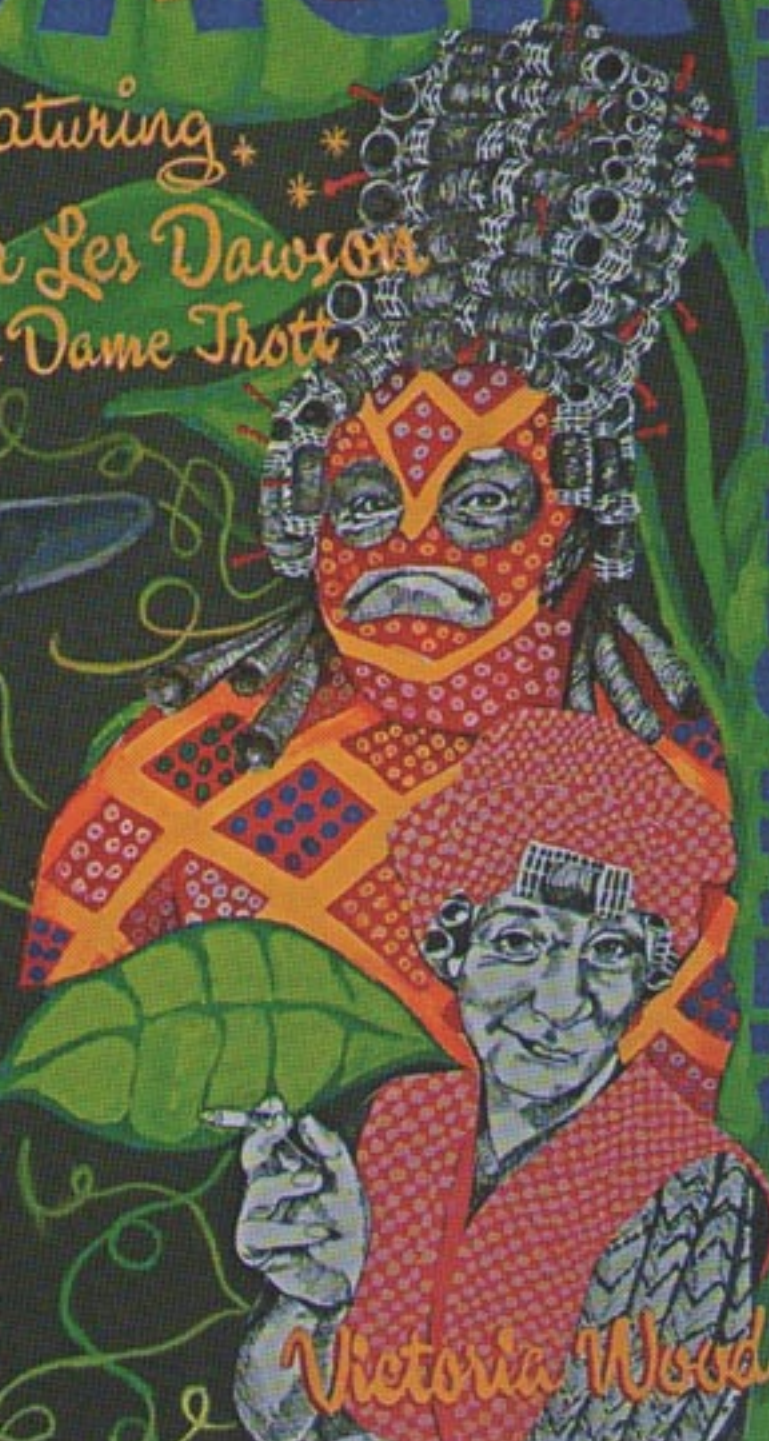


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