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Suspended Pratfalls: Slapstick in Contemporary Art

Levi Hanes
MFA, B.A. (Hons)

Supervisors: Prof. Dan Carey, Moore Institute, NUIG; Prof. Rod Stoneman,
Huston School of Film & Digital Media, NUIG; Dr. Maeve Connolly, IADT
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Declaration

I, Levi Hanes, certify that the Thesis is all my own work and that I have not obtained a degree in this University or elsewhere on the basis of any of this work.

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Abstract

This thesis considers a specific comedic trend in contemporary art that engages in a process of critical enquiry towards its own material structure and contextual frameworks. Certain contemporary artists employ a form of critical enquiry that is informed by, and structured through, a slapstick technique based on what recent comedy theorists such as John Morreall, Noël Carroll, and Mike W. Martin term Incongruity Theory.¹ This theory suggests, as a basis for humour, that the viewer has an ironic distance from the object of consideration and an awareness of its context, an awareness of the incongruous act within a normative event. Artworks that feature the humorous, material disruption of slapstick express the content through a series of expositions and disruptions deployed by the artist and documented in the artwork. I propose that, in order for humorous artwork to launch a critical enquiry, it must make apparent to the viewer the physical and contextual material construction of the artwork. Slapstick, I will argue, is a route towards this reflexive material criticality. As a comedic event predicated on visual disruption, slapstick incorporates its narrative framework through its setup and disruptive act, creating an ironic distance in the viewer from the object of consideration, or artwork, and its context. This distancing is not necessarily an alienating effect; rather it is a seemingly paradoxical event informed by an empathy elicited in the viewer towards the art object, obtained through a series of expositions and disruptions deployed by the artist and documented in the artwork.

Drawing on theories concerning art as a method of mimicking the sublime derived from Theodor W. Adorno and Jean-François Lyotard's considerations of Immanuel Kant's aesthetics, I suggest that critically

¹ John Morreall, ed. Introduction to *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 1-8. Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Mike W. Martin, "Humor and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruity," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 172-86.

² Theodor W. Adorno, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 30.

³ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁴ Walter Robinson, "Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism," Artspace.com, April 3, 2014 accessed March 31, 2017, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-

engaged slapstick artwork does not resolve in a distinct meaning or content or declarative statement other than a consideration of the process of making and the reception of the object by the viewer. Through cognition of the distanced reflexive process, the viewer avoids anthropomorphising the object of consideration and thus the artwork remains an other. The artwork that is concerned with its formal and contextual construction can thus engage with slapstick techniques, but does not necessarily rely on the conclusive punch line often employed in comedy to signify resolution. This lack of deterministic resolution distinguishes artworks that engage in similar media to mass entertainment such as moving image and still photography. Rather than a resolution predicated by mass entertainment, the artwork remains reflexively open-ended, suggesting humorous outcomes, while not depending on them.

Introduction

This thesis investigates recent comedic trends in contemporary art. When compiling a survey of contemporary artists for this research, it became apparent that much of the artwork concerned appeared to be drawing on similar style and material as the avant-garde and modernist movements from the turn of the twentieth century. This tumultuous and innovative period in art holds particular interest to this thesis not least because of its profound impact on Western art with its incorporation of then new and non-traditional media, but in particular for the many iterations of humour brought into the corpus. Dada especially offers useful, if problematic, examples of a process of art-making that is seeming antithetical to traditional fine art with its use of disparate media including theatre, film, vaudeville, photography and its own distinct use of seemingly sardonic humour. Yet, as Theodor W. Adorno notes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, the very bourgeois frameworks Dada sought to dismantle, the distinction between social, entertainment and art spheres, were the distinguishing features that allowed Dada act as critiquing agents.² Thus a tension between the intention to dismantle the institutional frameworks that define art and the seemingly necessary adherence to the semblances of art was invoked in Dada and continues to problematize and provide grist for contemporary artists with similarly humorous results.

In this thesis I examine how artists imbue their artwork with a humorous sense of the tension between the frameworks of art and resistance to codifying elements through the evident construction of the object or image. I will argue that humour is not only an effect of the tension; it is an integral aspect of certain reflexive art. I draw on film theorists to explore both the form and content associated with images and the implications of linear narrative in art. In particular, I use film theory from or about the period of the historic avant-garde, when film was itself moving away from its episodic nascence towards the narrative dominance of what the film theorists David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson in their

² Theodor W. Adorno, Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 30.

influential eponymous book termed ‘classical Hollywood cinema.’³ This formative period in film, loosely considered ‘pre-sound,’ or moving image prior to synchronised sound recording, proves useful to my formal analysis of art objects and images as it engages with formal analysis of a visual media that was transitioning from another field, theatre. Whether using the film theorist Donald Grafton’s analysis of slapstick disruption to linear film narrative or the transferal of theatre composition to filmic mise-en-scène and editing by the theatre and film director/theorist Sergei Eisenstein, the film theories suggest that in a medium such as film or theatre there can coexist disparate and often contradicting information that can suggest an alternative to normative associations with narrative structure or images. Furthermore, by examining the transferal of physical and visual comedy from one medium, theatre, to another abstracted form, film, I will suggest further formal readings of humorous content from less overtly durational art objects and images.

Although my own practical studio interests were drawn from this historic avant-garde and its more contemporary iterations, I had some concern that the comedic and stylistic similarities between contemporary artists and their antecedents was a form of shorthand employed by contemporary practitioners for commercial and institutional credibility rather than critical integrity. Some recent art trends that draw on the provocations associated with Dada have led the art critic Jerry Saltz to reference the term, popularized by the art critic Walter Robinson, “Zombie Formalists,”⁴ to describe a format of process-led, knowing and often ironic art with a lack of content.⁵ Indeed, it would not be out of place to consider many recent trends in contemporary art as the literary theorist Peter Bürger

³ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁴ Walter Robinson, “Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism,” Artspace.com, April 3, 2014 accessed March 31, 2017, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184. The term was coined by Martin Mugar in his blog post <http://martinmugar.blogspot.co.uk/2013/12/zombie-artthe-lingering-life-of.html>

⁵ Jerry Saltz, “Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?” Vulture.com, June 17, 2014, accessed March 31 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/why-new-abstract-paintings-look-the-same.html>.

considered the neo-avant-garde of the post-World War Two artists, Fluxus and Arte Povera for example, as referencing the historic avant-garde in style alone, lacking the imperative critical integrity that was fundamental to the avant-garde in the early twentieth century, especially Dada. Prior to constructing a critical formal analysis of slapstick in contemporary art, I was initially concerned that the recent comedic trends in contemporary art were falling for similar empty gestures suggested by Saltz and Bürger, coupled with the added concern that artwork that engaged with humour suggested frivolity, or an empty gesture at flaunting taste, for either rebellious credibility or financial gain (or indeed both). To address this concern and to establish a framework for analysis, I set out to consider methods of articulating a form of critical humour that (although drawing on similar stylistic and material trends set forward by the historic avant-garde) could remain a relevant means of critical enquiry in a contemporary setting. Regarding the stylistic and material concern set out by Saltz and Bürger, one problem with distinguishing the historic avant-garde from contemporary art was the sheer range of material used by the early twentieth century artists, including film, photography, printing, theatre and machine-made constructions. Indeed, one of the defining principles of the historic avant-garde was its embrace of contemporary media and technology, incorporating the material drawn from mass-production and entertainment into more traditional artists' media of painting and sculpture.⁶ Film historian Tom Gunning, comedy theorist Ian Wilkie, and art critic Hal Foster discuss the influence on the historic avant-garde, especially Dada, of early film and its connection with vaudeville and variety theatre and its melange of media,

⁶ Examples of the material influence of mass media on the historic avant-garde can be seen in Marcel Duchamp's and Man Ray's (1890-1976) ready-mades; the sculptures of Duchamp, Ray's, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Raoul Hausmann (1886-1971); constructed from mass-produced objects, and the photo-collages of Hausmann, Kurt Schwitters; collages of John Heartfield (1891-1968), Picasso, Hannah Höch (1889-1968), the Dada film's of Ray, Hans Richter (1888-1976) and Ferdinand Léger's (1881-1955) *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) to name a few. For further consideration of the inclusion of mass production tools and materials in the historic avant-garde see Dietrich Scheunemann, "On Photography and Painting. Prolegomena to a New Theory of the Avant-Garde," in *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives: Avantgarde, Avantgardekritik, Avantgardeforschung*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 15-48; and Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, et al. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism, Vols. 1&2*. 2nd ed. (Thames and Hudson, 2011).

visual and physical disruption and audience involvement.⁷ If one is to engage practically with contemporary art considering its antecedent's holistic approach and vast variety of often conflicting ideologies, materials and referents associated with the historic avant-garde, it is hard to avoid referencing the avant-garde in some manner of stylistic trend, either in the use of contemporary media, or traditional fine art material. Thus, considering the act of incorporating new technology and material is itself a process of modernism and the historic avant-garde, in order for a contemporary practitioner to seek some form of critical relevance and codifying resistant practice he or she should look to how the inherited materials can convey an accumulation of meaning over the novelty of material.

Considering the impact of the historic avant-garde on contemporary art practice, it follows that if one were to be concerned with the critical integrity of a contemporary artwork outside of a superficial reinforcement of the historic avant-garde's canonical status, one should look to how the artwork is constructed, how the various materials and their suggested content engage with each other and how these various elements provide information to the viewer. I will be considering what constitutes content later in this chapter. Suffice to say at this point I am specifying content as not only the information conveyed by the image or concept of the artwork, but also what the formal construction, the colour, fabrication material, the form and the location of the artwork indicate to the viewer, what Adorno considers as a formal sediment in artwork.⁸ The formal and contextual reading implies that the physical construction of the object, the artwork, is important to how it conveys meaning or content. Following this line of reasoning I was drawn to a form of comedy that relied on visual clues for its construction and articulation of content through visual disruption, slapstick, in order to see if by engaging with the formal elements of visual comedy an artwork could suggest to the viewer an awareness of the reflexive nature of

⁷ Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde." *Wide Angle* 8 (1986), 229-235; Ian Wilkie, "Vaudeville comedy and art," *Comedy Studies*, 4.2 (2013): 215-229; and Hal Foster, "Dada Mime," *October* 1.105 (2003): 169, accessed November 11, 2014, doi: 10.1162/016228703769684263.

⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 368.

its construction. Considering this formal parameter I looked to a form of comedy defined by its visual and/or physical disruption of normative expectation slapstick.

This thesis will explore how a practitioner can facilitate an empathetic critical engagement with the viewer through the material of the artwork by a process of introducing a humorously disruptive element. This disruptive element calls attention to the frameworks, structures and material used in the fabrication of the object that situate the object of consideration as an artwork. The disruptive element can take a variety of forms and actions, but is an incongruity that both stands out from the context and is dependent on the same context for its disruption to be effective. Regardless of the form or action, the incongruous disruption exists as a symbiotic element with the artwork; it is dependent on the materials or circumstances that make up the artwork in order to facilitate the disruption. The viewer is made aware of the discrepancy brought on by the incongruity through a conceptualization of the normative elements that stand in contrast to the disruption. While this reflexive element informs the viewer of a knowing reflexive fabrication of the artwork, it also draws the viewer into a process of conceptual assembly of the artwork, a process of reverse engineering whereby the viewer cognitively reconstructs the object or event using the materials evident in the object or documentation. This reverse engineering process invokes a mimetic empathy in the viewer as he or she has similarly constructed in their mind an, often absurd, object or event as has the artist. This process of empathetic engagement with an object or event draws parallels to amusement derived from watching a slapstick event: the viewer internally re-enacts the event, ironically suffering the similar pratfalls of the protagonist whilst comfortably distant enough from the event to derive pleasure. Drawing on slapstick frameworks, the disruptive elements in the following artworks can manifest in various forms and actions dependent on the contextual elements associated with the media employed. How well the material and contextual elements are engaged with by the artist and made manifest to the viewer differs the reflexive critical impact of the artwork.

Slapstick in contemporary art is recognised in the practices of well-known artists with overt examples such as the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader's (1942-1975) series of films depicting the artist falling from tree limbs, roofs, into canals (see fig. 1), in a forest and over trestles, to the American artist Paul McCarthy's (1945-) oeuvre, most famously his video *Painter* (1995) (see fig. 2) wherein the artist depicts a parody of a painter reminiscent of American Abstract Expressionists, applying paint to canvases with a mop, muttering "De Kooning,"⁹ and attempting to hack his cartoonish gloved fingers off with a cleaver. In the British artist Steve McQueen's (1969-) 1997 film *Deadpan* (see fig. 3) the artist directly referenced Buster Keaton's film *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) re-enacting the famous scene of the barn wall collapsing over the actor. Similarly turning to film, this time in the form of a parody of educational kitchen tutorials, the artist Martha Rosler (1943-) employed a deadpan reading of kitchen utensils in alphabetical order in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) (see fig. 4). The turn of the twenty-first century saw a variety of group exhibitions showcasing various contemporary and twentieth century canonical artists and artworks under the rubric of slapstick including most recently 'The World Turned Upside Down: Buster Keaton, Sculpture and the Absurd,' at the Mead Gallery, University of Warwick 2013; 'Slapstick!' Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg 2013; 'Double Act: Art and Comedy' The Mac, Belfast and Bluecoat, Liverpool 2016; 'The Funnies' MOT International gallery, Brussels 2015; 'Broken. Slapstick, Comedy, and Black Humor: The Goetz Collection' at Haus der Kunst, Munich 2014; 'Laugh-in: Art, Comedy, Performance' Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego 2015. The art magazine *Frieze* dedicated an issue in 2007 to 'The Slapstick Method'¹⁰ with various contributors considering the impact of physical comedy in the visual arts. The then editor Jörg Heiser published a book on contemporary art with a chapter dedicated to slapstick in contemporary art practice titled 'Pathos versus Ridiculousness: Art With Slapstick.'¹¹ These articles and

⁹ A reference to the Dutch-American painter Willem De Kooning (1904-1997).

¹⁰ *Frieze Magazine* 110 (October 2007).

¹¹ Jörg Heiser, *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2008).

chapter assisted in focusing this thesis's theoretical framework towards specific artworks and comedic technique. Heiser selected two of the artists used as benchmarks for this thesis, Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and Bruce Nauman (1941-), as important figures within what he considered the "slapstick method" in contemporary art.

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Figure 1: Bas Jan Ader, *Fall 2, Amsterdam*. 1970, Film still. Black and white 16mm film, duration 19 seconds. Courtesy the Estate of Bas Jan Ader. Available from: Grimm Gallery, <http://grimmgallery.com/artists/bas-jan-ader/> (accessed May 4, 2017).

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Figure 2: Paul McCarthy, *Painter*. 1995, Video still, Colour Video, Duration 50 minutes 1 second. The Tate collection, London, United Kingdom. Available from: Phaidon, <http://uk.phaidon.com> (accessed April 17, 2017).

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Figure 3: Steve McQueen, *Deadpan*. 1997, Film still, Black and white 16mm film transferred to video, duration 4 minute 35 seconds. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States of America. Fractional and promised gift of Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner. Available from: Moma.org, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/98724> (accessed April 17, 2017).

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Figure 4: Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. 1975, video still. Black and white video, duration 6 minutes 33 seconds. Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, United States of America. Available from: [eai.org](https://www.eai.org/titles/semiotics-of-the-kitchen), <https://www.eai.org/titles/semiotics-of-the-kitchen> (accessed April 17, 2017).

Although I draw on two key artworks from Duchamp and Nauman's oeuvre to inform the theoretical framework I have intentionally avoided using artworks from both artists that engage with direct visual puns on the supplied titles (e.g. Duchamp's snow shovel titled *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915) (see figs. 10 and 11) or Nauman's series of direct visual pun briefly discussed in Chapter Three *Eleven Color Photographs* (1966-70) (see figs. 23-27). Likewise, I have chosen *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) (see fig. 5) from Duchamp's ready-made series in part for its declarative title, and its consideration as both a ready-made and constructed object. I have made this selection wishing to focus on artworks that have been constructed in some manner (as opposed to selected as in the ready-mades of Duchamp's bottle rack or the above mentioned shovel) and that focus more on their visual material structures and contents to inform the visual disruptive implications inherent in slapstick rather than their relationship to verbal linguistics. Some artworks are still strongly informed by the verbal elements, an aspect I will consider below.

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Figure 5: Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*. 1913 (1951), replica of lost original. Metal wheel mounted on painted wood stool, 129.5 x 63.5 x 41.9 cm. Available from: MoMA.org, <https://www.moma.org/> (accessed April 17, 2017).

As with arguably all contemporary art, much of the content of the artwork is its context, therefore outside inference such as the cultural or utilitarian implications of the objects used and verbal referents form at least a supplement to the visual elements of the artworks. However, the selected artworks are not as dependent on their verbal elements in defining the main impetus of their construction; therefore they function better for the following formal and structural reading I bring to them. Furthermore, the artworks that are not dependent on verbal cues remove another element that might invoke an illustrative function to the artwork and therefore reduce them to a narrative construct, an aspect that I consider below as antithetical to the artworks considered.

The slapstick artworks I will be considering suggest to the viewer an absurd logic through the evident construction of the final form. I have distinguished two forms of slapstick drawing on the distinction of the slapstick prop (see fig. 6) used in theatre as a noise maker whose simultaneous suggested violence and artifice is indicated in its structure and the slapstick event as a narrative construction with simultaneous disruptive and contiguous actions evident in the documentation. The evident construction of the object or event makes the viewer aware of the fabrication, the

indications of continuity and disruption, and through a process of reverse engineering on the part of the viewer, suggests an empathetic response in the viewer with the absurd construction.

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Figure 6: Slap stick. Available from Dictionary.OnMusic.org, <http://dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/3207-slapstick> (accessed April 18, 2017).

The prime example of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* illustrates a slap stick object constructed to indicate its two disparate objects fitted together with a potential action contradicting the objects' initial utility. Jeff Koons's sculptures, *Gazing Ball (Barberini Faun)* (2013) (see fig. 12) and *Gazing Ball (Antinous-Dionysus)* (2013) (see fig. 13), similarly indicate the construction of the object, humorously alluding to cultural tastes and visually disrupting the viewing process through the distorting image of the reflective spheres. Urs Fischer's *Service à la française* (2009) (see fig. 18) uses mirrored surfaces and idiosyncratic image constructions to disrupt the cultural inferences of sculptural objects in the exhibition space and the objects' image conflated with the viewer. Lena Henke's *Hang Harder* (2012) (see fig. 19) building materials and unorthodox hanging of art objects indicate a physical and visual disruption to the exhibition norms, yet the formulaic representation suggests an erring towards a punch line concerning aesthetic selection of art objects further indicating issues at stake when considering the use of slapstick and humorous acts in art.

The second distinction of the slapstick event draws on Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967-68) (see fig. 8) a film that is both a documentation of a banal choreographed event and a considered media with implicit expectations that

serve the slapstick event. The media of documentation in Nauman's photographs are brought to the fore as the titles of *Finger Touch No. 1* (1966-67) (see fig. 26) and *Finger Touch with Mirrors* (1966-67) (see fig. 27) indicate a visual divergence between the documented action depicted in the images and the content or suggested meaning of the photographs. John Baldessari's *Throwing Four Balls in the Air to Get a Square (Best of Thirty-Six Tries)* (1972-1973) (see fig. 28) photographic documentation further considers the fabrication of artwork indicated in the title, suggesting elements in the construction of the artwork through the process of fabricating the images and indicating a playful engagement with formal and logical construction of the title's prescribed actions. Similarly, Peter Fischli and David Weiss's *The Time at Our Disposal (Zeit die zur Verfügung steht)* (1984/86) (see fig. 29) fabricate a series of formal constructions that amusingly draw on common materials with temporary formal balancing acts dependent on the medium of photography. Isa Genzken's *Two Loudspeakers* (1986) (see fig. 21) construction is more directly aligned with traditional constructed sculptures yet through its shape, material and descriptive, if ambiguous title, indicates a disruption between utility and form of the objects.

Drawing on the various objects, events and documented forms of the aforementioned artists, I fabricated a series of objects, exhibitions and video exploring further iterations of media with integrated humorous disruptive elements. In the video *Mirror in a Field* (2015) (see fig. 31-35) I fabricated a filming device that simultaneously recorded the protagonist, scenery and the filmmaking apparatus suggesting a disruptive visual experience. For the *Fruit Scan* series (2016-17) (see figs. 44-48 and 50), I used a domestic flatbed scanner and printed still life photographs that played with cubist concepts of space and the image surface. I further explored objects and images in a group of exhibitions that both suggested and denied utility indicating a physical response in the viewer, using the exhibition space as a means to further deny the practical utility of the objects whilst showcasing the various potential usage and interpretations of the objects through comparison and contrast with their surroundings and associated artworks.

The artworks suggest to the viewer the framework that establishes them as art, the art historical and cultural signifiers referenced as the normative elements, whilst disruptive aspects are inserted through constructed elements or by inference of the title. In all of the artworks the media both forms and suggests the disruption to the object or event. The content of the artwork, the meaning and material inferences, follow traditional methods and references for art as forms of ideal shapes and concepts, yet the artworks indicate an other, a frame of reference outside of the normative social conceptions related to traditional aesthetics through the disruptive elements.

I argue that these disruptive elements act as slapstick, a visual and physical comedy engaged with narrative and formal structures whilst simultaneously indicating a disruption to these structures. The resulting humorous reading of the disruption indicates a successful communication by the artwork of the incommunicable other, that the viewer is both let in on the structures and the disruption yet not existentially threatened by the process. The result of the reception of the slapstick artwork is an engagement by the viewer with the conceptualisation of the artwork, an ironic distance from the event that reveals an other outside of the frameworks established. How artists engage with these constructive and disruptive elements, and how, especially, they are able to maintain the suspension of both as conclusive elements, through a form of suspended punch line, whilst maintaining an amusing reception can further ensure a critically engaged artwork.

I have drawn on these references and intend to offer a deeper theoretical grounding, clarification of terms, and articulation of the application of the “slapstick method” within formal and contextual references in the following chapters. Further to this elaboration, I intend to bring new insight into art theory through the inclusion of comedy studies and integration of formal film studies. The theoretical framework will be augmented by drawing on a critical theory suggested by the anthropologist Michael Taussig’s studies of indigenous peoples’ association with potential reifying nature of colonial culture. Taussig’s theory suggests that a viewer

can be situated in an ironic distance, and simultaneous empathetic relationship with, an object of contemplation through a process of distanced mimesis.¹² The ironic distanced, yet empathetic viewer shares qualities with the structures that inform slapstick and critical contemporary art in their engagement with and disruption of contextual frameworks, the narrative set-up in slapstick, and the historical and institutional contextualization in contemporary art.

The selection of the two primary artists in this thesis, Duchamp and Nauman, indicate a wry, seemingly indeterminate and obscure reference to slapstick in their practice. These oblique approaches to slapstick informed my interest in selecting them in order to delineate aspects of slapstick that may not be readily apparent as in the previous examples by Ader, McCarthy, or McQueen. This is in part, to test the application of potential slapstick in humorous artworks that may not overtly suggest comedy through props, images or gags, such as a banana peel, as seen in *Grasa, Jabon, y Platano (Grease, Soap and Banana)* (2006) (see fig. 7) by the artist Wilfredo Prieto (1978-). Rather than overt props, I suggest that the artists analysed in this thesis indicate slapstick through an apparent process of construction of the objects or events rather than overt reference to codified slapstick acts or props; the artists are not pronouncing slapstick but inferring it. It is my intention to establish a framework for abstracted slapstick that, once articulated, can be used in future artworks, enabling a form of a theoretical toolbox for a critically engaged, humorous art practice. Furthermore, by looking at artworks that indicate through various material and contextual elements and media manipulation a formal slapstick without the gag or punch line, I will reinforce the criteria of contemporary art that emphasises the questioning of the structures associated with the material of the artwork over conclusive, determinant summations.

¹² Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, (New York: Routledge, 1993).

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Figure 7: Wilfredo Prieto, *Grasa, Jabon, y Platano (Grease, Soap and Banana)*. 2006, grease, soap and banana peel, dimensions variable. Collection Jesús Villasante. Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam and NoguerasBlanchard, Barcelona. Available from: Phaidon.com, <http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2013/june/27/low-comedy-meets-high-art-at-slapstick/> (accessed April 1, 2017).

I will argue that the suspension of the punch line or gag encourages a critical reading of the artworks focusing on the how and the why of the construction of the object rather than on its intended meaning or conclusion, as one might read in Ader's *Falling* series and McQueen's *Deadpan* as an expression of existential pathos and the creative act, or in the case of McCarthy, a parody of the same existential pathos, or an exposure of the implicit violence and subconscious oppression of the woman's role in the kitchen in Rosler's film. Rather than the slapstick events that tend towards overt statements on their subject, in this thesis I will be seeking a method of implementing slapstick in art in order to elicit an experience in the viewer that suggests alternatives to the normative and deterministic social structures associated with market-driven economies of late capitalism and reinforced by the institutional settings that the following artworks are situated. A method of conceptually engaging with alternatives to the status quo is suggested by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* as the "shudder" provoked by nature in its unrestricted form and in certain artworks that invoke a reflexive response towards their material and content. I will discuss

the shudder in greater depth later in this chapter; let it suffice in summary that the shudder is an internalised mimetic experience for a viewer similar to Immanuel Kant's concept of experiencing the sublime, a process of perceiving the infinite or unrestricted "nature." Unlike Kant's concept of the perception of the sublime necessitating the domination of nature through empirical conceptualisation, Adorno's viewer conceptualises the experience whilst maintaining the unknowable, un-codified nature of the experience. Thus, the shudder is evoked in the person who is witness to and aware of an experience that is overwhelming and undefinable, an experience of an other existence outside the known, codified world. This experience of the shudder offers a glimpse outside the constraints of normative realms that does not result in codifying the other that provoked the experience.¹³ Artworks then that engage with the paradoxical role of representing the unrepresentable offer an opportunity to consider options outside the status quo. A method of engaging with the unrepresentable is to indicate the structures that seek to represent or mimic nature in the artwork, to simultaneously express nature and expose art's inability to accurately represent the experience, a paradoxical parallel representation suited to slapstick that relies on an audience recognizing the structures in the set up it seeks to disrupt.

The thesis is divided into four chapters with a final conclusion. The first chapter will consider the theoretical framework drawing on narrative film theory with a focus on montage and slapstick and how these integrate with Incongruity Comedy Theory, to form a type of ironic mimesis. It will examine related writings of the associated theories concerning contemporary art that engage with mimesis, and certain forms of parody and irony. This section will consider and define terms that will be applied to formal and conceptual analysis of the selected artworks surveyed in the following chapters. It will question how slapstick works as a critical, self-reflexive tool for artworks through mimetic irony, an amusing process of cognitive engagement by the viewer with the artwork.

¹³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 118.

The next two chapters will consider recent artworks that draw from two formal definitions of slapstick. Chapter Two will focus on the slap stick object, a noise-making theatrical prop, as a constructed object that visually indicates its conceptual implications. This chapter will cite Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* as the primary source examining how the construction of the individual parts of the object are made evident in the final object and how this informs the conceptual framework and disruption. Furthermore it will examine the implications of utility or lack of utility and how the potential for activation of the object, either through an imagined or actual engagement, informs the reading of the artwork. Chapter Three will consider the slapstick action as visual disruption within a temporal event. Bruce Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967-68) (see fig. 8) will serve as a primary example as it consists of a recording of a banal, seeming non-event, whilst referencing early slapstick film.¹⁴ The fourth chapter will discuss some of my more successful practical applications of techniques drawn from the artworks and the research. The analysis of these practical applications will provide insight into the intention, process, and application of the techniques set out above and in the following pages.

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Figure 8: Bruce Nauman, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*. 1967-68, film still. Black and white 16 mm film. Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, USA. Available from: EAI.org, <https://www.eai.org/titles/walking-in-an-exaggerated-manner-around-the-perimeter-of-a-square> (accessed April 17, 2017).

¹⁴ The delineation between object and performance or event in the following artworks is a matter of degrees rather than distinct division. Indeed, the artworks discussed in this thesis share qualities of both descriptors of slapstick as an object that suggests an incongruous act in its construction and an event with an implicit or explicit incongruous act. However, this distinction will help illustrate through comparison the different methods of slapstick that can be utilised in artworks through nuanced formal and conceptual processes.

I have selected two key artworks to establish the frameworks supporting the thesis Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* and Bruce Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*. The two artworks will serve as an introduction to the terms of interest in the thesis: considering contemporary art and critical aesthetics. Following the exploration of these terms, I will proceed to consider the use of certain texts from film theory and their application to contemporary art. I will argue that the current divergent media and critical foci of contemporary art is drawn from their antecedents in Western art, the historic avant-garde, a term used by the literary theorist Peter Bürger to denote the artistic movements of the early twentieth century (pre-World War Two) who, arguably, sought to reintegrate art from its autonomous status back into the social realm, whilst investing fine art objects with critically engaging content and material.¹⁵ The two key artworks and the subsequent examples draw stylistically and thematically from the historic avant-garde,¹⁶ as well as the influences that the historic avant-garde integrated into art: vaudeville, cinema, and multi-media applications and references, incorporated into a body of artwork that engaged with semiotic juxtapositions.

Examining the stylistic similarities and the conceptual and formal link between vaudeville and the nascent media of early film on the historic avant-garde as well as the continued influence on the selected artists, I will also consider how film theorists have addressed the conversion of vaudeville to early slapstick film and how disruptive acts are implicated through the material and conceptualisation of film. I will then consider how this form of analysis can be applied to the slapstick-influenced material and media in specific artworks.

I will proceed to address how recent developments in comedy studies contribute to the theoretical underpinnings of contemporary art practice through the propagation of Incongruity Theory. I will suggest that through the use of slapstick techniques and a transparent presentation of the

¹⁵ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, *Theory and History of Literature Vol. 4*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Indeed, Marcel Duchamp was associated with Dada.

media and material that goes into the fabrication of the artwork the viewer is engaged in a cognitive process of synthesis and simultaneous disruption of the conceptual framework presented in the object. In the process of synthesising the framework suggested by the artwork, the viewer is engaged with an internalised mimicking action of the fabrication; the viewer cognitively assembles the artwork, imagining either the actual physical construction or configuring the conceptual elements that indicate the object as art. This process of conceptual synthesising is a form of mimicry that simultaneously engages the viewer in the making process whilst maintaining the distinction of the artwork as an observed other. Thus the artwork forms a cognitive link with the viewer that both engages empathy and distanced irony considering the event or object. This form of ironic mimesis in the viewer I will consider through the lens of the Michael Taussig's theory concerning the use of mimicry in Panamanian indigenous people regarding colonial influences that promotes a co-existence with other potentially reifying cultures. An equivalent to Taussig's ironic mimicry, I will argue, is at the core of the slapstick experience, and when applied to an art practice can enable an artwork to both engage a viewer whilst maintaining a critical stance towards its fabrication, intention and potential failure of the artwork's conceptual cohesion, elements that are fundamental in maintaining a reflexive and non-determinable artwork. I will conclude this chapter by summarizing the framework I will use to consider the following artworks.

Chapter One: Methodology and Literature Review

As this thesis considers a specific trend in contemporary art that engages in a process of comedic critical enquiry towards its own material structure and contextual structures, the theoretical framework will draw on fields that have considered the structural mechanics of visually disruptive comedy, notably slapstick film studies. As a comedic event predicated on visual disruption, slapstick incorporates its narrative framework through its setup and disruptive act, creating an ironic distance in the viewer from the object of consideration, or artwork, and its context. In this chapter I will draw from narrative film theory focusing on silent-era montage and slapstick film structures. I will proceed to examine how these theories relate with Incongruity Comedy Theory to integrate in artworks forming a type of ironic mimesis. I will consider and define terms that can be applied to formal and conceptual analysis of artworks in the following chapters, questioning how humorous visual and conceptual disruption in an artwork's form can suggest a cognitive engagement by the viewer with the artwork, eliciting an ironic mimetic position for the viewer that encourages a critically reflexive arrangement between the viewer and the artwork.

1.1 Considered Types of Contemporary Art and Critical Aesthetics

Before embarking on an analysis of the intersection of slapstick in contemporary art, I will set out the parameters of the type of contemporary art I am considering for this thesis. The critical criteria I will be considering to define contemporary art will assist in delineating art from other fields that use similar media, such as film, photography, and design. Contemporary art draws on a variety of media associated with commercial and entertainment purposes, from industrial manufacturing, to cinema, television, theatre, music and dance. The lines between the distinctions of commercial interests, industrial utility, entertainment and art are increasingly blurred by the diversity of material and media that contemporary art utilises. Whilst acknowledging that the delineation between art and commercial interest is

ambiguous at best, for the sake of this thesis, I will be considering contemporary art as a field of interest that emphasises the interrogation of its own context, material and content over its ability to communicate concrete narrative conclusions, utility in function, or promote an agenda other than reflexivity.¹⁷ This form of contemporary art frequently draws on and questions art history and the autonomy of art from other social contexts as a means to distinguish itself from its modernist predecessors.

Adorno's theory of aesthetics looks to modernism as a guide to reinvigorating critical engagement in art. In the bourgeois distinction of art from life Adorno found a potential of on-going self-criticality in art through perpetuating a pseudo autonomous distinction between art and the social sphere thus creating an objective position for the viewer to conduct criticism towards both art and social constructs.¹⁸ Art as a reflexive engagement with material is a defining element of modern art and considered by Adorno as a form of critical social function unique to art. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno addresses the separation of the art sphere from social praxis as the start of reflexive modern art following the decline of religious and courtly power with the rise of bourgeois social institutions in Europe.¹⁹ Drawing on Adorno, the literary theorist Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* considers the avant-garde a historic art movement that was constituted as an extension of modern bourgeois culture, yet was fundamentally critical of the culture. Similar to Adorno, Bürger situates the development of the avant-garde within the establishment of the bourgeois institutions, art having moved from the sphere of religious or courtly social function to one of seemingly autonomy and of self-reflection.²⁰ Far from having *critical* self-reflection, Bürger finds bourgeois art serving a function to neutralize criticism: it acts to reinforce a sphere "detached from daily life." Bürger describes a viewer before a bourgeois artwork experiencing a sense of

¹⁷ This is not to say art cannot engage with narrative or serve purposes other than reflexivity, but for the sake of distinction and clarification of the formal and contextual analysis of this thesis, the distinguishing element for art is this reflexive, anti-narrative aspect.

¹⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 138-9.

¹⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.

²⁰ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 10.

individualism, a sense of “imagined satisfaction of individual needs repressed in daily praxis,” yet without tangible effect as the experience is situated outside of life praxis and cannot be integrated.²¹ The bourgeois artwork and the viewer’s experience of it are held within the frameworks of the art institution, a physical space such as a museum or gallery and a conceptual one associated with artwork that promote individualism.

Bürger sets the avant-garde as having existed in a specific period prior to World War Two situated in Europe. He cites specific art movements, Dada, early Surrealism and the Russian avant-garde after the October revolution, as examples of the type of avant-garde that sought a politically motivated attempt to reintegrate art with the life sphere. In these examples, Bürger finds a similarity between them in their rejection of art as it developed in bourgeois society and in their subsequent failure in the attempt. Bürger notes Marcel Duchamp’s anonymous submission of *Fountain* (1917) (see figs. 9), a prone urinal, for the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibition as an example of the historic avant-garde’s failed provocative dismantling of barriers between art and life praxis. The subsequent association of the artist and the object with art, Bürger surmises, institutionalized the provocation adding it to the canon of artistic techniques.²² He distinguishes this “historic avant-garde” from the post World War Two artists of Europe and the United States in the fifties and sixties, the “neo-avant-garde.”²³ Noting that the neo-avant-garde claimed to have the same goals of reintegrating art into society, Bürger suggests that this form of critique was no longer valid as the historic avant-garde had failed using the same methods. The crux of the problem for the neo-avant-garde was association with the historic avant-garde in style, or similarity in surface materials and techniques. Indicating that the historic avant-garde incorporated “the totality of artist means” in order to reintegrate art into the social sphere, Bürger states that material alone could no longer distinguish

²¹ Ibid., 12.

²² Ibid., 53.

²³ Ibid., 109. Aside from Pop Art referenced in a footnote, Bürger does not explicitly allocate artists or movements to the neo-avant-garde outside of the general geographic location and time period. Ibid., 115.

daily life from art.²⁴ Therefore, with the incorporation of these methods and movements within the fine art canon, the subsequent artists and movements that used similar methods and materials of the historic avant-garde could not distinguish themselves from the institutions that had reified the methods and material and thus their critique was undermined *a priori*.

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available*

Figure 9: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*. 1917, porcelain, approximately 36 x 48 x 61 cm (artwork lost) Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz. Available from: [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_(Duchamp)), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_\(Duchamp\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountain_(Duchamp)) (accessed April 17, 2017).

Instead of extending the institutional critique of the historic avant-garde, Bürger describes the neo-avant-garde as mimicking their antecedents in style without effective critique.²⁵ The neo-avant-garde found themselves in the same bind as the historic avant-garde: in order to make an argument against the stratifying nature of bourgeois institutions the artist sought provocation through integrating decidedly non-art objects into the art sphere, a provocation that relied on their status as artists and by associating the provocative objects as artworks. Thus, the provocations were undermined as the objects had already been, or were subsequently, integrated into art institutional canonical gestures. In Bürger's analysis, the neo-avant-garde was further compromised by their acknowledgement of the

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁵ Ibid.,

historic avant-garde: they either recognized the failure of the historic avant-garde in dismantling the distinction between art and life and thus were motivated to continue the effort knowingly using the same techniques and materials and thus perpetuated the failure, or were cynically mimicking the methods and materials of their antecedents for institutional recognition.

Regardless of the neo-avant-garde's intentions, Bürger's criticism is that they knowingly perpetuated the failure of the historic avant-garde as they worked within the same institutional frameworks of their antecedents and thus were reinforcing the reifying process associated with the institutions.

Bürger's criticism of later incarnations of the avant-garde has been contested. Libbie Rifkin, in her assessment of Bürger's analysis of the historic avant-garde notes that he considers the avant-garde as a historical moment that treats the artists and the associated institutions with a "sociological wedge" separating the entities of artists and institutions "in theory only."²⁶ Subsequently, Rifkin notes, scholars of later movements have treated the two terms as mutually exclusive. Paul Mann has argued in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* that the avant-garde is not only the rejection of tradition and its associated institutions, but also defined by the same tradition. The avant-garde acts as an agent of recuperation as a "proper technology" of tradition²⁷ whereby the avant-garde's "criticism is not an adversary force but rather a means by which culture discovers its contradictions so that it can accommodate them to itself."²⁸ Recourse for artworks with the intention of resistance to the cultural systems they are contained within follows in the form of Adorno's suggestion that art maintain its illusory autonomy from the social praxis, resisting the conclusive normative structures whilst acknowledging its own failure to supersede the codifying aspects of the culture industry. I will consider how an artwork maintains its illusory resistant stance to the culture industry below, only saying at this point that it is through the inherent process of

²⁶ Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), <http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/>, accessed May 17, 2017.

²⁷ Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 92.

²⁸ Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 118.

fabricating art through mimesis that the conceptual integrity of autonomy is preserved.

Bürger's framing of the failure of Dada and the subsequent neo-avant-garde draws a parallel with Adorno's critique of Dada in *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno considers Dada's failure in their attempt to dismantle the barrier between art and the life praxis as predicated in their continued attempts to make objects based on abstract concepts that failed at semblance of the ideal or "real."²⁹ However, Adorno found that the avant-garde did provide a critical formal and materialist method of evaluating elements of social praxis. By making its failed removal from social praxis evident, an artwork could show the shortcomings of society. As the theorist Nathan Ross writes concerning Walter Benjamin and Adorno's concept of mimesis, an artwork's illusory autonomy and mimicry of social structures works through an "*imitation of rationality*" (author's emphasis): "Art imitates the social and historical form that rationality takes; in so doing, it makes us aware of what is irrational in the rational."³⁰

The historic avant-garde opened up what could be considered artwork beyond the traditional painting and sculptural material, expanding the types of objects available to the art sphere. The literary theorist Dietrich Scheunemann saw this expansion of physical matter incorporated in art as an opportunity to examine "the conditions under which an ordinary article of life transforms into a work of art."³¹ By examining the material construction of the artworks, a viewer may consider how the physical material, the implied content and/or utility of the material and its surrounding environment inform the reading of the object of consideration. It is no longer a necessary aesthetic element for an object to be considered high or low culture, rather that its construction suggests a questioning of its

²⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 30.

³⁰ Nathan Ross, "The Polarity Informing Mimesis: The Social Import of Mimesis in Benjamin and Adorno," in *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory: New Readings of Benjamin and Adorno*, ed. Nathan Ross (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 78.

³¹ Dietrich Scheunemann, "From Collage to the Multiple: On the Genealogy of Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde" in *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 30.

associated contextual elements over its direct utility for it to be considered art.

The following analysis of contemporary art practice considers art as a distinct activity both within and about culture with a particular focus on how objects are fabricated to suggest content or meaning. This line of reasoning follows Jean-François Lyotard's assessment of the postmodern as a continuation of the modernist project of interrogating the contextual frameworks that surround art practice. Postmodern art in Lyotard's distinction carries forward modernism's avant-garde disruptive nature seen as a continuous process of experimentation through a disruptive force that upsets established rules for the reception of meaning.³² Critical art interrogates the language of art, the phrase or way of speaking, examining the integrity of the structures associated with meaning-making. While interrogating its own structures of communication, Lyotard's concept of postmodern art maintains the modernist attempt to paradoxically present the unrepresentable: art attempts to articulate the unknown.

The presentation of the unrepresentable suggests Kant's formalisation of the dynamic sublime that Kant likens in his *Critique of Judgement* to forces of nature, forces that through their power and changing aspects threaten to overwhelm the observer.³³ Lyotard considers art a unique practice within the cultural sphere that best engages with the sublime as a sensation of time, of presenting the unrepresentable now, a time predicated on the dismantling of consciousness.³⁴ The experience of the sublime for Lyotard is a process of considering that an experience has happened rather than describing an event. The process is of an "agitation" – an experience he

³² Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." *Paragraph* 6 (1985). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43151610>. Accessed May 15 2017.

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81-7.

³⁴ Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," 1-2.

relates to Kant's agitation in reference to the mind exercising judgement.³⁵ The agitation, for Lyotard, is only possible when "something remains to be determined."³⁶ The act of making an art object, the "determination" of the picture, is as a witness to the indeterminable, an object that provides an indication of what it is not.³⁷ Thus an art object is formed as a process of agitation, the material is constructed to present an on-going query into its construction and the context that it is received.

The contemporary art under consideration in this thesis follows in formulation to Lyotard's example of the postmodern as the avant-garde of modernism, a process of interrogation of culture as a whole, whilst maintaining Adorno's criteria for critical art as a removed, if illusory stance to the material it critiques.

As the historic avant-garde demonstrated, a method of social criticism is to hold up a mirror, particularly a distorting one, to social norms in the form of an object constructed using the materials of mass entertainment in order to show the irrationality of the rational behind the constructs. Yet, as the incorporation of the tools and material of mass entertainment is normalised in the art sphere and the institutional settings of galleries and museums lose their former dominance as locations of art, it becomes difficult to distinguish between mass entertainment and art. To assist in distinguishing between the two spheres and to clarify how slapstick can be implemented in art in a more concrete form, I look to Heiser's distinction between entertainment and art as differing in their adherence to

³⁵ Up until this point I have used Meredith's translation of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. However, Lyotard appears to cite a different translation of the passage in reference: "For while taste for the beautiful presupposes and sustains the mind in *restful* contemplation, the feeling of the sublime carries with it, as its character, a mental *agitation* connected with our judging of the object." Found in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 101. Meredith translates the passage as "For the feeling of the sublime involves as its characteristic feature a *movement* of the mind combined with the judging of the object, whereas taste in respect of the beautiful presupposes that the mind is in *restful* contemplation, and preserves it in this state." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 78. There is scope to consider the relationship between movement in cognition with Benjamin and Adorno's concept of mimesis of the sublime. I use Pluhar's translation of this passage for the sake of continuity with Lyotard's argument, but will otherwise continue with Meredith's translation for the remainder of the thesis as I find the translation more nuanced.

³⁶ Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

narrative structures. Heiser considers mass entertainment as beholden to narrative and resolution. He does not dismiss narrative structures in art in the form of biography, historical context, or allegorical reference. Rather, Heiser distinguishes between art and entertainment based on a “quality” in art distinguished by the enquiry proposed by the artwork. Here quality may be substituted with Adorno’s notion of integrity in artwork.³⁸ The artwork’s quality therefore lies in how well the work of art interrogates its own construction; how its content, meaning and physical material is configured to communicate with an audience. Heiser proposes that “[w]ith works of art, it’s less about *what* than about *how*. Not about the story itself, but about what set the story in motion, what interrupts it, what gives it rhythm.”³⁹ Therefore, contemporary art that is concerned with critical engagement with culture is defined by its interrogation of the structures that set the narrative in motion. I suggest that the following artworks pose these questions through a series of humorous disruptions to the “rhythm” of narrative structure. The humour is derived through the paradoxical inclusion of the viewer through his/her recognition of the process of fabrication and simultaneous distancing through the observer’s own mimetic process of comprehension, a tertiary mimesis of the artwork’s mimicry of its subject.

As Heiser notes, the materials that are drawn from mass-produced objects or popular film and theatre retain their narrative implications from their commercial context. The paradoxical tension between the narrative implications of the material of the artwork and the subsequent anti-narrative disruption in the construction lends these forms of artwork an agitation that enhance their critical reflexivity. The interaction between these narrative and anti-narrative elements can lead to humorously incongruous manifestations. The artist may articulate these to further the critical enquiry of the artwork towards its material (location, physical material and apparent content).

³⁸ A critical integrity based on how well the object engages with its contextual elements, simultaneously acknowledges its potential, if not inevitable, failure in the process. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 30-33.

³⁹ Heiser, *All of a Sudden*, 16.

The selected artworks in this thesis draw from the art historical canon. Indeed, they owe much of their critical and formal concerns and appearance to art historical references and to the historic avant-garde in particular. I will argue that although the considered art objects draw on art historical elements, the following artworks function through a form of formal slapstick whereby a viewer need only draw on common knowledge of the material used. The common knowledge of material includes the objects used in constructing the object, their potential utility outside the setting and their non-utility within the art context; a sense that through form abstract ideas can be, to a greater or lesser degree, conveyed; and/or a general knowledge of Western art history will facilitate the contextual elements and encourage an appreciation of the formal slapstick suggested by the artworks.

1.2 The Comedic Aesthetic and Art

In his chapter on “Pathos versus Ridiculousness: Art with Slapstick,” Heiser refers to Duchamp and Nauman’s artworks in his assessment of “slapstick methods” in contemporary art. Heiser considers Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* as one of the first in the canon of modern art to engage with a slapstick disruption to the narrative imposed on art by bourgeois institutions. Heiser considers *Bicycle Wheel* an object of potential movement that “knocks the dignified off balance” suggesting that the stool has no practical use, for sitting on it would result in a pratfall, a knowing yet overt physical disruption.⁴⁰

Although Heiser’s assessment of Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* is a helpful suggestion for how to address art through formal comedic techniques, his reading of the pratfall as “knock[ing] the dignified off balance” is a secondary and more literal reading that could limit the artwork’s impact as a historical institutional critique to a crude slapstick prop. I will focus rather on the potential implications suggested in the form and the utility ascribed to the object by Duchamp as a meditative tool.

⁴⁰ Heiser, *All of a Sudden*, 22.

Duchamp suggested that the object's function was to enable the wheel to spin freely once activated by the viewer, so as to view the turning spokes and enjoy "looking at it, just as I enjoyed looking at the flames dancing in a fireplace."⁴¹ This activation of an art object would seem at odds with the passive viewer/object relationship of standard museum practice. The potential action of spinning the wheel in a setting that suggests otherwise creates an internal tension at odds with the contemplative association suggested by the potential action and the subsequent appreciation of the spinning of the spokes. This wry association with a potential action within an object's setting contains the slapstick potential. This second reading suggests a form of *implied* slapstick, not as a suggested prank, but a disruptive potential action suggested in part by the construction of the object and indication to its activation.

The suggested slapstick is also indicated if not fully realized in Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*. In a summary of Nauman's contribution to the field, Heiser describes Nauman's oeuvre as a series of events that touch on the "conditions of the artistic production: The narcissistic drama of the individual trying to make something—an idea—out of the supposed nothing of confusion and desperation."⁴² Heiser observes, without elaboration, that "[i]n Nauman's miniature choreographies, Samuel Beckett and John Cage meet Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, depriving slapstick of comic relief."⁴³ Heiser implies, through the association of the existential and minimal practices of the cited playwright and composer and the visual and physical antics of the actors, a form of minimal, reductive performed art practice in Nauman's oeuvre that seemingly engages with physical comedy yet suspends the expected outcome or pratfall. Heiser proposes that rather than direct and literal visual gags in the manner of an obvious pratfall moment, Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* suggests a more subtle approach, translating vaudeville slapstick

⁴¹ Marcel Duchamp from an interview of the artist by Arturo Schwarz (ed.), *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000), 588.

⁴² Heiser, *All of a Sudden*, 46.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47.

into art practice. This lack of a punch line whilst drawing on the processes associated with slapstick forms a process of applying slapstick in art that is reflexive and critically engaged.

The artist in Nauman's film is featured walking a prescribed and repetitive choreography that ends at his starting point, whereby no conceivable act is performed outside of the description in the title. The result is a logical, if absurd, minor event. The film features an action that does not lead to a slapstick act. Rather, through the formal associations of the stationary documentary format of the film, the exaggerated banal event of the performed walk contrasts with the expectation of filmed events as documentation of exceptional acts. The art object, the performance/film is a curious minor event deflating grand gestures associated with artists as virtuosos and autonomous geniuses, reducing the studio activity to minor, mundane if absurd actions. In the film, the physical and visual disruption is suggested through a process of an absurd act, the walked choreography, coupled with an anticipation of an action, some event or act that would disrupt the banal event. The recorded event in *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* is a logical and rational execution of the choreography stated in the title dogmatically executed on the screen. In an inversion of the slapstick pratfall, the lack of an anomalous act, the denial of the slapstick act, forms the humorous, incongruous and disruptive action. *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* therefore turns the exercise of fabricating an artwork into an absurd physical and visual disruption to expectation, thus turning the whole event into a slapstick rupture through methodical, banal action.

These two artworks reflect the focus of this thesis on a particular strand of contemporary art that is concerned with concepts of modernism such as the artist as an autonomous progenitor of art and that artwork reflect the essential material that forms it, elements that reflects early modernist

precepts and high modernist media specificity respectively.⁴⁴ Although drawing on precepts set out in modernism, the artists featured in this thesis work within a framework that questions the defining terms of modernism and indeed art in general, such as the role of the artist as an autonomous agent to the social contexts of politics or commerce, and what and why certain material is considered artwork.

The artists evoke something similar to what the literary theorist Linda Hutcheon considers postmodern parody. Hutcheon posits that contemporary artists use elements of modernism formulated in such a way as to question the “[u]nacknowledged modernist assumptions about closure, distance, artistic autonomy, and the apolitical nature of representation.”⁴⁵ Although questioning notions associated with art such as “closure” and “autonomy” that Hutcheon sets out, the artists surveyed in this thesis draw on similar techniques and ethos of a critical reaction against traditional aesthetics in art that were formed in the modernist era by the historic avant-garde. This stands in contrast to Hutcheon’s implication that the critical approach is unique to the postmodern artist. Furthermore, as I will set out below in consideration of parody and irony, I will make the argument that the contemporary artworks surveyed are drawing on the historic avant-garde not solely as elements to parody or as a pastiche, both methods associated with postmodernism, but as a continuation of the formal and contextual investigations set forth by the historic avant-garde, as methods of interrogating the viewer’s relationship with material through incongruous constructions of art objects.

With the advent of the historic avant-garde, the distinction between art and various forms of mass entertainment may seem blurred with the incorporation of film, video, theatre and more recently, web-based platforms

⁴⁴ The modernist precept of the autonomous artist draws on Charles Baudelaire’s modern painter as a bohemian, dandy, flâneur whose genius resides in a child-like instinct in documenting the “ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” in modern life; and the later high modernist media determinacy of Clement Greenberg’s distinction of art based on the limitations of its medium. Charles Baudelaire “The Painter of Modern Life” in *The Painter of Modern Life: and Other Essays*. Trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), 13; Clement Greenberg “Towards a Newer Laocoon” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 562-8.

⁴⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 99.

into the art lexicon. To assist in the delineation of mass entertainment from art and to clarify how slapstick can be implemented in art, I look to Heiser's distinction between entertainment and art as antagonistic application of narrative structures. The proposition put forward by artworks, in Heiser's definition of contemporary art, and the selection that I will consider, is not a statement, but an exposition considered through the artwork of the process of exploring queries and the structures that lead the viewer towards narrative construction. Unlike mass entertainment, this form of critical contemporary art does not seek to fabricate the content of the media, the film, image, or book within a structure to facilitate telling a coherent story. Rather the artworks that I will be analysing seek to interrogate the codifying elements that frame the story, or indeed that frame the artwork itself.

In order to set up a critical criterion when considering the following artworks, I will draw on Heiser's anti-narrative concept and look to principles set out in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno's criteria for the integrity of artwork depends on the integration of reflexivity in the artwork to the material, the content and form, of the artwork, how well the construction of the artwork informs the viewer of its own susceptibility towards elements of mass entertainment and its resistance to the same elements.⁴⁶ This argument follows Adorno's criteria for an artwork's integrity based on its willingness to engage with its potential failure in its ability to self-examine the construction of its material and content and its ability to resist reification by commercial interests in its institutional environments and associated materials. This approach maintains the separation of art from the social praxis, indeed, the separation defines art in Adorno's assessment.⁴⁷ Adorno considers art as a sphere that can, in some way, offer an objective view of a context, or at least allude to such a removed autonomous objective, if illusory, stance for the audience whilst still fabricated with the reified material of the culture industry and mass entertainment.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 151.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 138-9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

Adorno's theory is not without critics. Amongst others, Bürger criticised Adorno for reinforcing bourgeois ideals of fine art's stratification between high and low art,⁴⁹ an accusation that was later broadened to critical theory in general as lending artworks a limited "aesthetics of negativity" that the art critic Johanna Drucker associates with the historic avant-garde.⁵⁰ Drucker's accusation mirrors Bürger's claim that the neo-avant-garde artist drew on the historic avant-garde style solely for the purposes of evoking critical and provocative stances, whilst firmly ensconced within the institutions they claimed to critique. The neo-avant-garde, Bürger suggests, was compromised by the codifying aspects of the art institutions they sought to critique by the artists' and the institutions' mutual substantiation. Yet, just as empty gestures and stylistic trends suggest the trappings of codification, so too does fabricating artworks with solely didactic implications, imbuing the fabricated artworks with what Drucker considers the "cliché of radicalism, its elitist activity tak[ing] place at a remove from politics, creating promotional copy for high-end products in a rarefied market catering to specialized tastes."⁵¹ Bürger and Drucker's claims bear consideration and suggest that working in the style of the historic avant-garde and indeed drawing on the terminologies and association of critical theory can be a source of cynical self-promotion and indeed reinforcement of commercial and art institutions' and collectors' claims of intellectual and critical integrity, thus potentially compromising an artwork's critical engagement.

The concerns raised by Bürger and Drucker, amongst others, were pre-emptively addressed in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and indeed formed the basis for his criteria for the integrity of artwork as a method of resisting reification. As Adorno notes, the momentum of art's autonomy was formed through a move away from religious ceremony and was encouraged by bourgeois interests. Adorno defines this movement as a move away from a religious (or state) utility of propaganda and thus a social function of

⁴⁹ Bürger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, liii.

⁵⁰ Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

religious ceremony or didactic purposes towards an understanding of artwork's intrinsic value, or *l'art pour l'art*.⁵² This shift of focus in art from a tool of propaganda to one of self-interrogation inaugurated a crisis within art as to its purpose or utility. This crisis, Adorno asserts, was art's strength, as it provided artwork with an uncertainty that was integral in its process of resisting reification within the social order suggesting an alternative to social norms. It is through this process of self-reflexivity that "[a]rtworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity."⁵³ Adorno suggests that "[i]n artworks, the criterion of success is twofold: whether they succeed in integrating thematic strata and details into their immanent law of form and in this integration at the same time maintain what resists it and the fissures that occur in the process of integration."⁵⁴ Thus, an artwork with critical integrity is able to form itself into a distinguishable object of consideration, whilst maintaining evident elements of its potential failure to do so, the "fissures" of the object. For an artwork to function as a critical device it must adhere to established frameworks, its context, to consider it as an artwork, yet paradoxically simultaneously resist the "immanent law of form." Further to these criteria, Adorno states that an integration of critical enquiry alone does not assure quality as "[e]ssential to art are defining characteristics that contradict its fixed art-philosophical concept."⁵⁵ Critical and resisting artwork therefore acts with a similar function to slapstick in the narrative structure, an adherent form that simultaneously disrupts the structure it adheres to, yet is dependent on it for its structure and therefore for its ability to communicate its disruptive elements. The viewer of both the successful artwork of critical integrity and of the slapstick event is made aware of both the structures, the context that inform the artwork and event, and the disruptive elements to the structures and context.

⁵² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Examining how the artwork integrates critical engagement within its formal construction and suggests this to the viewer will assist the critical assessment of the artwork. In this way the artwork acts as a documentation of the production that encapsulates Adorno's concept of the *truth-content*, a concept that the literary theorist Simon Jarvis describes as the "configuration of materials which are historical, not timeless, a configuration which each work of art performs in a singular way."⁵⁶ In other words, the truth-content is an artwork's reference to its own context and conceptual framework. Adorno sets out truth-content as informed by an internal dialectic within the artwork between its content (*Inhalt*)⁵⁷ and its form, two mutually dependent aspects of artwork that make up its social import (*Gehalt*).⁵⁸ The artwork's meaning or import is dependent on its form as the form mediates the content. What form the artwork takes *informs* the reception of the social import, or content. As Adorno notes "The content (*Inhalt*) of a picture is not simply what it portrays but rather all the elements of color, structures, and relations it contains."⁵⁹ It follows, then, that, using Adorno's parameters, "aesthetic success is essentially measured by whether the formed object is able to awaken the content [*Inhalt*] sedimented in the form."⁶⁰ This process of assessing material fabrication methods assists in critically considering artworks that are materially dependent. Furthermore, these criteria are relevant to the discussion of artworks that engage with mass entertainment media yet resist the conclusive elements of mass entertainment structures. Therefore, a formal discussion of the fabricating techniques employed in the following artworks will help inform the reading of how slapstick functions within the artwork and how this in turn suggests the content of the artworks to the viewer.

The formal and contextual criterion for assessing artwork requires a critical analysis considering the content and contexts associated with the

⁵⁶ Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 105.

⁵⁷ In his editor's notes, Rolf Tiedemann clarifies Adorno's use of *Inhalt* in aesthetic contexts as: "idea of thematic content or subject matter" and *Gehalt* as "content in the sense of import, essence, or substance of a work." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 368.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

materials that are used to construct the artwork. In this manner the formal concerns, the shape, colour, and composition, can incorporate the contextual elements that assist in fabricating the content of the artwork. A viewer engages with an artwork by assessing how and what material forms the artwork. Through perception the viewer can assess the contextual frameworks suggested by the artwork and the associated humorous disruptive, reflexive and resistant elements involved.

The assessment of an artwork based on its contextual framework and disruptive elements lends itself to the following theories associated with comedy and film studies set out below. The comedy and film theories provide a method of formally interrogating artworks as well as setting a criteria for fabricating artworks that resist reification whilst engaged with the social and commercial spheres that encourage reification; the media of mass production and commercial interest such as moving image media, photography or indeed any graphic media. Using theories associated with mass entertainment and the intersection of comedy, especially visually indicative disruptive comedy such as slapstick, can assist in establishing criteria for critical visual artwork that uses the material construction and contextual implications of mass entertainment. In this manner, which I will set out below, critical artworks can suggest through the construction of formal concerns a slapstick implication that creates or indicates a visual disruption to the “immanent laws of form” and therefore engages in a process of adherence to and resistance towards formal laws.

The following artworks pose these questions through a series of humorous disruptions that incorporate the viewer in the process. This line of critical enquiry is associated with Heiser’s notion of the “slapstick method,” a term he aligns with a technique of implementing visual and potential physical disruptions within the construction of artworks that act as critically engaged objects. I will be seeking to extrapolate the terms and criteria that define an artwork as a critically engaged object constructed with humorous disruptions. As Heiser notes, the materials that are drawn from mass-produced objects or popular film and theatre retain their narrative implications from their commercial context. Furthermore, I suggest that the

art context, the gallery, museum, or canonical art historical references that encapsulate an artwork evince their own narrative context surrounding the object, with certain expectations and formal concerns that the comic, slapstick artwork incorporates and simultaneously disrupts as a part of its material. This paradoxical tension between the narrative implications of the material and the anti-narrative disruption through the construction of an artwork distinguishes the artwork as a, potentially, critical object. Furthermore, by adhering to the material structures suggested by slapstick techniques these forms of artwork are lent a friction that can prove beneficial when seeking to establish a critically reflexive object. How these narrative and anti-narrative elements interact in an artwork can lead to humorously incongruous manifestations that the artist can articulate to further the critical enquiry of the artwork. This incongruity forms a fundamental aspect of the critical enquiry and forms the basis of contemporary comedy theory set out below.

1.3 Humour Theory and Incongruity

When suggesting comedy in contemporary art often the more evident examples include an obvious visual gag, or semantic joke in the object. One need only look to Duchamp's provocation to the Society of Independent Artists Salon with his submission of the signed and upended urinal *Fountain* to see an example of a visual gag, indeed an implied slapstick gag,⁶¹ of an item whose utility has been usurped by its categorisation as an artwork. The structure of the joke or gag is a narrative framework that establishes a normative circumstance such as courteously holding a chair for someone to assist someone in sitting. The act establishes a circumstance of decorous behaviour and benevolence, setting up a narrative for an event, for example two persons meeting to have a courteous interaction. Within this narrative set-up a disruptive action can be inserted to circumvent the normative structure, a gag, such as the chair-holder pulling

⁶¹ Any activation of the object for its intended use would circumvent its utility as any liquid would run out from its top, not through its intended reservoir.

out the chair just as the person is about to rest on it. The conclusive nature of jokes and gags serve as corrective measures lending them to didactic implications emphasising the normative structures they disrupt by highlighting the absurd anomaly of the gag. Yet, as considered in the section of film theory below, the film theorist Donald Crafton has argued that the slapstick event described above serves either as both an unresolved concurrent event, the continuation of the decorous behaviour (the chair-holder braces the chair and the person sits on the chair), *and* the slapstick act of the pratfall where the person who is about to sit falls to the floor having the chair pulled out from under him or her.⁶²

Tom Gunning, in response to Crafton's assertion, argues that the disruptive event ends with a resolution and reincorporation of the pratfall within the narrative structure; the slapstick act reinforces the narrative structure through its disruption calling attention to the structural framework, the framework that incorporates a decorous protocol *and* a set-up for a pratfall.⁶³ In this instance, the pratfall acts as a parody of the decorum implied in the set-up suggesting a reassessment of the structures that lead up to the slapstick act. To circumvent this resolution suggested by Gunning, art under the auspices of Heiser's anti-narrative structure and Adorno's self-reflexive conception, offers an alternative more in line with Crafton's unresolved, simultaneous and paradoxically contradictory elements of the event.

A critically engaged humorous artwork presents a circumstance whereby the potential for the person who would sit on the chair is to sit and fall simultaneously. This concurrent act depends on a suspension of the resolution to the event. The structure of the gag or joke is established and contextually alluded to, but the pratfall or punch line to the joke remains suspended. It follows that this thesis is concerned with artworks that engage with a self-reflexive approach, that seek to interrogate the methods of eliciting humour from a joke or gag, rather than servicing the punch line or

⁶² Donald Crafton, "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy," in *Classic Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Bronovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995), 106-19.

⁶³ Tom Gunning, "Response to 'Pie and Chase,'" in *Classic Hollywood Comedy*, 120-22.

pratfall. This form of reflexive humour and indeed artwork is reliant on the examination of incongruity. Although Duchamp's *Fountain* does suggest these criteria of simultaneous implied slapstick acts, whilst questioning the criteria for the material of artwork, its nature as direct provocation as a comment on institutional authority regarding the criteria of what is art, the artwork suggests a closer alignment with a gag, at the service of its didactic content of provocation, rather than a question over its *own* integrity as an artwork. To further delineate the material and formal concerns of comedic art, I will turn to some leading theories in comedy to establish an aesthetic framework.

1.3.1 Categories of Humour Theory

The leading general theory of comedy, according to comedy theorist John Morreall and film theorist Noël Carroll, amongst others, is based on incongruity. Incongruity Theory posits that humour is derived from a cognitive response to a sensual reception of an event that simultaneously encompasses a normative circumstance with an incongruous disruption. Morreall, Michael Clark and Mike C. Martin regard this consideration of incongruity an aesthetic process of a subject considering and appreciating a comic object—a process of simultaneously sensual and cognitive comprehension of the act and the circumstances of the act by the viewer. In his introductory essay to *Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, Morreall surveys the three theories that have held sway over Western philosophy categorized as Superiority, Relief, and Incongruity Theory. Superiority Theory, Morreall writes, draws from Plato and Aristotle who held laughter as a direction of scorn towards someone and therefore held humour as ethically suspect. Morreall argues that superiority applies to too few examples for a general theory, as it does not distinguish an “essential connection between laughter and scorn.”⁶⁴ The breadth of physiological possibilities for laughter, Morreall concludes, including shock, biological quirks, or fear, complicates using laughter as an essential and defining

⁶⁴ Morreall, Introduction to *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 3.

aspect of humour. This complication of ascribing a physiological reactive response of laughter to the cognitive recognition of an amusing event is further problematized in the second theory suggested by essays of Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud. In Spencer's "The Physiology of Laughter" and Freud's "Humor," laughter is considered a release of excess energy built up by the subject from conforming to social norms.⁶⁵ In this form of relief, or release, theory, a joke forms a means to consider the constraints of the social norms with a contradictory conclusion, an absurdity that recognises the suffering in conforming and offers to release energies built up in suppressing the desires contrary to these norms through a laughter derived by the recognition of the absurd object. Carroll dismisses this theory as also too limiting for a unifying theory and one too reliant on what he terms a "liability of presupposing hydraulic views of the mind which are highly dubious" based on scientific jargon of their days that have little scientific grounds.⁶⁶ Like superiority, Relief Theory indicates a physiological dependence on humour's effectiveness, and although I will suggest that the following artworks depend on a form of physiological empathy by the viewer with the event suggested by the artwork, I will argue that this process is also reliant on a conceptual distance from the event, the humour defined by a pleasure derived from both conceptualising the event and empathetically engaging with the object.

The third category set out by Morreall considers incongruity drawn from Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer's consideration of humour. Kant maintains the physiological orientation of humour stated in Relief Theory considering laughter the result of intestinal release as a result of a joke's absurd conclusion. Although the joke resolves in laughter, Kant considers humour as a concept of amusement at the play of ideas, rather than at the expense of a subject suggested by superiority, or at the resolution

⁶⁵ Herbert Spencer, "The Physiology of Laughter," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 99-110 and Sigmund Freud "Humor," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 111-116. As Carroll notes in his survey of humour: "[t]he theories of Spencer and Freud have the liability of presupposing hydraulic views of the mind which are highly dubious. Both postulate the existence of mental energy that behaves like water—flowing in certain channels, circumventing blockages, and seeking outlets as the pressure builds." Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 38.

⁶⁶ Carroll, *Humour*, 38.

of an event suggested in Relief Theory. The resultant outcome, Kant posits, is not enjoyed by the viewer's reason, as comprehension is ultimately frustrated by the lack of resolution to the incongruity in the event.⁶⁷

Schopenhauer further considers the appreciation of the punch line's absurd outcome as a cognitive feat that elicits amusement. In his discussion of laughter in *The World as Will and Idea*, the object of amusement instigates a reception of a thing that when considered in the abstract *a priori* seems "plausible; but afterwards, if we come down to the perception of the particular case, thus *a posteriori* the impossibility of the thing, the absurdity of the assumption, is brought into prominence and excites laughter through the evident incongruity of what is and what is thought."⁶⁸ Therefore, the conceptualisation of the circumstances surrounding an amusing object is the amusing aspect of the object. Rather than the humour being dependent on the superiority of a subject over a lesser object in the case of Superiority Theory, or as a physiological release of expectant energy through expectations of social norms as in Relief Theory, incongruity offers a broader concept of humour, and serves the purposes of my argument as it includes cognition of paradoxes and inconsistencies whilst at a distance from said instances so as to not cause harm to the subject, or viewer, thus the ability for the viewer to derive amusement rather than existential terror or horror, from the object.

Michael Clark, in his essay "Humor and Incongruity," postulates a method of describing Incongruity Theory as an adequate theory for humour by seeking a "formal object" of amusement. The essence of an amusing thing Clark surmises is drawn from a process of "the enjoyment of (perceiving or thinking of or indulging in) what is seen as incongruous, partly at least because it is seen as incongruous."⁶⁹ Amusement is derived from the process of appreciating incongruity, a recognition of the absurd act

⁶⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 161-162.

⁶⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, "Supplement to Book I: Chapter 8, 'On the Theory of the Ludicrous'" from *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R.B. Haldane and John Kemp, 6th edition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1907-1909) in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 59.

⁶⁹ Michael Clark, "Humor and Incongruity," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 150.

of appreciating incongruous objects. The amusing thing is amusing because it is recognised by the observer as an absurdity. Drawing on Schopenhauer's hypothesis, Clark equates amusement derived from incongruity as a similar instance to Schopenhauer's consideration of the ludicrous. Schopenhauer describes the ludicrous as an "incongruous subsumption under a concept" of one or more objects to "the standard instances of the concept."⁷⁰ The ludicrous is formulated from a paradoxical and unexpected realisation of the subsumption of the object into seemingly normative concepts.

Schopenhauer postulates that amusement is derived from a recognition of the ludicrous. The viewer apprehends the "incongruity between such a conception and the real object thought under it, thus between the abstract and the concrete object of perception."⁷¹ In his essay "Humor and Incongruity," Mike W. Martin clarifies Clark's terms for an aesthetic appreciation of humorous incongruity, noting that appreciation of incongruity can be an aesthetic pleasure without amusement.⁷² Humour derived from incongruity, Martin surmises, is formed through a process of experiencing mirthful amusement through appreciating the incongruity established in the construct. Therefore humour is a prerequisite *feeling* of association with the cognition of the object considered and requires a contextual referent to indicate humour, as incongruity itself is not essentially humorous. In this manner of appreciation, Clark contends that the incongruity is not so much resolved, or rationalised, in the mind of the viewer, but left to remain incongruous and appreciated as such.⁷³ The process of enjoying incongruity is enhanced by the recognition of the absurdity of the process leading up to the incongruity and of the process of recognising and enjoyment of said incongruity. Therefore, to derive amusement from incongruity requires an appreciation of its contextual circumstances and thus recognise the incongruous element in relation to

⁷⁰ Ibid., 149.

⁷¹ Schopenhauer, "On the Theory of the Ludicrous," 54-5.

⁷² Martin cites Pablo Picasso's (1881-1973) painted eulogy to the bombing of a Basque town during the Spanish Civil War, *Guernica* (1937) as an example of something one can derive aesthetic pleasure from but not amusement. "Humor and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruity," 176.

⁷³ Clark, "Humor and Incongruity," 150.

these circumstances. The audience of incongruity must have some distance from the event, either actual, in the sense of a viewer of a slapstick film, or intellectually, as one might laugh at oneself for tripping over nothing in order to derive amusement from the incongruous act.

Supporting this aesthetic appreciation of the incongruous object, and reinforcing the contextual necessity of incongruous humour, is Noël Carroll's distinction of incongruity theory as a comparative notion that "presupposes that something is discordant with something else" and thus the "comic amusement emerges against a backdrop of presumed congruities or norms."⁷⁴ Carroll cites various examples of incongruity that support his theory. Of particular interest to the analysis of the artworks surveyed in the thesis is the comic narrative and meta-jokes that are dependant on non sequiturs. Carroll describes non sequiturs through a frequent theme of comic narrative of the misperception by a character of his or her circumstances. He cites the example of the reader or viewer made aware a character mistaking a master of the house for a gardener. In the joke, Carroll writes:

[t]he audience is aware of this [misperception by the protagonist] and tracks the spectacle under two alternative, but nevertheless conflicting, interpretations: the limited perspective of the mistaken character and the omniscient perspective of the narrator. Inasmuch as these viewpoints effectively contradict each other, the incongruity theorist counts them as further instances of incongruous juxtaposition.⁷⁵

Thus, the amusing appreciation of the incongruous event necessitates simultaneous acknowledgement in the viewer of the normative contextual elements established in the event with the contradicting incongruous act.

In summation of the preceding theories considering incongruity, a formal object draws amusement in a viewer through the apprehension of an incongruity between the object and its contextual circumstances. Once a formal object or non sequitur has been identified, the contextual circumstances, or "backdrop" in Carroll's terms should be defined in order to analyse the resultant incongruity. How this comprehension of incongruity

⁷⁴ Carroll, *Humour*, 18.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

is developed in an artwork can be elicited through formal considerations. Incongruity Theory offers parallels to aesthetic formal concerns when considering artworks that offer critical potential through specific material considerations in the artworks' fabrication. To be able to identify this process of establishing a contextual framework, backdrop or set-up, and simultaneously forming a disruption within an art object, I will look to the final formal construction of the artwork in order to decipher how a viewer would be informed of the context and incongruity through the obvious material construction of the artwork. For this formal analysis I will draw on some key film theory terms concerning *montage* as well as theories concerning early film and slapstick, described below.

1.3.2 Film Theory and its Relation to Comedic Art

The film theorist Christian Metz in his *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* considered narrative film “a temporal sequence,” a recording of a series of events and images that fabricate a beginning and conclusive end through a visual language that draws on the viewer's general contextual knowledge.⁷⁶ This semiotic approach can also prove useful when applied to constructions of events and images that do not offer a conclusive end. Indeed, through examining art objects as a series of events, materials and images constructed into an object of contemplation I posit that, just as one could apply analysis of slapstick events in a narrative film, a similar process can be applied to other objects of contemplation. Examining the construction of the experience of an art object within the framework of a narrative establishes its context as an aspect of the art object. The contextual narrative forms the set up for the disruptive material elements in the artwork. Therefore, just as one would analyse the slapstick disruption in a film against the normative elements established in the film, the disruptive material in the artwork is set against its contextual (narrative) framework of, say, the exhibition space. As set out above, the precedent for critically

⁷⁶ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 18.

engaged artwork to examine the fabrication and engagement of materials and methods of mechanical reproduction found in contemporary mass culture such as film and photography was set in the historic avant-garde. This approach of incorporating the methods and material of mass culture is, in effect, to turn the devices of mass media towards itself in order to view it through a critical lens. The meaning or content of the artwork, incorporating new or traditional media, can be derived through an analysis of how the material, the form and content of the artwork were constructed. Thus theories that analyse early film will prove useful when applying similar structural and contextual analysis of artworks that draw from this primary source of media (early film) if not directly then through the influence drawn through the historic avant-garde's direct engagement with the media.

Focusing on early film serves several purposes in this thesis. One is to consider pre-synchronised sound film as a distinct medium from synchronised sound recording in film in order to remove a sensorial variable to the visual experience, thus reducing the material effects to consider. Another reason is that early pre-sound film and the associated theories I will discuss tend to focus on the transitional aspect of film performance from stage and vaudeville to film, thus the medium of film and its relationship to the material it is recording is brought into contrast. Furthermore, the influence of early film and concurrent vaudeville left their indelible mark on the historic avant-garde and its subsequent antecedents in contemporary art. By examining the theories associated with this period of film and slapstick, I hope to elicit a theoretical framework that engages with the formal and contextual elements of artworks that similarly invoke early slapstick film.

The lasting impact of mechanical reproduction especially moving image and photography on modern and contemporary art has resonance in the artworks surveyed, not only in the material used, such as film and digital video, but also in additive and subtractive techniques informed by early film montage theory with an inflection of the disruptive routines used in vaudeville and early slapstick film. Tom Gunning in his essay "The Cinema of Attraction" considered the impact of film techniques used in early films to adapt stage performance to a new, mass produced format on the historic

avant-garde.⁷⁷ The media transferal of the vaudeville performance to film, indeed the integration of film within the episodic structure of the vaudeville theatre were drawn upon by the historic avant-garde. Gunning notes that the variety theatre with its “aesthetics of astonishment and stimulation,” encouraged an audience that engaged with the performances and spectacle through heckling and singing along, an aspect that Gunning notes the Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) particularly praised.⁷⁸

Gunning and the film theorist Donald Grafton both draw on the Soviet filmmaker, theatre director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of attraction as a point of interest in early cinema and the avant-garde. Indeed, Grafton draws on Eisenstein’s “theatre of attraction” as a description of the slapstick moment in narrative film. “In slapstick comedy,” Grafton attests “there is a variant of this concept [Eisenstein’s narratively disruptive attraction]: the ‘lyrical’ is the narrative, functioning as the regulating component; the ‘attraction’ is the gag or, again in Eisenstein’s words, the ‘brake’ that has to be applied to sharpened dramatic moments.”⁷⁹ In his analysis of the integration of early film and vaudeville cinema, Gunning draws on Eisenstein’s theory of attraction in theatre. In his essay “Montage of Attraction,” Eisenstein considers the experience of theatre as a material that is derived by the viewer from the attraction of the theatre. The attraction as defined by Eisenstein is derived from the musicians, the text and the costumes and is the “aggressive moment” in theatre that influences the senses and psychology of the viewer. The skilled technician manipulates these elements to negotiate the sensual and psychological reception of experience by the audience.⁸⁰

Eisenstein would later transpose the theory of attraction to one of collision in film montage. In his essay “The Dramaturgy of Film Form” Eisenstein considered the construction of film through montage, a

⁷⁷ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde.,” 229-235.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 232-3.

⁷⁹ Grafton, “Pie and Chase,” 110. Citing Sergei Eisenstein, “The Unexpected,” in *Film Form*, trans and ed. by Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1949), 23.

⁸⁰ Sergei M. Eisenstein, “Montage of Attractions,” in *The Film Sense*, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Meridian, 1957), 230.

construction formed through the juxtaposition of images that utilised the content derived from a collision of the individual shot or images' content. The resulting collisions of juxtaposed images and actions, Eisenstein posited, provoke a startled response in the audience.⁸¹ Montage of attraction suggests a way of fabricating a narrative structure from a series of disparate images relying on editing and the audience's visual and cultural comprehension to apprehend the representation on screen. The subsequent content of the sequential independent shots form a vertical conflation wherein "each sequential element is perceived not *next* to each other, but on *top* of the other."⁸² Thus, the meaning of the subsequent images and the received content of the film is derived through the accumulated information attained through the montage of attractions, a form of visual and contextual "blending" in the viewer' conception in Eisenstein's terms.⁸³

Reinforcing this idea of the formal and contextual construction of film content through its formal material, the film theorist Rudolf Arnheim set out a more reductive analysis of film drawing on the abstract nature of film's indexicality. Regarding the photographic reproductive process of film, Arnheim considers the resulting moving images as essentially the replication of a series of shapes and tones projected on a screen. Unlike the viewer's experience of seeing an object in person, a process of multiple sensual and contextualising experiences synthesised in the brain, film, Arnheim stresses, is the product of the recording of light reflecting off planes and recorded on a two-dimensional surface. How this material is constructed in the editing suite and by the viewer's conceptual orientation is how meaning or content is derived from film.⁸⁴ Through a process of image association with actual objects by the viewer and the manipulation of the

⁸¹ Sergei Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form" in *Film Form*, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1977), 45-63. Eisenstein describes montage as a form of constructing a film through combining individual shots, a process that is not exclusive to juxtaposed images of disparate subjects. In his essay "The Cinematographic Principle and Ideogram" Eisenstein establishes how individual shots of a subject from varying angles or distances can constitute a montage. Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and Ideogram," in *Film Form*, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1977), 33-4.

⁸² Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," 49.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, "Film and Reality," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 323.

images and editing decisions by the filmmaker, a film draws on these individual elements to construct content. Arnheim and Eisenstein's theories argue that meaning or content is derived from a medium through an amalgamation of various materials and images informed by the audience's contextual foreknowledge of the individual elements, the images, and the final medium. Film montage, then, draws meaning and narrative from sequences of images that are dependent on the viewer's perceptions and general understanding of the contextual information suggested in the fabricated sequence of images.

In the contemporary artworks that I have selected the fabrication of the art object is a process of juxtaposing individual objects or actions with their own recognisable associated content into a collision of semiotic perceptions. This is, in part, an artefact of the historical avant-garde's incorporation of materials of mass production such as Duchamp's *Fountain* as well as the incorporation of forms of mass entertainment such as theatre and cinema. Thus, both the form and the context associated with art has been expanded and conflated, each element questioning its own substance. Further to the materials, Bürger as well as others have noted that it was the historic avant-garde's intent to dismantle the bourgeois division of high art from the life praxis. The historic avant-garde subsequently rendered previous distinctions between the materials and elements that constituted art from objects of utility, entertainment or propaganda if not obsolete then contested. Thus, the lexicon of art was expanded to include a comedic interrelationship between common materials from the social sphere, such as mass produced objects, and traditional elements such as genre and formal categories like painting and sculpture. The incongruity between object and content could be further highlighted by the title (e.g. Duchamp's use of a snow shovel in a sculpture titled *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915) (see figs. 10 and 11)). The viewer's reception of the artwork is informed through considering how these seemingly disparate components interact within the exhibition space.

*image
not
available*

Figure 10: Marcel Duchamp *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. 1915, Original lost. Wood and galvanized-iron snow shovel, approximately 132 cm. Available from: Toutfait.com, http://www.toutfait.com/unmaking_the_museum/Shovel.html (accessed April 17, 2017).

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Figure 11: Marcel Duchamp *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. 1915 (1964), Replica, original lost. Wood and galvanized-iron snow shovel, approximately 132 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States of America. Available from MoMA.org, <https://www.moma.org/> (accessed April 2017).

In the following sections I will consider how certain artworks incorporate mass production or non-art associated elements *into* the world of the artwork. By considering how these elements are integrated and concurrently maintain their distinction in a humorous manner, the artworks suggest a method of disruption to the narrative/contextual elements that both constitute the artwork and implicate the contextual elements surrounding it. This analysis follows along the lines of Incongruity Theory considering the amusement derived from the conceptualisation of two co-existing and paradoxically contradictory elements. Likewise, the acknowledged friction

between the art and non-art elements in the selected artworks does not lead to a conclusive resolution. Rather, the collision between the elements forms the artwork and imbues it with the content that resists conclusive resolution. The humorous elements are in part a by-product of this friction, or collision, and the recognition by the viewer of the circumstances that gave rise to it and in part the *inflection* of the artist's manipulation of the materials to imbue the work with an approachable context of what could be a distressing disruption of normative conclusions.

This form of analysis offers insight into how various materials in art can be used to elicit similar sensations in an audience as the cinema of attraction, potentially provoking and engaging critical thought in the viewer. The film theory of Eisenstein and Arnheim offers an interrogation of juxtaposed images and their abstract and semantic implications. I posit that by using theories that consider early silent film, I am able to isolate semantic implications of the various combinations of images that more closely relate to the surveyed artists whose practice engages with similarly image-oriented and contextual visual objects. Coinciding with the formal implications of film studies for this thesis, early film's episodic nature coupled with vaudeville's conflation of media, audience participation and expectations informed the historic avant-garde, which in turn have implications for contemporary art practices, both stylistically and conceptually. Furthermore, a connection between early film slapstick and contemporary art can be drawn as Jörg Heiser indicates when considering Eisenstein's theory of attraction with slapstick. Heiser suggests that Eisenstein's concept of the content derived from the collision of images as "semiotic slapstick."⁸⁵ This proposal proves useful for contemporary art that employs visual media using disparate images and materials to evoke a variety of sensations and subject matter.

Further considering the transfer of theatre techniques to film, in a series of related and responsive essays, Gunning and the film theorist Donald Grafton considered the disruptive nature of slapstick in narrative structures of early cinema, and how this disruption was translated from the

⁸⁵ Heiser, *All of a Sudden*, 40.

vaudeville stage to the cinema experience.⁸⁶ This consideration of the transfer of technique from differing media of the stage to screen informs a method of analysing the transferal of slapstick to other more differentiated media than vaudeville to film, including photography, sculpture and painting. Grafton notes when citing a contemporary review of a Charlie Chaplin film, the reporter “intuitively distinguishes between linear aspects film (plot, narrative, diegesis) and nonlinear components (spectacle and gag).”⁸⁷ In this statement, Grafton sets out both the terms for the form of the media as plot, narrative and diegesis and the disruptive elements that make up the slapstick event as spectacle and gag. These terms and formal elements can be transferred to other less-durational and linear objects such as sculpture and still images. By discussing the implied content of objects and images presented in an art context, the objects can be considered within a greater contextual narrative, including the art sphere, whether implied by the gallery setting or acknowledgement within the canon.

The art sphere suggests a context wherein the object of consideration is situated and therefore considered an artwork. Thus an object such as a construction of a stool and a bicycle wheel can be recognised as an artwork when placed on a plinth and exhibited in an art exhibition space. These contextual narrative elements provide frameworks for the slapstick elements to contradict, or otherwise disrupt. As I will discuss below, these events or disruptive elements need not be active or actual in a linear, time-based film sense. I posit that the humorous art objects can indicate the linear and disruptive elements of slapstick through the evident construction and visual/semantic structures without depending on the conclusive pratfall or gag.

1.3.3 Slapstick

My argument considers slapstick as a form of comedy that utilises visual gags that imply an absurd or violent disruption of an event. It follows

⁸⁶ Grafton, “Pie and Chase,”106-119 and Tom Gunning, “Response to ‘Pie and Chase,’” 120-2.

⁸⁷ Grafton, “Pie and Chase,”106.

that for the absurd or violent act in a slapstick comedy or artwork to be humorous the act must convey an artifice or some form of indication that the effect of the disruptive action is not an existential threat to the viewer. The viewer is then able to conceptualize the event with a knowing distance from the action. The viewer's distancing from the event is fundamental for the viewer to derive amusement, otherwise the absurd or violent disruption would pose existential harm. The contextualization of the event by the viewer follows the distinguishing elements of slapstick, yet establishing the framework for the narrative structure that the disruptive event or act occurs does not preclude a determined conclusion. Furthermore, my argument assumes an appreciation of incongruity at the root of the humorous amusement. John Morreall considers incongruity in relation to humour as a conflict between, on the one hand, the audiences' perception, memory or imagination, and on the other hand the audiences' "conceptual patterns" and expectations.⁸⁸ The contextualization of the event by the viewer follows the distinguishing elements of slapstick. As Donald Crafton concludes in his essay "The Pie and the Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick:"

One way to look at narrative is to see it as a system for providing the spectator with sufficient knowledge to make causal links between represented events. According to this view, the gag's status as an irreconcilable difference becomes clear. Rather than providing knowledge, slapstick misdirects the viewer's attention, and obfuscates the linearity of cause-effect relations. Gags provide the opposite of epistemological comprehension by the spectator. They are atemporal bursts of violence and hedonism that are as ephemeral and as gratifying as the sight of someone's pie-smitten face.⁸⁹

As Crafton sets out above, the gag in a slapstick narrative can draw attention to the narrative set-up that led to the gag's activation through a punch line, yet does not offer a summation of the event. Similarly, Heiser's suggestion of the parallel between Eisenstein's cinema of attraction and

⁸⁸ John Morreall, "Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, 188-9.

⁸⁹ Crafton, "The Pie and the Chase," 119.

slapstick engaged in artworks through a semiotic gag suggests that an artwork can become the catalyst of a conceptual distancing from the narrative or contextual framework that surrounds the artwork for the viewer.⁹⁰

In the following chapters an analysis of artworks will be formed through the examination of how the materials both engage with the art context and the implied utility of the artwork's individual components through a humorous material and contextual juxtaposition resulting in simultaneous, yet contradictory contextual inferences. Thus a slapstick artwork can function through the use of visual and physical set-ups and incongruous disruption to the expected conclusion without the inclusion of an actual pratfall. In the preceding artworks, the pratfall may exist as a potential event, but does not materialize in the artwork.

The sustained incongruity in these artworks acts as an agitation to narrative structures associated with the media or format. Crafton suggests that slapstick is a "fundamental" opposition to narrative structure as it ruptures the structure of film storytelling.⁹¹ He deems slapstick a short-circuit to the closure implicit in film's narrative durational conclusion, considering slapstick "the division between narrative and spectacle [that] is balanced, but not resolved."⁹² Slapstick as a narrative disruptor described by Crafton provides a parallel argument with Heiser's definition of the role of contemporary art. When Heiser considers (presumably slapstick) film's affinity with art he notes that film "tells funny little stories as a guise through which to render storytelling itself absurd, by repetition of motifs (running gags), chaotic montage, and overindulgence in certain medium-specific effects [...] For a good gag, slapstick will gladly dispense with narrative logic, plot, and characterization."⁹³ Slapstick therefore lends itself to an affinity with a type of contemporary art practice that seeks a reflexive critical stance, sending up the normative structures and frameworks

⁹⁰ Heiser, *All of a Sudden*, 40.

⁹¹ Crafton, "The Pie and the Chase," 111.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 360.

⁹³ Heiser, *All of a Sudden*, 17.

associated with the field, whilst simultaneously dependent on these structures to define it as art.

1.3.4 Irony and Parody

In his essay on mime in Dada performance, the art critic and historian Hal Foster described how especially Cologne and Zurich Dada facilitated the dismantling of the delineation between the art sphere from the life praxis through a mimetic process of personifying the “traumatic mime” or “traumatist” that embodies the social disruptions of the epoch. Foster writes “a key strategy of this traumatist is mimetic adaptation, whereby the Dadaist assumes the dire conditions of his time [...] and inflates them through hyperbole or ‘hypertrophy’ (another Dadaist term). Such buffoonery is a form of parody that Dada made its own.”⁹⁴ Foster considers the Dada traumatist as a figure that took the day-to-day subjugation to mass culture as a subject and material for art practice. Yet, the process of mimicry need not take the form of parody with its implications of superiority over its subject matter. This form of parody as superiority is informed by a method of mime that both objectifies the subject of parody and potentially implicates the viewer in this objectifying process. If the viewer does not align with this superior stance to the subject matter the potential is to alienate the viewer from the parodic event.

Rather than parodying or satirizing the material, I suggest that the form of miming evoked by Dada can constitute an ironic stance in relation to the circumstances surrounding mass-production and the “dire conditions” that persist to this day. I posit that mime can be seen as a form of distanced irony suggesting a distanced, observing empathy in the viewer, in part by contextualizing the viewed performance and through a process of empathy with the performer as an almost biological inference of the performed actions. This empathetic response to the otherness presented in the artwork or performer that employs vaudevillian slapstick maintains the

⁹⁴ Hal Foster, “Dada Mime,” *October* 105 (2003): 169, accessed November 11, 2014, doi: 10.1162/016228703769684263.

otherness of the circumstances and subjects caught up in the reification process of mass-production and entertainment. Using a form of mime suggested by Foster, yet employing an ironic, non-parodic approach, the considered artists in this thesis extend the role of mime to a performance of the artist made manifest in their artwork and transmitted to an internalised performance by the viewer.

The delineation between parodic objectification and mimetic ironic empathy runs parallel to the distinction between Superiority and Incongruity Theory, a distinction further elucidated by examining two types of parody and irony. In John MacKay's introduction to Adorno's essay on Chaplin, MacKay notes that in the actor Adorno found an alternative to the laughter he and Max Horkheimer associated with the culture industry, where "To laugh at something is always to deride it."⁹⁵ MacKay notes that in Chaplin, Adorno saw a possibility for an alternate laughter, "a critical laughter soberly aware of its own affinities to domination."⁹⁶ Shea Coulson, in his survey of Adorno's analysis of comedy, suggests irony as a technique for counteracting the dominating nature of the subject over the object, citing Chaplin's mimetic irony in *Modern Times* (1936) as exemplary. Coulson presents Chaplin's character as mimetic of his fellow workers yet maintaining a certain aloofness, and ultimately being critical of their *situation* (not them). This is achieved through mimicry, and he thus acts as an agent resistant to reification, resisting too the reification of his subjects.⁹⁷

The industrialization of the workplace and daily life, the topic of Dada's buffoonery, was exemplified in *Modern Times* as an absurdity of mechanical logic imposed on organic life, a focus of Henri Bergson's theory of the role of laughter in society. Although Bergson's theory attributes a corrective function to humour in society, pointing out the absurdity of the adherence to inelastic logic, and thus encouraging a more liberal progressive

⁹⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1971), 141.

⁹⁶ John MacKay trans. "Chaplin Times Two" by Theodor W. Adorno, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9 (1996) 1: 57. Accessed May 17, 2016. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/yale.1996.0001.

⁹⁷ Shea Coulson, "Funnier than Unhappiness: Adorno and the Art of Laughter." *New German Critique*, no. 100 (2007): 162. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27669190>. Accessed October 31, 2014.

society, it does offer an understanding of the mechanisms for creating an absurdly logical construction, one that in the case of art, need not come to resolution, and which therefore does not necessarily result in a corrective element to social norms. Of interest here is Bergson's concept of the compulsive incongruous figure as absentminded, in the manner of Don Quixote: a comical mechanical agent whose actions and decisions are derived from a form of reasoning based on an exaggerated ideal. Bergson posits that it is this confrontation of the internal logic of the literal-minded undertaking of an ideal with the "inexorable logic" of reality that produces the comic.⁹⁸

Similarly recognising the potential corrective utility of comedy, Linda Hutcheon considers parody as a method of playing with social norms through contradictions situating "parody [as] doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies."⁹⁹ Hutcheon suggests that this dual process of legitimizing *and* subverting the social norms maintains a critical effectiveness as parody "may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there."¹⁰⁰ Yet, the complicity remains, reinforcing the values of the subject the parody seeks to subvert through the use of similar reasoning. Indeed, as Hutcheon implicates, through the process of engaging in the frameworks of the subject it parodies, through a reversal of the power structure, the power structure itself is reinforced by the parody. Further to this reinforcement, the implications of parody, as with Superiority and Relief Theory, acts as a corrective agency, a method of exposing the wrongs seen in the subject of parody in order to change the structure, not remove it. Further to this corrective process, parody reinforces the objectification of the subject of parody through the process of clearly delineating the defining characteristics of the subject and subjugating the codified elements to mockery. This delineation of the other for mockery simultaneously distinguishes a binary between the subject of parody and the audience (and

⁹⁸ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 5. Accessed February 26, 2015 from <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4352>.

⁹⁹ Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, 101.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

agent) of mockery whilst seeking a corrective solution to the subject. Parody in its reinforcement and rebuking of its subject seeks a progressive agenda of inclusivity within the structure it critiques. In contrast, the irony posited by Coulson is seeking an, as yet, undiscovered alternative to the circumstances it is considering. The process of irony maintains the *otherness*, or alterity, of the subject of irony whilst maintaining the mime or ironist's mutual alterity from the subject. This process of ironic mimesis, which I consider below, offers a method of incorporating the viewer in the slapstick conflation of material used in an artwork whilst not propagating the objectification of the subject.

1.4 Mimesis

Mimesis, and its derivatives mimicry and mime, are broad terms used in this thesis for a process of relating the fabricated world to the “real”/natural or imagined world. Mimesis as imitation and art has its roots in Plato. For Plato, mimesis (and thus art) is a production of appearances, and a tertiary outcome thrice removed from the source of truth in abstract forms. Therefore, art, for Plato, is an unreliable source of truth.¹⁰¹ Mimicry, imitation and mimesis are inverted in their relation to verity in Adorno's aesthetics, where art's imitation of contexts and rational systems exposes the flaws inherent in the systems. Furthermore, as Lyotard indicates in his assessment of the sublime and the avant-garde, art's mimicry of the sublime affects the viewer/subject, and her/his judgement, through the senses and the resulting feelings.¹⁰²

Adorno considers communication as a reaffirmation of societal nexuses, a process of using language established within the framework of a society.¹⁰³ This communication is anathema to critique, as the

¹⁰¹ Stephen Davies, “Theories of Art,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics Oxford Art Online*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), accessed May 18, 2017, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0505>.

¹⁰² Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 9.

¹⁰³ Georg W. Bertram, “Benjamin and Adorno on Art as Critical Practice,” in *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory: New Readings of Benjamin and Adorno*, ed. by Nathan Ross (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 9.

communication requires normalized criteria. Therefore, Adorno surmises, critique can only exist through a process of *noncommunication*.¹⁰⁴ If artworks are to convey information (communicate) about a world outside the confines of the social nexus they must do so through a process of its failure to encapsulate this unknowable, non-communicable concept, through a fabrication that is evident in its construction of non-communication. The information is conveyed through some form of communication, recognisable actions, words and images, but their construction crucially alludes to the failure to encapsulate the otherness to which the artwork refers. The resulting mimicry is a knowing failure, resulting in a form of buffoonery manifested to the viewer. What I am analysing here are the implications of failure suggested by an art object through its content, sensed by the viewer, but not fully codified in the cognitive process.

Through a procedure of forming itself around a subject through mimesis, an artwork has an integrity aligned with the subject/thing that it is based on. Through self-reflexivity, the artwork is aware of its failure to replicate the subjective other indexically. This awareness distinguishes art from the “standard of empirical reason” that Kant’s subject employs when confronted with the sublime, a process of dominating the experience through cognitive reason.¹⁰⁵ Adorno considers art’s mimesis as a form of representing the sublime that counters Kant’s distancing and dominating observer with an experience that sustains the overwhelming experience of annihilation of the “I” in confrontation with the infinite. In attempting to mimic the other, the unrepresentable, or the sublime, art simultaneously mimics the cognitive processing of the sublime described by Kant and exposes art’s limitation in representing the experience. Due to (modern) art’s illusory autonomous status from empirical cognition, art offers an opportunity to point towards the unknown, whilst simultaneously indicating its ridiculousness in its attempts and failure to dominate the unknown other. In a self-reflexive artwork, there is contained “a memento of the liquidation

¹⁰⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 117-8.

of the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude.”¹⁰⁶ This recognition of a primal opponent results in a sustained shudder for the observer and offers a glimpse outside the constraints of normative realms.¹⁰⁷

The sustained experience of the un-representable parallels Lyotard’s consideration of the sublime in relation to art as a temporal experience in the “here and now.” Like Adorno, Lyotard posits the question of whether art can represent the sublime as a paradox concerning the representation of “something which can’t be shown, or presented.”¹⁰⁸ The “now” to be represented in the object is a “stranger to consciousness and cannot be constituted by it.”¹⁰⁹ Instead the art object, representing the unknowable “now” or sublime, “dismantles consciousness.”¹¹⁰ Through the process of dismantling, a series of questions arise through the perception of the artwork, rather than summations of the event or the “now.” The questions posed are “is it happening, is this it, is it possible?”¹¹¹ Thus the art object challenges not only the object’s existential self, but also what it attempts to represent and indeed the viewer’s perception of either the object or the sublime event. Should an artwork represent its (potential) existential denial and in effect suggest the overwhelming presence of the sublime through Adorno’s concept of the shudder with an amusing air, the entire project suggests an even greater incongruity from the initial self-reflexive (serious) enterprise set forward by Adorno’s aesthetics, indicating that the project itself is at risk of failure.

The subjective experience of the unknowable other is the topic of the anthropologist Michael Taussig’s *Mimesis and Alterity*. In his analysis of the indigenous Panamanian people the Cuna (or Kuna), Taussig found instances where the colonial cultures had been incorporated into the indigenous culture, such as sculptures of European figures and Jack Daniel’s bottles, but denied the association with the colonialist culture by

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 245.

¹⁰⁷ Adorno cites Beethoven’s entrance of the reprise in his Ninth Symphony as an example of this experience. Ibid., 245.

¹⁰⁸ Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 1.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 1-2. Lyotard is not clear on how the art object does this other than through a series of questions that arise from considering the artwork.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 2.

the Cuna. The images and form of the colonial culture had been incorporated into cultural objects of the Cuna, but the colonial content was denied by the receiving culture. Taussig draws on Walter Benjamin's theories of mimesis to consider the cultural transferal as a form of mimesis in line with the non-objectifying relationship with the other: the subject, or viewer, considers the other, incorporates mannerism or form, but does not consider this incorporation as representing the other. In this form of mimicry, the viewer resists anthropomorphising the object of consideration, the object remains an other, but an empathetic conceptualisation occurs in the viewer.¹¹² He considers mimesis a uniquely human trait seen in children at play where the distinction of the self and the other becomes porous. Taussig suggests that the child-like mimesis is a "sensuous connection with things" that is informed in part by the child's "bodily knowledge" and "the relation to the body of the mother as well."¹¹³ Benjamin similarly describes mimesis as illustrated when a child imitates a windmill: the act instigating an opening of tactile experience of the world for the child.¹¹⁴ This stands in contrast to the act of domination or superiority over nature or the object through empirical reason as suggested in Kant's observer appreciating the sublime. Similarly, the mimesis of Adorno's shudder is an act of a subject (the child) assimilating with the object (the windmill), whilst maintaining the alterity of both. This form of understanding the other is in contrast to the process of anthropomorphizing the object in the observer's image, an effect

¹¹² Taussig's concept of mimesis and alterity considers the biological phenomenon of the conceptual incorporation as a process likened to the theorist Julia Kristeva's postulation of the "semiotic chora," a pre-lingual stage of development of children defined by a mix of sensual perceptions and needs. Kristeva considers the chora stage as a period when the child does not distinguish itself from the mother or the rest of the world. From these theories, Taussig considers a form of mimicry that is informed by sensation and bodily knowledge, similar to those shared between mother and child. This summary draws from Taussig's text *Mimesis and Alterity*, 36 and the following resources: Johanne Prud'homme and Lyne Légaré (2006), "The Subject in Process," in Louis Hébert (dir.), *Signo* [online], Rimouski (Quebec), <http://www.signosemio.com/kristeva/subject-in-process.asp>. Accessed June 2, 2017; Dino Felluga, "Modules on Kristeva: On Psychosexual Development," in *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. January 31, 2011 Purdue University, accessed June 2, 2017. <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/kristevadevelop.html>.

¹¹³ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 36.

¹¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Selected Writings, vol. 2*, trans. Emond Jephcott, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 720.

of bending the object or nature to the instigator's will through empirical reasoning. It follows that one can have an internal mimetic experience of watching someone trip awkwardly, in effect experience the trip, yet retain a cognitive distance from the experience and therefore find it amusing, without the amusement focused on the person tripping, as Superiority Theory would suggest. Rather than a superior stance, the viewer is amused by the context, the absurd conditions that result in the trip, informed by the viewer's mimetic experience and confirmed in the cognitive conceptualization, rather than the denigration of or a superior delineation from an other.

Taussig also finds correlation of the ironic mimetic process in cultures in general. Art objects, Taussig posits, are derived from "the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power."¹¹⁵ Art, Taussig suggests, represents a mimesis of alterity, offering a method of engaging with otherness, paradoxically engaged through an ironic awareness of the artificiality of the circumstance and the potential for failure: the process of mimesis is a process of *attempting* embodiment of the subject: a recognition that the subject is an other, and therefore, not fully expressible in symbolic form.¹¹⁶

1.5 Levity and Critical Enquiry

There remains a seeming contradiction between the theories of laughter and amusement and those that seek critical engagement. The problem arises from the reception of comedy and the potential outcome of levity. Carroll's assessment of incongruity counters my argument for an ironic empathetic mimetic process of appreciating incongruity. Carroll

¹¹⁵ Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, xiii.

¹¹⁶ This summary of Taussig's consideration of mimesis and aesthetics draws from Michael Kelly, ed., "Mimesis," in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 234.

suggests that a necessary element in comic amusement is non-empathetic distance from the event. This form of distance ensures an unmitigated amusement of the event, therefore clarifying humour derived from incongruity from other forms of appreciating incongruous events.¹¹⁷ Further to this comfort requirement of the audience to enjoy humour is a sense of levity, and by implication, a sense of triviality. Carroll aligns with Kant's assessment of a joke's reliance on the relief of conflict: that once the incongruity of the project has been explained and normalised by the punch line the consequences of the incongruity posited in the joke is reduced to nothing.¹¹⁸ This would suggest frivolity and a lack of a critical aspect in an artwork engaging in comedy, or that the critical engagement is subservient to the gag in order to elicit amusement from a joke. I suggest that a solution to this problem lies in Heiser's anti-narrative distinction of art, Adorno's autonomous sphere, and Lyotard's association between art and the sublime: although artworks may employ the material and structures of mass entertainment, it is not incumbent on art that it fulfil the expectations of these materials and structures. It is art's questioning agenda that distinguishes it from these other modes of mediation, it requires a suspension of the expectations incumbent on narrative driven projects.

If an artist were to construct an artwork setting out the narrative/contextual set-up to the gag, and in some manner present *and* suspend the punch line so as to prevent a resolution of the problematic incongruities, the artist would be able to maintain the suspended observation of the parallel events that appear both internally congruous and paradoxically anathema to each other. In this way, the artist would fulfil Adorno's criteria for an artwork's critical integrity through the transparent construction, potential failure, and subsequent exposition of this process. In addition to the possibility of suspending the punch line or gag, there is a further solution to the problem of levity found in the recognition of

¹¹⁷ Carroll notes that an interest in incongruities is not partitioned into a binary of whether the viewer is threatened or amused. Citing the enjoyment of mathematical equations, Carroll suggests a process of engaging with incongruities outside of humour. The amusing recognition of an absurdity, Carroll surmises, is a defining element of incongruous humour. Carroll, *Humour*, 35.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

incongruity. Michael Clark's assessment of humour from incongruity supports this claim for art. Describing amusement from incongruity as an appreciation of the "incongruous subsumption under a concept" of one or more objects to the "the standard instances of the concept."¹¹⁹ Clark contends that in this manner of appreciation, the incongruity is not so much resolved, or rationalised, in the mind of the viewer, but left to remain incongruous and appreciated as such.¹²⁰ The enjoyment of incongruity is enhanced by the recognition of the absurdity of the process leading up to the incongruity and of the process of recognising and enjoying the incongruity. Therefore, to derive amusement from incongruity requires an appreciation of its contextual circumstances. The audience of incongruity must have some distance from the event, either actual, in the sense of a viewer of a slapstick film, or intellectually, as one might laugh at oneself for tripping over nothing, but a cognitive empathetic engagement remains possible.

What the audience is experiencing when witnessing artwork that employs a slapstick technique is an exploration of this process of mimesis and ironic distance to an object. Heiser describes the slapstick method as a "central triggering mechanism, both a premeditated trick and a spontaneous idea [...] that's responsible for bringing art into being and making it go somewhere."¹²¹ This distinction follows Heiser's suggestion that this activity of exploration distinguishes it from other outcomes in mass entertainment that share the same media. The distinction is based on a lack of declarative statements or outcomes in critically engaged artworks. In this manner, art proposes a question of how an audience is to come to the conclusions implied in mass entertainment media through the media and content that the object of observation, the artwork, engages. Following on from Heiser's anti-narrative pronouncement I argue that an artwork uses a slapstick method to provoke the self-reflexive query through some form of amusing disruption specific to the media structures used in the process of making the object of observation. Through the material, the artwork suggests its fabrication process to the viewer.

¹¹⁹ Clark, "Humor and Incongruity," 149.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 150.

¹²¹ Heiser, *All of a Sudden*, 17.

Thus, deriving a story or direct allegory from an artwork is secondary to a branch of contemporary artwork's primary objective of questioning its own internal logic. Correspondingly, deriving a joke or punch line from a slapstick technique in art practice is secondary to its primary concern of interrogating the methods of production. The slapstick technique can remain a "central triggering mechanism" suggested by Heiser to the fabrication of the art object, in contrast to mass entertainment where laughter or amusement forms the imperative or resolution of the narrative constructs. That is not to say that the inclusion of slapstick in art forms some essential conclusive analysis to artwork, that the use of slapstick can ensure critical integrity in artwork. Rather than an essential element, the following analysis will explore how the artworks employ various slapstick approaches and to what material purpose. Through this examination of how the objects indicate slapstick will offer a method of making a critical judgement on the artwork.

Chapter Two: Art as Slap Sticks: Constructed Objects of Failed Utility

This chapter considers artworks that emulate the slap stick prop illustrated earlier, as objects whose constructions visually indicate their conceptual framework. The slap stick object demonstrates through its construction its function as a disruptive tool or device (e.g. a stage prop of a violent tool) whilst simultaneously alluding to its ineffectiveness in performing its disruptive utility (e.g. a violent tool that only effects a loud noise with minimal physical violence). Through a survey of artworks that draw on thematic concerns formed through additive structures, I will draw comparison to Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*. The following artworks are constructed objects with recognizable individual parts fitted together in a manner to refer to the construction and suggest to the viewer the establishment of the content of the materials and their relative context. The reading of the object is informed by the visible construction of the object and the individual elements that configure the artwork (the physical materials as well as the former utility of the individual parts and the exhibition context) and forms the basis of the establishing narrative or content of the artwork as well as the disruptive agent that forms the constructed object. Examining the contents of the object and how it is visibly constructed informs how its slapstick elements, the set-up and disruptive act, are established and interact with each other. As presented in the introductory chapter, the slap stick prop implicates its utility in its visible constructed elements and evokes a violent or disruptive action through its use. Furthermore, the object provokes amusement through its simultaneous exaggerated implication of action and diminished impact on the recipient. Similarly, the following artworks are constructed and situated in their exhibition contexts as signifiers of artwork establishing their content and context through material form, whilst simultaneously implicating non-art references and/or visual disruptors, the former utility of the objects that form the construction, informing the perception of the art context and the objects of consideration.

This chapter will cite Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* as its primary example of the slap stick art object extrapolating how various material can be employed to suggest an art object that contains the combination of material and contextual elements into a discordant and contradictory construction. Following a consideration of *Bicycle Wheel*, I will proceed to two sets of recent sculptures that share a similar approach to constructing an art object. This section will include two sculptures from Jeff Koons's *Gazing Ball* series from 2013 comparing them to a similar painting series circa 2014-5 to draw distinctions between the concept of including a reflective sphere within a sculpture versus a painting, and its success as an articulation in the objects of contemplation. I will then consider Urs Fischer's *Service à la française* (2009), a series of sculptural artworks that, similar to Koons's *Gazing Ball* series draws on traditional sculptural techniques and include a reflective surface. I will suggest that the subsequent visually disruptive experience derived from Fischer's reflective cubes is evoked through the inclusion of the viewer with the images silkscreened on the form. Following these two examples, I will consider Lena Henke's group of stacked painted boards, folding chair supports and supported painted board *Hang Harder* (2012) and Isa Genzken's concrete and steel *Two Loudspeakers* (1986). These two sculptural artworks suggest examples of visual gags that employ either comic incongruity in the use of materials in the case of Henke, or the suggested utility in form but obvious lack of utility in function in Genzken's objects. These examples will seek to clarify and examine potential slapstick techniques in constructing objects as well as potential problems with approaches that are too dependent on a resolving element, or gag, and therefore diminishing the critical and resistant elements of the artwork.

2.1 A Slap Stick Art Object: Utility and Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*.

Jörg Heiser considers *Bicycle Wheel* an object of potential unsuspecting movement that “knocks the dignified off balance.”¹²² He suggests that the stool does not have a function since as a part of the artwork it cannot be used as intended, as sitting on it would result in a pratfall. As I discussed in the introduction, Heiser's account of *Bicycle Wheel* is useful in suggesting the slapstick potential in art objects, but his analysis of the object goes only as far as the individual component's utility, not considering the utility of the structure as a whole. The title of the artwork, *Bicycle Wheel* suggests that it is the top part of the object that is the focus of attention, suggesting that the stool does work similarly to its intended structure as a support. Instead of being used as a sitting device, the stool functions as a plinth or stand for the wheel, allowing the wheel to function as a free-spinning optical device.

Artwork featuring utility objects whose function is disrupted is a running theme of Duchamp's early ready-mades, notable in his *Fountain*, and emerges concurrently with other historical avant-garde inclusion of mass-produced and mass entertainment media that broadened the material criteria for artwork. Although similar to *Fountain* in its use of mass-produced objects with compromised utility, *Bicycle Wheel* operates in the art institutional setting of the gallery or museum as a critique in two ways. Firstly, like *Fountain*, it functions as a non sequitur within the institutional setting, as a provocation using mass-produced commodities issued high art status by the inclusion within the institution through an interposition by the artist, his signature or certificate demarking a work of art. Secondly, *Bicycle Wheel* is a functioning device that requires manual activation, an act that in the exhibition setting would have been out of place.¹²³ With a hundred years having past since the historic avant-garde's inclusion of mass-produced materials in the art sphere, the surprising element of including such material

¹²² Ibid., 22.

¹²³ Arguably, *Fountain* also requires activation in a far more provocative manner in its original utility.

in the exhibition space has long since lost its provocation and has become a part of art's canon. Yet, the content of the mass-produced material, the implications of the object's intended utility, and the contrast with its inclusion within the institutional setting of a gallery remains an active element in the reading of the object. When considering *Bicycle Wheel* as a slap stick object (i.e. an object constructed to visually indicate contradicting actions), deciphering the utility and social content of the individual elements and their at-times contradictory readings as art objects, what is indicative in the object's structure and what is implied by the non-exhibition contents, help in delineating what the set-up and disruptive elements are that inform the critical engagement in the artwork.

The narrative framework or set-up that is established around *Bicycle Wheel* is two fold: Primarily, the gallery or museum establishes a context for the use of objects for commercial, pedagogical or didactic purposes or a combination of these intentions. The objects in this setting function as a source of information that the curatorial staff extrapolates through didactic literature and other contextual objects, props or architecture. The content of the considered objects in this context, as objects of some conceptual framework that represents cultural ideas, be they ideas of beauty in materials or forms, or representing cultural ceremonies, are to be considered as foregrounding to the function of the individual object. Largely, these items are meant for observation and not direct interaction, thus the placement of objects on plinths, behind cordons or in glass and Perspex cases. In this rarefied context, the *Bicycle Wheel's* intended function of spinning a wheel to invoke contemplation outside the space it inhabits rather than as a curious object, suggests it as an object inviting transgressive interaction. Secondly, the protocol of how to engage with an object in an art setting (e.g. not to touch it) suggests that an art object is representative of an abstract idea that art attempts to replicate in form rather than function. Unlike this classical approach to mimesis in forming the ideal, *Bicycle Wheel's* function as a device used for spinning and optical meditation and therefore unrestricted cognitive activity is not the forming of an idea, but a means to encourage a potentially random process of contemplation. The

form of *Bicycle Wheel* in this function does not point towards a specific if abstract ideal, rather it points towards an ideal of the abstract: the formless, unregulated process of daydreaming. Thus the sculpture of an upturned bicycle wheel on a common stool is a witty semantic play on traditional aesthetics associated with form and ideas.

On a formal level, *Bicycle Wheel* is an awkward construction with an aesthetic appeal more towards utility than formal aesthetics of beauty. The object appears as an object constructed with a seeming disregard towards classical formal grace as its construction reflects its materials rather than the materials crafted to represent other objects (e.g. marble carved to look like drapery or flesh). Duchamp's object looks like its material, a construction of two incongruous, mass-produced objects. The traditional aesthetic concerns of form representing abstract ideas of beauty or graceful composition appear secondary to the object's function, either as an art institutional provocation or as a machine, an object of utility to produce the spinning optical effect. The object's utility is an antithesis to bourgeois concepts of art for arts' sake. Further to this lack of design flair, the object is seemingly useless as a utility object, as Heiser notes "Duchamp's bicycle stool was no good for sitting on" and thus functions on a slapstick level, as any attempts to sit on it would provoke a falling off.¹²⁴ Both utilities of the individual components in *Bicycle Wheel* are seemingly disrupted by the fabrication of the art object; the stool is no longer functional as a sitting device with the wheel fixed on top. The wheel is no longer able to easily roll along the ground. Thus, the constructed object is a formal non sequitur, it suggests utility but its paradoxical construction denies the same utility.

Yet, if taking Duchamp for his word, and one were to activate the wheel as it was intended by spinning it, the object of a bicycle wheel set upside down on top of a stool then appears as an appropriate, functional and indeed practical device made of materials to hand for the utility of pleasant diversion. Thus, the object does not function as its primary components do but does function adequately in its constructed intention. The wheel's inversion on the stool allows its spokes to spin freely at an appreciable

¹²⁴ Ibid., 22.

height from a sitting position. The object conceptually moves to and from utility to uselessness depending on the contextual associations. Thus, like the theatrical slap stick prop, the construction of the object and the visual indicators of the utility of the individual components draw attention to the object's contextual dependency. Through the incongruous and seemingly contradictory components, construction and implied mechanical action and association with an artist, *Bicycle Wheel* represents a slap stick prop/object in an art context.

As a product of its two components, *Bicycle Wheel* neutralizes their individual functions, the stool rendered useless for sitting and the wheel unable to assist transportation. As an artwork under traditional formal aesthetics, it is undermined by the mass-produced inclination towards utility over abstracted beauty. As an abstract concept of aesthetic contemplation, *Bicycle Wheel* requires activation and therefore serves a useful kinetic function, it moves from the art sphere of non-utility to a functioning visual tool for meditation, yet it remains in the art sphere due to its authentication by the artist and its inclusion within the institutional art canon.

The sculptural device functions both as a tool of absurd utility and as a conceptual artwork, firstly as an institutional critique much like the urinal Duchamp submitted to the Society of Independent Artists, as the intersection of mass production and fine art; a non sequitur within the fine art environment. Duchamp's fabrication alludes to the non sequitur element of Carroll's analysis of Incongruity Theory. In Carroll's analysis non sequiturs draw attention to the conventions of telling jokes. Carroll cites the example of the meta-joke—"Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side" as an example of incongruity as it

violates, while also revealing, our conventional or normative expectations about jokes, namely that they possess surprising (and faux informative) punchlines. That chickens cross roads to get to the other side is hardly informative; being told that they do so is anomalous only as the conclusion of a joke. Likewise, non sequiturs are incongruous, because they subvert our

expectations that conversations and stories will be comprised of parts that are coherently and proportionately linked.¹²⁵

The non sequitur functions as the disruptive element to the narrative flow—a slapstick jolt to the narrative logic of the situation. Likewise the ready-made can function as the non sequitur in the institutional setting.

As the disruption of mass-produced objects placed in art institutions has long since lost its provocation, I will focus on questions raised regarding intent of function in its function as an artwork interrogating aesthetic concerns of form and content alongside the utility of the materials that formed the construction and what implications the combination of materials indicates in the exhibition context. I will consider the further implications of what *Bicycle Wheel* suggests as an object of implied utility as an active act of restraint on the part of the recipient/gallery attendant, suggesting that considering the initial intention of the device as a moving, operable device offers scope for evaluating similar constructions as objects of alluring and simultaneously restrictive objects of interaction, implicating the viewer as a fellow constructor of the artwork and thus the slapstick event/object through an internalised mimetic participation with the art object.

Without direct physical interaction with the implied prop, the viewer of the object is left in a point of stasis when considering the artwork: the artwork's intended use is to be spun, but its implications as an artefact within the museum or gallery setting is for it to be observed and not touched. A tension then is suggested by the intention of utility and denial of use derived from the viewer's recognition of the concept as an object of absurd utility and the context as a venerated object. The object then suggests an internalised simultaneous conceptualization of the object serving two antithetical purposes. To understand how the object physically functions, the viewer would only be able to activate the device conceptually, as touch is prohibited in the setting.

Further to this imagined passive interaction with *Bicycle Wheel*, another process of miming can be elicited by viewing the artwork, that of the fabrication of the object. The construction of *Bicycle Wheel* is fairly

¹²⁵ Carroll, *Humour*, 24-25.

self-evident: the wheel is fixed upside down through a hole drilled in a common stool. The objects are common, mass-produced items and presented in such a manner as to illustrate the constructed object's pragmatic fabrication. The straightforward construction and presentation of the components lends a diagrammatic presentation of the fabrication of the artwork to the viewer. Through a brief glance, a viewer can reverse engineer the process of fabricating the object. This process of reverse engineering implicates the viewer in the fabrication of an absurd object; just as watching a protagonist in a slapstick routine walk towards a lying rake the viewer imagines his or herself in a similar hazardous action.

In the case of *Bicycle Wheel*, the artwork's potential content is not solely a contemplation of a conceptual provocation within the art setting. The object's utility suggests an activation forming a moving optical sensation. This implies that some event occurs when a subject, or viewer, is physically engaged with an art object. The thing-of-contemplation exists outside the object, not as a form of an abstract ideal, but an ideal perceived *through* the object, through activating the form. In this manner *Bicycle Wheel* diverges from traditional sculpture that seeks to create forms that are drawn from ideals of shapes such as spheres, cubes or cones, or concepts, like beauty or Nature. Therefore, in contrast to traditional sculpture, the thing-of-contemplation is not objectified, but it, the experience of the thing, is activated by an interaction with the constructed object. The constructed object informs the viewer of the otherness but does not form it. The object-that-directs-contemplation, the ready-made, through direct engagement by the viewer by spinning the wheel, or otherwise imagining spinning the wheel, directs the viewer elsewhere into a realm of contemplation and in the process engages the viewer as an agent of that activation and contemplation. Therefore, the structural elements of the object, the ready-made, become, largely functional, enabling the (potential) action to take place.

Bicycle Wheel incorporates the viewer in the art-making process through the contemplation (not revelation) of the other, an abstract idea. The abstract idea is a suggested thing or thing outside the artwork, not contained by the artwork. In this function of alluding to an other, an unquantifiable

abstract concept, *Bicycle Wheel* forms the critically reflexive artwork addressed in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*: it both attempts to represent the abstract point of contemplation, yet simultaneously cannot contain it within its form and is dependent on the viewer's conceptualisation for activation. *Bicycle Wheel's* integration of use and lack of utility within the structural and contextual material lends itself towards a successful critical and resistant object as it neither situates as an appropriate object within institutional settings (its object-of-contemplation remains outside of its physical form), nor does *Bicycle Wheel* fully function at its critical level without the institutional setting. If encountered outside a gallery or museum it becomes a novelty utility object, less a conceptually incongruous object, therefore it remains within the conceptual, if artificial, sphere of art. Although it draws on slapstick implications through its prop-like structure as a stool that would push the person attempting to sit off it, or a visual pun of a wheel that is supported instead of supporting, its acknowledged lack of utility is part of its agency. Thus, *Bicycle Wheel* embodies the slapstick iteration of Adorno's critically engaged artwork, dependent on the art sphere for its context, but resistant to an empirical definition of its content. The object's construction humorously alludes to both its failure to function as an object and simultaneous success as a tool for abstract contemplation.

Similar to a slap stick prop, an artwork is dependent on the contextual inferences and its visual contradictions to function as a paradoxical conceptual object. The slap stick suggests violence and simultaneously suggests the dampening of the violent act in its hinged construction. The inclusion of the ready-made in the art institutional setting, its allusion to sculptural form (e.g. three-dimensional construction of little seeming utility), and its association with an artist suggests a classical aesthetic reading of the object, a consideration of its form and colour in relation to an abstract ideal. Simultaneously, the same formal reading resists the aesthetic standards as the forms reference the material make-up of the object, a mass-produced stool and bicycle wheel. The appreciation of the object (the slap stick or *Bicycle Wheel*) is in the suspension of either implication of the object's utility; in the case of the slap stick object the

implicated but ineffectual violent tool, in the case of *Bicycle Wheel* the useful material of the stool and wheel, made useless in construction, yet alluding to utility in a contemplative manner, either as an implied or actual meditation on the spinning of the wheel. A critically reflexive artwork engages slapstick as a prop when it suspends its conclusive, defining form, maintaining its fluctuation between utility and abstract concept. When visually engaging with *Bicycle Wheel*, the viewer vacillates between the utility or uselessness of the object through a process of conceptual construction. An indication of its use as an artwork, as a representation of abstract concept or ideal (form or concept) and its intended physical activation is suggested by the artwork's context (e.g. exhibition setting) and its individual parts, yet its facilities remain as elements without resolving in defining the object. No one use, reading, interpretation nor function is fully actualised or synthesised by the viewer.

2.2 Conceptual and Visual Slap Stick Structures: Disruption in the Constructed Object and Image in Jeff Koons's *Gazing Balls* Series and Urs Fischer's *Service à la française*.

2.2.1 Integration of form and image: Jeff Koons's *Gazing Balls*.

Jeff Koons's *Gazing Ball* series (see figs. 13-17) extends Duchamp's ironic inclusion of mass-produced objects into the art sphere. To emphasise the intrusion of low culture suggested by mass-produced material into high culture art institutional representation, Koons had fabricated a series of plaster cast Greco-Roman sculptures (a reference to representation of classical formal beauty) and painted replicas of well-known pictures that inform the canon of Renaissance and early modern art with which he has inserted a blown glass blue sphere, or gazing ball, reminiscent of common American lawn ornaments. Koons's constructions reference Duchamp's ready-mades as statements on contemporary art, equalizing mass-production and high art in a visual gag, a reference made apparent in Koons's variation

on *Bicycle Wheel* and *Bottle Rack* (1914) (see figs. 14 and 15). Beyond this obvious visual gag, I will argue that the inclusion of the blue sphere, at least with the sculptures, suggest a more complicated integration of objects and images, one that suggests a mimetic process between the object and the viewer that is more than a process of fabricating an object in the likeness of another. Indeed, in interview Koons alludes to this other form of mimesis as a connection between the viewer and the object although he does not elaborate beyond general terms.¹²⁶ The combined effect of the reflective surface in the sphere incorporates the exhibition context, the exhibition space and viewer within the image of the object through the distorted reflected image on the surface of the glass sphere. The combination of materials lends the final object of contemplation a similar construction of a slapstick gag, combining the narrative continuity of fine art classicism represented by the plaster casts with the narrative disruption in the commercial lawn ornament, an implicit non sequitur to fine art. These elements are combined in the final object of consideration as obvious differentiated objects with distinct material differences in content and surface, effecting an ironic visual and cognitive disruption with the final physical object.

¹²⁶ In an interview, Koons's considers the gazing balls as elements in the sculptures and paintings that form a connection with the viewer. "It's *metaphysics*, and it's a *phenomenology* (emphasis in the original)" he states concerning the connection between the object and the viewer. Later he summarizes his intentions with the *Gazing Ball* series: "I was just trying to give a little bit of an oversight of my interest in these pieces. I see them as devices of connecting. I always just wanted to be involved in the dialogue with the avant-garde. These are the artists I have an interest in—that I enjoy." M. H. Miller, "'These are Works that I Enjoy': Jeff Koons on his Amazing Blue Balls." <http://www.artnews.com/author/mmiller/>. Posted 11/09/15 3:33 PM, accessed November 14 2016.

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Figure 12: Jeff Koons, *Gazing Ball (Barberini Faun)*. 2013, plaster and glass, 177.8 x 121.9 x 139.4 cm. Available from: <http://www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/gazing-ball> (accessed May 28, 2016).

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Figure 13: Jeff Koons, *Gazing Ball (Antinous-Dionysus)*. 2013, plaster and glass, 153.4 x 112.7 x 69.9 cm. Available from: <http://www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/gazing-ball> (accessed May 30, 2016).

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Figure 14: Jeff Koons, *Gazing Ball (Bottlerack)*. 2016, galvanized steel and glass, 91.4 x 40.5 x 40.5 cm. Available from: <http://www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/gazing-ball/gazing-ball-bottlerack> (accessed December 9, 2016).

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Figure 15: Jeff Koons, *Gazing Ball (Stool)*. 2013-2016, painted stainless steel, wood, glass, and aluminium, 33.66 x 33.66 x 101.76 cm. Available from: <http://www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/gazing-ball/gazing-ball-stool> (accessed December 9, 2016).

In his set-up to the gag on high and low Western culture, Koons establishes two narrative strands, primarily establishing and reinforcing the

fine art, high culture context of the exhibition space through the images and sculptures of canonical Western artworks. Koons's sculptures draw on the historic avant-garde provocations of including mass-produced objects in the art context. The subject matter of the constructions, the Greco-Roman sculptures and selection of canonical paintings are idiomatic to the point of cliché, a cliché that mirrors the inclusion of mass-produced objects as provocation, an action that was once provocative during the era of the historic avant-garde and now common place in art institutions. As a statement, or gag, the artwork is a reiteration of the historic avant-garde's gestures, but the physical construction suggests a particular interaction with the viewer that suggests something other than reinforcing clichés regarding fine art and mass-culture.

The mirrored sphere inserted in the plaster casts acts as the slapstick catalyst. The surface of the sphere and its particular placement within the sculpture reflects the viewer looking at the ideal object. The distorted likeness of the viewer's image is reflected back as a grotesque by the form of the spherical object. This incorporation of the grotesque image of the viewer with the classical form of beauty acts as an antithesis of classical aesthetics of beauty, an object made beautiful through the inference of the ideal form. In an ironic paradox, one of the ideal forms in the sculpture, the sphere, distorts the image of the viewer and stands in contrast to the plaster figure of idealized beauty. Thus two ideal forms, the plaster cast and the sphere are in visual disparity with each other, both in their cohesion as a sculptural object and in their inferences of ideal forms. Furthermore, the material that forms the two objects are in distinct contrast to each other, similar to the juxtaposition of wheel and stool in *Bicycle Wheel*. One part of the sculpture is fabricated in the matt and stark white surface of plaster and the other formed in the highly reflective and saturated blue of a glass sphere. The objects stand at either end of the spectrum of idealized form, one a literal anthropomorphic embodiment of ideal human form, the other the formal realization of an abstract geometric ideal of the sphere. Combined, the two forms emphasise the difference between their material and conceptual media.

In the sculpture and painting *Gazing Ball* series the gazing ball instigates a disruption to the passive observation of the object by reflecting the image of the observing viewer. When considering the plaster object, the viewer is partly observing his or herself in the act of observing through the reflection in the sphere. The image of the object incorporates the viewer and affects the visual experience. The act of viewing becomes a part of the observation experience as it is incorporated into the image the viewer considers. The viewer's contemplation is a component of the artwork's content just as it was in *Bicycle Wheel*. Whereas Duchamp's construction facilitated an abstract point of reference, a meditative tool without constraints on the subject matter of the viewer's contemplation, Koons's object suggests a subject for contemplation: the image of the object, the reflective surface. Although this superficial contemplation lends itself to an incongruity between representations of ideals, of beauty represented in the plaster form and contradicted by the grotesque reflection, or ideal form in the sphere distracted by the reflected image, the subject of contemplation is dictated by the art object, lending itself to a more illustrative construct, representing failure of representation, but not, necessarily, pointing towards alternative interpretations. The art object, as a whole, represents a concept of contradicting, if related in classical schema, ideals, and thus, not the self-reflexive construct as stipulated by Adorno, rather, as a self-aware illustration of theories of aesthetics. Yet, there remains a humorous critical component in the sculptures indicated by the construction of the object, a point I will clarify through comparison with the painting iterations of the series.

The integration of sculptural elements can be considered in contrast to Koons's other iteration of the *Gazing Ball* series using canonical Western art paintings (fig. 16 and 17). The *Gazing Ball* painting series present two different media interactions, the flat window of the picture plane disrupted by the evident object of the gazing ball fitted to an aluminium shelf. The elements that make up the object of contemplation are delineated by effectively three different functional categories: the "window" of the picture plane with its implied high cultural value referencing fine art canonical

masterpieces, the distorted image reflected in the garden ornament in the gazing ball, and the aluminium shelf camouflaged in paint serving a functional role of holding the gazing ball, yet, appearing as a distracting elemental feature of the object. The disruption formed by these various elements in the painting series is not a negotiating of formal concerns found within a particular medium as it is in the sculpture series. Rather, in the paintings, the disruption is obvious on a material and functional level and therefore able to be categorized as disparate materials placed as an illustration of the concept.

Koons's *Gazing Ball* painting series illustrates that incongruity alone does not substantiate a critically humorous construction. The individual elements of the painting/sculptures appear as incongruity for the sake of incongruity. Adorno's concept of an artwork's form containing a "sediment" of content suggests that the individual components that form the artwork, that are made evident to the viewer, inform the viewer of the content of the artwork. Therefore, for an evident and incongruous element of an artwork to serve as a critical feature in an artwork (humorous or otherwise), say an aluminium shelf camouflaged in oil paint, other than a necessity engineering feature, it must be considered an active element in the artwork. In the painting series iteration, the aluminium shelf seemingly points toward the obvious conclusion that it is difficult to fix three-dimensional objects to a painting, a clumsy analogy perhaps to painting's inability to depict real objects, but little more than an illustration of this concept or its structural function.

Each element in the painting series has a distinct, coherent conceptual reasoning and in this way fails to work as an incongruous element within an art object; the elements emphasise and reinforce the illustration of the concept of placing the sphere on art objects.

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Figure 16: Jeff Koons, *Gazing Ball (Manet Olympia)*. 2014-2015, oil on canvas, glass, and aluminium, 140.3 x 206 x 37.5 cm. Available from: <http://www.jeffkoons.com/artwork/gazing-ball-paintings/gazing-ball-manet-olympia> (accessed December 9, 2016).

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Figure 17: Jeff Koons, *Gazing Ball (Manet Olympia)*. Gagosian Gallery, NY. Available from: "Jeff Koons 'Gazing Ball Paintings' @ Gagosian Gallery in New York," *Autre*, November 16, 2015. From: <http://autre.love/journal/2015/11/15/jeff-koons-gazing-ball-paintings-gagosian-gallery-in-new-york> (accessed December 9, 2016).

Although there is similar material disparity between the plaster and the blown glass in the sculptural series, their form as objects maintains the genre integrity of the artworks; they act as constructed sculptures instead of combined media of painting and objects. The conflation of similar media

(e.g. three-dimensional representation of ideals) with disparate plastic material and cultural significance coalesces in a sculpture that is paradoxically more difficult to parse than the painting series. The distinguishing elements of the sculptural artwork are integrated thematically as three-dimensional objects, but the material (plaster and glass, colour and organic or geometric forms) are strikingly incongruous. The difference between the materials, plaster cast and blown glass, further reinforces the disparity between the formal image represented in the human figure and geometric sphere. As the two disparate objects are within the same category of art as sculpture they suggests a conceptual challenge in considering them as disparate features within a structure. As noted above, both elements reference ideal forms yet from opposite ends of the formal spectrum, one a cultural ideal of the human body, the other an abstract geometric ideal. Unlike the paintings where the sphere object is fixed outside the form of the painting, outside the picture's image plane, both items of contrast in the sculptures are incorporated in a three-dimensional space and fixed together to make a singular form, if visually disparate image. Thus, the *image* of the sculpture is in contradiction to the formal integrity of the object. The objects suggest a humorous incongruity between the visual and material distinction between the parts and the conceptual cohesion of the object: as a genre, the object is a sculpture of ideal forms, despite its disparate and contradictory cultural associations.

Cognitively recognizing the various elements of the sculpture is a humorous process of comprehending the subject matter of displayed fine art nudes and the juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory cultural contents of the gazing ball lawn ornament. The banal absurdity of the project adds to the amusement and facilitates the internalized mimetic process of constructing the object in the viewer's mind. The mimetic process for the viewer is two fold. One: the viewer becomes a part of the sculptural image through the reflection in the gazing ball. Two: the evident process of setting the ball on the sculpture suggests the action of creating the artwork. The viewer then is incorporated in the incongruous project through a process of comprehending the fabrication of the sculpture, both as an image in the

reflection and the formal comprehension of constructing the object and its implicit conceptual framework. The mimetic process of the viewer is one of an inferred involvement in an absurd project of placing incongruous objects on received cultural icons. The mimetic humour is further implicated in the viewer's reflection—the viewer is presented as a comically distorted voyeur by the spherical reflection. Thus, the viewer simultaneously comprehends the object as an other, as a constructed art object and distorted reflection, whilst empathetically engaged in the construction of the object and image, through reverse engineering and mirrored reflection.

In contrast to Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* as an object fabricated with the intention of facilitating meditation, leading the viewer to another place for contemplation, Koons's gazing balls place the viewer's distorted reflection as the point of contemplation, in effect placing the distorted image within the object of contemplation. In these objects the surface of the artwork is the focus of contemplation. The experience in the Koons's object becomes one of literal self-reflection for the viewer. The interactions implied in the *Gazing Ball* series is one of a process of looking and the looking viewer's image intruding on the perceived image of the object. Thus, the gazing ball is an incongruous addition to the plaster sculpture and the viewer's image reflected in the ball incongruous to the image of the art object.

Koons's *Gazing Ball* sculptures feature discordance between the individual components of the artwork (e.g. the image of the artwork, the image of the viewer, white plaster, human form, and blue glass sphere), a discordance that is pointedly aimed towards a high art and low kitsch dichotomy, indicating a provocation by equating the two. This comparison is less ambiguous in intention than, say, the Duchamp ready-mades that alluded either through visual puns or utility to different interpretations than their former utility. When the content of *Gazing Ball* series is positioned as a joke, either through the ironic juxtaposition with established canonical artwork and common garden features, or through the juxtaposition of idealised forms of beauty with the grotesquely distorted reflected image of

the viewer in the reflective glass, the object quickly serves its purpose and function as a declarative joke leaving little else for contemplation. This declarative aspect is more resounding in the clear delineation between sculptural form and painted image in the painting series.

Despite this indication of universalizing beauty, either as a form of satire concerning the vanity of the viewer, or reinforcing established norms of beauty, the sculptural versions of the series indicate a more nuanced reading of the content of the objects, beyond the conceptual joke of high and low culture. The sculptural construction integrates the two materials to form a sustaining incongruity of a singular sculptural form, differentiated by its surface of matt white plaster and the reflective surface of blue glass, yet structurally integrated as a sculptural form. The conceptual elements of formal ideals and the distinction between object and image are enhanced by the simultaneous integration and paradoxical distinction between the two elements of the sculpture-object. Thus, like the slap stick object, the visually and physically disruptive elements of the artwork are integrated and simultaneously suspended from each other in the perception of the viewer.

2.2.2 Suspended Image and Form: Urs Fischer's *Service à la française*

Urs Fischer's *Service à la française* (see fig. 18) similarly draws on traditional media and genres to fabricate seemingly provocative sculptures of banal objects and images. The title refers to a form of serving various dishes of a meal at the same time. Like the serving of a variety of differing foodstuffs, the exhibition features a series of tightly packed cubic forms with images of disparate subjects from souvenir trinkets like the Empire State Building with King Kong, Emil Rodin's *Kiss* (1889), an image of link-chain fixed to the ceiling and a block of wood. The images appear larger than they would occur as objects and are photographed with a high degree of acuity lending to a hyper-realistic presence. The use of nonsensical objects of simple implied utility or pleasure is not itself particularly provocative, but the use of materials and the method of production do suggest a particular tension between the fabrication of the objects, the

inclusion of the viewer's reflection, and the verisimilitude of image fabrication.

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Figure 18: Urs Fischer, *Service à la française*. 2009, silkscreen print on mirror-polished stainless steel sheets, polyurethane foam sheets, 2K polyurethane adhesive, stainless steel beams, aluminium L sections, screws, Installation dimensions variable, photo by Stefan Altenburger. Available from: <http://www.ursfischer.com/exhibitions/Marguerite%20de%20Ponty/images/44412> (accessed June 1, 2016).

Although similar to Koons's series in the use of cultural signifiers and reflective surfaces, Fischer's objects reference a different process of fabricating sculpture that result in a divergent association between the viewer and the reflective image. I will argue that although Fischer employs similar subject matter in his sculptures, the contrast of high art with low subject matter, the viewer's image conflated with the objects' and the method of construction alters the conveyance of the subject matter, suggesting a distinctly different reading to Koons's objects. The contrast between the two artists' methods reinforces my claim that the material construction of the object, the humorous visual and implied physical disruption in the construction of the object and image of the artwork, its slapstick construction, informs the reading of the artwork. Koons's *Gazing Ball* sculpture series were fabricated in a tradition of additive sculpture

technique whereby the material is added to an existing armature or structure to build up the form. Traditionally this would be a metal or wood structure formed like a skeleton with the sculpted material, such as clay or plaster, added to give the shape form. This additive formation is similarly employed in Duchamp's configured ready-mades such as *Bicycle Wheel* as a constructed form made out of added on structures. This incorporation of material to make a form is contrasted by the other traditional method of making sculpture through carving away at a material, such as marble, stone or wood. This subtractive method would start with a cubic form of the material on which a stencil is drafted on the five sides of the shape denoting the figure that was to be carved away. The excess of material carved away forms the negative space or the space that defines the edges of the form. Once the excess material is removed the final form of the sculpture remains.

For *Service à la française*, Urs Fischer had fabricated mirrored stainless steel cubes with silkscreened images suggesting a visual gag on the subtractive sculptural technique. The silkscreen images consist of composite photographs of objects taken from multiple angles and silkscreened onto the reflective surface, forming outlines similar to the stencils used in subtractive sculpture. Where the silkscreened image ends and the reflective surface remains is the material that would have been removed in a traditional subtractive sculpture to suggest the form of the object. The negative space in the Fischer sculptures is the reflective surface.

The sculptural objects in *Service à la française* suggested by the subtractive technique and the template-like images are in a process of translating the two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional objects into three-dimensional sculptural form. The images were formed through a composite process, taking a number of photographs from a particular angle to get the greatest amount of detail. Through the multiple-photographic method, *Service à la française* circumvents the indexical presumption of photography through editing software to create clearer verisimilitude to how the viewer processes an object; the images of the objects portray the subject without perspective distortion or shadows which would normally occur in a single lens exposure. *Service à la française* further indicates the process of

making flat images three-dimensional by alluding to a method of subtractive sculpture, the sculpting template. Placed on the five sides of the block, the template consists of a drawing or image of the intended object viewed from the respective side of the block it is placed on. Thus the viewer is presented with three-dimensional objects that indicate various stages of fabrication in the final object, the raw material of the stainless steel block as the primary stage, the photographic templates as the preparatory stage, and both elements representing the object in the final stage of representation. In this conflation of the stages of production of traditional subtractive sculpture in the final presentation, the sculpture suggests a play on the title as serving all stages or servings of the artwork at once.

Aside from the durational stages of construction represented as the final object, the collection of cubes has additional material and conceptual disruptions to the expectations of interactions with sculpture. The primary impression of the objects is that of the images silkscreened on the surface of the cubes. The series of banal objects represented in larger-than-life scale and packed into an exhibition space with little room to contemplate the individual objects give the exhibition an absurdly overwhelming sensation; in effect the oversized banal objects humorously overwhelm the viewer. Furthermore, the reflective surface of the steel panels suggests a visual gag as the “negative” space of the sculptures is physically reversed. Yet, although the negative space in this instance incongruously consists of material, its function as delineating the silkscreened image’s form remains as the mirrored surface reflects the surrounding environment further distinguishing the edges of the image from the images of the surroundings. With a seeming play on the implication of “negative” in the negative space, a parody of the exhibition is established in the object’s structure: the physical form of the image of the silkscreened object, its edges, is defined by the images of it, the sculpture/image’s, surroundings. Thus the environmental context of the object is reflected in the negative space of the reflective cube edges. Furthermore, the images of the other sculptures, the gallery and the viewers informs the negative space that articulates or forms the edges of the image of the object, a reversal of how negative space

should behave as a removal of material to inform the mass of the object of observation. The form, image and material of the objects in *Service à la française* simultaneously form the artwork and amusingly contradict the conceptual implications of the structures: the mirrored surface acts both to establish the contextual surroundings of the artwork, highlighting the methods of construction and acts as the defining edges to the object, whilst confusing the image of the artwork, blurring the lines between an object of contemplation, its surroundings and its observer. This contradiction of the mirrored surfaces suggests a failure of the artwork's construction as a distinct object, whilst the surface is simultaneously included in, and forms, its structure.

Further to this humorous allusion to the sculptures' potential fabrication, the general seemingly excessive size of the objects, matched with their unlikely implied fabrication into subtracted sculpture suggests a form of absurdist act in intended use of the forms and images. The absurdity is emphasised by the mundane subject matter of the images made ostentatious by association to their size and inclusion in an exhibition space. The objects in the exhibition suggest a form of cultural dandyism, an ironic distancing from daily life ascribed to early modern artists. Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, and David Hopkins in their survey *Marcel Duchamp* describe this form of dandyism as a sophisticated form of taste. Dandyism in art “assumed in its audience not a revolutionary instinct, but a private and delicate wit. The dandy was an observer, withdrawn and aloof [...] The mixture of these self-imposed demands—to be withdrawn from everyday life, but to observe it and find enjoyment precisely in its most mundane moment—made for a sublime aristocratic challenge.”¹²⁷ This describes a form of irony that aligns with Superiority Theory as it delineates between the knowing connoisseur and those without taste—at the expense of those without. The evocation of knowing taste implicates the inferior viewer who may be enthralled with the object purely on aesthetic or novel terms not recognizing the joke on taste. Reflecting the withdrawn aloofness, the

¹²⁷ Dawn Ades, Marcel Duchamp, Neil Cox, and David Hopkins. *Marcel Duchamp*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999) 21-22.

objects in *Service à la française* suggest a form of readily made sculpture, seemingly without much effort from the hand of the artist i.e. the artist-sculptor does not sculpt the sculpture. The images placed on a reflective surface invoke the negative space, but without the effort affected to remove the superfluous material.¹²⁸ Furthermore, the exhibition features sculpture made with an ironic shrug of reducing genre to its formal elements: a three-dimensional representation of a subject with a seeming indifference to the content of the images.

The attention to detail in the fabrication of the cubes and the images stands in contrast to the indifference suggested by the conceptual framework and the lack of hand-made craftsmanship indicated in the objects. The oversized objects suggest the monolithic scale of traditional monumental sculptures with the images and reflective negative space that create an intriguing dynamic. The dynamic of the sculptures is enhanced by the enticing detail of the image and the highly reflective surface. The reflective surface also functions as a rebuffing element similar to Koons's gazing ball: when observing the object of contemplation the viewer is made aware of his or her own presence looking at his/her reflection indicating an implicit voyeurism and vanity. Yet, the effect of the reflective surfaces is in contrast with Koons's distorted spherical image, as the viewer's image is reflected directly in the polished steel of Fischer's cubes. The process of looking at Fischer's cubes implicates the viewer with the clichéd art objects (Rodin's sculpture for instance) and every-day materials including a block of wood, a chain link, or a chocolate éclair.

Fischer's reflective cubes problematize the mimetic inclusion of the reflected image of the viewer. The allegorical implications of Fischer's negative space (the "negative" implications on the reflected images) paradoxically include the viewer in the image of the object while simultaneously suggesting, by the implied function of the negative space, that the viewer is *not* the object of consideration. The delineation between

¹²⁸ Yet the fabrication of the objects is to a high standard, despite the nonchalance of the concept, or indeed to emphasise the aristocratic gesture, a reflection on the skill of the fabricators and the expense of the production, and thus the oversight of the discerning artist.

the non-reflective silk-screened image and the mirrored stainless steel reflected image of the viewer is a visible reinforcement of the conceptual separation of the viewer from the object of contemplation.

A second element of empathetic mimetic association with the artwork occurs when the viewer is engaged with the reflective object. Due to the filling of the exhibition space with the mirrored objects the effect of the reflections is a plane of mirrored and silkscreened images. When combined in the visual space the resulting image is something similar to viewing multiple overlapped layers within photo-editing software like Photoshop. The viewer and the object's image are incorporated within the various reflective planes of the other reflective sculptures. The varying scale of images and cubes lends to the effect of the Photoshopped collage of enlarged likeness of the objects and the multiple images of the disjointed viewer. The viewer thus becomes a flattened and displaced image similar to the objects that surround him or her, an effect of visual and conceptual disruption for the viewer whilst cognitively aware of the actual forms before him or her. In this manner, the viewer is incorporated into the montage of the exhibition image, an illustration of Eisenstein's vertical editing technique of an image containing collisions of differing contents and implications, an experience that changes as the viewer moves through the space. Conceptually the viewer is reduced to another flat image and, by implication, a banal object of consideration, a potential reinforcement of a humour based on the superiority of the art object over the subject of the viewer.

Although moving through the columns of reflective surfaces suggests an experiential reflected performance for the viewer, the objects remain as points of passive observation. The viewer is involved in the disruptive visual element through his or her reflection, but the action of creating this image does not suggest further investment by the viewer other than contemplating the objects before him or her. The viewer's mimetic process of constructing the object before the viewer, suggested in Duchamp and Koons's examples, is not as overt in Fischer's example. Instead, the

image of the object of consideration changes with the viewer's articulation through the space. The banality of the objects and the absurd size and construction lends the experience of contemplating the banality as itself an absurd action, implicating the viewer in a passive, potentially parodic performance of an art enthusiast.

2.3 Slap Stick Props: Material Incongruity and Utility Gags in Lena Henke's *Hang Harder* and Isa Genzken's *Two Loudspeakers*.

2.3.1 Painting Gags: Lena Henke's *Hang Harder*.

Lena Henke's *Hang Harder* (2012) (see fig. 19 and 20) combines the construction of utility objects with art references similar to Koons's and Duchamp's examples. In its constructed form, Henke's tableaux of boards covered in epoxy resin and tarpaper supported by folding chairs are used in an additive sculpture tradition, the individual components of the constructions form the object and are evident in its final iteration. Unlike Duchamp's combination of two items of utility into an object for contemplation, Henke's construction shares a similarity to Koons's use of conflating art objects with mass-produced utility items. The individual objects are less the enigmatic construction of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* as Henke's use of common building materials, loose painting style and repetition of technique suggest that the resultant constructs are less about fabricating enduring artworks than fabricating (temporary) objects that reference paintings as statements regarding fine art objects. The wood panels are constructed with enough visual information to indicate paintings, but treated both in hanging and in the material to suggest that the point of the objects, their content, is more to do with their implications as objects rather than the conveying information through the gestures, compositions or colour choice. The wood panels share a symbolic value within the final construction similar to Koons's use of Greco-Roman plaster-casts as objects that reference art objects from the Western art canon, but are not,

necessarily to be considered individually beyond general concepts of aesthetic content.

*image
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**Figure 19: Lena Henke, *Hang Harder*. 2012, wooden panels, tarpaper, epoxy resin, chairs
Installation view, Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, 2012. Courtesy of the artist & Galerie Parisa
Kind, Frankfurt. Photos Simon Vogel. All images available from:
<http://www.parisakind.com/lena-henke/selected-works/hang-harder-nak-neuer-aachener-kunstverein.html> (accessed June 1, 2016).**

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**Figure 20: Lena Henke, *Hang Harder*. 2012, wooden panels, tarpaper, epoxy resin, chairs.
Installation view, Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, 2012.**

The panels are constructed using common building supplies typically used for structural rather than aesthetic purposes.¹²⁹ Although referred to as sculptural forms in the exhibition literature,¹³⁰ the painted panels suggest in their positioning along the gallery walls, their composition and shape large abstract paintings. The painted boards are covered in epoxy in a loosely painted style, with the black tarpaper showing through the transparent resin implicating emotive gestural painting of, say, existential angst. The exhibition location, in a gallery with white exhibition walls, the lighting and the implicated positioning of the objects indicate an exhibition of artworks. Although the materials suggest building supplies and impromptu supports in the folding chairs, the clearly delineated positions of the objects and the traditional exhibition contextual elements of gallery, accompanying literature, and photographic documentation clearly indicate the objects are to be observed within an exhibition setting, not happened upon in mid-construction.

The two primary indications that the panels are not solely to be considered as objects of consideration but aspects of a slapstick configuration is the use of the folding chairs as stands and the stack of similarly treated boards used as a platform in the corner of the gallery. The utility of the chairs and the stack of boards are in contrast with the suggested emotive, gestural and darkly covered boards that indicate large-scale paintings. The combination of casual utility and expressionistic gesture suggests both a contrast of attitude towards the construction of an exhibition and the fabrication of the artwork. The placement of objects in the gallery suggests that the viewer is witness to a temporary state of configuration where perhaps the boards are positioned to give an impression of what they will look like once more permanently fixed in place, with the chairs and stacked board platform removed. The implication that what is witnessed is the final iteration situates the exhibition in a suspension of appropriate

¹²⁹ The chipboard used for the panels, the epoxy resin and tarpaper are materials used for their structural integrity and low-cost and thus used as protective barrier under the aesthetic cladding of buildings.

¹³⁰ *Lena Henke: Hang Harder*, 5 February — 22 April 2012. Neuer Aachener Kunstverein. <http://www.neueraachenerkunstverein.de/content/2012/ausstellungen/lena-henke/?lang=en>. Accessed April 20, 2017.

configuration. The exhibition presents the utility stage prior to the exhibition when objects are casually positioned to indicate the final arrangement contrasted with the final stage when all items of utility are out of sight and the art objects remain for undistracted consideration.

Additionally, the configuration of the stack of boards, two chairs and panel is placed in the corner of the gallery space before a recessed section, the width of the board only just covering the edges of the recess, the base of the vertical board exposing the bottom of the recess. The configuration suggests that the panel is to cover over an anomaly in the exhibition wall, however inadequately, in contrast to exhibition standards of either ignoring architectural anomalies or using them to the advantage of showcasing the artwork. In Henke's structure the awkwardness of the architectural anomaly and the objects' construction is highlighted by the placement before the anomaly, further suggesting the placement of the boards is more about the action of placing than the content of the individual boards themselves. The emphasis of placement over content further undermines the suggestion that the boards are individual artworks or paintings, rather that they form parts of a larger construction, functioning as symbolic references.

In the exhibition *Hang Harder* there is little ambiguity in what is to be considered artworks over symbolic objects. In its fabrication of materials and positioning of objects the exhibition functions more as a pictogram or allegory with each element indicating a purpose for a specific reading of the exhibition as a whole. Like a set-up for a gag, the elements of *Hang Harder* are clearly delineated suggesting a particular utility to the circumstance, a board covered in tarpaper and resin to suggest both construction materials and rough, expressive paintings; chairs and stacks of boards to indicate unorthodox use of materials in constructing an exhibition space. The structure and individual elements of the exhibition is at the service of a statement. The artwork structures suggest a statement on inappropriate handling of art material, circumventing propriety implicitly and suggesting temporality of the structures, further suggesting a visual pun on art as temporary resurfacing of exhibition walls.

The individual parts of the exhibition act as props, reducing the individual elements to their symbolic or utility function. The elements act as subordinates to the implications of the structure. Having more in common with Duchamp's *Fountain* than *Bicycle Wheel*, the stacked board structure and panels indicate a statement on art, architecture and the aesthetics of presentation. Thus, a parody is formed considering art as utility object, a mocking of art institutions, taste, and the concept of the autonomous artist as unique craftsman seeming at the forefront of the exhibition's statement through the unorthodox placement of artworks, the rough handling of materials, and the overt references to building materials and overwrought, if slapdash, craftsmanship.

As well as this parodic inference, there is a physicality about the artworks that suggest also a slapstick element to them and in this an ironic knowing attempt at creating structures that fail in implications, but, perhaps, succeed in their intentions of, paradoxically, successfully representing the attempt and failure. This implication of failure suggests the parodic nature of the exhibition, as a reflection on the exhibition's knowing failure to convincingly represent evocative artwork over symbolic wall cladding. Any empathetic engagement by the viewer, either through the cognitive construction of the exhibition or fabrication of the individual "paintings," incorporates the viewer into the parodic process, either as a superior agent against institutional associations surrounding tasteful arrangement and hanging of pictures, or the butt of the joke for rejecting the premise of the disruption. Similar to the experience of Fischer's *Service à la française*, Henke's *Hang Harder* emphasises the viewer's passive engagement with artwork indicating that the viewer is either an intruder to the space, an attendant arriving too early to the exhibition and thus witness to the preparation, or as a witness to a parodic display of art as wallpaper. The viewer is either *in* on the joke or at the expense of it.

2.3.2 Material Incongruity: Isa Genzken's *Two Loudspeakers*

Whereas Henke's use of materials and construction is employed to satirize the exhibition experience, Isa Genzken's sculpture suggests a parody through caricature and indications of anthropomorphic structures. In the construction and titling of *Two Loudspeakers (Zwei Lautsprecher)* (see fig. 21), Genzken fabricates a visual pun on the implied anthropomorphic figures and the utility of art with two concrete blocks on steel stands. The title of *Two Loudspeakers* is contradicted by the lack of physical utility in the construction of the artwork. Thus, the implied content of the object as a mechanical means of reproducing sound is denied by a visual interrogation of the object. By investigating the object in an aesthetic manner, by considering its form, composition and material contents, the indicated utility suggested by the title is contradicted. The object of consideration moves from a potential object of utility implicated in the title to an object of aesthetic consideration as an art object.

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Figure 21: Isa Genzken, *Two Loudspeakers*. 1986, concrete and steel sculptures, Tate Liverpool. Available from: [amyicurrie @amyicurrie, 20 Jun 2016, https://twitter.com/amyicurrie/status/744843771158880256](#) (accessed March 17, 2017).

As with all of the examples in this chapter the context of the exhibition space and the association of the object with an artist forms the narrative set-up of the art object, suggesting that objects that may be read as detritus or innocuous incongruities outside of the exhibition space are to be considered as art objects within aesthetic and conceptual frameworks of the gallery. The objects of consideration in this case consist of two cast concrete objects with two circular recesses suggesting the cones found in hi-fidelity speakers, situated on steel stool-like supports similar in stature and configuration of stereo home-entertainment speakers or anthropomorphic figures. The positioning of the sculpture suggests two objects in conversation, a visual pun enhanced by the material of cast concrete suggesting a muted conversation, an action implied by the positioning and form but rejected by the concrete material.

The implied structure acts as a semiotic and wordplay gag that resonates with the objects' inferred formal qualities. These qualities of loudspeaker shape and minimalist formal aesthetics resonate with the title suggesting utility through association with the title and the structural semblance of loudspeakers or figures, a mimetic impression of two (mechanical or humanoid) speakers on stands. Simultaneously, the title is in contrast with the visual information presented by the objects: the material renders the potential of "loudspeakers" useless. The hollow holes and solid concrete structure missing the necessary hardware such as the speaker cone or electronics renders the objects ineffectual loudspeakers. Through a process of allusion and material dismissal the sculptures' ambiguous forms seemingly reinforce and contradict illustrative readings of the title and associative parodic readings of the materials. Therefore, the material both reinforces the contextualizing title by association and denies either implied iteration of the title, the loudspeaker or loud person, in its actual function. The title is seemingly a joke, inferring either concrete block-heads as loud pontificators, or parodies of seemingly stoic minimalist gestures of sculptures, but far from illustrating either gesture, the combination of title and structures further complicates the reading of the objects. The formal structure of the objects conflates the designation of the title and exhibition

contextual frameworks with the structural denial of the implied utility of the objects. The failure of the structure to reinforce the framework is paradoxically the success of the object as an artwork. The sculpture is not an illustration of its contextual elements; rather it functions as a disruption, a self-reflexive humorously critical object.

The objects' construction is readily evident in the final form of the artwork, and similar to the previous artworks, the viewer's cognitive mimesis of the artwork's construction likewise indicates the absurdity of the process. Genzken's structures more overtly engage with anthropomorphic elements than the previous objects. Koons's sculptures are obviously based on human forms, but are more directly referencing high art representations of form. Fischer's anthropomorphic elements rest more in size, the object's scaled to human size or larger and incorporating the viewer's image within the image of the object. Henke's artwork is the least anthropomorphic, relegating human relations with objects as functional placement of forms. Genzken's objects anthropomorphise the subjects through their title, positioning and formal allusions to mouths and eyes. Simultaneously, the anthropomorphising of the objects is subverted by the plastic material of the objects: the concrete and steel structures allude to loudspeakers and busts but are obviously not the implied subjects, sharing more with minimal sculpture's use of mass-produced industrial material, than realist replication of mass-produced products or portraiture.

Two Loudspeakers forms a juxtaposition that acts as a visual gag and simultaneously disrupts the gag as a declarative gesture. The set-up and punch line of the artwork is incorporated in the object of consideration confusing rather than elucidating the reading of the objects. Through its physical material construction an allusion to both avant-garde and minimalist use of machine-produced sculptures, the artwork's seemingly illustrative title, anthropomorphic construction, and exhibition context, *Two Loudspeakers* appears suspended between formal and contextual aesthetic consideration. Neither implication is completely confirmed. In *Two Loudspeakers*, the disruption is a visual and cognitive dissonance between implied function as illustration of concept or allegory for dialogue, and

aesthetic object. The interpretation of the material either on purely formal levels as material formed around abstract ideas and as an allegorical reading of the title remains effectively suspended. Thus, the slapstick disruption as well as the narrative framework that informs the artwork are simultaneously reinforced and disrupted by the form. Genzken's structure is successfully able to hold the humorous structure and collapse of meaningful reading in a state of suspension, successfully negotiating humorous, slapstick and critical reflexive elements within the form and context of the object.

2.4 Conclusion

The preceding examples present variations on constructions of artworks that incorporate various materials found within the art sphere with high aesthetic finish and common mass-produced material carrying various degrees of ironic intimation. Whilst some structures play with obvious disruptions to the material utility of the objects, by example Duchamp's stool and Genzken's loudspeakers, other objects work with visual puns to disrupt the institutional associations of art objects as hallowed, demarcated objects of contemplation such as with Henke's painted boards, and Koons's sculptures. The process of observing the objects is further disrupted by implied and actual sensual contemplation of the artworks with Duchamp's spinning wheel and the reflective surfaces of Koons's and Fischer's sculptures indicating images or readings that are alternate to the formal construction of the objects. Genzken inverts the "reflective" sensual experience, implying sound through the title and shape of the object but rendering the objects mute. The viewer is left to imagine the sound.

These examples share a similarity in their conceptual misuse of materials suggesting a tension between the art objects, their material and their exhibition context. Similarly, the sculptural objects in this chapter draw on general notions of dichotomies of propriety and utility and high and low taste with varying implications for the viewer in engaging the artworks. The contemporary artworks draw from Duchamp's constructed and found ready-made art objects and likewise indicate a playfulness concerning taste

and appropriateness drawn from the historic avant-garde. After a century of use, however, the implications of misappropriation of material is not effective in itself as a critique of the institutional status quo, not least when such acts have become institutional norms. Therefore, the question of how the previous examples distinguish themselves from the criticism Bürger aims at the neo-avant-garde of appropriating the historic avant-garde's process in style alone remains.

In Henke's *Hang Harder* this question is most pointedly a criticism. The objects created are quite comfortable in their institutional circumstances whether in the museum or gallery. As with Fischer, these comical takes on traditional media are fabricated *for* the institution, their internal gazing and interaction is meant for the institution visitor, or for the contemplation of the collector. The constructions point towards attitudes regarding taste, low and high art materials and contextual juxtaposition, frequently placing the viewer in an awkward position as a disjointed, narcissistic voyeur in Fischer's reflective surfaces, or as a visitor arriving too early to an exhibition, when the artworks are only roughly in place and the objects treated with casual indifference in Henke's exhibition. To consider the objects on a formal level, or indeed interrogate how they use the material to construct the objects and negotiate the exhibition space seems to miss the point. These objects, especially in *Hang Harder* seem to have been constructed as symbols only, as forms of critique of setting and taste rather than their own construction. Therefore, the art objects in *Hang Harder* especially, are relegated to illustrative tools for a concept, rather than means of reflexive critiques on their material.

These artworks function as slapstick devices similar to Heiser's reading of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, as tools whose utility function is in contradiction to its indicated use, a utility indicated and contradicted by the objects' context both within the art gallery and without. As in the slap stick object, the contradiction concerning utility is evident in the construction of the objects, the material structure, thus rendering them props that simultaneously invoke slapstick actions and reflexive consideration by the viewer regarding the object's utility and context. The potential use in the

majority of surveyed artworks is indicated through the potential for the artwork to articulate the implied utility. Koons's *Gazing Ball* series display artworks to be viewed and yet with the inclusion of a reflective surface indicate the viewer in the process of looking. Likewise, Fischer's constructions present the viewer's image within the fractured image of the objects in the exhibition. Henke's painted boards are intentionally poor coverings for architectural anomalies and the folding chairs and stacked boards form temporary positioning supports, the panels seemingly at the point of damaging or sliding off their structures. Genzken's concrete blocks suggest sound-producing objects, but are obviously ineffectual in that capacity. Thus an implied utility is suggested and simultaneously suspended or thwarted in the construction of the objects.

The selection of artwork has varying degrees of dependency on the art institution for their content. Duchamp's construction is a provocation of art institutional formal aesthetics, presented as an ungainly device for personal meditation. The object functions as an object for contemplation regardless of the provocation. Its humour lessened in the domestic space, although its construction remains an incongruity regardless of its context. Likewise, Koons's and Fischer's constructions maintain their visual imbrication of the viewer within the image of the object regardless of the setting, yet the Greco-Roman plaster casts in the former and the large-scale images of banal objects in the later are obvious plays on aesthetic tastes, a content that is dependent on art institutional association. Genzken's content, like Duchamp's other ready-mades such as *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, fluctuates between illustrating the title and the actual utility or aesthetics of the object itself. The content of the sculptured objects refer to certain art historical inferences, but as use-less devices the visual pun remains with the title, not, necessarily the exhibition space. Henke's *Hang Harder* is most dependent on the art institutional setting. Although a tarpapered and resin covered board resting upright on two folding chairs would stand out in most settings, the seemingly makeshift construction and allusions to painting and sculpture are clearly intentionally incongruous in the white-wall cubical of the gallery. Indeed, the indication of painting and sculptures' poor utility as

institutional wallpaper or structural aesthetics that *Hang Harder* indicates is dependent on the institutional setting and association. The individual materials appear secondary to the statement that the exhibition/artwork suggests. Unlike Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* constructed to facilitate a meditation towards an other place or Koons's gazing ball sculptures that seemingly indicate a generalizing and universalizing aesthetic judgement but presents awkward and disorienting confluences of objects and images, Henke's individual components are less constructed in a manner that questions their own construction or integrity, rather the exhibition displays an object at the service of a narrative analogy.

The artworks' critical integrity in the previous examples is supported by their inverse relationship to the components' facility within the structures that either the institution associates with the artwork or that facilitate the joke on the same structures. When the art object loses some of its ambiguity at the service of a joke, as seemingly is the case with Henke, and indicated in Koons's and Fischer's overt high/low culture dichotomies, the objects of consideration appear secondary to the statement of depreciated materials, in the case of Henke's structures, or now conventional equalizing of taste in Koons's and Fischer's iterations. The objects appear positioned together for the sake of a joke, the individual parts suggest allegorical shorthand for a statement on art, utility and art institutions. In this pedagogical or didactic formation the artworks are more in line with the provocation of Duchamp's *Fountain* rather than the indicative potential exposition of his *Bicycle Wheel*. When at the service of a joke the provocation takes precedence over the content. Once the provocation becomes the status quo, there remains little for the art object to suggest. In effect, the joke on the institution and taste "works" but as a self-interrogating object it does not sustain the paradoxical simultaneous aesthetic interest and query. In the form of a joke or provocation, the individual components of the object are not there to be considered other than recognised for what they are: symbols of paintings and sculptures placed in an incongruous and aesthetically wrong position, suggesting a physical disruption to the norms that is dependent on the gag for its content.

This chapter examined artworks that consisted of constructed objects whose function within the exhibition space formed an aspect of their content, objects that rely on an interaction with the viewer—either as passive participants whose image is incorporated within the object as in the case of Koons’s and Fischer’s artworks or as a witness to incongruous artefacts, of misplaced, misappropriated materials in Henke’s exhibition or conceptualizing utility of inert material in the case of Genzken’s *Two Loudspeakers*. In all of these examples the physical, plastic material of the object forms the artwork and is integral in the suggested utility and context of the artwork. The object, or objects, implicate(s) action through the associations with the social and art spheres. The artworks act as a slap stick prop, a device that conveys utility through its structure. This function stands in contrast to the artworks in the following chapter that rely on the presented media to convey the action that has already taken place, the material under consideration is the documentation of the slapstick act. In this chapter the artwork as objects indicate a potential action of the viewer with the item and therefore anticipate potential use and rely on the viewer’s passivity to inform the tension between intended utility and exhibition propriety. In the following chapter’s artworks the viewer is in a more passive position, anticipating the action unfolding before him or her in the documenting medium. Although the documenting medium has a secondary role to the forming of the artwork, it remains as a reflexive material and integral to the slapstick artwork and experience.

Chapter Three: The Documented Event and Suspended Punch Line: How Slapstick Can Exist in Art Without the Resolution of a Pratfall or Gag

This chapter will consider the slapstick act in art as an action within an event. Whereas the previous chapter focused on the art object that signified the potential slapstick act through its tactile material construction, the artwork in this chapter is more difficult to locate in object form. The selected artworks rely on photographic documentation either as film or in print form. The artworks feature performed actions by the artists either directly documented in the photographs or films in the case of Bruce Nauman and John Baldessari (1931-), or indicated through the object documented in the photographic print, as is the case in Peter Fischli (1952-) and David Weiss's (1946-2012) series of photographs. In this manner of photographically documented event, the artworks draw more directly from the early film translation of vaudeville stage theatrical slapstick of physical comedy in live action to the abstraction of slapstick on the screen. Yet, the locus of the artwork in these following four examples remains elusive as each artwork engages with the documenting medium in unique ways indicating a visual and cognitive disruption with the presumed role of documenting photography. The various elements in the selected artworks functioned as the contextual framework and the simultaneous disruptive element, from the durational implication of the event suggested by the titles and/or the construction of the film or photograph, to the images produced in the replication. With the four examples, the slapstick moment may lay outside of the recorded event as an indicated or implicit potential act.

In the following examples, the photographic medium acts as a documenting tool that fabricates an image of an event wherein a slapstick act implicitly or explicitly acts as a disruptive element. The potential physical disruption to the material construction of the artworks is indicated through an association with the potential energy, an implied set-up and disruption to the narrative rhythm indicated by Heiser and suggested by the acts that construct the final object of contemplation, the moving or still image. The documented events that suggest an act that does not occur,

through a process of indicating a disruptive act yet refraining from enacting it, creates a tension from potential energy, the object of consideration has obviously been invested with energy that appears ready to release in some manner. This energy is indicated either through a stated or implicit structural element in the following artworks. The tension serves to encourage the viewer's engagement with the artwork in a process of simultaneous comprehension of the narrative scope, established by a framework of the title and/or indicated in the visual clues of the image, and an anticipation of the disruptive element, the implied or actual disruption to the implied framework.

Although the photographic image in the examples suggests a secondary role to the event or act, the following artists engage with media in ways that suggest that the documentation plays a role in the event, if not fundamental to the final artwork then by informing the final image with contextual evidence. The traditional aesthetic value of form describing abstract ideals is treated by the artists as secondary or non-existent in the media as the print or film is presented to the viewer as a secondary purpose to the event it documents. Yet, I will argue that not only does the documenting medium engage with the conceptual fabrication of the artworks, the subjects of the medium (the events) suggest a formal construction of materials based on ideals of form and therefore do engage with classical aesthetic ideals, if not regarding beauty than with abstract ideas, a form of aesthetic consideration more in line with the mimetic of Adorno's reflexive integrity and Lyotard's representation of the unrepresentable. The artworks engage the medium and the event as temporal constructions that indicate both the event and the disruption whilst simultaneously acknowledging the failure to encapsulate the whole project.

As the following examples do not display overt pratfalls to distinguish the event or act as a slapstick disruption, I will analyse how implied actions or contextual suggestions indicate visual and/or physical disruptive elements. This process of implicating slapstick is derived similarly to the implications of the slap stick object discussed in the previous chapter as a potential action indicated by the object of

contemplation, but not necessarily activated. This potential action acts similarly in the viewer through a mimetic effect of potential energy, a built up tension that indicates some form of release that does not materialise in the documentation. In this chapter I will discuss how the energy of the object of consideration is explored through the photographic medium by delineating the event and/or act that indicates a disruptive element to the contextual framework that surrounds the object often shifting the emphasis of where the artwork is situated, whether in the medium or in the event/object. The shifting of emphasis from a visible object or action to the documentation and indication of the duration of the event documented effects a tension regarding the object's construction. Examining how the artwork engages or informs the event, through contextual framework and highlighting the humorous incongruity, can elicit the material integrity of the artwork's content.

The chapter will begin with a consideration of Bruce Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* to establish the framework for the following artworks. After considering Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, the chapter will be divided into two sections that will examine the slapstick event from slightly different angles. The first section will analyse artworks that consider the photograph as an integral part of the conceptual framework that both replicates the event as well as form a new event. In this section, Nauman's *Finger Touch No. 1* and *Finger Touch with Mirrors* (both 1966-67/70) are similarly an event contained in the photograph, yet the photographic image becomes complicit in the artwork as a paradoxical illustration of the title, something the actual event cannot physically enact. The second section will consider John Baldessari's *Throwing Four Balls in the Air to Get a Square (Best of Thirty-Six Tries)* (1972-1973) and the collaborating artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss's photograph of a sculpture *The Time at Our Disposal (Zeit die zur Verfügung steht)* (1984/86) as documented events. In both events, the indicated act, designated by Baldessari's title or implied through the evident fabrication process in the structure photographed by Fischli and Weiss, is a precarious construction of

an object, an object that is to be viewed for what it forms and as an indication of the action that constructed it and will instigate its collapse. Both documented events reveal a simultaneous success and failure either of a near impossible goal set forward in the title of the former, or with immanent collapse suggested by the material structure in the later. In the two examples the medium used to convey the event plays different roles. In Baldessari's series, the photograph holds a largely secondary role to the event it documents, although it does indicate the conceptual framework surrounding the act and therefore is fundamental to conveying the act. In the Fischli and Weiss images, the photograph is a documentation of an object with a temporary nature, obviously constructed, and prone to collapse. Therefore the Fischli and Weiss image shares a common element with the Baldessari series as a document of a temporal event.

By examining the construction of the event and object of contemplation and its means of mediation through the photographic medium, I will describe how the structure of the art object informs the viewer of an implied visual or physical disruption. The disruption, I will argue, paradoxically forms a constructive element in the artwork, although it follows either a destructive element suggested in Fischli and Weiss's print, a failure in actualising in Baldessari's photographs, or the relative non-event of Nauman's exercises. The media in this chapter informs the viewer of the event and the disruptive act, serving a secondary, observing role to the event/act, similar to that of the viewer. Yet, like the physical slap stick object discussed in the previous chapter, the photographic medium functions as a point of contemplation on the construction of both the subject of the image, the action or object being documented, and the medium that constructs the image, the photograph.

3.1 The Recorded Slapstick Event: Selections from Bruce Nauman's Films and Prints

3.1.1 The Art Object as Slapstick Event: Bruce Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*

In the 1960s, Bruce Nauman produced his artwork *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (see fig. 22). The film is part of a series of collaborations with composer/choreographer Meredith Monk. In the film, Nauman enacts an exercise described by the title. Through a rigid and prescribed choreography and minimal execution of movements including an exaggerated gyration of his hips, Nauman circumscribes a taped square on the floor situated in a cluttered industrial looking room. Repeating his actions in reverse, Nauman completes four circuits of the square ending where he started in the lower right corner of the screen and the film ends.

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Figure 22: Bruce Nauman, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*. 1967-8, film still, 16 mm film, duration 10 minutes, Electronic Arts Intermix. Available from: EAI.org, <https://www.eai.org/titles/walking-in-an-exaggerated-manner-around-the-perimeter-of-a-square> (accessed February 16, 2017).

The film depicts the artist performing the act of creating artwork in his studio. Three parts form the artwork: the choreography, the artist enacting the choreography, and the documentation of the choreography by the camera. These three forms of objects, the choreography summarized in the title, the performing artist and the film suggest the slapstick set-up through the construction of their materials and the literal interpretation of their function; each element functions in its purpose like the Don Quixote character referred to by Bergson following an inexorable logic. The choreography is a minimal, if slightly exaggerated “normal” walk, a seemingly absurd reduction of choreography into basic elements of structure and movement furthermore made explicit in the title. The art object, including all of the elements (choreographic title, regulated repetitive action, and documenting film), is a sequence of an absurdly banal and regulated action.

In the format of film, the artwork or filmed choreography, becomes a part of the set-up or framework for the slapstick scenario. It establishes the contextual framework—the context of the slapstick act. Despite the informality of the filming process, the film as an object suggests certain implications to viewer. The film designates a linear and finite period that the action will take place. The title and the documentary nature of the filming suggests that what is being observed is something of interest, something to study, and something that will unfold over the finite period of time of the film.

The film forms an aspect of artwork in two parts. One part is the photographic material’s explicitly indexical nature; it is a recording of events set before the camera and completed when the camera stops without editing or special effects. The indexical documentary aspect of the film is reinforced by the positioning of the camera to best enable the recording of the event without cinematic embellishment. The awkward placement of the camera at a slight angle from the bottom right corner of the square marking on the floor adds to the veracity of the image: the camera appears to be constricted by available space and positioned to take in as much as possible within the studio. These formal and aesthetic decisions suggest that the

purpose of the performance and the accompanying camera is to serve a functional completion of the task at hand: to record the event. This causal formatting of the film and production lends an informal quality to the event suggesting further that the role of the camera is simply recording an event, not embellishing the actions.

The film in *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* functions as a method of cognitive and implied physical engagement for the viewer. The repetitive motion, the mannered walking, the casual setting established by the *mise-en-scène*, and the non-professional medium used in the film suggest a facility in producing the artwork, something that could be replicated by the viewer. The ten-minute duration of the film and the slow pace of the protagonist's walk provide a period for the viewer to consider the elements. The process of considering the protagonist's actions suggests a mental mimetic process of engagement between the viewer and the artist.

The viewer thereby enters a state of conceptual and bodily empathy with the experience. This occurs alongside the observer's engagement with the film, as the viewer sits through the real-time experience of the actor. The repetition of the actions, the bracketing of the experience in the title of the artwork, and the literalisation of the execution leaves little for the viewer to do but to contemplate the actions documented. This contemplation on the physical routine and the internal, cognitive processing of the logical play-through of the actor's actions runs parallel with the viewer's experience of slapstick comedy as a durational experience of a logical play-through of exaggerated physical and visual disruptive events

Through a series of prescribed monotonous actions, Nauman presents a prolonged incongruous circumstance that establishes an unexpected yet rationally applied, awkward, paradoxical physical situation that serves as a rupture to the expected outcome or narrative. Nauman's slapstick incorporates Bergson's contention that it is the action of the mechanical man that derives laughter.¹³¹ In *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, it is the tension between the

¹³¹ Bergson, *Laughter*, 6.

intent and the actual event, the “absentminded” protagonist logically, if absurdly, playing out of an ideal in contrast to the common rationality that evokes the slapstick situation and therefore provokes amusement.

It is within this framework of the ludicrous yet logical playing out of a concept that Nauman’s *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* evokes the slapstick. His actions follow the instructions set out in the title, yet the anticipation is for another outcome: an event, a puncture, or a slapstick moment. The denial of the potential act is, in part, the event, yet the whole of the actuality, the potential, and the execution of the act or the potential and subsequent denial and conclusion, respectively, is contained within the performance. The performance is then a form of internal critique on the *making* of the performance and calls into question the rationale behind the artwork. In this way the material of the film, not only the actual film stock, but also the tools, (i.e. the camera, the “studio,” the actor, and the choreography) is embroiled in the form of the final artwork.

Nauman’s captured action alludes simultaneously to the exclusivity of the artist as designator of artwork, in the ready-made genre, and reference to the commonality of the event: a simple gesture of walking is presented as an art object, albeit made exceptional in its exaggeration, mediation, and logical application and documentation. *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* simultaneously questions the illusory aspect of art’s autonomy in its banality and reinforcing it through comedic incongruity, the act as an exaggerated banality. The filming of such a banal act is itself exceptional enough to warrant an autonomous status. Physical humour, either outright directed by the artist through creating the banal work and subjecting it to the viewer, or indeed turned back at the viewer for tolerating this experience, internally embodying the action and potentially anticipating something other than what has been set out, engages an integral part of the critical reflection of the artwork.

3.1.2 Slapstick Media: The Integrated Document of Visual Puns and Durational Banality in Bruce Nauman's *Finger Touch No. 1* and *Finger Touch with Mirrors*

Much of Nauman's artworks feature plays on words. In a series titled *Eleven Color Photographs* (1966-1967/1970) (see figs. 23-27), the artist illustrates figurative expressions such as "Bound to Fail" (see fig. 23), or "Eating My Words" (see fig. 24), and one of his canonical artworks "Self-Portrait as a Fountain" (see fig. 25) with performed actions that are photographed as small tableaux. The images document literalisations of the titles in the form of visual puns following a logic of literal enactment similar to his film. As with the film, Nauman enacts a series of actions alluded to in the titles.

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Figure 23: Bruce Nauman, *Bound to Fail* (from the portfolio *Eleven Color Photographs*). 1966-67/1970/2007, ink-jet print exhibition copy (originally chromogenic development print), 50.5 × 60 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Gerald S. Elliott Collection 1994.11.h. Available from MCAChicago.org, <https://mchicago.org/Collection/Items/Bruce-Nauman> (accessed April 8, 2017).

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Figure 24: Bruce Nauman, *Eating My Words* (from the portfolio *Eleven Color Photographs*). 1966-67/1970/2007, ink-jet print exhibition copy (originally chromogenic development print), 49.2 × 60.5 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Gerald S. Elliott Collection 1994.11.j. Available from MCACHicago.org, <https://mcachicago.org/Collection/Items/Bruce-Nauman> (accessed April 8, 2017).

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Figure 25: Bruce Nauman, *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (from the portfolio *Eleven Color Photographs*). 1966-67/1970/2007, ink-jet print exhibition copy (originally chromogenic development print), 50.9 × 60.3 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Gerald S. Elliott Collection 1994.11.k. Available from MCACHicago.org, <https://mcachicago.org/Collection/Items/Bruce-Nauman> (accessed April 8, 2017).

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Figure 26: Bruce Nauman, *Finger Touch Number 1* (from the portfolio *Eleven Color Photographs*). 1966-67/1970/2007, ink-jet print exhibition copy (originally chromogenic development print), 50.2 × 60 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Gerald S. Elliott Collection 1994.11.b. Available from MCACHicago.org, <https://mcachicago.org/Collection/Items/Bruce-Nauman> (accessed April 8, 2017).

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Figure 27: Bruce Nauman, *Finger Touch with Mirrors* (from the portfolio *Eleven Color Photographs*). 1966-67/1970/2007, ink-jet print exhibition copy (originally chromogenic development print), 50.5 × 60 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Gerald S. Elliott Collection 1994.11.d. Available from MCACHicago.org, <https://mcachicago.org/Collection/Items/Bruce-Nauman> (accessed April 8, 2017).

In this series of documenting visual puns, Nauman similarly conflates the medium with the event it documents. Although largely dependent on visual as well as verbal puns, two photographs in Nauman's

Eleven Color Photographs are less about illustrating the titles' phrases than about visual paradoxes in translating the verbal cues. These less illustrative artworks engage in a physical and visual representation of the title that is more oblique than straightforward puns. The titles *Finger Touch No. 1* and *Finger Touch with Mirrors* (see figs. 26 and 27) are more descriptive than the other idiomatic titles and appear to function as methods of distinguishing, labelling, or categorizing a series of performative engagements that, unlike the rest of the series, do not directly link with verbal language. The event documented in the two photographs is a process of structuring the literal interpretation of the title as a visual pun. The suggested action indicated by the title is ambiguous, made more so by the recorded event. The singular noun "finger" without visuals suggests either the act of fingers touching each other, or a singular finger touching an object. The visual documentation maintains the ambiguity. The two sets of fingers are from the same actor and thus the image seemingly indicates "finger touch" to be a description of a singular "finger touching an object." Yet the mirror image reflects the pair of hands as another set that meet the acting hands at the mirror surface, visually suggesting that, in the photographic image at least, the latter descriptor of two sets of fingers touching is illustrated. The visual discrepancy indicates that the photograph is not solely documentation in the form similar to Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*. The image presented in the *Finger* photographs suggests not just a documentation of a literal act indicated by the title, but also an action that could not occur live (i.e. two sets of the actor's hands pressing against each other). The photographs simultaneously represent an actual and conceptual event: the act of two sets of fingers touching, the actual and the reflected image. The disruptive act depicted is partially the actualising of fingers touching in the image, and the cognitive recognition of the incongruity, the fingers are not touching, they are pressing against reflective glass. The act both occurs and is denied in the viewer's cognitive process of deciphering the photographic image.

The object of contemplation is difficult to locate in the photographs, as the titles suggest that the photographs are referencing an action, the touching of sets of fingers, but the action photographically recorded (of a set of fingers pressing against glass) refutes the title, the two sets of fingers do not touch, only the tonal descriptors that indicate fingers in the photograph, the images of fingers, touch. The location of the object then transfers from the recorded event to the recording image, the photograph. In the photographic image the sets of fingers are touching. The action's documentation appears as a performance more centred on the documentation than the physical act. Yet the photograph is of two sets of finger-objects connecting at a line. This visual paradox has implications for the photographed image as well the documented event.

The tension of the object presented resides at a more cognitive level than actual or implied documented event. The implied energy in this event is more indicative of the process, pressing of fingers on glass, suggesting a temporal event, than one of a physical tension implied by potential energy. The event forms a suspended moment of visually enacting the title, yet simultaneously contradicting through the veracity of the medium that constructs the image, the photograph. What the photograph documents, sets of fingers pressing against the glass, is countered by what the image *means* when framed by the context of the title. Therefore the event is a more secondary element to the viewer's cognitive and mimetic processing of the image. The awkward or disruptive physical or visual elements in the photograph, the elements associated with slapstick, reside in the tension of the interpreting the event rather than an anticipation of an act.

Thus the mimetic process for the viewer is an awkwardness in his or her position with regards to comprehending the image. To understand what the image is depicting the viewer projects a re-enactment of pressing fingers to glass, or observing the act in in live performance. Simultaneously, the viewer is aware of the mediated image and that the photograph indicates that the title is accurate in both of its potential readings: both fingers touching a thing (the reflective surface) and fingers touching each other. The actual events of fingers pressed on reflective material is problematized

by the title, the photographic surface, and the tonal indications, the groups of tones that indicate the two sets of fingers are, visually, pressing against each other. The visual sense contradicts both the mimetic re-enactment by the viewer and the cognitive processing of the indexical information of the photograph: the image is of reflective glass, but it is also of two sets of fingers, neither more real than the other as both are images in a photograph. The intellectual break comes with this recognition of the visual disruption and the contradictory suggestion that although there is a break or barrier, visually, the “touch” occurs, not with two sets of actual hands, but two sets of *visual* or virtual hands, at least in the case of the photograph. Further to this, the title is ambiguous enough to allow for a broader interpretation that the touch need not be between sets of fingers, but simply that a set of fingers is touching *something*.

Nauman’s verbal/visual pun plays on sense, cognition and resulting perception. A conceptual paradox is suggested by the nature of the photographic print, essentially a chemical reaction that reproduces the light and dark elements of an event on a visually two-dimensional plane. Drawing on Rudolf Arnheim’s contention that meaning derived from the photographic medium is one of learned association with the tonal representation in photographic prints, the viewer recognises the tonal indicators that suggest soft pliable flesh of the fingers pressing against the hard reflective material. Upon recognising a gestalt of tones in a photographic print suggesting objects, surfaces and depth, the viewer is able to distinguish an event of a set of hands pressing against a mirror that reflects the action and *seemingly* represents two sets of hands pressing against each other. The ostensible aspect is the paradoxical crux, since if the viewer is willing to suspend the point that he or she is only witness to degrees of dark and light tones of the photographic image, then the representation is of two sets of hands pressing together, the glass plane that divides the two sets of hands only existed in the actual moment that is photographed. What the viewer is witnessing when looking at the photographic print as a material (suspending the virtual, mediated aspect of this event) *is* two sets of finger-shapes connecting. In this way, *Finger*

Touch No. 1 and *Finger Touch with Mirrors* suggest both the documentation of the titles and the seeming contradictions inherent in the action of the indexical photographed image.

3.2 The Recorded Slapstick Act: Traces of Acts and Implied Energy in Documented Objects in John Baldessari's *Throwing Four Balls in the Air to Get a Square (Best of Thirty-Six Tries)* and Peter Fischli and David Weiss's *The Time at Our Disposal*

As with Nauman's recorded event, the following artworks engage with various elements in a conflated process represented in a final print or set of images. The following two examples, John Baldessari's *Throwing Four Balls in the Air to Get a Square (Best of Thirty-Six Tries)* and the collaborative Peter Fischli and David Weiss *The Time at Our Disposal (Zeit die zur Verfügung steht)* feature inanimate objects as the primary focus of photographic prints. In both cases the objects have been animated in their fabrication, balls are thrown into the air in Baldessari's images, and items balanced into precarious structure in Fischli and Weiss pictures. Similarly, the objects depicted have had energy invested in them through their construction/animation and indicate in the construction of the image, an inevitable release of energy: the balls will fall from the apex depicted and the sculptures will eventually collapse. The events pictured could not exist with any notable duration outside of the photograph. The images of objects and actions depict relatively innocuous events with disruptive acts of slapstick integrated into the construction of the process and object. Despite the disruptive implications both artworks engage with classical formal concerns of composition, form and representation of ideals in shape and balance, albeit inflected with ironic humour.

John Baldessari's *Throwing Four Balls in the Air to Get a Square (Best of Thirty-Six Tries)* (see fig. 28) draws on a similar structure to Nauman's film series. In a series of six photographs, Baldessari engages in a series of seemingly straightforward actions stated in the title. The photographic medium is similarly employed to document the event, but the

resulting images have a different result in the final object of contemplation, the photograph. The artwork consists of three objects to consider: one, the composition of the balls in the air presented in the photograph, two, the act of throwing the balls suggested in the title and illustrated in the images, and three, the act of documenting the event.

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Figure 28: John Baldessari, *Throwing Four Balls in the Air to Get a Square (Best of Thirty-Six Tries)*. 1972-1973, offset lithographic plates 23 x 33 cm. Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, Courtesy of the artist. Available from: Experimentsinmotion.com, <http://www.experimentsinmotion.com/motion-gallery/90/Throwing+four+balls+in+the+air+to+get+a+square+best+of+36+tries/> (accessed July 4, 2016).

The camera in Baldessari's project is engaged in the process of fabricating the final object of contemplation. Due to the conceptual nature of the photographs, the object of contemplation is not only the final medium that the viewer encounters, the photograph, rather it is in part the event of throwing the balls and the composition composed in the snapshot. Unlike Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, Baldessari's events produce different compositions, largely defined by chance combination, episodic acts within a greater composition of the conceptual whole. Therefore the camera takes a more integrated role in the fabrication of the artwork, in effect framing the composition of the conceptual project.

The event is comprised of a series of actions taken by the artist of throwing the balls into the air and documenting the resulting configuration when they reach a relative apex. The event is framed by the title and in part by the indexical recording of the event by the camera. The resulting artwork is dependent on both aspects of the framing to exist. The title alone would be sufficient to suggest the conceptual framework and is necessary to appreciate the photographs that would otherwise appear as relatively random acts of throwing balls towards the sky captured in a snapshot. The position of the camera suggests a subtle difference to Nauman's composition. In Nauman's film, the camera is positioned so as to capture the whole of the choreographed routine, in effect standing in for the viewer at the performance. Although it remains as a compositional element defining space within which a figure moves, the camera maintains a secondary role compositionally to the attention of the moving action. The event of walking through the choreography is presented to an audience. In Baldessari's photographs, the camera is situated to recreate the Point of View (POV) of the photographer, or someone near him, so as to see the composition of the balls against the sky. Therefore, the conceptual attempts of forming the square take precedence over the final composition of the artwork. The focus of the object in Baldessari's artwork shifts from the event to the composition that is created through the event. This is in contrast to Nauman's film where the event suggests the object of contemplation as

something elsewhere from the documenting recording, either in the act of enacting the choreography or in the contemplation by the viewer. These same elements exist in Baldessari's but the emphasis of the formal aspects of the image is engaged to a greater degree.

The exercise suggests a playful approach to art-making both in the suggestion of gesture with the toy-like brightly coloured balls, and the seemingly spontaneous framing of the compositions similar to snapshot photography. The framing of the compositional elements in the photograph mirrors the improvisatory nature suggested in the title. The nature of the framing incorporating sporadic images of the surroundings suggests a snapshot improvisatory photography, further alluding to the "amateur" premise of the experiment.

In his seemingly improvisational project, Baldessari demonstrates that the classical platonic formal ideals are not achievable in practice: a perfect square is near impossible to achieve when throwing balls into the air. Yet, the failure of these ideals forms the artwork. In an inverse fashion, Baldessari's compositions reinforce classical formal consideration that art references ideals, but cannot fully replicate them. Indeed, the failure to actualize the conceptual ideal of the square form is acknowledged from the start with the title. Therefore, any intention regarding the final outcome of the project is accurately represented in the photographs: a paradoxically successful documentation of art's failure to achieve ideal form. The content of the photographs is not the ideal forms of squares delineated by the four points represented by the red balls, but the relatively random combinations of red balls against a blue sky. The event of forming the ideal is circumvented by the actuality of the material, the balls thrown into the air. The balls are both necessary to form the structure that will shape the ideal, whilst the act of throwing them, the fabrication of the artwork, all but ensures their failure. The result is a simultaneous physical fabrication and disruption of the artwork's mimicry of ideal form.

An examination of the artworks' formal construction elucidates a further conceptual disruptive element between the intent stated in the title and the activity documented in the photographs. The composition of the

photographs is focused on the main objects, the balls against a blue sky and at times other elements that suggest the location of the event, such as the tossing hand and trees. The seemingly haphazard composition of the images further encourages a reading that both a casual approach was taken to the execution of the formal structures implied by platonic ideals, the tossing of the balls, and the documentation. The lack of rigid protocol in the fabrication of the images (say of a stationary camera position and long shot to formalise the composition, the position of the balls the only variable) indicates that the point of interest is the event, the attempts at making the square rather than a uniformity or control of the exercise. That the image was constructed in such an improvised manner suggests, in part, that the image was constructed with the intention of conveying a relaxed and unregimented manner. Conceivably, one agent could have fabricated the event with one hand tossing the balls, the other holding the camera. This approach suggests, on the one hand, a relaxed and potentially disparaging implication of artworks that have been constructed in a more regimented manner. On the other hand, the images that are created through the process draw on similar chance compositional elements as the balls form when tossed in the sky. Thus, despite the casual, and potentially judgemental parody (the seemingly effortless fabrication of art indicating any further rigid control as extraneous) of an earnest art-making event of tossing balls into the sky, a series of uniquely composed images are fabricated. In these photographs a degree of compositional interest is derived from constructed random configurations of artificial and natural occurrences. Should the viewer derive any pleasure from the resulting images it is with the knowledge of the methods of composition, indicated, in part, in the evidence of the serial presentation, the incidental elements of the hands, tree-tops, and the seemingly random configuration of the balls framed by the instructive title.

The event framed by the title and suggested in the photographs engages with a form of physical energy, as a documentation of released energy in the thrown balls, and potential energy suggested in the photographs of the balls at their apex. The tension suggested by the

potential energy is formed partly through the knowledge that gravity will act on the balls (releasing the invested energy of the throw) as well as a suggested potential of the balls actualizing the ideal form (the square) in a form of conceptual tension. Furthermore, the photographs are documentation (the snapshot associated with split-second elements of active scenes) of kinetic energy of the balls thrown into the air, and potential energy (the balls at their apex). The snapshot represents the paused moment before another action, the change in the balls' composition into a further inclination into the apex of the arc or the decline. The snapshot becomes the pause or apex, indicated through the descriptive element of the title and the general knowledge associated with function of a snapshot as a frozen act describing the action of an event.

This indication of potential energy informed by the title and the visual cues informs a mimetic response in the viewer. The mimetic process in the viewer's perception of the event is informed partly by conceptualizing the circumstances of the events, the tossing of the balls in the air, and anticipating the (improbable) chance of forming a square. The process is informed, also, by the revelation of the failure of the square formation (yet success of the stated "attempt") and the resultant composition. Furthermore, the anticipation of the formal resolution in the formation of a square and the inevitable failure of the balls to compose the figure, and the intuited falling of the objects is simultaneously conceptualised by the viewer. The viewer engages with the photographs by invoking the nature of the snapshot as a transitory, illusory experience, a moment caught outside of ordinary, real-time, sensual experience. Baldessari's images based on impossible goals, illustrate the mimetic process of art as set forward by Plato, as tertiary mimicked forms relating to conceptual ideals. The artworks are fabricated through an agency of basic, essentialist aspects of the art-making process: an artist fabricates an object from material in some manner of documentation or representation of another thing, a concept, image, or object, objects based on inexpressible ideals. This lends the photographs a humorous, seemingly iconoclastic sentiment that presumably extends to general practice of virtuosity in art making. The seemingly inane act

suggests a classic comedy or slapstick act of presenting a circumstance that would suggest an outcome, only to have a comical upturning of these intentions from a resulting physical articulated failure or pratfall, a logic, if disruptive, inevitability. The failure at representing the ideal is implicated in Baldessari's images, whilst simultaneously undermined as a successful composition. What is actually documented in the photographs is the intent of the artist set forward in the title as an "attempt." The failure to form ideals in turn becomes a success as documentation of the attempt.

The act of conceptualizing the circumstance and rationalizing the physical action and implications of the images by the viewer is a process employed in the mind of the viewer, as the actual images are of four balls against a sky, at times joined by a hand or a tree-top. The act of fabricating the image is simultaneously an absurdly banal action, whilst it fulfils an internal logic to illustrate the near impossibility of actualizing idealized form in the embodiment of a square. The viewer, upon witnessing the photographs and rationalizing the image (and incorporating the title) has been made complicit through the internal mimetic process of fabricating the circumstances that leads to a physical act of paradoxically successful failure. In effect, the viewer has witnessed and participated in a logical slapstick moment.

The Swiss artists Peter Fischli (1952-) and David Weiss (1946-2012) similarly drew on traditional formal concerns when they documented a series of precariously constructed sculptures in a series called *Equilibres* (ca. 1984). The *Equilibres* series consist of approximately 40 unassuming photographs of common miscellany objects; tools, containers, and detritus found around the domestic or workplace, carefully (if unreliably) balanced into seemingly abstract sculptural forms. There is enough information in the background of the pictures to suggest a studio or domestic setting, rather than a photography studio or white cube gallery. The quality of the images suggests semi-professional, adequately functional descriptive photographs, with shallow depth of field, elements of the objects in soft focus, and minimal lighting.

Fischli and Weiss's photographs play on the utility of traditional documentation of sculptures as mediation of the more permanent objects in traditional sculpture. Due to the precarious construction of the *Equilibres* objects, indicated in their obvious temporary construction, the photographs are the only representation of the objects. The photographs act to intercede between the actions that fabricate the object and the object's inevitable collapse, to convey the process of constructing an artwork at its moment of equilibrium. The photograph in the *Equilibres* series plays a similar role to Baldessari's series, capturing the object at its apex between fabrication, investment with latent energy, and its collapse and release of potential energy. The composition of the image references traditional representation of objects with its central composition capturing the whole of the subject, and in this way draws parallels with Nauman's film. The object depicted in the photograph is an event of fabrication (and potential collapse) efficiently documented. Unlike Nauman's or Baldessari's photographs, the composition of the image is not foregrounded as the object of consideration; rather it is the composition of the material in the sculpted object that is the focus as implied by the centre focal point. Therefore, like the Nauman film, the documenting material takes a secondary role, a framework to define the temporality of the content (i.e. the performance of Nauman's film or the constructed object in Fischli and Weiss's photograph). Thus, the concept of the *Equilibre*'s series, the precarious construction of common material as art, is not dependent on the photograph, but the existence and conveyance in any durational form is dependent on the print. Therefore one could assume that the photograph is not *the* object of contemplation for aesthetic judgement. That is, the photograph, like the Nauman film, adequately documents the event to convey it in an illustrative and descriptive manner to the viewer.

The titles of the photographs further indicate the casual nature of the objects' construction implied by the materials and the utilitarian photography. For example, the photograph *The Time at Our Disposal* (1984) (see fig. 29) suggests a degree of cursory construction in the object, suggesting an inane project resulting in temporarily balanced objects as the

outcome of idle artists. In the photograph there is a suggestion of an informal approach in the documented representation of the final object, yet consideration in the crafting of the sculpture. Effort on the part of the artists is evident in the functional positioning of objects to maintain structural integrity (at least until the photograph is taken), contextual suggestions of the objects chosen (e.g. useful objects, or consumable goods) and an intricate construction suggesting an engineering grace and elegance in the final constructions that stand in contrast to the potential for collapse and the ordinariness of the materials. The resultant object suggests an effort in its construction in order to express the feats of balance and seeming defiance of gravity. The construction of these common objects into a precarious form suggests an effort was made regardless of the material used. *The Time at Our Disposal* suggests, perhaps, not just an appreciation of everyday objects and mundane actions but also a return to interests associated with classical aesthetic concerns of beauty through a reference to the recognition of ordinary objects, though odd, seemingly incongruous, interactions with the material. Although the material and temporality of the sculptures may allude to a disregard of traditional aesthetic criteria of permanence and beauty, the documentation records an expression of seemingly genuine attempts at constructing sculptural feats of engineering. The resulting prints represent an effort in conveying an ideal of balance and structural integrity and therefore a representation of ideal form with ordinary material and literal gravity. Here the force of gravity plays on the pun of aesthetic association of *gravitas*. The *Equilibres* are not necessarily sculptures containing gravitas in the lyrical form, but literally constructed *with* gravity.

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Figure 29: Peter Fischli & David Weiss, *The Time at Our Disposal (Zeit die zur Verfügung steht)*. 1984/86, colour photograph, 40 x 30 cm, Sprüeth Magers gallery. Available from http://www.spruethmagers.com/artists/peter_fischli_david_weiss (accessed May 30, 2016).

The photograph *The Time at Our Disposal* indicates simple gestures, if exceptional balancing and effort in construction, that seems to suggest the futility of art-making in a classical standard as a balanced, well-crafted representation of beauty (effectively gestures of supreme craftsmanship with little use-value) as the objects produced in this case are reduced to functional form for balancing: no longer heroic historical references, but the everyday detritus and miscellany. Furthermore, the delicate balance suggested by the structures, indicates their precarious circumstances. The physical material is seemingly not fixed other than by the immaterial or invisible force of gravity and mass, two interconnected elements of force and material necessary for the object's construction and inevitable collapse.

Fischli and Weiss's objects draw on similar constructed ready-mades like Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* in both the use of common, mass-produced material fabricated into improbable or absurd constructions. Similarly, *The Time at Our Disposal* suggests a construction to direct the viewer towards an invisible point of contemplation through potential energy. In *Bicycle Wheel* the spinning wheel was to evoke a meditative state, in *The Time at Our Disposal* the tension of the construction and the implied collapse indicate the invisible force of gravity.

The photographic mediation distinguishes Fischli and Weiss's artworks from Duchamp's ready-mades as the Swiss artists' prints are necessary for the artwork to exist. As the sole documentation and the only remaining evidence of the event of balancing, the prints allude to the actual ephemeral nature of the objects. Duchamp's objects similarly allude to an elusive event, the unregulated meditative space found when contemplating the spokes, but the material form of the tool remains intact, in some iteration. Fischli and Weiss's objects share the same experience of their antecedence of a vacillating consideration between the materials that construct the object and the implications of the object for the viewer. The items of the structure remain individual items, containing their implicit content as mass-produced objects. The parts of the construction remain simultaneously individually identifiable and as necessary parts of a structure. The unity of the individual objects in *The Time at Our Disposal* is quite literally a balancing act, or a register for an action, as the objects and photograph are the documentation of an event.

The slapstick elements are integral to the structure of *The Time at Our Disposal*. The individual elements of the constructed object function both as structural necessities to the art object and as the potential failure points. The structure is therefore simultaneously the literal construction of an artwork, indicating the framework that suggests "sculpture" and the material that result in abrupt physical collapse. *The Time at Our Disposal's* balancing act is both the reason for the sculpture's existence, the tension of mass and gravity, and the commemoration of the (momentary) suspension of the event, prior to the implicated end. The documented event and object

is a visual comedy of potential destructive collapse, a slapstick moment, anticipated in the structure of the object. Yet, the object of consideration exists for the viewer as a photographic image—a perpetually suspended object as an image of balancing commonplace material. The image is both a representation of the potential (presumed inevitable) collapse of the structure and the resistance to this collapse, both in the construction (using the elements that would cause the collapse, gravity and mass, to create the structure through tension) and in documentation, freezing a sustained image of both the implied integrity of the structure and its physical disruption.

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined two formats of documented conceptual art that approached the formal structures of the slapstick event from differing angles of approach in relation to their media. The documenting association of the camera, its indexicality, or veracity of recording events and objects before it, is a more pronounced feature in Nauman's film and Fischli and Weiss's prints. Although instrumental in representing the event and object of the artwork, the indexical role of the camera renders its contribution to the construction of the art object as secondary to the event that produces the recorded material, the choreographed walk or the constructed object respectively. The camera remains important to the artwork, not only as a means of transmitting the images and information, but also integral to the conceptual framing of the artwork. This framing is foregrounded in Badlessari's photographs, as the composition of the artwork is dependent on the camera frame. Likewise, Nauman's filmed event is a recorded event, implicating at least two points; one, that it is of import to be recorded, therefore deserving viewing and two, the film indicates that the event is to be of a linear narrative duration: it has a beginning, middle and end. Similarly, Fischli and Weiss's object has an implied duration: the material of the artwork is individually decipherable, the construction obvious and the photograph reinforcing the temporality of the structure. In all three examples the image is of the artwork at its apex of destructive,

disruptive, or collapsing potential indicated in the photographs or anticipated in the filmed event.

Nauman's *Finger Touch* and *Finger Touch with Mirror No. 1* humorously draw on the documentary aspect of the camera with an emphasis on the medium's integration with the artwork-event. Although seemingly documenting an event of an artist pressing a reflective surface, the image produced is simultaneously the indexically recorded event *and* the implied alternate translation of the title, an act of fingers touching each other or the image of each other. In all four examples the artworks indicate a physical and visual gag, an indication of an expected presentation and simultaneous disruption to the expectation, established largely by the materials playing on fine art associations of appropriate materials and construction. These artworks simultaneously engage with aesthetic principles of constructing models of intangible, invisible or ephemeral concepts, much like classical notions of aesthetics considered an artwork's negotiation of its material to represent ideal form.

A particular form of slapstick runs through the artworks surveyed conveying a physical tension engaged by potential energy, either with gravity, or implied physical breaks with presumed or implied routines. The artworks suggest the notion of potential energy with objects or actions invested with energy that will be released in some form. With many of these artworks, the delay of this potential energy heightens the tension. Arguably, the delayed conclusive action invests the artworks with greater integrity, suggesting that if the tension remains in an artwork, there is a retention of self-awareness and internalised critique of the methodology and materials embodied in the artwork.

The artworks imply a physical gag implicating a parody of aesthetic norms, yet appear to maintain an inquisitiveness and concern with the continued fabrication of art objects however banal the materials, or indeed the outcomes, and maintain a contemplative consideration of material concerns of art. They appear as both a send-up of the cultural expectations of art to embody transcendence in materials and a genuine engagement with the materials to test the limits of sculptural, cultural and structural integrity.

The artworks discussed in this chapter suggest a tangible form as the focus of the artwork, whether the human body or inanimate objects. Yet where the artwork is situated, either as a sculpture or as an idea of a sculpture is complicated by the mediated method of presentation in these artworks. The use of film or photography complicates and, in part, reinforces the performative nature of the acts documented, informing the transient nature of the artworks, suggesting the transience of the category of artwork, and encouraging an active mimesis with the viewer by suggesting the performative element within the viewer as they witness the event through the media. Despite this inclusive engagement with the viewer through implied mimicry of fabricating the object, there remains a distancing aspect between the viewer and the actual event, in part fabricated by the medium representing the artwork, and in part suggested by the documented actions: the events are set in motion by artists alone in their studio or with an accomplice, but situated in a setting contrasted with the viewer's location. This distancing humour encourages a rational assessment of the media, the artist's actions, and the viewer's relationship to the event. Although in contrast to the mimetic experience of the viewer, the rational query is also informed by the experience. The mediated, distanced event in these examples also presents the disruptive act as a potential or inevitable condition, all of which informs the viewer of the fabricating process through an empathetic experience, one derived from reverse engineering the fabrication of the event. By examining the methods of investing media with empathetic and reflexive elements, establishing context and humorously disrupting expectations, the results indicate a means to fabricate critically engaged artworks, processes I examine in practical terms in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Suspension in Action: Practical Application & Results

Over the course of the PhD research period, I developed projects relating to the various considered elements of slapstick through different media. Of particular interest to these projects was how to incorporate a slapstick disruption that was specific to the medium used. The query considered how to incorporate the overt or implied disruptions to the physical as well as the conceptual construction of the artwork. Drawing on the methods used in the artworks discussed in Chapters One and Two, I considered how these methods could be implemented in the materials, namely digital video, sculpture and painting. These projects met with various degrees of success. In the following chapter, I have selected some of the key artworks and exhibitions from this period that best illustrate the main interests of this thesis. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the experiments and consider the decisions that went into the construction of the objects and exhibitions with the aim of analysing how successful they were in application of the slapstick disruption discussed in the previous chapters. In the following sections I will consider the media and techniques used and how these formal concerns inform the viewer about the cognitive and sensual experience in a humorously disruptive manner.

A line that is drawn through the selected artworks, and indeed my general art practice, follows an interest in documenting the actions of fabrication in the final object of contemplation. I posit that the final objects of contemplation that were formed in these projects, in particular, the videos, prints, sculptures and exhibitions, act as documentations of the construction of the objects considered. As expressed in the previous chapters, when the process of constructing the artwork is made overt, the viewer is engaged in a cognitive process of constructing the artwork. Through this process, the viewer experiences a cognitive mimetic procedure that engages, indeed incorporates the viewer in a process of humorously absurd construction. Thus, like the Bergsonian figure of Don Quixote discussed in the first chapter, the viewer is implicated in the process of

paradoxically absurd yet logical construction of an artwork, yet remains a knowing viewer.

An example of the consideration of the material of the artwork made apparent to the viewer is in the construction of the tetherball sculptures featured in the exhibition 'Balls and Things' at Platform Arts, Belfast in 2017 (fig. 30).¹³² The sculptures were constructed to show their individual parts consisting of cement, rope, pipe, bucket and a painted ball. The construction of the objects is similar to how they would function as sports equipment. The humorous absurd quality of the objects is, in part, the objects' anthropomorphic posture, angled and hanging like dispirited figures, in contrast to the appropriate upright fittings in playgrounds. The altered posture of the poles exaggerates the tension between the sports utility of the objects and the simultaneous rejection of their utility in an art setting within the exhibition space. This rejection is made implicit through the objects' reference as sports equipment and the viewer's conceptualising the objects as sports equipment, a process of rationalising the action implicit in the object, *and* the simultaneous recognition that the objects are not to be engaged with in manner of their previous utility, i.e. hitting or kicking the objects in sport. This rejection of utility as sports objects is informed by the other part of their construction as art objects, the painted surface and inclusion in an art context. The humour is derived in part by agitation of the contradicting implicit utilities of the object for sport and its contextual elements that frame it as an art object. The humour is further implied through the visual play on the implied pun of the potential for giving an artwork a kicking, punching, or general thrashing.

¹³² Tetherball is a sport common in American schoolyards. Consisting of a vertical metal pole approximately three meters in height with a yellow ball, the tetherball, the size of a small practice football fixed to a nylon rope hanging from the top of the pole at a height of approximately sixty centimetres from the ground. Two contestants use their hands to hit the ball in a clockwise direction. The aim is for one contestant to wrap the rope around the pole with the ball contacting the pole in the contestant's favoured direction.



Figure 30: Levi Hanes *Untitled*. 2017, Tetherball, nylon rope, aluminium pipe, wood dowel, concrete, gravel, cardboard, and plastic bucket, approximately 122 x 50 x 20 cm. Image courtesy the author.

The agitation drawn from the elements of the artwork that suggest a potential utility, and simultaneously inhibit this utility, is a theme continued throughout the following artworks. The tension and cognitive agitation suggested by the contextual elements serves to illustrate the humorous reflexive nature of artworks engaged with disruptive and resistant elements and encourages a similar cognitive process in the viewer, a form of mimicry of the construction of the object under consideration. Following on from these concepts, the chapter is divided into two sections: the first section will consider the video *Mirror in a Field*, a video that was constructed to encapsulate the whole of the videoing process through a mechanism incorporating a mirror with the recording device. In the construction of the video, *Mirror in a Field* acts as both the slap stick object exemplified by Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, considered in Chapter Two, and as a

documented event humorously exploring the process of art fabrication similar in the methodical and banal nature of Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* considered in Chapter Three.

The second section explores two categories of artworks featured in three exhibitions held during the final year of the PhD research focusing on two elements from the exhibition: giclée inkjet prints of fruit and painted sports balls. In the section, I will consider how the exhibitions work similarly to the video in a real-time conflation of anticipated slapstick event and simultaneous complementary and contradictory images and objects. Unlike the video, the exhibitions remove the time-based objects, opening the potential for further implications to be derived by the various elements that constitute the contextual environment of the exhibition.

In the following sections, I will consider what constitutes the object and/or event in the artwork. In this process I will set forward the suggested or implicit content and material, and the contextual or sensual aesthetic aspects that indicate the object is an artwork. Further to these establishing elements, I will consider the aspects that suggest the object's descriptive elements: the material that constitutes the fabricating elements (either the titles, the individual parts that make up the object, or the tools that fabricate the image or object). These descriptive elements indicate a non-aesthetic functional quality to the artwork. In this consideration I will examine how the intersection of the various elements that provide contextualisation of the artwork and infer meaning and content, simultaneously suggest the object's own ironic mimetic engagement with the material and ideas that form it. The reflexive aspects in an artwork, those elements that suggest the ironic mimetic engagement, also indicate the process of fabricating the artwork to the viewer. Thus the viewer engages in a conceptual fabrication process of the artwork, a process that he or she engages with a knowing distance from the event or object. In conclusion, the degree these artworks engage with slapstick and suggest the empathetic and cognitive response in the viewer determines the artwork's success and critical integrity as an object of contemplation that resists reification.

4.1 Video as Document and Object of the Slapstick Event in *Mirror in a Field*

The structure and critical enquiry of the role of the artist as fabricator of artworks suggested in Nauman's film formed the initial inspiration and framework for *Mirror in a Field* (see fig. 31-35). The video was conceived through a process of considering a literal interpretation of a video that contained the materials of its construction, namely the location, the video maker and the camera, within the visual representation of the final video. In *Mirror in a Field*, the author sought a humorous literalisation, a Bergsonian absurd, over-rational interpolation of a structural video incorporating a mirror into the screen to reveal the filmmaking process. The mirror-object obscures the object of observation, the protagonist.



Figure 31: Levi Hanes, *Mirror in a Field*. 2015, video still, digital video, duration 4 minutes 23 seconds. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 32: Levi Hanes, *Mirror in a Field*. 2015, video still, digital video, duration 4 minutes 23 seconds. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 33: Levi Hanes, *Mirror in a Field*. 2015, video still, digital video, duration 4 minutes 23 seconds. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 34: Levi Hanes, *Mirror in a Field*. 2015, video still, digital video, duration 4 minutes 23 seconds. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 35: Levi Hanes, *Mirror in a Field*. 2015, video still, digital video, duration 4 minutes 23 seconds. Image courtesy the author.

The filming production and video format establishes a durational element to the process and frames the set-up for the incongruous event. The set-up for the comic structure of *Mirror in a Field* is defined by the viewed

elements, the protagonist and the setting simultaneously conflated with the structures that fabricated the object of consideration, the elements of the camera and the background. The three elements that constitute the fabrication of the video consist of the landscape setting *behind* the camera featured in the mirror, the medium used represented by the camera, and the mirror/selfie-stick/smartphone recording device. These three elements become a part of the diegetic world of the video (e.g. the protagonist and his setting), through the device of the mirror/selfie-stick/camera.

The location was chosen to evoke a bucolic setting, so as to situate the protagonist, the author, as an artist performing the act of conveying nature through his media. In order to contain the digital and therefore malleable nature of the medium, the duration of the video is contained within the single shot including the actions of starting and ending the recording device. In order to situate the process of filming within the filmed event, I fabricated a device that could simultaneously record a scene and divulge the recording device in the process so that the whole of the production was presented to the viewer as it was documented.¹³³

The formal construction of the single-shot video attempts to integrate Eisenstein's montage theory of juxtaposed images through a conflation of the material of the video in a single unaltered shot. Through this process, the video engages with Heiser's "semiotic slapstick" through the visual conception of fore and back ground: two images that contradict the POV position of the camera yet simultaneously are accurately indexical as records of the events and objects before the camera. Thus, the material of the landscape setting, the durational filming, the armature and mirror, the camera and the performer conflate in the final medium that constitutes the artwork, the video. The process of fabricating the object informs the viewer's perception of the video; the sensuous experience informs the conceptual fabrication of the artwork.

The humorous disruption in the video is situated in part with the mirror device as a tool of revealing the filmmaking process. In its act of

¹³³ Post-production in the video was limited to minor adjustments in the audio to prevent peaks that may disrupt the playback process.

revelation, the mirror partially obstructs and conflates the subject of the video. The subject switches between the protagonist holding the camera device and the reproduction produced within the device itself, depending on the focus of the viewer. The static setting of the landscape also becomes an active part of the visual experience as the camera movement articulates two separate landscapes within the image of the video. The two images consist of the background behind the figure and the reflected background behind the camera with opposite lateral movements across and behind the mirror. Thus, the video's subject matter, the protagonist in the field, is incorporated with the recording device and the device's setting. The slapstick element is represented in two forms of disruptive incongruity in the video. The first form is the physical disruption of the mirror, obscuring the subjects, the protagonist and the setting, whilst revealing the construction and the surrounding setting. The second form of disruptive incongruity is formed in the viewer's attempts to comprehend the video, alternating between the foreground presented in the mirror and the background of the figure and the landscape. The mirror device disrupts the distinctions between subject and background in the video through the obstruction of the figure and by its activation of the inset screen of the mirror reflection presenting the camera and its background as an additional focus. The visual slapstick element is then the recognition of the conflated elements, both adding to the information of the filmed subject whilst obstructing and disrupting the visual information.

Although similarly drawing on the theme of artist as art fabricator, *Mirror in a Field* and Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* diverge in the viewer's mimetic association. The static camera in Nauman's film is reminiscent of theatre-like presentations of action in early film. In *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, an actor performs to camera on a clearly delineated stage with the diegetic world established in the single static shot. In this format of filming, the mimetic process for the viewer is through a projection of his or herself into the actor as one would in a theatre

environment, the mimesis is in a third-person abstraction. In this abstraction, the camera records the object of contemplation.

Unlike the static camera in *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, the camera in *Mirror in a Field* is an active part of the artwork through its documentation and articulation of the scene. The camera's recording and movement through the setting forms the viewed experience on the screen. The recorded device and context is incorporated in the viewed experience. Furthermore, the camera/mirror construction suggests a mimetic experience for the viewer through the POV shot: the viewer is given the experience of being in the scene through the position of the moving camera. Paradoxically, the device that provides the image obstructs the POV perspective. The partial anonymity of the protagonist and POV shot should suggest a more direct projection of the viewer into the diegetic world of the film. Yet, it is the simultaneous presences of the mirror and the reflected image of the recording device that disrupts the projection of the viewer into the protagonist or the camera, as both the protagonist and the recording device are evidently conflated in the shot as a reminder of the fabricating process. The mimetic slapstick process is not one of the viewer considering him or herself the subject of the film, but rather as one who cognitively deciphers and in a process of reverse engineering, constructs the conflation of the images seen on the screen. Through a process of considering the background and the foreground, the reflection of the recording device and the camera operator's action, the viewer is constructing the fabrication of the video as it unfolds over its duration at a considered remove from the experience conveyed by the video.

The mimetic experience in *Mirror in a Field* is a more conceptual form than cognitively engaging in the similar activities seen in Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*. In *Mirror in a Field* the viewer's experience is a form of visual disruption and alternation between the background landscape and figure and the foreground image of the camera and the landscape reflected in the mirror. Thus, the device that mediates the setting and experience disrupts *Mirror in a Field's* visual information concerning a figure in a bucolic setting. *Mirror in a*

Field's content is the material of its construction; the traditional subject of a film (protagonist and setting) and the tools that record the event. In this construction, and its incorporation of the elements of the recording device and the background behind the device *into* the diegetic of the art object, *Mirror in a Field* draws on aspects of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*. In both artworks, the construction of the object of contemplation informs the viewer through the obvious placement of the devices that make up the object: the mirror/camera, actor and setting in *Mirror in a Field*, the stool and bicycle wheel in *Bicycle Wheel*. Through a conceptual mimicry of the absurd construction, the viewer can surmise the event that constituted the fabrication of the artwork.

Bicycle Wheel and *Mirror in a Field* are conflated objects that suggest a consideration of their absurdist construction through the obvious construction of materials and the fabricated object's relationship within the art context, yet they also allude to an ambiguous *other*. In *Bicycle Wheel*, Duchamp implied the other as a meditative space evoked by the spinning wheel. In *Mirror in a Field* the other is a constructed abstracted image of conflated images consisting of the protagonist, background and reflected images moving in opposite directions although maintaining the same flat two-dimensional space of the viewing screen. The video is not a documentation of a location, a story or an extrapolation of the process of fabrication; rather it is a consideration of the process of conflating all of these elements, the mediated experience as something other than either an indexical recording or the actual experience of articulating the setting.

By including the tool and therefore the fabrication process of the final medium of the artwork, the production of representation becomes a greater importance to the final object for the viewer to consider. The construction of *Mirror in a Field* is closer in similarity to Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* as an artwork object where the fabrication of its individual parts is made present in its final form. The distinction between *Mirror in a Field* and *Bicycle Wheel* is, in part, the durational element of the viewer's contemplation as well the placement of ambiguity in the artwork's consideration, two aspects that are interrelated. The medium used, video,

moderates the durational experience for the viewer (the time of considering the object) as there is a clear starting and ending point following a linear and fixed timeline. Although the video features an object of contemplation, a conflation of the recording device, the camera and the mirror, with the images presented on a screen, the viewer's engagement is a passive role not one of constructing an image of the artwork as is the case of say the Koons's *Gazing Ball* series or fabricated through a point of contemplation as in Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, albeit cognitively engaged through a process of conceptualising the images presented on the screen. With Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* as an object that could be conceivably constructed, the viewer is potentially able to manipulate the device that constitutes the artwork, whilst the artwork remains the object of contemplation. Any manipulation of the medium in *Mirror in a Field*, either as a re-enactment by the viewer or editing of the video, would result in a different production. Thus, *Mirror in a Field* remains a point of contemplation, similar to Nauman's *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* rather than an integrated mimetic experience that may be suggested through an object such as Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*.

4.2 Exhibition of Slapstick Things: Exhibition as Potential Actions for Objects

The exhibitions 'Things,' 'Balls and Things' and 'Balls' follow on a similar theme to *Mirror in a Field* in that the exhibitions seek to present objects of contemplation that incorporate the fabrication of the artwork as part of the content in the final object. Thus, the mediated process is made apparent and informs the viewer in the final material of the artwork. The materials used in the artwork suggest incongruous associations within their own structures and/or the artwork's setting within the context of the exhibition and with the other included objects. Many of the artworks in the exhibitions contain objects that suggest a process of restrained or potential action or manipulation on the part of the viewer. Such objects like the

painted footballs and tetherballs suggest a restrained action by the viewer through an implied potential action by the association of these objects with events in the non-exhibition sphere, such as the sports field. The circumstances of the exhibition space imply an incongruous setting for the same objects. This incongruity is made evident to the viewer through the suggested inherent utility and function of the objects outside the exhibition.

Many of the objects included in the exhibitions suggest further mimetic responses in the viewer through the construction and placement of the objects, suggesting a more abstracted concept of mimesis than the implied utility/uselessness binary of the sports balls. For instance, a stack of bricks in 'Things' indicate a process of constructing the structure through the apparent form fabricated by the individual bricks. Similarly, the scanned images in the *Fruit Scan* series suggest the documentation of placed objects and the process of scanning facilitated by home or office machines.

Furthermore, the exhibitions were constructed to showcase the shifting connotation and interpretation of pre-existing content connected with the objects through association with other objects in the exhibition space, extending the potential analogies and interpretations of the meaning and content of the objects through these associations. For example, the similar shapes and material of the colander and the polished stainless steel sphere placed in the grid-like floor display in 'Things' suggests some intended association and pictographic meaning. These potential analogical references were integral to my intentions of alluding to the objects' potential and shifting meaning or content regarding art objects. The exhibitions suggest a sense of alluding to other meaning and uses of objects other than their intended utility in the life praxis, whilst resisting conclusive outcomes or implicit meaning in the exhibition environment. The process of integrating various objects of utility into the exhibition space sought to overtly draw on the implied narrative context associated with the art gallery to provide a framework for the artworks and objects to work with or against their initial content or context in a simultaneous, and paradoxical, cohesion with and friction against the normative expectations of the exhibition setting.

As I have discussed in the previous chapters, the semiotic suggestions of images and their interrelations with the context and associated images and objects through the juxtaposition with other images and the social contexts that viewers bring to these combinations incorporates a tension or agitation within the content of the artwork. The subsequent combinations of analogous images form the “semiotic slapstick” alluded to in Heiser’s consideration of Eisenstein’s montage theory discussed before. The paradoxical circumstance of the useful objects in the exhibition context draws on Duchamp’s ready-made contextualisation of common-placed objects of utility transformed by the artist and exhibition context into objects of contemplation, as exemplified in *Bicycle Wheel*. Similarly, the banality of the objects used in the three exhibitions suggest both the exceptional experience drawn from the banal as exemplified in Nauman’s *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* as well as the contemplative potential implicated in both Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* and Nauman’s film. This potential I will consider in further detail below as I consider some of the objects from the exhibition.

The three exhibitions follow on the semiotic slapstick through exercises in two forms of contextual and narrative slapstick. The first form considers the exhibition format as an instructive or illustrative tool for the objects it contains. The choice of objects and placement were informed by the context of the gallery to establish aesthetic consideration of objects and actions within the space whilst referencing the objects’ potential utility outside the context of the exhibition setting. The internalised juxtaposition of the objects’ utility within and outside the gallery setting suggests a humorous tension between the use and uselessness of art objects. Through various manipulations of the objects and media used to represent objects, the exhibitions sought to explore how this friction contributed to the content and meaning of the objects of consideration. The second form of slapstick used in the exhibitions was through a process of considering the form of the objects. I directed my attention towards the essential elements of the medium of the objects, such as the materials that form a painting, print or sculpture, and exhibition space and how humorous incongruities could be

constructed through an application of absurd, Bergsonian inexorable logic of these essential elements. I drew on the formal qualities to draw out incongruities and disruptions within the structures of the artworks to create a friction with the expectation of the formal structures and the artwork's context within the exhibition space. The objects of consideration were formed with materials that, like the slap stick prop, allude to another purpose, a utility, yet remain the obvious construction of their materials. For the purposes of this chapter I will consider the first exhibition 'Things' as the primary source for the material and theoretical framework for the following two as it contains material and techniques that feature in the other two exhibitions. I will subsequently extrapolate from the examples comparing the qualities with the variations on the themes in the other exhibitions.

The exhibition 'Things' can be delineated into three sections represented geographically in the gallery setting: the floor section containing objects, the prints at either side of the floor objects, and the painting on the back wall (see figs. 36 and 37). The sections configure particular approaches to representations of content. The three sections are further delineated by the mediation of the items presented. The floor section consists of objects in a grid-like pattern and in various forms of manipulation by the artist. Some items are stacked, folded, placed, or in some cases more directly manipulated by the author in the case of the painted football, the processed photography paper, and the glass vitrine case. The prints feature images of fruits scanned by a flatbed scanner and printed on archival paper and framed. Finally, the back wall consists of a painting diptych depicting the chevron markings used to enhance visibility on the back of service vehicles. The objects of utility and the chevron painting function as references to the content-tension between representation of objects, their implicit utility and their function as aesthetic objects in an exhibition space. The three sections, the prints, painting and floor objects, act as various methods of creating visual puns and gags

through a process of referencing the materials that constitute the objects of contemplation and their reference to the surrounding objects.



Figure 36: Levi Hanes, 'Things,' 2016, exhibition image, Galway, 126 Gallery. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 37: Levi Hanes, 'Things,' 2016, exhibition image, Galway, 126 Gallery. Image courtesy the author.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will focus this section on two aspects that directly integrate this friction of utility and aesthetics as part of the material manipulation of the object of contemplation, the *Fruit Scan* print series and the sports balls. I will consider how the material and contextual elements interact with some of the selected objects below. Similar to the following two exhibitions, 'Things' acts as an analogy for the process of making content through material manipulation and image association. Thus, the exhibition and the following examples from the triad of exhibitions form a suggestion of a pictogram that do not directly translate to verbal content nor do they form a coherent meaning or content outside representation of the process of content through incongruity and perceived visual puns. The objects sustain a type of relationship to each other through visual, material and contextual similarities and contrasts—existing as simultaneously congruous and incongruous elements within a single context of the exhibition space. Thus a suspended outcome in the form of meaning or content reinforces the incongruous aspects of the exhibition material.

Painted sports balls are recurring objects in the three exhibitions. The first iteration in 'Things' is a football covered in textured white paint (see fig. 39). Two differing iterations of the sports ball feature in 'Balls and Things' as tetherball structures and footballs similarly painted in loose gestural styles and lastly the same balls placed on an aluminium foil floor in the exhibition 'Balls' (see fig. 41-44). The sports balls were selected to directly implicate the internalized slapstick mimetic process within the viewer through a process of simultaneously implicating the normal response to the object (kicking or hitting the ball) and the restriction of this action indicated by the exhibition setting. Thus, the balls serve as an illustration of the slapstick potential for artworks: the contemplation of the object for its potential, implicit utility and its indicated aesthetic use as a thing of abstract contemplation through its context and manipulation by the artist. The final exhibition of the trilogy 'Balls' extends the slapstick disruption between the viewer and the objects of contemplation into the exhibition space. As the viewer traverses the gallery space to contemplate the objects on the floor, his or her movement wears away the aluminium foil revealing the grey floor beneath. In this physical change of the environment an analogous reference can be drawn as the exhibition 'Balls' records the process of viewing art through the worn foil, implicating that through the process of observation the artwork's context is changed.



Figure 38: Levi Hanes, untitled white painted ball from 'Things,' 2016, Galway, 126 Gallery. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 39: Levi Hanes, untitled painted football from 'Balls and Things,' 2017, acrylic on football, Belfast, Platform Arts. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 40: Levi Hanes, untitled tetherball structure from 'Balls and Things,' 2017, mixed materials, Belfast, Platform Arts. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 41: Levi Hanes, untitled painted footballs and aluminium foil floor from 'Balls,' 2017, Glasgow Project Room. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 42: Levi Hanes, untitled painted footballs and aluminium foil floor from 'Balls,' 2017, Glasgow Project Room. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 43: Levi Hanes, untitled painted footballs and aluminium foil floor from 'Balls,' 2017, Glasgow Project Room. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 44: Levi Hanes, opening reception, untitled painted footballs and aluminium foil floor from 'Balls,' 2017, Glasgow Project Room. Image courtesy the author.

'Balls' elaborates on the previous iterations of the intrinsic suggested utility and restriction of use of the sports balls as a visual gag. The play on the function of the sports balls is extended to the exhibition space as an area that the viewer articulates, and ultimately alters by his or her presence, as he or she moves through it. This articulation disrupts the visual elements, changing the physical and visual attributes, just as the meaning of an object changes in relation to its context and corresponding images, an experience that is informed as one moves through an exhibition space comparing differing objects. 'Balls' actualises the changed semiotic experience of moving through an exhibition space through the alteration of the exhibition material, the aluminium floor, as the viewer experiences the exhibition. The viewer's experience of the exhibition is not solely a cognitive experience. The foil floor creates a metallic sound similar to

fracturing thin ice. Attendances were observed walking tentatively through the space, frequently using a flat-footed walk as one would over a delicate surface, lending the audience an automaton-like gait. Similar to *Mirror in a Field*, the reflective aluminium surface in 'Balls' drew the attention of the viewer from the traditional subject of an exhibition, the "art objects" of the balls, to the background or floor and awareness of his/her awkward walking. Thus the viewer simultaneously effects Eisenstein's collision of images and experiences and Bergson's mechanical man by moving through the exhibition space. The slapstick action then, is articulated through the viewer onto the surface of the exhibition both informing and disrupting the content of the exhibition space, the floor and subsequently the floors association with the balls.

The exhibitions 'Things' and 'Balls and Things' (see fig. 45) feature two iterations of a series of prints made with a domestic flatbed scanner. The *Fruit Scan* series was fabricated with traditional still-life photography or painting in mind utilising the effects of the Contact Image Sensor (CIS) flatbed scanner to exaggerate the optical distortions of indexical tools such as cameras and scanners. The first iterations, featured in 'Things,' were European standard (A4) sized prints that replicated the objects and scanning surface to-scale (see figs. 46-48). The second version of the series, shown in 'Balls and Things,' was printed on a large (176 x 214 cm) Poly Vinyl Carbonate (PVC) banner (see figs. 49 and 50), a common commercial advertisement material featured on storefronts, billboards and other public locations. The resulting two versions diverged from each other not only conceptually but also in scale and in perception. The conceptual framework for the A4 prints was to replicate what the machine "saw" in replication, what the sensors perceived when scanning the fruit, by simulating the scanner's surface in the print, the scale and glossy surface of the print similar to the surface of the scanner glass. The resulting image is both a replication of the scale of the objects recorded by the device and a view from the perspective of the device. Although the resulting images offer a seemingly accurate facsimile of the objects recorded, with consistent

colours and perspective references to depth, the process of reproduction has altered the resulting image from how the fruits would be perceived behind glass with the human eye. The seeming distortions are the results of the bar of lights and sensors, and the incremental planar scan that constitutes the CIS linear scanning device. The effect in the print is a “flattening out” of the surfaces of the objects with the edges of the fruits extending out at equal measure from where the objects touch the glass of the scanner.



Figure 45: Levi Hanes, 'Balls and Things,' 2017, exhibition image, Belfast, Platform Arts. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 46: Levi Hanes, *Fruit Scan 013*. 2016, Giclée print, frame, 32 x 23 cm from 'Things,' 2016, Galway, 126 Gallery. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 47: Levi Hanes, *Fruit Scan 016*. 2016, Giclée print, frame, 32 x 23 cm. from 'Things,' 2016, Galway, 126 Gallery. Image courtesy the author.



Figure 48: Levi Hanes, *Fruit Scan 004*. 2016, Giclée print, frame, 32 x 23 cm from 'Things,' 2016, Galway, 126 Gallery. Image courtesy the author.

The linear sensors and lights result in a shallow depth of field and limited lighting of three-dimensional objects the resulting limitations of the linear-planar recording process evident in the distortions in the image. Subsequently, the colour and detail of the objects' image appear clearest at the surface of the prints, where the objects contact the glass of the scanner. Furthermore, the print image of the objects with seemingly multiple vanishing points extending out from each object, results in what appears to be individual objects that recede from view from their centre outward in all directions as opposed to uniform points of recession in the picture plane in traditional Renaissance perspective exemplified in single lens cameras. In fabricating the images, I sought to exploit the optical distortion formed by the CIS scanner to evoke the action of creating the image in the print image: the recording device moving along the surface of the glass recording at a limited depth, the information before it. The resulting mechanical

reproduction is an obvious distortion of the objects' three-dimensionality, its depth, yet simultaneously forming a seemingly accurate image of the fruit's surface.

The PVC banner draws on a similar fabrication process to the *Fruit Scan* series featured in 'Things,' consisting of an image of fruits scanned on the same CIS device. Whereas the fruit scans in 'Things' were represented analogous in the prints, thus indicating the simulation of verisimilitude—the monumental scale of the PVC print emphasizes the fabrication of the image-making process. The scale of the banner further emphasises the nature of the CIS scan's rendering of the objects to the viewer through an exaggerated sensual perception of the visual distortion. The subsequent exponential vanishing points and the contrast of focus and scale to the actual fruits caused by the linear scanner sensors have a disorienting effect on the viewer, an aspect that was less obvious in the scale of the 'Things' prints. This disorientation is particularly noticeable when the PVC banner fills the viewer's peripheral vision. By exploiting the limitations of the scanner's mechanical reproduction, the scale of the banner image presents the assumed verisimilitude of the fruits' image as a series of translated lines of information that result in a recognisable, but inherently confused and obfuscating image in an exaggerated manner not as readily perceptible in the A4 iterations.



Figure 49: Levi Hanes, 'Balls and Things.' 2017, exhibition installation image, Belfast, Platform Arts. Image courtesy the author.

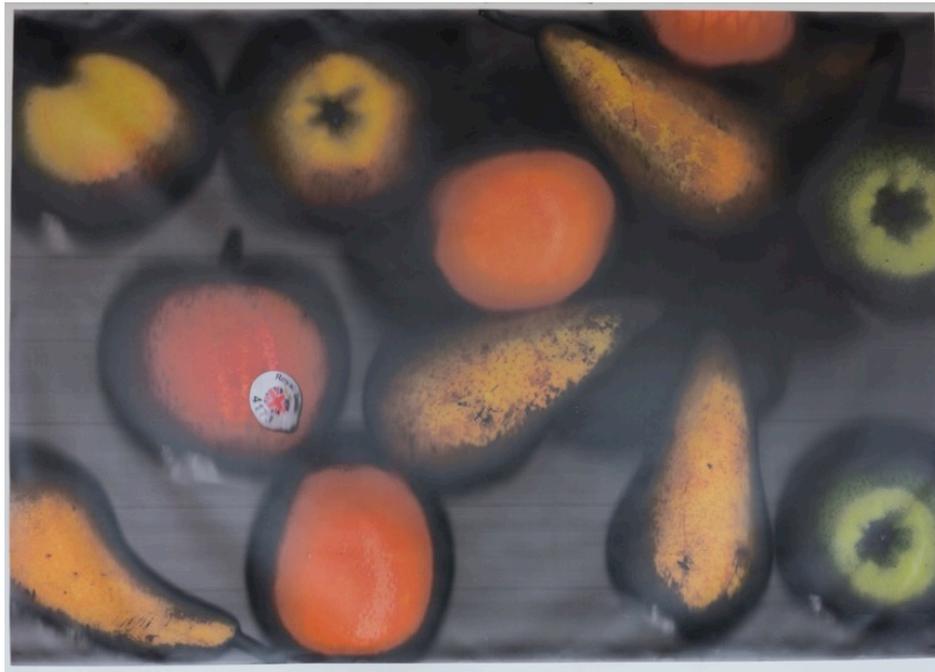


Figure 50: Levi Hanes, *Fruit Scan 020*. 2017, ink-jet print on Poly Vinyl Carbonate, 176 x 214 cm from 'Balls and Things,' 2017, Belfast, Platform Arts. Image courtesy the author.

In both iterations of the *Fruit Scan* series the mechanical process of fabricating the artworks is incorporated in the final image. Unlike the filming device used in *Mirror in a Field*, the construction of the image in

the *Fruit Scan* series is not readily apparent without some knowledge of the scanner-recording technology. The title alludes to the process although it requires specialist knowledge to understand the construction of the visual experience. Yet, despite this degree of opacity in the construction of the material, there exist visual clues in the images: the seemingly flattened-out images of the fruit, the multi-directional vanishing point in the perspective and the shallow depth of field allude to visual incongruities to what is seemingly a photographic, therefore indexical, process of recording the image of the objects. The prints present a visual slapstick of verisimilitude through a reference to lens and photographic reality combined with the distortions of the mechanical reproduction.

The conceptual slapstick is further illustrated through the inference of the view of the objects. The prints feature an image of the still life arrangement that only the machine could view. Unlike the camera that stands in for the viewer, the scanner records the surface “under” the object, which is hidden from the viewer when placing the objects on the glass surface of the scanner. Likewise, the scanner only records what it can “read” off the immediate surface of the object, where it comes in contact with the glass of the scanner or within reach of the limited light source, a pun on the potential shallowness of the mechanically reproduced images of objects. The *Fruit Scan* prints through their simultaneous indexical recording of visual information and the visually disorienting effects act as simultaneous indexical and analogous representation of the conflation of context and material in mediated images.

4.3 Conclusion

The preceding exercises and examples of slapstick intersections with material and contextual content vary in approach and indeed outcome as successful projects. The success of these projects rests partially in their alignment with the mimetic association with the viewer and partly with the artworks’ ability to simultaneously integrate the materials to form cognitively cohesive objects of contemplation whilst maintaining the

incongruous elements that constitute the slapstick disruption. How well the object represents the material integration and paradoxical inclusion of incongruities substantiates the critical integrity of the artwork. The objects and images in the three exhibitions suggest an amusing simultaneous contradiction between utility and concept through the tension between the utility of objects and images and their aesthetic consideration within the exhibition space. Yet how these objects and images engage the recognition of these elements differs with the medium and process of fabrication.

One distinction that perhaps most strongly delineates these examples is the duration that the viewer engages with the objects. On the one hand the received image is of a documented disruption, the video and print are forms of a documenting process that records the construction of the slapstick disruption as an art object, either the performance in *Mirror in a Field* or the still life fruits, the disruptive elements included within the construction of the media: the video is bisected by the mirror device or the print indicating the distorting effects of the sensors. However, the slapstick disruption is also contained within the medium as a specific moment, four minutes and twenty-three seconds long in *Mirror in a Field* or in the static image of the *Fruit Scan* prints. Although the disruption is maintained in the object of consideration (the medium/image) the resultant construction of the image is a documentation of a contained action. On the other hand, the sports balls are objects of potential action; a viewer simultaneously perceives the object of consideration and the potential physical interaction with the object, thus potentially activating the original object's utility. In the objects, unlike the static or moving images where the event has been documented and to a degree codified, a potential remains of possible activation of the artwork through an alternative means, therefore the viewer remains a potential agent of activation. In both the images and the objects, the empathetic process remains intact, although the process of reception is sensually different in the iterations.

The prints, abstract painting, and the commonplace object/sculptures are displayed as an offering of art as limited use-value objects with open ended potentials for contemplation and interpretation. The slapstick element

is drawn from these objects and images by the perception of the viewer, a process of sensually engaging with the objects, recognizing their intended utility and inferring the contextual realignments within the exhibition space. In this realignment and contextualisation, the objects maintain their former inferred utility whilst existing as art objects within the exhibition space.

Tension between attraction to the objects and a resistance to the suggested utility of the object is an internalised phenomenon that in the exhibition circumstances implies humour through the paradoxical utility of the objects and the denial of their use by the context. Through the conflation of the implied content of the object, image and the exhibition space the objects engage with the environment and the viewer through a sensual reception and cognitive processing of contents and contexts that suggest a process of open criticality that does not shut down potential avenues of interpretation. The conflating process of congruities and incongruities suggest an ambiguity that allows for a humorous suspension of a conclusion to the discordant and paradoxical incongruities within the contextual circumstances of the exhibition space. These aspects form or suggest the accepted norms of the gallery setting and objects implicating that an integral part of the visual experience of the exhibition is the coexistence of congruous and incongruous elements. The preceding artworks simultaneously follow a type of humour derived from the congruity and incongruous aspects made physically evident through slapstick, and the conceptual enquiry of narrative structures constituting contemporary art interests, whilst suspending deterministic outcomes, or narrative conclusions.

Chapter Five: Thesis Conclusion

In the preceding chapters I have set out a framework to consider contemporary artworks within a formal slapstick critique. I posited that through a range of material constructions, from sculpture, performed events, and mediated variations of these forms, artworks can engage with similar material as their predecessors in the historic avant-garde within the institutional frameworks of art galleries, museums and collections and indeed follow in a similar disruptive and critically resistant spirit against reifying tendencies associated with the institutions. Bürger's criticism of the neo-avant-garde mimicry of the historic avant-garde in style alone reinforcing museums' and collectors' cultural and commercial value raises the question of whether contemporary artists, working within the structures of art institutions and commercial interests, can engage critically with fine art objects. Furthermore this line of questioning asks whether artwork that draws on traditional, classical fine art references or indicate the avant-garde in style and/or material can have any resistant agency to the culture industry without simply reinforcing paradigms that favour commercial interests, or the institutional status quo? Due to the expansive use of material in the historic avant-garde, including material and techniques of mass-production and entertainment, material alone cannot distinguish contemporary artists from their antecedents or commercial interests. We need to consider how contemporary artists interrogate the methods, techniques, and materials availed in the artwork to form an analysis of their approach in order to consider the resistant traits.

In the various examples, I looked to a method of critical engagement with material and associations with art that queried the fabrication of artwork itself as a means for contemporary artists to engage with the spirit of the historic avant-garde. To this end, a form of humour derived from the visual presentation of materials and set-ups lent itself to this form of analysis. I considered how the artworks utilised formal considerations of slapstick, how the artwork engaged the narrative framework, establishing the context for considering the artwork, then provided a disruptive element, implied or actual into the formal construction of the artwork.

The frame of reference in the artworks was established using existing art paradigms and the associated cultural references and utility of the objects included in the art sphere. In the most obvious case, Koons's sculptural *Gazing Ball* series used canonical sculptures to establish the art historical classical ideals of aesthetics as a foil to the disruptive act of placing reflective garden decoration orbs. Yet the disruptive act in Koons's sculptures is not just a disruption for the sake of upsetting established paradigms. Rather, I argued, interesting and critically engaged artworks are those that use the material associated with the paradigms to point elsewhere and resist codification. The artworks are not held to the gag or punch line as a conclusive ending to the perambulatory set-up established in the artwork. In the artworks that resist the simple gag, the disruptive act is conflated within the piece.

Thus, an artwork such as Jeff Koons's sculptural *Gazing Ball* series works as a slapstick art object in its resistance to paradigms. Despite Koons's claim to the series' association with universality, beauty and its suggested implications of equalizing high and low art material (or in its potentially cynical reading as a parody of "art appreciation" after the inclusion of ready-mades and modernism),¹³⁴ the artwork's critical effectiveness lay in its tension between the individual elements, its material and its reflexivity. The artworks engage in setting up a context of consideration (classical sculptures of canonical "beauty" and high art awkwardly paired with alluring kitsch objects) within these paradigms in earnest attempts at autonomous consideration whilst simultaneously indicating through the material and construction (the obvious discrepancy of materials) the potential or actual failure to support those claims.

¹³⁴ In an interview recounted in *The Guardian*, Koons stated that the gazing ball "represents the vastness of the universe and at the same time the intimacy of right here, right now." When considering the addition of the balls to the paintings he states, "These paintings are stronger for being together with the gazing ball – if you removed the gazing ball they don't have the same power, they don't have the same phenomenology. These paintings in their own time were some of the greatest masterpieces in western art history, but in this time, this moment, they're most powerful as they are in this state of gazing." Alex Needham, "Jeff Koons on his Gazing Ball Paintings: 'It's not about copying,'" *The Guardian*, November 9, 2015, accessed August 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/09/jeff-koons-gazing-ball-paintings-its-not-about-copying>.

In most cases, the surveyed artworks have engaged the historic avant-garde with similar material and in a similar disruptive spirit through the constructions of objects that integrate a physical and visually apparent incongruous element that lend the artworks a resistance to codifying aspects. Aside from the element of disruptive construction, the artworks suggest a distanced ironic humour evidenced in the conceptual as well as visual reception of the artwork. Far from a side effect of the incongruous elements of the artworks, the humorous, distanced empathy affected in the viewer by the material construction of the artworks informs the critical resistance of the artwork. By encouraging an empathy with the construction of the object as well its deconstruction, intimated or actual, the viewer is simultaneously sensually informed by the object and empathetically engaged with the set-up and disruption through a cognitively distanced and simultaneous internalised mimetic process of engagement with the event and act.

To elicit the incongruous elements and empathy, the artworks draw on elements of the absurd. In their physical material construction, the structures of the artworks, the choreography, or programmatic exercises, the artworks suggest an articulation of a seemingly inexorable logic made visually evident in the conclusive object, the film, sculpture or photograph. For example, Jeff Koons's *Gazing Ball* series draws on general knowledge of art history and ideals of form and beauty through recognisable objects whilst extending the aesthetic frameworks of art material referencing ideal forms to the common lawn ornaments by fixing a gazing ball to the statue. Furthermore, the resisting artworks incorporate the parameters of the absurd logic within the physical and/or visible structure of the object such as Nauman's adherence to the stated choreography in his *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* film, or the documentary nature associated with the photograph and the common objects precariously balanced in Fischli and Weiss's *Equilibres*.

The slapstick objects suggest to the viewer an absurd logic through a transparent construction of their final form. The individual components that constitute the artwork are evident in the final object, whether it is the

photograph of miscellaneous objects constructed into a balanced configuration in Fischli and Weiss's prints, or a choreography filmed from start to finish by the artist. Through the transparent indication of how the artwork is constructed, it engages the viewer through the process of referred construction, an empathetic internalised re-construction of the absurd event by the viewer. Both the fabricator and the viewer are aware of the absurdity of the project, often made evident in titles such as Baldessari's "attempts" or Nauman's titles, or through the juxtaposition of the high cultural material associations of sculpture and low culture mass-produced objects seen in Duchamp, Koons, Fischer, and alluded to by Fischli and Weiss, Henke and more abstractly Genzken. Regardless of the methods, the artworks knowingly play on high/low culture and absurdist gestures. Yet, the artworks seem to suggest an intention to evoke in the viewer a concept similar to the classical aesthetic association with representing ideals, or, if not that, then some *other*, some form of an abstracted idea. Thus, the artworks have the markings of the shift in aesthetic concerns from the representation of abstract ideals suggested in beauty to the representation of some inarticulate other in alignment with Adorno's and Lyotard's associations with modern and postmodern art and the sublime.

To greater or lesser degrees the artists have engaged with a conceptual project that seeks to elicit an evocation of the other through an empathetic and cognitive engagement with the viewer. Through a construction of tension between expectations, institutional and cultural contexts, material content and the evident potential of physical collapse the artists fabricate objects that contain potential disruption, an act or release of energy, that requires a level of understanding by the viewer of the premise or context, and the potential disruptive act. Therefore, the two main elements that form the mimetic experience of slapstick artworks arise from the formal consideration of the conceptual and material construction of the artworks. Through understanding the conceptual and material framework of the artworks, the viewer is able to conceptualise the potential act or energy indicated by the art object and thus, through a reverse engineering of the

construction of the object, engage in a mimetic process of construction and the disruptive elements of the artwork.

Furthermore, the majority of the artworks paradoxically engaged with slapstick techniques that do not necessarily rely on the conclusive punch line often employed in comedy to signify resolution. In the examples that err towards more direct slapstick readings, and therefore appear to have a structural and conclusive punch lines, gags or pratfalls the effect of the artwork, the conceptual interests and the material query of the individual structures, is overshadowed by the prescriptive aspect of the elements. I argue that when a joke, gag, or punch line is readily readable in an artwork the individual parts of the artwork are reduced to their function of describing the joke, not question the structures that set the joke in motion. Examples of this more declarative slapstick approach include Koons's sculptures, Fischer's mirrored cubes, and Henke's chair and painting configuration. The individual elements in these artworks suggest a joke utility on their art historical content, the elements of the artwork tend toward the facility of the joke over the criticality of the technique. Yet, a degree of ambiguity and questioning of structural integrity remain in these examples. Koons's sculptural versions of the *Gazing Ball* series remain a ludicrous conflation of object as an image, between the additive construction of the plaster casts and the reflective sphere and the distorted image of the viewer and the structure represented in the reflected surface. Likewise, the image and the reflective "negative space" in Fischer's *Service à la française* similarly conflates the viewer with an image of sculptural artworks, further querying what it is the viewer is looking at, the constructed object or his or her reflection. In contrast, Henke's structures appear perfunctory gestures to fulfil roles within the slapstick structure. The paintings are sufficiently constructed to represent paintings, their image and material of secondary concern to their role as "paintings" in the construction, of near equal aesthetic interest to the folding chairs that are placed on the painting stack. As a sculpture, the individual components fulfil their structural and symbolic function. No singular part of the sculpture draws more attention than the whole, neither the stack of paintings as a base, the two folding

chairs, nor the upright painting. The construction works as a humorous statement, yet the aesthetic query of the construction of the artwork is rendered secondary to the construction of the statement. Therefore, the slapstick punch line supersedes the critical analysis of the slapstick structure.

This thesis set out to describe a form of comedic inflection in contemporary art practice with the intention of articulating a set of tools, methods and conceptual frameworks that could offer the art making process methods to engage the viewer in a similar process to the construction of the artwork. I have argued that through the use of certain slapstick methods of establishing contexts and material constructions with normative associations, the set-up of the joke, one can then insert physical and/or visual disruptive elements within the artworks. Both the set-up and disruption is made evident to the viewer in this process. Furthermore, by presenting the artwork in a manner that clearly delineates its individual components and alludes to its fabrication, the viewer can configure the process and thus imagine the construction of the artwork. Through this reconstructing process, combined with an empathetic association with the artwork, the viewer can simultaneously engage with the artwork on a physiological (albeit imagined) level and cognitive level. The experience of the artwork then is one of engaging with an other, an object formed by another agent, whilst conceptually maintaining the otherness of the object.

Following on from this consideration of slapstick as not just a jolt or disruption through a pratfall, I posit that a suspended or prolonged form of absurd disruptive action suggests that slapstick offers a means to form an empathetic communication with the viewer through a process of a type of mimesis. This mimesis allows the viewer to take part in a process similar to that undertaken by the artist, involving the simultaneous perception of two narrative strands or potential outcomes from a selection of material. From this empathetic-yet-distanced position, the viewer can appreciate an absurdist rationale, the inexorable logic of the fabrication, and maintain the integrity of the individual elements – the concept, context and object – maintaining the otherness of the observed materials and circumstances

through the mimetic experience. Through this process, the viewer is put in the position of the maker and the materials, yet maintains distinction as viewer. Slapstick accentuates this process through its disruption of the circumstances of viewing the object, through implied or actual action.

I posit that through humour arising from incongruity, an artist can utilise many of the techniques of the historic avant-garde to interrogate the methods and materials used to convey meaning in art objects and mass media. The process of avoiding reification is brought about through the ironic distancing associated with set-ups found in early slapstick cinema. Just as with a joke without a punch line, there is no conclusive outcome of the cognitive process within these artworks. This suspension follows a similar criterion put forward in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* – the suggestion that the *meaning* of an artwork can be explored through a process of sensual and cognitive resonance, whilst left partly ambiguous, or at least, non-declarative.

Although the focus of this thesis has been largely on photographic and sculptural artworks that are oriented toward art venues and audiences, the implications of humorous, self-reflective and resistant acts extend beyond the traditional grounds of art, beyond the museums and galleries. The implication of creating objects of consideration that simultaneously attempt to mimic the unrestricted aspects of the sublime, and expose their failure to do so, defines critically-engaged artworks, yet the form these artworks take and where they take place is open to any circumstance where the fabrication of an object or event occurs. The potential for resistance to the reifying nature of capital and the search for possibilities outside normative structures may occur at points where we as fabricators and observers are privileged, facing acts that are not existentially threatening. Indeed, the process of fabricating incongruous and disruptive objects may even prove amusing.

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Appendix I: Exhibition/Programming Material

'Balls' 2017, Glasgow Project Room Exhibition Material

LEVI
HANE
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Glasgow Project Room

11-17 June 2017
Preview Saturday 10 June 6-8pm
Gallery Hours Sun- Sat 12pm - 6pm

1st Floor
Trongate 103
Glasgow, UK
G1 5HD



Levi Hanes 'Balls'
Glasgow Project Room

11 June 2017 – 17 June 2017

Opening Reception: Friday 10 June 2017, 6-8 pm

Gallery Hours Sunday – Saturday 12-6 pm

www.levihanes.com

'Balls' features new artworks by the American artist Levi Hanes drawing on recent developments in his practice based PhD in slapstick and contemporary art. In a nod to Billy Name's silver covering of Andy Warhol's East 47th Street studio, the gallery floor is lined with aluminium foil spread so that upon entering there is no alternative to walking across it and ultimately 'damaging' the surface. The installation of aluminium foil creates a reflective, alluring 'field' across the gallery floor that will change with the treading by visitors revealing the gallery floor beneath. This compelled interactive element is intended to suggest both an allegorical reference to physical exertion and gestural mark making in art practice and an actual change in the exhibition space from audience engagement. The white footballs dispersed across the aluminium field are painted in an abstract and expressive style reminiscent of American Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock, Clifford Stills and Franz Kline, suggesting both a playful send up and an acknowledgement of the implied sublime referenced in post war Expressionism. Furthermore, the footballs suggest a tension between the utility of the object (as a thing to be kicked or played with) and its condition as an art object in an exhibition.

This exhibition follows on Hanes' recent research and studio developments focused on the application of critical theory and comedy in contemporary art practice as an Irish Research Council practice-based scholar at the Huston School of Film & Digital Media, National University of Ireland, Galway. The exhibition is made possible with generous support from the IRC and Hope Scott Trust.

From 2009-2010 Hanes served as a Committee Member at Transmission Gallery, Glasgow after completing his MFA at the Glasgow School of Art in 2008 and a Fine Arts BA, English Literature minor at the Robert D. Clark Honors College, University of Oregon. Hanes was the recipient of the Arts Council Ireland Visual Art Bursary 2013, Glasgow Visual Artists Award 2011, 2009, and Tramway, Glasgow MFA Residency 2008.

Recent solo exhibitions include 'Balls & Things' Platform Arts, Belfast (January 2017); 'Things' 126 Gallery, Galway (September 2016); Intermedia Gallery, CCA Glasgow (2013); La Bête, Glasgow (2010); "Girlfriends" with Mark Briggs, Project Room, Glasgow (2009); and Tramway, 2009. Selected recent group shows are "Materiality" NUI Galway (2015); Torrance Art Museum, LA (2014); Ormston House, Limerick (2013); and Project Room, Glasgow (2012).

With thanks to Neil Bickerton, Clare Stephenson, Colin Macfarlane and Kari Stewart at the Glasgow Project Room; Kari, Dan Monks, Mark Briggs and Aimée Mollaghan for their help and support; Prof. Rod Stoneman, Prof. Dan Carey, and Dr. Maeve Connolly for their PhD supervision.



‘Balls & Things’ 2017, Platform Arts, Belfast Exhibition Material

LEVI ·
HANES
BALLS
· & · TH
INGS ·

Platform Arts, Belfast

6-21 January 2017
Opening: Thursday 5 January 6-9pm
Gallery Hours Wed- Fri 12pm - 6pm
Sat 11am-4pm

Phone: +44 28 9031 1301
Email: platformbelfast@gmail.com

1 Queen St
Belfast
Co. Antrim
BT1 6EA



“Balls & Things”

Levi Hanes

6-21 January 2017

Opening Reception: Thursday 5 January @ 6pm



“Balls & Things” features new artworks by Levi Hanes that examine aspects of the relationship between objects and images and their intended use. The series of objects and images were made with the intention of creating a tension between the viewer and the expectations associated with the objects and the exhibition space. Featuring a range of objects; from a large PVC banner of scanned fruit, hand painted sports balls, an oil painting reproduction and images, the exhibition seeks to critically explore a range of internalised physical and cognitive disruptions in the viewer, suggested by the artworks through visual puns and gags.

Hanes' (b. U.S.A.) practice frequently explores the role of the artist in mediated culture. His exhibitions draw on modernist theories of the individual and materiality, and Enlightenment concepts of beauty and the sublime with a critical orientation regarding the relationship of these theories in contemporary practice.

Hanes is currently an Irish Research Scholar at Huston School of Film & Digital Media, National University of Ireland Galway, researching comedy in contemporary art for a practiced-based Ph.D. From 2009-2010 he served as a Committee Member at Transmission Gallery, Glasgow after completing his MFA at the Glasgow School of Art in 2008 and a Fine Arts BA, English Literature minor at the Robert D. Clark Honors College, University of Oregon. Hanes was the recipient of the Arts Council Ireland Visual Art Bursary 2013, Glasgow Visual Artists Award 2011, and Tramway, Glasgow MFA Residency 2008.

Recent solo exhibitions include: Glasgow Project Room (June 2016); 126 Gallery, Galway (September 2016); Intermedia Gallery, CCA Glasgow (2013); La Bête, Glasgow (2010); *“Girlfriends”* with Mark Briggs, Project Room, Glasgow (2009); and Tramway, (2009). Selected recent group shows are *“Materiality”*, NUI Galway (2015); Torrance Art Museum, Los Angeles (2014); Ormston House, Limerick (2013); and Project Room, Glasgow (2012).

'Things' 2016. 126 Gallery. Galway Exhibition Material

LEVI
HANE
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126 Artist-Run Gallery

10-25 September 2016
Opening Reception Friday 9 Sept 7-9
Gallery Hours Wed-Sun 12pm - 6pm
or by Appointment

Phone: + 353 (0) 864491366
Email: contact@126.ie

15 St Bridget's Place
Hidden Valley, Woodquay
Galway City, Ireland



Christina Mullan / Levi Hanes



Installation view of Levi Hanes' 'Things' at 126 Gallery, courtesy of the artist.

Levi Hanes' 'Things' at 126 Gallery.

At first Levi Hanes' exhibition 'Things' makes one feel as if the world has paused. We enter the gallery as an actor in a freeze-frame, negotiating the objects delicately placed on the floor. We must not break the fourth wall, we cannot step into their arrangement however much we are drawn to the spaces between them. The ordering of the pieces into a grid (*Evian Water Bottle, Colander, Galvanized Metal Bin Liner* etc.), the artist tells us, is "informed by ideas of commonplace alchemy, and an attraction to the functional design of objects of limited use."

The emptiness between the items, their stillness as they catch the artificial light and cast their own permanent shadows, lends them a sense of lack and an oddness only accrued by repeated viewing. The singularity of their disposition (and here we have started to think of them as a group, a cluster of things in and of themselves, rather than an art piece as a whole) marks them as new once more. An elemental change is well illustrated by *Sunlight Exposed Photographic Paper* curling up at the edges, as if smouldering still. Louis Sullivan's famous axiom 'form follows function' comes to mind as we question how objects of use, dependent on the compliance of hands, mechanism or material to be 'complete', negotiate their new role. A childhood joke also echoes: "What's pink and fluffy? Pink Fluff. What's red and invisible? No tomatoes."

Retreating, we scan the walls instead, where *Vehicle Chevron Marking*, a diptych of acrylic paint on canvas, blares and glares at us, mimicking traffic and emergency services' signage. Warning! Danger! It declares and we seek comfort elsewhere, in the soft and hushed intimacy of the giclée prints *Fruit Scan*

Appendix I: Exhibition/Programming Material

013, 016 and 004. The fruits are huddled together, safe behind glass. We see our own reflection in the surface and feel as if we are being watched as we consider them. The lines and shapes on the floor are echoed in the bend and twist of the fruit. Curves and shadows are confined by the edges of the flatbed scanner, which captures each piece at its apex to the glass.

In 1912 Carl Einstein wrote that “every precise form is an assassination of other versions: mortal anguish cuts the current. More and more reality is decomposed, which makes it less and less obligatory, the dialectic of our existence is reinforced . . . it is a traumatic accentuation.” There is certainly an element of assassination in Hanes’ exhibit. Elements have been shaped in order to contain – be it materials or liquids, and others have been reshaped or folded. Each retains permanence. The fruit will never rot in its scanner bed. The brick endures and is still permeable. The care in the placement and the softness of the prints’ tones act as a foil to the shiny, man-made machinations of the items themselves. Trauma gives way to humour. What’s yellow and invisible?

Christina Mullan is an artist and PhD candidate at GMIT.

Levi Hanes, ‘Things’, 126 Gallery, Galway, 10 – 25 September 2016.

Mullin, Christina. “Levi Hanes’ ‘Things’ at 126 Gallery.” *Circa Art Magazine*. Exhibition review, February 2016. Accessed from: <http://circaartmagazine.website/this-matters-now/christina-mullan-levi-hanes/>

‘Some Thing Funny’ 2016, Poetry Club, Glasgow Screening

Some Thing Funny

A screening of artists' videos exploring the intersection of critical comedic techniques and contemporary art.

Featuring: Mark Briggs, Kathryn Elkin, Erica Eyres, Malcolm Le Grice, Levi Hanes, Bruce Nauman, Shelly Nadashi, Martha Rosler, John Smith, Tom Varley, and William Wegman. Programmed by Levi Hanes.

Wednesday 13 April 2016
19:30, Free Admission
The Poetry Club
100 Eastvale Place
Glasgow, G3 8QG



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Some Thing Funny
13 April 2016
Programmed by Levi Hanes

Tonight's screening features a selection of film and videos made by artists who share an interest in examining the construction of media and artwork and the role of the artist in meaning-making. Often employing a degree of irony, the videos in this programme explore how both the artist and the viewer derive meaning through image, words and performance. The canonical films and videos of Bruce Nauman, Martha Rosler, John Smith, Malcolm Le Grice, and William Wegman form the basis of my own theoretical approach to both my research and practice whilst I consider Mark Briggs, Shelly Nadashi, Tom Varley, Kathryn Elkin and Erica Eyres as influential colleagues who derive similar influence from the canon and whose practice I consider an active form of contemporary art feedback. Many of the artists in this screening, if not all, are interested in the process of making, investigating the layers and materials that go into the final *things* we consider artwork and by extension other mediated experiences.

The pioneer filmmakers Auguste and Louis Lumière's piece starts the show with one of the earliest versions of slapstick film. More theatrical than filmic in its stage-like setting and performance to camera the film demonstrates banal actions and content that will have resonance with the videos that follow. Upon collecting the films and reviewing them it became apparent that a theme runs through this programme regarding the body as represented and manipulated by the performer and displayed to the camera. Nauman's enacting an exercise prescribed by the film title becomes a meditation of banal observation and a tension of potential yet unfulfilled disruption through the duration of his movements. The physically manipulated body is further explored in Eyres' modelling of clay (re)constructing a face on a polystyrene mannequin head whilst a narrator reads a biography of lesser celebrity. Nadashi performs as an actor and a physical and psychological manipulator of another actor/client's body whilst establishing the advertisement profile of desirable property. The distanciation between the subject of conversation and what we witness is further explored in the celebrity interview outtakes suggested in Elkin's video. The jump-cut editing and disjointed narrative partially resolve in our understanding of what we see and what we have been told as the video progresses, exposing both the artifice of celebrity interviews bracketed with the candour of the actor and the director regarding the themes discussed and suggested.

The construction of language, image and interpretation is further examined in Rosler's deadpan demonstration of kitchen utensils and Smith's wilfully misleading and witty word/image play. Le Grice piece re-enacts Lumière's film as a subject for the deconstruction of the film process including: on 'set' and off diegetic soundtracks and the film stock itself. In Briggs' video, language is literally embodied as a solitary engagement between two squelching fists in a bathtub where we are witness to an onanistic-like experience of the videomaker partially disembodied and he witness to a

Appendix I: Exhibition/Programming Material

conversation in a private language enacted by his own body. Similarly, Hanes incorporates the camera operator in the frame using a mirror device to simultaneously show the filmmaking process and, in part, obscure the subject whilst traversing a bucolic Irish landscape suggesting the contemporary mediated experience of being in a place. In Wegman's video the deadpan performance is shared with his dog who patiently undergoes mild humiliation whilst a voiceover describes the advertisement machinations of a new and used car advert, the items for sale not discussed, nor pictured. Finally, the disjunction between new and old media, representation and actuality, irony and emotion reaches a culmination in Varley's examination of classic existential films and their correspondent in conceptual film. Referencing Carl Theodor Dreyer's classic 1928 film *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) and Bas Jan Ader's *I am too sad to tell you* (1971) Varley toys with representations of gravitas seen in the visages on the screen and positions them as a FaceTime conversation of loss suggesting examples of mediated experiences of other's emotion and our contemporary relationship with existential auteur film and artist video canon.

Through methods associated with slapstick and deadpan, such as disruptive incongruity and ironic distanciation, the artists featured in this programme explore how our mediated experience can be manipulated and dismantled by a process of examination of the material used to represent our daily experiences in order to encourage critical engagement with these means of representation. The screening represents key videos and artists that have influenced my recent research in comedy in contemporary art as an Irish Research Council (IRC) scholar pursuing a practice-based PhD at the Huston School of Film & Digital Media, NUI Galway. The screening is funded, in part, by a bursary from the IRC.

-Levi Hanes.



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Videos and Biographies:

1. Auguste and Louise Lumière, *L'arroseur arrosé*, 1895, film, 43 seconds.

Auguste Lumière and his brother Louis Lumière invented the Cinematograph in 1895, a machine that made and projected what were arguably the first modern-day motion pictures. Making many movies over the following years they established many of the basics of cinematography, composition, camera-angle and directorial technique. They stopped making movies in 1901 seeing little future business in the venture. The featured piece represents one of the earliest versions of slapstick film. More theatrical than filmic in its stage-like setting and performance to camera the film demonstrates banal actions and content that will have resonance with the videos that follow.

2. Shelly Nadashi *A Hidden Quiet Pocket*, 2014, HD video, 19 minutes 26 seconds.
Performers: Hagar Tenenbaum (client) and Shelly Nadashi (masseuse).

Shelly Nadashi lives and works in Paris. Her work juxtaposes video, sculpture, writing and performance. Her work can be conceived as a comment on the social role of the artist, hierarchies of values, the relationship between performer, artwork and audience, and the mechanism through which it is assigned. Or rather, as she pompously once announced herself: "My condition is somewhere between clown and hermit".

After having completed her studies at The School for Visual Theatre in Jerusalem Nadashi moved to Glasgow in 2007 in order to undertake a Master of Fine Art degree at The Glasgow School of Art. Her work has recently been presented at the New Museum Triennial, New York (2015); Gallery Christian Andersen, Copenhagen (2015); Etablissement d'en Face, Brussels (2014); Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow (2013), Sotoso, Brussels (2013); and Transmission Gallery, Glasgow (2011). This year she will present a new work as part of Manifesta 11 in Zurich.

3. William Wegman, *New and Used Car Salesman*, 1973-74, Video, 1 minute 35 seconds.

William Wegman (U.S.A) works in various media including photography, painting, drawing, and video that often involve the assistance of a dog to play out conceptual frameworks. Since the 1970s Wegman's work has been exhibited in museums and galleries internationally. In addition to solo shows with Sonnabend Gallery in Paris and New York, Situation Gallery in London and Konrad Fisher Gallery in Dusseldorf, his work was included in Documenta V, featured in the Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, and a retrospective of his work was presented at Brooklyn Museum travelling to The Wexner Centre for the Arts.

Intermission

4. Kathryn Elkin, *Deleted Scenes*, 2016, SD video, 3 minutes 40 seconds.

Kathryn Elkin was born in Belfast, 1983. She graduated from Glasgow School of Art's Environmental Art course (2005) and received a Post Graduate Diploma in Art Writing from Goldsmiths College, London (2012). She was a Lux Associate

Appendix I: Exhibition/Programming Material

Artist (2012-2013) and Artist in Residence as part of the BBC's Artists in the Archive project (2014).

Her performance and video works concern roleplaying and improvising, alongside an ongoing interest in the 'out-take' and clowning 'on set'. The videos often resemble simplified versions of music videos and TV talk shows. Elkin's works typically manifest through citing a referent—such as an artist, a song, a writer, or performer—upon which she applies personal methods of translation, transcription and representation. She has an ongoing interest in shared 'cultural' memory (e.g. those produced by popular music, television and cinema) and the melding of this information to biographical memory.

5. Bruce Nauman, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, 1967-68, 16 mm film on video, silent, 10 minutes.

Bruce Nauman (U.S.A.) art practice incorporates a range of media including sculpture, photography, performance, video and film. His artworks frequently suggest an interest in the psychological and sensual experiences derived through often banal exercises executed by the viewer or the artist. Nauman's work is often derived from examining the role of the artist and language in communicating concepts. His work is represented in public and private collections worldwide and has been exhibited in prestigious institutions internationally. Nauman lives and works in Northern New Mexico.

6. Erica Eyres, *Clay Head*, 2015, HD video, 6 minute 49 seconds.

Using the same mirror that appears in the opening shot, I modeled the clay head after my own image. However, the face developed its own persona with the addition of distinguishing (though manufactured) eyes, teeth and wig; a sort of ventriloquist dummy whose mouth has been frozen shut. Much like the narrator, the clay head emerges from an anonymous, blank face. Although the prosthetic version is more developed than its interior, the face remains inanimate and only displays emotion with the aid of fake tears, administered by a pair of disembodied hands.

Erica Eyres lives and works in Glasgow, Scotland. Eyres graduated with a MFA from Glasgow School of Art in 2004, and is currently doing her PhD at Northumbria University, Newcastle. She has had solo exhibitions at CCA, Glasgow and the Kunsthau, Erfurt, with selected group exhibitions including PS1, New York; Plug In ICA, Winnipeg; and The Akureyri Art Museum, Akureyri, Iceland. Her work is in international collections including The Rubell Family Collection, Miami and The David Roberts Collection, London.

7. Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975, Video, 6 minutes 10 seconds.

Martha Rosler (U.S.A.) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Rosler works in several media with a focus of everyday life in the public sphere frequently through the examination of women's experience. Rosler's artworks are in the permanent collections of numerous international museums. Her work has been exhibited in prominent exhibitions including the 50th Venice Biennale; documentas 7 and 12, Kassel; several Whitney Biennials, New York and SkulpturProjekte Münster 07. She has taught at the Städelschule in Frankfurt and at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

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8. John Smith, *Associations*, 1975, 16mm film on video, 6 minutes 30 seconds.

John Smith (U.K.) works in film, video and installations developing a body of work that playfully explores and exposes the language of cinema, images and filmmaking. In the 1970s he was involved with the London Filmmakers' Co-operative. Smith's films are frequently shown in international film festivals and shown in a variety of international museums and galleries. He lives and works in London and is a Professor of Fine Art at University of East London.

Intermission

9. Levi Hanes, *Mirror in a Field*, 2015, SD video, 4 minutes 25 seconds.

Levi Hanes' (U.S.A.) art practice frequently explores the role of the artist in mediated culture drawing on modernist theories of the individual and materiality and Enlightenment concepts of beauty and the sublime with a critical orientation regarding the relationship of these theories in contemporary practice. Hanes is currently an Irish Research Scholar at Huston School of Film & Digital Media National University of Ireland Galway researching comedy in contemporary art for a practice-based Ph.D. From 2009-2010 he served as a Committee Member at Transmission Gallery after completing his MFA at the Glasgow School of Art in 2008. Hanes was the recipient of the Arts Council Ireland Visual Art Bursary 2013, Glasgow Visual Artists Award 2011, 2009, and Tramway, Glasgow MFA Residency 2008.

Recent solo exhibitions include 126 Gallery, Galway (forthcoming 2016); Intermedia Gallery, CCA Glasgow; and Tramway, Glasgow. Selected recent group shows are "Materiality" NUI Galway (2015); Torrance Art Museum, LA (2014); Ormston House, Limerick (2013); and Project Room, Glasgow (2012).

10. Mark Briggs, *A Speech Disfluency, Also Spelled A Speech Dysfluency*, 2013, SD video, 3 minutes 2 seconds.

A Speech Disfluency, Also Spelled A Speech Dysfluency plays with ideas of empathetic understanding in non-verbal communication. Taking as a point of departure from what the author Samuel R. Delany terms the "Fractured Subject;" the cognition and estrangement of the self against the "ideological mirage" of a centred subject relative to Western, patriarchal, normative and gendered identity models, the video translates an imagined altercation between mediated characters, playfully questioning conventions in physical intimate behaviour.

Mark Briggs (based in Glasgow) works within audio and video, sampling and appropriating found footage and recorded material to question ideas around intimacy and the personal in the public. Mark Briggs is part of the collective of artists *OaPaO* (Object and Punctuation and Object) and since 2012 he has produced *gas-tower.com*. *gas-tower.com* creates thematic video art episodes and periodical public events and original sound and video works. Selected recent exhibitions include *Fantom Cinema*, the Old hairdressers; Glasgow International, *Public Building*, Transmission Gallery; Glasgow, *Phenotypic Plasticity*, ReMap, Athens, *A Certain Lack of Coherence*; Porto and has screened works at MUMOK; Vienna, Moto; Berlin, Elaine MGK; Basel and Limoncello; London.

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11. Malcolm Le Grice, *After Lumiere (L' Arroseur Arrose)*, 16mm on video, 1974, 13 minutes 16 seconds.

Malcolm Le Grice (U.K.) is known for his work associated with the London Filmmakers' Co-operative exploring the material and construction of film, video and digital media including early computer works in the 1970s. He has shown in major international exhibitions and his films and videos are in various international collections. Le Grice has written critical and theoretical work including a history of experimental cinema 'Abstract Film and Beyond' (1977, Studio Vista and MIT). Le Grice is a Professor Emeritus of the University of the Arts London where he is a collaborating director with David Curtis of the British Artists Film and Video Study Collection.

12. John Baldessari, *Easel Painting 1972-73*, Super 8mm film on video, silent, 1 minute 26 seconds.

John Baldessari (U.S.A) works with a range of media including photography, sculpture and video. His artworks are often focused on visual interplays with commercial images and film tropes. Baldessari's early conceptual practice examined traditional aesthetic precepts of form, composition and colour through restrained gestures with the fabricated media and objects.

His work has been exhibited internationally in solo and group shows at various prestigious institutions. He has taught at Southwestern University, California; the University of California at San Diego; and the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia. Baldessari lives in Santa Monica, California.

13. Tom Varley, *Ex Machina*, 2016, Video, 3:30 Minutes.

Tom Varley (b. Keighley UK, 1985) is an artist working in a range of media, including film, video, painting and text. His work is concerned with the relationship between language and abstract, sensory experience - combining material to explore the ways that meaning is constructed and interpreted. Tom graduated from Glasgow School of Art in 2008, served on the Transmission Committee 2010-12 and is currently studying for an MFA at Goldsmiths College, London. Recent exhibitions and screenings include: Global Committee, Brooklyn; Ciné 13 Théâtre, Paris; ICA, London; and Glasgow Project Room. Tom is a 2015-16 associate of 'The Syllabus', Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridgeshire.

Appendix II: Publication

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Interdisciplinary publishing in the humanities & social sciences

**ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD**
INTERNATIONAL

Comedy and Critical Thought

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Edited by Iain MacKenzie, Fred Francis, and Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone

Part of the series Experiments/On the Political

Publication Date: Mar 2018

Pages 208

Media Studies Critical and Cultural Theory Media

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Appendix III: Conferences and Papers

Selected Conference Presentations

- May 2016 **Comedy and Critical Thought Conference**, University of Kent. "Comedic Agency and Contemporary Art Practice."
- Nov 2014 **Comedy and Society Conference**, Hull University. "The Active Agent: Comedy in Early 20th Century Avant-Garde Art."
- June 2014 **Creating Cultures in Culture, Media, and the Creative Industries Conference**, King's College London. "Plastic Media: Screen Theory and the Fine Arts."
- June 2014 **Image-Movement-Story Symposium**, University of Roehampton, London. *Shapes on Grey*, 2014 Art video screened.
- April 2014 **"Must Go On"** RUA/RED Gallery, Dublin. Artist discussion chair.

Appendix IV: Moving Image Link

Mirror in a Field, 2015, online access:

<https://vimeo.com/145859074>

Password: Gary