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37 Funny fragments: the UoS Comedy and Performance Art Project assemblage

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ABSTRACT

What follows is an account of the ongoing University of Salford (UoS) Comedy and Performance Art Project. This has evolved into a series of staged and recorded 'Non-Events' that broadly seek to uncover any interactions between the fields of Comedy Practices and Performance Art. The report that follows takes the form of a 'Kaprow-ian assemblage' of fragments that attempts to capture both the rationale and the spirit of enquiry behind the UoS Comedy and Performance Art Project.

KEYWORDS

Comedy; fluxus; performance art; funny; University of Salford Project

1. Background to the project

The University of Salford (UoS) Comedy and Performance Art Project builds on the previous practical and research work of two lecturers working on the Comedy and Performance degree course, Dr. Richard Talbot and Dr. Ian Wilkie. Their previous research work on, variously laughter, dementia and virtual clowning, Scottish comedy, comic personae, experimental performance and Vaudeville Comedy and Art has now given rise to the creation of this Project, namely, a series of what have been titled 'Non-Events' that broadly seek to uncover any interactions between the fields of Comedy Practices and Performance Art. The project will continue the research theme first introduced in Talbot and Wilkie's re-enactment of 1960s Fluxus Group sketches, as performed during the 2019 UoS Festival of Research. Subsequent related project experiments undertaken by staff and students at the University of Salford have included the recorded staging of an absurdist meta-scene from N.F. Simpson's 1958 play A Resounding Tinkle (Simpson 1958); a recreation of Joseph Beuys' 1974 I Like America and America Likes Me with its live, interactive installation with a coyote and an attempt at creating a spoof meme showing the experimental reversal of Damien Hirst's recent non-destruction of his Non-Fungible Token Art (Gumuchian, 2022). Most recently, on 1 April, 2022, the project developed a large scale, staged 'Happening'/'Big Non-Event' that comprised a gallery, café, archive and a live show. This Non-Event was closely modelled on John Cage's 'simultaneous lectures' – educational events that he was staging as early as 1952 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina (Kirby, 1995, 19). In Cage's simultaneous

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lectures it was 'equally important... that much of the work done in the Cage class was humorous, a feature that would come to the fore in Fluxus' (Altschuler, 1991, 21).

The Big Non-Event's pop-up café was run by Richard Talbot in his Kurt Zarniko persona. Kurt, in turn, assumed the persona of Jeanine, a French café owner. The gallery, curated by postgraduate student and Festival of Research event collaborator, Adam Forbes, consisted of a fake archive of materials associated with a non-existent, dead, comedian, Frankie Russell. Other gallery exhibits included a model version of Marina Abramowić's 2010 show *The Artist is Present*, entitled *The Artist and her Puppet are Present* and a live re-enactment of Gilbert and George's 1969 work *Singing Sculpture*. The performance event element that followed the gallery tour included an enactment of John Cage's 1952 'silent' piano piece *4 minutes 33 seconds*, performed by a Professor of Collaborative Composition (with the carefully timed intrusion of a pantomime horse); a Dada-esque, avant-garde, noise and objects-based solo performance by a postgraduate student and a formal interview with the non-existent abstract conceptualist artist 'Luther Blissett'.

The 'assemblage' (Kaprow, 1996) of textual fragments that follows attempts to capture something of the rationale behind, and the spirit of enquiry, that impels, the ongoing UoS Comedy and Performance Art Project.

1.1. Image 1 - Fluxuos



Image taken from the pilot project – The Flux**uos** Re-enactment Happening at the 2019 Festival of Research at the University of Salford, in which both investigators and two students re-enacted several Fluxus Art Movement sketches in front of a live audience. The photo shows Talbot in eye-patch as George Maciunas; Wilkie with toupee as John Cage; and postgraduate student Adam Forbes as Allan Kaprow (c) Hannah Briggs, 2019.

2. FLUXUS by George Maciunas

'IT STRIVES TO BE MONOSTRUCTURAL, NON-THEATRICAL, NONBAROQUE, IMPERSONAL QUALITIES OF A SIMPLE NATURAL EVENT, AN OBJECT, A GAME, A PUZZLE OR A GAG. IT IS A FUSION OF SPIKE JONES, GAGS, GAMES, VAUDEVILLE, CAGE AND DUCHAMP'. *Fluxus* by George Maciunas. In Sandford 1995, p. 94 (Maciunas 1995).

2.1. (Con)fusion

When accused by an art expert of being "as mad as a hatter, of course", the artist Nat Tate relied, "no, it's rather that you've been had, as a matter of course". Langkow (1995, XIII).

3. Kirby's caveat

Happenings are NOT 'sophisticated buffoonery designed to give a deceitful impression of profundity'.

Michael Kirby, Happenings. In Sandford, 1995, p. 2 (Kirby, 1995).

4. Welcome to the UoS Comedy and Performance Art Project Website!

(Website under construction)

We are interested in interactions in the fields of Comedy Practices and Performance Art. What synergies, parallels and contrasts are there between performative Comedy and the field of Performance Art?

We aim to create a forum to question relationships between Comedy and Performance Art, asking questions such as 'can (or should) Performance Art can be funny?' and 'is the laughter response something that both comedians and performance artists actively and legitimately seek?' As Video artist Martin Creed suggests, 'comedians seem to look for the absurd and ridiculous, for things that are silly, in the same way that artists do' (Duquid, 2008).

The rationale for the project draws directly on both the ethos and the writings of the Fluxus Group Movement. It takes in the linkages between the avant-garde performances of the early twentieth century Dadaists' preferred style of fusing music and a form of comedy in the 'Cabaret Voltaire' and takes further inspiration from the modern and contemporary comedic and radical Performance Art of practitioners such as The Kipper Kids, Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Bryony Kimmings.

Finally, the project touches upon the nature of comedy's troublesome relationship with critical thinking about the exhibiting and curation of 'comic' art in traditional settings.

5. More on the Fluxus ethos

'The idea of playful exchange is the starting point of much Fluxus work...many Fluxus works are meant to be acted, staged, performed, read, or put on by a group'. Galliano, 2019, 45-47.

6. Trying to make sense 1

Extract 1 from a recorded conversation between Wilkie and Talbot

Well, Richard. What? What are we doing? What are we trying to do here?

RT

That's a good question. I suspect that we're trying to wedge something into the Academy in a way. We're trying to activate a kind of research, that is not easy to define or easy to facilitate, or to easily account for. Because, by its very nature, it wants to undo all of the things that we normally hold as kind of framework, I suppose...We think, you know, comedy is an obscure art, and that performance art is an elusive thing. So, I think one of the things we're trying to do is to grapple with this in the context of the higher education institution and in the context of research as we know it. And that was part of the pleasure as well, you know, trying to think of ways to get this under the radar. And, to make it all somehow tangible. And then account for it in some way that adds to knowledge and which is, also, when knowledge is in question; if you want to unravel and unpick our framework for knowledge as accounting for knowledge. That's kind of one sort of pompous way of answering it. A simpler way of responding is to say that we just wanted to do something creative, refreshing, playful, enjoyable, where we could pursue our personal creative interests or research interests and curiosity, you know, in a way that was less bound up in proving some kind of outcome.

IW

I think you're much further down the way of, you know, thinking about what it is that I am still, you know, just groping towards. It's more of a sense with me that... I remember really – it's a very strong memory – when I was at university a long time ago and they used to have these events and things. And I remember a guy came along who was a performance artist, I suppose. And they put him in a room and he just walked around this room. It had candles on the floor and plastic ducks and things. And he walked around this room, and he had a duck caller that you blow through and stuff like that. And occasionally he would just stop. And I just remember at the time watching, I was fascinated. I remember everyone thinking, 'Oh God', you know, really slagging him off and things like that. But I thought at the time, I thought, 'Well, do you know what?' I don't know what it was, what it was supposed to be, whether it was supposed to be funny. I didn't even know. But I thought it was...It was such an act of, you know, anarchy in a way, within the much more formal, you know, musical setting. And with comedy or whatever was going on. That always stayed with me, and I thought, you know, actually, I have no idea whether that guy was serious or whether it was a parody or whatever. Being interested in comedy and how it works, and then being interested in that aspect of art, which is slightly radical, slightly sort of tongue in cheek, perhaps slightly provocative, I've always just wondered if there were any kind of correlations that go on under the wall or at least not expressed... I think that's another danger, you know, that where we delve in any way, shape or form into this area is that you know, we can be accused of being absolutely pretentious. Although I like that.... I want to personally try and say, look, isn't the fascinating that's going on, the comedy... What's going on and how they're using similar things and how, you know, both of those activities [coalesce]. Causal reactions, which is somewhere between laughter, you know, and scorn almost, you know?

7. Laughing in a foreign language?

'In Journey to the Lower World, the first of [Marcus] Coates' shaman works, he performs a traditional Siberian Yakut ritual for a group of residents in a

condemned tower block in Liverpool... During his shamanic journeying, the residents' nervous giggles escalate into ribald laughter as he utters an incantation of strange feral sounds. "I took the ritual and occasion very seriously," Coates remarks, "but I didn't want to take myself too seriously, because I wasn't in a position to. It was up to the audience how serious the event was. They laughed all the way through."

In Laughing in a Foreign Language, 2008, 60-61.

8. Gomez pena's gag

'Question: "Excuse me, can you define performance art?"

- "I'll answer you with a joke: What do you get when you mix a comedian with a performance artist?... A joke that no-one understands."

(My godfather Rene)'.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña. In Tramposch et al., 2021, 17-18 (Gómez-Peña, 2021), pp. 17-18.

9. Oh Beuys!

(Website under construction)

In 2021, Wilkie recreated Joseph Beuys's Action piece I Love America and America Loves Me. The original took place in May 1974 in a New York gallery, where Beuys spent three days locked in a room with a live coyote (which mostly ignored Beuys' attempts at interaction). The Action was intended to reflect Beuys' troubled relationship with the US and its politics. The footage of the event, looks, we believe, rather funny.

The recreation took place during a seminar with students on the MA Contemporary Practice Performance in the New Adelphi Studio Theatre in the UoS Peel Park campus. The recreation featured no live coyote but instead used a stuffed dog, a student loosely dressed as a coyote, and a small cockapoo puppy called Brenda and was built using the comedy 'Rule of Three' principle (McKeague, 2021).

10. Jokers/hoaxers?

'I'm an idiot, I'm a practical joker, I'm a hoaxer'. Tristan Tzara, Journal of Dada, 1920, p. 1. (Tzara 1920)

11. Landing page: the UoS Comedy and Performance Art Project

(Website under construction)

About

The website acts both as a holding form and a repository for text-based, photographic and video material from the network's events: a space for ongoing conversation, and a noticeboard for publicizing regional events, such as calls for proposals and contacts. The website is crucial for shaping and sustaining the network and a useful resource for practitioners and academics. Events, performances, and visual installations will be publicly displayed or performed during subsequent meetings of a developing network. These outputs will provide a basis for the network to interact with a wider public. Certain advertised events will be **streamed live online**, with the potential for online participants to take part in the discussion. Again, this allows us easily to enlarge the various 'Non-Events' that we create to include a much wider pool of people who cannot necessarily attend the events in person.

Links to the Big Non-Event:

- 1. Advertising/publicity for the Big Non-Event
- 2. Photographs from the Gallery (Hannah Briggs)
- 3. Accompanying cards from the exhibits shown in the Gallery
- 4. Video commentary about the Pop-up café by Richard Talbot and Ian Wilkie
- 5. Video commentary about The Singing Sculptures by Richard Talbot and Ian Wilkie
- 6. Video commentary about Three Comics in the Gallery by Richard Talbot, Ian Wilkie and Adam Forbes
- 7. Video commentary of The Frankie Russell Archive with Richard Talbot, Ian Wilkie and Adam Forbes

12. Gallery Card 1

The Artist and Her Puppet are Present

Artists: Marina Emubramowitch (1947–1999) and Big Bird (1969-)

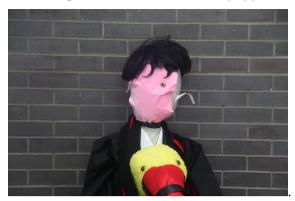
Media: Papier- mâché, Gouache, Yakult, Lobster, Telephone, F'tang, F'ang, Ulay, Biscuit-Barrel

Marina Emubramowitch's career as an artist began when her puppet notoriously took a pair of scissors to British chat show host Michael Parkinson's tie in 1976. This interaction, in turn, inspired Fluxus artist Yoko Ono's work 'Cut Piece'. Marina Emubramowitch later met husband, fellow artist, Matt Groening, when he ran a souvenir shop selling Oil of Ulay on the Great Wall of China. This artwork, 'The Artist and her Puppet are Present', in which people were invited to sit in solitude opposite Marina Emubramowitch within a gallery setting was adjudged by participants to be a powerful and life-changing experience. The Aga Khan noted that he was rid of a very painful verruca after the event, while the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, James Callaghan, was inspired to reduced VAT on diesel prices as a result of his encounter with the artist.

Marina Emubramowitch sadly died after falling off her roof while trying to move her TV aerial in order to get a better picture for the 1999 EUFA Cup semi-finals match.

We are grateful to students from the University of Salford's Taxidermy and Digital Abattoir Degree who have so skilfully stuffed and mounted the late artist for this exhibition, and we invite you to have your own encounter with the Artist and her puppet. A souvenir photograph of your encounter can be purchased at the Box Office at the end of the tour for £19.99 per print or £14.99 for a digital version.

12.1. Image 2 – the artist and her puppet are present



© Hannah Briggs 2022.

13. A problem?

'Quite a bit of contemporary art practice yokes together two qualities that are generally an unfailing trigger for laughter. On the one hand you have earnest intent, on the other you have the oddity of the means... humour is famously inimical to belief suspension, nipping in to snip the strings so that the whole Calder mobile comes down in a clatter of hilarity...that's the catch with high art humour. It isn't a joke very often, it's "about" joking, which is quite a different proposition'.

Sutcliffe (2008, 7).

14. Emin's beds

'[Tracey] Emin's My Bed - a double bed with stained sheets, surrounded by detritus such as soiled underwear, condoms, slippers, and empty drink bottles - generated most controversy. Two artists, Yuan Chai and Jian Jun Xi, jumped onto the bed, stripped to their underwear, and had a pillow fight. Police detained the pair, who called their performance Two Naked Men Jump in Tracey's Bed'.

Holledge (2021, n.p).

15. Trying to make sense 2

Extract 2 from a recorded conversation between Wilkie and Talbot

It goes back to the beginnings of comedy, I think, but also believes in this notion, doesn't

it, of that MC figure as being a creative artist in a way that, er, is both kind of happening inlive time as a creative [act] but also invokes this notion of ritual. And you know that those expectations that we have, which are almost primal - about when we go to an event and something happens in that event, the person who is sort of making it happen, this almost magical magician figure is often a comedian or comic or, you know, or a clown that certainly gives us that bridge - that function between form and meaning.

RT

I was thinking about what the Fluxus practitioners were responding to when they felt the need to make this work in the beginning, that they were sort of responding. Responding to the art establishment and possibly consciously trying to unravel it even though they were saying, 'well, this is up to you. What you do with these.... [they] are just instructions'. You know, they had a subversive objective, I think. And so, I was thinking what would be the equivalent for us now?

16. Gallery card 2

Gilbert and George - Living Sculptures

Artists: Gilbert and George

Media: Gilbert, George, Blood Pressure Medication, Hefty Fee.

We are very honoured to have the artists Gilbert and George with us today. These Young British Artists comprise of George Passmark who is 87 and Gilbert Failgrade who is 85. They live and work together in a skip at the back of Aldi's off the Old Kent Road and have been producing art using digital mixed media, sticky-back plastic and a cocktail of their own bodily fluids since 1927.

This 1960 installation 'Gilbert and George's Living Sculptures' draws from the work of another comedy double act – Bud Flanagan and Lou Costello – and features the lyrics to Morecambe and Hardy's wartime hit 'Ooh, me fallen arches ain't half throbbing, missus'. A number so memorably remixed and sampled by Dame Gracie Hess and MC Snoopy Dog-Dog in their hit 90's Ibiza Euro Party Dance Anthem.

Ladies and Gentlemen - we now present 'Gilbert and George - Living Sculptures'



16.1 Image 3 - singing sculpture encore

Josh Omri and Joe Brady as George and Gilbert's Singing Sculpture © Hannah Briggs 2022.

16.2. Gilbert and George 1

'Singing Sculpture (1970) had the two of them dressed smartly and with their faces and hands painted with metallic paint, standing on a pedestal miming to the Flanagan and Allan song "Underneath the Arches" ... From the early 1970s, they would indulge in evenings spent doing nothing more productive than getting drunk to be documented in photo pieces... The question immediately arises as to whether this is quileless or ironic activity'.

Archer (2002, 101-102).

16.3. Gilbert and George 2

'A friend of mine sees you as 'the Morecambe and Wise of the art world' Do you think this is justifiable?

George: No, not at all. We wouldn't see that.

Is there no element of humour in your work at all?

George: We're not conscious of creating humour in any way. In fact, in any case, one of us is not dead'.

In Violette and Obrist (1997, 141).

17. And yet...

'The prank or the joke is not antithetical to performance art...the tacit reliance of the Kipper Kids, as artists, on the joke... muddles the strategies with which we may validate certain practices as serious objects of aesthetic consideration (and therefore as art)'.

(Johnson, 2019, 172).

18. Manifesto!

(Website under construction)

Our manifesto with this work is:

- 1. To support, deepen and sustain scholarly enquiry into Comedy Practices and Studies and its intersections with Performance Art.
- 2. To support and enhance the growth of interdisciplinary practices between Comedy and Performance Art through research collaboration and activity.
- 3. To develop public appreciation of the interaction between Comedy and Performance Art (and Art more generally), thus raising awareness of potential forms for Comedy practices as well as access to a theoretical and conceptual framework through which to understand both disciplines.

19. Trying to make sense 3

Extract 3 from a recorded conversation between Wilkie and Talbot

...but then it's also got the layer because it's Kurt. Is it Kurt being Jeanine or Richard being Kurt being Jeanine? What are the layers and how should they be deployed or made visible?... we never quite knew at any point really, who you were. It was great. I loved that. And '4minutes 33' because it actually genuinely had an old-fashioned comedy variety feel to it. Something went wrong in the middle, which made it even funnier – that Professor W. had to busk it, improvise where at 4 minutes 32 in he thought; 'I'm not gonna get interrupted by this pantomime horse', which he'd insisted on. And so he went, 'Oh, I'm terribly sorry. It evades me. I'll have to start again'. And that, I thought, that was hilarious. Actually, he played a brilliant character, but for me it was like for me watching a proper comedy skit then. What I thought was gonna be just weird was the living sculptures, Gilbert and George. So, you know, two students painted their faces and sang along to Underneath the Arches [the 1932 song associated with the comic duo Bud Flanagan and Chesney Allen] in the doorway of the gallery. And it was strangely compelling. It was. There was something about it that. I mean, one of the other participants said to me'l could have watched that for hours', and that was completely unexpected to me. I thought, no, they're all just going to move on. But no, people wanted to stay and watch it for ages. I don't really know why, but... So that was like, for me, an art. So that was a performance art moment actually that, because it did whatever it was supposed to do, I suppose, on the spectator.

RT

Yeah, it felt right. It looked right and it was one of those moments we thought, 'Oh, we're getting... we're approaching... or... we're in it'. We're in it. This is it. It's being considered. And I suppose people get that feeling when they're watching, devised improvisation or something, and it's taking off or we're not trying so much. We're not forcing things. We're not bringing prepared ideas. This had a kind of a mood around it that was connecting somehow with the incongruous, the ridiculous in a way that was not something that we could have imagined beforehand. That's the pleasure of its novelty, I suppose.

IW

I think that, you know, it's hard to get the state and you don't know you're going to get there but somehow, you know - and it's all in the flash. It's all in the moments, moments, through the whole thing. And we are that, you know, actually... the touch paper was lit and took off a bit. But you have to create the conditions for that to possibly happen.

20.1. Gallery card 3

It's A Gas

Artists: Collaboration between Jeff Koons, Banksy, Damien Hirst and Lorraine Kelly Media: Everything, Nothing

This artwork is entitled 'It's A Gas'. It depicts the inside of a balloon. The artists' state that if you look closely you can see the shifting refraxivity of a liminal space that is, paradoxically, filled with emptiness whilst callesthenting an ever-changing vortex. This specially commissioned work was purchased by the University of Salford for 1.8 million, thanks to a grant from the KL Foundation and a sponsored bake sale by the Justified Ancients of Mu Mu.

20.2. *Nothing?*

"You cannot see my latest artwork, but it exists," artist Salvatore Garau told a press conference at the Art-Rite auction house in Milan. "It is made of air and spirit. My immaterial sculpture lo Sono (Lam) finds form in its own nothingness... lo Sono was auctioned here in May, with a pre-sale estimate of 6,000-9,000 euros, but competing bidders pushed it up to 15,000 euros. The buyer went home with a certificate of authenticity, and instructions on how to exhibit the invisible sculpture in a private house, in a space of roughly five-by-five foot, free of obstruction".

Private Eye 1551, Funny Old World, 9 July 2021 (Private Eye 1551 2021).

20.3. Something?

"I do not assert copyright claim to the idea of a banana duct-taped to a wall." Californian artist Joe Morford stated in a legal deposition to a Miami court....[Maurizio] Cattelan (whose 2019 "Comedian" artwork also featured a banana duct-taped to a wall, and was sold for \$120,000) argued in his defence that "Morford's banana was synthetic – mine was real... US District Judge Robert N. Scola rejected Cattelan's claims, ruling that "Using silver duct tape to affix a banana to a wall may not espouse the highest degree of creativity, but its absurd and farcical nature meets the minimal degree of creativity needed to qualify as an original. And an artist may be able to claim copyright of the expression of that idea".

Private Eye 1581, Funny Old World, 9 Sept 2022 (Private Eye 1551 2022).

21. Is comedy art?

(Website under construction)

At the Leicester Comedy Festival 2021 panel 'Is Comedy Art? Beyond a Joke Discussion' 6 February 2021, eminent comedian Stewart Lee and leading critics and practitioners including Oliver Double and Sophie Quirk surmised that comedians do not like to let people know that stand-up comedy is an art! They deduced that the comedian's serious artmaking is missed by critical/art/social commentary because of the 'shambolic'/non-serious figure and the cultural status of the comedian. This leads us to speculate about the role of the performance artist. Is a cultivated persona a form of artistic expression? How do both forms speak to the encounter between an individual and the audience. Both forms deal with irrationality. Art, like Comedy, is 'where something happens'.

Our network aims to trace the linkages between the avant-garde performances of the early twentieth century and contemporary performance and Performance Art: a useful marker for the beginning of a lineage is in The Dadaists' preferred style of fusing music and a form of comedy in the 'Cabaret Voltaire'. These proposed linkages are being evaluated to position the idea of neo-Dadaist strain within modern comedy and to provoke further investigation of the adaption of comic principles in Performance Art.

This network and its activities are attempting to trace some of the influences that popular comedy from the Vaudeville tradition has exercised on art and will touch upon the nature of comedy's troublesome relationship with critical thinking about 'Art'. Within the last two decades galleries have been dedicating exhibitions to humour in art, that are within its teleology to make us laugh. The touring exhibition Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art (2007), Knock Knock: Humour in Contemporary Art (2018) at the South London Gallery, and This Is Not a Joke (2015) at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery: These group exhibitions' focus upon comedic techniques within art raises the question of whether the practice of exhibiting these works considers comedic methods to the curation of the art.

In this network Comedy Practices are investigated and presented in written and performed comedy through events and activities curated in a manner sympathetic with the mode of the avant-garde: a 'double game' that is, arguably, deliberately bewildering. The purpose of this bewilderment will be continuously investigated and staged by the network and so encapsulated as A Big Non-Event. This subversion of conventions of promotion, advertisement and audience relations is also an opportunity to invent and to question artistic values and ask whether we can productively frame the inexplicable, the non-serious.

22. Trying to make sense 4

Extract 4 from a recorded conversation between Wilkie and Talbot IW

...but I think that gave us sort of ambiguity, which was lovely about it all and also gave a sort of kind of like an energy of, like, Oh, my God, are the one hand, you know, this is great. No, it's not that Dada Dada da, you know, I'm going to. About this I'm gonna so it was it, it was it. I just thought it was fascinating, actually, you know.

RT

Umm, I don't know whether we might be over worrying about that though, in a way, because like, you know, we could call it a laboratory experiment. And it really is like, you know, the Petri dish situation, you know: set up the equipment and wait to see and maybe it's not the thing you meant to get, but something quite aside from that reveals itself. You know, maybe that actually fits in with the scientific experiment quite neatly: the scientific process or scientific method. It's just a question of arguing that it's serious research somehow and that it's more like.... Well, if all that we can say from this is that everything... Well, I'm trying to sum it all up in one phrase, which is impossible. But you know, if all we can say is, well, there's a reality there and there's a puncturing of constructed reality. And that these two different forms, comedy, and performance art, have different parameters and they share constraints, but they have different locations or durations or different audience relations. Maybe they have some of those similarities, though, and that's what we're trying to work out, I suppose. The fact that it's so difficult just now to sort of sum it up - that maybe justifies it as research.

23. Something and nothing?

"I think, first of all, we need a situation in which nothing is being transmitted: no one is learning anything that was known before. They must be learning things that were, until this situation arose, so to speak, unknown or unknowable: that it was due to the fact of the person coming together with other people or, so to speak, coming together with himself, that this new knowledge which had not been known before could become known."

John Cage in conversation with Robert Filliou. In Filliou, 1970, 114.

24.1. 'Funny' 1

'Causing laughter or amusement; humorous.' (Oxford Languages - Google dictionary definition) .

24.2. 'Funny' 2

'Difficult to explain or understand; strange or odd.' (Oxford Languages - Google dictionary definition).

24.3. Forward with the funny?

Definitions of the word 'Funny' emphasise two meanings, first the notion of 'humorousness' and 'the causing of laughter', and second, the connotations of the 'strange, surprising, unexpected, or difficult to explain or understand' (Cambridge, 2023). Is there, therefore, something to be discovered within that dichotomy? Is the dual sense of making something 'funny' what comedians and, perhaps, some performance artists strive for in their creative expressions? Charles Darwin postulated that what makes humans laugh is 'something incongruous or unaccountable, exciting surprise and some sense of superiority in the laugher' (Darwin, 1960, p.31). If then, there is some meaningful synergy to be extracted from the double meaning of 'funny' in its twofold connoting of something odd, weird or incongruous that strikes the spectator with a reaction of surprise, that both makers of comedy and performance art might share in their practices of meaning-making, where does this lead? Perhaps here, Freud's notion of the duality experienced in the clash of the familiar and unfamiliar that he raises, first in relation to humour and laughter, i.e. in 'the source of comic pleasures being a comparison between two expenditures which must be ascribed to the preconscious' (Freud 1964, 208) could, second coincide with his conception of the 'unheimlich':

In a 1919 essay "The Uncanny,"...his definition of this special kind of fear...in other words, not familiar... we fear that which is not from the home... This is very strange, as it suggests that the meaning of unheimlich and heimlich, or uncanny and canny, overlap. Like the word buckle, which can mean to break apart or to come together, uncanny thus means itself and its opposite at the same time. Weird, right?

(Malewitz, 2023, n.p.).

Ultimately, the 'funny' for which comedians and performance artists strive might similarly lie in a conflicting space. As Simon Critchley notes, 'contemporary art doesn't starve its audience of humor... I think we approach the paradoxical core of the best humor: it is not funny. Rather it is troubling, unsettling and disorientating' (Critchley, 2010, 150). Funny, then, it can be argued, is truly funny.

25.1. The big non-event finale 1



Richard Talbot as Kurt Zarniko as Jeanine; Dr. Ali Matthews (in pig mask) and two student participants view the Gallery at the 2022 Big Non-Event © Hannah Briggs 2022.

25.2. The big non-event finale 2



Wilkie as Adam Forbes in the gallery at the 2022 Big Non-Event, in front of a screen showing Wilkie as John Cage and Talbot as George Maciunas at the 2019 Fluxuos Happening[©] Hannah Briggs 2019 and 2022.

26: ...And finally...

Moving ahead, Fluxus will continue to inspire the ethos of the UoS Comedy and Performance Art Project in one important sense:

In the mid 1960s... humor was part of a larger aspect of the fluxus attitude: carnivalization. This involved the recognition and celebration of a comic and absurdist ethos and the wild disorder of the non-rationalized world... simply put, Fluxus was serious about not being serious (Smith, 1991, p. 58).

Next on the agenda for the Project will be an attempt in 2023 to create an original, in-house Fluxus and Comedy inspired work that might be viewed as both types of 'funny'. This work aspires to be an example of both - and neither - a comic piece and/or a piece of art. This recording will, in turn, be added to the Project website which is intended to be the springboard for a 'Nonference' in 2024–25. The Nonference will take the form of a symposium/forum/discussion/experimental space for practitioners, scholars and anyone interested to come together. The Nonference will allow for the attendees to rummage about in the debris of the collision between the practices of comedy and performance art that have been raised in the scope and work of the Project so far. We hope to see you there. And please bring your funny - whatever that means to you.

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