Quick—Nobody's Looking: Sidestepping Structures of Power in Contemporary Art through Wry Humour and Absurdist Institutional Critique

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This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Michael Lindeman

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Abstract

How might a contemporary artist trouble systems that prize compliance and quietly sideline dissent? Can criticality in contemporary art be sustained when collection and dissemination are reliant on platforms invented to favour aesthetic experience? This thesis examines specific aspects of the contemporary art world's inner workings as I have encountered them—through both participation and critique. It presents a synthesis of social, institutional, and self-critique.

The research begins with Marcel Duchamp's 1963 retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of Art and examines his influence on first-generation Californian conceptual artists. It also explores connections and contrasts with historical and contemporary conceptual artists in New York, Europe, and Australia.

The project surveys subversive approaches employed by seminal artists to bypass conventional museum models, social networks, art pedagogy, and tacit rules sanctioned by cultural gatekeepers. Building upon institutional critique from the 1970s and 1990s, it advocates for new methods of art critique that navigate institutional entanglements.

Research was conducted at international libraries, archives, and through witnessing actions by key artists. Hybrid creative-critical writing was employed to collapse the conventional dichotomy of artworks and the written component. The creative works of this thesis range from text-based finger paintings to performances with hired actors. Through a cocktail of absurd and wry humour, they confront the status quo of contemporary art and advance new frames of knowledge.

Big Boy Comes to Town: Duchamp in Pasadena

By Michael Lindeman

> *When the artist was still a pariah and a bum, the resistance of society to his way of life would bring about a meaningful explosion within himself, provided he had something to say. It may be that great art can only come out of resistance, out of a state of war which forces the artist into an attitude of dedication that is almost religious and does not need the acceptance of society.*
>
> —Henry J. Seldis, "Gamesmanship of Art and Life—Marcel Duchamp Style"[1]

This thesis emerged out of my curiosity into the impact Marcel Duchamp's 1963 retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of Art had on the first generation of Californian conceptual artists. It occurred to me that it was an amusing and apt paradox to coalesce Duchamp with the West Coast. While some decades earlier, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* (1913) dashed into a somewhat controversial limelight at New York's Armory Show, artists and institutions along the marginalised shores of California were staging their own metamorphosis, determined to leave the status of a cultural backwater behind.

Duchamp's additional rejection from the Society of Independent Artists under the pseudonym R. Mutt for an upturned urinal titled *Fountain* (1917), in my view, was the trigger for his "meaningful explosion within himself" and "resistance."[2] Duchamp's exclusion from the art world and self-imposed retreat into the quiet discipline of chess found an unlikely parallel in the omission of many first-generation Californian conceptual artists, who, like him, operated outside institutional favour early on in their careers.

When on assignment for *Time* magazine, photographer Julian Wasser captured many of the contemporary Californian artists at the opening of the then seventy-six-year-old

Duchamp's inaugural retrospective. Artists such as Edward Moses, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, Edward Kienholz, Robert Irwin, and Ed Ruscha (most of whom were the crew of the retrospective's curator, Walter Hopps), hammed it up at the late bloomer's opening. They were also joined by the young Andy Warhol, who happened to be in town for his second Los Angeles exhibition at the Ferus gallery.

Never satisfied with the official documentation of historical events—particularly the glitzy surface of the art world—I recognised the importance of looking past the Californian artists lucky enough to join the in-crowd, and toward those excluded from Duchamp's retrospective shindig. These "pariahs" and "bums" were outsiders, further marginalised from the institutions and social networks in the still developing West Coast art scene.[3] Nonetheless, they were individuals who embodied the aura of Duchamp in their creative enterprises. Fittingly, Duchamp's retrospective poster casts him as "a criminal still on the loose, on the outskirts of society."[4]

I was drawn to the artists in Duchamp's Californian orbit for their subversive spirit, time spent off the institutional guest list, and sardonic wit. Artists who sidestepped and poked fun at the establishment that propped up the status quo of visual culture. This type of "resistance" became visible when I researched Tom Marioni's offbeat parodies of conventional museum models, Ant Farm's do-it-yourself projects that skirted the edge of art and architecture, and the upending of orthodox art pedagogical modes by John Baldessari.[5] Throw Mike Kelley's later jitter-inducing rogue characters and taboo themes into the mix, and I had a punchy group of artists who in their own ways rode the ripple of Duchamp's readymades, irony, and social commentary.

As I deepened my understanding of Duchamp's Californian retrospective, I began to question how far his delayed but inevitable canonisation extended beyond the West Coast. Was Walter Hopps simply a curator fulfilling his role, or did he act as a kind of orchestrator, using Duchamp's retrospective to stage a deliberate clash of ideas shaped by the West Coast's emerging cultural identity? Did the show's impact mutate depending on geography, its meaning shifting from Pasadena to New York, from a sunlit suburb to the centre of the art market? These questions led me to examine overlaps and tensions between California-based artists circling Duchamp's gravitational field and their East Coast counterparts. Rather than settle into a coast-

to-coast comparison, however, I narrowed my focus to one New York-based figure in particular, German-born Hans Haacke, whose practice took Duchamp's legacy and turned it into a pointed critique of politics, power, and the institutions that mediate both art and society.

To further highlight Duchamp's sway beyond the marginalised conceptual artists tied to the Californian countercultural scene, I peppered my writing with Duchampian echoes refracted through European conceptualists such as Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, and some practitioners of Italy's Arte Povera. Not to overlook Australian artists and fellow Duchamp devotees, this pursuit was also punctuated with local flavours of parody, acerbic wit, and deadpan humour.

By surveying such a wide constellation of conceptual artists, my research propelled a contemporary pursuit of institutional critique that operated in a different register. Rather than proposing an entirely new strain of critique, the project demanded a recalibration—an explicit redefinition of what the institutions now are. In this context, the terms *institution* and *status quo* intersect to denote not only conventional museum models, but also the entrenched social networks, art pedagogy, and unwritten rules enforced by cultural gatekeepers.

As an artist compelled to agitate systems of inclusion and exclusion via text-based finger paintings on mirror, sculptures, installations, and performance elements, the trajectory and reception of Duchamp's eventual integration into art history in 1963 struck a chord. It resonated with my creative-critical hybrid writing and studio-led practice. Accordingly, this thesis took its cue from artists who, seduced by Duchamp's irreverent legacy, treated the art world's rulebook less as doctrine than malleable material—something to be intentionally annotated, misinterpreted, or gently unravelled.

[1] Henry J. Seldis, "Gamesmanship of Art and Life—Marcel Duchamp Style," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1963, https://www.duchamparchives.org/amd/archive/component/SBK2_1961-63_07/.
[2] Seldis, "Gamesmanship of Art and Life."
[3] Seldis, "Gamesmanship of Art and Life."
[4] Dickran Tashjian, "Nothing Left to Chance: Duchamp's First Retrospective," in *West Coast Duchamp*, ed. Bonnie Clearwater (Miami Beach, FL: Grassfield Press, 1991), 67.
[5] Seldis, "Gamesmanship of Art and Life."

Introduction

Bald, straight, white, mid-career and slightly overweight male artist seeking…

This thesis confronts the hand I have been dealt and interrogates the position I occupy within the Australian art world. At its core is a guiding question: How might a contemporary artist trouble systems that prize compliance and quietly sideline dissent?

While unconventional in structure and voice, the thesis remains within the conventions of the degree, adhering to its framework even as it pushes against its assumptions. Readers will find that my conceptual approach to methodology is woven throughout this introduction. In addition, a dedicated subsection on methodology outlines the practical mechanics of the research, such as the key texts that informed the writing style and the archives consulted during its development.

The research positions artistic practice not only as its method but also as its subject. Less an intervention than a critical observation and a complicit participation, it is an enquiry conducted by an ambivalent artist entangled in the very structures under critique. With measured irony, the project illuminates the machinery of the contemporary art world, fully aware that so-called avant-garde art often resembles a rebellious teenager: eager to push boundaries, yet rarely able to wriggle free from its cultural and political confines.

Momentum is drawn from the dialectical tension in the work of selected conceptual artists—a resistance to the power structures that trade in cultural and economic capital to shape discourse, determine careers, and assign value. In such a context, the research advances a strategy of friction that is not always outward facing; it can take the form of inward scrutiny, pivoting toward introspection that edges precariously close to self-sabotage. Or perhaps it's a form of radical sincerity. As Theodor W. Adorno argued, "Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become

uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber."[1] The strain of practice explored in this thesis embraces contradiction, engaging in a self-critical mode that strives to retain authenticity and political force within a compromised visual culture.

The ghost of Duchamp permeates the research as an exemplar of how an artist might critique the social armature that supports prevailing aesthetic standards. Yet his disillusionment eventually led to his withdrawal from artistic production, supposedly in favour of chess, disenchanted with an audience he believed lacked discernment.[2]

Rather than retreat, this thesis responds to such concerns by examining how a contemporary artist can maintain cultural traction while sidestepping dominant structures—the entangled systems of influence spanning museums, markets, art pedagogy, and the informal economies of taste sustained by peers and social media metrics.

The project follows a delimited yet heterogeneous trajectory, borrowing Roland Barthes's method of *drifting* across a constellation of thinkers.[3] These include Dave Hickey, Nicolas Bourriaud, John Dewey, Henri Bergson, Gershom Scholem, Immanuel Kant, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Bataille, Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Jean Baudrillard, and Theodor W. Adorno, among others.

These theoretical touchstones underpin chapters focused on five seminal artists and collectives: Tom Marioni, Ant Farm, John Baldessari, Mike Kelley, and Hans Haacke. A final, sixth chapter offers an analysis of my *Regression Paintings*, an ongoing series of finger paintings on mirror. Additional artists appear throughout, where appropriate. At times, they provide a conceptual synthesis within the written component or act as a stimulus for the studio-led work. At other points, they serve as a counterpoint.

I am aware of many other artists whose subversive and often humorous practices resonate with this research. Several employ text, performance, absurdity, or institutional critique as core strategies. However, given the scope of this thesis, an examination of their practices is beyond reach. These include Sean Landers, Scott

Reeder, Mel Bochner, Andrea Fraser, William Powhida, Martin Creed, David Shrigley, Maurizio Cattelan, Peter Tyndal, Piero Manzoni, Pino Pascali, and Ad Reinhardt (particularly his Art Comics). Ultimately, I focus on the most relevant examples—seminal artists whose work aligns with my intellectual framework, material and aesthetic decisions, and broader engagement with the art world.

Well, excuse me: Strategic circumvention and provocation of the status quo

This thesis, through both its written and studio components, presents models of art practice that sustain criticality while evading institutional practices in contemporary art. Among the forces that perpetuate these conventions are the internal mechanics of the museum model, entrenched social networks, and institutionalised art pedagogy. Added to this are the tacit rules enforced by cultural gatekeepers: museum directors, curators, assessment panels, arts writers, consultants, and—perhaps most tellingly—other artists.

Led by research and filtered through lived experience, the project employs creative practice to explore how knowledge can be felt and embodied. It addresses the dynamics of cultural exclusion while examining strategies for navigating the institutional architectures that sustain them. Duchamp's own history of rejection is closely aligned with many of the project's thematic concerns.[4]

One might ask what motivates a man like me to seek counsel from the seminal conceptual artists analysed in this thesis. At various points in their careers, these figures encountered related challenges. While the nature of those predicaments has shifted, the question of artistic relevance remains pressing. The prevailing mood in the Australian context is legible in recent domestic grant outcomes, the programming of international biennials, and cliquish institutional rhetoric.[5] Perhaps this milieu is articulated most directly in the words of the director of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art: "Today, if you are a white male artist, you are not so interesting... It doesn't mean to say you're not a great artist—I think it's more that this isn't what is relevant for people now. You have to think in a timely way."[6] Collectively, these factors

expose a cultural atmosphere in which visibility, identity, and ideology increasingly dictate artistic legitimacy.

This condition echoes what Adorno and philosopher Max Horkheimer described as the "culture industry," which continues to mediate cultural and political discourse through its systems of approval and exclusion.[7] I refrain from elaborating on my own haunted cultural heritage and traumatic family history—dismissed as irrelevant by the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art based on my race and gender. Instead, the research identifies strategic ways of confronting or outmanoeuvring prevailing codes of taste, judgment, and legitimacy.

In today's climate, discrimination is rarely disguised by the language of meritocracy. Pierre Bourdieu observed that "the most select groups prefer to avoid the brutality of discriminatory measures," instead opting to "combine the charms of the apparent absence of criteria… with the certainties of selection."[8] In short, the illusion of individuality masks a rigorous enforcement of group homogeneity. Even that simple courtesy—the pretence of fairness—seems to have been abandoned in contemporary times.

Naturally, the dominant ideological order—whether state-sponsored or market-driven—extends well beyond museums and their curators. The research-based and practice-led enquiry of this thesis examines how artists are increasingly coerced by the culture industry to build brands. In this environment, visibility becomes currency, with 'likes' and 'followers' functioning as metrics of legitimacy. Driven by desperation and performative narcissism, this race for validation turns the calculated pairing of some artists' work with canonised masterpieces on platforms like Instagram, for example, into little more than a clambering self-promotional hustle. Duchamp, with typical candour, once remarked: "I find that so stupid. There should not be any competition. I mean there is nothing to compete for except the money. It's just a form of disguised envy, don't you think?"[9]

As Adorno and Horkheimer suggested, the "refusal to play along" with dominant social logic—the way things are—is essential if art is to avoid becoming hollow and merely decorative.[10] In this spirit, the thesis identifies practices that adopt a posture, or what

Adorno and Horkheimer term “comportment,” toward existing cultural arrangements.[11]

However, such refusals are rarely without consequence. At times, the research frames exclusion as a social dimension of abjection, drawing on the theories of Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva. In this context, the artist becomes a perceived risk—a perception that conveniently justifies their marginalisation.[12] Positioned within this matrix, the thesis explores how certain artists and strategies weaponise the art world’s exclusionary logic, inhabiting and exaggerating its premises through calculated complicity.

A disarming wit: First-generation Californian conceptual art

Apart from a chapter on the German-born, New York-based conceptual artist Hans Haacke, which serves as a counterpoint, this thesis deliberately narrows its focus to a group of first-generation Californian conceptual artists. The practices of these figures emerged in proximity to the countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.[13] Their work, I argue, is a strain of institutional critique that is distinctively West Coast, characterised by irreverence, wit, and lo-fi ingenuity. The inclusion of the artists examined here is strategic. These artists—Marioni, Ant Farm, Baldessari, and Kelley—offered models of practice that destabilised dominant paradigms not through theoretical tautology but via absurdity, a do-it-yourself ethos, social engagement, and a deep suspicion of seriousness.[14]

Unlike their East Coast counterparts, who were characterised by a self-referential conceptualism that often traded in the aesthetics of redundancy and a closed system of logic, the West Coast artists researched here forged an alternate trajectory. Freed from the magnetism and authority of New York’s critical and market structures, many developed idiosyncratic forms of resistance. They eluded the rigidity of the art establishment by founding alternative spaces, adopting collaborative modes of production, and deploying humour as a means of disruption. As Baldessari expressed to successive waves of students while teaching at CalArts, “Art should not be boring.”[15]

His pedagogical and artistic legacies, alongside the convivial, prankish provocations of Marioni, and Ant Farm's spirit of improvisation, reflect a commitment to a disarming wit, serious in intent, unserious in tone.

The practices of the first-generation Californian conceptual artists were entangled with the counterculture but not reducible to it. They operated within a liminal zone—at once inside the institution and the counterculture, shifting between irony and sincerity, and negotiating art in relation to embodied experience. This research reframes their geographic, economic, and ideological marginality not as hindrance, but as a condition that fostered innovation via constraint. It allowed for a renegotiation of value and audience that is deeply relevant to my own concerns as an artist who is manoeuvring within dominant spheres of cultural production.

In this light, the omission of a deeper analysis into canonical New York figures such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and Sol LeWitt in the written component is deliberate. While foundational to conceptual art's historical scaffolding, their work often relies on a closed system of verification—a loop of language and meaning that leaves little room for affect, spontaneity, or social friction. The Californian variety, by contrast, bristles with contradiction and unpredictability. It is this strain, laced with provocation, laughter, and the occasional beer or joint—that resonates most closely with the way this thesis analyses, invents, and occasionally misbehaves.

Institutional critique, or critical mischief, or polite subversion, or smiling dissent

Drawing on the diverse—and at times absurd—tactics of first-generation Californian conceptual artists, this thesis develops a particular strain of institutional critique grounded in levity. While the label *institutional critique* may not be the most fitting rubric, at its core the project functions as a kind of amusement—or in-joke—designed to entertain your humble provocateur, while optimistically extending to a wider audience.[16] Other terms might better describe the tenor of this enquiry, such as *critical mischief*, *polite subversion*, or *smiling dissent*, but in any case, the label matters less than the attitude.

This attitude, of course, long predates the term institutional critique. Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) offers a proto example. By adding a debasing moustache and goatee to a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Duchamp mocked artistic authority and undercut both the aura of the canonical artwork and the academic institutions that uphold it.[17] Though his gesture was sparked on the rue de Rivoli, Paris, when he purchased the postcard reproduction in the early twentieth century, it nonetheless anticipated the evolving strategies artists have subsequently adopted in their responses to institutional dynamics.

To remain relevant amid shifting cultural and sociopolitical conditions, the project proposes that contemporary artists must develop customised tactics. Operating within an idiosyncratic visual culture such as Australia requires no less remodelling. This thesis proposes a modified phase of institutional critique that overlaps with earlier iterations emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, and the second wave of the 1980s and 1990s.[18]

While artists discussed at length in this thesis such as Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers—alongside others not discussed, including Michael Asher and Daniel Buren—offer significant insight into the first wave of institutional critique, this research diverges from their core motivations.[19] It does not aim to merely examine the systems of the museum with the intention of disruption. Instead, it questions how the assumptions and strategies of institutional critique—since its inception over fifty years ago—might evolve, now that many of its once-transgressive tactics no longer appear as radical or oppositional as they once did.[20] This recognition prompted a recalibration of the thesis: rather than proposing an entirely new strain of institutional critique—which may no longer be possible—it calls instead for a redefinition of what the institutions or structures of power now are. Only through this reappraisal can critique remain responsive to the expanding terrain of cultural power. If the institution has evolved, so too must the register of critique.

In contemporary times, it is worth asking whether raising one's voice remains the most effective way to be heard. Why not imagine a critique that sidesteps spectacle and avoids jostling for institutional attention altogether? As the sharper edges of institutional critique have been rounded by years of institutional embrace and

biennial-friendly packaging, this thesis seeks a model that traffics in humour, ambivalence, and carefully crafted mischief. Rather than shouting from the margins, it might murmur from within, inviting uncertainty, contradiction, and a knowing smirk. Its criticality may be no less pointed, but it arrives dressed in irony, nuance, and just enough charm to duck under the velvet rope while smiling.

Professor of art history John C. Welchman questions whether there is "something delusional in practices… so attached to deconstructing the apparatuses of the museum—mostly from within the institution—yet still believe themselves to be 'critical'… from the outside."[21] There seems to be truth to this observation, if not a touch of dark comedy. It is both naïve and ultimately ineffective to imagine that structural transformation can be achieved from within by exercising critique under the institution's vigilant eye. This thesis takes Welchman's provocation seriously, not by abandoning the institution altogether, but by questioning how critique might remodel its methods without relinquishing its role as a participatory strategy. Rather than imagining institutional overhaul through conceptual posturing, it shifts its critical emphasis—less toward dismantling the institution, and more in the direction of remodelling the coordinates of critique.

With this shift came a growing recognition in the research of a deeper paradox that had always underpinned institutional critique: that the critic and the institution are not opposites but are in fact co-dependent. Art historian Isabelle Graw argues that critique is itself an institutionalised practice.[22] Whether tolerated, absorbed, or redirected, critique is governed by the very apparatus it seeks to interrogate.

Acknowledging this predicament, the project advances an understated model of institutional critique—one that does not demand escape or dismantling, but instead inhabits the institution's shadow zones with irony, parody, and a sense of mirth as critical tools. Rather than declaring the death of critique, it quietly reinvents it from an adjacent location, sidestepping the heroic attitude of rupture for a type of unpretentious yet subversive participation that is socially aware, reflective, and purposefully oblique.

The thesis aims to cast its net wider than museums and galleries as institutions worth

critiquing, turning its attention to the wider mechanisms that produce and sustain artistic value. It defines institutions as something much broader—encompassing funding bodies, arts writers, consultants, art pedagogy, philanthropists, social media, self-proclaimed cultural tastemakers, and, crucially, artists themselves—agents omitted from earlier definitions. This broadened frame brings into view certain artists and other strategic actors—their social climbing, self-branding, interpersonal dynamics, and the acts through which they signal artistic legitimacy to others. Let's not pretend we haven't met them. Such emphasis arises from lived experience, drawn from close observation and sustained interaction with figures operating within the contemporary art world. In turn, the thesis treats artists and art world cognoscenti not as dispassionate observers but fully enmeshed players, adept at curating not only their work but also their personas, alliances, and eligibility for the next opportunity.

Relax—we're just havin' fun!

The thesis identifies a range of approaches used by selected seminal artists to lead audiences toward laughter, moments of bemusement, and sustained amusement as a gateway into art and ideas.

Author Sheri Klein recognises irony, paradox, pun, and satire as notable forms of humour.[23] However, it would be difficult to claim that the work of any artist examined in this project, or my own historical and recent studio-based works stemming from the research, falls neatly into any single category. Rather, the artists and works surveyed often reflect a complex confluence of several forms.

In my experience, humour in art is not as readily accepted in Australia as it is in other media, such as television and film. This research seeks to resist what appears to be a lingering tendency among critics and cultural gatekeepers to dismiss artists who use humour as mere jokers—or more troublingly, as the joke itself. Such an attitude is perhaps unsurprising, given the adversarial judgements on humour dating as far back as Plato.[24] Most philosophical discussions have unfortunately focused on laughter and humour as derisive or domineering, rather than on playfulness, wit, or comedy itself. In *Philebus*, Plato claims "when we laugh at the ridiculous aspects of our friends, the admixture of pleasure in our malice produces a mixture of pleasure and distress."[25]

The pleasure of laughter directed at others results in cruelty. Professor of philosophy John Morreall recognised in Aristotle a corresponding hostile sentiment on humour and laughter as "educated insolence."[26]

These ideas on humour emerging from Plato and Aristotle fit into superiority theory, which identifies humour as a mild form of aggression rooted in feeling superior.[27] However, it fails to explain forms of humour that are not based on ridicule. This thesis undertakes an exploration of humour's varied expressions in the work of selected conceptual artists: Marioni's offbeat, droll pranks; Ant Farm's absurd amalgamations; Baldessari's dry wit and irony; Mike Kelley's barbed jabs at authority; and even Haacke's brazen exposés of power structures. However, none of these artists—nor my own overlapping approach to humour—sit comfortably within the narrow frame of spiteful engagement proposed by superiority theory.

Rather than indulging in superiority or aggression, the thesis enlists humour to disarm and gently throw expectations off balance. This tactic is more closely aligned with theories of relief and incongruity. Relief theory, as articulated by Freud, proposes that humour serves as a socially acceptable outlet for repressed thoughts and feelings, particularly those directed toward institutions and people.[28] Many of the artists discussed in the project use absurdity, satire, and self-deprecation to expose power, and to navigate codes imposed by institutional authority. Their jokes do not punch down; rather, they unsettle facades through their perplexity.

Morreall elaborates on this point, arguing that "the artist and the humourist, if they are doing their job well, will surprise us."[29] It is this quality of surprise that binds the work in the research more closely to incongruity theory. Associated with Immanuel Kant, the theory suggests that humour emerges from a disjunction between expectation and outcome, producing a rupture that can amuse, or provoke contemplation.[30] With this in mind, the thesis seeks to uncover ideas and artworks that steer viewers into an uncertain position—caught between a knowing snigger and a cognitive jolt.

This welcomed ambiguity is a type of absurd humour that hovers ambivalently between sincerity and mischief—a space in which viewers are unsure whether to laugh

or nod earnestly. Such humour draws on a kind of perceptual and logical looseness that Henri Bergson equates with play: "to detach oneself from things and yet continue to perceive images, to break away from logic and yet continue to string together ideas, is to indulge in play."[31] This is not escapism, but a purposeful loosening that invites viewers to think differently without corralling them into seriousness.

This thesis also proposes a humour that functions not merely as a punchline but as a gesture of sly refusal positioned between complicity and critique. Many artists operate like jesters in the royal court, both inside and outside the institution. As author Nicola McCartney notes, "they thus straddle both the inside and outside of artworld infrastructures. This special liminal position is what allows them to poke fun at the 'court.'"[32]

Yet, as the research reveals, this position is not without risk. To attack the spectacle and exclusivity of the art world can marginalise artists as unserious or deviant. Humour in art must remain, as McCartney puts it, "somewhat outside of societal norms to retain its agency."[33] The thesis argues that a joke merging too neatly into institutional expectations risks becoming another product, consumed rather than allowed to unsettle. Still, for artists working at the threshold, humour can be a form of subversion that is trickier to censor because it never quite makes its position entirely known.

Barthes, Freud and other gonzo friends

The written component of this thesis unfolds across several chapters, blending absurd and deadpan humour with scholarly research through a hybrid creative-critical method. This method adopts a long-form journalistic structure, akin to New Journalism texts such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) by Hunter S. Thompson,[34] and *The Painted Word* (1975) by Tom Wolfe.[35] Thompson's brand of gonzo journalism, channelled through his alter ego Raoul Duke, critiques American counterculture—a shared interest with many first-generation Californian conceptual artists.[36] His use of irony, such as covering the National District Attorneys' Conference on Narcotics while on a serious binge, alongside his immersive reporting style, shapes the tone and structure of this thesis.

Author and critic James E. Caron captured a key tactic within this project when describing Thompson's shift from clear description "into the realm of the wildly exaggerated, the fantastic, and the absurd, but always with a matter-of-fact air which makes the reader wonder just what is true and what is not."[37] My writing, and by extension the studio work, walks a tightrope, merging absurd thoughts with banal facts, all delivered in a deadpan manner reminiscent of Thompson's technique.

While Thompson inserts himself directly into the story, *The Painted Word* provides a contrasting model. Wolfe's more distanced approach relies on analogy, presenting the art world through the eyes of a bemused outsider. He described its social and political manoeuvres as a ritual: "The Boho Dance" and "The Consummation" between the artist and the culturati.[38]

Wayne Koestenbaum's *My 1980s & Other Essays* (2013) serves as a close structural model. His essays combine criticism and personal voice in a witty, engaging style. This interplay of research and lived experience informs the thesis, offering a way to blur boundaries between genres.

Koestenbaum also admired Roland Barthes (1915–1980), whose work further influences this thesis. As he wrote, "Barthes had a lifelong mission, a messianic thread that connects his disparate ventures into the analysis of fashions, texts, and temperaments: the fight against received wisdom, obviousness, stereotype."[39] In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), Barthes embraced fragmentation, favouring an agile narrative form. This approach informs both the writing and studio-led research of the thesis. Barthes referenced "drifting," "drift," and "the drift," capturing a freedom to move fluidly across binaries.[40] Similarly, art critic Dave Hickey described his own cultural engagement as an immersion in "the ordinary stuff—the ongoing texture of the drift,"—a notion that aligns with the associative mode of thinking and making in the thesis. [41]

Spanning the chapters and studio work, this mode is adapted through an intentional kind of disoriented and comical wayfaring, drifting between spaces. In part, it is a method of "notebooking"—a preparatory form of collecting information by chance, which remains an important part of the process.[42]

Woven through the project is a psychoanalytic thread. Alongside Freud's essays on repression and regression, his paper "The Uncanny" (1919) also guides the writing. Freud claimed, "fiction presents more opportunities for creating uncanny feelings than are possible in real life."[43] He further argued that the writer

> can increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality, by bringing about events which never or very rarely happen in fact. In doing this he takes advantage, as it were, of our supposedly surmounted superstitiousness; he deceives us by promising to give us the sober truth, and then after all oversteps the bounds of possibility.[44]

Just as Freud saw fiction's power to amplify effect, this thesis, through creative-critical writing, unsettles and entertains by oscillating between sincerity and exaggeration. Intermittent farcical narratives extend the written component beyond a typical practice-led thesis, but this expansion is essential for injecting animation and absurdity into the analysis of selected artists, artworks, and the studio practice shaped by the research. These narratives, drawn from autobiographical fiction, feature Michael Lindeman personas engaging with characters inspired by real-life encounters both within and beyond the sphere of visual culture.

The fictional characters often emerge from reflections on the artists and theorists studied, as well as encounters with awkward or prickly figures from everyday life. They embody an intentionally absurd, humorous, and misunderstood nature. By incorporating them into both the written and studio components, the thesis blurs the line between scholarly investigation and creative practice, offering a distinctive interplay of personal experience and critical enquiry.

Methodology

As noted earlier, the research methods and structure of this thesis are deliberately designed to move beyond the limitations of staid scholarly enquiry. It breaks from formulaic approaches to writing about art, contributing instead through a more dynamic and engaged mode of critique. As Hazel Smith noted, "a sophisticated writer will tend to play with the conventions a little to make the text a more enticing 'read.'"[45] By intermingling the studio-led practice with the written component, the thesis

actively engages with the tension between the two.

The written component operates as an artwork, both informing and echoing the wry humour and idiosyncrasies of the studio practice. Blending quotidian vernacular with formal language, it lures the reader into a playful yet pointed critique of the institutional seriousness that pervades the contemporary art world. Drawing on satire and situational irony, the writing sets the absurdity of pranks and jokes against the pretensions of the art establishment.

Each creative-critical chapter animates discussions primarily centred on seminal Californian conceptual artists. Examining specific artworks and their contexts, the writing uses ekphrasis among other strategies.

The thesis integrates art criticism with fictional expression—a method that also informs the studio practice. At times adopting a conversational, stream-of-consciousness, autobiographical style, the writing parodies the journalistic format with comical subheadings and a classic newspaper font. Endnotes replace footnotes to maintain reading flow. While borrowing the aesthetic of print media, the writing sidesteps nostalgia by presenting it in the digital format that rendered print obsolete. The journalistic structure also enables further games, such as a recurring author portrait. Each 'article' features an image of a different Michael Lindeman, sourced during Google image search procrastination sessions. These proxy writers often provide licence to play the buffoon. Beyond a surface strategy to hold attention, the adoption of multiple fictional identities expresses a deeper urge to dodge the discomfort of self-disclosure while still circling around it. This reflex speaks to a broader strategy in the studio practice, bypassing the competitive pressures of a visual culture in which artists are compelled to vie for attention.

Between chapters, a recurring critical voice appears: Professor Charles Olstink, commissioned to review Lindeman's long-form essays. His motivations seem less scholarly than opportunistic, driven by generous remuneration and career aspirations.

Olstink's short reviews summarise each chapter and offer provocative glimpses of what lies ahead. He is a metafictional character, loosely based on a narcissistic man about

town. Although his credentials are questionable, his influence on the local art scene persists, thanks largely to an irresistible charisma and a love of hearing himself speak.

While Olstink adds an irreverent internal layer, the thesis also draws on more conventional research methods. Field research included visits to archives, libraries, and studios in California, New York, and Italy, helping to address gaps in the understanding of seminal conceptual artists and movements. Access to the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) sparked imaginative contributions. At BAMPFA, I encountered a series of ludicrous letters by Marioni, written to curators, deans, and collectors intended to bypass institutional barriers. One letter prompted a confused reply from the CalArts dean, questioning how Marioni had come to believe he was exhibiting in the school's gallery. Such material provided factual content, insights into Marioni's critical strategies, and witty stimulus for the project.

Also, at BAMPFA, I examined the Ant Farm collective's archives with founding member Curtis Schreier. The collection—containing proposals, manifestos, ephemera, renderings, and press clippings—offered a comprehensive view of Ant Farm's role in 1960s and 1970s Californian conceptualism. Schreier's unguarded commentary deepened my understanding of his practice and motivations.

In San Francisco, I met with both Chip Lord—another Ant Farm founder—and Marioni. Multiple visits to Marioni's studio, along with lunch at Henry's Huan Chinese restaurant (he likes medium spice), revealed aspects of his deadpan humour and performative strategies. Viewing Marioni's Society of Independent Artists (SIA) weekly *action* provided further insight into the live nature of his work. At Chip Lord's studio—a combined office and archive—I observed the thorough planning and idea synthesis typical of Ant Farm's countercultural approach.

In Los Angeles, research at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) Balch Art Research Library informed chapters on John Baldessari and Mike Kelley. I also consulted an original catalogue from Duchamp's 1963 retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of Art, enriching the analysis of his influence.

At the MoMA Library and Archives in New York, I examined materials on Joseph

Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, Andrea Fraser, Hans Haacke, Ian Burn, and a full edition of *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*. Research at the Whitney Museum's Bulwark Library included audio recordings of Haacke in the *Seminar with Artists* series, shedding light on his critiques of corporate influence. At the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum: Lewis Kachur records, I accessed files related to Haacke's cancelled 1971 exhibition under then director Thomas M. Messer.

In Italy, research at institutions such as Castello di Rivoli Research Institute (CRRI), Fondazione Paolini in Turin, and MUSEION Bibliothek in Bolzano contributed to content on Arte Povera, the Italian counterpart to conceptual art.

Collectively, these fieldwork experiences sharpened critical questions, introduced unexpected crosscurrents, and directly informed the conceptual and aesthetic directions of the thesis. They also underscored the importance of working within—and in opposition to—institutional frameworks, a recurring theme in both the written and studio components.

As I moved through this field of enquiry, my theoretical understanding deepened, yielding new insights. The project unfolds iteratively, functioning as a feedback loop circulating through examples of my past studio works, research, and new creative developments. The writing blends everyday vernacular with historical and contemporary art references, alongside key theorists and philosophers, reflecting a commitment to rigour and accessibility.

The studio-led practice culminates in several interconnected bodies of work. These include a custom LED changeable letter sign paired with rectified readymade sculptures; a suite of humorous hand-painted text works and manifestos on linen; and a series of finger paintings on mirror. Site-specific actions and props, based on fictional characters from the written component, are performed by hired actors in uncanny cameo roles in the exhibition for examination. These works are underpinned by shared conceptual threads, including an engagement with the art world's social networks, ironic proposals for art pedagogy and therapy, and the interrogation of tacit rules enforced by cultural gatekeepers.

Chapter outline

Chapter 1, "Drinking and driving: Tom Marioni takes a detour down new conceptual side streets," introduces the Californian conceptual artist as a brazen participant in the Bay Area art scene. This chapter distinguishes his early absurd performance and sculpture practice from that of the East Coast conceptual artists of New York, drawing on perspectives from author Tony Godfrey, artist Joseph Kosuth, and Professor Lita Ming.

The 'article' then discusses both the benefits endowed to, and the limitations placed on, West Coast conceptual artists. These include their use of do-it-yourself strategies, such as Marioni's Museum of Conceptual Art, and his canny modes of critique that operated in parallel to institutions rather than in overt opposition. Some of these offbeat projects are illuminated through research at the Steven Leiber Conceptual Art Study Center, BAMPFA, and various California archives.

Next, the chapter progresses to a speculation on overlaps between Marioni and Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers, focusing on their shared engagement with museums. This discussion draws on French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and Duchamp's 1957 lecture "The Creative Act." Marioni's performance-based works are then linked to the warm and humorous gestures of Australian artist Jane Polkinghorne. In addition, my own unconventional educative offerings are considered through the prism of the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, John Dewey.

My awkward endeavours are then contrasted with Marioni's cunning pranks, which, in turn, inspire absurd strategies for sidestepping cultural etiquette in the pursuit of having one's practice included despite the odds. Rejection and failure are further explored through additional works by Marioni and me, as well as Australian artist Aleks Danko's jocular methods of repurposing unsuccessful activities, framed by Roland Barthes's ideas on success and failure. The 'article' concludes by recognising Marioni's strategies for creating opportunities and securing his artistic legacy.

Chapter 2, "Visionary ideas or futile stoner pranks? The fun and cultural critique of

Ant Farm," launches with an absurd self-diagnosis for obsessive compulsive disorder, triggered by an overload of junk mail in my email accounts. Seeking tactics for dealing with this conundrum, the chapter looks to the Californian collective Ant Farm. Research at BAMPFA and other archival sources facilitates findings on Ant Farm's countercultural parodies of hacking techniques.

Examining seminal works by the group, the 'article' explores their promotional strategies, unconventional materials, and makeshift motivations, set against the backdrop of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and American architect, theorist, and inventor R. Buckminster Fuller. Woven throughout are samples of my own historical works, which share a similar incongruity and absurdity to Ant Farm's eccentric undertakings. These are supported by Immanuel Kant's ideas on the sources of laughter.

Attention then moves to Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan's visionary ideas on eliminating hierarchy in education through technology, alongside my founding of the Agitated Citizens Against Spam Association. Further seminal works of cultural assessment and nostalgia by Ant Farm are subsequently discussed, framed by philosopher Walter Benjamin's notion of redemption. Finally, the chapter integrates an examination of additional works that hover between comical absurdity and a probing commentary on artistic discernment. These include projects by Ant Farm, Aleks Danko, and my own early Duchampian sculptures, which aim to ironically hack institutionalised modes of knowledge dissemination.

Chapter 3, "How to play your own game: The Baldessari masterclass," examines approaches in tackling geographic, aesthetic and social marginalisation, including French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a type of voluntary isolation. The 'article' then discusses John Baldessari's style of art pedagogy, considers his wide-ranging education, teaching experiences, and interest in Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. It aligns these concerns with methods I have introduced to a variety of sometimes reluctant students. Several examples of Baldessari's early ironic works, which mock uninspired procedures of art pedagogy, are considered in parallel to my own chance encounters with people whom I introduce to the visual art world. Here, the chapter refers to French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's ideas on societal codes and rules of communication, together with

Baldessari's boredom toward them.

An iterative cycle of exclusion, failure and irony follows in the 'article' by way of a juxtaposition between more of Baldessari's early works and my own paintings and drawings. It then freely evolves into a contemplation of an *Artworld Success Seminar* I have developed alongside Australian artist Bonita Ely's *Murray River Punch* performances. The chapter culminates in an assessment of Baldessari's countermoves, which aggravate the machinations of power and authority, while drawing on French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault's notions of the control of discourse.

Chapter 4, "Mike Kelley is a pants shitter & proud," acts as a conduit between the first-generation Californian artists and a successive wave of artists. The chapter contrasts Kelley's practice—an alternative mode of unsettling dissonance—with that of other artists explored in the thesis. Concepts of the abject and abjection are introduced through references to pants shitting, as well as the writings of French philosopher Georges Bataille and Bulgarian theorist Julia Kristeva. The chapter explores the social dimension of abjection as both excruciating and bemusing, revealing the unsettling humour embodied in such experiences.

The 'article' also examines Kelley's manoeuvrings via fictional narratives, the myths of Joseph Beuys, and my own musings on more local spurious tales shared by peers. It proceeds to convey a set of experiences and feelings toward certain individuals who display an inflated sense of power and authority, aligning these with Kelley's critique of social institutions such as the family, education, and religion, which manifests as blunt loathing. Attention then moves to failure and low culture as both subject and aesthetic strategy in Kelley's practice. It also considers my psychotherapist's neglect of his duty of care, along with Sigmund Freud's writing on the uncanny as something once familiar that was repressed and has since re-emerged.

Chapter 5, "Hans Haacke's hardcore muckraking," was written 'on assignment' in New York City. The chapter draws on philosopher Karl Marx's theories on the antithetical poles of capitalism to guide an edgy focus on wealth and poverty in the city, which pervades findings on the German-born, New York-based conceptual artist Hans Haacke. The piece discloses Haacke's institutional critique as searing and

uncompromising, in contrast to the artists discussed previously. It also acknowledges the influence of American writer and theorist Jack Burnham, and explores the physical, biological, and social systems into which Haacke's projects can be divided.

My own experiences with social systems in New York are braided throughout the chapter, reporting on various confronting interactions overlaid with French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard's writing on the phenomenon. This tense atmosphere imbues the writing as I visit various archives and study centres, which operate as refuge and critical sources on Haacke's provocative practice. Findings are correlated with several of my historical installation works.

The long-form 'article' continues to drift from Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy's general systems theory to French philosopher Henri Bergson's essay on laughter. This discussion considers Haacke's biological transgressions with animals, which, in the museum context, demonstrate a type of absurd humour articulated by author Nicholas Holm.

The focus then turns to an overlap between Haacke's strategies and my own for veiling identity, choosing instead to prioritise the artwork itself, supported by Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde's sentiments on masks enabling truth. The chapter phases out with the assistance of German philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas, who helps articulate another squabble I found myself in with a New Yorker. Finally, it concludes by referencing German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht's influence on shaping Haacke's blunt approach to institutional critique.

Chapter 6, "Regression Paintings: The cerebral vs visceral blockbuster," uses the analogy of a prize fighter to describe the varying experiences and influences on my continuing series of text and finger painting on mirror. The 'article' sets out the aim of the *Regression Paintings*—to sidestep what is deemed fashionable, acceptable, or valuable—and proposes a mode of nuance inspired by American writer Wayne Koestenbaum and French theorist and critic Roland Barthes. However, veiled in the declaration of is a proposition for a type of play and refuge supported by Professor John Morreall and writer Nicola McCartney.

To elucidate the encounter of looking at and reading the paintings on mirror, the discussion subsequently shifts to the realm of phenomenology. It describes a periphery of partial obscurity within the perceptual field, supported by the work of Austrian German philosopher Edmund Husserl and the lived, embodied experience recognised by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The analysis also integrates reference to Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings*.

The chapter then moves to defend the fun and amusement embedded in the *Regression Paintings*, supported by German philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's assessment of the financial and ideological forces of the culture industry. This is followed by a juxtaposition of my mirror paintings with a seminal mirror work by Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn. His piece undermines its reflective variable potential in favour of conceptual austerity. Unity is later established with my work through a deliberation on Burn's late *Value Added Landscape* series.

The writing proceeds with what seems like an inevitable enterprise into the realm of humour. It cites French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to advocate for a levity that builds connection while still poking fun. The writing includes discussions on pertinent artists such as Australian Aleks Danko, with a witty text-based mirror work, as well as a reverse-stencil, word-based painting by American Ed Ruscha. Finally, the chapter draws on Michel Foucault's insight that discourse is a contested site of power. It proposes that the *Regression Paintings* seize this space to assert a counterpoint to institutionalised systems of taste and authority.

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, "Art, Society, Aesthetics," in *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 2.
[2] Duchamp stated that he withdrew from artmaking to avoid becoming a socially integrated artist, lamenting the uncritical demand for new work by a growing, indiscriminate public and warning that it encouraged mediocrity and trend-driven production. See Seldis, "Gamesmanship of Art and Life—Marcel Duchamp Style."
[3] French literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician Roland Barthes referred to the notion of the "drift" throughout his essays. See Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Hamilton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
[4] Duchamp's now-famous *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* was rejected by the Salon des Indépendants in 1912—not by strangers, but via his own brothers, painter Jacques Villon and sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon, who were tasked with breaking the news. See David W. Galenson, "You Cannot Be Serious: The Conceptual Innovator as Trickster," in *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6–7, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=461135
[5] As a snippet of the status quo in Australian arts funding please refer to the grants awarded to visual arts mingled throughout all artforms in the "Arts Projects for Individuals" category (decision date 26.11.24) administered by Creative Australia. One need not research too deeply to find startling statistics on prizes, funding, appointments to positions of power etc. in recent years across the entire Australian cultural sector. Addressing historical exclusion by implementing exclusion seems a somewhat paradoxical concept to me. See Creative Australia, "Investment and Development: Awarded Grants," *Creative Australia*, accessed December 4, 2024, https://creative.gov.au/investment-and-development/awarded-grants/. Careful not to fall from your chair.
[6] Suzanne Cotter quoted in John McDonald, "Let's Think Twice before We Exclude White Male Artists from Our Galleries," Sydney Morning Herald, March 11, 2022, https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/small-art-for-narrow-minds-is-what-happens-when-identity-politics-take-precedence-20220225-p59znp.html.
[7] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 114.
[8] Pierre Bourdieu, "Reconversion Strategies," in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 162.
[9] Calvin Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews*, ed. Paul Chan (Brooklyn, NY: Badlands Unlimited, 2013), 41.
[10] Theodor W. Adorno, "Art, Society, Aesthetics," in *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2002; orig. pub. 1970), 12.
[11] Adorno, "Art, Society, Aesthetics," 12.
[12] Rina Arya, "Social Abjection," in *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 7.
[13] The American counterculture was a loosely connected movement that emerged in the 1950s, blending political dissent, artistic experimentation, and a rejection of mainstream consumer values. Simultaneously reliant on and resistant to the capitalist systems it critiqued, it used satire, spectacle, and media-savvy protest to

blur the line between rebellion and participation. See Christopher Gair, "Introduction," in *The American Counterculture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 1–14.
[14] Although Kelley was not a first-generation Californian conceptual artist, he occupies a key position as a conduit between CalArts, where he studied under John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, Michael Asher, and David Askevold, and more recent generations of Californian conceptual artists. See Rainald Schumacher, "The Janitor Who Keeps House in Our Soul: Notes on Mike Kelley," in *Mike Kelley*, ed. Ingvild Goetz, Karsten Löckemann, and Stephan Urbaschek (Hamburg: Kunstverlag Ingvild Goetz, 2008), 35.
[15] Luca Beatrice, "John Baldessari," in *Los Angeles State of Mind* (Milano: Skira Editore, 2021), 37.
[16] American artist Andrea Fraser suggests that the term *institutional critique* may have first been used by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh or Craig Owens, under whom she studied. It may also have circulated among her peers at the School of Visual Arts or the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. Fraser was likely the first to commit the phrase to print in her 1985 essay on artist Louise Lawler. See Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFly Books, 2009),126–127.
[17] See Calvin Tompkins, *Duchamp, A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996), 221–222.
[18] Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, preface to *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFly Books, 2009), xv.
[19] John C. Welchman, introduction to *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP-Ringier, 2006), 11.
[20] Welchman, 12.
[21] Welchman, 13–14.
[22] Isabelle Graw, "Beyond Institutional Critique: The Institution Inside Ourselves," in *Institutional Critique and After*, 141.
[23] Sheri Klein, "Before the Laughter," in *Art and Laughter* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 9.
[24] John Morreall, "Humor's Bad Reputation," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 10–13.
[25] Plato, *Philebus*, trans. J.C.B. Gosling (London: Oxford University Press, Ely House, 1975), 50.
[26] Morreall, "Humor's Bad Reputation," 10–13.
[27] Chrisoula Lionis, "Laughing in an Emergency: Weaponising Humour in Contemporary Art," in *Comedy in Crises: Weaponising Humour in Contemporary Art* (Cham: Springer International, 2023), 5, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18961-6.
[28] Lionis, 5.
[29] John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 91.
[30] Morreall, 66.
[31] Henri Bergson, "The Comic in Character," in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1911), 96.

[32] Nicola McCartney, "The Significance of Authorial 'Play Spaces' for Seriously Funny Art," in *Comedy in Crises: Weaponising Humour in Contemporary Art*, ed. Chrisoula Lionis (Cham: Springer International, 2023), 102, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18961-6.
[33] McCartney, 150.
[34] Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by Raoul Duke* (London: Paladin, 1972).
[35] Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).
[36] Constance M. Lewallen and Karen Moss, *State of Mind: New California Art circa 1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1.
[37] James E. Caron, "Hunter S. Thompson's 'Gonzo' Journalism and the Tall Tale Tradition in America," *Studies in Popular Culture* 8, no.1 (1985): 3, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23412909.
[38] Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, 15.
[39] Wayne Koestenbaum, *My 1980s & Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 51.
[40] See Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.
[41] Dave Hickey, "Unbreak My Heart, An Overture," in *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy*, ed. Gary Kornblau (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997), 10.
[42] Safdar Ahmed, "Notebooking," in *A to Z of Creative Writing Methods: Knowing, Doing, Practicing and Creating*, ed. Deborah Wardle, Julienne van Loon, Stayci Taylor, Francesca Rendle-Short, Peta Murray and David Carlin (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 117–119.
[43] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro-Sciences* 11, no. 2 (2018): 98, https://www.crossingdialogues.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Ms-E18-02.pdf.
[44] Freud, 98.
[45] Hazel Smith, "Creative Hybrids," in *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, ed. Steven Earnshaw (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 332.

Drinking and driving: Tom Marioni takes a detour down new conceptual side streets

By Michael Lindeman

When learning about certain works across Tom Marioni's practice I often find myself doing a double take. I ask myself, "Is this guy serious?" This is usually followed by a knowing snigger at what I then interpret as an ingrained yet camouflaged mockery of the contemporary art system in his work. My initial disbelief shifts into cheer when I realise Marioni could be a witty touchstone for my own practice, an artist who parodies the conventional museum model and its varied adjacent participants. For some reason, Marioni's work reminds me of the ridiculous attempts by drunk drivers to swindle the cops on the reality TV show *RBT*.[1] It typically features classic scenes of drivers winding down their window to reveal blazing red eyes and then claim they had only one drink, two hours ago. The offender, nonetheless, maintains a deadpan face and an innocent demeanour, and frustrates the police officer with feeble bids at blowing into the breathalyser.[2]

Figure 1. *Portrait of Tom Marioni*, 2009. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

Born in Cincinnati in 1937 and relocating to San Francisco in 1959, it's safe to say that

Marioni became part of the conceptual furniture on the Bay Area art scene.[3] As a founding contributor to the first-generation Californian conceptual artists, it seems his practice fell loosely into the area of institutional critique, a familiar device used by West Coast artists. Works such as John Baldessari's *Tips for Artists Who Want To Sell* (1966–1968) and Ed Rusha's *Museum on Fire* (1968) leap to mind. However, there was something peculiar about Marioni's early performance and sculpture; it was not a coherent fit with the more recognised conceptualists of the 1960s, particularly artists from New York. Yet what is it about Marioni's practice that distinguished it from his contemporaries on the East Coast?

The East vs West Coast shootout

New York's brand of Conceptual Art was fundamentally a workshop for testing how ideas hitch a ride on images and words. For Joseph Kosuth (b. 1945) and his peers, art was stripped of sentiment, boiled to pure meaning, and served cold as facts. Author Tony Godfrey noted that other conceptual artists perceived this as "tedious and self-indulgent."[4] Kosuth outlined his logic in the key 1969 essay "Art after Philosophy" in this way: "What art has in common with logic and mathematics is that it is a tautology; i.e. the 'art idea' (or 'work') and art are the same and can be appreciated as art without going outside the context of art for verification."[5] Kosuth contended that the subjective interpretation of art is inconsequential. It seems that attaching personal, already known meanings to art was irrelevant to him; put differently, that values are located on the periphery of art's conditions. Godfrey referred to this almost purely language-based art as "hardcore Conceptual Art."[6] Marioni steered away from this kind of self-referential exploration of ideas and understanding, where an artist's commentary on their work merely reiterates itself without offering new insights. Instead, I get the impression he infused his work with wit, absurdity, and a warm yet dynamic variation—more like hardcore fun. Art historian Leta Ming proposed that Marioni's work was "a kind of anti-New York art, a deliberate attempt at desacralizing the high seriousness that characterized the East Coast avant-garde scene."[7]

Figure 2. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965.
Wood folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of "chair," dimensions variable.

When viewed side by side, New York conceptualism reveals itself as quite frosty, in contrast with first-generation Californian conceptualists such as Marioni. Kosuth's canonised work *One and Three Chairs* (1965), for example, illustrates an idea as the work. The piece consists of three parts presented to the viewer: a simple wooden folding chair, a photograph of the chair, and a printed dictionary definition of the word *chair*. However, it strikes me that the work is not any of these three parts. The work is the question: What is a chair? In what way do we represent this object? Thus, what is art?[8] In a 1969 article in *Studio International*, Kosuth defined conceptual art as follows: "The 'purest' definition of conceptual art would be that it is inquiry into the foundations of the concept of 'art,' as it has come to mean."[9] He prefaced this with "as an advocate (through works of art and conversation) of a particular kind of art best described as 'Conceptual' I have become increasingly concerned by the nearly arbitrary application of this term to an assortment of art interests—many of which I would never want to be connected with, and logically shouldn't be."[10]

To my mind, Kosuth appeared somewhat territorial about the term *conceptual*, as if it were trademarked—by him. I don't think artists such as Marioni would have cared much about creating such prosaic art, which had little scope for wit and humour. Materials and objects, used as props or artworks in themselves, can be representational of whatever an artist chooses and in any context. Kosuth's definition of 'pure' conceptual art seems much too narrow for artists or audiences to feel genuinely compelled. It appears to be thoroughly engrossed in its own self-importance, overlooking the broader framework or external perspectives. There's no mischief in it, and it mistakes austerity for depth.

As many of the first-generation Californian conceptual artists did, Marioni swerved around the laborious and resolute logic of the theoretical conceptual art from New York, although this move was not without its price. He opted for a type of humour that could be experienced as offbeat and droll, albeit undervalued. To quote Godfrey again, "Those who supported the most theoretical tendencies in conceptual art have remained the most vocal, with the result that much that was poetic, witty or humorous has been, in comparison, underrated and neglected."[11]

Marioni hotwires conceptual art

How did Marioni and his West Coast contemporaries grapple with being overshadowed? How did they bypass the influence of the conceptual artists, gatekeepers, and art market back East?[12] Rather than asking for permission to join the conceptual art conversation, Marioni and his peers stole the conceptual vehicle of art itself, steering it toward a more irreverent and playful destination. Fuelled by a high-octane shameless attitude and a do-it-yourself ethos, I have a feeling they thrived on the artistic freedom made available via an exclusion from the cultural hub of Manhattan.

As Italian curator Luca Beatrice observed, "Art in Los Angeles is made for pleasure and often for fun; rules about what's 'in' or 'out' are not so strict, the scope is very democratic, whereas in New York talk is always about investment, economics, finance and the system."[13] After all, there was no market, criticism or interest attached to Californian artists in the mid 1960s and early 1970s, as artist Ed Moses (1926–2018) explained: "California was raw, no one gave a shit out here, about the artists, or what they were doing."[14] Affordable real estate, abundant light, and space to work and park—this was the upside of being overlooked. It enabled them to develop their customised strain of conceptual art out of the spotlight, with limited wear and tear on the wallet. It was an atmosphere enriched by what American art critic Dave Hickey described as "the sweet emptiness of cool, bright rooms and the sinister glamour of summer sunsets."[15]

Museum of Conceptual Art

It seems to me that California's detachment from the criticism and art market constraints of New York allowed Marioni to develop his own brand of fun-loving, irreverent conceptual art. He opted not to engage in the self-referential scrutiny of idea and perception; rather, his work demonstrated an encounter with social interplay. Supporting this engaging approach, in 1970 Marioni founded the Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA), San Francisco, which operated until 1984.[16] While artists in New York and Europe had been working in the field of conceptual art since the mid 1960s, it was considered progressive in Northern California at the time. MOCA presented conceptual, sound, and performance art.

Figure 3. Tom Marioni, Entrance to MOCA, 1975.

Marioni's newly established platform saw him invite the audience to experience both his work and the work of others as it was created.[17] While he created a do-it-yourself environment to realise his performance works, it appears that the etiquette and constraints of the museum were areas of focus, or perhaps resistance, for Marioni's enquiring lampoonery. From the early stages he invited artists such as Bruce Nauman (b. 1941), Barbara Smith (b. 1931), Terry Fox (1943–2008), and Vito Acconci (1940–2017) to realise projects. At the time, they were making challenging performance-based works that were a mismatch with—or simply ignored by—conventional exhibition spaces. American art historian and curator Kristine Stiles described Marioni's strategy, noting that "he astutely framed the context of their performances with the word 'museum,' endowing MOCA, and the art shown in it, with historical significance."[18]

Stiles hinted at a relevant feature of both the function of MOCA and Marioni's work more broadly, a tendency that separated his work from some artists working in the realm of institutional critique. Marioni chose a backroad detour to bypass the congestion of institutional authority, rather than engaging in an overt critique or attack. Alternatively, he sought to both parody and piggyback on the modes of power that museums retained, for himself and other artist peers, as Stiles suggested in her assessment of MOCA. By assigning MOCA a position in the art scene of San Francisco, Marioni seized a certain cachet, and cultivated an exhibition space that agitated systems of inclusion and exclusion. MOCA also permitted Marioni to use a humour that harnessed an alternative register, misaligned with the status quo.[19]

Wacky treasures from the archive

Of course, such freedom had the potential to provide a few speed bumps along the way for Marioni and his friends. While I researched at the Steven Leiber Conceptual Art Study Center, BAMPFA, California, it was exciting to find many archived treasures—evidence of loose activities and bold engagements that materialised from MOCA.[20] For example, one of the letters I drifted upon was addressed to the artist Terry Fox at MOCA from Montgomery Capital Corporation who had managed the building. It outlined some of the "reprehensible" conduct of guests at an event and the state they had left the building, including the use of firearms, resulting in a bullet becoming lodged in another tenant's wall. Other letters from the building management sought payment of rent owed and threatened legal action.[21] Rent issues are often commonplace for an artist's project space, though I can understand how the use of firearms might have made the landlord a bit skittish. It makes me wonder if Californian performance artist Chris Burden (1946–2015) was inspired by tales of gunplay at MOCA when he made his iconic video *Shoot* the following year.[22] The "wild boy of Australian art," Adam Cullen (1965–2012), also had a thing for integrating firearms into his art practice.[23] Could MOCA's legacy have subtly encouraged the dicey intersection of artistic experimentation and weapons?

By 1972 Marioni had relocated MOCA to 75 Third Street, a bigger space across from the original.[24] Maybe he was shown the door from the first location for the firearms horseplay and evading rental payment. Nonetheless, it was a wily move; somehow

Marioni persuaded the building owner to provide the new space free of charge. As evidenced by the numerous letters of correspondence I pored over at BAMPFA, he had a knack for advancing audacious proposals, always seeking outcomes to serve his ideas.[25] Perhaps this was indictive of the do-it-yourself countercultural milieu of California. Marioni's mode was supercharged, and sometimes it paid off: when the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency acquired the building, they were required to maintain the rent at the former owner's price. As a result, MOCA remained free for the next twelve years.[26]

The honest lies of Broodthaers

I find myself speculating if Marioni was aware of Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976). There appears to be overlaps between the two. Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles (*Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles*)* shared many similarities with Marioni's MOCA. Broodthaers operated the museum from his apartment between 1968 and 1972.[27] Initially, he appointed himself as director of the *Section XIXème Siècle*, the first stage of the multi-part project located in his Brussels lodgings, before it expanded and morphed into presentations at conventional museums.

Alongside convincing a bona fide museum director to deliver the inaugural address, Broodthaers also programmed discussions and circulated letters published under the museum's official banner.[28] The letters were sent from the "Cabinet des Ministres de la Culture" (Cabinet of Ministers of Culture)—an amusing touch.[29] Similarly, Marioni invented his own functioning, alternative institution, and like Broodthaers, spotlighted the spectacle and self-promotion that orbits a museum with irony. MOCA was publicised by Maroni in a way that embellished its prestige; it was located above Breen's, a landmark San Francisco bar and definite drawcard for thirsty artists. Also, below it was a restaurant styled on a Bavarian beer hall, and Marioni used a booth at the front of the restaurant as his office. It was a lean operation masquerading as a fully-fledged institution. He attempted to charm potential "museum members" by hyping benefits such as "ten thousand square feet of exhibition space, seven stories of parking next door, a café downstairs, and free beer on Wednesdays while artists' videotapes were shown."[30]

Despite the audacious veneer of MOCA, Marioni exuded an air of success and cachet, even if it hadn't yet materialised. Framed by Marioni himself as "an excuse for a party," MOCA's emphasis on avant-garde sculpture, site-specific installation, and performance effectively doubled as a contingency plan against market failure.[31] In Broodthaers's case, his satirical intentions were far more overt compared to Marioni's deadpan appropriation of institutional frameworks. His museum project critiqued the commercialism of art through a paradoxical combination of marketing and "anti-commercial" structure—some serious mental gymnastics going on there.[32] Broodthaers declared his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*—which in its first iteration consisted of "crates, postcards and inscriptions"[33]—as "quite simply a lie, a deception."[34] However, I might label these as "honest lies." Broodthaers, by establishing a parody of a museum in his private apartment and seizing its traditional authority, ironically created a fabrication with the sincere objective of exposing the artificial construction of cultural institutions. In an essay on Broodthaers, American artist Mike Kelley (1954–2012) superbly supported this notion:

> Broodthaers ... is more devious. His work looks sentimental and heartfelt, all the while proclaiming its insincerity. Yet its true insincerity lies in the possibility that Broodthaers really *is* sentimental and heartfelt. He strikes me as a contrary artist—who wants to have his cake and eat it too. He desires to be sincere and insincere at the same time.[35]

While parallels can be drawn between the two, I argue that Marioni's and Broodthaers's work diverge in their distinct engagements with institutional structures. The complex fictitious museum Broodthaers created, which used symbols such as eagles and the development of bizarre 'departments,' critiqued the power dynamics and cultural leverage of art institutions.[36] Marioni's MOCA leaned toward a more subtle and innocent form of dissidence, where his focus remained firmly on the artists themselves and the freedom to develop their work.

Marioni's offbeat social encounters

Figure 4. Tom Marioni, *FREE BEER (The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art*), 1970–1979. Refrigerator, framed print, shelf, beer bottles, and lightbulb, dimensions variable.

As Broodthaers' *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* evolved into museum presentations, Marioni, while running MOCA, also occasionally created works that embodied his autonomy within museums. He remained steadfast in his vision and refused to let institutional settings dictate his approach. One such action was *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art* (1970), in which he used the museum space for an exclusive gathering of friends—no curators permitted. In another work, *My First Car* (1972), Marioni tampered with the museum's protocols for his private gratification and presented a car in the exhibition space. Not concerned with following the usual channels to access the infrastructure and audiences available in museums, it seems he had a checklist that prioritised his needs as an artist, which included offbeat social encounters. Via an interview for a San Francisco news website, Marioni conveyed his strategy, saying, "I wanted to be part of the establishment, but I wanted to do it from the back door."[37]

In his 1998 book, *Relational Aesthetics*, French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (b. 1965) discussed the requirements of an approach akin to Marioni's cunning disguise: "The relationship between people, as symbolised by goods or replaced by them, and signposted by logos, has to take on extreme and clandestine forms, if it is to dodge the empire of predictability."[38]

In 1970, at the Oakland Museum, Marioni sought to sidestep "the empire of predictability" through crafty gamesmanship. To forge meaningful connections beyond cultural codes, Marioni ironically staged this action under the pseudonym Allan Fish. For *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*, he somehow gained access to the Oakland Museum and invited sixteen friends on a Monday when it was usually closed, and together they enjoyed a few drinks.[39] Initially,

the choice of beverage was Anchor Steam beer brewed in San Francisco, generously donated by the brewery. When this delightful arrangement ended, Marioni switched to Pacifico Clara Mexican Lager as his social lubricant of choice for the ongoing performance work in later versions from the 2000s onward. A key element of the work included leaving the remnants in the space as an archive of the action.[40] The work undermined the artistic righteousness of the museum's usual area of activity; Marioni sought to encourage participation and stray from the conventional distance between objects and viewers in the exhibition environment. He described this booze-up with friends in his memoir: "Basically, the show consisted of the evidence of the act. It was an important work for me, because it defined Action rather than Object as art. And drinking beer was one of the things I learned in art school."[41]

Figure 5. Tom Marioni, *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*, performance, 2014. Site Santa Fe.

Certainly, *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art* was a critical work for Marioni, but if the action was mostly concerned with the social gesture of gathering, why did he not clean out the exhibition space afterwards if he was in fact interested in a move away from *object* and toward *action*? Or do the elevated remnants from the performance operate as validated components to the work, equally as important as the action itself? Maybe they were just too pissed to clean up after themselves. The careful placement in the exhibition space of beer bottles on custom

shelves and the construction of a functional bar were evidently vital traces for Marioni in his action. Ming understood that his intentions were far more nuanced than the mere presentation of such vestiges: "Marioni made a mockery of the traditional museum, throwing into relief their methods of staging authority and grandiosity."[42] I sense the props left in the space satisfied Marioni's mischievous desire to circumvent barriers in institutional spaces: no drinking, no talking, no bags, no photography, no touching the work—no fun!

I think Marioni used *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art* as a way of marking his territory. Not quite as boorish as the drunk 'tradie' who urinated on the bonnet of a police car in a memorable episode of *RBT*.[43] However, Marioni did once urinate into a bucket from a stepladder (again under the pseudonym Allan Fish) for his performance *Piss Piece* (1970) at MOCA.[44]

Duchamp's creative act

Aside from Marioni staking his claim, one could speculate if Duchamp's "The Creative Act" played a role in shaping his approach. In this 1957 lecture Duchamp proposed that the creation of art is shaped by two primary roles: the artist, who initiates its existence, and the viewer, who ensures its survival through interpretation and memory.[45] He also declared that "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpretating its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."[46] Marioni, it seems, had to come to terms with the inevitability of relinquishing full autonomy. In response, I believe he actively sought to connect with audiences, striving to secure a historical position in Californian conceptual art, albeit always on his own terms.

A lineage can easily be drawn from Duchamp's ideas on the dual forces behind the creation, interpretation and assigning of meaning through to Marioni's actions, via happenings and Fluxus.[47] Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* builds upon Duchamp's concept and these subsequent movements further by emphasising dialogue and relationships as the intrinsic foundation of artistic meaning. Bourriaud claimed that television and literature confine individuals to private spaces of consumption, and

while theatre and cinema allow for group engagement, there is an absence of immediate, collective commentary on what is seen; any discussion is postponed until after the experience concludes. In contrast, he suggested, "At an exhibition … even when inert forms are involved, there is the possibility of an immediate discussion, in both senses of the term. I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time. Art is the place that produces a specific sociability."[48] In my view, this was Marioni's objective in his actions—to perceive and communicate experiences as they unfolded:

> The artist produces an "action," an activity that the audience experiences at the moment of its creation, like a group of medical students observing an operation in the round. The art is not participatory as in happenings or encounter groups. The art is not a repeat from a script as in theatre and is not a piece of real life. The artist's role in society is to observe real life and report on it poetically.[49]

Goofy institutional critique

Despite the immediacy and excitement of the actions, like a youth taking the family car for a joy ride, I find it remarkably impressive that Marioni never seems to break from his deadpan character. His straight-edged explanations are incongruous with the absurdity of his actions. I can't determine if he innocently stumbled upon his ironic and goofy mode of institutional critique or if he was a complete strategist. Apart from the rebellious remnants of his crafty festivities left in the museum, I want to interpret Marioni's *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art* as a sarcastic manoeuvre aimed at the art world's elitist practices. His get-together with artist friends, while sidelining the trustees, curators, socialites, and public who normally loom large at museum soirées, elevated the figure of the artist to VIP status. In doing so, he gleefully held up a mirror to the insularity of these exclusive art world gatherings. Forget velvet ropes; Marioni's beer-fuelled festivity strikes me as a strain of nutty critique, suggesting that the 'highest form of art' might be as simple, and as subversive, as clinking beer bottles with those who create the art.

Of course, whether he recognised it or not, Marioni entangled himself in the very system that institutional critique sought to dismantle. He became both a stealthy critic and an inadvertent co-conspirator, all while climbing the greasy pole of the art world.

Then again, isn't that how it works? Still, one must tread carefully; denying our local B-list TV soapie actors-turned-curators, art consultants, and self-made Instagram celebrities even a crumb of cultural capital would risk burning every bridge on the narrow highway of the Australian art world. How else would our cultural dilettantes stage their routine 'selfie' post if they're not invited to the jamboree?

Jane Polkinghorne is present

Gaining insight into Marioni's *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art* calls to mind a more recent humorous beer drinking performance by Australian artist Jane Polkinghorne, *The Artist is Present (Drinking)* (2015). While Marioni orchestrated quiet communion within the museum walls, Polkinghorne short-circuited the whole enterprise. She took the premise outdoors, cracked a beer, and let social interaction—unfiltered and slightly tipsy—do the heavy lifting. It wasn't just a cheeky gesture; it was a necessary one. If inclusivity was the goal, the gallery had to be left behind. The work gets to the point: sometimes, the clearest statement on art's pretensions is a low fence, two chairs, and a cold drink.

Figure 6. Jane Polkinghorne, *The Artist is Present (Drinking)*, 2015. Performance, social interaction.

Like Marioni's action, Polkinghorne's work relied on beer to activate communication between the artist and guests. With an iconic Australian Esky by her side, Polkinghorne sat on the inside of a fence facing the footpath and proceeded to carry out a range of parodies of performance artist Marina Abramović.[50]

Instead of an audacious gathering of friends in a museum context like Marioni,

Polkinghorne lured strangers on a suburban street with beer.[51] She referred to her performance as "a pathetic parody of performance," although I'd call it a brilliantly disarming gesture.[52] Polkinghorne's welcoming and humorous performance, to me, illustrates a distinct overlap between Californian conceptual artists and some—very rare—Australian artists brave enough to make work that mocks the status quo of the art world, which often takes itself too seriously.

An invitation to chug beer

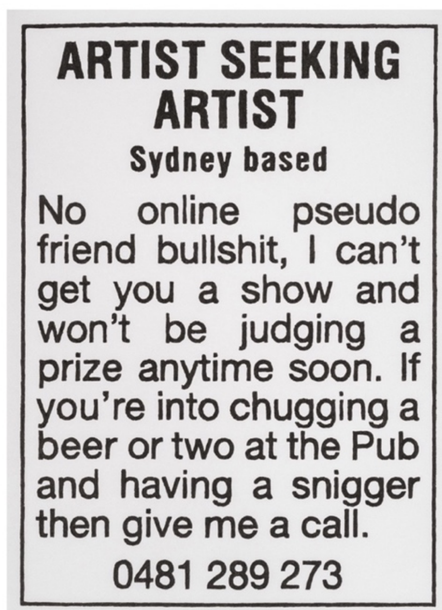

Figure 7. *Artist Seeking Artist*, 2018. Archival pen on watercolour paper, 42.7 x 31 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

In a spirit akin to Marioni's *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*, and with a nod to Polkinghorne's warm gesture, I made *Artist Seeking Artist* (2018). This hand-drawn pen work was part of a large series of replica newspaper classified advertisements. It was an attempt to bridge the distance between artist and viewer/artist. *Artist Seeking Artist* was a gesture that offered an alternative space for artists outside of the hub of museums and galleries—an attempt to rewire the social system of the art community. The drawing was a deliberate statement that outlines my position as an artist: I don't engage in social media to concoct an inflated status, and I am not in a position of power to practise nepotism. These announcements aside, if you would like to meet up at the pub for a beer and a cheerful time give me call. My phone number appears at the bottom of the drawing. Initially reaching audiences in the gallery space as a physical object when exhibited, alongside appearing on online platforms, I intended *Artist Seeking Artist* to expand further into a performative realm, or as an open-ended set of actions.

Artist Seeking Artist offers an educative experience beyond the often stiff and uncertain gallery or museum space. An unrestrained, neutral zone where artists can meet and talk, loosened by alcohol and a comfortable barstool, the pub is a locus where individuals can abandon the pretensions of the art gallery environment. *Artist Seeking*

Artist proposed to cast the net wider, outside of the regular pool of audiences at exhibition openings and added an element of chance via its open call approach. Through the work I aimed to create an unfeigned atmosphere conducive to new concepts and discussion. The ideas of American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey (1859–1952) were an exemplar to the action component of *Artist Seeking Artist*. Dewey noted:

> Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected.[53]

I received numerous text messages and phone calls from strangers who hoped to meet for a beer. At the risk of developing a drinking problem, I agreed to join anyone who had connected with me for the *Artist Seeking Artist* action. Dewey's notion of all communication, and correspondingly, all "genuine social life" is an educative experience was verified; however, I had not anticipated that some individuals might seek out communication (via a drink at the pub) as an outlet for antagonistic behaviour.

One such character was Joey Barney. Initially, Joey seemed cordial via our messages when arranging a suitable time to meet. Nevertheless, the tone of our encounter shifted the moment I returned from the bar and placed our beers on the table—the reception was not quite a thank you, but more like a snarl. I gulped with anxiety and sweat ran. Joey, my new drinking companion for the afternoon then launched into a comprehensive scolding of my art practice, venues I had exhibited my work at, and advised me that I did not belong to any meaningful, virtuous groups. After the shock of this early communication, I recognised that the barrage and intellectual posturing from Joey was truly amusing and educative. I gathered a fantastic dossier of content from our get-together, which will undoubtedly inform the creation of new works. Fortunately, all the other encounters for the *Artist Seeking Artist* actions were much more affable, and in some circumstances the platform for new friendships and collaborations to develop.

Bubbly in *My First Car*

Figure 8. Tom Marioni, *My First Car*, 1972.

Wisely, Marioni used participatory modes to create social environments with a greater focus on the vetting process with *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art*, in contrast to the open call of my *Artist Seeking Artist* action. His work *My First Car* (1972), however, had a bumpier reception. For this action Marioni purchased a used Fiat 750 with the money budgeted for an exhibition at the De Saisset Art Museum at the University of Santa Clara—a Catholic university. The piece referenced the support of artists by the church at the time of the Italian Renaissance.[54] He tied his need for transport with the funding offered for art materials by the then director, Lydia Modi-Vitale. Marioni the prankster inscribed the door of the car with the text "De Saisset Museum" and dates of the show. He then parked it in the gallery on a nineteenth-century rug.

At the opening reception of *My First Car* Marioni made himself available for conversation with the audience, although in this action he was not swigging on a beer. As he recalls, "I sat in the car and drank champagne and there was a microphone in the back seat and in the corner of the gallery was a video camera."[55] The following day, the president of the university ended Marioni's *My First Car* exhibition: "It was closed like, the next day. Because the president of the university thought that they were being—that I was getting away with something. I don't know what the reason was, they just said it's inappropriate or something."[56] Despite the abrupt closure of the presentation, Marioni retained the car.

Works such as *My First Car* were antics that functioned as veiled yet biting appraisals of civil codes. I suggest Marioni's actions made a distinctive contribution to institutional critique, not as an overt attack on the institutions of art and culture, but with an attitude that tended to approach them with absurdity and humour. He offered

a subversive road map for ensuing artists who seek methods of swerving around structures of power and resisting the status quo. Ming discussed the significance of Marioni's unruly art, noting that even though it may have been "easily dismissed because of its miming of rebellious, puerile adolescent male behaviour, this potentially troubling aspect of the work is precisely what needs to be examined and historicized."[57] Ming's comment highlights a tendency for art that relies on humour to be swiftly dismissed and excluded by cultural institutions and their gatekeepers.

Marioni's practice is no doubt a type of caper—an absurd form of conceptual art. But as French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) claimed, "comic absurdity gives us from the outset the impression of playing with ideas." Bergson also noted that "the comic character no longer tries to be ceaselessly adapting and readapting himself to the society of which he is a member. He slackens in the attention that is due to life. He more or less resembles the absentminded."[58]

Marioni's appointment & exclusion

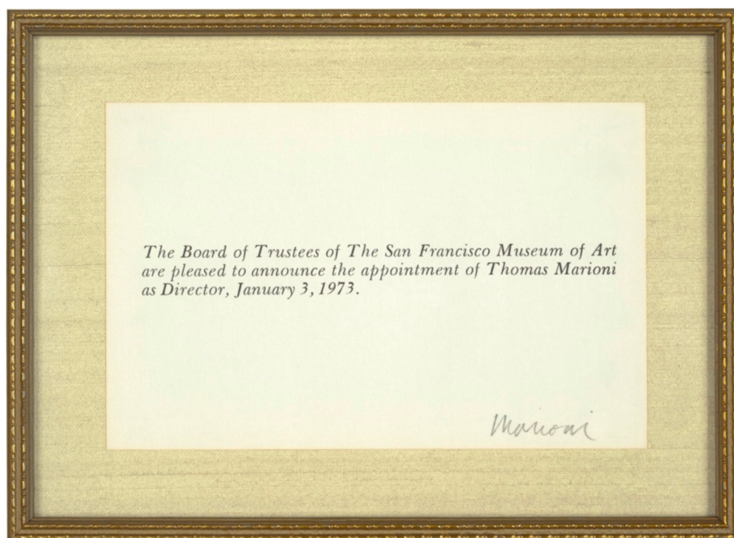
The Board of Trustees of The San Francisco Museum of Art are pleased to announce the appointment of Thomas Marioni as Director, January 3, 1973.

Figure 9. Tom Marioni, *Untitled*, 1973. Offset lithograph, 13.97 x 19.69 cm.

An example of Marioni's exclusion due to his playfulness and a type of pseudo absentmindedness, and a remarkable demonstration of offbeat humour, occurred in 1973, when the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) was seeking a new director. Marioni mailed a note/artwork called *Untitled* (1973) to SFMOMA to announce his appointment to the position, which was then inadvertently published in their *Museum News*. His notice was a type of *faux naïf*—a pose of innocence—which escalated to a scandal in no time.[59] The museum's board members were furious that they had not been consulted. Marioni was disqualified the following year for his prank and omitted by the genuine appointed director Henry Hopkins from a fiftieth

anniversary exhibition at the museum. The show celebrated every significant Californian artist except Marioni.[60]

Marioni's mock absentminded approach in his *Museum News* announcement inspired me to rethink how I could connect with a broader audience through my studio practice. With a self-imposed social media exile securely in place, a lack of the 'right' friends, and a smoking jacket growing ever smaller in my wardrobe, I waited for the quotidian squeaky brakes of the postie's motorbike to deliver an invitation or news of an acquisition—anything at all, standards suspended. Eventually, I realised it was time for another method, the invitation seemed to have been lost in transit. I decided to send a letter to Dr Nick Mitzevich, Director of the National Gallery of Australia. The letter expressed my excitement about a two-part installation of mine, titled *Artists Anonymous* (2025), being acquired by the National Gallery. The work features a large-scale LED-lit changeable letter sign, and an installation of customised timber children's chairs arranged in a circular formation, reminiscent of a group therapy session. The letter also proposed that I assist with the placement of the work in the gallery, while extending an invitation for Nick to attend my solo exhibition in Melbourne, where he could view the installation before it was transported to its new home.

Michael Lindeman
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10 August 2025

Dr Nick Mitzevich
Director
National Gallery of Australia
GPO Box 1150, Canberra ACT 2601
AUSTRALIA

Dear Nick,

I wanted to invite you to my upcoming exhibition, *Artists Anonymous*, opening at Sullivan + Strumpf, Melbourne, on 30 October. I'm thrilled that the two-part work of the same name has been acquired by the gallery. It's an honour to have it join the National Gallery of Australia's collection.

I'm thinking of driving down from Sydney to install the show and would be happy to swing by and pick you up on the way—there's plenty of room in my Mitsubishi Sigma Station Wagon (just serviced, so I reckon we'll make it). It might be a good opportunity for you to see the work in situ before it heads off to its new home.

Maybe when I drop by, we can look at which works on display could be rotated into storage to make room for *Artists Anonymous*.

Looking forward to catching up.

Talk soon,

Michael

Figure 10. Michael Lindeman, *Dear Nick*, 2025. Digital print, pen, copy paper, 29.7 x 21 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

My letter to Nick was a risky move and I really don't know how it will land. Fingers crossed I'm not penalised in a similar way to Marioni, although I have a feeling, we are both taking the long route in this game.

Marioni's exclusion from Henry Hopkins's exhibition at the SFMOMA, a temple of contemporary art, strikes me as a form of oppressive discipline. The power, status, and grand architecture of contemporary museums have seen them transformed into a new type of church, an authority that shapes society and culture by communicating public virtue. I am reminded of one of Australia's most celebrated artists (and a former trustee of one of the country's most significant museums) proprietorially declaring a certain museum as "my church." [61]

If museums have become an alternative environment for worship, it is not a stretch to propose that Marioni is a kind of comedic mystic. Not necessarily in the metaphysical sense, but as an avant-garde sage. Those wielding power in museums, the art institutions, often veer away from artists who choose to take detours from established routes. As philosopher and scholar Gershom Scholem noted, "They usually do their best to place obstacles in the path of the mystic. They give him no encouragement, and if in the end the obstacles frighten the mystic and bring him back to the old accustomed ways—so much the better from the standpoint of authority."[62]

Marioni didn't scare; however, he did in a way, return to the museum. After being embarrassed by a *Newsweek* magazine review of the fiftieth anniversary exhibition that mistakenly mentioned Marioni as a participant, Henry Hopkins reluctantly added Marioni's *Untitled* announcement to the show, both for its San Francisco iteration and subsequent touring versions. Years later, collector Bob Bransten, a board member of SFMOMA, purchased the work from Marioni for $500 and donated it to the collection.[63]

Thanks

Like the early rebuff of Marioni's *Untitled* announcement, I too have had my escapades with rejection and failure—potentially another misstep is on the way when Nick receives my missive. In the text-based soft sculpture *Thanks* (2018), I elected to focus on the rebranding of unrecoverable debt. The large-scale work was crafted from clear vinyl material, which was hand cut into a disquieting, deflating three-dimensional font, forming the word "Thanks." Each flabby letter of the sculpture woefully leans against the gallery wall, steadied by their contents: hundreds of crumpled copies of

rejection letters collected over the past twenty-five years.

Thanks is an anxiety ridden sculpture with a confessional bent. The knock-back letters for prizes, scholarships, and exhibition proposals are both denied and archived in the sculpture. Yet my dreams were not shattered, nor my confidence crushed. Instead, the work poses the notion of failure as a viable artistic method, while collapsing procedures of inclusion and exclusion in the art world through its dogged participation.

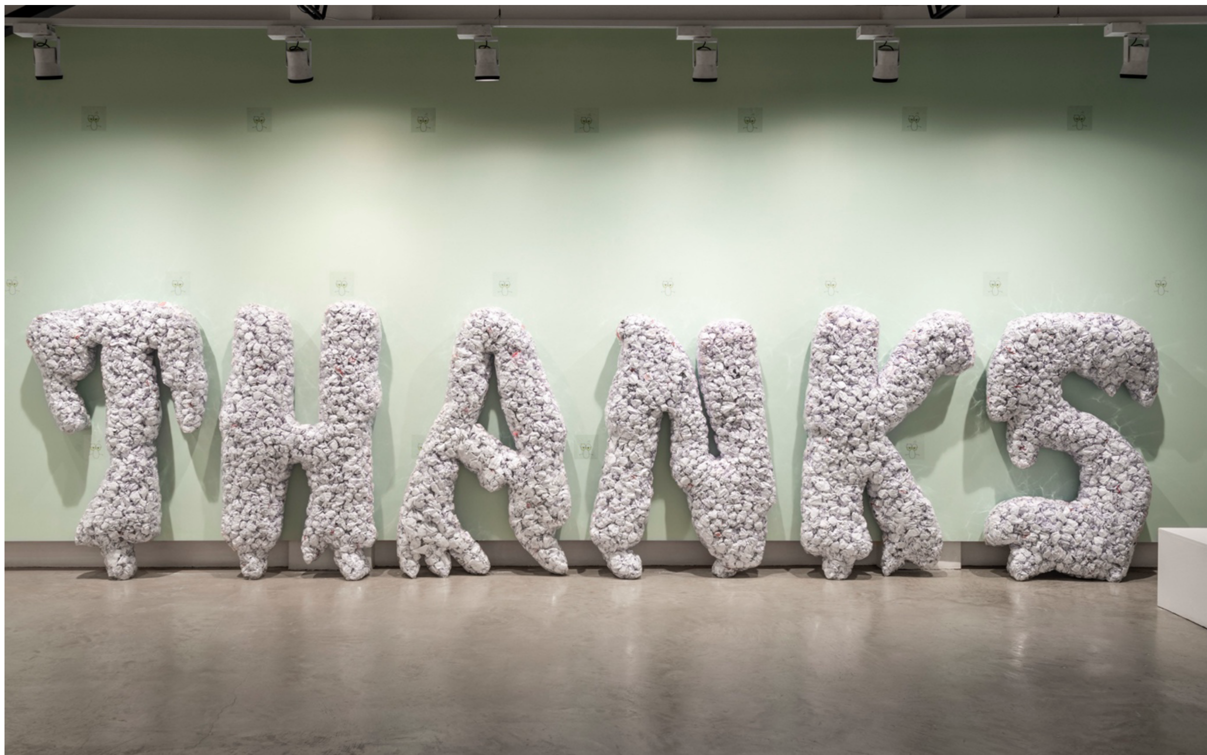


Figure 11. Michael Lindeman, *Thanks*, 2018. Rejection letters, clear vinyl, decals, dimensions variable. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

It's heartening to find that Marioni's career is also marked by failures and wrong turns. He reshaped these challenges, and in some cases, even invited them. Alongside provocations such as *Untitled* he seemed to be invariably scheming minor entertaining taunts, which would often backfire, almost hoping for misfortune to arrive. One such ploy included Marioni having a brass plaque made for his front door, which read: "Breaking and Entering, March 5, 1975." He had hoped the plaque would act as a preventative to frequent break-ins to his space, only for the plaque itself to be stolen.[64] I doubt Marioni was too distraught by the outcome. Later he engaged in his own cheeky stunt of theft, stealing a splinter from the door of Duchamp's last work, *Étant*

donnés (1966).[65] Marioni likely saw the theft of his plaque as an unplanned conceptual art collaboration, where even burglars unwittingly played their part in the circulation of ideas. To quote Marioni, "The work of art is not the object; the work of art is the information that is communicated, a stimulating experience that awakens the intellect through the senses."[66]

Danko stuffs art

Figure 12. Aleks Danko, *Art Stuffing*, 1970. Enamel paint on hessian bag stuffed with paper, 90.7 x 56 x 28 cm. Photographer: Christian Capurro.

I'm not sure if Marioni always practised this philosophy; he was often drawn back to incorporating objects, which informed and expanded the scope of his actions. Similarly, for Australian artist Aleks Danko (b. 1950), art-as-idea didn't mean leaving objects behind either. It was not one or the other. The first time I encountered Danko's *Art Stuffing* (1970), my thoughts immediately turned to Marcel Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise* (1916), as if the two were sharing a quiet, enigmatic joke across time.[67] Like *Thanks*, Danko's sculpture also made use of exhausted time and materials, efforts that may not have amounted to 'successful' outcomes. His hessian bag was loaded with life drawings from his undergraduate art school days, the front of the object covered in white slapdash enamel paint and black stencil font, branding the contents "ART STUFFING."[68] This "autobiographical strategy" recoups and makes use of experiences and art supplies that in most cases the artist would dispose of, humbled by their amateur attempts at rendering a life model.[69]

Unlike the transparent celebration of rejection letters in *Thanks,* Danko at least shields the viewer from cringe and pity in *Art Stuffing*. One speculates what exactly does Danko suggest with his utilitarian materials and text in the sculpture? Is he poking fun at the industry of art as commodity? Is it a comment that art in the commercial realm is mostly a placeholder, filler, rubbish? Or did he simply acknowledge that life drawing wasn't his forte, and his early attempts demanded to be hidden. Danko's parody and

comments are left to hang, activated by the spectator in a Duchampian schema.

In the face of judgments, barriers, and inevitable failures that define the creative journey of every artist, Danko's *Art Stuffing* employed wit and parody to grapple with the paradoxes of the artistic milieu he inhabits. Similarly, *Thanks* relied on a clear vinyl skin as a vehicle to transmit ideas about my position as an artist and invite reciprocation. Meanwhile, Marioni carved out his own space with absurd provocations, undeterred by the inevitability of rejection. I am drawn to artists and ideas steeped in self-deprecation and humour, using these qualities as both weapon and shield to assert an unyielding presence. Failure or success, financial or critical, is inconsequential. In this regard, I find resonance in French theorist, philosopher and critic Roland Barthes's thoughts on success and failure: "The world subjects every enterprise to an alternative: that of success or failure, of victory or defeat. I protest by another logic: I am simultaneously and contradictorily happy and wretched … beyond success and failure; I have withdrawn from all finality."[70]

I believe this fragment of text by Barthes serves as an archetype for both my practice and Marioni's. I'm sure there's some soul searching in Danko's work too. It seems that the overlap in our work is the desire to create an environment for incongruous creative handiwork, which serves as a satirical disregard for signified boundaries or context. We operate on a different register—there is no right and wrong, no winner and loser. Indifferent to success and failure, our aim is to seek an enterprising and self-fashioned route.

Marioni reroutes cultural clout

Marioni's work included an irreverent accent that covertly jeered the authority of the institution and decorum. While some may dismiss his actions as juvenile, absurd, or simply dumb, a closer look reveals his intent: to expose the entanglements between art institutions and artists. His oblique, deadpan humour and a kind of feigned absentmindedness ensured that his subtext remains hidden in plain sight. By laying bare the inner workings of the art world, he embraced the role of the artist as both instigator and critic, standing firmly against art market biases and rigid museum conventions.

A core part of Marioni's blueprint is the rerouting of cultural clout away from museums to build his own artistic presence and create broader opportunities. His strategy wasn't just subversive, it was fun. By bringing friends into the mix, he crafted a self-sustaining, mischievous critique of the institution that any artist would envy. He remains a touchstone for yours truly. Marioni ignored the road rules, redefining not only the function of art but also how artists and audiences could share experiences. His practice was an ongoing search for alternative avenues, a deliberate detour around the theoretical gridlock of New York conceptualism.

Marioni's divergence was fuelled by a humour so misaligned it often blurred the line between sincerity and absurdity, what Nicholas Holm described as "bizarre moments that push the limits of credibility."[71] Put differently, Marioni's approach, in his own words, was like "Steering a car out of control down a steep street."[72] Despite the audacity of his methods—the guy had balls—he managed to outmanoeuvre cultural gatekeepers without crashing. His practice introduced a generosity and affable spirit that dismantled conventional barriers between artist and audience. Marioni proved that an artist can critique institutions, contribute meaningfully to the field, and still have fun doing it. I'll drink to that, but I won't be getting behind the wheel.

[1] *RBT* is a television series that focuses on random breath testing for drugs and alcohol by police on the roads of Australia. It is narrated by actor Andrew Daddo. It's quite entertaining but has too many commercial breaks for my liking.
[2] A breathalyser is a device used to measure alcohol content in breath. Register over 0.05 in NSW, Australia and you'll be in some strife.
[3] Pierre-François Galpin, "Marioni, Tom," *Grove Art Online*, 22 September 2015, https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T2287898.
[4] Tony Godfrey, introduction to *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 14.
[5] Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 21.
[6] Godfrey, "The Crisis of Authority," in *Conceptual Art*, 207.
[7] Leta Y. Ming, "Making and Unmaking the Museum: Tom Marioni and San Francisco Conceptual Art, 1968–1979, (PhD thesis, University of Southern California 2012), 26.
[8] Godfrey, introduction, 10.
[9] Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy Part II: Conceptual Art and Recent Art," *Studio International* 178, no. 916 (1969): 160.
[10] Kosuth, 160.
[11] Godfrey, introduction, 15.
[12] *Back East* is an informal term referring to the eastern part of the United States.
[13] Luca Beatrice, "La La Land: Memories and Notes on the City of Angels," in *Los Angeles State of Mind* (Milano: Skira Editore, 2021), 18.
[14] *The Cool School*, dir. Neville Morgan (Arthouse Films, 2008), 86:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOWZ4-H2YA8.
[15] Dave Hickey, "Coming Attractions," in *Feint of Heart: Art Writings, 1982*–2022, ed. Jarret Earnest and Elizabeth Gordon (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2024), 247.
[16] Tom Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy* (San Francisco: Crown Point Press, 2012, 93–94.
[17] Jennifer Christie Leitch, "Tom Marioni: Artistic Intoxication," PhD thesis, University of Southern California, 2010, 24–25, https://api.core.ac.uk/oai/oai:digitallibrary.usc.edu:p15799coll127/308116.
[18] Kristine Stiles, "Performance Art," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 691.
[19] Stiles, 691.
[20] The Steven Leiber Conceptual Art Study Center is an archive held at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), California.
[21] L.E. Patterson to Terry Fox, 6 May 1970, box 1, folder 2, Steven Leiber Conceptual Art Study Center, BAMPFA, CA.
[22] On October 3, 1971, Burden performed *I Became a Secret Hippy* at Marioni's MOCA. See https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/284460. There's every chance he heard about the shenanigans with firearms at MOCA prior to making his seminal video performance *Shoot* on November 19, 1971. See Frazer Ward, "Gray Zone: Watching 'Shoot,'" in *October* 95 (2001): 115–130, http://www.jstor.org/stable/779202
[23] Cullen overestimated the level of immunity artists are afforded when they overstep the law. When the penny dropped and he was arrested he remarked "I am very, very scared." See Joyce Morgan, "All I Was Doing Was Making Art. I Am Very, Very Scared. I Have Never Hurt Anyone, Ever," *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 21, 2011, https://www.smh.com.au/national/all-i-was-doing-was-making-art-i-am-very-very-scared-i-have-never-hurt-anyone-ever-20111021-1mcgw.html.

[24] Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy*, 102.
[25] Marioni's unsolicited proposals were amusing and indicative of his calculated strategy, or his innate, oblivious nature—I can't tell. He would send letters to other artists such as Joseph Beuys, Carl Andre, Chuck Close, and Lawrence Weiner. One of the most absurd letters was sent to New York collector Robert Scull asking him to fund a project: a videotaped event with artists performing on a train from California to New York (American artist Doug Aitken somehow stole Marioni's unrealised idea for his 2015 filmed performance *Station to Station*). Other hilarious proposals by Marioni included him asking for teaching positions at various colleges, submissions to create a museum of contemporary art through the Department of Parks and Recreation, and a letter to the Bank of America seeking a position as "an Organizer of exhibits and displays." His success rate with such propositions didn't seem too high, comparable to my own attempts at accessing opportunities. At least, as I see it, there's always the fleeting chance of one's name being remembered, just before the letter gets crumpled and lobbed into the wastepaper basket.
[26] Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy*, 102–103.
[27] Holland Cotter, "'Marcel Broodthaers,' a Knot of Riddles in a MoMA Retrospective," *New York Times*, February 11, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/12/arts/design/marcel-broodthaers-a-knot-of-riddles-in-a-moma-retrospective.html.
[28] Andrea Fraser, "Critical Practices: What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere? Part II," in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 69.
[29] Deborah Schultz, "Broodthaers the Museum Director," in *Marcel Broodthaers: Strategy and Dialogue* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2007), 81.
[30] Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy*, 103–104.
[31] Marioni, 93.
[32] Schultz, "Alas, Bankruptcy—The Museum For Sale," in *Marcel Broodthaers*, 82.
[33] Godfrey, "The End? Decline or Diaspora of Conceptual Art?,"in *Conceptual Art*, 259.
[34] Marcel Broodthaers, "SECTION D'ART MODERNE (PRIVATE PROPERTY), 1972," in *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona, Ediciones Poligrafa, 2012), 359.
[35] Mike Kelley, "Marcel Broodthaers (1992)," in *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 155.
[36] Cotter, "'Marcel Broodthaers.'"
[37] Jesse Hamlin, "It's Really Art—Drinking Beer and Gabbing with Friends," *SFGate*, February 13, 2004, https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/It-s-really-art-drinking-beer-and-gabbing-with-2823896.php.
[38] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002), 9.
[39] Marioni commenced employment at the Richmond Art Center in 1968. To continue as a practising artist and fulfill his commitments as a curator without perceived conflicts of interests he coined the fictitious name Allan Fish. It would not be a stretch to suggest that he was inspired by Duchamp's alter ego, Rrose Sélavy. See Tom Marioni, "Oral History Interview with Tom Marioni," by Mija Riedel, *Archives of American Art* (December 2017): 14.
[40] Hamlin, "It's Really Art."

[41] Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy*, 93.
[42] Ming, "Making and Unmaking the Museum," 48.
[43] *Tradie* is Australian slang, a shorting of *tradesperson*.
[44] Marioni performed *Piss Piece* in the first exhibition at MOCA, *Sound Sculpture As*, under his alias Allan Fish. Taking place on April 10, 1970, Marioni invited nine other sculptors to make sound works for the show. See Tom Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy*, 94–96.
[45] Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 138.
[46] Duchamp, 140.
[47] In his article "Real Social Realism," Marioni acknowledged European artists working with happenings such as Milan Knizak and Tadeusz Kantor. He also discussed American Allan Kaprow's theatrical happenings and the parallel participatory—often humorous—Fluxus movement. These influences clearly shaped and intersected with his own concept of actions in nuanced and distinctive ways. See Tom Marioni, "Real Social Realism," in *Writings on Art: Tom Marioni 1969*–1999, ed. Jennifer Rodrigue (San Francisco: Crown Point Press, 2000).
[48] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 15–16.
[49] Tom Marioni, "Déjà Vu: Art to Fit a Situation, December 1976," in *Writings on Art*, 52.
[50] The work of seminal female performance artist Marina Abramović often evokes an emotional and intense reaction from viewers. Her performances lack humour, which makes Polkinghorne's parody even more subversive and witty. See Mary Richards, *Marina Abramović* (London: Routledge, 2019), 11.
[51] Jane Polkinghorne, "Foam Rainbow: Where Humour, Disgust and Failure Mingle in Contemporary Art" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2016), 159.
[52] Polkinghorne, 161.
[53] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 5.
[54] Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy,* 133.
[55] Tom Marioni quoted in Darlene Tong, "Chronology of Literature, 1970–1979," in *Performance Art Anthology: Source Book of California Performance Art*, ed. Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong (San Francisco: Last Gasp Press; Contemporary Art Press, 1989), 83.
[56] Marioni, "Oral History Interview with Tom Marioni," 39.
[57] Ming, "Making and Unmaking the Museum," 14.
[58] Henri Bergson, "The Comic Element in Situations and the Comic Element in Words," in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1911), 96.
[59] *Faux naïf* is a comedic strategy Marioni used to appear simple and unsophisticated. He played the innocent trickster to ignore the expected etiquette and satirise the institution's power. See https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/faux-naif.
[60] Marioni, "Oral History Interview with Tom Marioni," 37–38.
[61] Ben Quilty, "A Ben Quilty Retrospective Opens at the Art Gallery of New South Wales Today" by Georgina Safe, *Broadsheet*, November 8, 2019, https://www.broadsheet.com.au/sydney/art-and-design/article/ben-quilty-retrospective-opens-art-gallery-new-south-wales-today.
[62] Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 25.

[63] Marioni, "Oral History Interview with Tom Marioni," 38.
[64] Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy,* 113.
[65] Marioni declared that a framed work he made with the splinter was "theft" and not "appropriation." As he peered through the peephole of the door Marioni gouged a splinter, lodging it under his finger nail. Back in his San Francisco studio he removed the tiny fragment of Duchamp's work. See Marioni, *Beer, Art and Philosophy*, 188–190.
[66] Marioni, "Real Social Realism," 11–12.
[67] For this 'assisted readymade' Duchamp collaborated with Walter Arensberg, an art collector and friend. Arensberg placed a small unknown object inside the ball of twine, which Duchamp then sealed between two brass plates. The identity of this object remains a mystery, known only to Arensberg and Duchamp, adding an element of intrigue and curiosity. See Pierre Cabanne, *Duchamp & Co.*, trans. Peter Snowden, ed. Jean Claude Dubost (Paris: Finest SA/Editions Pierre Terrail, 1997), 106–107.
[68] Heidi Museum of Modern Art, Facebook, January 16, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2277558908956140&id=135408203171232&set=a.135909583121094.
[69] John Barbour, "Story Danko Topic Keyword," in *Aleks Danko: My Fellow Aus-Tra-Aliens*, ed. Lesley Harding (Sydney; Melbourne: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia; Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 72.
[70] Roland Barthes, "The Intractable," in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 22–23.
[71] Nicholas Holm, "Humour Without Reason: The Nonsense of Absurd Humour," in *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Springer International, 2017), 153.
[72] Tom Marioni, "Sketchbook Notes," in *Writings on Art*, 82.

Marioni and my unease in the hair salon

— by Charles Olstink

With four hours to spare in the salon getting fresh highlights, I began writing my review of what purported to be a long-form essay on Californian conceptualist Tom Marioni, written by artist and writer Michael Lindeman, whoever that may be. He claims Marioni's practice embodies a distinctive form of institutional critique that operates through deadpan absurdity and playful subversion, blurring the lines between sincere participation and satirical resistance. Positioned against the rigid, humourless logic of East Coast conceptualism—exemplified by Kosuth's tautologies—Lindeman makes a surprisingly strong case for Marioni's West Coast alternative, which embraced wit, looseness, and social engagement.

Drawing on influences like Duchamp and Fluxus, Marioni transformed the museum from a solemn temple into a stage for convivial disruption, inviting participation and highlighting art's relational, performative nature. Lindeman seems to be good at talking about the social aspects of the art world, but I never see him at any important soirées around town. I doubt he even receives an invitation.

Marioni's founding of MOCA was a DIY platform, which Lindeman claims was both mimicry and parody of institutional authority. The writer seems obsessed with emphasising the act of artistic freedom while critiquing entrenched power structures in Marioni's charming and irreverent practice. Newsflash, Lindeman: you'll never succeed in replicating such a strategy in this town, not on my watch—even with bizarre drinking and driving analogies.

The essay touches on philosophers such as Roland Barthes, with his notion of existing outside judgement, and thinkers like Henri Bergson on comedic absurdity. These insights illuminate Marioni's embrace of failure, ambiguity, and humour as tools to navigate and destabilise art world binaries and hierarchies. It's no surprise that Lindeman would turn to failure himself. He walks a fine line between wit and outright foolishness.

The essay alleges that Marioni reroutes cultural clout away from traditional museum

dominance. Lindeman outlines how Marioni's practice reveals the art world's entanglements and gatekeeping through tactical acts such as drinking beer as art or staging his own prank appointment as a museum director. Marioni created an alternative artistic network that privileges social exchange, spontaneity, and generosity over exclusivity and prestige. I'm not sure where I fit; I do enjoy being generous to my exclusive group of friends when writing or curating projects. There's something about Lindeman's work and writing that makes me uneasy, though I can't quite tell if that's the point or the problem.

★★☆☆☆

Next week I'll be reviewing Lindeman's essay on Ant Farm, the countercultural collective from California. Let's hope they don't give him too many recalcitrant ideas. He's already becoming a thorn in my side.

Visionary ideas or futile stoner pranks? The fun and cultural critique of Ant Farm

By Michael Lindeman

I have a confession to make: I think I have obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Or at least an ineffectual relationship with the junk folders in my email accounts, and the advertisement-supported software that keeps popping up on my computer screen. Email subject lines such as "Viagra Super Force," "Natural Tattoo Removal," "Potty Train Dogs," "Jackpot Game," "The Belly Solution," and "Chinese Spiritual Formula" permeate my deep internet sessions and coerce me into a perpetual tussle.[1] Okay, "The Belly Solution" could help me out, but I think I'm good with everything else. Initially, these unsolicited cyber-world advances got me hot under the collar. Eventually, I began to treat them as a sort of mission, not quite a game, though there's an undeniable layer of entertainment to it. Throughout my day—and often into the evening when I'm really in the zone—I methodically comb through my junk folders to report ads. Each time I block and eradicate an advertisement, I feel a sense of triumph. The algorithm, or whoever it is, can't fuck with me!

After toiling away for some time now, and much to my bemusement, I have come to realise that this strategy doesn't seem to be of much use. The spam emails continue to appear in junk folders, and the ads keep muscling in on my computer screen.[2] It makes me want to drive back and forth over my laptop in my mid-1980s Mitsubishi Sigma station wagon, but that would be stupid, I know. So how can I find a way out of this

conundrum? Perhaps I should reply to each spam email, to politely request that they unsubscribe me. I'll let them down easily by saying I sincerely do like their products and services. I'll explain that with recent speeding fines, medical bills after a freak studio accident with a caulking gun, and a new cage for the budgies, money is a bit tight. Otherwise, I'm not sure how to reconcile my troublesome situation online.

I think I need help with this, and from multiple sources—a type of collective labour with a countercultural ideology may do the trick. A team of experts in the field would certainly be handy at this point. I have a hunch that solutions will be found, or at least I'll be inspired after a perusal into the approaches of San Francisco-based conceptual art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, adjacent to the counterculture of the period. From my cursory knowledge to this point, I know those guys were invariably on the hunt for new materials and tools to tinker with the invasive structures of influence and manipulation.

Heavy-duty recalcitrance

Personally, I find junk mail and adware to be an irritating and dangerous condition in society, although it's possible I have a lower tolerance than others. I recognise that a connection between tactics in dealing with the triggers of my self-diagnosed OCD and the motivations of Californian conceptual artists presents as a peculiar notion. However, please let me explain. In much the same way, the first-generation conceptual artists from California and other like-minded countercultural communities were recognised for their heavy-duty recalcitrance. Shared tools and information were key to their critique of, and resistance to, the bane of advertising and mass culture. One example was the journal *Radical Software*, a significant source of information for creating alternative media, particularly television.[3] The Sony Portapak, which became available in 1967, was also an important tool for subverting the binding structures of sanctioned media.[4] Rather than rejecting technology entirely, many artists of this era understood that meaningful resistance required its strategic use.[5] Driving over my laptop in a frustrated outburst is definitely not the solution. Whereas the Californian countercultural communities were confronting billboards, television, and other brazen agents of persuasion, the adversaries behind my spam problems are far more elusive—faceless, calculating, and embedded deep within the circuitry. My aim is to root out

these less visible saboteurs, using technology not as a weapon of destruction but as a means of defence, and to do so alongside others. With any luck, this will keep our junk folders clear of their handiwork for good.

Through studying collectives of artists and cultural thinkers in San Francisco, I hope to understand their methods and apply similar strategies to my own online complications. I'm thinking of a community of collectives such as T.R. Uthco, Video Free America, Optic Nerve, TVTV (Top Value Television), and Ant Farm.[6] The one I find most intriguing is Ant Farm, a group that cultivated a type of magnetic cultural contemplation. It seems that they pooled energy and resources to arrive at absurd yet prescient critiques of image and power, which sat outside the established worlds of both art and architecture.[7]

Figure 13. Doug Michels, Chip Lord, and Curtis Schreier, in front of Ant Farm studio, with the Cadillac that became the Phantom Dream Car, Pier 40, San Francisco, 1973.

Operating between 1968 and 1978, Ant Farm commenced working out of the San Francisco Bay Area, before extending across the U.S. on various nomadic projects. Founding members Chip Lord (b. 1944) and Doug Michels (1943–2003) were soon to be joined by Curtis Schreier (b. 1944) and Hudson Marquez (b. 1947). Lord, Michels, and Schreier were recent graduates in architecture, with Marquez the only member to attend art school.[8] The number of members in the group fluctuated according to the type of projects being worked on, and at times they shared resources and skills with other collectives.[9] I think these non-art characters could guide me to discover the remedy to my internet plights. So, what would Ant Farm have done had they experienced my computerised quandaries? How can I apply some of their ingenuity to serve my own

selfish objectives of clearing those pesky junk folders permanently? To uncover answers to these questions, I need to delve into Ant Farm's motivations and examine samples of their projects, using them as case studies for my article.

A loose collective

Corresponding to the countercultural movement of the time, Ant Farm operated in a climate of significant cultural transformation.[10] While researching at the Steven Leiber Conceptual Art Study Center, I carefully sifted through the Ant Farm folders. I found a weathered manifesto that declared, "Ant Farm researches and develops new forms of social interaction through expanded systems of information and environment."[11] Although their emphasis was less weighted toward protests for civil rights and the Vietnam war, Ant Farm shared in a form of collectivity guided by countercultural attitudes.[12] The group's ethos encouraged communal projects, having no fixed membership, and a do-it-yourself philosophy, all without hierarchy. As founding member Doug Michels recalled, this involved "mixing disciplines and not having a leader, or having every person lead at times, follow at others."[13] The idea of a loose collective is a tempting mode, even for an anxiety ridden brooder like me. (Note to self: overcome bashful disposition and form a community with others who are equally devoted to ridding the planet of online spam and advertising).

Ant Farm's anti-hierarchical approach was evident from the outset. They embodied a dynamic bundle of experimentation, satire, and pedagogy that sparked collaboration. What more could one ask for? In 1968, Doug Michels travelled across the United States to lecture at more than thirty schools of architecture. He became aware that students had limited scope for freedom in their studies and that they were seeking alternatives. In response to this void, Michels initiated a workshop in Washington D.C. the same year called Crash City, which enabled students to determine issues and areas they felt compelled to pursue.[14] Crash City was not only a development in education but one of the foundational values of Ant Farm's ideology. Michels describes its objectives in this way: "A truly responsive learning environment is possible only when the need to please others is removed and replaced with a system based on self-motivation."[15] This is sage advice for anyone navigating a creative life.

Wobbly Dutch ovens and ephemeral bubbles

Given most of its members had received a formal education in architecture, it was logical that Ant Farm would take an instinctive jab at Brutalism, the favoured architectural style of the time.[16] In stark contrast to the harsh concrete surfaces of Brutalism, Ant Farm initiated experimentations with cargo parachutes in 1969. The resultant objects were developed into colossal inflatable balloons installed in various surprising locations, including college campuses, parking lots, concert venues, and the desert.[17] Inflatables such as *Pillow* (1969) undoubtedly reflected the young architectural graduates' curiosity for testing unconventional forms of accommodation. Yet I can't help but picture interiors so bare they might leave even a Zen monk feeling short-changed. That's assuming, of course, they could keep their balance in these wobbly alternatives to traditional structures.

Figure 14. Ant Farm, *Pillow*, 1969. Temporary installation at Saline Valley, California, 15.24 x 15.24 m.

Pillow was commissioned by the California-based author and editor, Stewart Brand. It was used as a studio on an isolated desert site and discussed in a supplement in Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*.[18] The inflatable illustrated Ant Farm's environmental

concerns, with an unsophisticated, portable method of gathering artists and audience.[19] *Pillow* embodied a lightness of touch on the landscape, an environmental awareness that created an ambiance of science fiction and prescient wisdom. I can also imagine the Ant Farm team and their friends finding the inflatables perfectly suited for Dutch ovens during pot-smoking sessions.[20]

Figure 15. Ant Farm, *Clean Air Pod*, 1970. Performance at lower Sproul Plaza, University of California, Berkeley, dimensions variable.

Breaching the constraints of modernist architecture, *Clean Air Pod* (1970) was another oversized, semi-transparent bubble. It was the principal prop in a performance that took place on the University of California's Berkeley campus. The piece was activated by barefooted men wearing white lab coats and gas masks, who invited onlookers to secure refuge in the fanciful inflatable with its purified air. Intended to alert students and staff to air pollution hazards, the project exuded an aura of alarm while incorporating ephemeral and nomadic ideas. This was a notable strategy embraced by the wider counterculture.[21]

Ant Farm's ethereal and unstable inflatable works resisted prevailing architecture of the time. As architecture and design historian Caroline Maniaque claimed, the inflatable "has no plan, no fixed section; the very descriptive tools of the architect's trade are denied."[22] In 1970, Ant Farm disseminated their ideas on ad-hoc design by publishing *Inflatocookbook*, a do-it-yourself guide with a clear plastic cover, distributed via mail order in a limited run of two thousand copies. It was inspired by the *Whole Earth Catalog* and shared instructions on making inflatables and advice on accessing materials.[23] *Inflatocookbook* featured a variety of graphic styles and emphasised the collaborative potential of group projects. Its pages combined eclectic imagery, such as marijuana leaves, currency depicting R. Buckminster Fuller, and geodesic domes, reflecting the counterculture's inventive spirit.[24]

Granted, the inflatables were low-cost, progressive sanctums that broke all the rules, but they were also inherently odd sculptures, offering little protection in anything but calm, dry weather. In a storm the result would have been pure chaos. Still, their ridiculous incongruity made them undeniably droll. Author and senior lecturer in media studies Nicholas Holm summarised this type of humour as being "premised in the abandonment of everyday regimes of sense and meaning and does not therefore adhere to the expected system of rules and logics that structure any given system."[25]

A false sense of security

Some early sculptural works I created, like *Belts on when Seated* (1999) and *Survival Kit* (2004), share a similar incongruity with Ant Farm's playful misinterpretation of safety in their inflatables. At the time, I was drawn to specific found or salvaged materials, often paired with more prosaic objects. Both works embodied the absurdity I aimed for. The idea for *Belts on when Seated* came during a long flight. I found myself staring at the "Fasten Seat Belt" sign and wondering: What's the point if the plane crashes? Not long after, I was driving around my neighbourhood and noticed a three-legged mid-century teak chair discarded on the curb, ready for council cleanup. After slamming on the brakes in the Sigma, I made a U-turn and claimed the treasure.

Figure 16. Michael Lindeman, *Belts on when Seated*, 1999. Mid-century chair, retractable car seat belt, dimensions variable. Photographer: Silversalt.

It was clear when I returned to the studio that my next step was to acquire a car seatbelt. This seemed to affirm the artist's conviction that with the right anecdote and a well-placed seatbelt, even the most ordinary junk can be ushered across the threshold into art—preferably with meaning attached. I had a specific brown retractable harness in mind, which required days of trawling through car wrecking yards deep in the outer suburbs. Like all my conversations with people outside of the art world, I opted not to elaborate on my intended application of the seat belt when I sought a common language with the large, greasy fellas who watched over each metal

morgue. These blokes weren't exactly into customer service and laid the boot in with their prices—they hit my Velcro wallet hard. Nonetheless, the work was realised, placed in the exhibition space with a dormant potential akin to a baited trap. To accompany *Belts on when Seated* I made a video, which was presented on a small black-and-white television and installed up high, in the exact position the video camera was situated when filming. The looped video with long intervals of the static chair featured yours truly. I casually walked into the space and took a seat, making clear the false sense of security created by the seat belt.

Figure 17. Michael Lindeman, *Survival Kit*, 2004. Styrofoam portable cooler, novelty dog shit, bicycle reflector, 20 x 31 x 19 cm. Photographer: Paul Green.

For *Survival Kit*, the task was similar. I purchased a small, inexpensive Styrofoam cooler at my local supermarket. The novelty and nostalgia of it excited me. Soon, I began thinking of ways to alter the cooler, creating a Duchampian rectified readymade, much like I had with the chair in *Belts on when Seated*.[26] I happened to have a novelty dog turd sitting on a shelf in the studio, a gift from a friend. It seemed logical to place it inside, hidden as a witty prank. At the time I was using various bicycle parts in other sculptures, so as an extension of these works, I fixed a bicycle reflector to the back of the sculpture to act as a type of beacon in dangerous environments.

Similarly, Ant Farm's inflatables and other projects (to be discussed below) employed incongruous materials, presenting a facade of protection and safety. In the same vein, *Belts on when Seated* and *Survival Kit* embody a comparable absurdity, evoking laughter in the process. In *Critique of Judgment*, German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) described how one may be influenced by absurd objects or actions in this way: "Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd ... Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing."[27] The expectation Kant referred to can be applied to the idea of a safe object on which to sit in *Belts on when Seated*, with added protection of the car seat belt, or to a vessel that promises a type of immunity to a threatening situation, such as *Survival Kit*. This

transformation "into nothing" isn't easily understood. Tumbling arse over... off the chair or discovering that the cooler's contents are a cruel hoax still provoke laughter. These moments disrupt expectations and throw one's sense of certainty off balance.

Countercultural almanac

I'm curious if my faux safety, do-it-yourself sculptures would have made the cut for the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Stewart Brand, who had commissioned *Pillow*, published the *Catalog* between 1968 and 1972. A notable influence on Ant Farm, the publication was a perfect fit for a collective interested in the disruption or hacking of mass media and consumer culture. A paragraph of text in the front matter of the *Catalog* outlines its purpose, or indeed "PURPOSE," indicating that it is a hack of "government, big business, formal education, [and] church," and instead hopes to encourage the "power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested."[28] There was nothing directly for sale in the catalogs; rather, they were archives of information—an almanac for the countercultural scene interested in sharing knowledge and resources.[29] As Chip Lord recalled, "the Whole Earth Catalog was an influence, its philosophy that with access to tools, everyone should be able to do everything themselves."[30]

When I flipped through *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* at the library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I was mesmerised to find the breadth of advertisements featured in this database. It included information on a Swedish composter, soil test kits, pruning handbooks, *The Cultivator's Handbook on Marijuana* (great for those stoner artists), goat husbandry, veterinary supplies, livestock and poultry production, surveying, wild edible plants, shelter, fundamentals of carpentry, a handbook of knots, whittling and woodworking, cookbooks, home brewing, aerobics, legal first aid, musical instruments, guides to filmmaking, and so on. The publication signalled that it was possible to live in a parallel world where access to information was democratised. One could argue that the *Whole Earth Catalog* was a prototype for a community-driven version of the internet—a precursor to the digital utopia that would later emerge, but with a focus on tangible, real-world resources and connection.

McLuhan's literate and tribal man

Ant Farm, much like the wider countercultural following of the *Whole Earth Catalog* in America, sought a departure from dominant media, cultural, and educational models. It seems likely both were influenced by the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980), who also discussed methods to eliminate hierarchy in education using technology. Art historian Deanne Pytlinski noted "Marshall McLuhan's positioning of electronic media (including television and video) as capable of provoking social change through global and instantaneous communication."[31] As McLuhan noted in his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*: "Today computers hold out the promise of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language. The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity."[32] McLuhan's statement was visionary in the sense that he predicted the progressive capacity of universal understanding via technology—specifically, the computer. He positively referred to the prospect of computers creating an interface for worldwide integration.

However, in a later chapter of *Understanding Media*, McLuhan seems to forewarn that the bracketing of activities due to technology can lead to a reduced perspective: "Literate man, once having accepted an analytic technology of fragmentation, is not nearly so accessible to cosmic patterns as tribal man. He prefers separateness and compartmented spaces, rather than the open cosmos ... He becomes less inclined to accept his body as a model of the universe."[33] McLuhan acknowledged that through the focus ascribed to technology, individuals could overlook the wider context in which their activities are located, due to the compartmentalising of tasks. For example, a man with OCD who works day and night to purge his junk folders of spam could develop a very narrow area of focus, neglecting other parts of his social, professional, and domestic life.

Agitated Citizens Against Spam Association and low-tech hacking

I'll deal with those issues later. Right now, I've got a far more pressing concern: those pesky junk folders! I've settled on a clear course of action after deliberating on Ant Farm's goodwill and its tendencies for cultural rumination. This includes the democratising approach of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and McLuhan's paradoxical cues regarding technology. As noted earlier in this article, my wish to form a community dedicated to ridding the planet of online spam and advertising must materialise. As the founding member of my cooperative, I name it the Agitated Citizens Against Spam Association (ACASA). At the outset it will be quite a low-rent enterprise, but with tenacity and urgency, ACASA will welcome and support members from all over the globe. Together we will conquer this scourge. (Note to self: design and fund the manufacturing of professional business shirts and name badges for all members).[34] Enough about ACASA for now—perhaps it's time to revisit Ant Farm and unearth some strategies to fuel my campaign.

As I continue to reflect on Ant Farm's healthy irreverence, I've come to realise that, alongside their interest in new educational formats, they were a formative collective of low-tech hackers responding to mass culture, navigating a fine line between celebration and critique. Their work often targeted regulated media and established architectural models by showcasing a unique countercultural stance. Of course, there's an array of hacker communities with differing motivations. Journalist and social scientist Rafael Evangelista has suggested that "some hacker traditions, such as that of California, succeeded in creating a dialogue and production in conjunction with counterculture, which was determinant for the cyberculture that followed."[35] The term *hacker* traditionally provoked negative undertones attached to lawbreaking, a subversive gesture, flipping the bird to authority.[36] When I refer to Ant Farm as hackers, I don't identify them as pirates plundering networks. Rather, I recognise them as a countercultural collective of pioneers who attempted to construct their own version of utopia.

In my view, Ant Farm's manipulation of technology and materials was in the service

of witty and bizarre projects that seemed to hover on the periphery of the art and architectural worlds. Maybe they pursued a knowing naivety as a type of smokescreen for some of their wacky projects. As Michael Sorkin, Professor of Architecture at City College of New York has suggested, “Ant Farm engaged the most powerful aspect of the joke: the possibility of splicing things that in conventional atmospheres would be considered impossible to join.”[37] Or perhaps it was simply the rebellious, outsider attitude they embraced, a group of stoners attempting to outdo one another with the most oddball propositions.

It’s no surprise to find that Stewart Brand wrote an essay in 1972 on hackers, “Spacewar: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death Among the Computer Bums,” published in *Rolling Stone*. In the opinion of art historian Roger Rothman, Brand’s influential *Whole Earth Catalog* had already been “explicitly designed as a countercultural force aimed at ‘hacking’ the system of consumer capitalism from within.”[38] In a similar way, ACASA could hack the computer systems of adware developers to orchestrate a type of reverse engineering; this would be a truly satisfying outcome. Yet do I have the capability to become such a hacker? I’m not sure. Stewart Brand described hacking as “about as straight as you’d expect hotrodders to look. It’s that kind of fanaticism. A true hacker is not a group person. He’s a person who loves to stay up all night, he and the machine in a love-hate relationship.”[39] Checking a couple of those boxes certainly sounds like fun, although I may have to work on my “hotrodder” demeanour. I’m not really into tattoos but there must be other ways to tweak my look. (Note to self: although Ant Farm’s tendency for hacking is an apt model to appropriate, I lack the knowledge to translate this idea into a practical application. Purchase a copy of *Computer Hacking for Dummies*).

Cadillac Ranch

Hovering in their limbo somewhere between established architecture and the art world, Ant Farm positioned themselves as innovative interrupters. Their amateur and absurd brand of hacking as a form of cultural assessment was characterised in collective’s iconic monument to the automobile, *Cadillac Ranch* (1974). Commissioned by patron Stanley Marsh III and installed on his property in Amarillo, Texas, Ant Farm partially buried ten Cadillacs nose first in a meticulous line alongside

the US's most famous highway, Route 66. Created over six weeks and with a budget of $3,000 ($300 per car), the work has since become an iconic roadside attraction.[40] With each car set on an angle with tail fins exposed, the site-specific work documents the evolution of Cadillac models from 1949 to 1964.[41]

Figure 18. Ant Farm, *Cadillac Ranch*, 1974. Site-specific installation, Amarillo, Texas.

Cadillac Ranch was not simply a form of overt hacking, despite its puncture of the landscape. The meaning of this extraordinary roadside landmark was also ambiguous in the sense that the viewer cannot be sure if Ant Farm transformed the vehicles into a static celebration of the automobile, or a memorial before its time. Was it a premonition of the demise of car culture with environmental connotations, while surveying a timeline of planned obsolescence? When discussing *Cadillac Ranch*, Michael Sorkin noted, "The Stonehenge quality precisely suggests the work of a cult willing to go to absurd lengths in worship of an object of totally strange character."[42] This has me curious; could ACASA also be deemed an oddball cult? I don't mind if my modest organisation is recognised as such. I'm curious if it will be entitled to the same tax concessions as registered religious institutions. (Note to self: call the Taxation Office for verification).

Objects on life support: a thematic revival

Shrewdly, *Cadillac Ranch* tapped into a broader cultural milieu at a time when Americans started to engage with history on a personal level, drawing connections between the past and their own lives. It appears Ant Farm's site-specific work became a type of nostalgic experience for Americans when reruns and revisits in television, fashion, and music were part of the 1970s zeitgeist. The work of philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) offers a compelling framework for understanding this recovery and memorialisation of historical objects and media, noting that "our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history."[43] Benjamin's notion of redemption in this passage of text did not necessarily refer to a literal emancipation or liberation, but rather a subversive revival that parts company with the domineering regulators of the past. I like to view this as a type of resuscitation of themes and objects, a resistance to, or hack of, planned obsolescence and consumer capitalism that fits neatly with the ethos of Ant Farm.

Another early sculpture from the same series as *Belts on when Seated* and *Survival Kit* is *Not Pop* (1999). Like *Cadillac Ranch*, this absurdist Duchampian fusion of readymade objects was intended as a memorial and celebration of elements, coalesced with a certain nostalgic aesthetic, albeit on a much more modest scale. *Not Pop* features a pristine floral shopping cart, seemingly transported from the 1970s via a time machine to the present. This alone is a jarring object for the viewer; however, the peculiarity is propelled further with the incisive addition of a car steering wheel lock securely stretched across the frame of the shopping cart.

Figure 19. Michael Lindeman, *Not Pop*, 1999. Vintage shopping cart, car steering wheel lock, dimensions variable. Photographer: Silversalt.

Not Pop is a consciously futile attempt to circumvent fashion and its interdependence

with history and social authority. Analogies are evident in the work of Benjamin, who noted, "Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past. This jump, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands."[44] Both *Not Pop* and *Cadillac Ranch* sardonically choose to ignore the commands of the ruling class to "brush history against the grain."[45] The works discussed here aim to sidestep power structures instead of reinforcing them. In our own ways, both Ant Farm and I have elected what objects will be assigned merit—not for their inherent value, but for their ability to disrupt expectations, critique cultural authority, and expose the absurdity embedded in everyday artifacts.

Phantom Dream Car

Ant Farm's fascination with the automobile, which was ingrained in the American allegory, continued with *Media Burn* (1975). Slyly taking advantage of a slow day in the media's news cycle, they staged an event on July 4 (Independence Day) in a rented parking lot at the Cow Palace, an indoor arena located south of San Francisco.[46] Colliding a car into a wall of televisions was the theme for Ant Farm's low budget, futuristic concept, alongside the sale of promotional souvenirs, programs, and T-shirts.

Media Burn was an ambitious production, which featured a customised 1959 Cadillac El Dorado Biarritz dubbed the Phantom Dream Car. A video camera was installed in the purpose-built roof-mounted tail fin and connected to a video monitor on the dashboard, which was in fact the only means of navigation for the drivers. Preparation for the *Media Burn* event was considerable. Aside from modifications made to the Phantom Dream Car, Ant Farm mailed provocative press releases that promised a media event to all the local TV and radio stations, newspapers, and magazines. With deadpan seriousness, a President John F. Kennedy impersonator arrived in a Lincoln limousine to deliver a speech (more than ten years after the real President's death). The impersonator was Doug Hall from T.R. Uthco, a collective that collaborated with Ant Farm frequently. The speech referenced "mass media monopolies" controlling the flow of information, and its grip over people in a "nation addicted to media."[47]

Figure 20. Ant Farm, *Media Burn,* 1975. Performance at the Cow Palace, San Francisco, July 4, 1975.

Watched by several hundred spectators and news crews, the 'artist dummies' Curtis Schreier and Doug Michels then drove the Phantom Dream Car through a twenty-foot-high pyramid comprised of forty-two flaming televisions. Video cameras documented the live impact of the Cadillac ploughing through the blazing televisions, resulting in, as curator Steve Seid wrote, "an image reproduced in art magazines, wildly popular postcards, and even a well-travelled music video,"—so much so that he wondered whether the image's wide circulation would "foil its own critique. Or was it supposed to?"[48] In response to Seid's query I suggest that through gaining broad attention for *Media Burn*, Ant Farm masterfully achieved their objectives. If not subverting commercial concerns of media networks, the work at least illuminated the collective control of television, as well as the apathy it induced. Local reporters present for the performance and the news anchors back at the studio were left bewildered, an added dimension to the hilarity of Ant Farm's compilation video of documentation, which featured some of the news broadcasts.[49] *Media Burn* exemplified Ant Farm's flair for an astute harnessing of the system it opposed—the ultimate hack.

The clash between space-age aspiration and do-it-yourself ingenuity, embodied by Ant Farm's Phantom Dream Car from the *Media Burn* event, was a recurring theme across

many of their elaborate projects. Some of these low-tech, sci-fi inspired concepts materialised in works such as *Truckstop Network* (1970), which featured the decked-out Media Van, and the futuristic *House of the Century* (1971–73).[51] These, like most of Ant Farm's activities, employed materials and ideas appropriated from popular culture as a type of counter to dominant structures. This countercultural utopian vision aligns with Rafael Evangelista's observation that "hackers practice a reversal policy, using the very rules of the system ... to establish a regime of collaboration and freedom."[52] Although Evangelista's ideas address hacking strategies more broadly, Ant Farm's approach extended this logic by absurdly repackaging systemic rules and technologies to highlight their contradictions.

Duchampian mischief

Figure 21. Aleks Danko, *Log Dog*, 1970. Wood, metal, chain, leather, casters, 2 parts: dog 45 x 78 x 29 cm, leash 155 cm.

I am reminded again of the oddball sculptures by Australian artist Aleks Danko. Viewing works like his *Log Dog* (1970) reveals similar contradictions—a deft blend of humour, parody, and critique. By animating a dead tree stump with wheels—acting as stubby legs—and pairing it with a leather collar and chain, Danko's creation playfully evokes a tough and chunky bulldog. The log, with its perfectly positioned node of a branch for a tail, strikes a balance between comical absurdity and a probing commentary on artistic discernment. Of course, this work is rooted in Duchampian mischief. It humorously disrupts the division between functionality and uselessness, an aspect of Danko's early practice described as having "an ironic usefulness."[53] His type of conceptual art chimes with the projects of Ant Farm, both pursuing a modified approach, as Danko observed: "Conceptual art was on the whole a very dry affair and my version affords me much more play, silliness, slapstick and stupidity than that other international model."[54] Danko was likely referring to the theoretical conceptual art from New York, but of course, there was definitely a healthy dose of goofing around on the West Coast of the United States by conceptual collectives such as Ant Farm.

Two of my own early sculptures, *Futuristic Walking Stick* and *Thong on Wheels* (both 1998), also hover in this realm of witty repackaging and incongruity. Each paradoxical work relies on industrial castor wheels to undermine the intended function of the objects. The mobility aid in *Futuristic Walking Stick* is subverted by the addition of a wheel, injecting danger and science fiction chic. Personally, I can't wait to glide around with this device in my later years. In the *Thong on Wheels* sculpture, deception is its stock in trade. While the work promises fun by merging leisure footwear with extreme sports, it more likely courts an entertaining yet perilous outcome—footage fit for a bloopers TV show. Both sculptures, like Danko's *Log Dog* and Ant Farm's hacking of popular culture, use absurdity and humour to critique conventional standards of fashion and utility while embracing the playful potential of recontextualised objects.

Figure 22. Michael Lindeman, *Futuristic Walking Stick*, 1998. Walking stick, trolley wheel, dimensions variable. Photographer: Siversalt.

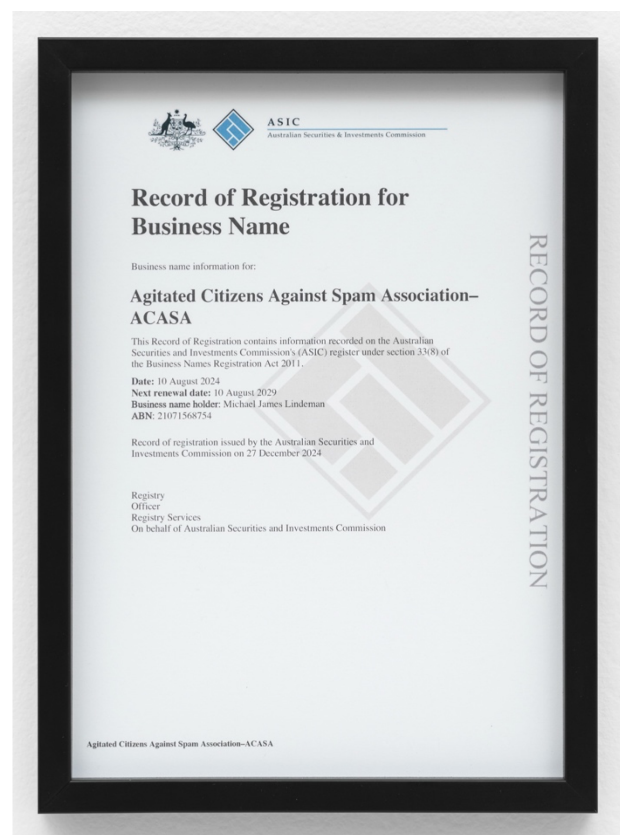
Figure 23. Michael Lindeman, *Thong on Wheels*, 1998. Rubber thong, trolley wheels, dimensions variable. Photographer: Marian Abboud.

ACASA's utopian handbook

My sculptures may have toyed with absurdity and critique on a smaller scale, but Ant Farm took this ethos to radical heights. Did they cultivate visionary ideas or specialise in futile stoner pranks? To my mind the answer is both. I'm sure pot and maybe even acid would have guided the Ant Farmers to humorously expand their outlook and engage in unconventional projects with preposterous and sometimes risky activities.

Nonetheless, I believe Ant Farm was a visionary collective that synthesised counterculture with popular culture through a low-tech communal approach that hacked institutions and their methods. Their process blended critique and celebration with absurdity and intellect, using locations as a metaphor to construct distinctive scripts. Ant Farm's visionary formulation embraced humour to create unsettling works and events that disrupted mass media's one-way stream of knowledge to unravel and critique the American myth. To quote the group's strategy from the BAMPFA archives, "to startle public awareness with events and images... and have inherent entertainment value in themselves."[55]

Thanks to Ant Farm's guidance, my laptop is safe; I'll be leaving my Mitsubishi Sigma Station Wagon parked on the driveway with the steering wheel lock on. However, I have come to the realisation that my anti-spam objectives will take some time to gain traction. There have been mixed results with progress. ACASA is now a registered organisation, and though I'm yet to hear from the taxation department about possible tax concessions, I did recently receive a notice of audit. This could be a sign that my query is moving up the department's list of priorities. There have been delays with my order for business shirts and name badges for ACASA, which is disappointing but not a major issue. It will all begin to feel real when I put the uniform on every morning, though. On the flipside, I received my purchased copy of *Computer Hacking for Dummies*, which is a surprisingly challenging read. I'm only halfway through it.


ASIC
Australian Securities & Investments Commission

Record of Registration for Business Name

Business name information for:

Agitated Citizens Against Spam Association–ACASA

This Record of Registration contains information recorded on the Australian Securities and Investments Commission's (ASIC) register under section 33(8) of the Business Names Registration Act 2011.

Date: 10 August 2024
Next renewal date: 10 August 2029
Business name holder: Michael James Lindeman
ABN: 21071568754

Record of registration issued by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission on 27 December 2024

Registry
Officer
Registry Services
On behalf of Australian Securities and Investments Commission

RECORD OF REGISTRATION

Agitated Citizens Against Spam Association–ACASA

Figure 24. Michael Lindeman, *ACASA—Record of Registration*, 2025. Digital print, copy paper, 29.7 x 21 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

Finally, I made two new friends, Greg and Joanne, at the bus stop. They share similar frustrations with spam, so the community at ACASA is steadily building. With

patience, discipline, and Ant Farm as a touchstone, I'll continue to forge ahead with ACASA to institute a liberated community of collaboration against spam. Beware cyber world strangers, we'll be organised and waiting.

[1] Advertisement-supported software, also known as adware, enables its developers to create revenue by systematically bombarding your computer screen with advertisements for goods and services you most likely have no interest in.
[2] Spam is any kind of unwanted, unsolicited digital communication that is sent out in bulk. Often spam is sent via email, but it can also be distributed via text messages, phone calls, or social media. See https://www.malwarebytes.com/spam
[3] *Radical Software* was a primary resource for pioneering video enthusiasts and provided both theoretical and technical information. See Deanne Pytlinski, "San Francisco Video Collectives and the Counterculture," in *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965–1977*, ed. Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 58.
[4] Steve Seid, "Tunneling Through the Wasteland: Ant Farm Video," in Constance M. Lewallen and Steve Seid, *Ant Farm 1968–1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 24.
[5] Pytlinski, "San Francisco Video Collectives and the Counterculture," 60.
[6] Pytlinski, 57.
[7] Constance Lewallen, introduction to Constance M. Lewallen and Steve Seid, *Ant Farm 1968–1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.
[8] Chip Lord received a B.Arch. from Tulane University College of Architecture, New Orleans, Louisiana in 1968, Doug Michels received a B.Arch. from Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1967, and Curtis Schreier received a B.Arch. from Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1967. Hudson Marquez attended Newcomb Art Department, Tulane University.
[9] Pytlinski, "San Francisco Video Collectives and the Counterculture," 57.
[10] Lewallen, introduction, 1.
[11] Ant Farm, "Early Manifestos 1968–1969," Accession no. 2005.14.248, Steven Leiber Conceptual Art Study Center, BAMPFA, CA.
[12] Michael Sorkin, "Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll, Cars, Dolphins, and Architecture," in *Ant Farm 1968–1978*, 7.
[13] Chip Lord, Doug Michels, Curtis Schreier, "Interview with Ant Farm (July 19, 2002)" by Constance M. Lewallen, in *Ant Farm 1968–1978*, 41.
[14] Lord, Michels, Schreier, 40.
[15] Doug Michels, "Revision January 1969," Accession no. 2005.14.240.6.a-b, BAMPFA, CA.
[16] Brutalism was a movement in modern architecture with an aesthetic of unfinished external concrete finishes. The Brutalist style emerged after the Second World War, becoming popular due to an urgent requirement for urban revival. See https://www.theartstory.org/movement/brutalism/
[17] Eli Alpern, "Ant Farm: Historical Essay," *FoundSF*, accessed August 10, 2025, https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Ant_Farm.
[18] "Whole Earth Catalog," Spatial Agency, accessed May 25, 2022, https://www.spatialagency.net/database/whole.earth.catalog
[19] Lord, Michels, Schreier, "Interview with Ant Farm," 49.
[20] For a definition of *Dutch oven* see https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Dutch%20oven&page=7
[21] Caroline Maniaque, "Searching for Energy," in *Ant Farm 1968–1978*, 15.
[22] Maniaque, 17.
[23] Maniaque, 17.
[24] Maniaque, 19. R. Buckminster Fuller was a renowned twentieth-century inventor and visionary. See https://www.bfi.org/about-fuller/.
[25] Holm, "Humour Without Reason," 17–18.

[26] Marcel Duchamp created "rectified" readymades by slightly altering objects. For example, in 1917 he accessed an advertising sign for *Sapolin Enamel* paint and modified the text to *Apolinère Enameled*. The work was a homage to French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, a close friend of Duchamp. See Cabanne, "The First Readymades," in *Duchamp & Co*., 106.
[27] Immanuel Kant, "Comment," in *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 203.
[28] *The Whole Earth Catalog*, ed. Stewart Brand (Menlo Park, CA: Portola Institute, 1971), 1.
[29] "Whole Earth Catalog," Spatial Agency.
[30] Lord, Michels, Schreier, "Interview with Ant Farm," by Lewallen, 53.
[31] Pytlinski, "San Francisco Video Collectives and the Counterculture," 59.
[32] Marshall McLuhan, "The Spoken Word: Flower or Evil" in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (Corte Madera, CA: Kingko Press, 2003), 77.
[33] Marshall McLuhan, "Housing: New Look and New Outlook, "in *Understanding Media*, 112.
[34] Expensive slacks, Oxfords or pumps will not be necessary as we'll communicate on web conferencing platforms, so members will only be visible from the waist up.
[35] Rafael Evangelista, *Beyond Machines of Loving Grace: Hacker Culture, Cybernetics and Democracy* (São Paulo: Edições Sesc São Paulo, 2018), 22.
[36] Evangelista, 25. Flipping the bird is an obscene gesture, demonstrating to someone in an offensive way that you are angry by turning the back of your hand towards them and putting your middle finger up. See https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/flip-give-the-bird
[37] Sorkin, "Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll, Cars, Dolphins, and Architecture," 6.
[38] Roger Rothman, "Against Critique: Fluxus and the Hacker Aesthetic," *Modernism/Modernity* 22, no. 4 (2015): 791, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modernism-modernity/v022/22.4.rothman.html.
[39] Stewart Brand, "Spacewar: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death Among the Computer Bums," *Rolling Stone*, December 7, 1972, 51. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2509556255?accountid=14757&sourcetype=Magazines&imgSeq=1
[40] Lord, Michels, Schreier, "Interview with Ant Farm," by Lewallen, 69-70.
[41] Lord, Michels, Schreier, "Interview with Ant Farm," by Lewallen, 66.
[42] Sorkin, "Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll, Cars, Dolphins, and Architecture," 10.
[43] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 254.
[44] Benjamin, 261.
[45] Benjamin, 257.
[46] Patricia Mellencamp, "Ant Farm Redux: Pyrotechnics and Emergence," *Journal of Film and Video* 57, no. 1/2 (2005): 42, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20688483.
[47] Seid, "Tunneling Through the Wasteland: Ant Farm Video," 31–32.
[48] Seid, 31.
[49] "Media Burn' by Ant Farm", 4 July 1975, West Coast Video Art, MOCAtv, video, 27:02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXY6ocvaZyE.
[50] Ant Farm used the *Media Van* to document roadside happenings, visit colleges for lectures and other events. The Chevy van included a "techno-lounge," antennae, a skylight, and signage. Seid, "Tunneling Through the Wasteland," 25.
[51] *House of the Century* was commissioned by Alvin and Marilyn Lubetkin and built near Angleton, Texas. See Felicity D. Scott, "Bubbles to Stone (and Back Again)," in

Living Archive: Ant Farm/Allegorical Time Warp, ed. Jeannie Kim (Barcelona: Actar, 2008), 139–150.
[52] Evangelista, *Beyond Machines of Loving Grace*, 27.
[53] Barbour, "Story Danko Topic Keyword," 72.
[54] Tracey Clement, "Aleks Danko: A Man with a Motto," *Art Collector*, no. 66 (October–December 2013), accessed 18 October 2024, https://artcollector.net.au/aleks-danko-a-man-with-a-motto/.
[55] Ant Farm, "19?? Depression 75: It's Nothing to Joke About," 4.2MAR.O binder, Accession no. 2005.14.246.29.a-b, BAMPFA, CA.

Selfie triumphs, Ant Farm's DIY ethos, and an Artist's delusions

— by Charles Olstink

Magnificent news: I received an official certificate from Guinness World Records for taking the most selfies. Despite a punishing schedule of celebratory events surrounding this milestone, I still found time to begrudgingly finish my review of Lindeman's essay on Ant Farm.

Lindeman's piece positions his anti-spam crusade via ACASA as a contemporary iteration of Ant Farm's countercultural spirit. The parallels are difficult to refute, particularly the use of absurdity and humour as strategic tools against algorithmic and media saturation. Echoing theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Walter Benjamin, the essay navigates tensions between technological utopianism and fragmented digital overload, transforming personal frustrations into collective, low-tech resistance.

Lindeman draws on Ant Farm's playful yet incisive legacy: its leaderless, DIY ethos and iconic interventions such as *Media Burn* and *Cadillac Ranch*. He proposes spectacle and parody as tools to disrupt dominant cultural narratives and foster communal creativity. Oh, how dewy-eyed. The writer believes this lineage is extended by artists like Aleks Danko and Lindeman's own sculptures, revealing humour as a form of conceptual mischief that destabilises convention and authority. He conveniently aligns these intellectual flourishes with Kant's theory of laughter and Nicholas Holm's insights on the subversive power of humour.

The agonising oddball elements in the reportage, the Mitsubishi Sigma with steering lock, tax audits, and incomplete uniform orders underscore the illogical yet sincere challenge of forming collectives in contemporary times. The writer epitomises the slow, often fumbling progress of grassroots activism—or perhaps this is simply indicative of Lindeman himself.

Lindeman's ACASA fancies itself a torchbearer for Ant Farm's jovial mashup of critique and counterculture, though the resemblance plays more like rehearsed

nostalgia than real risk. His nod to Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* attempts to situate his antics within the rarefied air of media theory and anarchic wit. In the end, this whimsically earnest essay insists that irritation and communal labour might somehow sublimate into cultural freedom and enduring critique. One hopes Lindeman isn't entirely deluded.

★★★☆☆

Next week's review will concern Lindeman's attempt at writing about the boredom of Californian artist John Baldessari. I do hope he managed to stay awake while doing so. I'd hate to have to feign interest.

How to play your own game: The Baldessari masterclass

By Michael Lindeman

If you're an art student still struggling to draw or paint, there are a few possible causes: wrong school, unsuitable teacher, insufficient effort, or a teacher who's given up entirely. You might also have enrolled in a class where drawing and painting aren't part of the deal—a fact that can unsettle some students and completely liberate others.

Artist and teacher John Baldessari (1931–2020) was certainly no slacker, but there wasn't much painting and drawing happening in his classes at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) either.[1] So, what did Baldessari teach if his students were shepherded away from their brushes and pencils? For students in Baldessari's Post-Studio Art classes, the opportunity to challenge traditional hierarchies between student and teacher was a defining experience.[2] Baldessari was empowered by the philosophical mission of CalArts, namely its prioritisation of ideas over traditional modes of pedagogy in the visual arts. He held an antithetical position toward the repetitive methods fostered by art educators of the past, including the sequential teaching of the eighteenth-century French Academy and

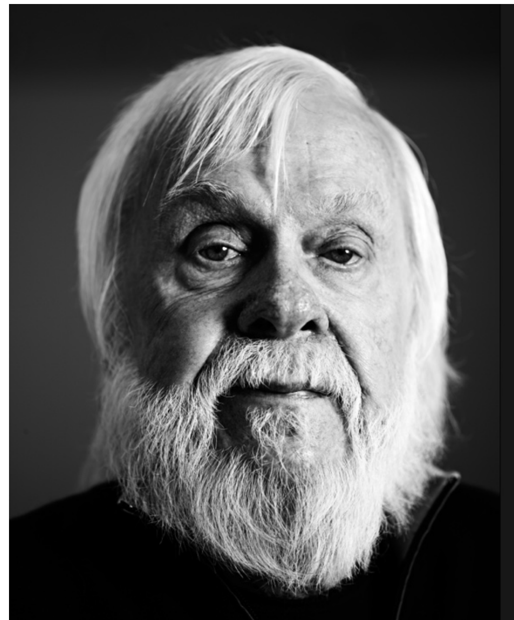


Figure 25. Hedi Slimane, *Portrait of John Baldessari*, 2011.

the art colleges that followed.[3] After all, why insist that students perfect figure drawing, the so-called foundation of art practice, if their real interest is in making videos?[4] I suspect Baldessari's motivations to develop new modes of teaching were initiated by a range of factors, such as his boredom with traditional art education and methods of making art, coupled with a genuine desire to expand possibilities for his students. The following quote sheds light on Baldessari's desire to revolutionise art pedagogy at the tertiary level: "I felt so many things were done wrong in my art education, and I wanted to correct them … I was very excited about art—about what it could be rather than what it was."[5]

Baldessari's boredom, my lesson plan

I've long been drawn to Baldessari's practice and teaching method but only recently carved out time to properly explore his legacy. His influence has subtly shaped my own approach to teaching, which often happens outside the traditional classroom. When I'm not in the studio, I offer impromptu lessons to anyone I sense has dormant creative potential—friends, family, strangers on the street, even acquaintances at events. I see myself less as a teacher and more as an enabler, an agent of disruption, nudging students to shake things up and stumble into their own revelations. In this way, even my initial, fragmentary knowledge of Baldessari's towering presence—both literal and figurative—has always loomed over my thinking, his gentle yet formidable influence guiding how I approach art and education.

It has become clear to me that Baldessari's studio practice, which I consider a specific strain of institutional critique, was tightly connected to the conceptual nature of his teaching. This is akin to my own style of corrupting the educational orientation of students. I think exploring Baldessari's early developments as an artist and his coinciding education could uncover the source of his boredom and the new games he devised, which became the foundation of his long and productive career. Tracing Baldessari's art world manoeuvres will likely reveal how his creative and teaching strategies were set in motion.

Overlooked & loving it

Baldessari was born to European immigrant parents in National City, near San Diego, California. His father was of Italian descent, and his mother was Danish. Baldessari's family heritage and early life as a first-generation American may have contributed to his early inclusion and positive reception in European exhibitions, long before gaining recognition in his native California.[6] When Baldessari discussed his early shows in Los Angeles and New York (which had limited acclaim),[7] he recalled a comment from someone who had viewed his work: "You know, you're a more European artist."[8] Baldesarri noted, "I had no idea what that meant... maybe there's something in my upbringing that causes me to do what I do here."[9] I sense his work had a layered richness, a sophistication and distinction that was incongruous with art being made in California at the time. Baldessari was an anomaly; his ancestry, work ethic, and extraordinary physical height was a mismatch with his peers, a precedent for the trajectory of his career as an artist. He was hard to miss yet often overlooked in California as an artist until the early 1970s.[10]

Baldessari's isolation in National City may have been frustrating at times. Like many living outside cultural centres, he faced the usual marginalisation and exclusion from the in-crowd. That distance, however, proved critical to the development of his teaching and work, shaping his approach in significant ways. Unbounded from the theories, aesthetics, and attitudes of the cool crew, Baldessari was free from social anxieties; he created space for his jovial yet pithy observations.[11] In a 2008 interview with curator and founder of Art21, Susan Sollins, Baldessari explained, "I don't think I could have gotten away with it in Los Angeles, because I'd be aware of all of the art around me and I probably would have been laughed at. In fact, when I tried to show my work around galleries in Los Angeles, that was pretty much the result."[12]

Like Baldessari, many artists embrace isolation, whether geographic, aesthetic, or social, which I find comforting. Excusing myself from certain distractions feels liberating, both for my practice and my anxieties, offering the freedom to focus through self-imposed solitude.

In 2011, I made a painting titled *Artwork "Isolation."* This large-scale text painting

was part of a series created between 2007 and 2012, which included seventy-five works on canvas. Appropriated clippings from the *Trading Post*, an Australian classifieds newspaper, inspired the project, with a particular focus on its "Paintings, Prints & Wall Hangings" category. At the time of painting *Artwork "Isolation"* I was experiencing feelings of isolation, making absurd acrylic meta-paintings that seemed to me as being simple yet cerebral, aesthetically restrained while conceptually expansive.

These paintings occupied an awkward position, not appearing to fit into any fashionable grouping. They challenged and divided audiences—some laughed, others were incensed. Earning me both awards and legal threats,[13] *Artwork "Isolation"* and the other paintings in the series would not have been possible without my wilful isolation, or what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) referred to as a "free self-exclusion."[14] Bourdieu's notion of a type of voluntary isolation is prompted by "those whom technocratic selection would exclude in any case."[15] *Artwork "Isolation"* was unclouded by the judgement of others.

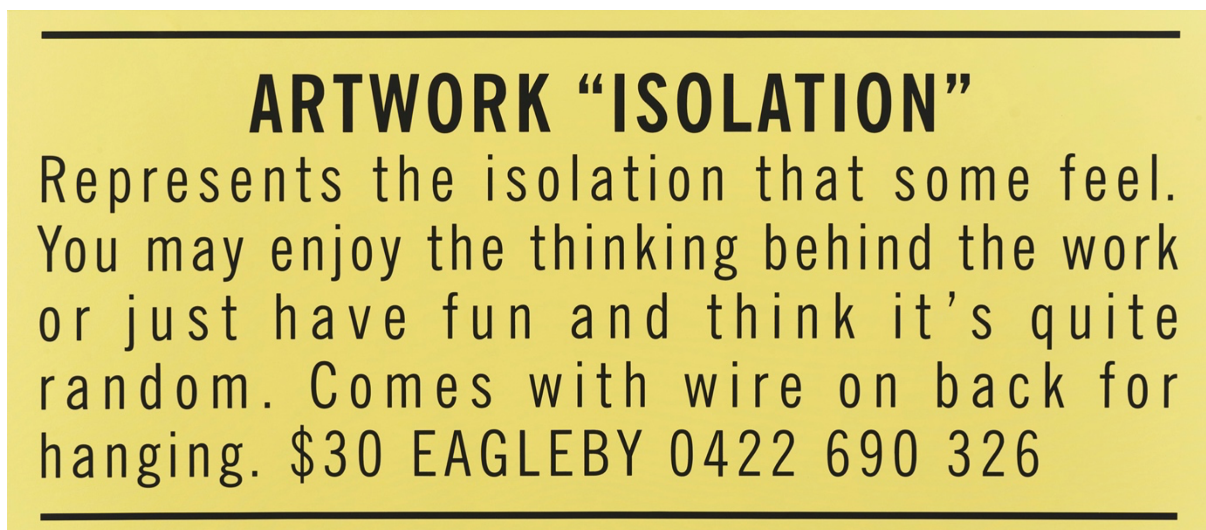


Figure 26. Michael Lindeman, *Artwork "Isolation"*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 74 x 168 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

Art lessons

Nevertheless, enough fond reminiscing about my sanctum of isolation, a place out of step with the status quo, anchored in a world of text and paint. Allow me to continue with an exploration into Baldessari's text-based work informed by his teaching and education. After graduating in 1953 from San Diego State College with a Bachelor of

Arts degree, Baldessari was keen to make a living and began teaching without delay. He then proceeded teaching to the widest range of students conceivable, including weekend life drawing at the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery, public high schools in San Diego, and preschool students at the La Jolla Museum. At 6′7″ tall, Baldessari interacting with groups of preschoolers would have been an amusing sight. His postings included work at a junior high school in a ghetto community, teaching juvenile delinquents for the Youth Authority of California, and classes at a community college.[16] Baldessari's impressive, well-rounded breadth of teaching appointments (all prior to his three significant terms as a professor),[17] dovetailed with further art history courses at the University of California, Berkeley (1954–55), a return to San Diego State University for a Master's in art (1955–57), and then a relocation to study at both the Otis Art Institute and the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles (which both later morphed into CalArts).[18] It's fair to say that he engaged in some serious, boots on the ground training.

One of Baldessari's most significant realisations while studying art history at Berkeley came from his inevitable failure to maintain a meticulous catalogue of everything he had ever read, a lapse that would echo throughout his work and career. This attempt, born of his obsessive nature and desire to impose order on randomness, ultimately gave way to an understanding that fulfilment could only be found in embracing fragmentation. As Baldessari himself observed, "Everybody knows a different world, and only part of it. We communicate only by chance, as nobody knows the whole, only where overlapping takes place."[19]

Baldessari reached this understanding through a process of self-examination, in part motivated by his interest in the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951).[20] Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953, contains writings through which the philosopher recognised that it was unattainable to advance his thoughts in a "continuous argumentative or narrative flow."[21] *Philosophical Investigations* is a complex medley of overlapping thoughts. Reflecting on his efforts to steer his thoughts against their natural tendencies, Wittgenstein observed that this was "connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction."[22]

Integrated with his various teaching positions, Baldessari's art practice clearly traversed in all directions—a Wittgensteinian sensibility. Throughout his early practice, Baldessari worked across many forms: text-only paintings, photo-text combinations on canvas, video performances, and irregular multi-part image works. Regardless of the medium, he consistently drew content from his everyday surroundings. Through this, he aimed to communicate with both his audience and his students. I sense that such an oblique method of threading ideas and materials was a practical, economical approach for Baldessari. Dictated by the time constraints of full-time teaching and evolving as an eminent artist situated outside cultural hubs, he devised a repertoire of readymade text and images. Baldessari's lists and archives were also generously shared with his students as a means of learning for all, prompting discussions, and broaching concerns in his own practice.[23]

Figure 27. John Baldessari, *Art Lesson*, 1964. Oil and mixed mediums on canvas, 172.72 x 144.78 cm.

Early in Baldessari's career the bond between his art practice and teaching was apparent, a symbiotic relationship serving the key objective of communication. For example, his painting *Art Lesson* (1964) was inspired by a copy of a text that described "how to draw things in perspective and how to make them look solid"—a printed page Baldessari had found by chance, while teaching at the University of California.[24] Relying on four configurations, the painting features two landscapes, a still life, and a portrait. Presented as a type of storyboard, passages of text meander across the work acting as instructional considerations for the creation, and critiques of, various types of painting. Samples of the text include: "No light and shade," "Portrait looks flat," and "Things falling out of picture."[25] I believe *Art Lesson* was a formative work for Baldessari, blending text and images in a way that both

mirrored and mocked the uninspired state of art pedagogy at the time. As if to double down on the monotony, his palette—cream and off-white—seemed designed to dull the senses rather than ignite them.

No more boring art

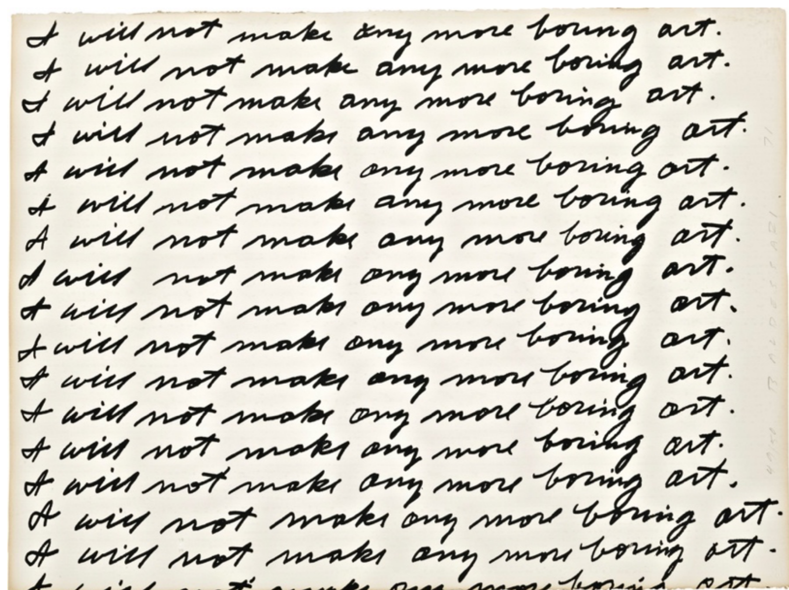


Figure 28. John Baldessari, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, 1971. Lithograph on Arches woven paper, 57 x 76.5 cm.

Baldessari's use of irony in tackling his sheer boredom with traditional approaches to teaching and creating art can be observed as a notable thread throughout his career. Skipping forward seven years from *Art Lesson*, he acted on an invitation from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design to hold an exhibition, for which he made *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971). Far from phoning it in, funding restraints associated with the exhibition prevented Baldessari from attending the college to make or install the work. Shrewdly, he introduced the idea that the students willingly wrote the phrase "I will not make any more boring art" directly onto the gallery's walls.[26] Baldessari had not anticipated such enthusiasm for a passage of text initially scrawled in his notebook.[27]

The students embraced this site-specific assignment, covering the entirety of the gallery walls with his declaration. Furthermore, a lithograph print (edition of 50) was published by the college without Baldessari's immediate instruction, along with a third element of the work, a 30-minute videotape of the performance featuring him monotonously writing the text repeatedly.[28]

In my view, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* was an attempt, although veiled, to mock the rigid, humourless conceptual art of New York, specifically the work of artists

such as Joseph Kosuth (discussed in a previous article in this periodical). Baldessari engaged in the game and returned serve after Kosuth's reference of his work in a *Studio International* essay published in 1969. While he appraised artists making 'pure' conceptual art at the time, Kosuth wrote of Baldessari in a trivial manner: "Although the amusing pop paintings of John Baldessari allude to this sort of work by being 'conceptual' cartoons of actual conceptual art, they are not really relevant to this discussion."[29] One wonders why Kosuth bothered to mention Baldessari at all. Beyond what seems to be Baldessari's playful jab at artists like Kosuth, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* was also, of course, a parody of the futile disciplinary actions typically imposed on students. The work suggested that the sequential teaching methods Baldessari opposed were nothing more than mere boring (and dumb) punishments. *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, the title and content of the work, was a pact Baldessari failed to adhere to—it really is a boring work. Yet this was the game he played, an intentional and ironic elevation of failure, absurdly embedded into an educational context of learning and achievement.

A kaleidoscope of fruits and vegetables

My own guiding of students and studio practice has also merged into a collective tendency. At times I explore and elevate my prosaic environment and experiences, albeit in a manner that is intentionally misregistered—off-kilter with traditional approaches to art education, materials, and techniques. For example, in early 2022 I had the pleasure of a chance meeting with Mrs Kokerspaniels, an elegant European lady—I think she's Latvian. I offered to help with her trolley as we crossed the road after leaving the local grocery store. A large bunch of bananas in her trolley caught my eye and for some reason I was compelled to discuss Maurizio Cattelan's work *Comedian*, 2019 with Mrs Kokerspaniels.[30] On a whim, it occurred to me that it was likely she would find an account of a banana duct taped to a wall intriguing.

After loading the groceries into Mrs Kokerspaniels' flawless 1970s Citroen, she insisted we talk further about contemporary art at the café next door. I ordered the strawberry tea, my new friend opting for a coffee, which she discreetly splashed brandy into from a flask hidden in her handbag. After much urging from Mrs Kokerspaniels, I reluctantly showed her some of my works on my laptop. We then engaged in a minor

tussle over the bill, yet our budding friendship weathered this early hiccup.

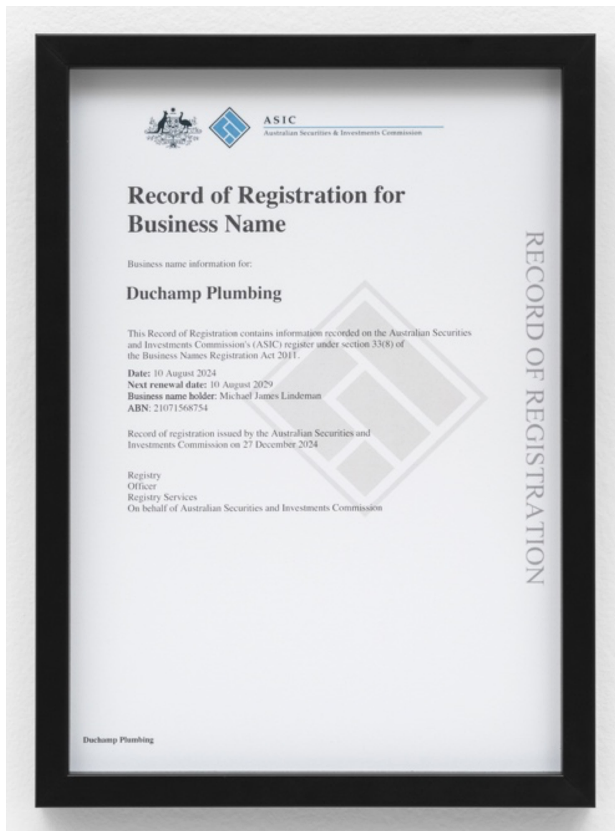
Unexpectedly yet pleasingly, Mrs Kokerspaniels is now a conceptual artist, making incredible ephemeral installations using a kaleidoscope of fruits and vegetables to poetically reference loss, mortality, feminism, masculinity, identity, the body, memory, religion, spirituality, globalisation, decolonisation, colonialism, political activism, community, the environment, sustainability, power, wealth inequality, disability, neurodiversity, First Nations peoples, queer theory, LGBTQ2+ issues, COVID-19 and associated lockdowns, global conflicts, and text-based art by dumb bald men. Like a duck to water, or more appropriately an artist to an open bar, Mrs Kokerspaniels has decoded the contemporary art game with prowess and is working towards her first museum exhibition scheduled for next year.

A semiotic flush: Gary & Duchamp Plumbing

Conversely, my conversation with Gary the plumber when he was replacing our hot water system did not unfold as planned. What kind of a plumber has no interest in Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*?[31] I presented books from my library to Gary of the upturned readymade urinal, archival YouTube videos of Duchamp explaining the work, and a miniature replica made by Australian artist Jacky Redgate that I have in my collection, all without success. Surrounded by a halo of durry fumes, Gary seemed trapped in a mental gridlock. After a pause, he turned aggressive, snapping, "Stop talking about weird art shit while I'm tryin' ta work!"

Undoubtedly Baldessari would have encountered his own versions of Gary the plumber from time to time, so how would he have handled such resistance? I imagine he would have taken a less coercive approach, shown openness and encouraged Gary to explore his own path at his own pace, perhaps even guiding him to feel as though he had discovered Duchamp on his own. Baldessari noted that teaching for him was "to be as non-tradition-bound as possible, and just be very pragmatic, whatever works. You know, and if one thing doesn't work, try another thing ... Extend your hand, that's what you do. Otherwise, you're like a missionary, delivering the gospel and leaving."[32] I'm not afraid to admit that I got it wrong with my sermon to Gary, I feel remorse for upsetting him while he was simply carrying out his job. I allowed my enthusiasm for

Duchamp's *Fountain* and the serendipity of having a plumber as a captive potential art aficionado cloud my sensitivity to what I was essentially attempting. I wish to share knowledge, engage in discourse, that's all. Next time I need a plumber, I'll be sure to call Gary, not just to fix a leak but to 'extend' my hand. In fact, I'll add both Gary and Mrs. Kokerspaniels to the mailing list for my next solo exhibition in Melbourne. It would be such a delight to have them present in the physical gallery space.



ASIC
Australian Securities & Investments Commission

Record of Registration for Business Name

Business name information for:

Duchamp Plumbing

This Record of Registration contains information recorded on the Australian Securities and Investments Commission's (ASIC) register under section 33(8) of the Business Names Registration Act 2011.

Date: 10 August 2024
Next renewal date: 10 August 2029
Business name holder: Michael James Lindeman
ABN: 21071568754

Record of registration issued by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission on 27 December 2024

Registry
Officer
Registry Services
On behalf of Australian Securities and Investments Commission

RECORD OF REGISTRATION

Duchamp Plumbing

Figure 29. Michael Lindeman, *Duchamp Plumbing—Record of Registration*, 2025. Digital print, copy paper, 29.7 x 21 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

My failure with Gary the plumber was not entirely pointless, in fact, it informed one of my most consequential projects to date. I made a piece that combined text and images—a type of brand for a new enterprise, which required me to register my own business called Duchamp Plumbing. That's right, conceptual art meets drainage systems. I designed the stationery, and the hi-vis uniforms that bear a large back print of Duchamp's *Fountain*, and an image of the mischievous artist smoking a cigar on the right-side of the chest.

It's okay to be wrong

In the same way I was able to ameliorate the differing interests of both Gary the plumber and myself by forming Duchamp Plumbing, Baldessari also created an artwork of such blunders. In his photo-text painting *Wrong* (1966–68), he again confirmed his interest in derivative rules and a failure to conform to them. The work on canvas features a reproduced photograph of Baldessari himself, standing directly beneath a palm tree and having the appearance of it rearing from the top of his head.

Below, the word *wrong* is hand painted in black, conceding that such a configuration is incorrect according to any authorised photographic handbook.[33] Baldessari emphasised and disrupted the rules of composition in works such as his deadpan *Wrong*. He questioned why we comply with time-honoured rules and conventions inherited from our parents, teachers, or other authorities. *Wrong* urged the viewer to consider their obliviousness to an entrenched subservience. The work allowed Baldessari to act as a type of social scientist and ask: Why do we comply? And why do we trust inherited rules?

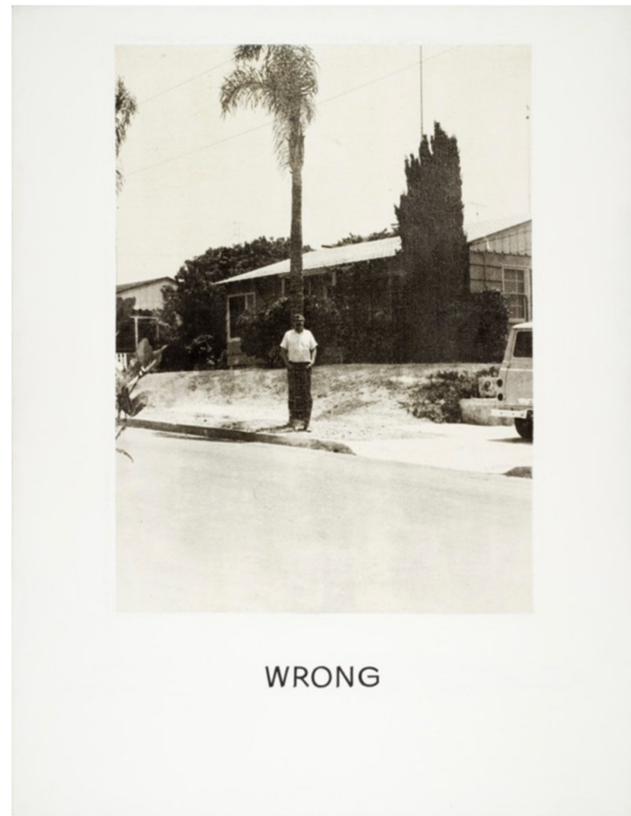


Figure 30. John Baldessari, *Wrong*, 1966–1968. Photoemulsion with acrylic on canvas, 149.86 x 114.3 cm.

If I turn to French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) for answers, he advised that, "To whatever society he belongs, the individual is rarely capable of assigning a cause to this conformity: all he can say is that things have always been like this, and he does what people before him did."[34] Here, Lévi-Strauss's response to the predicament of compliance points to a psychological limitation, an oblivious adherence to how things are always done. In my view, artists and educators such as Baldessari have led the way when drawing attention to the specific context of the rules dictating presentation and acquisition of art. I suggest it is a contract signed by others, constraints that we are scarcely cognisant of—a mindless way of removing complication from our lives and deferring the task of order and assigned value to other people, to entrenched societal codes. Baldessari's *Wrong* addresses this by manifesting an illogical humour, which applied and desecrated convention in unison.

A trademark veneer of irony

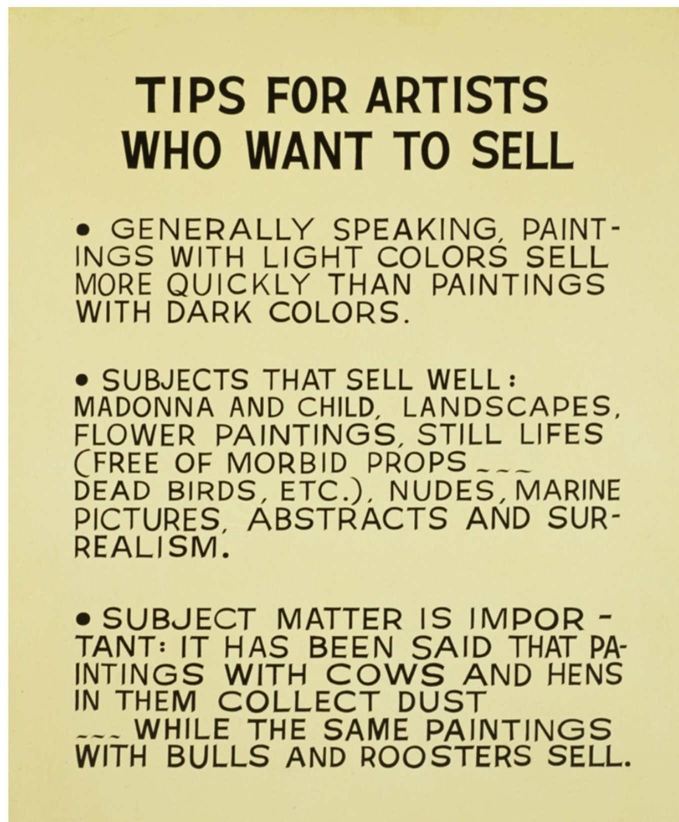


Figure 31. John Baldessari, *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell*, 1966–1968. Acrylic on canvas, 173.36 x 143.51 cm.

In another painting from the same period, *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell* (1966–68), Baldessari humorously continued to educate the audience with his trademark veneer of irony. For this work, he relied exclusively on candid information—text—to counter his disinterest in the conventions of painting, much like his boredom with traditional forms of art pedagogy explored in *Art Lesson*. By hiring a sign painter as an alternative to hand painting the canvas himself, Baldessari forged ahead and played his own witty game.[35]

With brashness, Baldessari aimed to remove any trace of decorative expression in the painting by opting for black painted text on canvas, "a kind of non-aesthetic art."[36] The work advised the audience that lighter coloured paintings sell quickest, along with his amusing yet accurate assertion that the trusty flower and landscape painting will ensure an artist's work is collected. With considerable weariness I still witness this lag in non-offensive, unimaginative but extensively collected decoration around town. Artists, as Mr Baldessari has advised, your subject matter must be selected carefully with the art market in mind. Forget about innovation and disruption, aesthetic appeal is what they want.

Loaded with deadpan wit, *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell* laid bare the rules of the game for achieving commercial success in the art world according to Baldessari, echoing Lévi-Strauss's observation that "culture does not consist exclusively of forms of communication of its own, like language, but also (and perhaps mostly) of rules

stating how the ‘games of communication’ should be played both on the natural and on the cultural levels.”[37] By offering practical yet absurdly reductive tips, I propose that Baldessari illuminated how these cultural rules operate not only within art but also across the broader social landscape, where success often hinges on the careful navigation of tacit expectations.

Although *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell* offered pragmatic advice for aspiring artists seeking commercial success, Baldessari paradoxically failed to adhere to the logic he outlined in the painting. Reluctant to contribute to such formulaic mediocrity, it became clear that his wry critique of the art market left little room for compromise, resulting in the exclusion of his own works. As the artist himself explained in an interview with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, “A lot of my early works were text-only pieces. Of course, that didn’t work out so well. It was a real challenge for me to get texts and photographs into galleries and have them accepted as art.”[38]

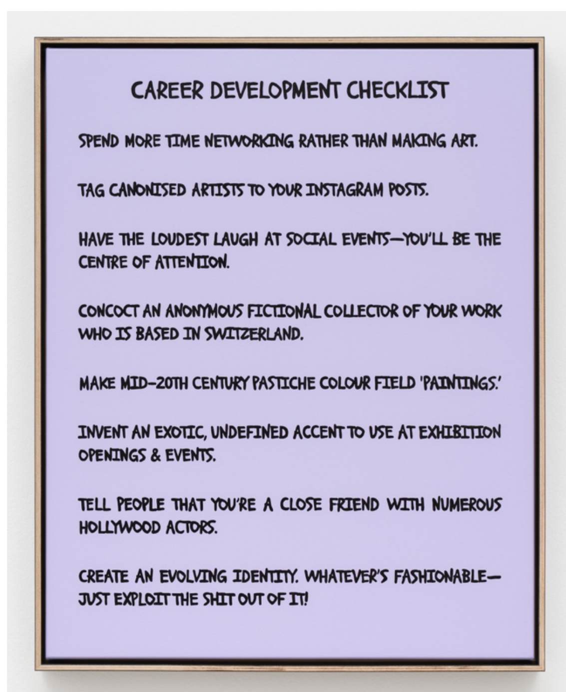


Figure 32. Michael Lindeman, *CAREER DEVELOPMENT CHECKLIST*, 2025. Acrylic on linen, 75 x 60 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

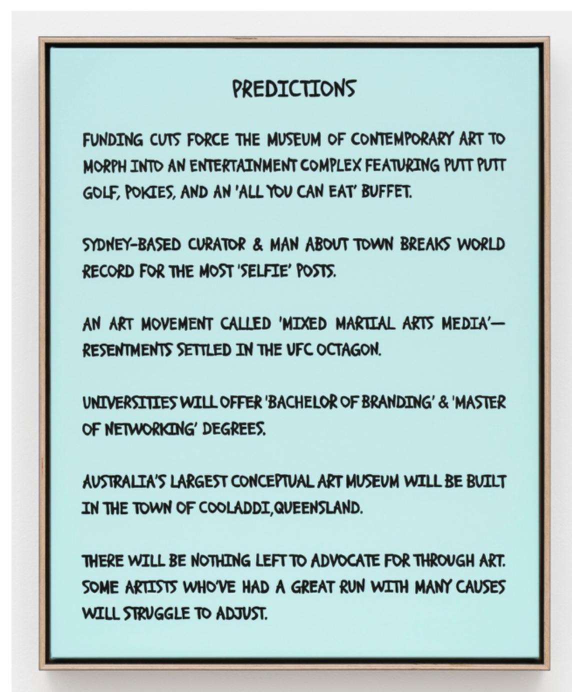


Figure 33. Michael Lindeman, *PREDICTIONS #1*, 2025. Acrylic on linen, 75 x 60 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

While Baldessari outsourced the painting of his text works, I have kept the process inhouse and painted mine by hand. A suite of acrylic on linen works made in 2025 feature a *Career Development Checklist*, absurd *Predictions* for the art world, and a

deadpan self-help manifesto for artists. Like *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell*, the series refuses to hide behind decorative aesthetics. Consisting of stark, black-painted script hovering over flat pastel backgrounds as defiant declarations, the works are intended to catch viewers somewhere between a deadpan grin and a quiet revelation.

Career Development Checklist offers a generous compendium of tactics artists might employ to achieve heightened levels of social and commercial success—methods as shameless as they are effective. Trust me, they work. I've witnessed many players who never let dignity get in the way of a good opportunity enjoy the spoils of such strategies. *Predictions #1* from the same series takes Baldessari's parody in works such as *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell* and injects it with a full dose of absurd prophecy. One can't be accused of playing it safe with this work—there's no slipping quietly into institutional expectations here. The work flirts with sincerity while embracing mischief, landing in an ambivalent, oddly satisfying space that leaves humour vulnerable to exclusion.

Artworld Success Seminar

Inspired by Baldessari's early, unsuccessful text-based works, I sought to confront what I perceived as an enduring bias toward aesthetics over ideas—a tendency reinforced by most cultural gatekeepers (curators and galleries) and, in turn, the art market itself. Or is it the other way around? My aim was to challenge the exclusionary practice of sidelining text and humour in art. Using the format of newspaper classified advertisements, I developed a series of hand-drawn, text-based works.

The drawings lampooned the printed template of tabloid media and reported on the passing of various art movements, seeking same, and other art related announcements. One specific drawing from the collection of twenty-six works was *Artworld Success Seminar* (2019). Adjacent to Baldessari's *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell*, which offered guidance on colour selection and commercially viable subject matter, *Artworld Success Seminar* tackled the elephant in the room: the social and political considerations artists must navigate to have their work collected, included in curated exhibitions, or acknowledged by their peers. The text-based drawing exposed the systems an artist must traverse beyond the creation of the work.

Figure 34. Michael Lindeman, *Art Classifieds*, 2018. Installation view, dimensions variable. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

Artworld Success Seminar was initially exhibited in a gallery context. Its documentation was then shared widely across various digital platforms, illegally pasted up around urban spaces as Bill Posters, and distributed via exhaustive letterbox drops to promote what I anticipated would be a modest, intimate event in a public venue. The seminar was conceived to reveal insights into “How to jump through hoops,” techniques to “Finesse your phony smile,” and “Air kissing demonstrations,” along with other essential recommendations for ambitious artists. The objective of the event was to share methods in outmanoeuvring engrained intolerance towards artists who create innovative, specifically text-based art laced with wry humour. It was a guide for such artists to obtain agency and claim their rightful place as cerebral contributors to the decorative landscape of contemporary commercial art.

I submitted expressions of interest to a handful of other gallery spaces in my community to present the seminar. On previous visits to view exhibitions at these sites I was often met with a cold blankness that conveyed the message: You’re not part of our club; you don’t belong to our clique (fuck off). Ouch. Still, I decided it was a kind gesture to extend my hand in friendship and shared interest, following the Baldessari blueprint. By some strange alignment of the stars, the venues I approached were all coincidentally developing comprehensive programs addressing the exclusion of artists working with text and humour. It felt like a festival was in the making—the perfect

platform for my seminar. Yet to my disappointment, most of my applications were met with silence, save for a couple of emails with "APPLICATION REJECTION" typed in the subject line. The body of the emails was just as empty as the greetings I typically receive at their exhibition openings.

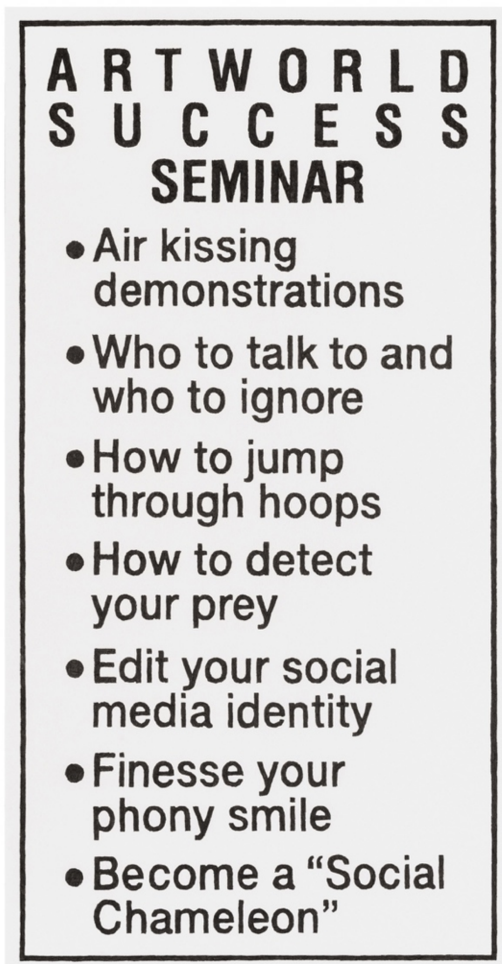


Figure 35. Michael Lindeman, *Artworld Success Seminar*, 2019. Archival pen on watercolour paper, 59.2 x 31 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

Slightly discouraged by the exclusion of my *Artworld Success Seminar* concept, it was time to recalibrate. Never one to dwell on disappointments, I reluctantly sold my garden gnome collection on eBay and made considerable charges to my credit card. I was then able to invest in ultra-white dental veneers, a fashionable toupee, a shiny burgundy polyester suit, and a state-of-the-art wireless headset. These crafty amendments allowed me to manufacture a brand—it was time to give the audience what they wanted. Thankfully, my career as an educator has now reached new frontiers, mirroring Mrs. Kokerspaniel's meteoric rise in market and institutional acclaim.

The *Artworld Success Seminar* has become much more than a preliminary promotional drawing; it is now a far-reaching speaking tour with sold out events in most museums across Australia and many regional galleries. Even the consultants and arts administrators who opted out of a Fine Arts degree but somehow still hold the keys to major collections and museum rosters are on board. They're also 'liking' me on their prominent Instagram accounts—we all know the opportunities that will generate. I'm feeling '#blessed' now. And guess what? I've swayed Gary the Plumber! Next year he'll be joining and overseeing operations at Duchamp Plumbing while I strut the stage. He also mentioned that he cleared the back of his garage to make a studio and plans to experiment with some PVC drainage pipe sculptures. Very exciting!

My manager has scheduled a tour of North America and Europe to showcase the seminar, and we're currently in negotiations with a television network for a special live recording. With Baldessari as a touchstone, I'm learning how to play my own game while educating others, developing strategies to evade inhospitable environments, sidestepping cliques, and entertaining myself and peers.

Bonita Ely's nectar of the gods

Figure 36. Bonita Ely, *Murray River Punch*, 1980.

Figure 37. Bonita Ely, *Murray River Punch*, 1980.

However, it would be wrong to credit all my recent achievements with the *Artworld Success Seminar* solely to Baldessari's wisdom. I think Australian artist and educator Bonita Ely (b. 1946) also inspired me greatly while supervising both my honours year and master's studies. Under the guidance of Ely, I became aware of her seminal work *Murray River Punch* (1980), but because my studio practice was drifting across assemblage, drawing, painting and installation at the time, I was too dialled-in to consider performance as a mode of working. On reflection, becoming aware of Ely's *Murray River Punch* performance certainly reverberated through *Artworld Success Seminar* many years later.

Emerging from a humble idea and initial exclusion, the *Artworld Success Seminar* is an earnest attempt to educate the widest audience possible. By contrast, Ely's *Murray River Punch* performances relied on overt humour and irony to simultaneously educate and critique. While the touring seminar navigates the complexities of self-branding and career strategies in art, Ely's work branched out further, serving as an incisive commentary on ecological degradation and industrial waste. Her performance took shape as a parody of a supermarket cooking demonstration complete with

background music to conjure a pleasant ambience.[39]

First performed in the Student Union foyer of the University of Melbourne, and later in 1980 in Adelaide's Rundle Mall, Ely's kooky preparation of the *Murray River Punch*, an unpalatable concoction of water, urine, faeces, salt, carp bones, and agricultural chemicals, was obviously a biting satire on the environmental exploitation perpetuated by capitalist agricultural systems.[40] Documentation of the performance on the artist's website depicts a smiling, virtuous Ely ladling the hideous beverage to bemused onlookers. The sarcasm is confirmed in the *Murray River Punch* handout—the recipe—where Ely refers to the refreshment as "nectar of the gods."[41]

Ely's spoof blurred the lines between entertainment and education, which is echoed in the performative elements of the *Artworld Success Seminar*. *Murray River Punch* leveraged performative tools to critique the sociopolitical consequences of environmental neglect. Despite overlaps in the delivery of both works, Ely's ecological focus offered a counterpoint to the seminar's emphasis on navigating art world hierarchies.

I argue that *Artworld Success Seminar*, rooted in the spirit of critique and education, shares a conceptual lineage with both Ely's incisive performances and Baldessari's inclusive pedagogy. While Ely's *Murray River Punch* focused sharply on ecological appraisal, its satirical delivery resonates with the performative strategies that underpin the seminar. These intersecting approaches to performance as a vehicle for critique are not only reflective of Baldessari's influence but also of the potential for art to blur boundaries, challenge conventional modes of art pedagogy, and motivate students.

Baldessari razes hierarchies

Building on this notion of pedagogy as performance, Baldessari's time at CalArts marked a pivotal moment in his career, where his inclusive teaching methods crystallised into a radical approach. It was as if the decisive experiences that had formed his artistic and educational philosophy obtained a location to fully unfold. Teaching at CalArts enabled Baldessari to stimulate a reciprocal, inclusive community.

It was an environment where hierarchies were razed and distinct disciplines shunned.[42] In a sense, this was his countermove or reply to anyone who had blocked his path and actively excluded him from opportunities. I propose that gestures of inclusivity and sharing were ironically part of his radical agenda in the Post-Studio Art classes, a departure from what Swiss curator and critic Bice Curiger describes as "features in the art world of that time, which was concerned with winning battles and celebrating the great, serious warriors."[43] Baldessari graciously offered himself as just one of many potential sources of guidance and inspiration to his students.

At CalArts Baldessari would supply catalogues from international exhibitions for his students to pore over, present slides of the most current work being made, coordinate fieldtrips, and arrange visiting artists to discuss their work.[44] It seems Baldessari made it his raison d'être to embrace artists from New York and Europe as visitors to CalArts. One assumes that this type of openness to a diverse range of art and ideas would be a primary obligation for those who facilitated a gateway of communication and education in the arts—a rapport with Wittgenstein's "travel over a wide field of thought."[45] But Baldessari's openness appeared to be directed outward, omitting authorities of the local scene of California. He obviously held a desire to even a score with certain figures in the Californian art world. This notion was illuminated when Baldessari discussed his coordination of visiting artists to CalArts, confessing, "I thought we had enough L.A. aesthetic and I wanted to introduce another way—probably my way of striking back. I didn't have any acceptance in L.A. anyway, so I drew on all the contacts I'd made in Europe and New York and tried to make CalArts kind of a watering hole for them."[46]

So, what motivated Baldessari to strike back? Why did he feel so notably overlooked? A brief glance at some important curated exhibitions dedicated to Californian artists at the time indicates an unmistakeable blind spot at the very least, if not an intentional attempt to edit Baldessari from the discourse. In any event, he was certainly an outlier for a period. In 1972, Baldessari was included in *Documenta 5* in Germany, which centred around minimal and conceptual art, along with Arte Povera. Bookending *Documenta 5*, between 1971 and 1973 he had shown in Düsseldorf, Amsterdam, Rome, Brussels, Milan, London, Florence, and Paris.[47] The United States was either slow to catch up with Baldessari's work, or he was the target of deliberate exclusion. Despite

the preceding exhibitions in Europe, Baldessari was remarkably excluded from the *Southern Californian Artists: 1940–1980* exhibition at Laguna Beach Museum of Art in 1981, and there was also no trace of his work in the premiere show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1983, which featured significant Californian artists.[48]

Baldessari's work was awkwardly situated in between more fully formed art movements.[49] It seems his inclination for critical discourse ensured his early misfit status, which elicited his exclusion. In a 1970 lecture, French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault discusses the function of such exclusionary systems:

> In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.[50]

I argue that Baldessari's examination and dissection of traditional art pedagogy, alongside his early practice imbued with irreverence and wit, was in fact powerful and dangerous. Baldessari's self-conscious, purely text and photo-text works embodied their own kind of power, which was clearly communicated. He undermined structures of authority and revealed their inner logic, leaving them vulnerable to further criticism, and maybe even ridicule. Accordingly, through his aggravation of the machinations of power and authority, Baldessari was excluded.

Reflecting on Baldessari's formative career—marked by an enduring, inquisitive wit and framed by numerous teaching roles—it seems he had no choice but to invent his own rules if he was to truly fulfil his aims. Not only did Baldessari need to believe in his modes of teaching and trust in his systems to translate his prosaic surroundings, ultimately, he was compelled to devise the game and its rules, albeit customised for his own conditions. The complex backdrop for his art and teaching included being the son of immigrant parents, his isolation in National City far from cultural centres, his extensive education and teaching experiences, boredom, time constraints, and the lonely realm of exclusion.

Like Baldessari, I've had to invent and play my own game—a way to navigate obstacles,

push against parameters, and generate friction with conventional hierarchies. For me, this has meant devising an evolving strategy for a productive, affable career. Mrs Kokerspaniels was ushered into the institutionally acclaimed world of contemporary art. Gary the plumber began uncovering his inner creative being. A hybrid business—Duchamp Plumbing—was launched, followed by an international speaking tour with the *Artworld Success Seminar*. Together, these ventures made clear the need to integrate my various interests. At the core of my identity, I am an artist. From that centre, a spectrum of harmonised roles emerges: a guide for agitation, a conduit between students and other artists, a business owner, and an educational entertainer with an impeccably manicured toupee.

For artists who also happen to be educators in some capacity, I regard Baldessari as a master touchstone, a guiding light for those who seek to create an environment that facilitates learning with an open, playful touch. This sense of play is an acknowledgement that navigating a career as an artist can be, or should be, an entertaining game if we are to be inspired and believe in one's creative journey. Alongside of an artist's consistent back and forth between materials and ideas, like the call and response in a musical composition, the act of railing against traditional approaches to art pedagogy and art making is the long game, yet with patience, it promises innovative and generous outcomes.

[1] CalArts is a private art University in Santa Clarita, California, founded in 1961 by Walt Disney, his brother Roy O. Disney, Nelbert Chouinard, and Lulu May von Hagen.
[2] Coosje van Bruggen, *John Baldessari: Interlude: Between Questions and Answers* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 57.
[3] Jacquelyn Ardam, "On Not Teaching Art: Baldessari, Pedagogy, and Conceptualism," *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 1 (2018): 147, https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0006.
[4] Ardam, 154,
[5] John Baldessari, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *John Baldessari/Hans Ulrich Obrist* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2009), 37.
[6] Sidra Stich, "A Conversation with John Baldessari: Conceptual Alchemy," *American Art* 19, no. 1 (2005): 77, https://doi.org/10.1086/429975.
[7] Baldessari had exhibitions at Molly Barnes Gallery, Los Angeles (1968), Eugenia Butler Gallery (1970), and Richard Feigen (1970). See Sidra Stich, "A Conversation with John Baldessari," 76.
[8] Stich, 77.
[9] Stich, 77.
[10] Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 58.
[11] Baldessari felt there was only one style of working in California, characterised by artists at the Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles (1957-66) See Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 57.
[12] John Baldessari, "Just an Artist," by Susan Sollins, *Art21*, accessed August 12, 2025, https://art21.org/read/john-baldessari-just-an-artist/.
[13] In 2010, I was awarded the Sir John Sulman Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) for a column of text paintings based on classified ads. While standing in front of the work, a viewer called one of the phone numbers displayed on a painting and alerted the original advertiser. The advertiser then threatened both the AGNSW and my representing gallery with legal action. I'm not sure whether the advertiser was concerned about a breach of privacy or believed I was exploiting them in some way. I was reminded of the late Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn (1939–1993). His *Value-Added Landscape* series—described by Burn as "collaborations"—featured anonymous amateur paintings sourced from second-hand shops, overlaid with Perspex panels bearing text. Using readymade paintings in this way, Burn was accused of "parasitical" activity. See Ann Stephen, "Seeing Between the Lines," in *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn*, ed. Ann Stephen (Sydney; Melbourne: Power Publications; Monash University, 1996), 13.
[14] Pierre Bourdieu, "Culture and Politics," in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 405.
[15] Bourdieu, 405.
[16] Baldessari, "Just an Artist."
[17] Baldessari acted as professor at the University of California, San Diego from 1967 to 1970, at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) from 1970 to 1988, and at University of California, Los Angeles from 1996 to 2007.
[18] Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 11.
[19] Bruggen, 11.
[20] Marcia Tucker and Robert Pincus-Witten, *John Baldessari* (New York: The New Museum, 1981), 10.
[21] Gary L. Hagberg, "Wittgenstein's Voice: Reading, Self-Understanding and the Genre of Philosophical Investigations," *Poetics Today* 28, no. 3 (2007): 501, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-006.
[22] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: G.E.M.A., 1958), ix.

[23] Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 75.
[24] Bruggen, 22.
[25] Jessica Morgan and Leslie Jones, *John Baldessari: Pure Beauty*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles; Munich: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Prestel Verlag, 2009), 270.
[26] Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 58.
[27] Stich, "A Conversation with John Baldessari," 80.
[28] Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, 58.
[29] Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy Part II," 161.
[30] Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan presented *Comedian* at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2019 in the Perrotin gallery booth. As an edition of three and two artists' proofs and "certificates of authenticity" the work sold for $120,000–$150,000. See Graham Bowley, "It's a Banana. It's Art. And Now It's the Guggenheim's Problem," *New York Times*, September 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/18/arts/design/banana-art-guggenheim.html.
[31] Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917 (a urinal) was purchased from J.L. Mott Iron Works at 118 Fifth Avenue, New York, a supplier of plumbing equipment. He turned it upside down and painted the name R. MUTT and the date on the rim. The readymade was then submitted to and rejected from the inaugural Society of Independent Artists exhibition. See Tompkins, *Duchamp, A Biography*, 181.
[32] Ardam, "On Not Teaching Art," 159.
[33] Robin Kelsey, "Playing Hooky/Simulating Work: The Random Generation of John Baldessari," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 4 (2012): 757. https://doi.org/10.1086/429975.
[34] Patrice Maniglier, "Signs and Customs: Lévi-Strauss, Practical Philosopher," *Common Knowledge* 22, no. 3 (2016): 416, https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-3622260.
[35] Anne Rorimer, *John Baldessari: National City*, exhibition catalogue (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 29.
[36] Stich, "A Conversation with John Baldessari," 63.
[37] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Problems of Method and Teaching," in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 296.
[38] Baldessari and Obrist, *John Baldessari/Hans Ulrich Obrist*, 9.
[39] Magdalena Olsza Nowski, "Recipes for a Liveable Future," *Esse* 109 (Fall 2023): 23, https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/102902ac.
[40] Bonita Ely, "Murray River Punch, 1980," accessed October 4, 2023, https://bonitaely.com/murray-river-punch-1980.
[41] Ely, "Murray River Punch, 1980."
[42] Ardam, "On Not Teaching Art," 148.
[43] Bice Curiger, "Doubly Detached, Doubly Immersed," in *Pure Beauty* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Munich, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 300. Exhibition catalogue.
[44] Ardam, "On Not Teaching Art," 160.
[45] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ix.
[46] Stich, "A Conversation with John Baldessari," 79.
[47] Stich, 76.
[48] Stich, 76.
[49] Too cerebral to be pop art and too permanent to be Fluxus Art, Baldessari's conceptual art operated somewhere between. See Jan Avgikos, *John Baldessari: National City*, exhibition catalogue (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 20–21.

[50] Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 52.

Baldessari’s autonomy and the only verdict that counts

— by Charles Olstink

Admittedly, I remain perplexed as to why I’ve been tasked with reviewing a piece appearing in the very same publication. It may well be an instance of editorial cannibalism, but I’ve long since discarded the notion that conviction must accompany compensation. The fee is satisfactory. That, in the end, is what matters to me.

Lindeman’s essay reports on Baldessari’s teaching at CalArts and his practice more broadly. We learn that he fundamentally disrupted traditional hierarchies of art education by privileging conceptual exploration over technical mastery. Drawing on Wittgenstein’s embrace of fragmented, open-ended thinking, and resisting rigid academic traditions, Baldessari redefined pedagogy as a space for autonomy and critical engagement.

One could propose that Baldessari’s legacy of playful subversion and conceptual rigour echoes through Lindeman’s multifaceted approach. Teaching, performance, and experimentation merge into a strategic game that treats exclusion not as loss but as creative freedom, aligning with Bourdieu’s notion of voluntary withdrawal from exclusionary structures.

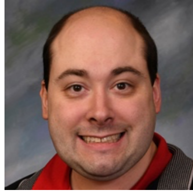
Lindeman’s art school spoof is, for better or worse, legible, even through the faint vape haze of Blueberry Storm coiling around my desk. His work extends what he perceives as Baldessari’s education and wry critique of art world power structures.

The Mrs Kokerspaniels anecdote reads as absurd, theatrical, and depressingly plausible. With productive failures like the Duchamp Plumbing project, Lindeman channels both Lévi-Strauss’s cultural codes and Foucault’s insight that discourse is curated by power structures. Alongside Bonita Ely’s ecological sendups, his writing and practice nods to a lineage of conceptual mischief-makers who turn critique into performance and pedagogy into parody. It’s clever. Of course, cleverness alone isn’t quite enough. Not in my view. Ultimately, it’s my verdict that counts.

★★★☆☆

My editor informs me that Lindeman's next piece tackles Mike Kelley, apparently a grotesque exposé of unfortunate mishaps, trauma and the abject. Heaven help us all.

Mike Kelley is a pants shitter & proud



By Michael Lindeman

It's difficult to know where to begin when discussing the work of Mike Kelley (1954–2012). How does one decode such complex, and at times, seemingly disorderly insights? From my scrappy and misguided undergraduate days loitering around the library at art school, or spinning Sonic Youth's album *Dirty* on my vintage turntable, I have only felt at ease when viewing the surface of Kelley's practice—cute, albeit grimy soft toys, humorous felt banners, caricatured ink drawings, early language-based performances, and rebellious fusions of high and low culture paintings.[1] His sprawling range of mediums made him hard to pin down. A diligent interrogation of Kelley's work was a path I chose not to take—not ready or not brave enough to deeply consider what I anticipated to be a manifestly wretched and unsettling experience.

Figure 38. Mike Kelley*, Ahh...Youth!,* 1991. Set of 8 Cibachrome photographs, 49.85 x 32.7 cm each, edition of 10 (2 Aps).

Following tentative preliminary dips into the arbitrary, messed-up aesthetics across his career, one thing I can be certain about is that Kelley demonstrated no loyalty to any specific media. Although this bumbling observation gets the ball rolling when unravelling his work, there are many necessary questions yet to address. Why did Kelley adopt such a smorgasbord of materials? What murky issues was he wading

through in his work? Why did I recoil, fearful of a more attentive analysis of Kelley's practice for so long? Furthermore, and most importantly, was he really a pants shitter?

Culinary recklessness

Figure 39. Carne asada tacos at Tacos Las Cachetonas, Los Angeles, 2016. Photographer: Michael Lindeman.

Now, prior to tackling the unfortunate mire of my last question, I must make an admission: I too once had a mishap in my pants. It happened while driving home after indulging in tacos doused with excessive lashings of hot sauce. Alarm bells should have rung earlier when I saw the raggedy cook retrieve meat from a cool box (or Esky, as we call it here in Australia). While my accident was a minor impasse, scarcely a trace to the outside world, I doubt I could be labelled a pants shitter. In the spirit of transparency, I feel it's only fair to acknowledge this hiccup.

Thankfully, only one other person was present on that ill-fated day in Los Angeles, and to my knowledge, that loyal soul has kept my little accident safely in the vault. Yet despite their discretion, I find it hard to forget. It may be a trauma I'm unable to repress, and it's causing me great anxiety. I'm even considering visiting a psychotherapist to work through this lingering issue.

Unlike my indiscretion, I assume Kelley's issue was a regular occurrence that required arduous clean up—high pressure cleaners, heavy duty detergents, and so on. I am of course, referring to his felt hanging piece of 1987, *Three Point Program/Four Eyes*, a work in which Kelley shunned the boundaries between high and low art. The work was part of a project titled *Half a Man*, which included other felt banners, black-and-white "symmetrical" paintings, "garbage" drawings, decorated furniture, and soft toy sculptures.[2]

The art of the bogus biography

The banners, including *Three Point Program/Four Eyes*, relied on a technique and felt material akin to the church pennants of Sister Mary Corita, although this is where the likeness ended.[3] Kelley's sordid themes replaced formative tenets addressed by the church to spread its message.[4] It seems Kelley's work with felt sought to provoke, and potentially offend his audience. With what some would consider bad taste, the banner explicitly parades the text "Pants Shitter & Proud P.S. Jerk-Off Too (And I Wear Glasses)." The piece turns shame into spectacle, refusing to let its audience look away from this spectacle of human failure. Through sarcasm and self-deprecation, Kelley transformed a humiliating act into an irreverent celebration of vulnerability.

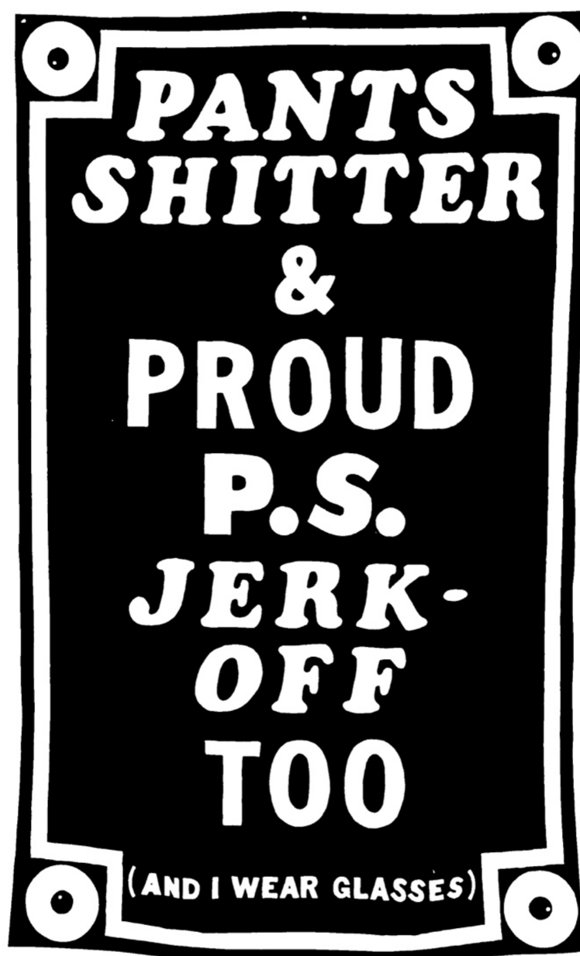


Figure 40. Mike Kelley, *Three Point Program/Four Eyes*, 1987. Glued felt, 238.8 x 151.1 cm.

If Kelley truly was a pants shitter, why would a grown man of his luminous status choose to declare such an unfortunate habit? It's curious that he would so publicly debase himself. The declaration in *Three Point Program/Four Eyes* runs counter to the norms of a profession often shrouded in smoke and mirrors, where some artists craft fictitious, often embellished self-identities. These guises are designed to impress, gain a competitive edge, and shield themselves from the harsh realities of an insecure livelihood dictated by the tastes and politics of cultural gatekeepers. Duchamp would be rolling in his grave.[5] It reminds me of a Sydney artist I once knew, who was notorious for claiming he was friends with Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio after a trip to the United States. No one believed him of course, yet he persisted with the tall tale, nonetheless.

It seems that Kelley followed a more humbling path; whether his pronouncement was true or false, we may never know for certain. I think, however, that fictional narratives, decoys, or even brash bullshit stories were part of Kelley's shtick, merged with a deep interest in varied sublevels of society.

In the *Wall Street Journal*, writer Kelly Crow relayed insights into Kelley's life and work in a sombre article. Crow discussed Kelley's tendency for whoppers about his childhood, including a fable about his impoverished youth. The editorial referenced a story from Kelley's neighbour, artist Diana Thater, who he told that "to get to school, he had to step across an open sewer."[6] The piece went on to reveal that Kelley grew up in a wholesome, unobjectionable suburban community—no soiled sneakers in class for young Mike after all.

I'm sure there are many other artists who have sought to create myths surrounding their biography and career as a point of difference. The speculative account linked to the persona and practice of German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), saved by Tartar nomads after crashing his plane in the Crimea, is an extraordinary example that comes to mind. Covered in fat and felt, key materials Beuys went on to use in his work, the artist claimed he was saved from his wartime wreckage by the tribesmen.[7] Some writers, critics and curators accepted the story, others questioned its factualness.

From felt to filth (and hopefully back again)

On another note, a quick Google search turned up a nearby psychotherapy service where I can access support for the anxiety that I mentioned earlier stemming from the pants incident years ago, which still troubles me. Dr Philpott is a convenient five-minute drive away from my home—comforting, since I tend to keep to my local area these days for peace of mind, if you know what I mean. Dr Philpott's Google reviews are patchy, receiving only two stars, and he looks quite stern in his profile image.[8] Nevertheless, I'm seeking help from him, and if he practises his profession in earnest then I'm willing to give it a go. My appointment is next week.

Returning now to my contemplation of Kelley's labyrinthian practice, I'm sure I'll continue to get lost, but hopefully find my way through the maelstrom of his creative

output in this piece of long-form journalism. I'm certain many themes and experiences from his world will compete for attention. My perusal of *Three Point Program/Four Eyes* has already set the tone: Kelley was a provocateur who invited the audience into what appears to be a humorous, juvenile adventure with homespun materials, which he then elevated into a contemporary art context. However, the trade-off appears to be something dark and menacing. Whether I like it or not, if I want to unravel Kelley's practice further, I must allow it to drag me into the viscous, grimy, and anxiety inducing enclave of the abject.

Through his anti-hierarchical work, it appears Kelley was tackling concepts of the abject and abjection theorised by French philosopher Georges Bataille (1897–1962). Bataille's notion of base materialism was core to the theories throughout his critical writing, where he unmasked the underside of life by straying from social rules.[9] Professor John C. Welchman has elucidated the juncture between Kelley and Bataille: "Kelley is concerned with figures or themes that don't quite fit, or that trespass across paradigms deemed separate or sacred by sanctioned critical interests."[10]

One of the strategies Bataille proposed to pervert the sacred—to transgress the authorised logic that denies our corporeality—was to remind us of a fundamental truth: we are made of flesh, and our skin is merely a partial seal, containing blood, urine, excrement, semen, saliva and other mucus-like substances hidden inside.[11] By acknowledging these bodily excretions, the shared signifiers that democratise humans and animals, we confront the aspects of ourselves that culture often seeks to refine or repress. Bataille referred to our psychological suppression and reminded us of the body in this way: "Man willingly imagines himself to be like the god Neptune, stilling his own waves, with majesty; nevertheless, the bellowing waves of the viscera, in more or less incessant inflation and upheaval, brusquely put an end to his dignity."[12]

Bataille's idea of base materialism, understood as "two classes whose symbolic relative position is that of high and low," contemplated the distasteful and unpleasant.[13] He meddled with civilised pursuits that aimed to steer culture adrift from the body and towards the mind. Bataille noted that base materialism is something "external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations."[14]

The cozy lure of rupture

Figure 41. Mike Kelley, *More Love Hours than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin*, 1987. 2 parts: found handmade stuffed animals and afghans on canvas with dried corn; wax candles on wood and metal base. *More Love Hours*: 243.84 x 322.58 x 15 cm; *Wages*: 132.08 x 58.42 x 58.42 cm.

This notion of the abject that refuses to be subsumed by overarching metaphysical systems finds a striking parallel in Kelley's practice. Works such as his two part wall-mounted and floor standing sculpture *More Love Hours than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin* (1987) demonstrate a certain stubbornness toward philosophical systems through his use of base matter, and of the abject more broadly.[15] This is not to say the piece, which features materials collected from thrift stores and flea markets, lacks in contributing to theoretical discourse. His wall-mounted mixture in *More Love Hours than Can Ever Be Repaid* presents the time-worn smiling and dopey faces of handmade stuffed animals and crocheted blankets. The accompanying *The Wages of Sin*, a cluster of melted candles propped to the side, foils any gauge of value. Together, they imbue the salvaged handcrafted materials with the notion of emotional transactions. As writer Kelly Crow observed, "How many hours of love did the grannies

who sewed such creatures hope to engender—and had they been paid in full?"[16]

Kelley's working-class vernacular in *More Love Hours than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin* appears to disclose an emotional liability for the recipient of such gifts, a declaration of how these now tainted soft toys, once made with tenderness, operated not financially but as social currency. Artist Laurie Simmons observation of Kelley's materials was that "Mike's toys were filthy (I'm sure he liked them that way) … and probably full of baby vomit and snot."[17] Rina Arya, Professor of Visual Culture and Theory, noted that we are repelled from materials such as Kelley's thrift store stuffed animals "because we do not want to be in contact with it; we fear it and it is perceived to be dangerous because of its powers to contaminate or pollute by contact or ingestion. As a result we recoil in fear."[18] If I accept this interpretation, it becomes comforting for me to excuse my initial reluctance to investigate Kelley's practice deeply. It validates my trepidation and reassures that I have not merely been a slacker.

Still, I'm not convinced that a fear of contamination was the bona fide barrier between Mike Kelley's work and my attention. After all, the goofy faces and punchy colours of his accumulated stuffed animals are quite benign, dazzling even. The worn and soiled fabrics ("snot and vomit"[19]) presented in *More Love Hours than Can Ever Be Repaid* and other works by Kelley that relied on similar materials are ancillary to the overall aesthetic of the works—quite inconspicuous. There remains something else that spooks me about his work, which I'm hoping to put my finger on as I learn more.

Although Kelley was a significant figure in the contemporary art world working with the abject—scatological references or other corporeal traces—he presented as family-friendly in contrast to some of his peers. He dialled down the infantile themes, use of jarring objects, and the scatological slightly more than numerous other artists. The United Kingdom's dapper duo Gilbert and George, for example, have long concocted unsettling environments where the divine and filthy overlap in works such as *The Naked Shit Pictures* (1994).[20] While Paul McCarthy, friend and occasional collaborator with Kelley, uses chocolate, mayonnaise, and ketchup in a mimetic manner to signify bodily fluids in his performance works and accompanying photographic documentation of nasty, encrusted props.[21]

Not to be outdone, the Italians contributed their own irreverent flair, most notably the radical anti-art of conceptual artist Piero Manzoni and his edition of *Artist's Shit* (1961).[22] Or the Italian-born, Vienna-based collective Gelitin, whose performances, sculptures, and photographic works offer humorous and juvenile tributes to poop.[23] Oh no, what did big daddy Duchamp set in motion with that upturned urinal back in 1917?

I suggest that Kelley was not seeking hardcore agitation, although undoubtedly, he had his targets. American art critic and historian Hal Foster suggested that the application of an infantile use of the abject to measure archetypal control serves "to mock the paternal law."[24] Granted, it can be argued that authority is a natural obligation of parents—after all, children do test limits—and I think Kelley was likely settling old scores through his practice. Evidently, his Catholic upbringing and his father were among the influences that had acutely impacted him.[25]

Foster's thoughts on the infantile embodiment of some contemporary artists' practice as the "obscene clown" can be applied to Kelley's use of abject themes. He used an amalgamation where his "degradation is pushed to the point of social indictment," and he "accepts this degradation for protection and/or profit."[26] In my view Kelley was cunning enough to realise that a transgressive rupture in the art world needs to be veiled in a way that beguiles the audience, either through absurd and self-deprecating humour (*Three Point Program/Four Eyes*) or coalesced with soothing, nonthreatening materials (*More Love Hours than Can Ever Be Repaid*). In his essay "Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny" Kelley himself hinted at the emotions he aimed to arouse by using soft toys: "a stuffed animal is not simply a model of some agreeable object, a friendly animal or object to weave fantasies around, like a doll. It is primarily a tactile object associated with great physical pleasure."[27] It is this tactile dynamic and imminent gratification that I think Kelley wielded to lure the viewer into his space.

Implicit Memory System: Gnarly yet playful

Through the installation of paintings that comprise *Implicit Memory System* (2018), I chased a similar interaction between viewer and the work. Scattered across the

gallery wall, the eleven acrylic paintings on canvas in varied sizes bombard the space and summon contemplation with a bulging, gnarly yet playful poo font. The title of the work announces a type of long-term memory embedded in my biological makeup, an innate and unconscious set of experiences and feelings toward certain individuals who illustrate an inflated sense of power and authority: policeman, gatekeeper, bouncer, warden, infringement officer, and so on.[28] These grandiose narcissists may have moved throughout my history—indeed, I'm sure they have—yet thankfully, I have no specific recollections of interactions or agitations with them.[29] Do I merely have a chip on my shoulder, or legitimate grievances? Or do genetics determine my temperament? (After all, it's always convenient to hold someone or something responsible for one's antics.) I can't say for certain if the arrangement of text-based paintings is a subversive, fictitious record of events or not.

Figure 42. Michael Lindeman, *Implicit Memory System*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, air fresheners, dimensions variable. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

Relying on the satirical brown poo font layered over baby blue backgrounds, the custom canvas panels of *Implicit Memory System* are tucked between a colourful grid sequence of air fresheners, which also stretch across the entire gallery wall. The artificially coloured air fresheners blanket the exhibition space with a cocktail of cheap fragrances reminiscent of childhood visits to nanna's house. The scent of *Implicit Memory System* is intended to lull the viewer into a closer inspection, in the same manner Kelley's cuddly soft toys and disarming afghans of *More Love Hours than Can*

Ever Be Repaid entices, however, only to reveal evidence of bodily fluids that threaten to contaminate.

The merging of the paintings—as droll and overt as they are—with the air fresheners in *Implicit Memory System*, create a double-edged tension in the work. In *Power of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection*, Bulgarian theorist Julia Kristeva suggests this ambiguous experience of abjection "lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated ... like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion."[30]

Although the allegorical stench of the subjects in the *Implicit Memory System* installation is temporarily quelled by the air fresheners' inevitable futile yet sweet veneer, the work embodies a more complex understanding of the abject in addition to its most familiar terms of filth and waste. In his essay "Abjection and Miserable Forms" Bataille drives at this complexity of abject things: "It is impossible to give a positive definition which is both general and explicit, of the nature of abject things. Abject things can be defined—empirically—by enumeration and by successive descriptions, and—negatively—as objects of the imperative act of exclusion."[31]

Despite *Implicit Memory System* brashly presenting an immediate signifier of waste, the 'low,' I believe this arrangement of paintings, and much of my other works over many years, also grapples with a type of social and professional abjection. In *Implicit Memory System* I introduce myself as the abject: oppressed, excluded. The rationale for framing myself as such would result in explanatory notes, recent statistics, and examples, which I choose not to launch into now. I'm dumb, but not that dumb.[32]

Bataille continues: "But the imperative forces do not exercise their coercive action directly on the oppressed: they content themselves with excluding them by prohibiting any contact."[33] The "imperative forces" referred to here, those conducting the exercise of abjection, are the grandiose narcissists unmasked in the individual paintings of *Implicit Memory System*, including the diplomatic canvas, *Michael*. This is a self-deprecating strategy that I believe assigns me licence to call attention to others. Nonetheless, through my existential experience as an artist who is compelled to make mostly text-based works using a mishmash of absurd aesthetics and concepts, I surmise my periodic exclusion by authority figures is due to some kind of relayed fear

of the other. We need only refer to a plumber's contribution in a conversation about conceptual art with me, for example, as a sound indictor of an artist existing on the boundary of wider society, out of place.

Rina Arya describes this fear of the other: "They are seen to represent a threat, a fact that legitimizes their exclusion from the social fabric. In their otherness they are regarded as abject, lowly, and despicable and… are 'cast away.'"[34] This perspective resonates with me. However, it appears I don't do myself any favours in the art world either—the double whammy! Often, I find myself standing alone at openings, anxiety ridden and awkward. My polite smiles and attempts at initiating conversation are met with swift pivots and, if I'm lucky, reluctant nods. This social dimension of abjection can be excruciating and bemusing, yet it can also be compelling in a perverse way.

Tracking the social networks—usually crews of artists—circulating through the art scene has its upside: the pseudo-elitist cliques, made up of the same faces I've seen around town for over twenty-five years (still yet to say hi), provide fantastic content for my own practice. Nonetheless, I am intrigued to uncover what motivates certain territorial groups acting as cultural gatekeepers to initiate this brand of social abjection. Am I not political enough? Is it my poor social media presence? Are the themes and materials in my practice unfashionable? Is there no room for humour on this turf? Is there a certain art world etiquette I am unaware of? I'm not sure what the answers are, but I will continue to be the abject, waving and smiling. As Kristeva noted, "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them."[35]

Anyway, I think I've dug myself a deep enough hole with my musings on social abjection and the earlier confession about the mishap in my pants. Allow me to return to Kelley in my search to hopefully identify the slippery issues in his practice, which I have baulked at for so long.

Waiting room with weeping woman

Oh, but before I dive back into Kelley's practice, let me share something more

immediate and mundane—my first scheduled appointment with Dr Philpott. I made it to his consultation room without any calamities. When I entered the office and approached the front desk, I was taken back to my undergraduate days at art school with an overwhelming smog of oil paint and mineral turps filling the room. I presented my Medicare card to Rossica, the secretary (it might be a Russian or Estonian name, I'm not sure).[36] She was mopping tears from her cheeks as I scanned the peculiar office setting. Ghastly impasto paintings choked every wall—I also wanted to cry.[37] Timid Rossica returned my Medicare card and offered a clipboard with documents to fill in. As I approached the section requiring details on occupation, for some reason I wrote "artist," and not one of my usual decoys, such as storeman or forklift driver.

The phone rang. Trembling as she listened to a grating rant, Rossica then jumped to her feet muttering something about "art supplies" and "please come back at this time next week." I must confess the episode unnerved me, and the drive home was in the balance—I feared for the unblemished beige cloth trim of the driver's seat in my Mitsubishi Sigma station wagon. Regardless, I made it home and I'll return next week. I need to confront fears and uncomfortable situations. It's the only way forward.

From Turd Man to the Stooges: Kelley's punk-infused artistic awakening

Back to my enquiry into Kelley. He was raised in Wayne, Michigan, close to Detroit. Prior to leaving the Detroit area, Kelley commenced his undergraduate degree at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1972.[38] Long before this point he had already signalled rebellious qualities. His older brother George claimed that young Mike once attended school wearing a second-hand dress to aggravate his parents. Kelley had also taught himself how to sew and revelled in creating comic books with friends, starring characters such as the mischievous hero Turd Man.[39] It seems he was not the right fit for Detroit or his clean-cut parents. As Harald Falckenberg, collector, publisher, and writer explained, "They showed no understanding for their son's artistic ambitions. In their view, artists were communists or homosexuals, possibly both."[40]

Despite this, in his adolescence Kelley was already curious about—and later influenced

by—an overlap between art and music explored at the time by performers such as Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, both from California. Their blend of chaos, satire, and sonic experimentation still resonates with me today. Playing any of my own Beefheart or Zappa records is a guarantee to induce a snigger in the studio, thanks to their absurdist use of language and jarring effect on the listener. Closer to home in Detroit, Kelley was fortunate to become familiar with bands such as the MC5 and the Stooges. These types of experimental, psychedelic rock and punk bands had a deliberate theatrical stage presence, often pervaded with humour. He also noted that during his formative years he was intrigued by parallel happenings in the art world context, unconventional performances by artists such as Joseph Beuys, John Cage, and the Fluxus group.[41] At a time when his blunt loathing for most things was already in full swing, this area of creativity at any rate had Kelley interested.

In his essay "Cross Gender/Cross Genre," Kelley provided a blistering assessment on how he felt at the end of the 1960s:

> I didn't feel connected in any way to my family, to my country, or to reality for that matter: the world seemed to me a media façade, and all history a fiction—a pack of lies. I was experiencing, I think, what has come to be known as the postmodern condition, a form of alienation quite different from postwar existentialism because it lacks any historical sense—there is no notion of a truth that has been lost.[42]

A nod to neanderthals

It's no surprise Kelley's undergraduate years of study had not provided the type of art pedagogy he coveted; he experienced an unease with his surroundings, didn't belong, and was compelled to escape. Kelley made his break in 1976, enrolling in an MFA at CalArts and gained access to teachers such as John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, Michael Asher, Laurie Anderson, and David Askevold.[43] He did, however, archive valuable observations and experiences from his undergraduate degree at the University of Michigan, which would inform his practice much later with works such as *Alma Pater (Wolverine Den)* (1990).

Figure 43. Mike Kelley, *Alma Pater (Wolverine Den),* 1990. 13 felt banners with flag poles, 2 framed oil paintings, 1 2-sided painted plywood panel, 1 basketball, 2 dog bed baskets & cushions, wooden benches, dimensions variable.

The *Alma Pater (Wolverine Den)* installation featured a return to felt banners, this time blue and yellow, adjacent to maroon coloured felt-covered walls—Kelley liked his felt. The work was a humorous denigration of the focus on sports in preference of academics at his university, appropriating content he had collected throughout his degree. Most of the source materials were pamphlets and other handouts associated with the Wolverines, the university's football team. Kelley was affronted by the university's promotion of the football team and the stupid machismo of its fraternities. Hence, his wry subversion in the title of the work in the shift from alma mater (Latin for fostering mother) to alma pater (fostering father).[44]

While speculating on the specific breed of Neanderthal-jock hybrid Kelley was mocking in *Alma Pater (Wolverine Den)* can be a reliable way to waste time—hardly a taxing mental workout—it's not a topic that rattles me much. I doubt it's the source of my apprehension to cast a close eye over his work. After all, it's common to encounter a fair share of cack-handed, self-appointed heroes on the local art scene as well.

It seems that one of Kelley's strategies was akin to a scavenger hunt—a meticulous

rummage through the Arts and Crafts movement, educational institutions, popular culture, subcultures, psychological theories, the American vernacular, or whatever themes and environments he chose to critique. His base materials were salvaged from the everyday abject dumping ground of consumer culture. Kelley was unafraid to slash the boundary, the flimsy social facade, and invite the viewer to witness the oozing underside of his found, reconfigured, and recontextualised materials. I suspect he was often repulsed by what he unearthed, yet he harvested material and ideas from his critiques as primary sources before fleeing to his next project.

Dr Philpott: The side hustle shrink

It's hard to believe a full week has passed already (progress on the article: negligible; editor: circling like a vulture). I have recently returned from my appointment with Dr Philpott, and it was an odd experience to say the least. Rossica seemed less agitated today, she was even humming along to a Jimmy Barnes song that boomed from Dr Philpott's adjoining room.[45] I suppose it made sense: Barnesy and hideous impasto paintings do go hand in hand. I sat in the waiting room until the entire album finished, my eyes watering from the salon hang and ears ringing from the shrieking vocals of our national treasure.[46] The door to the room burst open—almost ripped off its hinges—as Dr Philpott ordered me in. I was confused to find that he was not the professional, suit attired practitioner I was expecting. Instead, Dr Philpott had an eyebrow piercing and was wearing dungarees and work boots, all encrusted with macabre colours of paint. The terrifying aesthetic extended to all other surfaces in the room—the floor, desk, chairs, and an array of stretched canvases leaning vertically against all walls across the space. It was more distressing than any of Kelley's works I have seen. Was this the doctor's romantic notion of an artist's studio? And was it his attempt for the viewer to have an experience of abjection?

I pushed aside a caulking gun on the only available chair to take a seat. Dr Philpott was already seated. He swivelled from side to side on his office chair and tapped a clipboard with his pen. "I see you're an artist," he asserted with a snarl. "You know, I'm an artist—a real artist. The psychotherapy thing is just a sideline." He continued, "What type of artist are you, Michael?" He didn't offer a chance to reply. "Are you one of us, or one of them? Hang on, let me guess—I bet you're one of those conceptual artists." I wasn't

sure if it was a rhetorical question, so I didn't reply. Dr Philpott then asked, "Who do you know in the Sydney art scene? I need to exhibit these new paintings. It'll be the best exhibition in town. Aren't they beautiful?"

Okay, so it appears Dr Philpott is not aiming for the abject in his paintings; he's seeking beauty. But I suppose through its affective power the abject can transform into beauty, or to quote Kristeva, "the sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us."[47] I told him that I didn't have a wide circle of friends, preferring to keep to myself and follow my own path. He then leapt up and plucked a book from his shelf: *Life Code* by Dr Phil McGraw.[48] "Here you go, this will sort out whatever petty problems you have. I need to get back to painting—goodbye." I was then escorted to the door.

Geez, that was an uncomfortable situation that I'll need to process. Was that a failure of duty of care? I'm feeling more unsettled and anxious after the appointment with Dr Philpott. I could be experiencing a paroxysm of trauma. Relax, focus on breathing Michael. Try to repress it. Maybe I'll read some of Dr Phil's book tonight before bed.

Artists Anonymous

Although my visit to Dr Philpott was confronting and didn't resolve my 'pants turmoil,' it did open my mind to the possibility of developing a form of therapy that could benefit artists. I saw an opportunity to assist a cross-section of practitioners, ranging from emerging voices to more established figures, through a collective support group. From my observations and experiences as an artist and educator, there seems to be a shortage of open, safe, and nonjudgmental spaces where creatives can comfortably discuss the roller coaster of a visual arts career.

This idea has inspired me to develop *Artists Anonymous* (2025), a type of group therapy that aligns with what American existential psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom (b. 1931) referred to as "therapeutic" and straddles "the blurred borders between personal growth, support, education, and therapy."[49] *Artists Anonymous* functions as both a two-part artwork and a method for "change or growth."[50] The therapy session environment echoes Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of *Relational Aesthetics*, where

"artistic activity, for its part, strives to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another."[51]

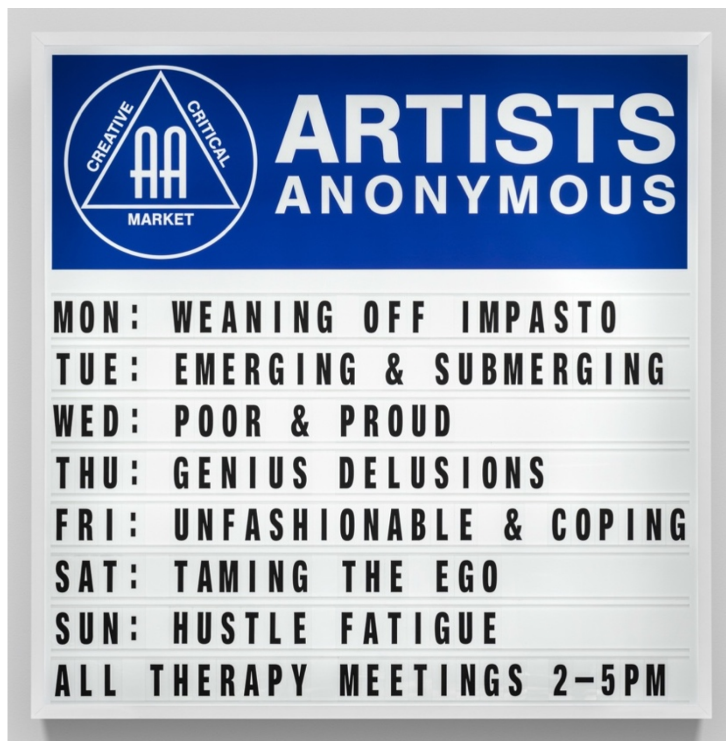


Figure 44. Michael Lindeman, *Artists Anonymous*, 2025. LED sign, transformer, acrylic changeable lettering, 203 x 201 x 16 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

The first component of *Artists Anonymous* is a large-scale, illuminated, changeable letter sign resembling those found outside churches or community centres. The sign displays a weekly schedule of sessions. For example, Monday's meeting tackles "Weaning Off Impasto"—the scourge of chunky oil paint often misinterpreted by collectors as 'good value'. On Sunday, participants address "Hustle Fatigue," the relentless grind of seeking opportunities to advance their artistic careers.

The second element of *Artists Anonymous* consists of eight wooden children's chairs arranged in a circular formation within the exhibition space. Their humour and absurdity are amplified by the miniature scale and customisations: for instance, an L-plate and training wheels for an "Emerging Artist" and paint-smeared boots fixed to the front two feet of the chair for an "Impasto Painter." These modified chairs function as rectified readymades in the Duchampian sense, acting as proxies for the diverse range of artists I've encountered across the Australian creative sector.

Figure 45. Michael Lindeman, *Artists Anonymous (Weaning Off Impasto)*, 2025. Rectified readymade wooden children's chair, accessories, dimensions variable. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

Figure 46. Michael Lindeman, *Artists Anonymous (Emerging)*, 2025. Rectified readymade wooden children's chair, accessories, dimensions variable. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

When Bourriaud discussed "participation and transitivity" in *Relational Aesthetics*, specifically referencing a work by Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. 1961), he grappled with its classification: "is it a sculpture? an installation? a performance? an example of social activism?"[52] I face a similar uncertainty with *Artists Anonymous*. Yalom provided a satisfying resolution to this puzzle for me when he observed, "Psychotherapy is both art and science; research findings may ultimately shape the broad contours of practice, but the human encounter at the center of therapy will always be a deeply subjective, nonquantifiable experience."[53] This idea resonates with *Artists Anonymous*, as the project defies strict categorisation, thriving instead on its ability to blend methodologies and elicit acutely personal, often unpredictable, responses. The work offers a space for failure to convene: a safe, nonjudgmental setting where artists might access therapy and rehabilitation. Like therapy, it is neither entirely defined by process nor by outcome. Instead, it exists in the dynamic, subjective space where art and audience meet, rendering each encounter unique and resistant to conventional labels.

My aim for *Artists Anonymous* was to extend beyond the confines of art, aligning with Bourriaud's broader ideas about relational practices. As he observed, such work

"points to a collective desire to create new areas of conviviality and introduce new types of transaction with regard to the cultural object."[54] Yet my work retains a tension, a tussle between its conceptual and aesthetic elements. Rather than dissolving objects into ideas, I have sought to infuse the objects in *Artists Anonymous* with meaning and humour.

The absurd, tiny scale of the 'toddler' chairs in *Artists Anonymous* reflects a mode of revisiting disturbances behind symptoms to resolve conflict—a process Freud termed *regression*.[55] Similarly, Kelley shifted from the sneering teenage attitude of *Alma Pater (Wolverine Den)*—though still mild compared to Dr Philpott's conduct—to themes of the infantile. These issues were firmly rooted in Kelley's earlier projects such as *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* (1991) and *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites* (1991/1999). Unlike the haphazard arrangement of stuffed animals and grubby blankets in *More Love Hours than Can Ever Be Repaid*, fixed in all directions and enacting a strange echo of Abstract Expressionism for the squinting viewer, Kelley's later works shifted more freely. They jumped between areas of focus, materials, and format.

The museum of flea market feelings

Craft Morphology Flow Chart was made for the Carnegie International.[56] Arranged on thirty-two folding tables, the kind that would be used at a flea market, Kelley presented 114 hand-made soft toys.[57] The objects were placed in an ordered, almost scientific approach; eerie science fiction films featuring humans examining lifeless, vulnerable aliens—or vice versa—comes to mind. Also included was one drawing, and on adjacent walls sixty black-and-white gelatin silver prints hang displaying some of the dolls, each with their own measurement gauge inside the margin.[58]

Figure 47. Mike Kelley, *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, 1991 (detail). Mixed media, dimensions variable. Photography: Brian Forrest.

Recalling Kelley's suite of mugshots in *Ahh...Youth!*, the prints accentuate the overall do-it-yourself museum presentation aesthetic throughout the *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* installation—shabby thrift store materials merged with a sterile archival environment. The categorised homemade stuffed animals displayed as detached, inanimate specimens remain to me a curious gesture. They invite reflection on the communion between the anonymous makers and their intended recipients, situated within a mediated space. They seem to act as poignant mediums for love and empathy.

Midlife Report Card (Selfie)

Much the same as Kelley's development of cataloguing handcrafted toys in *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, my painting *Midlife Report Card (Selfie)* (2018) employs an equivalent taxonomic system. The painting depicts an anatomical diagram at 1:1 scale that carefully organises physical features, embraces vulnerability, and aims to subvert failure. The portrait goes against the grain of our quest for success and highlights a belief that those who are judged as a failure are overlooked. Philosopher William

Desmond argued that “the most elemental functional failure, bodily failure, we find in old age; hence age enjoys no inherent respect for the cult of success. Frequently to be successful means health, wealth, youth, no matter how vacuous. Age, sickness, death, whatever slips outside the norm is forgotten, unnoticed, unmentioned.”[59]

Figure 48. Michael Lindeman, *Midlife Report Card (Selfie)*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 204 x 142 cm. Photography: Mark Pokorny.

Stripped of the body, the distinguishing characteristics of the sitter in *Midlife Report Card (Selfie)* overtly announces one’s psychology via restrained, descriptive text. The painting is a type of reverse self-portrait, and a sense of inadequacy fans a denial of the corporeal or at least masks the body with self-deprecating humour. The word *selfie* in the title of the work is a wry jab at the strategies many contemporary artists are compelled to implement in obtaining visibility—the players who eagerly post social media images of themselves at even the most minor events, hoping for a little ego boost from their ‘friends’ in the comments and a cheeky fleeting hit of dopamine.

If French theorist, philosopher, and critic Roland Barthes was alive today his Instagram biography might read, “Self-commentary? What a bore! I had no other solution than to rewrite myself—at a distance, a great distance.”[60] Here, in his succinct musing titled “Patch-work,” Barthes discussed the notion that his theories, writings, and memories may have no fixed juncture in time. He elaborated further: “Far from

reaching the core of the matter, I remain on the surface, for this time it is a matter of 'myself' (of the Ego); reaching the core, depth, profundity, belongs to others."[61] Reminiscent of Barthes's admission of writing about himself at a distance, where fiction and nonfiction blur over time, and Kelley's use of fictional narratives woven throughout his projects, *Midlife Report Card (Selfie)* similarly presents me through my own vision—a paradoxical portrayal that is both unvarnished and veiled. In doing so, I aimed to foster empathy with the viewer through the self-portrait. I believe Kelley's soft toy works achieved a comparable connection, despite his attempts to strip emotion from projects such as *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*.

Pine-scented oblivion: Sanitising empathy

The conscious act of codification in Kelley's *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* continued in *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites*. In this installation, one large, mutated cluster of soft toys in a range of colours is suspended mid-space. Surrounding this contorted hub of the work, twelve smaller, more spherical accumulations (or satellites) hover, segregated from one another according to colour. Some of the smaller conglomerations are connected, their weight counterbalanced through the hanging system.[62]

It was compelling to discover that the suspended soft sculptures in Kelley's *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites* are accompanied by ten large-scale functioning deodorisers in a range of colours, a coincidental association to the air fresheners punctuating my *Implicit Memory System* installation of paintings. Kelley's budget, however, obviously extended much further to enable the fabrication of impeccably painted fiberglass deodorisers. These devices periodically sprayed a pine-scented vapour into the space from their wall-mounted locations.[63] In contrast, my work settled on fun-size readymade air fresheners purchased online from Chemist Warehouse.

The bulbous forms and flashy colours of *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites* can be construed as a signifier of consumption and waste. The haunted conscience is disclosed as abject, low objects, sweetly masked in a futile attempt at cleansing.

Figure 49. Mike Kelley, *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites*, 1991/1999. Plush toys sewn over wood and wire frames with Styrofoam packing material, nylon rope, pulleys, steel hardware and hanging plates, fiberglass, car paint, and disinfectant, dimensions variable.

To my mind, Kelley intensified his effort to strip away the sentimentality attached to cuddly stuffed animals in *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites* more than in previous works. Rather than placing the materials outward and exposed, here the toys are sewn together facing inward and suspended. By hanging the sculptures and allowing them to sway in the space, an instability and disorientation is activated. The individual sculptural forms are not only divested of their identities but also suppress the viewer's empathic connection to them.

Failure as subject & aesthetic strategy

However, if Kelley's goal was a thorough erasure of all sentimentality in *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites*, I believe he failed. Viewers had already become fluent in his visual vocabulary through the history and emotional weight of abject materials used in works like *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* and his 1990 *Arena* series.[64] By this point, the interpretation promoted by the media—and consequently absorbed by audiences—had settled into something fixed. Turning the stuffed animals inward, stitching them together, or arranging them in mock-museum formats did little

to unsettle that reading. So, what was Kelley's motivation in steering the work away from its established meaning?

I think Kelley sought to distance himself from an audience evaluation of his stuffed animal works that alluded to something depraved—Kelley as a victim of abuse. Without prior explicit awareness of such claims, I feel this undertone may have surrounded and polluted my engagement with his practice in some strange way. It was not the pants shitting, filthy abject materials, or his cantankerous punk manner that had me recoiling from his work until now. It was an ambience of abuse.

Kelley became aware of an accepted belief that his stuffed animal sculptures addressed the issue of child abuse, and as he explained, "I found that it was impossible to bypass the audience's tendency to project onto stuffed animals. Viewers invariably desired them to be pseudo-children and were unwilling to give up this belief."[65] This was a reading of the work that frustrated Kelley, and he frequently rebutted it. In interviews he argued that if he had been abused by anyone or anything, it would have happened during his undergraduate degree, specifically the brainwashing of the Hans Hofmann-style of art pedagogy at the University of Michigan.[66]

George, Kelley's brother, was aggravated when he saw the stuffed animals on display at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. A reporter asked whether Mike had been sexually abused as a child. George was tempted to whack him. While the brothers' parents, and the nuns at their school, were rigid, George took offence at the implication of historical abuse. The persistent commentary that hemmed in any discussion of the works ultimately led Kelley to cast aside the soft toys in his practice: "There was simply nothing I could do to counter the pervasive psycho-autobiographic interpretation of these materials. I decided, instead, to embrace the social role projected on me, to become what people wanted me to be: a victim."[67]

Wily Kelley used his failure to convey the correct meaning of his work (or the viewers failure to be on the same page) to advance his practice. He used the unanticipated feedback to amplify his tendency for provocation and fictional narratives. Kelley continued to develop convoluted projects shaped by his research into Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny," as well as more recent writing on repressed memory

syndrome.[68] These influences informed several later works, including *Educational Complex* (1995),[69] and his elaborate *Kandor* series (1991–2011).[70] The artist described the uncanny as "a somewhat muted sense of horror: horror tinged with confusion."[71] Freud considered the uncanny in this way: "It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a secretly familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition."[72] Kelley's later work reflects a shift from the stuffed animals' evocation of failure and low culture to a more intricate investigation of psychological residue, repressed memory, and the disquiet buried in the everyday.

Even in earlier works, though, Kelley's focus wasn't necessarily trauma per se, but failure, as both subject and aesthetic strategy. His stuffed animal works don't simply mine sentimentality or shock; they underscore the flaws of the human hand and the breakdown of idealised forms. Through his use of craft materials, Kelley challenged the assumption that handmade equals authentic, framing instead a world where everything aspires to a manufactured ideal and falls short. "Idealised objects," he said, are "the model for the craft object—rather than something that predated it—all craft objects become failures in respect to it."[73] In *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites*, this tension is palpable, as hyper-slick fabricated deodorisers orbit a grubby constellation of stuffed toys, a cosmic diagram of idealisation gone awry.

I believe Kelley's fascination with failure transcended his aesthetic decisions, guiding both his choice of materials and working methods. This sensibility informed his strategy of melding fiction with reality, generating dissonance that encouraged viewers to question their assumptions. As Kelley noted, "The failure of the object to meet the expectations of the viewer. That there's enough of a problem there for the viewer to raise a question or a problem. I don't want my objects to read as being right."[74] Yet his disruptive approach did more than unsettle audiences—it also distanced him from misinterpretations he found unbearable, particularly the persistent reading of his works as autobiographical explorations of child abuse. Kelley's frustration with this misreading points to a greater failure: the failure of his audience to accept his practice on his terms, or Kelley's failure to convince the audience otherwise.

Ironically, Kelley's success—both critical and economic—may have felt like a spiritual

failure to him. Despite his occasionally irascible temperament, he could not evade the pressures of the art world. In an interview with *Artillery* magazine's editor-in-chief, Tulsa Kinney, Kelley confessed, "I am going to stop making art. I am having a real hard time in my life with a lot of personal and family problems. I don't need more art-world bullshit to make my life difficult… I've been working nonstop for years and years, I'm overworked and exhausted."[75] Sadly, on 31 January 2012, Kelley—who had spent his career exploring how social institutions such as the family, education, and religion mediate, suppress, and regulate individual experience—was found dead by suicide in his Pasadena home.[76] These same institutional forces, compounded by the demands and whims of the art world itself, may have contributed to the burden he ultimately could not carry. Perhaps his compulsion to craft strategic riddles, endlessly splicing personal and cultural histories, played its own part in this unravelling.

Reflecting on Kelley's practice also compels me to confront my own failures. Initially, I was too apprehensive to engage deeply with what I expected to be a profoundly unsettling experience. My first encounters with Kelley's works were clouded by a misreading—a sense of violation that I now recognise as stemming from the cultural baggage unfairly attached to his practice. It wasn't the filthy, abject materials, the fictional narratives, or Kelley's abrasive manner that unsettled me, but the false spectre of victimhood projected onto his works. Similarly, I have come to realise that it's important to embrace vulnerability—an act Kelley so irreverently celebrated.

This reckoning has also led me to confront the failures of others, including my psychotherapist, Dr Philpott, who neglected his duty of care in favour of pursuing his amateur art career. Yet I can't help but circle back to my own blunders, like the infamous day in Los Angeles when I experienced failure in its most literal and embarrassing form—a taco-induced accident in my pants courtesy of an ambitious helping of hot sauce. Through satire and self-deprecation, I hope to turn this humiliating memory into a gesture of shared humanity, much like Kelley's transformation of shame into a type of creative armour.

In the end, I believe Kelley's work set out to provoke, offend, and finally fail—not to meet expectations, but to subvert them. If failure was indeed the game, as his practice suggests, then it—and his life—deserves not just acknowledgment, but celebration.

Rest in peace Pants Shitter.

[1] Kelley's *Ahh... Youth!* (1991) was featured on the cover of Sonic Youth's 1992 album *Dirty*. The work includes a set of eight mugshot Cibachrome photographs adapted for the cover and inside sleeve of the album. Seven photographs featuring thrift-shop dolls and stuffed animals. The remaining image presenting a portrait of an indifferent, acne covered, adolescent Kelley. The cover image is an odd, hand knitted orange soft toy glancing sideways and smiling.
[2] Amanda Cruz, *Mike Kelley: "Half A Man,"* exhibition catalogue (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1991), 2.
[3] In the 1960s Sister Mary Corita created cheerful posters to advocate for the Catholic Church, before leaving her order to completely dedicate her life to art. See John Miller, "The Mortification of the Sign: Mike Kelley's Felt Banners," in *Mike Kelley: Three Projects: Half A Man, From My Institution To Yours, Pay For Your Pleasure*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago, 1988), 16.
[4] Howard Singerman, "Mike Kelley's Line," in *Mike Kelley: Three Projects*, 5.
[5] For Duchamp's comments on competiton see Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp*, 41.
[6] Kelly Crow, "The Escape Artist," *Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2013, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324678604578340322829104276.
[7] Peter Nisbet, "Crash Course: Remarks on a Beuys Story," in *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2001), 5–7.
[8] The Google search engine, which enables access to content in publicly accessible documents offered by web servers, also offers a platform for reviews and ratings on businesses, assisting potential customers to decide if a certain business provides a quality service that fits their requirements.
[9] Rina Arya, "Abjection in the Visual Arts," in *Abjection and Representation*, 83.
[10] John C. Welchman, introduction to Mike Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), xvii.
[11] Arya, "Recovering the Sacred: The Abject Body," in *Abjection and Representation,* 77.
[12] Georges Bataille, "The Big Toe," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 22.
[13] Georges Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms (1934)," in *More and Less*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Yvonne Shafir (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 9.
[14] Georges Bataille, "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," in *Visions of Excess*, 51.
[15] From high school onward, Kelley was known for his unyielding attitude and irritable style. See Crow, "The Escape Artist."
[16] Crow, "The Escape Artist."
[17] Laurie Simmons, "Both Sides Then (Boys and Toys and Candle Wax)," in *Mike Kelley: Timeless Painting*, ed. Jenelle Porter (New York: Hauser & Wirth; Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts, 2019), 34.
[18] Arya, "Unpacking Abjection," in *Abjection and Representation*, 38–39.
[19] Simmons, "Both Sides Then," 34.
[20] Despite dividing the audience, having funding withdrawn, and provoking protests, Gilbert and George have not waivered in their abject themes. See Eamon Sweeney, "Gilbert & George–Art For All," *Tales from the East Pier*, November 11, 2017, https://swench.net/2017/11/11/gilbert-george-art-for-all/, and Mark Holborn, "Gilbert & George Storm America's Citadels," *Aperture* 97 (1984): 2, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24471976.

[21] See Arya, "Abjection in the Visual Arts," 95.
[22] See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Survey," in *Arte Povera*, ed. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (London: Phaidon, 2014), 22.
[23] Examples of the collective Gelitin's scatological projects include *Vorm-Fellows-Attitude* (2018) and Das Kakabet (2007). See https://www.gelitin.net/projects/.
[24] Hal Foster, *The Return of The Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 159.
[25] Kelley's mid-career survey exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1993 was titled *Catholic Tastes*. On the cover of the catalogue he was dressed as a janitor, including a name tag and mop and bucket—a nod to his father's occupation. See Schumacher, "The Janitor Who Keeps House in Our Soul," 34.
[26] Foster, *The Return of The Real*, 160.
[27] Mike Kelley, "Playing with Dead Things: On the Uncanny," in *Foul Perfection*, 75.
[28] See "Implicit memory," Lexicon of Psychology, accessed December 19, 2023, https://www.psychology-lexicon.com/cms/glossary/42-glossary-i/4579-implicit-memory.html.
[29] Grandiose narcissism is a domineering form of narcissism. See Charles A. O'Reilly, "Grandiose Narcissists and Decision Making: Impulse, Overconfident, and Skeptical of Experts—but Seldom in Doubt," *Personality and Individual Differences* 168 (Jan 1, 2021): 110280, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110280.
[30] Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.
[31] Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms," 11.
[32] If you're yet to catch my drift about the social and professional abjection of myself and others, one need only refer to the awarded grants for visual arts mingled throughout all artforms in the "Arts Projects for Individuals and Groups" category (decision date 26.11.2024) administered by Creative Australia. I cannot see how anyone who advocates for equality and equity would not be shocked and appalled. See Creative Australia, "Investment and Development: Awarded Grants," *Creative Australia*, accessed December 4, 2024, https://creative.gov.au/investment-and-development/awarded-grants/.
[33] Bataille, "Abjection and Miserable Forms," 9.
[34] Arya, "Introduction: Social Abjection," in *Abjection and Representation*, 7.
[35] Kristeva, *Power of Horrors*, 15.
[36] Medicare is Australia's health care system facilitating a wide range of health and hospital services for subsidised cost or no cost.
[37] Impasto painting is a technique in which paint is applied thickly to the surface—often excessively so. It's typically wielded with a palette knife by a male artist convinced of his own profundity. The style remains curiously popular in Australia, from major institutions to members of the public who may not know much about art but know what they like. Some collectors love it also. I think they believe excessive amounts of paint is good value.
[38] Kelley studied literature and art at the University of Michigan, which was recognised for its progressive approach. See Harald Falckenberg, in *Mike Kelley: 99.9998% Remaining* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012), 20.
[39] Crow, "The Escape Artist."
[40] Falckenberg, *Mike Kelley: 99.9998% Remaining*, 19.
[41] Karsten Löckemann and Stephan Urbaschek, "A Telephone Conversation with Mike Kelley, August 2008," in *Mike Kelley*, 87–88.
[42] Mike Kelley, "Cross Gender/Cross Genre," in *Foul Perfection*, 102.
[43] Schumacher, "The Janitor Who Keeps House in Our Soul," 35.

[44] Mike Kelley, "Alma Pater (Wolverine Den)," in *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 35–37.
[45] Jimmy Barnes, affectionately known as Barnsey, is a Scottish-born Australian singer. His abrasive screaming (some refer to it as singing) has earned him the position of a heroic figure in Australian popular culture. From hard-drinking bad boy in his younger years to saccharine grandpa who advocates for social/political causes (or virtue signals), Barnsey is beyond critique–proceed with caution.
[46] The salon hang (or salon-style hang) features paintings installed from floor to ceiling of the exhibition space originating in Paris in the 1670s. See the National Gallery of Canada website: https://www.gallery.ca/salon-hanging/
[47] Kristeva, *Power of Horrors*, 210.
[48] Dr Phil McGraw is an American author and television host of *Dr Phil*, on which he provides clinical psychological care to people as a type of reality TV.
[49] Irvin D. Yalom and Molyn Leszcz, preface to *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), xii.
[50] Yalom and Leszcz, xii.
[51] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 8.
[52] Bourriaud, 25.
[53] Yalom and Leszcz, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, xv.
[54] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 26.
[55] Sigmund Freud, "On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. James Strachey, ed. the Institute of Psycho-Analysis and Angela Richards (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), 10.
[56] Held at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania every four years, the Carnegie International has a focus on artists working at the time. It is an international exhibition and the longest running of its kind in North America.
[57] John C. Welchman, "In the Image of Man," in Mike Kelley, *Minor Histories*, 50.
[58] Welchman, "Glossary," in *Mike Kelley*, 218.
[59] William Desmond, "Philosophy and Failure," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2, no.4 (1988): 295.
[60] Roland Barthes, "*Patch-work* ~ Patchwork," in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Hamilton (Berkeley: University of California Press), 142.
[61] Barthes, 142.
[62] Schumacher, "The Janitor Who Keeps House in Our Soul," 42.
[63] See "Mike Kelley: *Deodorized Central Mass with Satellites*," Phillips Auctions, accessed December 15, 2023, https://www.phillips.com/detail/mike-kelley/NY010506/13.
[64] Kelley's *Arena* series was made in 1990 and included stuffed toy animals organised on blankets and exhibited on the floor. See Kelley, "In the Image of Man," in *Minor Histories*, 80.
[65] Mike Kelley, "Architectural Non-Memory Replaced with Psychic Reality," in *Minor Histories*, 320.
[66] Jay Heikes, "Grade and Point to Average," in *Mike Kelley: Timeless Painting*, 46.
[67] Crow, "The Escape Artist."
[68] Kelley discussed and wrote about the psychological theory of repressed memory syndrome frequently. He found debate on the ambiguous theory informative to his projects. Some therapists claim all memories of abuse that emerge in therapy are genuine, while others profess such memories are fantasy. See Welchman, "Glossary," 223.

[69] *Educational Complex* is an architectural model and amalgamation of every school Kelley attended. The spaces he could not recall were left vacant, referencing the repression and loss of memory in repressed memory syndrome. See Kelley, "Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #1 (Domestic Scene)," in *Mike Kelley*, 167.
[70] In the *Kandor* series Kelley used Superman's mythical home city on the planet Krypton as a theme for architectural models, blown glass and resin, and the internet, using metaphor and explorations of memory. See Welchman, "Glossary," 220.
[71] Mike Kelley, "Playing with Dead Things: On The Uncanny," in *Foul Perfection*, 73.
[72] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental and Neuro-Sciences* 11, no. 2 (2018): 95, https://www.crossingdialogues.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Ms-E18-02.pdf.
[73] Mike Kelley and Julie Sylvester, "Talking Failure," *Parkett* 31 (1992): 101.
[74] Kelley and Sylvester, 103.
[75] Falckenberg, *Mike Kelley: 99.9998% Remaining*, 19.
[76] Falckenberg, 19.

Birthday cake and Kelley's abjection

— by Charles Olstink

It's my birthday today! Naturally, my post is already gaining well wishes on Instagram, but duty calls. I'm obligated to review Lindeman's most recent foray into the mind of Mike Kelley before returning to more gratifying affairs.

In this lengthy, and mildly traumatising essay, Lindeman draws on Georges Bataille's base materialism and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. He discusses Kelley's transformation of childhood nostalgia and bodily shame into complex performances of social critique, where soft toys become instruments of subversion rather than objects of comfort. Remind me never to pick up a plushie in a second-hand store—abominable!

It's obvious why Lindeman would choose to discuss Kelley's work: both favour a slippery mix of autobiography and fiction. Whether Lindeman's approach is some profound statement or just attention-seeking theatre is, frankly, still up for debate. In Kelley's *Three Point Program/Four Eyes*, a work Lindeman has a peculiar fascination with, boundaries between art and trash, and high and low culture, are collapsed.

Kelley's Catholic upbringing and implied personal trauma fuel a nuanced exploration of failure and vulnerability, which Lindeman attempts to convey as both shield and provocation. We're led to believe that Kelley cloaks his critique in humour and misdirection, inviting viewers into a fringe space of discomfort and empathy.

Lindeman's engagement with Kelley's legacy is marked by a neurotic self-reflection that blurs criticism with confessional absurdity, exemplified by his satirical 'pants mishap' and awkward therapy sessions. Inspired by Irvin D. Yalom's mix of enlightenment, hand-holding, and crying sessions, as well as Freud's themes on regression, Lindeman embarks on a kind of therapeutic excavation. He uses humour, vulgarity, and self-deprecation to prod at his own artistic insecurities, while casting a side-eye at the art world's more firmly fortified doors.

Lindeman's works like *Implicit Memory System* and *Artists Anonymous* mirror

Kelley's tactic of seduction and repulsion. They create intimate yet destabilising spaces where failure, shame, and sarcasm become tools for both critique and connection. Lindeman channels Kelley's strategic embrace of imperfection and the abject. Personally, I find this level of emotional exposure a touch needy—I've always preferred my artists wounded, but silent.

★★☆☆☆

Buckle up readers, in the forthcoming review for publication I turn my discerning eye toward Lindeman's article on German-born Hans Haacke. Let's see which of them proves the bigger nitwit when it comes to biting the hand that feeds.

Hans Haacke's hardcore muckraking

By Michael Lindeman

Greetings from New York City. I'm currently on assignment here but not sure about the length of my stay. I suppose it's all about how creative I can be with my per diem.[1] As previous visits can attest, this place will eat you alive, and not only financially. For me, the allure of Manhattan is the knowledge that I can seek out the best of whatever I'm curious about: tuna melts and matzo ball soup (both favourites), international bands passing through, bizarre treasures at flea markets, and—most of all—contemporary art.

An edgy juxtaposition & simmering tensions

However, aside from the highlights mentioned above, when in New York I can't seem to put the blinkers on, narrow my focus, and ward off a tendency for guilt when it rears its head. I presume it to be an empathy that quells the excitement of all that is on offer. Nonetheless, a sober contemplation of the dichotomy or contradictions of capitalism, its inequalities and benefits on display in a charged-up cultural hub such as New York City, inevitably forces their way into my field of vision. This dialectical framework of capitalism was conveyed by philosopher Karl Marx (1820–1895) when he articulated mechanisms of the system that induce wealth creation and lead to worsening conditions for workers and "the dangerous classes,"[2] via "relative surplus population."[3]

> Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital.[4]

The contrasting poles Marx outlines are impossible for me to ignore while drifting around New York City. The deepest layer of the “relative surplus population”—tramps, gangsters, prostitutes, and junkies—jarring with luxury cars, high fashion, and blue-chip art form an edgy juxtaposition. I perceive an ambience of simmering tensions. These gaping social and economic inequalities might explain the brash demeanours and general hustling nature of some New Yorkers I’ve encountered on this trip so far.

Always on the move

The purpose of my research excursion here in Manhattan is to learn more about the conceptual artist Hans Haacke (b. 1936). Although Haacke was born in Cologne, Germany, and gained an early education at art school in Kassel, he has resided in New York since 1965.[5] With even a cursory knowledge of Haacke’s practice one would be beset with anxiety if meeting with the artist. Nevertheless, further reading of interviews in print and viewing video recorded discussions with the artist allayed any trepidation. As writer Blake Gopnik noted, “what was shocking was his quietude,” and he “answered questions with an amiable, unflappable calm.” Or as artist Andrea Fraser (b. 1965) touted, “He’s just a really nice guy ... I’ve never seen him be aggressive.”[6]

Figure 50. *Portrait of Hans Haacke*, 2019.

It’s hard to perceive Haacke as anything other than contemplative, polite, and now quite elderly. Yet a wider view of his work illustrates a consistent interest in frameworks or “environments”—a direction that sidestepped the mid-life crisis of non-objective and abstract art when the field grew introspective, uncertain, and vaguely existential. I suspect transgression was high on Haacke’s list of priorities, motivated by a desire to disrupt conventional methods of critical assessment. In other words, institutional critique was his thing—which I can certainly get behind.

In some of his earliest works Haacke sought to abandon the static archetype of painting and sculpture. To quote the artist directly, "always on the move, never permitting the status quo."[7] To effectively convey what I mean by his take on environments, it is important to acknowledge the influence American writer and theorist Jack Burnham had on Haacke, whom he met shortly after travelling from Europe to the United States with the support of a Fulbright scholarship (1961–62).[8] As a result, Haacke was motivated to consider that artworks, akin to biological organisms and social structures, undergo complex, interactive processes within their environments, presenting a broad new perspective on the relationship between art and technology through systems theory.[9] One might contend that from the late 1950s onward, some of these systems gathered momentum for artists, manifesting as light and kinetic art, works outdoors, and happenings.[10]

Field notes: real-time events (with claws)

Haacke's practice can be bracketed into three distinct types of system—physical, biological, and social. They can be crafted by human hands, spawned by nature, or a delightful mash-up of both.[11] The decision on which system Haacke might use at any given time appears to follow no fixed chronology, continuing to cycle over the decades of his career. His practice has always been guided by opportunities to develop a project, specific sites connected with projects, and rigorous research he has undertaken himself. However, Haacke's adoption of physical systems appears to be the yardstick for his earliest works in this field, functioning as a platform for more expansive biological and social systems explored in further projects.

It seems Haacke's ongoing game plan is to create systems, disrupt systems, and shine a light on the systems already active. This strategy surveys the mechanics of organisations, where "information, energy and/or material occurs."[12] The analytical working methods of Haacke seem rather benign—not too controversial by any means—so it's mysterious to find him labelled as "the master of museum disruption," and learn that "curators have tried to ignore him."[13] I hope my appointment at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Library today will shed more light on whether Haacke was indeed a disruptor or if his reputation for belligerence is exaggerated.

Figure 51. Museum of Modern Art Archives and Library, New York, 2023. Photographer: Michael Lindeman.

Well, I've arrived at the MoMA Library, and I think I'll take a moment to sit in the foyer before I approach security for access. I need to decompress and document an unexpected turn of events. When I travelled uptown on the F train, a man with what would be best described as a 'claw hand' entered and introduced himself as Jake to the passengers on the jam-packed subway carriage. He politely proceeded to declare, "I have no special talents … I'm just hungry and need help." I presented a five-dollar bill and hoped not to touch the 'claw hand'. Unfortunately, it snapped at my palm like a crab. Sharp, filthy nails raked the skin—human contact ranking high on my personal panic index. Jake sensed my discomfort and bristled; he then stalked me around the train snapping his claw and frothing with vitriol. Holy shit, my reaction had provoked something terrifying; I really didn't mean to offend. The train pulled into 57th Street, and I lunged out onto the platform, ousted in a panic. The doors were quick to slam shut on Jake's protruded claw as it writhed and clamped onto my shirt, and his barnacle-encrusted teeth gnashed at me through the window. Unfazed passengers scarcely looked my way. It wasn't my first encounter with the disturbed in New York City, nor I suspect, will it be the last. However, Jake's abrupt swing in temperament caught me off guard, pushing him to the forefront of the city's many eccentrics. The experience reminded me of something French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) had written, which captured the essence of this phenomenon: "In New York, the mad have been set free. Let out into the city, they are difficult to tell apart from the rest of the punks, junkies, addicts, winoes [*sic*], or down-and-outs who inhabit it."[14]

The simmering tensions of New York City I mentioned earlier in this piece of reportage were most definitely palpable this morning. After a bemused scan of my torn shirt sleeve by the security guard, I'm now settled comfortably in an elegant library, with a stack of archived materials before me—a stark contrast to the menacing subway setting. Some of these materials refer to Haacke's early developments in the analytical language of systems, alongside Jack Burnham's influence on him.[15] Burnham wrote,

"A systems viewpoint is focused on the creation of stable, on-going relationships between organic and non-organic systems be these neighborhoods, industrial complexes, farms, transportation systems, information centers, recreation centers, or any other matrixes of human activity."[16] In a dramatic way my subway encounter with Jake and his 'claw hand' is a demonstration of Burnham's notion of systems, with its confined passengers (organic) and subway carriages as capsules for activity (non-organic). But to maintain a stable relationship in a mostly unregulated subway carriage can sometimes be tricky. Once the doors have shut it is akin to a zoo with captive specimens from a broad cross-section of society in a free-for-all. I propose that this human interaction, with its unanticipated consequences spilling out of the subway carriage, constitutes a type of social system—what Burnham described as "real-time events, events which are uncontrived and happen under normal circumstances."[17] Normal, that is, if your baseline is New York City.

Haacke bites the hand...

Haacke's early systems, such as *Blue Sail* (1964–65) and *Condensation Cube* (1963–65), were, to some extent, compromised or contrived when measured against Burnham's notion of real-time events. They were clearly works made for the gallery context and centred around the constraints of organic systems. Nonetheless, environments created in elementary works like *Condensation Cube* were important, and in my opinion, necessary developments in Haacke's vocabulary. For *Condensation Cube*, Haacke efficiently made use of a clear, sealed acrylic cube with a small amount of distilled water inside. Contingent on variations in the exhibition space such as light and air temperature, a cycle of evaporation and condensation unfolded.[18] Upon careful contemplation, it becomes apparent that *Condensation Cube* was not merely a physical system; it was a mingling of physical and biological—a type of model for the dynamics of physiological procedures.[19] The work was a deft exemplar of how a system might operate in relation to another larger system, influenced by external factors that govern its internal processes. Haacke's systems were succinct investigations into the discordant containment of organic systems with non-organic systems.

In *Blue Sail*, Haacke artfully anchored a large piece of chiffon fabric from each corner with fishing weights and suspended it horizontally from the ceiling of the exhibition

space. Below, an oscillating fan blew upward, gently causing the sail to undulate.[20] In my view, Haacke's use of movement intelligently exposed the hidden interactions between variables. His use of movement went beyond the presentation of visual patterns to critically extend the work into a conceptual demonstration of how components interact within systems. Of course, Haacke was not the first artist to experiment with kinetics in three-dimensional form. Marcel Duchamp with his *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), was one of a group of artists who tussled for this honour.[21]

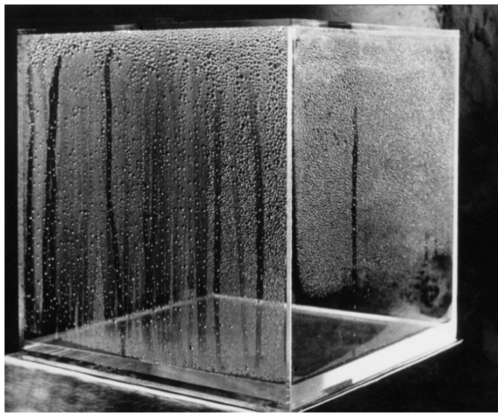


Figure 52. Hans Haacke, *Condensation Cube*, 1963–1965. Clear acrylic, distilled water, and climate in area of display, 76 x 76 x 76 cm.

Figure 53. Hans Haacke, *Blue Sail*, 1964–1965. Chiffon, oscillating fan, fishing weights, and thread, 335.3 x 325.1 cm.

Some of Haacke's system works from the 1960s seemed to satirise the minimal and serial works of his artist peers—heavy hitters such as Americans Tony Smith, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, and Donald Judd come to mind. However, beyond aesthetics, I sense that the German outlier's work was concerned with change, in contrast to a type of minimal art that celebrated stillness.[22] Conceivably, this marked an early example of how Haacke clashed with the status quo of the art world at that time and contributed to his acerbic reputation. Through this form of institutional critique, he exposed the mystique of art while adding his own imprint. When Haacke placed his systems works into a gallery context, he both mocked and revealed the very mechanisms that sanctify them. In Haacke's own words: "It sort of bites the hand that feeds it."[23]

Many of Haacke's early systems such as *Condensation Cube* and *Blue Sail* positioned the viewer as a bystander, an observer to a process that unfolded entirely without their participation.[24] These physical systems functioned independently, without relying on the viewer's intervention or conceptual engagement. However, this did not always

apply to Haacke's systems. In *Photo-Electric Viewer-Programmed Coordinate System* (1968) (I promise not to make you read that protracted title too many times), the viewer was central to an activation of the work. A photoelectric cell registered shifts in light caused by the viewer's movements, triggering changes in the installation's own illumination. The result was a sensitised environment that responded directly to presence and gesture. In this way, the body assumed a vital function within Haacke's system, closing the circuit between viewer and work.[25]

A superfluous charade, carefully orchestrated

In 1999 I created my own type of physical/social system titled *Space Age*. The work featured a thrift store exercise bike that I restored, a vintage kitchen stand mixer with a bicycle training wheel attached to one of the beaters, and a 1970s stereo system with faux wood cabinet and speakers positioned on a stage in the gallery space. With these haphazard materials I set about creating a kinetic installation. When viewers entered the exhibition space, a motion sensor activated the mixer, which was placed on the floor. The training wheel attached to the beater then set the wheel and cranks of the bike in motion, while ground rubber from the friction of both wheels collected in the mixing bowl below. The illusory energy created by the movement of the exercise bike cranks also conveyed a source of power for the turntable and stereo receiver by way of a suspended power cord pitched to the top of the stage, which vanished behind the stereo. Despite the turntable arm being locked in the 'up' position, not touching a spinning John Cage LP, *Nova Musicha*, the sound emanated.[26] Hidden behind the stereo was an audio tape player with a looped recording of the Cage compilation. Through the juxtaposition of disparate objects, the *Space Age* installation was indeed an absurd, superfluous charade aimed at sharing Cage's minimal, chance compositions. Similarly, Haacke's systems employed a careful orchestration of organic

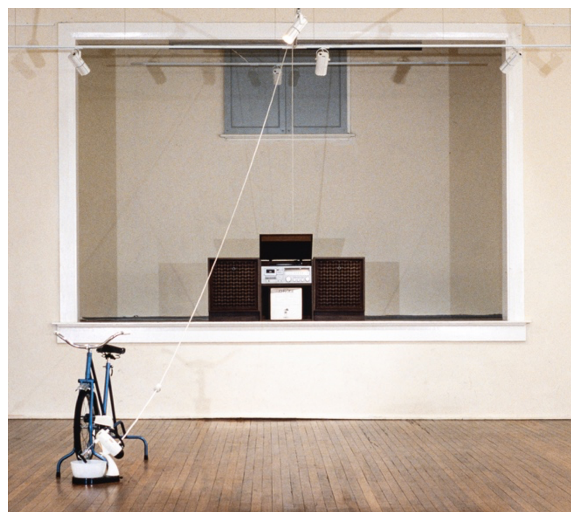


Figure 54. Michael Lindeman, *Space Age*, 1999. Exercise bike, mix master, training wheel, John Cage album: *Nova Musicha*, stereo, motion sensor, audio cassette tape deck, power cord, dimensions variable. Photographer: Alex Cyreszko.

and non-organic elements to critically examine and expose the dynamic processes within controlled environments. This approach, much like the *Space Age* installation, underscored the interplay of chance and structure, highlighting the inherent complexity and interdependence of systems.

Late capitalism and the pastrami incident

Today's research led me to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Library and Archives at its offsite location downtown. I was looking forward to it, as my knowledge of Haacke is still quite fragmentary. This would fill some of the gaps, particularly regarding his squabble with the Guggenheim Museum I had heard about—a visit to the scene of the crime, one could say. I knew it would be a long and intensive session of reading from mid-morning until they asked me to leave, so I decided to grab a sandwich on the way.

From an extensive selection I made the call on a pastrami and Swiss cheese hero sandwich with hot cherry peppers and Russian dressing. I had read a review that claimed this deli was the best in Manhattan. At US$18.95 (AU$28.36) it was a pricey sanga but I knew it would be colossal.[27] Tentatively I asked the young lady at the register if I could have a tad less cheese. With a sigh she said, "I'll do what I can."

I stood back and observed the deli worker, who wore a beret, work and intermittently perform a snappy solo flamenco dance on a raised platform under a neon-lit menu. It was quite theatrical and upbeat. This guy was a one-man band, efficiently juggling tasks while staging an entertaining show for a crowd of amused customers. Soon I sat down on a stool, peered out onto 1st Avenue, and unwrapped the big bopper. Remarkably, the sandwich comprised of eight slices of Swiss cheese, making a slab of cheese one inch thick. I approached the person who had served me, and she relayed my request to remove some of the cheese to the deli worker. Alarmingly, he threw his tongs down and stared at me before withdrawing around a corner with my hero.

The deli worker, steam practically billowing from his ears, emerged with my lunch in hand and bounded toward me, bellowing over and over, "I'm a sandwich artist, I'm a goddamn sandwich artist." I didn't stick around. I had been hustled out the door again, first Jake with the 'claw hand' and now a temperamental deli worker. What the fuck

was going on?

After a moment of reflection, I'm quite certain that my humble plea for less cheese was not the catalyst for the deli worker's intimidating antics. No doubt the stresses of living and working in New York City take their toll, sometimes causing even the calmest individuals to fly off the handle. The city's high living costs paired with low wages create the perfect storm for tension. In a place often seen as the epitome of capitalism, the exploitation of labour and glaring inequalities becomes even more pronounced, with workers' efforts driving profits that rarely benefit them proportionately. Or as Marx stated, "Capital is dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks."[28] Yet I don't believe these are the only causes of erratic social behaviour. It seems to me that some individuals here exhibit a sense of arrogance and audacity. Baudrillard described it in this way:

> With the marvellous complicity of its entire population, New York acts out its own catastrophe as a stage play. And this is not an effect of its decadence, but of its own power, to which there is, of course, no threat. In fact, this absence of threat is its power.[29]

Here, Baudrillard implied that New York's power lies in its perceived invulnerability, suggesting a collective swagger—a "you can't fuck with me" attitude. Don't get me wrong, I'm fond of their cockiness. New Yorkers seem to believe their city, and by extension themselves to be so resilient and powerful that they can afford to dramatise minor issues without fear of real consequences. The deli worker's bluster certainly prompted me to bolt for the door without argument; that hero sandwich will have to wait for another time.

Welcome to the jungle: ryegrass, palm trees, and archival protocols

Anyway, after using a QR code and passing through a metal detector, I gained refuge at the Guggenheim Library and Archives. There seems to be a pattern developing: libraries and archives are my safe space here. Initially it had looked like it might be a tough day, as the librarian was all over me about citing and handling materials, along

with providing numerous other forms for me to fill out. I understand that he was regulating proper archival research protocols, but this was something else. I was the only researcher present, and he sat quite close watching my every move. At least it was better than being chased from the subway or fleeing from an irate sandwich artist, I suppose.

Returning to Haacke, further research at the Guggenheim Library revealed an intriguing shift in his work from physical systems, such as *Condensation Cube* and *Blue Sail*, to biological systems. This transition marked the emergence of political considerations in his work and coincided with Haacke's engagement in the writings of Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901–1972), which had captured his attention.[30]

Bertalanffy's general systems theory viewed biological processes of "evolution and adaptation" as interrelated systems, and it seems to me that Haacke applied systems theories as a guiding blueprint for the evolution of individual works and his practice more broadly.[31] Some of the first biological works Haacke realised included *Grass Cube* (1967), *Grass Grows* (1967–69), *Bowery Seeds* (1970)[32] and the perfect analogy for New York City, *Guggenheim Rye in the Tropics* (1971).[33] In these biological systems, Haacke scrutinised the variables of propagation, birth, and decline of living organisms, specifically vegetation. In contrast to the physical systems discussed earlier, these works were what Bertalanffy referred to as an "open system."[34] As he explained, "Every living organism is essentially an open system. It maintains itself in a continuous inflow and outflow, a building up and breaking down of components, never being, so long as it is alive."[35] Alongside Bertalanffy's theories, Haacke's biological systems also draw parallels with the installations of Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis, who in 1967 began to incorporate "heterogeneous images and materials," including earth, plants, and animals, into gallery environments.[36]

Figure 55. Hans Haacke, *Grass Grows*, 1967–1969. Installation view, “Hans Haacke: All Connected,” 2019. Photographer: Dario Lasagni.

In *Grass Grows*, Haacke formed a mound of soil in the gallery to cultivate grass seeds on. Filtered light through the gallery’s windows allowed the work to flourish during the exhibition.[37] After examining the work and reflecting on its context—a controlled and sterile museum space—I perceive Haacke’s unfolding of a natural process as a masterful form of resistance and critique of institutional methods. In this jarring work, his biological system bypassed the constraints of the museum and defied expectations of the viewers.

Haacke was also content to explore ideas with his biological or open systems outside of the gallery context. In *Bowery Seeds* he placed a pile of soil on the roof of his studio building on New York City’s Lower East Side. Left to chance, windblown seeds and dormant spores germinated, and the artwork evolved into something both unexpectedly structured and spontaneous.[38] I believe this strategy is central to Haacke’s practice, a deft demarcation of materials and environments that facilitated his experiments with physical, biological, and later, social systems. While I have yet to uncover blatant examples of muckraking, Haacke’s unwavering commitment to his concepts and processes demonstrated his determination to circumvent the conventional frameworks of the art institution.

While under the watchful eye of the librarian at the Guggenheim, I discovered Haacke’s biological experiment *Guggenheim Rye in the Tropics*. I was struck by how the work served as a profound reflection of New York City’s social and economic inequalities—there could have been no more fitting venue to choreograph such a work. Of course, this may not have been Haacke’s precise intention for his biological system,

but the work resonated deeply with me, aligning with my own reflections on various encounters while drifting around the city.

In preparation for an exhibition at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1971, Haacke created *Guggenheim Rye in the Tropics* by planting winter rye under palm trees adjacent to the rotunda window on the ground floor of the museum. In the same way New York City's poles of wealth and poverty integrate, the rye grass and palm trees were Haacke's choice of disparate materials.[39] I interpret the grand ornamental palms as a proxy for the soaring architecture of the city—virile, radiant, a manifestation of stature. Juxtaposed and sharing the same soil beneath, the humble rye prospered. Akin to the city's underclass—Jake and the sandwich artist, indifferent to the spectacular fanfare above them, they continue with resilience.

In this city, I am currently wedged in a dichotomy, extravagant and repressed, wealthy and needy, a discord in jumbled yet amalgamated conditions. Haacke's work compels me to think of the paradoxes of New York City, the interdependent and grinding tangle that drives the city forward. Regrettably, *Guggenheim Rye in the Tropics* was never presented to the public due to the abrupt cancellation of the exhibition prior to opening—a detail the archives have been suspiciously quiet on.

As I delve deeper into Haacke's practice, it becomes apparent that each experiment laid the groundwork for subsequent projects, woven throughout his career as new opportunities arose. His site-specific biological system *DER BEVÖLKERUNG (To the Population)* (2000) made for Germany's Reichstag—the historic government building for legislation in Berlin—serves as a prime example of this. The work raised hackles when members of the Christian Social Union and Christian Democrats opposed Haacke's proposal.[40] In a more sophisticated mode, *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* was an extension of smaller scaled experimentations Haacke had been working on decades earlier through works such as *Grass Grows*, *Bowery Seeds*, and *Guggenheim Rye in the Tropics*.

Figure 56. Hans Haacke, *DER BEVÖLKERUNG (To the Population)*, 2000. Berlin, Reichstagsgebäude. Earth, plants, wooden box, webcam, website, 21 x 7 x 0.5 metres.

For Haacke, the title of the work means "to everyone living in the country" regardless of nationality. It was an intentional subversion of the discriminative and outmoded statement "Dem Deutschen Volke" (To the German People), which is etched on the Reichstag's exterior. This inscription had embodied a malevolent interpretation in times of Nazi control, when Jewish citizens and others had been ostracised, or worse.[41] Facing upward in the courtyard of the Reichstag, the words "DER BEVÖLKERUNG" are crafted in large white neon and surrounded by plants. Each member of the Bundestag (German parliament) was welcome to contribute fifty kilograms of soil from their election districts, which was added to the surrounds of the letters to germinate seeds and provide nutrients to plant roots in this new environment.[42]

In 2006—and entirely unaware of Hans Haacke at the time—I created an installation titled *Streetscape* in the sculpture garden of Sherman Galleries, Sydney. It was my own type of biological system, using hundreds of stolen milk crates, and terrariums made from recycled plastic bottles. Housed in the terrariums were weeds collected from the gritty streets of my inner west neighbourhood at the time. Who would have thought an expansive installation in a prestigious Paddington gallery could be coordinated from a tiny sunroom in a one bedroom rented apartment. I suppose an embarrassing bank balance and subversive demeanour will do it. In a review of the work critic and artist

Ian Geraghty claimed, "the ghost of Duchamp is never far away from Lindeman's practice," and "Lindeman's artworks often seem to question their own collectability, as if possessing an in-built criticality."[43]

Figure. 57. Michael Lindeman, *Streetscape*, 2006. Milk crates, terrariums with weeds, dimensions variable. Photographer: Paul Green.

Figure 58. Sherman Galleries Sculpture Garden, 31 October 2020. Photographer: Michael Lindeman.

Of course, *Streetscape* was commercial suicide, perpetuating my already precarious financial situation. How could I think the outcome would be anything otherwise? The weeds in the work threatened to seed and germinate in their new impeccable environment, while the stolen crates summoned an impromptu police visit. Projects such as my collection of elevated weeds was hardly a recipe for success.[44] However, when I reflect on my practice today, it is pleasing to realise that it continues to follow a consistent trajectory. Throughout my career I have constantly pursued methods to question convention, bypass the status quo, and short-circuit inadequate systems. By this, I mean art world trends, market dynamics, and hierarchical relationships which, in a commercial context, can smother experimentation and expression.

The conceptual menagerie

It's a new day, and I find myself gliding down Bowery Street. Much like when I mapped my old neighbourhood and gathered weeds for the subversive *Streetscape* work, I've been drifting in recent days. In a Roland Barthes-esque manner, I move between thinking, writing, looking, administration, laundry, boredom, eating, and drinking more than I should. Just now, I noticed a man remove a pizza box from a litter basket on the street corner. He kissed the lid before opening it. Surprisingly, the slice of pepperoni he retrieved looked pretty good. I think I'll stock up on a slice or two on my

way back to the apartment for a day of writing.

I'm back at the computer and feeling energised. I've stayed out of trouble recently—no confrontations, not even a side-eye on the subway. I think I'm starting to get the hang of New York City's unwritten rules, dodging the random flare-ups of aggression like they're just another piece of chewing gum to navigate on the sidewalk. Still "on the move" to quote Haacke, I'm now turning my attention to his biological systems using animals.[45] But the word *using* makes me feel uncomfortable; maybe if it's framed as *employing* or *implementing* the services of animals I would feel more at ease with the idea. Despite that, I must admit, I've long hoped to realise a work with either a donkey or turkey in an exhibition space wearing a trucker hat embroidered with "Michael" across the front. Of course, if it was a turkey, the hat would need to be a miniature version. I realise that using animals in artworks can raise ethical concerns, but providing the living creature is shielded from stress, harm, and poor conditions, I think it would be acceptable. I would also need to ensure that their presence serves a thoughtful purpose rather than exploiting them for mere spectacle.

Haacke experimented with a range of projects that employed animals laced throughout his practice over the same period as some of the other biological works mentioned earlier. These include *Live Airborne System, November 30, 1968* (1968), *Chickens Hatching* (1969), *Ten Turtles Set Free* (1970), and *Norbert: "All Systems Go"* (1970–71), along with many others. For *Live Airborne System, November 30, 1968*, Haacke lured seagulls with breadcrumbs to a location at Coney Island, New York, to create what he referred to as an "air sculpture."[46] The idea of orchestrating an artwork with wild birds drawn to a specific location can be perceived as an absurd experiment, which eventually led to further works such as *Chickens Hatching*. However, in this work the following year, Haacke's system was much more controlled. By using thermostats and heat lamps as incubators he created a cycle of interaction and response in "the development of eggs into chicks."[47] I find this project, what Burnham referred to as a real-time event, to embody a disorientating amalgam of profundity and absurdity. The juxtaposition of a natural process such as the hatching of chickens within the controlled context of a gallery imbues the work, for me at least, with a certain sense of incongruity and transgressive humour. These works are far more compelling than Haacke's physical systems.

I'm not sure Haacke intended his biological systems involving animals to be humorous. Nevertheless, they do seem to deliberately violate and deviate from social conventions to provoke critical thought. In French philosopher Henri Bergson's (1859–1941) essay on laughter, he discusses the comedic qualities of rigid language. One could apply this notion to inflexible archetypal museum and gallery environments. By placing animals in this location, a striking transgression or paradox occurs, which resonates with Bergson's thinking on comic meaning: "Hence the following general rule: A COMIC MEANING IS INVARIABLY OBTAINED WHEN AN ABSURD IDEA IS FITTED INTO A WELL-ESTABLISHED PHRASE-FORM."[48]

As mentioned earlier in this article, animals were integral to the projects of other artists working around the same time, thrusting absurd ideas into well-established models of presentation, so there doesn't seem to be an adequate rationalisation for most museums to ignore Haacke, or for his reputation as a controversial figure (perhaps he rattled the cage in other ways at a later point in his career). For example, Jannis Kounellis's 1969 work *Untitled (12 horses)*, staged in Rome's Galleria L'Attico, also critiqued the system of art presentation. By fastening twelve horses to the gallery wall, the Arte Povera artist aimed to disrupt the codification of an "artistically sacred" environment.[49]

Figure 59. Hans Haacke, *Goat Feeding in Woods*, 1970. © Hans Haacke / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020.

Contemporaneously, Haacke explored similar interests by addressing biological systems as a form of institutional critique with *Goat Feeding in Woods* (1970). By situating a goat near the prestigious museum park of the Fondation Maeght, France, adjacent to sculptures by artists such as Joan Miró and Alberto Giacometti, Haacke seemingly aimed to accentuate the tension between living elements and the curated, controlled locale of the institution.[50] One could speculate whether the work probed the role of the

artist within such institutional systems. Did Haacke's juxtaposition operate as an analogy for how artists, akin to animals in a system, can be manipulated and curbed by markets, collectors, and art institutions? I believe so, although he achieved this with what I consider to be a canny strategy. Haacke's use of animals enabled nuance, or a type of veil to these sentiments rather than explicit, didactic declarations aimed at specific targets.

In *Ten Turtles Set Free* (1970)—no esoteric artist games with the title here—Haacke freed ten store-bought pet turtles, again, a project realised at the Fondation Maeght.[51] Aside from the public release of the armour-clad waddlers into the museum's surrounds during the exhibition opening, this biological system became quite discreet. I feel works such as *Ten Turtles Set Free* illustrate where Haacke's interests lie. Prescient ideas related to biodiversity and environmentalism were more important to him rather than legacy seeking. I'm sure the notion of this subversive system, present yet out of sight, independent of the controlling mechanisms of the institution while harnessing its platform, provided Haacke with great satisfaction.

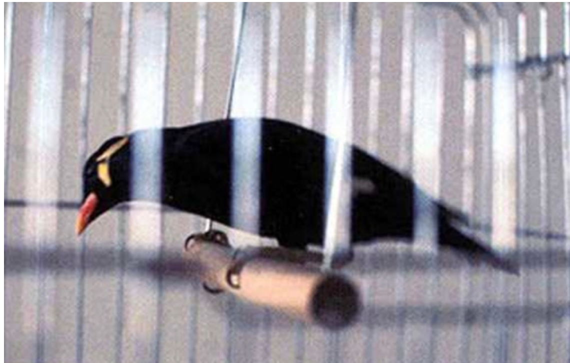


Figure 60. Hans Haacke, Norbert: "All Systems Go," 1970–71.

While I could endlessly discuss Haacke's biological systems using living creatures I can't move on without covering *Norbert: "All Systems Go."* For me, this is one of Haacke's most amusing and absurd biological systems. Like *Guggenheim Rye in the Tropics*, it was also a planned work for an exhibition at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1971. The work demonstrated a type of ludicrous humour, which author Nicholas Holm considered as "that which does not make sense, or, in other words, the humour of that which does not adhere to the expected system of rules and logics that structure any given system."[52]

Sadly, as Haacke's exhibition was cancelled, the work was unrealised (I think I could be closing in on the whole Haacke/muckraking gripe here).[53] *Norbert: "All Systems Go"* was a failed, farcical endeavour to train a mynah bird to repeatedly screech "All

systems go" while caged and installed in the exhibition space.[54] In contrast to *Chickens Hatching*—a work which "made direct use of the possibilities presented by cybernetic systems,"[55]—the concept of *Norbert: "All Systems Go,"* ironically named after American computer scientist and mathematician Norbert Wiener, who coined the term *cybernetics*, appeared to poke fun at systems of control and communication between animal and machine, as well as at Wiener himself.[56] The work, if realised, would have bypassed any control of activities reached between animal and machine. Instead, it proposed a return to a natural method of communication between biological organisms. One might imagine that a looped cassette player, repeating "All systems go" may have assisted Haacke in training the stubborn mynah bird with a rote learning technique. Or perhaps the failure to get his feathery friend to comply was precisely the point.

Haacke's unresponsive mynah bird reminds me of John Baldessari's equally ineffectual attempt in *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* (1972). His black-and-white video was an equally oddball form of institutional critique, with a specific focus on art pedagogy. Of course, just as Haacke had no luck with his mynah bird, Baldessari's attempt at teaching a plant (an obvious metaphor for repetitive and outdated forms of art education) also failed—however, not without a humorous, durational and deadpan outcome.[57]

I think I'm enticed by the notion of animals or biological systems in art as they can lend a certain element of humour to the field while acting as a stand in for other more mischievous intentions. Bergson argues that the comic is fundamentally tethered to human experience, yet "You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression."[58] He proposed that if we giggle at animals, it is because we locate something in them that echoes human attributes. To my mind, unresponsive or not, they become funny when placed into a physical, intellectual, and human context such as an art museum.

On the topic of unresponsive biological organisms in artistic actions, it would be remiss not to acknowledge—albeit cautiously, so as not to become entangled in the complexities—that Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) was likely a touchstone for both Haacke and Baldessari.[59] This specific action of Beuys,

like those of Haacke and Baldesarri, appears to have manifested as both a sincere attempt at interspecies dialogue, and also a way of indirectly ridiculing various facets of the art world, which is more compelling to me. Undoubtably, this group of conceptual artists implemented the strategies of the avant-garde's disruptor-in-chief, Marcel Duchamp. Artists such as Baldessari and Haacke, with Beuys serving as a conduit to Duchamp, developed modes of working that can be interpreted as both contemplative critiques of the institutions of art and as absurd shenanigans. American writer and friend of Duchamp, Louise Norton posed: "Then again, there are those who anxiously ask, 'Is he serious or is he joking?' Perhaps he is both! Is it not possible?"[60]

Low-profile, high drama

One thing beyond a joke is the looming deadline for my long-form Haacke piece, with my editor now applying the blowtorch. After a week at my laptop, I finally stretched my legs and got some exercise today. I needed a new external hard drive—a safety net for all the valuable content I'm continuing to collect on this research trip. So, it made sense to take a walk to an electronics store on 5th Avenue. My aim was to get in and out without any drama. I'm trying to develop a stealthy way of moving through the world without attracting attention or engaging in confrontation. Who can blame me? Jake with the 'claw hand' and the sandwich artist have me rattled.

I entered the electronics store wearing my amber-coloured sunshield glasses, the type that fit over optical glasses, and my furry winter hat with ear flaps—I think it's called a trapper hat. Disguises have been a strategy for me for some time, particularly when I can't squirm out of agonising promotional events. They offer a way of dealing with the situation by creating distance or a protective barrier. Personally, costumes also act as a subversive critique of certain narcissist show ponies during these activities. To quote Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."[61]

Figure 61. *Ace Hotel, Sydney*, 2022. Courtesy Vogue Living. Photographer: Anson Smart.

I once wore a paper bag with a sketch of my face on it over my head as part of a project's marketing photo shoot. I'm sure Duchamp's female alter ego, Rrose Sélavy, and Italian artist Pino Pascali's comical portraits of himself interacting with his sculptures set the tone for my own low-budget disguise.[62] It was fascinating to also discover that Haacke similarly avoids having his face shown in the media, preferring to keep the focus on his art practice.[63] Haacke is known to "lack interest in and to be unwilling to play the 'art personality game.'"[64] Entering the electronics store wasn't meant to be a performative extension of my work or any other smart-arse prank—this time it was self-preservation, no frills.

The salesperson proudly displayed his name badge: Tony. He was welcoming and enquired where I was from after hearing my accent. After my reply he expressed how much he liked "Ozzies" and mentioned he had relatives living in Sydney. As I always like to educate myself on the pros and cons of potential big-ticket purchases, then go away to evaluate the options, I decided to say, "thank you" and that I would return when I had considered all the choices. On a dime, Tony tweaked; he pounded and shattered the top of the glass cabinet we had peered through at the products only moments prior. Alarmed, I scrambled for the door as he raced around the counter ranting about me stealing his time and knowledge. "Relax, relax, Tony, I'm coming back," I said, but there was no allaying the situation. His frenzy only amped up. He removed his belt and flogged me with it as I leapt onto the sidewalk. If not for Tony's pants dropping to his ankles and tripping him over, I don't know what would have happened. Although he was portly, he sure moved with urgency. I think the whole commotion was a complete misunderstanding, which resulted in an unfortunate outcome. It was one of those scenarios that made me question the principles of

communication and perception.

German philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) suggested that if "communicatively acting subjects,"[65] such as Tony and I, aim to strike an understanding, we need to acknowledge the "abstract concept of the world."[66] Through this communicative process, we reaffirm our shared social interactions "of an intersubjectively shared lifeworld."[67] Individuals, or what Habermas refers to as acting subjects" can steer an argument in one of two directions. One can participate in arguments by considering reasons for or against claims in a rational manner. Alternatively, like Tony, one might remain "deaf to argument," as demonstrated in his reluctance to confront the misunderstanding logically, resorting instead to dogmatic assertions concluding in violence.[68] While I concede that I might not have fully grasped the "abstract concept of the world" or the tacit expectations of a different cultural setting, I still think Tony went too far.

The interplay of art & politics

No visits to any shops or rides on the subway today—I'm heading directly to my last appointment on this field trip at the Whitney Museum of American Art's library. I need a quiet, safe space to research and write; I'll deal with the PTSD later.[69] I missed the deadline for the Haacke article, but my editor agreed to give me another week. She mentioned that another writer could put together some criticism with minor paraphrasing to fill the gap in the periodical. They can use one of the many recent press releases the publication has received as a primary source.

At the offsite Whitney Library, I started with an audio recording of a lecture Haacke delivered in 1986. Some of the notes I captured while listening and tapping at the keyboard included "unravelling reach of large corporations," "highlights the exploitation of poor for maintenance of the system," "inequality in wages," "museums are in plight—no government funding," "the only art which gets big billing is the blockbuster," and "what the corporations have recognised as a tremendously successful tool to polish their image—so in effect the interests of both parties are merging, whether this is in the service of art is a whole other story."[70] It's safe to say Haacke's focus on physical and biological systems, or a mix of the two, had strayed

into the realm of the social and political. Or to quote the press release for his exhibition *Unfinished Business* at the New Museum, "the position of corporate sponsorship in shaping culture and the interrelationship of art and politics."[71]

So, why the shift into working with social systems? In an interview, Haacke stated, "I realized that my work did not address the fraught social and political world in which we lived."[72] I suspect this is a concern many artists confront throughout their career, as I do—an existential contemplation on the impact of their art practice. However, it's bewildering to view some artists in my field of contemporary art push this approach to the limits of credibility, morphing into self-appointed authorities on a wide range of sociopolitical issues, with a new cause for each body of work. They seem to champion so many crusades that it's a wonder there's any conviction left to go around. What exactly do they stand for? The late Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn (1939–1993) referred to this as "the classic petty bourgeois dilemma."[73] Nevertheless, specific artists are embraced as saviours by certain cultural gatekeepers. A declaration by an Australian curator comes to mind, when he labelled one such artist "the knight in shining armour" destined to rescue Australian painting.[74] Personally, I prefer to stay in my lane to focus on art and my direct experiences within the art world. I'll leave the sermons and chameleon-like ethos to others.

What happens when, rather than engaging in disparate moral grandstanding, an artist narrows their focus and dares to illuminate the interplay of art and politics—the very issues that most only dance around? Haacke's exploration of social systems marked an audacious move, purging the nuance and veiled approaches that had characterised his earlier physical and biological works. His *MOMA-Poll* (1970) ensured an exclusion at New York's Museum of Modern Art for twenty-nine years—an emphatic answer to my question.[75] The work was Haacke's contribution to a curated exhibition called *Information*. Visitors were encouraged to respond with voting slips to a question displayed over two clear boxes. The question was: "Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?"[76] Dangerous territory Mr Haacke, considering Nelson Rockefeller was a trustee at MoMA from 1932 until his death in 1979.[77] As for the reliability of such a poll, one might question whether it truly reflected a broad consensus, particularly given the political leanings often associated with art museum

visitors.[78] Furthermore, does the transparency of the boxes raise concerns? Could it have influenced the responses?

Contemplating *MOMA-Poll* has imbued the air with a scent of muckraking for me; it's evident that Haacke aimed for brazen provocations with his social systems. It was also not a surprise to find that he was compelled, in part, by German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956). In high school Haacke studied Brecht's essay "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties."[79] The essay offered a cogent blueprint for igniting political change, and I think it's worth listing his Five Difficulties here in my article:

1. The Courage to Write the Truth
2. The Keenness to Recognize the Truth
3. The Skill to Manipulate the Truth as a Weapon
4. The Judgment to Select Those in Whose Hands the Truth Will Be Effective
5. The Cunning to Spread the Truth Among the Many [81]

Brecht's ideas lingered with Haacke as a latent guide, emerging to shape his blunt approach to social systems. However, while Haacke was eager to propose a method free of militancy or pitchforks, he sought instead to strategically inject challenging opinions and attitudes into public discourse through the institutions he had access to.[82]

In 1971, Haacke was invited to prepare a solo exhibition for New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. It strikes me that Brecht served as a significant touchstone, inspiring Haacke to seize the opportunity and push the museum's boundaries as a platform for sociopolitical truth. Planned biological systems such as *Guggenheim Rye in the Tropics*, mentioned earlier, got the green light; in contrast, Haacke faced pushback for some of the social systems he was developing. One of the works was *Shapolsky et. al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971), which exposed the murky property empire of one of New York's most infamous slumlords.[83]

Shapolsky et. al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings presented an expansive 142 silver gelatin prints of building facades and empty lots, typewritten dossiers on the

properties, two Manhattan maps with sites conveniently flagged, and six charts unravelling the tangled web of business ties in Harry Shapolsky's real estate empire.[84] Haacke conducted rigorous research to gather content from the publicly available County Clerk's office records.[85] Despite this, Guggenheim director Thomas Messer, after consulting with the president of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and seeking legal advice, cancelled the exhibition six weeks before its opening. This messy incident escalated when Edward Fry, the exhibition's curator and a supporter of Haacke, was also fired soon after.[86]

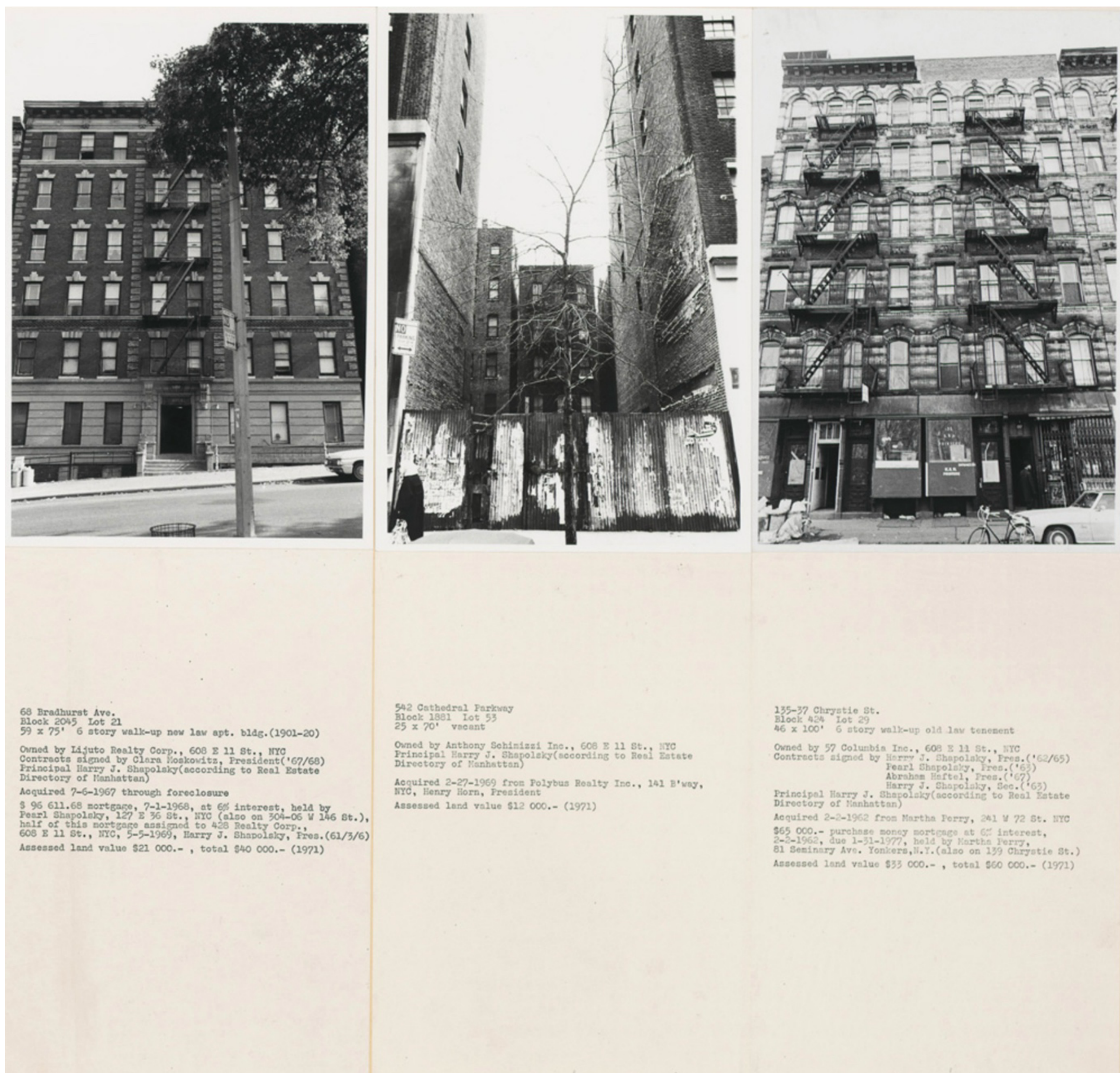


Figure 62. Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et. al Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, 1971. Photographer: Ronald Amstutz.

In a letter to Haacke, Messer stated that the social system would be arduous to defend should the museum face a libel suit and "a muckraking venture under the auspices of

the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation also raises serious questions."[87]

Muckraking—that's a harsh characterisation, considering the Absolute Charter of the Guggenheim is "to provide for the promotion of art and for the mental or moral improvement of men and women by furthering their education, enlightenment and esthetic taste."[88] Haacke responded in a letter addressed to "All Interested Parties," defending his work, correcting what he perceived as Messer's errors, and declaring, "Mr Messer is guilty of censorship and infringes on the artist's right to free expression."[89] It amounted to a very public art world beef, complete with letters, accusations, and competing principles.

Timid channels of the status quo

It seems Haacke's urge to convey the truth of sociopolitical situations in clear, concrete terms was a step too far for Messer. One might assume that there was some type of connection between Shapolsky and the Guggenheim Museum, yet, after much investigative journalism I can't find any evidence. Nonetheless, it serves as an unsettling reminder of where artists are positioned within culture and society at large when push comes to shove. Through my experience as a practising artist, it appears not much has changed. With an ever-expanding crowd of non-artists vying for a slice of the art industry pie, most artists—depending on how far they're willing to bend (or break)—still lose sleep over rent, all while navigating the relentless hustle of self-promotion. Edward Fry articulated the enduring conundrum faced by artists: whether to strive for "a dynamic, creative society" or to accept "the treatment of artists as hired help under orders," which "encourages the stagnation of life in the timid channels of the status quo."[90]

Messer's cautious stance reads like an insurance policy, protecting not the institution's integrity but its ties to patrons who might have recognised themselves a little too well in Haacke's exposé. The implication, of course, was a potential destabilisation of the museum's donor base. I suspect Messer's actions may have also been driven by a touch of self-preservation. I wonder if Haacke fully understood the compromised nature of the museum when he set out to adopt Brecht's methods for his solo Guggenheim presentation. Could he have simply been a heavy-handed artist who had mistakenly

provoked trouble, much like my own startling confrontations across New York City in recent times? If Haacke wasn't aware of the influence that potential sponsors had on the works museums presented at the time, he certainly became acquainted with it afterward. To quote the artist, "They only support institutions and exhibits that make them look good. Public relations is part of their business plan. Therefore, many museums are allergic to works that risk alienating potential sponsors."[91]

Hans Haacke could have chosen the path of least resistance by continuing to explore physical and biological systems. Instead, his social systems marked what I believe to be a natural and logical progression in his practice. Haacke's unflinching critique of institutional systems challenges artists to ask: How can we navigate, provoke, and disrupt the structures that define the art world without falling victim to censorship or being subdued into passive compliance? As an exemplar for artists, Haacke can lead you to precarious places from which you may not emerge victorious if you're not careful. Unlike the artists I've analysed in previous articles, he doesn't dabble in dissent; he comes out swinging, risking reprisals. Haacke's social systems, dismissed by Messer as muckraking, ultimately led to his ejection from the Guggenheim Museum—a price he paid for his convictions.

In Haacke's own words, "Almost all cultural institutions are private and depend on the good graces of donors and ... on sponsors."[92] In his opinion, the public pays the bills, but corporate sponsors write the rules—a dire reality he confronts with a take-no-prisoners approach. Haacke's social systems offer a prescient glimpse into the creeping privatisation of cultural institutions. As these spaces grow more dependent on corporate sponsors, they risk undermining the production and equitable presentation of contemporary art.

I contend that these hurdles have extended further into public arts funding and institutional support. The knee-jerk response to historical exclusion—imposing new exclusions on certain artists under the contradictory guise of inclusivity—has created additional barriers and an impossible ticking of boxes for those who are declared out of favour. They become burdened by the legacies of prior inequalities and tarred with the same brush, so to speak. Yet the quandary for artists remains when it comes to navigating these confines strategically. What other choice is there for those seeking a

sustained, legitimate connection with others? By now, it's clear that the game of presenting one's practice in the 'right' venues is sewn up. This is something that Haacke was cognisant of when he noted, "So-called 'avant-garde art' is, at best, working close to the limitations set by its cultural/political environment, but it always operates within that allowance."[93]

The gentle art of self-sabotage with a polite smile

This is not to say artists can't navigate these parameters, only that doing so requires a mix of cunning, luck, and a high tolerance for rejection. While works such as *Ten Turtles Set Free*, *Norbert: "All Systems Go*," and other biological systems by Haacke rely on absurdity, the institutional critique in his social systems tend more toward transgressive humour. This humour surfaces through the shock or astonishment that Haacke could be so brazen, confrontational, and unwavering in his convictions—a kind of jarring candour.

Nonetheless, Haacke implements humour as a tool that negotiates the expectations of the art institution and the audience. I believe the truth about unscrupulous conditions can be entwined or repackaged with humour, and, as Brecht wrote, "offering them the truth in such a manner that it will be a weapon in their hands, and at the same time we must do it so cunningly that the enemy will not discover and hinder our offer of the truth."[94] I argue that Haacke has not always followed Brecht's instruction for a cunning method closely enough. Had he done so, his solo presentation at the Guggenheim Museum might have held a prominent place on his resume today, listed under the year 1971. Although I may be viewing this through the lens of contemporary Australian art, I believe institutional critique requires a more nuanced and covert approach, especially in a smaller pond such as ours.

Coupled with humour, engagement in varied forms of art pedagogy has been a cornerstone of many seminal conceptual artists' strategies. For Haacke, this approach is fundamental to the essence of his systems—a strategy of rigorous research aimed at sharing new knowledge. I think it functions as a generous form of public service. To quote American writer Lucy Lippard, "From the grab-bag of public information [Haacke] spotlights aspects of society we have taken for granted, thereby performing

the classic artist's function of teaching people how to see."[95]

Aside from Haacke's practice helping museum visitors to sharpen their perception, he also taught for many years at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City.[96] In addition, he was a visiting artist at the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program for decades.[97] If Haacke hadn't led the charge, dismantling institutional facades and challenging systems of power, who knows where the careers of younger artists like Andrea Fraser, William Powhida (b. 1976), and the anonymous artist collective Bruce High Quality Foundation (formed 2003) might have landed. A direct lineage from Haacke can be drawn to numerous political activist protests in recent times at the Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Whitney as well. These activist disruptions exposed the fractures between benevolent giving and the uncomfortable truths it often tries to mask.[98]

Haacke's steady income from teaching positions also allowed him the freedom to create uncompromising works, free from market pressures. This autonomy allowed him to sustain his focus on the dematerialisation of art while addressing the complex realities of the contemporary art world, exposing its ethical, economic, and political entanglements with society at large.[99] The capitalist whirlwind of New York City is the perfect locale for such examination; the dynamics are augmented in an art world which is often swayed by the city's powerful financial and political currents.

Reflecting on my own bumbling missteps in New York City, I see a parallel. Haacke and I may occupy different stages and take separate routes, but the lessons resonate. Could I have handled my subway run-in with Jake better? Probably. Should I have just removed the cheese from the sandwich myself and avoided upsetting the sandwich artist who prepared my hero? Definitely. And perhaps not leading violent Tony in the electronics store into thinking he had an immediate sale would have spared me some trauma. My experiences revealed my own naivety—a misunderstanding of cultural differences and the tacit etiquette in a city defined by vast social and economic inequalities. In contrast, Haacke was acutely aware of the provocations embedded in his social systems, which occasionally earned him an escort to the door of certain museums. As Edward Fry aptly remarked, "If an artist's work and thought provoke

controversy, it is a sure sign of life," flipping the script on scandal and framing it as a declaration of moxie.[100]

For contemporary artists seeking to trouble systems that reward obedience, Haacke's legacy offers both inspiration and caution. He shows us what can be achieved when compromise is not an option, but also the cost of such defiance. However, as Haacke observed, there is a silver lining: "Fortunately art institutions and other cultural power agents do not form a monolithic block; so the public's access to such works might be limited but not totally prevented."[101] For Haacke, his social systems aim to overtly provoke the art institution, its leadership, and its sponsors, regardless of the consequences. Although he takes the long and difficult route, he always seems to find a venue and an appreciative audience. In a so-called culture industry that still rewards compliance and punishes dissent, his work reminds us that rocking the boat is not just a choice—it's a necessity.

[1] My per diem is the daily expense allowance from my publisher. With ongoing cutbacks by head office and the unfortunate exchange rate I might be skipping the odd meal while here, which I suppose is a preferable option rather than purchasing an entire new wardrobe to accommodate my ballooning figure.
[2] Karl Marx, "Different Forms of the Relative Surplus Population. The General Law of Capitalistic Accumulation," in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels (Mosa: Progress Publishers, 1887), 448.
[3] According to Marx, the three branches of relative surplus population are the floating, the latent, and the stagnant. Floating: surplus population of labour exists in fluid form in an ever-decreasing ratio to the scale of production. Latent: a latent surplus population in agriculture consists of workers who are underemployed and set to relocate to manufacturing jobs when opportunities arise. Stagnant: consists of irregularly employed workers with very low wages and poor living conditions, providing capital with a constant supply of disposable labour. see Marx, "Capital," 447–448.
[4] Marx, "Capital," 449.
[5] Tate Gallery, "Tate Gallery 25 January–4 March 1984: Hans Haacke," Collection: PAD/D, Series Folder: I.984, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY.
[6] Blake Gopnik, "Hans Haacke, Firebrand, Gets His First U.S. Survey in 33 Years," *New York Times*, October 15, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/arts/design/hans-haacke-new-museum.html.
[7] Gloria Sutton, "Hans Haacke: Works of Art, 1963–72," in *Hans Haacke: All Connected*, ed. Gary Carrion-Murayari and Massimiliano Gioni (New York: Phaidon Press, 2019), 11.
[8] Haacke received his second prestigious scholarship, the Fulbright, to study at the Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia. See Hans Haacke, "Hans Haacke in Conversation with Gary Carrion-Murayari and Massimiliano Gioni," in *Hans Haacke: All Connected*, 218.
[9] Pamela M. Lee, "Unfinished 'Unfinished Business,'" in *Hans Haacke: All Connected*, 86.
[10] In 1959, Allan Kaprow coined the term *Happening* for his *18 Happenings* exhibition at New York's Reuben Gallery. These events were the artists' canny escape from being the clichéd all-knowing genius, aiming instead to involve viewers as active participants. Happenings were also a bold way to break free from the staid confines of galleries and museums. See Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, 88.
[11] Hans Haacke, "Correspondence: Guggenheim, 1971," in *Working Conditions: The Writings of Hans Haacke*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 43.
[12] Haacke, 43.
[13] Gopnik, "Hans Haacke, Firebrand."
[14] Jean Baudrillard, *America* (New York: Verso, 1989), https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4716668.
[15] John A. Tyson, "Beyond Systems Aesthetics: Politics, Performance, and Para-Sites," in *Hans Haacke: All Connected*, 258.
[16] Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (1968): 31, https://www.artforum.com/features/systems-esthetics-201372/.
[17] Jack Burnham, "Real Time Systems," *Artforum* 8, no.1 (1969): 51, https://www.artforum.com/features/real-time-systems-210752/.

[18] Lee, "Unfinished 'Unfinished Business,'" 87.
[19] Christina Chau, "Kinetic Systems: Jack Burnham and Hans Haacke," *Contemporaneity* 3 (2014): 72, https://doi.org/10.5195/contemp.2014.57.
[20] Chau, 74.
[21] Around the same time or shortly thereafter, artists including Alexandre Archipenko (1887–1964), Naum Gabo (1890–1977), and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) experimented in the field of kinetic art. See Frank Popper, "Three-Dimensional Works in Movement," in *Origins and Development in Kinetic Art*, trans. Stephen Bann (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 121–155.
[22] Tate Gallery, "Tate Gallery 25 January–4 March 1984: Hans Haacke."
[23] Tate Gallery, "Tate Gallery 25 January–4 March 1984: Hans Haacke."
[24] Hans Haacke, "Provisional Remarks, 1971," in *Working Conditions*, 48.
[25] Alexander Alberro, "Introduction: Hans Haacke and the Rules of the Game," in *Working Conditions*, xxiii.
[26] I purchased John Cage's album *Nova Mushica* at a garage sale in Western Sydney in 1994 for one dollar. The record did not belong there, and I was happy to become its new guardian. I was even more delighted to recently find the same record on eBay for $287. The LP is a compilation of Cage's compositions released by the Italian record label *Cramps* in 1974. It features a range of pieces from *Music for Marcel Duchamp* (1947) to *Sixty-two Mesostics Re Merce Cunningham* (1972). American John Cage (1912–1992) was an avant-garde composer. See Julia Robinson, *John Cage* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
[27] *Sanga* is Australian slang for sandwich.
[28] Marx, "Capital," 163.
[29] Baudrillard, *America*.
[30] Tate Gallery, "Tate Gallery 25 January–4 March 1984: Hans Haacke."
[31] Chau, "Kinetic Systems," 64.
[32] Chau, 73.
[33] Carsten Höller, "Life Itself," in *Hans Haacke: All Connected*, 56.
[34] Ludwig von Bertalanffy, "The Meaning of General System Theory: Closed and Open Systems: Limitations of Conventional Physics," in *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Application* (New York: George Braziller, 1969), 39.
[35] Bertalanffy, 39.
[36] Jannis Kounellis's first installation integrated inorganic and organic components: troughs filled with soil and planted with cacti, a live parrot standing on a perch fixed to the wall, and goldfish presented in an aquarium. See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera* (London: Phaidon, 2014), 107.
[37] Alberro, "Introduction," xxii.
[38] Alberro, xxii.
[39] Höller, "Life Itself," 53, 56–57.
[40] Haacke, "In Conversation with Gary Carrion-Murayari and Massimiliano Gioni," 231.
[41] Haacke, 231.
[42] Hans Haacke, "DER BEVÖLKERUNG (To the Population), 1999," in *Working Conditions*, 192–193.
[43] Ian Geraghty, "*Michael Lindeman: Streetscape*, Sherman Galleries," *Reviews: Sydney 69* (April/May/June 2006): 101.
[44] In an era when slow-motion videos of extreme sports and crossdressing parodies of music clips were all the rage on the Sydney art scene, I decided to pivot from my own sculpture and video experiments to create some distance. Some might consider this compulsion to evade the fashionable as an act of self-sabotage.

[45] Sutton, "Hans Haacke: Works of Art, 1963–72," 11.
[46] Jack Burnham, "Hans Haacke: Wind and Water Sculpture," *Tri Quarterly Supplement* 1, no. Spring (1967): 14.
[47] Sutton, "Hans Haacke: Works of Art, 1963–72," 14.
[48] Bergson, "The Comic Element in Situations," 59, emphasis in original.
[49] Germano Celant, "Tradition is Revolution," in *Jannis Kounellis*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2019), 17–19.
[50] Ursula Ströbele, *Hans Haacke: Art, Nature, Politics* (Mönchengladbach: Museum Abteiberg, 2020), exhibition catalogue, https://museum-abteiberg.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020_06_04_Raumtexte-Hans-Haacke_DINA4_EN.pdf
[51] Ströbele, *Hans Haacke: Art, Nature, Politics*.
[52] Holm, "Humour Without Reason," 150.
[53] Luke Skrebowski, "All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham's Systems Aesthetics," *Grey Room*, no. 30 (2008): 54–83, https://doi.org/10.1162/grey.2008.1.30.54.
[54] Höller, "Life Itself," in *Hans Haacke: All Connected*, 61.
[55] Skrebowski, "All Systems Go."
[56] *Cybernetics* was coined by American computer scientist and mathematician Nobert Wiener and Mexican physician Arthuro Rosenblueth: "We have decided to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in machine or in the animal, by the name *Cybernetics*." See Norbert Wiener, introduction to *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and in the Machine*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1961), 11.
[57] Ardam, "On Not Teaching Art," 154.
[58] Henri Bergson, "The Comic Element in General—The Comic Element in Forms and Movements—Expansive Force of the Comic," in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 10.
[59] Ann Temkin, "Joseph Beuys: An Introduction to his Life and Work," in *Thinking is Form: The Drawings of Joseph* Beuys (New York: Thames and Hudson; Philadelphia Museum of Art; The Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 16.
[60] Louise Norton, "Buddha of the Bathroom," in *The Blind Man*, no.2 (May 1917): 6.
[61] Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 389.
[62] Duchamp used his blithe and sardonic Rrose Sélavy between 1920-1941 so he could, "have two identities." See Calvin Tompkins, "Enter Rose Sélavy," in *Duchamp: A Biography*, 231. I was fortunate to view Arte Povera artist Pino Pascali's retrospective at the Fondazione Prada, Milan. The exhibition featured a series of archival black-and-white photographs of him and his works in humorous parodies of promotional photographs.
[63] Gopnik, "Hans Haacke, Firebrand."
[64] Tate Gallery, "Tate Gallery 25 January–4 March 1984: Hans Haacke."
[65] Jürgen Habermas, "Rationality: A Preliminary Specification," in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, vol. 1 *Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 13.
[66] Habermas, 13.
[67] Habermas, 13.
[68] Habermas, 18.
[69] Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health complaint caused by experiencing or witnessing a traumatic incident, triggering ongoing fear and stress responses even after the danger has ceased. See

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd.
[70] Hans Haacke, *Hans Haacke* [sound recording], Seminar with Artists Series (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1986), Bulwark Library–Media, N367.H22 SWA19861014.
[71] New Museum, "The New Museum Presents Retrospective of the Work of Hans Haacke," press release, November 6, 1986, quoted in Lee, "Unfinished 'Unfinished Business,'" 78.
[72] Haacke, "In Conversation with Gary Carrion-Murayari and Massimiliano Gioni," 222.
[73] They seek elite validation without giving up their working-class street cred. It's the age-old petty bourgeois struggle: playing both sides and flipping loyalties when convenient. Michael Auping, "Interview with Ian Burn," MoMA Archives, Collection: PAD/D, Series Folder: I.387. 3.
[74] Barry Pearce, former head curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of NSW anointed Ben Quilty as our palette knife wielding hero. See Lenny Ann Low, "The Hot Seat: Ben Quilty," *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 18, 2007, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/the-hot-seat-ben-quilty-20070318-gdpowl.html.
[75] Haacke, "In Conversation with Gary Carrion-Murayari and Massimiliano Gioni," 223.
[76] Haacke, "MOMA-Poll," in *Hans Haacke: Working Conditions* 31–32.
[77] Haacke, 32.
[78] It's intriguing to note that only 12.4% of a total of the 299,057 visitors to the exhibition participated in Haacke's poll. See Haacke, *Working Conditions*, 32.
[79] Haacke, "DER BEVÖLKERUNG," 200.
[80] After Hitler seized control of Germany, Brecht, exiled in Denmark, set out to confront the political nightmare, hoping his writing might provoke change. See Kristen Hileman, "Romantic Realist: A Conversation with Hans Haacke," *American Art*, 24, no.2 (2010): 78, https://doi.org/10.1086/656460.
[81] Bertolt Brecht, "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties [1935]" accessed August 10, 2024, https://revolutionary-socialism.com/en/writing-the-truth-five-difficulties/.
[82] Hileman, "Romantic Realist," 78.
[83] Lisa Phillips, "Director's Forward," in *Hans Haacke: All Connected*, 7.
[84] Alberro, "Introduction," xxx–xxxi.
[85] Hans Haacke, "To All Interested Parties," April 3, 1971, Accession no. 1995.46.3.171, BAMPFA, CA.
[86] Ströbele, *Hans Haacke: Art, Nature, Politics*.
[87] Thomas Messer, "Untitled," March 19, 1971, Accession no. 1995.46.3.171, BAMPFA, CA.
[88] From the Absolute Charter of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (the administrative framework of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum), June 25, 1937. See Hans Haacke, "The Guggenheim: The Issues," interview by Edward Fry, *Arts Magazine* 45, no 7 (May 1971): 18, Collection#: A0059, Box: 643667, Folder: 55.
[89] Haacke, "To All Interested Parties."
[90] Haacke, "The Guggenheim: The Issues," 18.
[91] Haacke, *Hans Haacke: All Connected*, 227.
[92] Hans Haacke, "Free Exchange, 1995 with Pierre Bourdieu (excerpts)," in *Working Conditions*, 180.
[93] Hans Haacke, "All The Art That's Fit To Show," in *Institutional Critique and After*, 55.

[94] Brecht, "Writing the Truth."
[95] Lucy R. Lippard, "Power Plays," *Village Voice*, February 25, 1981.
[96] Alexander Alberro, preface to *Working Conditions*, vii.
[97] Howard, Singerman, "In Theory & Practice: A History of The Whitney Independent Study Program," *Artforum* 42, no. 6 (2004); 171, https://www.artforum.com/features/in-theory-practice-a-history-of-the-whitney-independent-study-program-168038/.
[98] Protests and political activations at New York's Guggenheim Museum focused on donations by the Sackler Family, who own Purdue Pharma, the maker of the drug OxyContin. See https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/09/arts/protesters-guggenheim-sackler.html. Protests at the Whitney Museum of Art called for the resignation of Warren B. Kanders from the board, owner of Safariland, which manufactures tear gas. See https://www.artforum.com/columns/a-statement-from-hannah-black-ciaran-finlayson-and-tobi-haslett-regarding-warren-kanders-and-the-2019-whitney-biennial-244098/. The Koch Brothers, donors and trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, were the focus of protests due to their climate change denying views, opposition to unions, resistance to minimal wages, and health care. See Patrick Doreian and Andrej Mrvar, "The Koch Brothers and the Climate Change Denial Social Movement," in *Handbook of Anti-Environmentalism*, ed. David Tindall, Mark C. J. Stoddart and Riley E. Dunlap (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020), 1–15.
[99] Haacke was a key figure, alongside artists such as Yoko Ono, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, and many others in a shift during the 1960s and 1970s from conventional painting and sculpture to conceptual, ephemeral, and performative modes of artistic practice. See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerilization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (London: Studio Vista, 1973).
[100] Haacke, "The Guggenheim: The Issues," 18.
[101] Haacke, "All the Art That's Fit to Show," 55.

Haacke and a bumbling fool

— by Charles Olstink

Let’s not pretend Lindeman isn’t a bumbling fool. While some of us are advancing the cultural frontier of celebrity and fashion, he’s off consorting with plebeians in a friendless and misguided bid for relevance. Does he really think this regime of practice will position him well in the contemporary art world?

His latest article defines New York as a deranged feedback loop of spectacle, failure, and performative survival. A city where tuna melts, luxury art, and Marx’s relative surplus population coalesce into a breathing map of capitalist paradox. Lindeman writes about his encounters with a claw-handed passenger on the subway, an attempt to purchase a sandwich from a volatile deli worker amid a meltdown and even gets flogged by an electronics store proprietor. He seems determined to disrupt passive consumption and expose the city’s barely concealed tensions. Why would one bother? I’d much prefer to attend a cocktail party and gather more content for my social media.

The writer displays a rather unrestrained fervour for minutiae, embracing lived experience like Jack Burnham’s real-time systems. Lindeman’s elaborate narrative traverses Haacke’s early biological works with chickens and turtles, where, the writer contends, absurdity and organic life expose institutional illusions of impartiality. Henri Bergson’s notion of the comic helps frame these events as failures in systems logic, where conventional decorum succumbs to unpredictability, be it animals, pastrami, or the jolting cadences of New York City. One wonders whether Lindeman has the nerve to disrupt civility in his own art practice with equal force.

Lindeman attempts to link his observational approach to Hans Haacke’s institutional critique—not as a clone but as parallel method. The reader is informed that Haacke shifted from physical to social systems—a turn sparked by Burnham, Bertalanffy, and Brecht. This marked a deliberate move from work already pushing the limits of formal aesthetics to one of ideological subversion. His works like *MoMA-Poll* and *Shapolsky et al.* weaponised nerdy research and exposure, probing the thresholds of museum tolerance. Yet Haacke’s own quiet presence stands in contrast to the transgressive boldness of his work, echoing Wilde’s view that masks reveal truth. Lindeman, too,

wears his costumes—sunshields, trapper hats, paper bags—not as disguise but as both self-preservation and critique, underscoring the art world's theatricality and its codes of inclusion. How dare he mock our flashiness—it's not our fault he can't afford designer fashion.

If Haacke bites the hand that feeds him, Lindeman likes to think he slaps it with Duchampian humour. Both artists endeavour to expose my institutions—not through spectacle, but by inhabiting those very systems. Such incongruity suggests a fundamental misapprehension of their own position: I don't believe either artist has earned the right to reframe the rules they so freely presume to critique.

★☆☆☆☆

Thankfully, my next review will be the final one in the series. My vibrant itinerary has made it difficult to summon both the time and the will to pass judgment thus far. Still, I've been subjected to a thorough sampling of Lindeman's output, spanning historical and recent works. Let's hope the artist's final essay on his finger-painted *Regression Paintings* isn't quite as juvenile as it sounds.

Regression Paintings: The cerebral vs visceral blockbuster

By Michael Lindeman

Behind any prize fighter there's a mass of support people: trainer, manager, promoter, PR team, sponsors, cutman, nutritionist, sparring partners, and so on. In *Regression Paintings*, my ongoing and most recent series of works, I too lean on a dedicated team for support, guidance, and inspiration. Of course, it would be impossible to identify every individual and experience that has informed my practice up to this point—every win, loss, or draw bears upon a previous artwork and informs the next. Instead, I drift through a foggy, concussion-induced memory to recall some of these disparate ringside mentors. To name just a few, they include artists, writers, and philosophers such as Roland Barthes, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Marcel Duchamp, Ian Burn, Aleks Danko, and Ed Ruscha.

It's no surprise then that the *Regression Paintings* are positioned in an idiosyncratic, eclectic arena. Heavyweight concepts grapple with featherweight records of experience. Each contender, from hard-hitting understanding to fleeting insight, faces off in the ring. There is no fixed weight class or hierarchy here, just a chaotic, all-in brawl where sharp insight and offhand jabs land with equal force. It might be confusing for the audience, and that's fine by me. After all, nothing's more uninspiring than a lopsided, formulaic event where the winners are already decided before the bell has even rung.

The neutral zone: Where meaning goes to loiter

This disorientation extends beyond the conceptual and into the material. Like the *Mirror Paintings* by Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933), the *Regression Paintings* refuse to contain an image within a stable frame, instead implicating the viewer in an unfolding scene. An example of this is *Regression Painting (Confused...)*, 2022. With its aesthetic hook of finger-painted acrylic on mirror—echoed throughout the series—the text, visible in the negative space of the reflective surface, bounces through an Australian vernacular to convey a confused state of being. The mirror refuses to be a passive backdrop; it absorbs the shifting world around it, trapping the viewer within the work and casting them as both spectator and subject.

Figure 63. Michael Lindeman, *Regression Painting (Confused...)*, 2022. Finger painted acrylic on mirror, 100 x 110 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

One might ask: Where does the confusion lie? Well, for me, the perplexity emerges when ruminating on the mechanics of art and culture in my local context.[1] While nuance is the combat plan that I wield in the *Regression Paintings*, experience has taught me not to go into specifics, preferring instead to skirt around the edges of the domain. Please forgive my evasive stance; I hope you understand. Sadly, I've witnessed creative peers seduced by the illusion of a free space for expression in the arts, only to find that these freedoms are sanctioned. The institutional structures that govern the art world include curatorial chokeholds, funding bodies, and both implicit and explicit rules. These forces dictate what is deemed fashionable, acceptable, or valuable. As a result, our southpaw friends end up copping a beating. Being cornered by what is approved and what is not necessitates nuance, which in turn becomes a tactical advantage in the *Regression Paintings*, unravelling in subtle, shifting ways without

ever settling into a fixed meaning.

I've come to realise that, like many of my works, the *Regression Paintings* use nuance and humour not to break the institution's guard but to slip through its defences. As American novelist Wayne Koestenbaum (b. 1958) wrote when he discussed Roland Barthes, "Nuance offers not a substantive passivity but a murmuring."[2] Unlike a passivity that is empty or disengaged, Koestenbaum identified a nuance in the writing of Barthes that was discreet yet still active, with meaning, in a subtle way. Similarly, through the *Regression Paintings*, I aim to unsettle formal structures of the art world's status quo with an understated and persistent nuance. It could be argued that I'm performing *The Low-Key Limbo*.

Figure 64. Michael Lindeman, *Regression Painting (The Low-Key Limbo)*, 2024. Finger painted acrylic on mirror, 38.5 x 97.6 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

Barthes articulated this type of nuance in what he referred to as the Neutral.[2] He noted that the Neutral "is not an average of active and of passive; rather it is a back-and-forth, an amoral oscillation, in short, one might say, the converse of an antinomy."[3] In the context of the *Regression Paintings*, the Neutral is applied as a refusal to showboat—a kind of self-erasure or stealthy presence, and an attempt to sidestep the spotlight of hierarchical power. I'm interested in a strategy that seeks agency not by seizing power, but by quietly diffusing it—what American art critic Dave Hickey (1940–2021) described as an "alternative discourse of embodied dissent."[4]

For Barthes, the Neutral is "the refusal 'to keep oneself in countenance' (the refusal of

any countenance whatever)—the principle of delicacy—drifting—pleasure in its ecstatic aspect: whatever avoids or thwarts or ridicules ostentation, mastery, intimidation."[5] Through the *Regression Paintings*, I seek a parallel apathy for domination, rolling with the punches via an innocuous gestural aesthetic rather than throwing them. However, paradoxically, the text (or concept) of the paintings is often laced with an acerbic humour, a counterpunch to mastery itself.

The smiling counterpunch

The intermittent lampooning enacted in the *Regression Paintings* can be read as a defensive stance. For those who opt to interpret the work as a combative demonstration, the works locate me at the centre of a complex, self-inflicted melee. Not rowdy or courageous enough to punch my way out of this conundrum, I choose to duck, weave, and smile. I find that my grin is indicative of an incongruous humour that acts as a planned manoeuvre, both willingly entangled in and pushing against the politics of the art world, like a fighter who takes a solid hit, smiles in acknowledgment, and keeps moving. Fundamentally, while peers are engaging in the grind of competition and hustle for opportunities, the *Regression Paintings* embrace humour as a type of play and refuge.

John Morreall suggested that as a type of play, "humor is pursued for pleasure. We call that pleasure amusement."[6] However, amusement differs from other types of pleasure as we need not be attracted. One can find something funny without being seduced by it, like an unfit artist with poor social media presence metaphorically dodging jabs in the boxing ring, which is hardly attractive. The finger-painted application of acrylic to the mirror substrates in the *Regression Paintings* can be read as quite subversive in a fine art context—it must drive the paintbrush nerds crazy, who I'm sure are unable to share in my amusement. For some, the works are unserious, although, to quote Morreall, "In fact, the violation of rules of serious communication is often the incongruity in humor."[7] I like to think of it as an antidote to art's current ills, administered by Dr Lindeman—chin up, take the hit, keep moving, and most importantly have fun.

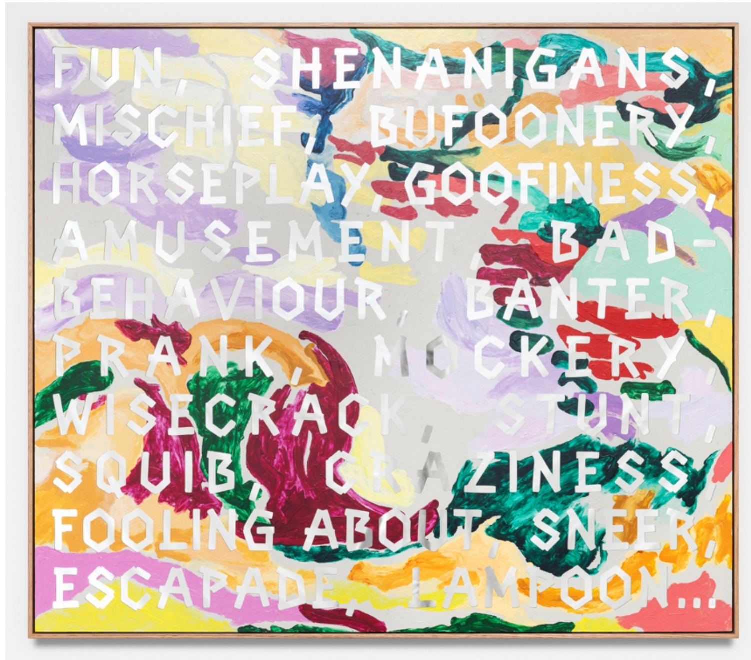


Figure 65. Michael Lindeman, *Regression Painting (Fun...)*, 2022. Finger painted acrylic on mirror, 100 x 110 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

In *Regression Painting (Fun...)*, 2022, the modus operandi was to "drift" in a Barthesian sense across language.[8] Each word in the painting extends the concept of fun, revelling in a jesting vernacular. The text glides over the reflective surface, offering the possibility that the viewer might find amusement, and more broadly, that art can accommodate invention, levity, and dialogue between artist and viewer. Artist and writer Nicola McCartney argued that humorous art, like a skilled boxer, needs room to move; it must create a kind of "play space" to land strategic strikes if it's to provoke discourse and make an impact.[9] A playful environment is more likely to spark laughter and prompt a reconsideration of perspectives that might have gone unchallenged.[10] With its lively spectrum of colours and up-tempo finger-painted application, *Regression Painting (Fun...)* argues for humour as a guiding force in artistic decisions—a rhetorical tool that shapes meaning, challenges perceptions, and provokes dialogue. A space for play can also challenge or undermine the rigid seriousness of the art world.[11]

Philosophy with footwork

This interplay of humour, movement, and engagement is not merely conceptual; it extends into the materiality of the *Regression Paintings* themselves. The visual and textural contrasts within the paintings, such as crisp reflective text against saturated colour, create a charged field of perception. Employing mirror substrates, the *Regression Paintings* lure the viewer into the ring by absorbing the world, skipping around with light, space, and motion. My sparring partners—the viewers—are both inside and before the works, active and passive. Through the reflective surface visible

in the negative space of the text, the works stage a phenomenological encounter, drawing the viewer's perception and bodily presence into the painting—"a descriptive science of lived experience."[12]

Rather than a static, passive interpretation of perceptual stimuli, the *Regression Paintings* coalesce a range of experiences, nuanced and in constant motion. The paintings never tire, darting around with urgency, their endurance akin to that of a prize fighter at the peak of their career. This frenzy, where movement and reflection in the mirror converge with textual concepts and layered gestural finger paint, generates a periphery of partial obscurity within the perceptual field. Austrian-German philosopher and founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) described this notion as "a dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality."[13]

Evidently, the viewer perceives the direct qualities of the paintings—paint and mirror. But Husserl's description can be applied to the lack of clarity, or the obliqueness of the *Regression Paintings*, both in their physicality and conceptual content—a field that is indeterminate alongside determinate, where viewers are simultaneously within and before the works, oscillating between engagement and detachment. Like a boxer reading an opponent's footwork, the viewer must navigate this interplay of clarity and obscurity, adjusting their stance in response to what the painting reveals or conceals.

To quote Husserl again, "an empty mist of dim indeterminacy gets studded over with intuitive possibilities or presumptions ... The misty horizon that can never be completely outlined remains necessarily there."[14] In this way, the *Regression Paintings* function as a phenomenological frontier that frames yet evades complete clarity—less a misty horizon and more a concussion, jarring and disorienting rather than softly fading from view. Straightforward coherence in the *Regression Paintings* is intentionally unsettled by the two competing strategies of cold, cerebral mirror text and radiant, visceral paint. The one-two dynamic of reading and seeing lures the viewer in before delivering the real intellectual hit.

This interplay of shifting perspectives and unstable representation echoes Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings*, which disrupt the traditional boundaries of depiction and reflection. Beginning in 1962, Pistoletto transferred photographic images via screen printing onto mirrored surfaces, embedding static figures within a constantly changing environment.[15] The effect is a space in which the viewer and the image exist simultaneously, blurring the boundary between observation and participation.[16] The spectator, unwittingly drawn into the scene, becomes both observer and observed, their presence captured and doubled within the reflective plane. Much like Husserl's notion of the indeterminate field, Pistoletto's works resist a fixed composition, as foreground integrates into background, representation into reflection, static into dynamic. As with the *Regression Paintings*, Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings* disrupt the linear flow of time. In his works, past and present do not merely coexist—they collide, entangled in an ongoing exchange where the act of looking continually reshapes the image. Reflection becomes both an archive and a real-time event, collapsing temporal distinctions so that time itself is no longer a backdrop but an active force within the work.[17]

Figure 66. Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Smartphone - giovane donna 6 movimenti A*, 2018. Silkscreen on super mirror stainless steel, 635 × 317.5 cm.

An analysis of any successful gladiator suggests a combination of brawn and brains is necessary. Expanding from the more cognitive understanding of Husserl's boundless realm of perception—the horizon as an ever-expanding field of potential meaning—French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) recognised this sphere as part of our lived, embodied experience. The active participation of the viewer, their movement, affects an understanding of the *Regression Paintings* by shifting its focus accordingly. Perception, then, isn't a one-two punch of intellect alone; it's a full-body engagement, demanding movement, instinct, and responsiveness. Merleau-Ponty introduced perception—what he termed "sense experience"[18]—into the domain of

bodily engagement when he stated that it "invests the quality with vital value, grasping it first in its meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, whence it comes about that it always involves a reference to the body."[19]

With Merleau-Ponty's thoughts in mind, we do not merely see or experience the *Regression Paintings* in a detached manner; rather, they demand an encounter where movement, sensory stimulus, and shifting perspectives are integral to the work. I intend for the *Regression Paintings* to be received as part of the audience's lived reality, engaging their bodily presence in the world. However, for me, the knockout blow is when this physical encounter resonates intellectually—when the mirrored text invites reading, interpretation, and the projection of the viewer's own embodied memories onto the paintings. I believe this to be the crux of the *Regression Paintings*: an equal emphasis on both the cerebral and physical gestures in perception. Far from shadowboxing, the *Regression Paintings* deliver blows that register both in the gut and in the mind.

Provocation is the real amusement

The *Regression Paintings* don't swing wildly; they sidestep, feint, and slip past expectations. Their impact isn't delivered by sheer force but through calculated movement, drawing the audience in and engaging them in the rhythm of the bout before they recognise their own participation. The finger-painted mirrors, like a well-timed counter, agitate networks of inclusion and exclusion, an aim always present in the contests of this professional light heavyweight contender. After all, there is no exclusion in these works; all spectators are embraced, captured, and rebounded into the spectacle. The works knock over the tradition of a 'painting inside a painting' as we know it—the type of *mise en abyme*[20] or meta-painting[21] adopted by artists ranging from Diego de Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) to René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929), and many in between and beyond. Instead, the *Regression Paintings* forge a space in which aesthetics, language, painting, and audience intersect, while continuing to reference and analyse art and its contexts via the often humorous and critical text contained in the paintings. The works are participating in a distinct match-up under a different sanctioning body.

I'll admit, the *Regression Paintings* are often thrown into the mix for my own amusement, though I suspect they don't always go the distance with the judges. It seems to me that commerce disguised as culture is often the status quo. I aim to break, if only momentarily, from the constraints of intellectual consumerism, where ideas are adopted for social status rather than critical engagement. In the dialectics of Horkheimer and Adorno this was referred to as the culture industry at work.[22] *Work* is the key term here, as play or free-spirited levity are curtailed in favour of a materialistic variant designed to serve commercial or ideological ends. As the German tag-team noted, "Pure amusement indulged to the full, relaxed abandon to colorful associations and merry nonsense, is cut short by amusement in its marketable form: it is disrupted by the surrogate of a coherent meaning."[23]

Horkheimer and Adorno's collaborative writing suggests that fun and amusement in the creative realm is deemed inferior by the culture industry's prevailing financial and ideological forces. The path of least resistance—the tactical move to gain supporters and build cultural (and financial) currency—would be to shut up, stay within the ropes, and maybe even embrace the synthetic reality of social media and other fads. But oh no, not this impossible-to-coach fighter. The urge to square up to the status quo and swerve away from trends is far too thrilling. After all, provocation is the real amusement for this finger painter.

Hustlers to the right, oddballs to the left

Some of the *Regression Paintings* fall into distinct categories, drawing attention to other readily accessible art world inhabitants. I'm not particularly concerned with challenging museum boundaries, a primary focus of the first wave of institutional critique of the 1960s and 1970s, which examined the interplay between economic and political narratives.[24] Nor do these works completely align with the second wave of institutional critique of the 1980s and 1990s, a phase that explored not just systemic issues but also personal and cultural identity within those systems.[25]

Instead, the *Regression Paintings* take a different approach, engaging with a more immediate and critical piece of the art world puzzle: the ways artists themselves participate and compete to gain advantage over their peers. As a reluctant yet active

witness, I find myself in a qualified position to articulate these dynamics. It seems that, to avoid becoming static or just another rigid category within the art world's structures, it's essential for institutional critique to remain adaptable, continuously evolving with the environments in which artists find themselves.[26]

Figure 67. Michael Lindeman, *Regression Paintings*, 2025. Installation view. Finger painted acrylic on mirror, dimensions variable. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

A series of *Regression Paintings* created in 2025 responds to these conditions, featuring smaller, rectangular mirrors with gentle yet vibrant colours—both aesthetic and slapstick hooks. Punctuating these vessels of content, each work highlights a single word—an archetype—underlined with an arrow, guiding viewers in a certain direction.

In the exhibition *Artists Anonymous* the works were arranged on the reverse of a free-standing wall in the centre of the exhibition space, hidden from view upon entering through the front door. Unaware, viewers proceed into the gallery and experience a range of other text paintings, sculptures, and *Regression Paintings* in the exhibition. Only when the spectators pivot are they confronted with a decision to dwell on—do they leave the gallery via the left as an "Oddball," "Freak," "Misfit," "Drifter," or "Loner," or exit to the right as a "Player," "Big Shot," "Poser," "Hustler," or "Pirate"?

The choice may seem definitive, yet these labels, like the works themselves, shift in meaning; depending on context and interpretation, they can be marks of exclusion or badges of honour. Don't take it personally—I probably qualify for most of those epithets myself.

Figure 68. Marcel Duchamp, *Hotel Green*, 1963. Oil on panel, 45.7 x 61 cm.

Like all my creative combinations, the *Regression Paintings* that steer viewers around the exhibition space rely on a playful and subversive act. Only after wielding my finger in the studio, I realised that one of my ringside mentors must have been the big boy himself—Marcel Duchamp. At the reception of Duchamp's 1963 Pasadena Museum of Art retrospective, hosted in the ballroom of the nearby Hotel Green, he was presented with an entrance sign by actor Dennis Hopper.[27] Hopper's theft of the sign from the front lawn must have impressed the readymade guru. I suppose this makes the work a knockout double-header between the two, with Duchamp landing the final blow by scrawling his signature across it.[28] The hand-painted sign features the text "Hotel Green Entrance" above a graphic hand that guided guests in the correct direction. After Hopper's opportunistic sneak-and-snatch I'm sure patrons were left dazed and confused about where to go, but it was perhaps a pleasant reminder for the seventy-six-year-old Duchamp of his last painting, *Tu m'* (1918).[29] At least my *Regression Paintings*, with their guiding arrows, stayed in place to offer patrons a clear choice.

Beyond the tautological trap

Underlying these playful directional cues is a more fundamental concern: how perception not only reveals but actively structures meaning—a line of enquiry similarly followed by Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn (1939–1993) in works like *No object implies the existence of any other (Hume's mirror)* (1967). With the viewer's scrutinising eye on the contest, Burn presents the title of the work—a denial of intrinsic connections between things drawn from philosopher David Hume (1711–1776),—on a mirror, materialising the concept in a sharp and effective strike.

Figure 69. Ian Burn, *No object implies the existence of any other (Hume's mirror)*, 1967. Synthetic polymer paint on wood, mirror, lettering, 64.5 x 64.5 x 3 cm.

By collapsing this didactic notion into such an ascetic form across the middle of the reflective surface, the work edges toward Joseph Kosuth's tautological structures.[30] In my opinion, these risk stagnating in an aesthetic dead end. This is despite the mirror's inherently unstable and experiential nature in Burn's hands, constantly activated by viewer participation. But while his early work deliberately skirted the focus on individual authorship and the cult of personality that dominates the art world—securing my loyalty to Team Burn—it also left me restless, wanting a bit more punch and pzazz. [31]

Where the text on *No object implies the existence of any other (Hume's mirror)* pulls its punches—it undermines the mirror's variable potential in favour of conceptual austerity and minimal material engagement—*Regression Painting (The Art Seduced You, and, Having Done So, it Giggled)* (2025) takes the opposite approach. It flirts, it jokes, it draws you in with an additional visual hook. It operates as a preventative measure against the cul-de-sac of conceptual art, a sidestep to avoid being backed against the ropes of reductivism. Kosuth's argument—that art's value lies not in its appearance but in its capacity to question its own nature, shifting the focus from aesthetic form to conceptual function—just doesn't get my adrenaline pumping.[32]

Can't we have both? I want to witness strategy and impact, thought and form landing with equal force.

Figure 70. Michael Lindeman, *Regression Painting (The Art Seduced You, and, Having Done So, it Giggled)*, 2025. Finger painted acrylic on mirror, 58.7 x 57.6. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

Burn's mirror quoted Hume to insist on philosophical detachment. In contrast, *Regression Painting (The Art Seduced You, and, Having Done So, it Giggled)*, paraphrases Dave Hickey to argue for the opposite: an artwork that's both seductive and self-aware—an invitation that, once accepted, reminds the viewer of the merits of levity. Hickey championed the pleasure of being caught off-guard, a clean right hook to complacency: aesthetic experience matters—it's not just about ideas.[33] After much resistance (embarrassingly slow on the uptake), I have come to realise that criticality in contemporary art can be achieved through aesthetics as a vehicle.

For some reason, I find myself far more compelled by Burn's later *Value Added Landscape* series (1992–1994). Part of the attraction, no doubt, was being gifted a copy of *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn* in 1996 by the dean at art school.[34] The works have stayed with me ever since. Learning that Burn had been a key member of the Art & Language artists' collaboration,[35] and later worked as a union journalist on his return to Sydney only deepened my respect for him.[36] He was a heavy hitter on the Australian conceptual art scene, even if, to some, conceptual art still appeared as "an exotic avant-garde variety of amateur art."[37]

Burn's return to artmaking with the *Value Added Landscape* series marked, in the words of his Art & Language collaborator Mel Ramsden, "a change of emphasis from unenchanted political art, effective and organisational, to an art with an approachable 'presence.'"[38] By buoyantly drifting across the genres of conceptual art and amateur finger-painted abstraction, I too aim for an approachable presence in the *Regression*

Paintings. One tactic is to mobilise the potential of humour to disarm the viewer—an offensive gesture opening access to other registers of meaning.[39]

It seems to me that Burn relied less on humour to disarm and instead pivoted toward the introduction of amateur aesthetics in his *Value Added Landscape* works. Within the context of high art, this move could be seen as subversive but delivered in a distinctly deadpan register, like a sly body shot that winds the viewer unexpectedly.

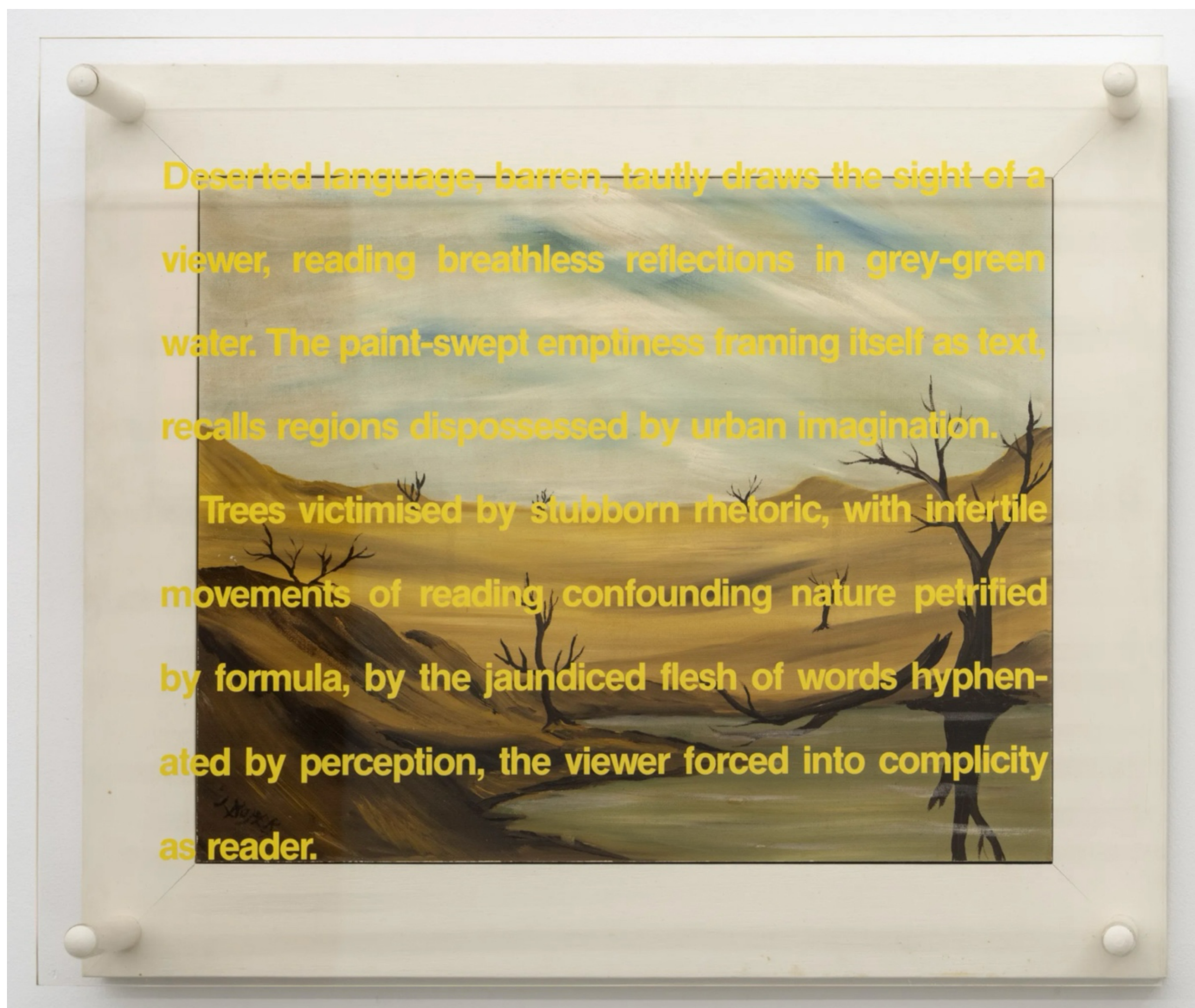


Figure 71. Ian Burn, *Value Added Landscape #12*, 1992. Oil and ink on board, transparent synthetic polymer resin, 59 x 87 x 10.5 cm.

Burn declared the works as collaborations with unknown artists.[40] The paintings were retrieved from second-hand shops and "then combined with a text which, at alternate moments, describes the picture, addresses the viewer and reflects on itself as text."[41]

In *Value Added Landscape #12* (1992), for example, Burn's trademark text is applied

to Perspex and hovers over the amateur painting, disrupting its surface. As Burn himself explained, “Language reduces the role of perception and brings into use new material, areas for ideas and processes beyond previous perceiving.”[42] This tension between sensory experience and intellectual engagement allows viewers to consider the landscape through a more critical lens. The text in *Value Added Landscape #12* challenges an idealised, albeit amateur view of the Australian landscape. The value added—that is, the text overlayed on the painting—issues Burn’s thrift store acquisitions an appearance of intellectual legitimacy.[43] However, this enhanced worth seems to entangle viewers by compelling them to not only look but also to read, and thereby acknowledge their own contribution in co-authoring meaning—a subtle jab at passive spectatorship.

While playing a similar game to Burn’s *Value Added Landscapes*, *Regression Painting (Promise of More…)* (2023) operates as an inbuilt, meta-painting proposition. Painted on a mirror, it oddly references a type of abstract landscape in a portrait orientation, blurring the boundaries between text and aesthetics. Where Burn’s combinations maintain a physical distance between image and text, *Regression Painting (Promise of More…)* integrates its elements into the same plane, weaving them together. Instead of the description of a painting embedded in Burns’ *Value Added Landscapes*, my finger-painted landscape looks to the process of constructing a painting itself. It foregrounds the physical act of painting: the gestures, intuitiveness, and methods an artist employs when constructing a landscape painting, such as “prophetic skid,” “juvenile squish,” and “lonely pleasure.” *Regression Painting (Promise of More…)*, in a sardonic and self-reflexive mode, calls into question the open-ended range of feelings

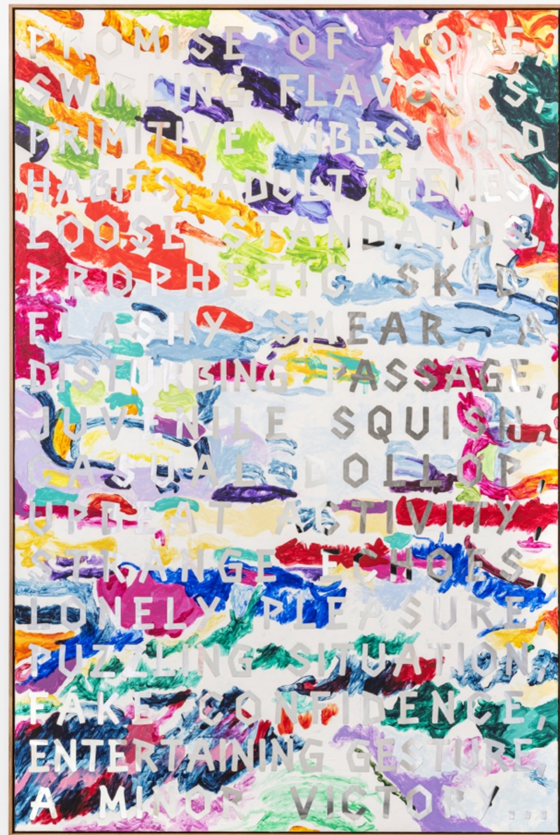


Figure 72. Michael Lindeman, *Regression Painting (Promise of More…)*, 2023. Finger painted acrylic on mirror, 161.5 x 107 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

and techniques a painter might encounter when working with urgency.

Please Continue—It's Great Material

Using sparse means akin to Burn's early *No object implies the existence of any other (Hume's mirror)*, Australian artist Aleks Danko's sandblasted text-on-mirror work, *IT'S SUCH A THIN LINE BETWEEN CLEVER AND STUPID* (2008–09), is presented in the guise of a sterile, reductive object. Yet the lure of Danko's piece—an invitation to pause and perceive the textual element on the mirror—reveals a punchline rigged with a tripwire. It is a well-timed jab masked as minimalism. As with Husserl's notion of a "dimly apprehended depth," the work functions on a perceptual fringe, waiting to wrong-foot the viewer.[44] The audience is caught in Danko's mischievous trap, and I'm not above admitting my enjoyment. Had they known satire was part of the deal, some nimble ducking and weaving might have ensued.[45]

Figure 73. Aleks Danko, *IT'S SUCH A THIN LINE BETWEEN CLEVER AND STUPID*, 2008–09. Sand blasted mirror, plastic mirror clips, 59 x 42 cm.

IT'S SUCH A THIN LINE BETWEEN CLEVER AND STUPID feels oddly prescient, created two years before the launch of Instagram.[46] Once caught in the work's reflection and neatly framed, viewers may be tempted to snap a 'selfie' and share it with the world, realising, or perhaps not, that they've become part of the gag. And so has Danko. By scripting a scenario where viewers pose under the fantasy of cleverness, Danko satirises not only them but the conditions of art viewership and authorship itself. His own authorship is folded into the joke, as if he too is smirking in front of the mirror, complicit in the cycle of vanity, irony, and conceptual snideness he sets in motion.

It's a moment where, to borrow from Merleau-Ponty, perception becomes embodied, as the viewer's presence shifts from passive looking to lived participation.[47] The ruse in Danko's mirror work, I argue, is not a mean-spirited attempt to provoke irritation but a way of observing certain participants in the art world—and anyone else who

might have narcissistic tendencies—through a humorous lens. Pierre Bourdieu described the joke, or in this case the prank, as "the art of making fun without raising anger ... tokens of attention or affection, ways of building up while seeming to run down."[48] Bourdieu's view feels especially apt when considering the disarming nature of Danko's mirror work. Undermining with a wink, it builds connection even as it pokes fun.

Echoing the subversive tone of Danko's sardonic practical joke, pieces such as *Regression Painting (Please Continue—It's Great Material)* (2023) extend a similar licence. Like Danko's mirror, the viewer occupies a shifting perceptual arena, caught between clarity and disorientation, intellect and instinct. This environment of instability encourages a habit of stumbling upon meaning—a kind of notebooking.

Figure 74. Michael Lindeman, *Regression Painting (Please Continue—It's Great Material)*, 2023. Finger painted acrylic on mirror, 41 x 56.5 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

The text for *Regression Painting (Please Continue—It's Great Material)* was sparked by some entertaining viewing at a post–art fair dinner with artists, collectors, and dealers. To my left sat a seasoned collector, and we exchanged brief but enjoyable fragments of conversation, repeatedly interrupted by a younger, bumptious artist on her other side, eager for attention. At times standing to parade his costume, at others brandishing a vape before the extended table of attendees, the aspiring main man only buried himself deeper with each outburst—a ruckus of wild swings, with no guard or signs of self-preservation in sight. In a rare lull, the collector leaned to me and said, "I think he's in for a tough time in life." I nodded, almost sympathetically. "Please continue—it's great material."

When the facade gives way

It wasn't just a clanger—it was performance. On reflection, it resembled a polished art world pantomime and reminded me of what Dave Hickey once referred to as a "bright sparkle and ironic shadow routine"—a description of the theatrical milieu surrounding

Figure 75. Michael Lindeman, *Regression Painting (Bright Sparkle and Ironic Shadow Routine)*, 2025. Finger painted acrylic on mirror, 49.5 x 46.5 cm. Photographer: Mark Pokorny.

his encounter with Californian artist Ed Ruscha (b. 1937).[49] Beneath the showmanship of our insufferable dinner companion was a self-awareness that seemed rehearsed, likely in front of a mirror. Beyond providing first-rate stimulus for another *Regression Painting*, the artist's dramatised self-display—part needy performance, part strategic self-branding—suggested the meltdown was staged as part of the method.

Like my own tactics of collecting text for the *Regression Paintings*—even agonising observation will do—Ruscha appears to draw language from a wide range of sources. The visual, aural, and cultural allure of California can be found in his rendered Hollywood signs and single-word paintings such as *Honk* (1961–62), *Oof* (1962–63), *Boss* (1961), and *Won't* (1964), to name a few. Some of these he referred to as "found readymade," gleaned from print, television, or overheard conversation.[50] Others, Ruscha claimed, emerged from dreams.[51]

Just as that performance over dinner distilled the artist-as-spectacle, Ruscha's word paintings refine language-as-object, both reframing everyday encounters as a kind of studied swagger. His canvases, like my *Regression Paintings*, seem to record moments when the facade of the world gives way and the familiar re-emerges, recontextualised.

For Ruscha's oil on canvas work *Won't*, he developed a reverse stencilling method, which is also used across a range of his works. In some cases, he painted the backgrounds, then masked a word, and subsequently painted a background again—like the clouds in *Won't*. In other paintings, the space inside the words was formed by the white substrate itself.[52] This process is like that of the *Regression Paintings*, only the world is opened further, and the works are activated by their surrounds.

The typography in *Won't* functions as a set of visual openings, framing glimpses of

clouded skies beyond the picture plane.[53] As simple as *Won't* appears, its peculiar fusion of text and imagery could easily frustrate the viewer. What does Ruscha mean by the word *won't*—the aperture to clouds? Its implications become varied and layered; any interpretation would quickly slip into complexity and amount to little more than guessing. *Won't* is a kind of sleight of hand: the art seems light and irreverent, but its meaning might be heavy. I'm reminded of a line by Walter Hopps in Duchamp's Pasadena retrospective catalogue: "Duchamp shows it hard, but in the easiest way!"[54]

Figure 76. Ed Ruscha, *Won't*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 182 x 170.5 cm.

It's no surprise to find that a young and suave Ruscha was snapped by *Times* photographer Julian Wasser at Duchamp's retrospective opening.[55] Enjoying the shindig with what Dave Hickey referred to as "Hollywood firepower on his arm"—his then girlfriend Patty Callahan—Ruscha was clearly a fan.[56] He described Duchamp as "a hero," not from a distance, but with the focus of someone studying video tape and learning moves.[57]

Ruscha doesn't just shadowbox in Duchamp's silhouette, he takes one of the old heavyweight's premier moves and throws it back onto the canvas. Instead of Duchamp's readymades, Ruscha advances prosaic words into the spotlight. Pulled from the ropes of everyday communication, it's suddenly punching above its weight—as much object as language.

No clear opponent, no scorecard to impress

If Duchamp offered the feint, and Ruscha the counterpunch, then the *Regression Paintings* bob and weave. Less about technical precision, more about instinct and intent, they enter the ring on their own terms. There's no clear opponent, no scorecard to impress. The point is to keep moving, to resist the choreography.

The *Regression Paintings* are confirmed underdogs. They're willing to go toe to toe, but only to sidestep the status quo. Are they informed by autobiographical experience, or are they auto-fictional? The distinction is deliberately blurred, and onlookers are left to wonder.

Collectively, these paintings present a hybrid slugfest, a confrontation entangled in an opaque network of power and knowledge dynamics. Like a fighter's corner team, they draw strength from a mix of intellectual and visual references: artistic, psychoanalytic, and even mischievous, all deliberately spliced together without hierarchy. The works muscle up against an era in which art, entertainment, fashion, and commodity culture have merged. What's another bloodied nose or bruised ego? If some gladiators fancy themselves above critique or can't take a joke—please, make sure the eye iron is cold and smear me with more Vaseline.

Of course, not all battles are waged externally. Repressing impulse while still playing the game invites awkward footwork, especially for those trying to illuminate the machinery of the art world while keeping one foot in the ring. In his 1915 essay "Repression," Sigmund Freud described this mechanism as "turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious."[58] He continued: "before the mental organization reaches this stage, the task of fending off instinctual impulses is dealt with by the other vicissitudes which instincts may undergo—e.g. reversal into the opposite or turning round upon the subject's own self."[59] I won't claim to enjoy pain; I'm no masochist, though I've been known to beat myself up emotionally—guilt, shame, and general self-deprecation, tranquillised with humour. But eventually that wears thin, so I turned to another method of defence, less guarded, more expressive: regression through finger painting.

With a dose of smelling salts and surprising stamina, the *Regression Paintings* call in another angle: a wry take on decorative abstraction. The paint is applied solely with my index finger. This deliberately juvenile technique, unburdened by skill or tradition, offers an armour against dismissal. If you can't beat them, unnerve them with sincerity. These crude gestures, slathered in urgent colour, act as a buffer against being cast off as mere cultural irritants. After all, that's how the game is played. Indeed, the tactile immediacy of finger painting offers a strange kind of catharsis, maybe even a

mindful release. When this act collides with mirrored surfaces and inverted text, something else opens: an intertextual mode that engages image and language in mutual friction—a slurred ekphrasis, if you will.

The bell rings. Mouthguard clenched. Final round. It's all rather surreal; I've never considered myself a brawler. Could this all have been a dream? Freud argued that regression is itself a form of defence, writing, "It is only dreams that can tell us about the regression of our emotional life to one of the earliest stages of development."[60] That might explain the emotional bruising of the arena, and those finger-daubed mirrors in brash colours.

Perhaps, through the *Regression Paintings*, I've withdrawn to an earlier stage of development. It's a way of managing the tedium of the art world's push and shove, the self-promotion, compliance, networking and brand-building. Still, the mirrored surfaces implicate the viewer as well—no one stands outside the struggle.

I've survived twelve rounds and fortunately it's a unanimous draw. I'm not here to win or collect the most 'likes'. These works operate under a different governing body, in an alternate register. I'm interested in loosening the ropes of the ring and letting something less legible in—something more pliable. Maybe that's the real offering, a sincere contribution by other means. As Michel Foucault reminds us, "history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle; discourse is the power which is to be seized."[61] The *Regression Paintings* seize that power, not to triumph but to stay in the ring long enough to voice a counterpoint. Rather than declarations, they employ sidesteps and a kind of Barthesian drift, in which humour and evasion act not as retreat but as strategy.

[1] Allow me, as discreetly and briefly as possible, to outline where my confusion stems from. With an unwavering belief in art, I reluctantly accept its structural corruption—opaque dealings, price manipulation, market speculation, and tax incentives via donations, freeports, etc. With a sigh, I also go along with a handful of curators promoting artists they have personal or financial ties with, and some collectors boosting their own holdings while serving on museum boards. Social capital in favour of creative merit is the status quo—I get it. What is most jaw-dropping are artist peers who choose to participate unethically when it suits them (at other times they spruik truth to power). The overt nepotism and conflict of interest is startling at times. A few local examples from an endless list: in 2019, the $150,000 Doug Moran National Portrait Prize was awarded by an artist to a close longtime friend. In 2022, a commercial gallery artist stablemate and friend presented an artist duo the Sir John Sulman Prize. In late 2024, an artist and board member of Creative Australia received a $50,000 Arts Project Grant. I could continue but it's a familiar script.
[2] Wayne Koestenbaum, "In Defense of Nuance," in *My 1980s & Other Essays*, 51.
[3] Roland Barthes, "The Neutral," in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Hamilton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 132.
[4] Dave Hickey, "The Birth of the Big, Beautiful Art Market," in *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy*, 68.
[5] Barthes, "The Neutral," 132.
[6] John Morreall, "The Good, the Bad, and the Funny: An Ethics of Humor," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 58, no. 4 (2020): 638, https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12390.
[7] Morreall, 640.
[8] Barthes referred to the notion of "drift" throughout his essays. See Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.
[9] McCartney, "The Significance of Authorial 'Play Spaces,'" 99.
[10] McCartney, 100.
[11] McCartney, 100.
[12] Edmund Husserl, forward to *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2012), xv, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203120330.
[13] Husserl, *Ideas*, 52.
[14] Husserl, 52.
[15] Soko Phay-Vakalis, "The Mirror in the Art of the Twentieth Century: From Division to the Infinite," *Circa*, no. 95 (2001): 30, https://doi.org/10.2307/25563672.
[16] Phay-Vakalis, 30.
[17] Michelangelo Pistoletto and Alain Elkann, *The Voice of Pistoletto*, trans. Huw Evans (New York: Rizzoli, 2014), 111.
[18] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Phenomenal Field," in *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 60.
[19] Merleau-Ponty, 61.
[20] The French term *mise en abyme* refers to a recognised strategy in Western art of arranging a small-scale version of an image inside a larger one. See "Mise en abyme," in Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198841838.001.0001/acref-9780198841838-e-1746.
[21] Meta painting is a conscious referencing or commentary on painting itself.
[22] Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Culture Industry," 114.
[23] Horkheimer and Adorno, 114.
[24] Raunig and Ray, preface, xv.

[25] Raunig and Ray, xv.
[26] Raunig, "Instituent Practices," 3.
[27] Dickran Tashjian, "Nothing Left To Chance," 64–65.
[28] Calvin Tomkins, "Wanted," in *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996), 422-423.
[29] *Tu m'* (1918) is Marcel Duchamp's final painting, a witty farewell to painting for the artist. Commissioned by Katherine Dreier, its title—likely short for *Tu m'emmerdes* ("You bore me")—hints at Duchamp's disinterest in the medium. The work is an amalgam of real and painted elements: trompe-l'oeil shadows of his earlier readymades, a painted tear held by real safety pins, and a bottlebrush protruding from the surface. As echoed in Hopper's stolen sign, a sign painter called A. Klang, executed the central pointing hand, adding another layer of Duchampian irony. A self-referential anthology of his own work, *Tu m'* gestures toward conceptualism's future. Assemblage and Neo Dada artists come to mind. See Martin Gayford, "Artists on Art; Michael Craig-Martin on Marcel Duchamp's Tu M' (1918)," *Daily Telegraph*, January 20, 2001,
https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A69799649/STND?u=usyd&sid=bookmark-STND&xid=8574bc74
[30] Kosuth outlined his logic in the key 1969 essay "Art After Philosophy" in this way: "What art has in common with logic and mathematics is that it is a tautology; i.e. the 'art idea' (or 'work') and art are the same and can be appreciated as art without going outside the context of art for verification." See Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After*, 21.
[31] Auping, "Interview with Ian Burn."
[32] Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After*, 18.
[33] Dave Hickey's words are paraphrased from an essay titled *Available Light* about the work of American artist Ed Ruscha. See Dave Hickey, "Available Light," in *Feint of Heart*, 31.
[34] In my second year of art school, David Hull, the Dean of Fine Arts, Music, Drama and Design at the University of Western Sydney showed an interest in my work. I was already using text in my paintings and assemblages. David was very generous and kind. He invited me to his office, offered advice, recorded an audio cassette tape of Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica* from LP for me, and introduced the late works of Ian Burn.
[35] For Art & Language NY, the museum, gallery, and journal system became the central focus of their critical inquiry. See Ann Stephen, "Ian Burn's Peripheral Vision," in *Ian Burn: Collected Writings 1966–1993*, ed. Ann Stephen (Berlin; Sydney: KW Institute for Contemporary Art; Power Publications, 2024), 22.
[36] Stephen, 31.
[37] Michael Baldwin, "Untitled paper," paper presented at *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* conference, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, March 19, 1995.
[38] Mel Ramsden, "Ian Burn's Excellent Adventure," in *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn*, ed. Ann Stephen (Sydney; Melbourne: Power Publications; Monash University, 1996), 23.
[39] Martin Herbert, *"Knock Knock: Humour in Contemporary Art*, South London Gallery, London, 22 September to 18 November," *Art Monthly* 421 (2018): 25.
[40] Ian Burn, "Notes on Value Added Landscapes," in *Artists Think: The Late Works of Ian Burn*, 8.
[41] Burn, 8.
[42] Burn, *Collected Writings,* 109.
[43] Burn, "Notes on Value Added Landscapes," 9.

[44] Husserl, *Ideas*, 52.
[45] Glenn Barkley and Lesley Harding, "My Fellow Aus-tra-aliens: An Introduction," in *Aleks Danko: My Fellow Aus-tra-aliens*, 11.
[46] See Stefan Murariu, "A Snapshot of Success: The Story of Instagram," *Medium*, March 31, 2023, https://medium.com/design-bootcamp/a-snapshot-of-success-the-story-of-instagram-95dedcf497c6.
[47] Merleau-Ponty, "The Phenomenal Field," 61.
[48] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Homology between the Spaces," in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 183.
[49] Hickey, "Available Light," 42–43.
[50] Jeffrey Weiss, "Words in Space," in *Ed Ruscha/Now Then: A Retrospective*, ed. Domenick Ammirati (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2023), 159.
[51] Weiss, 159.
[52] Ana Torok, "Chronology: 1970–1984," in *Ed Ruscha/Now Then: A Retrospective*, 221.
[53] Ana Torok, "Torn, Poured, Discarded," in *Ed Ruscha/Now Then: A Retrospective*, 102.
[54] Walter Hopps, "Marcel Duchamp: a System of Paradox in Resonance," in *Marcel Duchamp: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Pasadena, CA: Pasadena Art Museum, 1963), n.p.
[55] Tashjian, "Nothing Left To Chance," 71.
[56] Hickey, "Available Light," 43.
[57] Robert L. Pincus, "Quality Material...: Duchamp Disseminated in the Sixties and Seventies" in *West Coast Duchamp*, 93.
[58] Sigmund Freud, "Repression," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 147.
[59] Freud, 147.
[60] Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for Times on War and Death (1) The Disillusionment of the War," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 286.
[61] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52–53.

Smirks and contemplation in Lindeman's *Regression Paintings*

— by Charles Olstink

Despite Lindeman's juvenile writhing in his *Regression Paintings*, one cannot ignore the unnerving sophistication repressed beneath the overlaid surfaces and punchlines. It pains me to admit it, but the artist's gall in using finger painting as both a strategy of regression and provocation is, begrudgingly, admirable.

The *Regression Paintings* rouse laughter and contemplation, though the target of either is often suspended in ambiguity. Instead of clarity, we get an indiscernible murmur, à la Barthes, with his Neutral lingering over the paintings like an awkward spectacle of rhetorical fog. In his article and paintings, Lindeman declares an intention to dodge, evading the posturing of both conceptual austerity (Kosuth and early Burn) and the identity-heavy reflexivity of second-generation institutional critique. Lindeman trades in perceptual wriggling, gestural candidness, and a self-aware humour that pokes at institutional decorum while refusing to commit to anything as dreary as an overt position. However, there is an abundance of text for the viewer to read between the lines.

Like any shrewd artist around town, Lindeman positions his finger paintings on mirror near other important figures. Has the penny dropped? Is he finally playing the game? He prattles about Pistoletto's reflective activities, Danko's mirror traps, even Duchamp's prankish reverberations, but in this article, they're filtered through the cringe of art fair dinners and other archived asides. Ringside, the heavyweight theorists are undeniable—Foucault, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty; even Horkheimer and Adorno get a nod. Yet they are less referees than bemused spectators in a fracas with no rules, no bell, and a protagonist who can't decide if he's throwing punches or winking at the viewer between jabs. Maybe it's indicative of a deeper ambivalence troubling the artist and writer.

Lindeman's editorial suggests his paintings function as jokes, but I have a suspicion they're also intended to sting—subtly, methodically. The mirror surfaces implicate

more than reflect; viewers become the target, captive in a perceptual loop where critique, humour, and aesthetic pleasure wrestle for supremacy. Meaning isn't fixed in his *Regression Paintings* and perhaps that's the point: Lindeman doesn't provide resolution; he offers participation in the unfinished. And if you find yourself unsure whether to snigger, flinch, or applaud, I'm certain that's exactly where he wants you. On that note, I'll end my review, ruefully aware that I might be starting to like Lindeman.

★★★☆☆

Conclusion

Over the course of this research, I have traced historical methods and developed responsive tactics for a contemporary artist to trouble systems that prize compliance and quietly sideline dissent. I have explored how a critical voice might be sustained within the formal institutions of visual culture and their surrounding social frameworks. The thesis navigated tacit codes, including hierarchies that exist even among artists themselves. Rather than retreat from these forces, my project has embraced both critical observation and complicit participation.

The review of literature and artistic practice revealed that interrogating the politics of cultural exclusion in contemporary Australian art required a new understanding of institutional critique. Previous waves of institutional critique were often developed in direct response to American and European art institutions. When applied to Australia's specific cultural landscape, however, they proved insufficient as the complexities of colonisation, government funding dependencies, and parochial networks intersect in unique ways. For a contemporary artist working in Australia today, the discovery of a distinctly attuned, context-specific model of institutional critique was essential to the project. This meant looking beyond traditional areas of focus. I was less interested in a limited critique of museums and galleries as institutions; instead, I was compelled to plot a more expansive definition of institutions, one that encompassed artists and other players in the cultural machinery as well.

At the same time, a survey of relevant creative precedents remained crucial. I was particularly enticed by the first-generation Californian conceptual artists, whose work served as a form of contextual review. Their propensity to operate between the institution and counterculture, irony and sincerity, revealed an undeniable overlap with—and further stimulus for—my own studio-led practice and creative-critical writing. I was especially drawn to their integration of humour, not merely as entertainment but as a critical device capable of unsettling institutional expectations.

I have argued that contemporary artists continue to be constrained by an implicit fear of ostracism, leaving even those inclined toward critique reluctant to probe the structures that authorise institutions of art. This revealed a persistent gap: the absence of strategies to sustain critical and self-reflexive practices adjacent to the art world's systems. The pressure on artists to shapeshift their concepts for the sake of maintaining a marketable 'brand' can hollow out prospects for genuine discussion. It creates an empty space—a dead zone—masked by a veneer of insincere support and applause, more gesture than conviction. Endorsement for wry amusement or irony also remains sparse, reflecting an entrenched judgement that humour is incompatible with critical seriousness, and is therefore omitted from dominant cultural discourse. This stricture leaves critical practice that leans on wit, caught in a paradox.

With this in mind—as a methodology intended to eschew the status quo—I initiated this thesis with a hybrid creative-critical approach, intermingling the studio-led practice with the written component. The critical text operated as an artwork—it informed and echoed the absurd humour of the studio practice. While I navigated a lineage of conceptual art by examining specific seminal, mischievous figures, I also introduced fictional Michael Lindeman personas and other incongruous characters throughout the chapters. These strategies were supported by a scholarly endeavour that absorbed writers and philosophers such as Roland Barthes, Dave Hickey, Nicolas Bourriaud, John Dewey, Henri Bergson, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Bataille, Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Jean Baudrillard, Theodor W. Adorno, and many others.

Building on this hybrid framework, I didn't arrive at the research empty-handed. There was already a foundation, albeit one in need of a more considered language for my practice. Artists often find themselves on a treadmill, moving from one project to the next without pause for reflection. This thesis interrupted that momentum, offering the rare privilege of revisiting examples of my earlier works, analysing the instincts that shaped them, and exploring how this recursive process deepened the research. The project activated a feedback loop in which past works informed the enquiry, and the resulting new findings, in turn, influenced the development of subsequent studio works.

Emerging from this iterative process, these combined determinants aimed to generate new theoretical insights, positioning the thesis as a model for a contextually specific form of institutional critique. The studio component of the project wielded a collection of materials and methods to realise its conceptual underpinnings. The works span across a large-scale fabricated LED lightbox, rectified readymade sculptures, hand-painted text on linen, framed certificates of business registrations, and ironic finger-painted abstractions incorporating text on mirrors. These diverse works formed a dynamic constellation, held together, yet disrupted, by the tension of live performance artists, who emerged through an uncanny presence from the creative-critical writing and into the gallery context.

The long-form journalistic mode of the creative-critical written component proved an apt and generative approach to the thesis, well suited to surveying specific conceptual artists who, in response to exclusion, sought to destabilise dominant paradigms in their own distinctive ways. The seminal artists examined provided a rich repertoire of innovative strategies, unfashionable aesthetics, audacious attitudes, and perhaps most significantly for my research, offered various precedents for melding criticality in contemporary art with humour.

Chapter 1 examined Tom Marioni's practice through field research at the Steven Leiber Conceptual Art Study Center, BAMPFA, California. The results were merged with research into philosophical theory, and first-hand reflection on multiple visits to Marioni's studio. My encounter with his peculiar form of institutional critique—more drinking session than evaluation—disclosed a critical schema based on conviviality, absurdity, and the cunning use of his pseudonym Allan Fish. Theoretical frameworks from Roland Barthes, Henri Bergson, and Nicolas Bourriaud supported the chapter, respectively informing ideas of ambiguity, comedic logic, and the covert rerouting of cultural codes in the conceptual strategies of both Marioni and my own studio-led works.

My study of Marioni's practice revealed an artist who dodges confrontation with sly encroachment—what I perceived as a delightfully goofy, yet sharp-witted take on institutional critique. His founding of the Museum of Conceptual Art in San Francisco exemplified this tactic—a space that reconceived the museum not as a site of power

but as a jocular venue for social exchange. Marioni's prank self-appointment as SFMOMA director, and beer-drinking-as-art rituals, signalled a gleeful disdain for institutional decorum in my thesis. Rather than attacking the museum from the position of an outsider, I was struck by his strategy to enter via the back door unnoticed, drink in hand, to unsettle its protocols.

Uncovering Marioni's *faux naïf* comedic method became a mischievous anchor to my own studio-led outcomes, a strategy that delivered deadpan provocation in the guise of innocent antics. His playful dissidence informed my own use of alter egos and satirical correspondence in the project, most notably in *Dear Nick* (2025), a work intended to initiate contact with a museum director through plucky communicative tactics. My *Artist Seeking Artist* action received mixed receptions—the casual beer with Joey Barney had a particularly memorable impact. Taken together, these experiments channelled Marioni's irreverent spirit, offering a liberating model of institutional critique that hijacks cultural capital with wit and a grin.

Chapter 2 developed from field research into the Ant Farm collective, again at the Steven Leiber Conceptual Art Study Center, BAMPFA, where I sifted through press releases, manifestos, receipts, notebooks, proposals, sketches and newspaper articles. I also viewed *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* at the Museum of Modern Art's library and archives, which offered further insight into their countercultural ethos. These materials informed my understanding of Ant Farm's utopian ideals expressed through lo-fi aesthetics, a refusal of hierarchy, and flair for absurd disruption.

While I identified Ant Farm as a formative group of low-tech hackers, balancing critique with celebration, I recognised a parallel between their do-it-yourself philosophy and my own OCD coping strategies. My focus was on their disruption not as breakdown but as schemed absurdity. This framing provided a useful entry point into theoretical models that also grapple with contradiction and mischief. Marshall McLuhan's cautiously optimistic vision of technological integration, and Immanuel Kant's theory that laughter arises from absurd contradictions, both resonated with my findings on Ant Farm's wacky critique. Similarly, Walter Benjamin's notion of a subversive revival—one that breaks from the domination of the past—aligned with my interpretation of Ant Farm's tactics as a form of cultural resuscitation.

Ant Farm's resistance to planned obsolescence acted as an interface between some of my own new and historical sculptures in the thesis. A notable outcome was my founding of the Agitated Citizens Against Spam Association (ACASA)—a satirical initiative. Like Ant Farm before it, ACASA sought to hack the dominant channels of information and ideology. The chapter on Ant Farm casts the collective—and by extension ACASA—as utopian pranksters: artists who morphed irritation into deliberately absurd interventions, crafting countercultural blueprints and alternative educational formats in response to the failures of prevailing institutions.

Like Ant Farm's unconventional forms of education, chapter 3 explored the pedagogical disruptions of John Baldessari. Study at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Balch Art Research Library and Archives was a core method for the chapter. I noted the influence Ludwig Wittgenstein's fragmented logic had on Baldessari. I also discovered how the radical pedagogical model of the California Institute of the Arts, where Baldessari taught, enabled him to subvert conventional hierarchies between student and teacher. In the development of my creative-critical writing and studio works, my methodology mirrored this logic, fusing research with an eccentric form of art mentoring, often delivered to unsuspecting recipients.

The research revealed that Baldessari leveraged text, deadpan humour and failure to convert exclusion into artistic autonomy. I discussed how his disruption of routine rules in artmaking echoed Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion that culture is less about communication and more about who gets to play the game. Parallels were drawn between Baldessari's early pariah status, Foucault's critique of exclusionary discourse, and the form of voluntary isolation described by Pierre Bourdieu. While this analysis was critical to expanded understandings of institutional critique, Baldessari's marginalised positioning was not as defeat but as a subversive device. Following this cue, the thesis broadly recasts rejection and failure as a generative enclave, where conceptual discipline merges with the occasional self-deprecating punchline.

Outcomes include mentoring the once unknown Mrs Kokerspaniels (now a much-respected artist), encouraging Gary the plumber toward experimentations with PVC pipe sculpture (after some initial resistance), the founding of Duchamp Plumbing as my side hustle business, and producing a series of acrylic text paintings on linen. One

painting dispenses career development tips, while another acts as a manifesto for the *Artist Anonymous* group therapy meetings, and a further two offer comic predictions for the art world. Rather than simply clown around, the survey of Baldessari's practice contended that humour—when conceptually armed—can slip past institutional gatekeepers and bend the rules while pretending not to grasp them.

Chapter 4 shifted from well organised irony to an embrace of visceral mess, channelling Mike Kelley's mode of cloaking snarling critique in confessional disorder. I focused on his integration of abjection and personal mythology, creating a disquieting mix of sincerity and subversion. I chose to present Kelley's work—permeated in childhood filth and psychic residue—through the lens of Georges Bataille's base materialism and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. These theories were applied as conceptual tactics that helped frame both Kelley's works made from dirty plush toys and my own taco-induced shame.

I recognised Kelley's genius stemmed from his ability to launder social critique through a slippery mix of autobiography and fiction. Research revealed that his practice applied a strategy in which failure and embarrassment functioned as calculated interventions, cleverly disguised as mishaps. In this spirit, my thesis disclosed how comedic self-sabotage could be wielded to disarm authority. Like Kelley, I learned that if institutional critique is to be granted entry, it may need to pose as vulnerability situated in a type of public therapy.

An examination of my earlier work *Implicit Memory System* amplified Kelley's logic of exposure through the inclusion of a self-critical canvas titled *Michael*, executed in abject 'poo font' and positioned among other authoritative figures in the installation of paintings. Building on this exploration of vulnerability, my *Artists Anonymous* installation wades into a psychologically unstable environment where sincerity and farce become entangled. *Artists Anonymous* straddles the blurred lines between therapy and art, echoing Irvin D. Yalom's notion of therapeutic space and Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of art as a modest conduit for connection and transformation.

Previous works discussed and new works developed in chapter 4, including fictional narratives, posit that critique can arrive in disguise, bumbling and anxiety ridden. My

encounter with the paint-smeared psychotherapist Dr Philpott (who offered me Dr Phil's *Life Code* instead of insight) confirmed this. In the context of this thesis, discomfort does not lead to catharsis but becomes a working condition of artmaking—one that turns failure, contradiction, and awkwardness into critical tools.

Chapter 5 followed a performative, drift-based research methodology grounded in lived/fictional experience to research conceptual artist Hans Haacke. Moving between New York libraries and archives, including those at MoMA, the Guggenheim, and the Whitney, I positioned myself as an observer in a city where Marxist notions on the contradictions of capitalism pulse through every experience. On assignment as a journalist, I encountered an irate claw-handed passenger on the subway, a furious deli worker/flamenco dancer, and a volatile salesman. I constructed these engagements to play out as farcical disruptions of the status quo. These anecdotes were designed to parallel the art world's coded etiquette, while my use of masks, trapper hats, and paper bags were applied as both shield and strategy, echoing Oscar Wilde's proposition that disguise can reveal deeper truths.

Connections were drawn between Haacke's shift from physical to social systems and a hardcore turn toward direct institutional confrontation. The research revealed that Haacke's blunt approach was inspired by Jack Burnham's notion of real-time events, Ludwig von Bertalanffy's general systems theory, and Bertolt Brecht's "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties." Uncovering this theoretical material identified where Haacke mocked, exposed, and restructured the gallery from within. I became aware of his calm demeanour, which stands in sharp contrast to the ideological weight of his practice—a form of polite subversion—a tension I have modelled while participating as a writer and artist in this thesis.

The study shows that Henri Bergson's view of comedy as the exposure of rigidity within systems finds expression in Haacke's early biological works, such as those involving turtles and chickens, which I frame as subtle critiques of control. These works disclosed how institutions normalise their own authority while appearing neutral. This chapter also allowed reflection on outcomes in my own practice, including earlier works such as *Space Age* and *Streetscape*, which corresponded with Haacke's physical and social systems. Analysis of these systems resulted in my fictional persona being

subsumed by the socioeconomic contradictions of New York City itself. Like Haacke's animals in controlled systems, I became both specimen and agitator. Significantly, the chapter also reflects on Haacke's later works *MoMA-Poll* and *Shapolsky et al.* that abandoned his more nuanced, veiled stance. By weaponising research, these works tested the limits of institutional tolerance and, in doing so, led to his exclusion—a penalty that was proof the work had landed exactly where it should.

Chapter 6 illustrated a wilful refusal to behave. Using finger painting—deliberately juvenile, unwisely sincere—I tested how far one could regress while still hitting the critical mark. In the *Regression Paintings* acrylic was applied to mirror, not canvas; the brush was overlooked for the immediacy of touch. The tactic wasn't to conceal their mischief—daubs, smears, and winks abound.

The creative-critical writing that examines the paintings is framed through a boxing metaphor. The gloves are off, but I'm still in the ring—dancing with conceptual heavyweights like Joseph Kosuth and the late Australian artist Ian Burn, while dodging the solemnity of first-wave institutional critique. I positioned my *Regression Paintings* in the company of Michelangelo Pistoletto, Aleks Danko, Ed Ruscha, and Marcel Duchamp, while intellectual sparring partners such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Edmund Husserl loomed large.

Key to the process was to embed the text within the negative space of the mirrors, paying specific attention to an Australian vernacular. In redefining institutional critique for a local context, the chapter and, by extension, the *Regression Paintings*, were filtered through the cringe of an art fair dinner and a healthy suspicion of art world decorum.

It turns out finger painting can be slyly cerebral. In these works, humour disarms, laughter conceals critique, and ambiguity unsettles interpretation. The mirror substrates are revealed as traps for the viewers within the paintings, who are implicated, not just reflected. Merleau-Ponty's notion of movement and embodied perception becomes integral to understanding how the audience is drawn into the works rather than simply standing before them. The research shows that just as viewers begin to find their footing, the *Regression Paintings* decline to demystify. Like

Barthes's Neutral, the paintings neither fully commit to joke nor to grumble—they hover. What emerges is a perceptual obscurity akin to Husserl's indistinct edge of awareness, where viewers loiter between clarity and uncertainty.

The paintings demonstrate how humour can function as a form of soft resistance. Rather than destabilising criticality, they establish rapport while covertly unsettling assumptions—a model echoed in Bourdieu's view that playful gestures can possess disruptive force. This approach also recalls Aleks Danko's use of wit to both charm and provoke. The *Regression Paintings* further underscore how play risks exclusion. As Adorno and Horkheimer caution, amusement is tolerated by the culture industry only when purged of its critical potential—a tension the *Regression Paintings* knowingly exploit.

This deliberate use of play—understated yet disarming—also shaped how the thesis moved, sidestepping convention and leaning into ambiguity. Roland Barthes's notion of drift—a fragmented, agile mode of narration—offered what seemed the most logical way to move captivatingly through the project. Equally instructive was a Wittgensteinian sensibility: a pastiche of overlapping thoughts, a wandering, not unlike the antics of Baldessari. The aim, at least on the surface, was to provide a memorable experience for readers and viewers alike—one that evaded the rigidities of staid scholarly enquiry. Lurking behind that justification, however, the decision was also bound by my acute and abiding fear of boredom.

Happily, the thesis's title—"Quick—Nobody's Looking: Sidestepping Structures of Power in Contemporary Art through Wry Humour and Absurdist Institutional Critique"—proved more than a provocation; it held firm as a conceptual umbrella under which the entire project was deftly assembled. Naturally, the title also sketched a provisional outline of the research trajectory—one that demanded ongoing clarification and reinterpretation as the findings unfolded.

For example, *quick—nobody's looking* and *sidestepping* evoked the spirit of the cunning Brecht deemed essential when truth must dodge gatekeepers—qualities that subtly inform the tone and tactics of this thesis. This sensibility also echoed Marioni's mode; he didn't storm the front gates of the art world but slipped in by stealth via the

back door. That same ethos of quiet intrusion ripples onward, animating the long-form journalistic and studio-led examinations of *structures of power in contemporary art*.

So, who or what were these power structures the research sought to sidestep? Beyond the usual suspects—museums, galleries, and funding bodies hiding politics behind a polished mask—were the artists and operators circling them, angling for access, status, and cultural currency. The thesis applied experiential knowledge—what one picks up in the trenches when observing the behaviours, postures, and coded rituals that govern, sometimes covertly, and other times theatrically, contemporary cultural legitimacy. It identified social climbing, strategic self-branding, and the often unspoken politics of participation through my knowingly complicit professional entanglement. In this way, the research positioned power not as a distant edifice but as something knotty and personal, enacted in conversations or snubs, warm greetings or cold shoulders at exhibition openings, and the tacit interactions that assess whether someone is worth engaging with or not.

To sidestep such structures was less about dodging outright than engaging obliquely, with irony, irreverence, and the barbed wink of *wry humour*. This humour was neither decorative nor benign. Rather, it formed the wily fulcrum of the thesis—a means of puncturing facades, unsettling expectations, and gesturing toward the uncomfortable truths that institutional doctrine sweeps to the margins.

Humour functioned throughout the thesis not merely as cathartic release or satirical jab but as an ambiguous, destabilising force. It played with this instability, adopting tactics more aligned with the relief and incongruity theories of humour, allowing critique to pass through the guise of play, mischief, or even naïveté. By refusing to flatten into a single tone—serious or inane, didactic or dumb—the research cultivated what might be called a form of strategic nonsense. The humour didn't seek approval; it hovered just long enough to disorient and short-circuit anticipated responses.

This thesis illuminated the mechanics of the contemporary art world as I have perceived and experienced them through measured irony and a diplomatic refusal to endorse the status quo. Consequently, I have advanced a mode of *absurdist institutional critique* that resists spectacular rupture—no placard waving and shouting

here. Instead, this project amplified an offbeat appraisal that nudges at parameters. The research has argued that the art world's shadow zones can paradoxically serve as a potent site for reimagining institutional critique in an Australian art context. Through this approach, it has offered a practical and conceptual agitation of the structures that determine who is visible, listened to, or remembered, and on what terms.

As the research of seminal artists conveys, the arguments articulated here are not without precedent. Over the course of this thesis, I've explored a series of profoundly dysfunctional and hilarious case studies, each offering its own misfires, ironies, and mishaps. Marioni pranked the museum, resulting in his exclusion. Ant Farm hacked institutional methods via a communal, albeit futile approach. Baldessari staged a deadpan sabotage of art pedagogy and bureaucratic logic. Kelley revelled in collapsing shame and reason. Meanwhile, Haacke tried (and failed) to train a mynah bird to talk for an exhibition that was cancelled before it opened.

These weren't failures in the reductive sense—not the misunderstood-genius narrative, nor the hollow vortex of defeat. Rather, failure emerged as a strategic position: a method to outmanoeuvre prevailing codes of taste, legitimacy, and self-importance. A space not of resignation, but of intentional misalignment. It's the one domain nobody's scrambling to occupy, and I'm happy to claim it. Besides, a bald, straight, white, mid-career and slightly overweight male artist working in Australia today doesn't exactly scream 'urgent cultural relevance.' Yet it's precisely this irony—this position of ideological marginality—that underpins the strength of the thesis. One must play the hand that's dealt.

This project has wandered the scenic route, looping through impasses, awkward exchanges, and acts of wilful misreading. Where others jockey for visibility through verified metrics and self-branding, this research has embraced error. Across both its written and studio components, it presented models of practice that sustain criticality while evading the institutional expectations of contemporary art. Failure morphed from lack, accident, and exclusion into a working method—a welcome unravelling that accommodated reflection, absurdity, and jolt.

Whether attempting to teach strangers, smooth-talk funding bodies, connect with fictional characters, or avoid public embarrassment while digesting tacos, this thesis has reliably mined failure for material. Projects like *Thanks*, *Midlife Report Card (Selfie)*, *Implicit Memory System*, *Artists Anonymous*, and many others trace this orientation, each advancing a model of institutional critique grounded not in rupture but in levity and self-deprecating humour.

Failure, in this context, is not escapism. It is a probing logic—a type of absurd humour that hovers ambivalently between sincerity and mischief, where viewers aren't quite sure whether to laugh or nod earnestly. It invites contemplation without insisting on it. It unclenches without setting loose. This thesis contends that failure—excluded, awkward and strategically useless—is exactly where new and necessary models of practice are found, by embracing the most undesirable districts of the art world. I'm most content settling down where nobody's looking—with a three-legged chair and a grin.

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