

Rudimentary Stratagems for Skilful Failures:

Tactical Deployment of Humour and Play in Drawing, Sculpture, and Performance Practice

Joseph Jowitt

2026

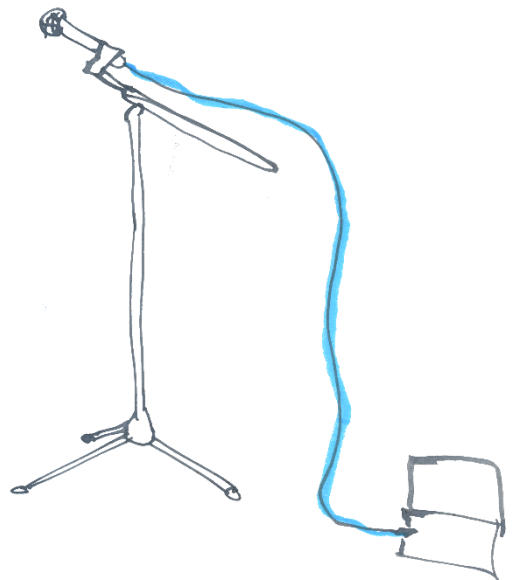
A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy



How many performance artists does it take to change a light bulb?

I don't know, I didn't stay till the end.

(Attribution unknown)

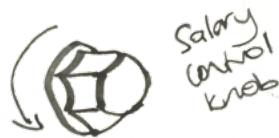


Abstract

Through creative practice-led research, this project investigates what happens when we lean into failure, loosen the grip on optimisation, and let mischief steer the making. It explores how a playful, comedic approach might interrogate our relationship with technology, language, and materiality, and whether such strategies can offer comfort and connection in times of crisis. Can laughing in an emergency create momentary communities of understanding? Through rudimentary object-making, diagrammatic drawings, and rickety animatronics, the work riffs on familiar media *meaning machines*—radios, remotes, signposts—rendered as laconic stand-ins. These gestures of failure invite a seesaw of recognition and distancing, opening space for ambiguity and connective speculation. Could the rudimentary approach of a comedy ‘sketch’ develop into a productive methodology when transferred to sculptural and drawing mediums?

Philosophical scaffolding in the project comes from Henri Bergson’s treatise on humour and his ideas around the tension between the mechanical and the vital. Alongside this, there is further support from Noë’s entanglement of art and life, Stiegler’s technics as prosthetic thought, and Haraway’s notion of ‘kinning’. Together, they frame humour not as embellishment but as a central disruptive, yet connective force—a way to reorganise ourselves in the ‘thick present’. The research asks: can erratum be an act of liberated resistance?

Therefore, this thesis proposes play as a serious philosophical stance: a mode of thinking that scrambles habitual frameworks, embraces erratum, and proposes a speculative possibility for holding things lightly in an unstable troubled world.



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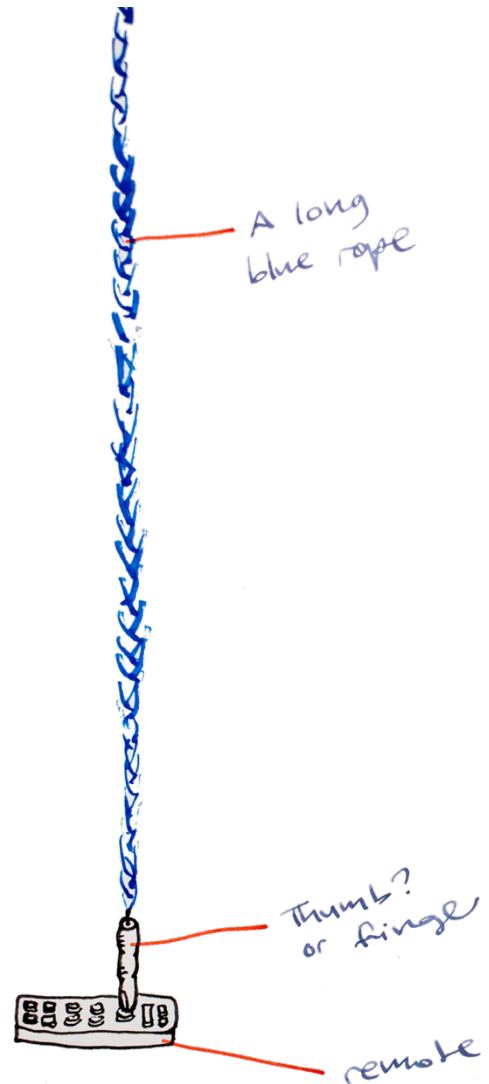
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Attestation of Authorship:

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person(except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date: 2 February 2026



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The introductory part

Dancing on the edge of comprehension

This creative practice-led research project explores the potential of play and humour as a tactical methodology within a drawing, sculpture and performance practice. It aims to investigate how a playful, comedic approach might operate as a strategy to interrogate our relationship to our immediate surroundings and offer some comfort in a time of crisis.

The measures and procedures employed in this project consist of rudimentary sculpture making, diagrammatic drawings, wobbly animatronics and stand-in performance. They all share a sketch-like methodology. The utility and limits of language are also explored as a conceptual material and probed as a space for play. Objects are generated as abbreviations or approximations, then gathered as a loose group, to tease out the relationships between them, and us, the humans viewing and interacting with them.

The creative practice—titled *Almost Completely (finished)*—presents familiar outlines of devices and technologies for information transfer: televisions, radios, newspapers and the associated detritus of remote controls, power plugs and dials. Alongside this the signpost, a basic communication device, is iterated. These loose approximations are constructed from a mix of found objects and materials (plywood, leftover timber, knitting needles), juxtaposed with more formal sculptural materials such as ceramic and bronze. Their surfaces are adorned with various buttons, dials and line drawings. Text is distributed and etched across the signs and other surfaces, such as a rug, or a signpost.

In the first section (*Strategies*), I'll lay out the means and characteristic features you'll encounter in this project. This will work as a roadmap of the kind of modes, methods and rationales which are considered important. As the title of the thesis suggests, these are strategies in search of skilful forms of failure, itself the last characteristic discussed. In the next portion (*The Matter with Things*), I'll delve into the philosophical ramifications and corollaries, exploring the thinking and making and how they've informed one-another. In the final section (*Cognitive locomotion*), I'll continue this enquiry into the practice while expanding the theoretical territory.

The research questions are addressed throughout the writing and relate to the strategies described below:

Could the rudimentary approach of a comedy 'sketch' develop into a productive methodology when transferred to sculptural, drawing, and performance mediums?

Can the idea of laughing in an emergency help create temporary communities of understanding and serve to create a 'connective reorganisation' within a time of crisis?

Could erratum be an act of liberated resistance?

Might a playful, comedic approach develop into a serious philosophical stance?

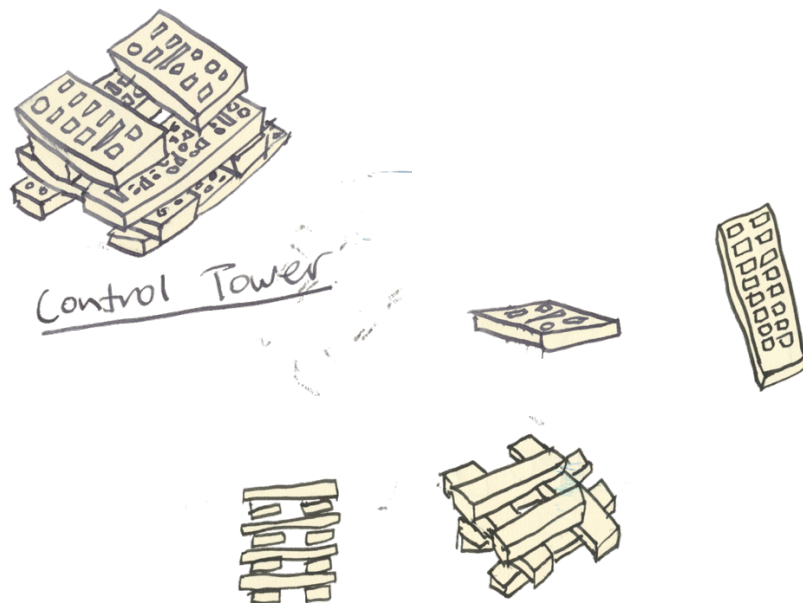


Figure 1. Joseph Jowitt, *Control Tower sketch*, 2025

Strategies

1) Playing at play playfully

The research is an attempt to make use of *play* as a verb, noun and a generative conceptual method. Play in this context means engaging in the practice of making art with experimentation as the primary means of approach. This method privileges trying things out and rejoices in tinkering and testing. There is an improvisational impulse at the core of the project, which embraces the provisional and the unfinished. This allows for a loose, spontaneous movement in the making, allowing for shifts of direction, as well as an acceptance of failure. When we embrace play as the central approach, failure is less associated with a negative outcome and simply becomes a catalyst for more play—and even forms of liberated resistance.

Within the framework of this practice, play as a noun is centred around a state, or a condition, a field of possibility. This allows for and recognises plays in meaning; ambiguities, double-meanings, spoonerisms and puns. Alongside this, it highlights the play within forms and materials: slippages, elasticities and juxtapositions. The artwork frames play as something it has, an inherent quality of openness, instability and humour.

To use play as a conceptual engine allows for a spontaneous locomotion within the practice. It is an offbeat pilot, allowing for unexpected directions of thinking, engendering silliness, mischief, ambiguity and elasticity. It can scramble habitual frameworks and disrupt linear reasoning, enabling novel interpretive possibilities. This creates a thoroughfare to think through the operations of sketching: drawing, performing, and the making of objects, a method that embraces the awkward, the stumbling and the contradictory, building surplus meaning through cheerful failures and gestures bouncing off one-another.¹

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer locates play as a fundamental concept of human existence—not merely a game, but a serious activity in which participants are “played by the play” itself. See Maria Kosma, “Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Universality of Play: The Greatest Form of Human Play Is Art and Its Signification to Movement Education,” *Athens Journal of Sports* 11, no. 1 (March 2024): 9, <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajspo.11-1-1>.

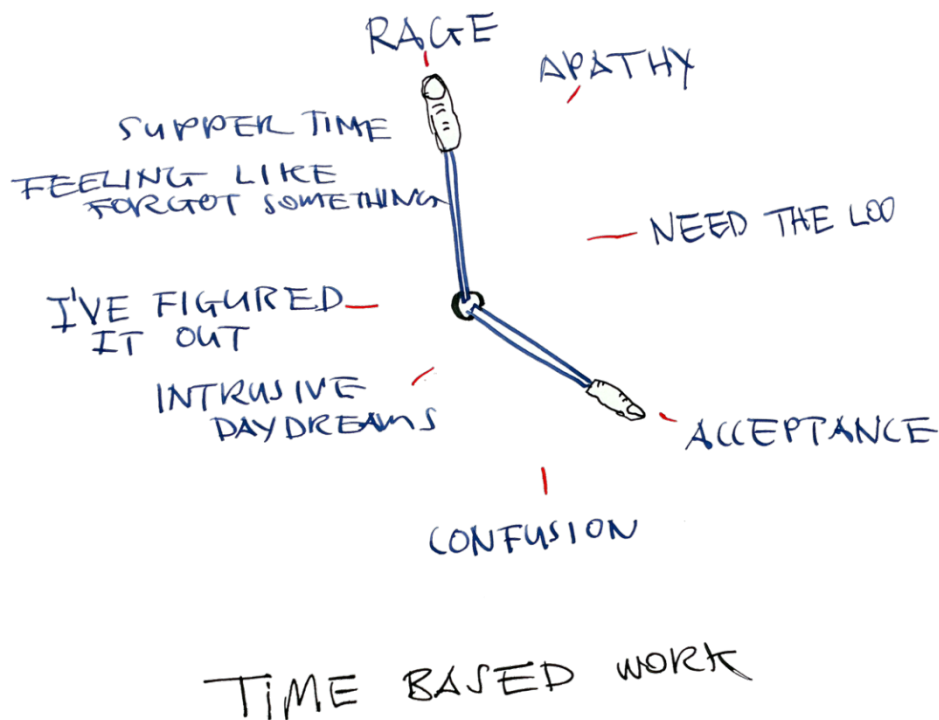


Figure 2. Joseph Jowitt, *Time Based Work*, (planning sketch), 2025

2) Humour and the comedic impulse

Play can result in humour, and vice versa, a playful mode can be a catalyst and driver for a loose, comedic attitude. The possibilities afforded by humour permit a strong force for open thinking; a mischievous, disruptive catalyst. In tandem with a tri-fold conception of play (verb/noun/engine of practice), humour works to rupture regular modes of thinking. In this context, these modes refer to the practical modes of cognitive configuration which most of us must employ to function in the modern-day world. American multidisciplinary artist and writer Jenny Odell, quoted in William Leith's review of her book *Clock Time*, locates this mode as "that crust that everyone grows to just get through the day. Except in these moments when ... something happens, or you experience a work of art, or have a conversation that pierces that crust."² *Almost Completely (finished)* explores how artmaking might perform this perforating action. In doing so it attempts to utilise a Bergsonian approach to humour to remind us of the bewildering opposition inherent in our fully human, complicated, material existence. Moreover, the artwork asks, could these approaches point us towards

² William Leith, "Clock Watching: Meet the Artist Who Thinks Time Is Ruining Our Lives," *Guardian*, April 23, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/apr/23/clock-watching-meet-the-artist-who-thinks-time-is-ruining-our-lives>

more vital, entangled ways of being in the world?³ As the research questions imply, can humour (supported by those three approaches to play) ripple through the art encounter, revealing unexpected depths, complications of knowing, and a coalescence of meaning? Humour dances on the edge of comprehension, allowing the dissonance of the varied currents of meaning to cross and imbricate one another, as well as acknowledging and allowing for the varied human possibilities of reading, understanding, experiencing and being.

3) Media as meaning machines

Acquiring my first tape recorder at 12 years old in 1992, suddenly meant I could capture and replay whatever I wanted from the radio. It was a formative moment, and soon after, I was happily splicing segments of captured broadcasts together, jamming piano concertos up against newscasts. Those initial audio forays were an early exploration of play and bricolage, which led me to computer music and then to video editing. After subsequent training in film school and years of employment in video production, I'm still beguiled by the possibilities of media, especially the physical mechanisms of distribution and transmission. These *meaning machines* have continued to reverberate throughout my life and have made their way into my art practice; they are the physical foundations of this project.⁴



Figure 3. Studio, *Meaning Machine* installation test, 2025



Figure 4. Studio, *Meaning Machine* installation test detail, 2025

³ I use the term 'entanglement' here not in Karen Barad's technical sense, but in the looser phenomenological sense proposed by Alva Noë, in which art and philosophy are in dynamic formative relation to us. See Alva Noë, *The Entanglement: How Art and Philosophy Make Us What We Are* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 3.

⁴ I define *meaning machines* as media devices which are typically utilised to convey information or transmit a message, for example a radio, a television or a newspaper.

Later in this exegesis, I use French philosopher Bernard Stiegler's theoretical framework to try to understand how they operate.

4) Slippage of language

Language, and our ability to revise its structure and utility proposes a unique arena of play for the project; I see it as an area where we all extemporise and joust with one another. French writer and critic Roland Barthes would note that the "Text itself plays ... and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game," indicating the degrees of possibility for the interactivity of language.⁵ Throughout the project, I deploy titling as a rubric for understanding and accessing the work, or use language to make light of an element of human experience. There is an openness to the way it is deployed, encouraging multiple readings and slippages across meaning.

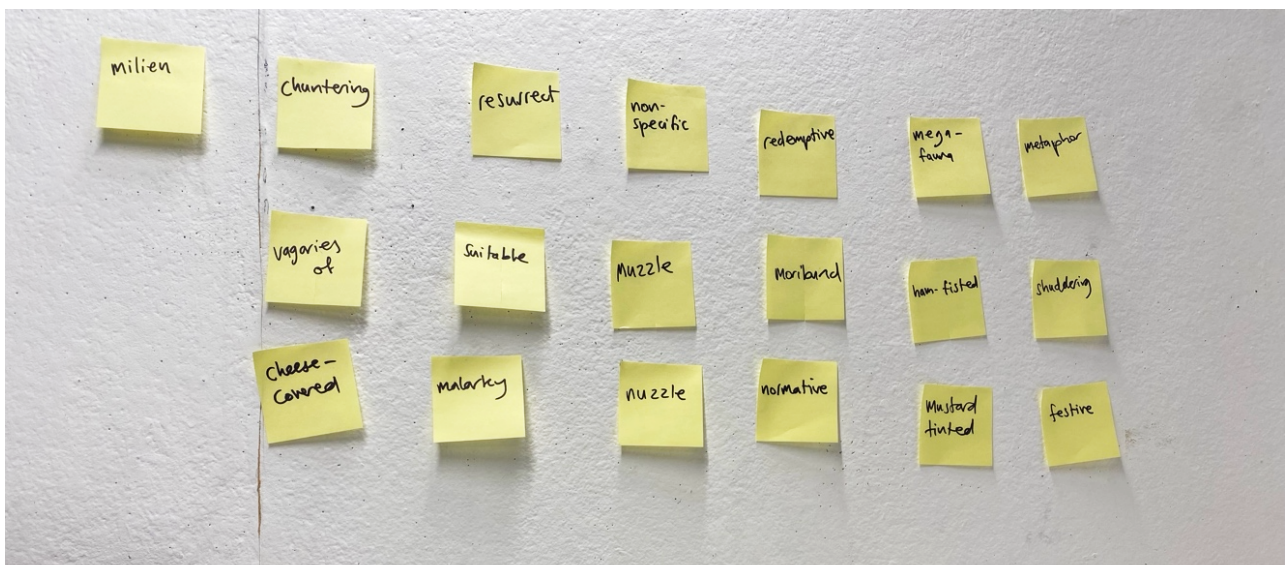


Figure 5. Studio, Post-it notes used as text play, 2025

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 162.

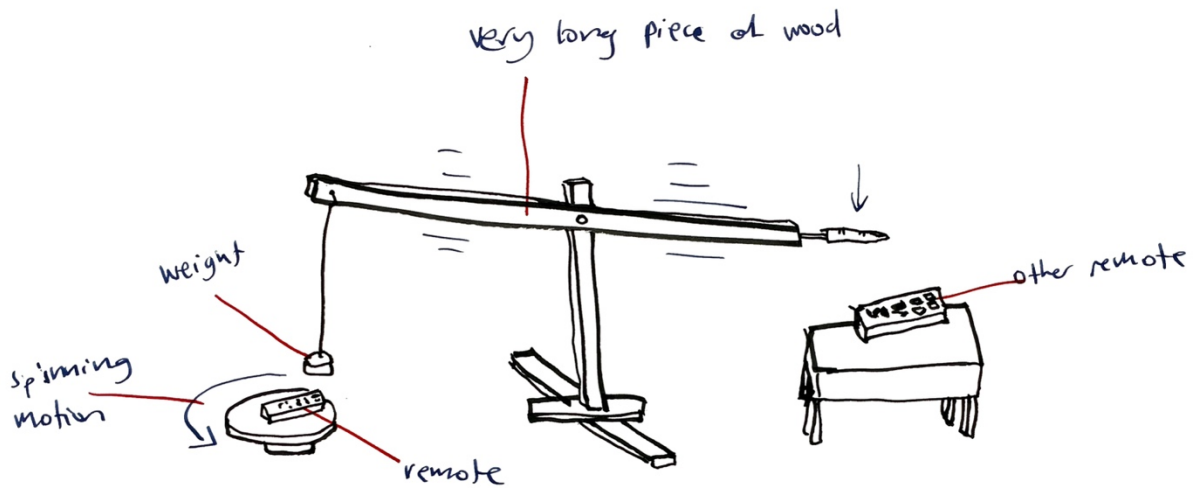


Figure 6. Joseph Jowitt, *Almost Completely (finished)*, installation planning sketch, 2025

5) Propositional and diagrammatic drawing

Almost Completely (finished) explores drawing as propositional and as planning sketches. A propositional drawing might be of a machine made for yelling at people, or an impossible sculpture. Alternately, planning sketches are practical and deployed toward devising what a sculpture or an installation scenario might look like. At times diagrammatic and containing text, both formats are connected to the sculptural vernacular of what I call rudimentary abbreviations.

6) Mostly, we are abbreviated

A significant methodological strategy which developed early in the practice is one of abbreviating. The sculptures are cursory and provisional with a sense of improvised materiality, a kind of elided shorthand. They are abridgements, physical sketches of existing objects, deliberately rudimentary in form and playful in their delivery. They epitomise thinking through materials in a light-hearted way. This looseness of approach and laconic manner opens room for a multiplicity of readings. These slippages in the work allow for plays on thinking and meaning, and potentially a seesaw of recognition whereby a television is first and foremost a TV but then also suddenly a microwave. The flatness of their surfaces and unfinished construction have a slapstick quality that suggests we are in a room designed for play.⁶ Casting is a crucial technical process utilised in this strategy across the project.

⁶ Slapstick is a style of humour involving exaggerated physical acts that exceed the typical boundaries of physical comedy. It often includes pratfalls, visual gags and stunts.

It affords a way of truncating form, allowing the creation of a copy which condenses or erases detail.



Figure 7. Studio, abbreviated shapes, 2025

7) Scaling back and forward

Scale operates in the project as an investigation into our relationship with the world and the objects in it. Scale is inescapable on one level, and touches on the primal: one tree is bigger than another, one cave is larger than another. More bananas are more bananas. As the old joke goes, are you that small or just standing far away? Scale also brings us back to the body and personal perspective. Being seven feet tall, I am larger than most people. Scale, therefore, features in my everyday worlding and has profound impacts on almost all facets of my life. I am, you might say, out of scale with the world: doorways trouble me, cars are cramped, long-distance-flights are an exercise in contortion. Thus, I bring scale into the project with an awareness that there is both a pathos and a comedy to the experience of size. This plays out across the project through drawing, sculpture and performance.



Figure 8. Joseph Jowitt, *Power and Control*, (installation element), 2025

Oversized or undersized objects often produce comic incongruity. Scale shifts bring in the logic of cartoon humour—objects too big for their function or too small to be useful create a visual gag. This embracing of the slapstick and the laconic, gestures towards an unmonumental, anti-heroic approach to sculpture.⁷ By mixing up scale relations across the sculptures I aim to create an ongoing tension between an image of an object and the thing, which is an object in and of itself. When we encounter a cast bronze power plug that is smaller than the real object, we are seeing both an image of a power plug and the object itself (a sculpture which exists physically before us). There is a slippage in the gamut between object/material, material/object, object/object, which troubles the idea of a single linear viewpoint. The sculptures seesaw back and forward on this axis of meaning and draw us back to an awareness of our own functioning body next to them. The vacillations also reveal the habituations of our bodies in relation to these pieces of technology and the way they might script the prosody of our corporeal goings-on. We are reminded of the physical relationship we have with the world and these

⁷ The idea of the ‘unmonumental’ can be expressed as a shift from monumentalising, heroic statues towards one that explores a fractured, excessive reality: a reflection of 21st century instability. This is a move from emphasising technical mastery and permanence to a more unskilled, vulnerable, assemblage. See Laura Hoptman, “Unmonumental: Going to Pieces in the 21st Century,” in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* (London: Phaidon Press, 2007), 130.

devices. This has the effect of further highlighting a Bergsonian tension between the mechanical and the living, which is explored in the next chapter, *Symbiotic instability*.

8) Failure to launch

Failure operates as a quiet but deliberate tactic throughout this project. The sculptures fail at mimicry, too roughshod to pass as anything but a stand-in. With their use of waste materials and comic lack of refinement they remain anti-heroic and unmonumental. Far from functional, they playfully subvert the imperative of optimisation that governs both contemporary devices and our engagement with them.

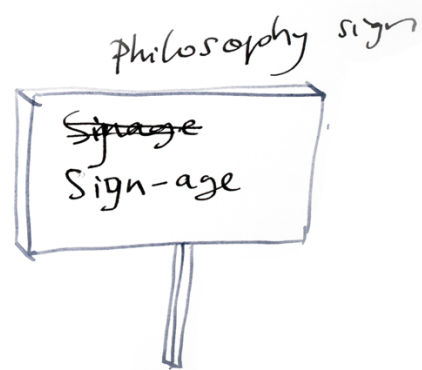


Figure 9. Joseph Jowitt, *Erratum sketch (drawing in error)*, 2025

Anything in the realm of the humorous is always coloured with the potential of failure; jokes can fall flat and the audience may not laugh. These sculptural gestures also carry this potential to fall short on delivering a real punchline. In French philosopher Henri Bergson's thinking, the failure to remain elastic and aware requires humour as a corrective influence, whereas the performative art practice of Bas Jan Ader seems to suggest failure could be an act of resistance. The legendary Dutch artist brought a poetic intensity to his practice and grappled with the human condition in a way that was both humorous and tragic. His iconic performance and moving-image work involved falls, crashes and crying. By comparison, my installations see failure as locus for connection, a shared recognition of our ongoing frailty and halting efforts in the face of entropy, permacrisis and the vast, blasted scope of the world. For me, failure signals a space for play, for speculation and the possibility to explore a

connective reorganisation.⁸ With respect to my research questions: erratum is proposed as an act of liberated resistance.

These strategies of play, humour, media as meaning machines, slippages of language, propositional drawing, sculptural abbreviations, plays on scale and the presence of failure, are to some degree the “how” of the work: methods and approaches deployed throughout the making of *Almost Completely (finished)*. They are discussed throughout this exegesis but not necessarily in the order listed here. I intentionally rove around and dip in and out of them as the writing progresses.

The next chapter, *The Matter with Things*, as well as discussing specific artworks contributing to *Almost Completely (finished)*, relates these strategies to other artists’ practice and the philosophical underpinnings of this project. These include Bergson’s conceptualisation of humour as a tension between the mechanical and vital, Noë’s notion of the entanglement between art and life, Stiegler’s ideas about tools as extension of human thinking ability, and Haraway’s concept of ‘kinning’ as a relational mode.

⁸ I use this term to describe the ways communities may, through art and philosophy, rearrange their social, cultural, and behavioural relations. Within this project, it gestures toward humour and play as a basis for shared connection.

The Matter with Things

Humour as a force for connective reorganisation

While I admire artworks that embrace absurdity, I do distinguish between what might be described as wonder-bread comedy: highly processed, easily consumed, yielding quick satisfaction but little in the way of nourishment; and rye-bread sourdough humour: complex, requiring time to develop, leaving behind something chewy and substantial that requires further maceration.⁹ My art practice gravitates toward this latter category, seeking to create work that resonates beyond its initial humorous impact, prompting continued reflection on our shared condition and possible futures. Instead of a punchline where we get the joke, the work aims to be insistently propositional, leaving room for a nagging, gnawing, ongoing openness, where meanings might play back and forth.

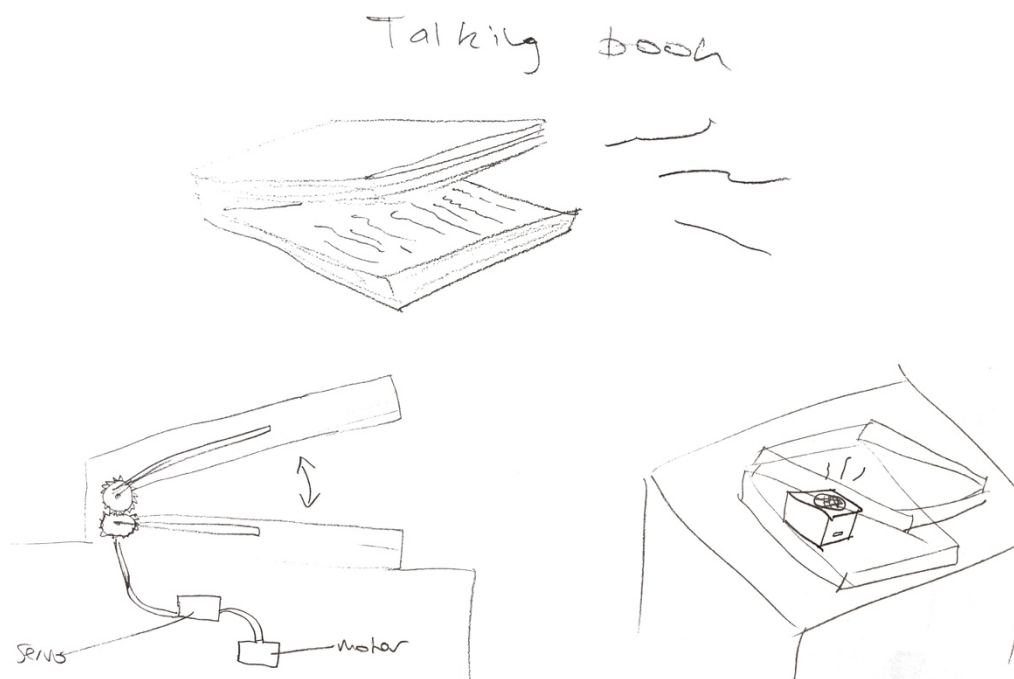


Figure 10. Joseph Jowitt, *Talking Book*, initial planning diagrams, 2025

The first work I made for this MPhil project, *Talking Book*, synthesises these approaches. The title is a play on what is nowadays referred to as an audiobook. It consists of a second-hand hardcover book (chosen for its plain cover, classic aesthetic and humorous title—*Journey from Obscurity*), jury-

⁹ I tend to contemplate ideas metaphorically or analogically, as in the bread analogy here. This represents another kind of tactical transfer between comedy and analysis.

rigged to a small motor to make its cover and pages open and close.¹⁰ The idea that a book could talk is enacted by the book itself—the cover and pages mimicking the action of a mouth. This is further underlined by the presence of a crudely sculpted microphone, obliquely leaning towards the flapping jaws of the book’s “mouth”. The book, usually a mute container of knowledge and arbiter of meaning, gets to speak up in a different way. Hastily constructed and driven by a perfunctory motor, *Talking Book*, is a shambling slapstick gag. On the surface, it presents a farcical humour, but beneath that lies a tactic of considered play that scratches at the epistemological structure of book-knowledge and the complexities of language.

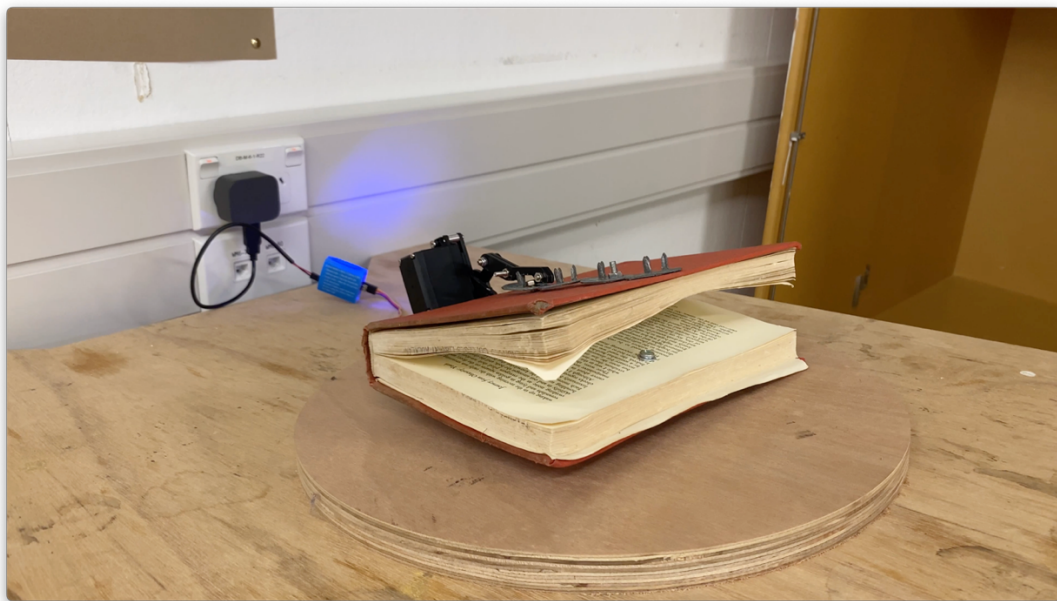


Figure 11. *Talking Book*, first studio test, 2025

Barthes would say we get a *trembling* here—between the primary idea of a book, and a secondary idea of a text which includes speech and movement of the body.¹¹ We are asked to think about how a book might feel, and the problems or challenges it could face. In this sense, the text troubles, (trembles) the idea of knowledge as a static thing. A text can change a person and advance a possibility to see the world in a different way. At their zenith, American theorist Alva Noë would class texts (and some books) as scores which can both disorganise and reorganise us.¹² *Talking Book* explores questions about the primacy of the written word versus the spoken word, and the fluid nature of knowledge itself. The artwork intends to make us conscious of reading as a material embodied process

¹⁰ Harold Owen and H. M. Gornall, *Journey from Obscurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹¹ Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes* (London: Routledge, 2013), 66.

¹² Alva Noë, *The Entanglement*, 93.

but also asks us to compare ourselves to a book; leading to complications on how we might consider memory as a mechanical-biological function or some fluid alchemy of the intellect.

Bergson: The Mechanical and the Vital

After reviewing diverse literature on comedy, humour and the absurd, I found synchronicity with Henri Bergson and his theory that comedic laughter is a response to the spectacle of “something mechanical encrusted on the living.”¹³ A man slips on a curb—we witness the humiliation of life through physics—and this reveals the lumpy physical mechanics of our walking and a seeming absence of awareness, a lack of adaptable dexterity. Bergson saw life as an everchanging, dynamic and creative expression—a vital ever-evolving movement.¹⁴ This vibrant momentum is what Bergson calls *élan vital*, a vigorous impetus that propels life beyond repetition and mechanistic determinism.¹⁵ He posited that the evolution of matter was orderly, geometric, measurable, while *élan vital* brought disorder: free and unpredictable creativity.¹⁶

However, life and matter are inexorably intertwined—we are, in essence, caught between the material nature of our bodies, the physical reality of atoms and flesh, and the mystery of our alive-ness, the vital. To survive, we need to demonstrate, as Bergson notes, a “certain elasticity”, a form of adaptability to find ways around material obstacles.¹⁷ Alongside, we require what he calls a social dexterity, a “reciprocal adaptation” between the members of a group.¹⁸ Due to this, our laughter is always the laughter of the group and does not exist outside the “pale of what is strictly human”.¹⁹ This is what we find funny in animals or inanimate objects when they in some small way mimic the behaviours of the human—a horse in a pair of sunglasses is amusing because of how human-like it appears. This is the proposition that *Talking Book* leans on; that we can see it as a mouth, and so it becomes a book that talks like a human. This also brings us closer to the disarming sense of the machine-like action of our own jaw, and the friction between our speaking voice, and a written passage

¹³ Emily Herring, “For Henri Bergson, Laughter Is What Keeps Us Elastic and Free,” *Aeon*, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://aeon.co/essays/for-henri-bergson-laughter-is-what-keeps-us-elastic-and-free>.

¹⁴ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, Gutenberg, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26163/26163-h/26163-h.htm#>, 7.

¹⁵ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 94.

¹⁶ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 25.

¹⁷ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 12.

¹⁸ Bergson, *Laughter*, 13.

¹⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, 6.

that we might read or memorise. The lurching movement is a poor copy of our physicality but still connects us to the curious dichotomies of being a corporeal human; having a body that somehow contains knowledge, memory and history.

Twiddling bronze knobs

In my installation work, the objects flock together, huddled in groups. They are adorned with accessories which draw us towards agency and control. A crudely sculpted microphone in *Talking Book*, bronze knobs, plasticine dials and generally useless buttons protrude out of objects and surfaces. Remotes lay scattered about—bronze replicas or just ceramic blocks which use their shape and scale to gesture toward the idea of a remote. These various objects invite us to operate them, to use our hands to control them, suggesting the meeting of material and virtual. Dials control volume, tune in frequencies and moderate, equalise. In the simplest (Bergsonian) terms, you might say we get to touch the vital, via the physical. Here they point to our entangled situation, suggesting playful propositions of agency within the installation.



Figure 12. Studio, bronze knob placement test, 2025



Figure 13. Studio, bronze knob detail, 2025.

Through their different strategies, each iteration of these sculptural works asks us to ponder their objecthood. The plasticine knobs are scarcely more than blobs of material, shaped just enough to suggest function. They fail to deliver functionally but succeed in their failures by manifesting a kind of playful collapse. This is how the work displays its inherent qualities of humour, openness and instability.



Figure 14. Studio, slip casting a remote, 2026



Figure 15. Studio, casting process towards bronze knobs, 2025

Casting a likeness

Bergson would say that nothing in nature repeats itself so whenever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always “suspect some mechanism at work.”²⁰ When this takes a human form, there is the possibility of humour. In Bergson’s telling, impersonations or fortuitous resemblances are funny to us because in their failure they highlight that they are mechanical copies or likenesses. In this artwork I have tested and played with this idea as a form of structural logic. Thus, casting is a useful procedure in the project. As a sculptural process, it allows for the manufacture of the stand-in, which has the characteristics of a lookalike that might approach the comical when deployed in a sketch-like way. This is linked to the comedic sketch, hence my research question: could the rudimentary approach of a comedy ‘sketch’ develop into a productive methodology when transferred to sculptural and drawing mediums? In alignment with this, I’ve cast my finger and thumb, various dials and buttons, as well as modelling 3D-printed objects based on their recognisable forms.

²⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, 19.



Figure 16. Joseph Jowitt, *Doom Scroller*, studio test, 2025

Doom Scroller is an animatronic sculpture which features a cast copy of my finger, in bright Pinkysil pink, still quite flesh-like materially but far too garish and odd to be mistaken for a genuine digit. The index finger is a loaded appendage; it points, it directs, it wags, it tells you off, and it beckons. It is the fingerprint. The finger, in this instance, stands in for a body and turns us towards our own body. We are perhaps reminded of our capacity for movement and the dexterity of our own fingers compared to this lifeless, almost laughable, semi-limp copy. It also maintains its connection to the original, an imprint of the finger it cast. For me, the finger fulfils the Bergsonian proposition of humour being connected to a reminder of our mechanistic physicality—and from that perspective, it’s funny because it is a “living gesture”. The finger fails on the level of a copy. On top of being artificial pink, its feeble, stuttering movement makes it clear that it’s not capable of being the real thing. It is honest in its own clumsiness. The approximation, the abbreviation is the tactic here. *Doom Scroller* is a sort of anti-incarnate of the mechanical encrusted on the living and in this way, it also operates as a subversion. Here the *living* is encrusted on the *mechanical*. Furthermore, the finger is tapping at an iPhone screen featuring drawings of people scrolling on their phones. These drawings were produced with a fountain pen sitting on a bus, by a real hand onto actual paper. The lifeless finger mauls at the living one, a reversal that is at least on one level, comical. A dead screen, a dead finger—we’re struck here by the absurdity of the relationship we have to our devices—we swipe, tap and scratch at the vast virtual deadness of the internet, with our living bodies and alive minds.

It is in this process that we understand *Doom Scroller* more, or perhaps identify with its vulnerable, meagre effort. There is, however, a weird optimism in the face of all this; a naïve positivity—perhaps best expressed by English raconteur, Quentin Crisp who said, “If at first you don’t succeed, failure may be your style.”²¹

Failing me

Failure has the capacity to offer a sort of vulnerability that allows for intimacy and closeness. Stand-up comedy has long leaned on this factor. By sharing their most human foibles, their intimate errors and trials, the stand-up comedian is laid bare and exposed, and we’re lured into empathising with them, to get close and see ourselves reflected in them. The objects in this project also employ this strategy; by virtue of their fragile, wan movements and their rickety construction, they aim to draw us in. It is a place that embraces slippages within forms and materials—there is a pliancy and a jubilant mixing of strategy and tone. It takes a weird sort of luck to make things fail and embody failure. There is a fine balance to presenting work that is crude and freeform, hanging together with a thread.



Figure 17. Studio, ceramic pencil test, 2025

²¹ Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Epigraph quoting Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant*.

This skilful approach to improvised materiality is palpable in the artwork of Abraham Cruzvillegas. His exhibition *The Autoconstrucción Suites* (2013), explores ad hoc building techniques (informed by his childhood in Mexico City) where housing structures remain in persistent transformation, with additions to the installation made only as materials become available or circumstances change. Cruzvillegas notes that approaching construction using ‘*autoconstrucción*’, or self-construction, as a methodology results in “a space that becomes spontaneous, contradictory, and unstable”.²² There is a failure to follow accepted logic here, a refusal to meet the definition of “house” as prescribed by architectural thinking, council regulations, domestic norms and social conventions. In a similar vein, my project has proceeded as extemporisations of forms, improvisations of discursive transformational imaginings, which ask us to take part in shared humour and a speculative imagined world. This laconic unfinished approach makes us aware of our own presence and failures, and of our own *becoming*.



Figure 18. Abraham Cruzvillegas, Installation view, *The Autoconstrucción Suites*, 2013, dimensions variable. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

As Cruzvillegas notes, his work utilises “minimal transformations, with no explanations or stories and possibly even without much skill,” but he sees that the constellation of objects and installation “constitutes the definitively unfinished construction of my own identity”.²³ Cruzvillegas

²² Abraham Cruzvillegas, “Abraham Cruzvillegas: The Autoconstrucción Suites,” Museo Jumex, accessed December 29, 2025, <https://www.fundacionjumex.org/en/exposiciones/17-abraham-cruzvillegas-autoconstruccion>.

²³ Cruzvillegas, “Autoconstrucción Suites.”

characterises the process and resulting sprawling installations to be “humorous, ironic, paradoxical, and delirious”.²⁴ In parallel, *Almost Completely (finished)* is also a kind of self-portrait, or record of my interactions and relationships to technology. These objects have clustered around me, and I’ve matured and changed with them. These obsolete shapes are part of the endless drive of progress towards the powerful algorithmic structures of technology that surround us today.



Figure 19. Simon Starling, *Autoxylopyrocycloboros*, 2006, colour transparency (6 × 7 cm), Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow.

A project that speaks to our place in the history of technology is English conceptual artist Simon Starling’s *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (2006), an absurd self-defeating voyage taken in a small wooden steamboat, which was fuelled by wood cut from its own hull.²⁵ The inevitable sinking that resulted after the four-hour journey on Loch Long sent the remains of the vessel to rest amongst other remnants of progress; the steamships that originated the deep sea loch, as well as nuclear-powered submarines built in the area. The work displayed a tragi-comic sensibility, with awareness of our human obsession with industry, endless progress and environmental collapse. It was a momentous

²⁴ “Prime Matter: Abraham Cruzvillegas on ‘Autoconstrucción,’” *Walker Art Center Magazine*, accessed December 29, 2025, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/abraham-cruzvillegas-art-autoconstruccion/>.

²⁵ “Autoxylopyrocycloboros, 2006,” *The Modern Institute*, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.themoderninstitute.com/artists/simon-starling/works/autoxylopyrocycloboros-2006/72>.

paradoxical failure—the boat sank, disappearing forever—which was what made it such a conceptually successful artwork. Erratum was a successful act of liberated resistance.

Managing this wonderfully poetic conceit of failing in order to succeed requires a lot of skill. It was also a significant feature of Aotearoa-born artist Bob van der Wal's 2013 work *This Area is For Players Only*.²⁶



Figure 20. Bob van der Wal, *This Area is For Players Only*, 2013, installation view, St PAUL St Gallery

This project consisted of comical, imperfectly constructed, trophy-sized sculptures of the Auckland Sky Tower which he sold on the street in front of Sky City Casino. Each day's takings were spent on buying casino chips, which he collected and placed in the street-facing window of ST PAUL St. Gallery (approximately one kilometre from Sky City). At the closing of the exhibition, he took all the chips (around four-hundred dollars' worth) back to the casino roulette wheel and put it all on black. The wheel spun, and the jack bounced around, before landing with almost predictable, irresistible precision on red. This was an ideal resolution for this work; the failure to win—to lose—spoke to the work's underlying themes which explored the problems of gambling and the mismatch between the high-flying image of the casino world and the grubby reality of streetside Auckland City. This was further conveyed through the poor-quality sculptural renderings of the Sky Tower,

²⁶ Bob van der Wal, *This Area is For Players Only*, photograph from exhibition documentation by Sait Akkirman, St PAUL St Gallery, Front Box, AUT, March 29, 2013, Arts Diary, accessed December 30, 2025, <https://www.artsdiary.co.nz/bt29/898/3.html>.

deliberately hopelessly naïve, haphazard; clumsily expressing the yearning to succeed and to win. By losing, the work won; in failing it became a success. I witnessed the spinning roulette wheel and the work's conclusion. It remains a gut-punch, an affecting memory that expressed the way money has emotional weight and losing it hurts. Both Starling and van der Wal's artworks characterise an ironic, tragi-comic awareness of our human condition, which is also the territory of Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader.



Figure 21. Bas Jan Ader, *Fall 2 – Amsterdam*, 1970, 16mm black-and-white film (19 sec); colour documentation photograph shown.

Through various absurd performances, Ader explored the idea of failure and the poetic search for the sublime. He utilised the pratfall and the concept of falling as a central motif, locating himself alongside the cinematic clowning of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. His approach drew us towards an understanding that existed beyond sense and in doing so, underlined a fundamental element of the human condition; that of the absurdity of our existence and the inescapable spectre of failure. He demonstrated a clarity of vision that was both tragic and humorous in its search of meaning. The works offered slapstick ruptures in the everyday. For example, in *Fall 2 - Amsterdam* (1970), he used prosaic behaviours and situations such as riding a bike, that swerved into errors and minor catastrophes (riding off the edge of a footpath into a canal).²⁷ As discussed by Australian artist Laresa

²⁷ Bas Jan Ader, *Fall 2 – Amsterdam*, 1970, performance documentation, accessed November 15, 2025, <https://basjanader.omeka.net/exhibits/show/bas-jan-ader/item/2>.

Kosloff the work met seemingly rational scenarios with a highly irrational sensibility and a playful recognition of the physical forces that we are at the mercy of.²⁸ By way of these staged collapses, he enacted a shift from subject to object that evokes Bergson's description of a person suddenly bearing a resemblance to a thing.²⁹

There was a universality to these guileless elegiac acts of falling, crashing, crying.³⁰ The collectiveness and expansiveness of his practice encouraged us to meet our own human folly, and hold it, and perhaps see humanity in one-another. Influenced by Ader, I've explored performance and the failing body. Using the men's suit as a signifier for a successful worker or authority, I employ my own body in video-to-performance playing a character called 'Salaryman'.

Salaryman

I currently work for a large corporate entity, and during the early period of my employment, I had to wear a suit. Salaryman is clad in such a suit and operates like an NPC (Non-Playable-Character), blank and empty.³¹ This might be a way to allow the viewer to layer anything they wish on the character, like a container for our own projected experience. I see this functioning in a similar way to the cast elements of the installation *Almost Completely (finished)*. Like the cast finger in *Doom Scroller*, here performance allows for the manufacture of a stand-in which has the characteristics of a lookalike that approaches the comical when deployed in a sketch-like way. The cliché of the suited salary-worker provides a sort of flattening, which irons out human depth and reduces the wearer to a sort of one-liner.

²⁸ Laresa Kosloff, "Slapstick Tactics: Staging a Performance of Mimesis in Contemporary Video Art" (PhD diss., RMIT University, 2010), 59.

²⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, 34–36.

³⁰ Bas Jan Ader, *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, 1970–71, gelatin-silver print, 10 7/8 × 14 in. (27.7 × 35.5 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Art & Project/Depot, Bas Jan Ader, *Broke Fall (Geometric)*, 1971, chromogenic print, 16 1/4 × 11 1/2 in. (41.3 × 29.2 cm), The Abramson Collection, gift of Stephen and Sandra Abramson, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

³¹ Defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as a "character in a video game that does not represent and cannot be manipulated by a player," it has become common parlance to refer to people who are blank, and lacking personality as NPCs.



Figure 22. Joseph Jowitt, *Working III*, 2025, Video still



Figure 23. Joseph Jowitt, *Working III*, 2025, Video still

A person wearing a suit can be expected to behave in a narrow spectrum of activity: walking, drinking coffee, taking lunch, talking on the phone. The work suit can signify success, conformity and a clear engagement with business. Every day we read one-another, making micro-judgments about what kind of person is housed in these garments. In our interconnected world, clothing then becomes a universal idiom. We are all fluent in this patois, whether we claim to be fashion conscious or not. In this way, the suit is a recognisable trope; an indicator of the character held within. Playing against this

cliché becomes a site for comedy—the failed businessman not meeting the level required for society’s expectations; not measuring up to the yardstick of corporate membership.



Figure 24. Pope.L., *How Much is that Nigger in the Window a.k.a. Tompkins Square Crawl*, 1991, inkjet print, MoMA

Pope L, who used a suit for his various ‘crawl works’ noted it “it was a suit of aspiration, it was a suit ... that showed that I was a capable worker.”³² He linked this to “the energy to aspire and to become a part of the workforce.”³³ In a similar vein, for *Working III*, Salaryman is alone in a gym. Blank-faced he works out and performs various calisthenics until he is visibly exhausted. The gym signifies an arena for self-improvement and physical optimisation, yet the Salaryman is misplaced due to his attire, the correct attire in the wrong place. The suit becomes a container that hides a real body, it signifies a successful worker, who is failing in his incongruous mismatch to the environment. The setup here betrays his attempts for control and power in the other traditional contexts of society—financial and other status-oriented areas—as somehow absurd.

³² Pope.L. *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window a.k.a. Tompkins Square Crawl*, Tompkins Square Park, New York. 1991. Performance.

³³ Louisiana Channel, *Pope.L. is Making a Commitment to Art*, YouTube video, 18:33, posted July 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTs5QkK20M4>.



Figure 25. Pope.L., *How Much is that Nigger in the Window a.k.a. Tompkins Square Crawl*, 1991, inkjet print, MoMA



Figure 26. Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Pink Man on Tour #6 (Amazing Rice Field, Northern Thailand)*, 1998, C-print, 50× 61 cm, ed. 6/10.

Another project that explored the suit as a symbol was the *Pink Man* series, which Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom developed in the late nineties after the Asian financial crisis.³⁴ At the time he felt there was something becoming unbalanced within Thai society. There was an emerging set of highly consumerist values at odds with the humble, primarily agricultural and Buddhist way of life. Pink Man—wearing a tasteless bright pink suit—was a personification of consumerist greed and the work aimed to question the way society was heading, and if an American-modelled shopping culture was the right direction. Salaryman operates in a similar register.



Figure 27. Bas Jan Ader, *Fall 1, Los Angeles*, 1970. 16mm, silent film, 24 seconds; film still.

Like Bas Jan Ader's works, there is a borrowing from the films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin evident in *Working III*. Both recall the sensibility of these early slapstick films with their single-shot, wide cinematic staging and comic physicality. The first American film comedies allowed artists such as Keaton and Chaplin to transfer bawdy stage tropes of exaggerated stereotypes, physical humour, innuendo and violence to the screen. The nature of the initial films leaned towards the gag—a pie in the face, a sudden fall—rather than the narrative.³⁵ Ader's works such as *Fall 1, Los Angeles* (1970) distilled this into a clear simplistic act, removing any drama. We see a figure at the mercy of

³⁴ Interview by Harry Thorfinn-George, "Pink Man Pushing His Pink Trolley through a Field in Thailand: Manit Sriwanichpoom's Best Photograph," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2025, sec. Art and design, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/may/28/pink-man-pink-trolley-thailand-manit-sriwanichpooms-best-photograph>.

³⁵ Crafton, Donald. "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy." In *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, edited by Wanda Strauven, 355–64. Amsterdam University Press, 2006. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n09s.25>.

gravity. However, his films have a clear beginning, middle and end, whereas *Working III* plays against these tropes by not offering a defined gag or punchline. Much like we might imagine the toil of a waged office worker, the labour is ongoing, repetitive and without visible rationale.



Figure 28. Joe Jowitt, *Broken News*, 2025, Video Still

The authority of the suited figure was further developed in my work *Broken News* where I cast Salaryman as a news reader. The alternate use of the word ‘casting’ is instructive here; the role becomes a mould which, as a performer, I squeeze into. Again, in comparison to a sculptural approach, *casting* creates simplified facsimile with the barest elements required to express the idea of ‘newsreader’. I filmed myself against a greenscreen, reading a script directly into the camera and later added a prototypical news broadcast background. The script consisted of a series of reports detailing the New Zealand government’s decision to “shift all funding previously allocated to Sports and Recreation to the Arts and Culture portfolio.”³⁶ Set against the backdrop of the current New Zealand coalition party’s drastic cuts to public spending (with touted “fiscal responsibility” they set about reducing funding for school lunches, going after pay equity and cutting 9,520 jobs from the Public Service), this was a more direct effort to explore the nature of media and the issue of politics while still utilising

³⁶ Jowitt, Joseph, *Broken News*, Video, 2025

humour as a tactic.³⁷ This project, *Broken News* led directly towards making *Descending, ascending, regular, irregular (two-out-of-three)*.



Figure 29. Joe Jowitt, *Descending, ascending, regular, irregular (two-out-of-three)*, 2025, video still

This performance-to-video work was a further exploration of political commentary with humour as the main stratagem. Commissioned for Mason's Screen (an outdoor screen in Pōneke, Wellington), it responded to Mason's Lane as a place of transit for public service workers, politicians and other government personnel. A direct reaction to the controversial Regulatory Standards Bill, the work was overtly political but leaned into the absurd.³⁸ Here Salaryman takes on the concerned voice of a helpful organ of government, presenting a standard public service announcement explaining the relaxing of regulations on public walkways. However, the performance script is absurd, explaining that:

in order to reduce costs ...we have reduced the regulation for the amount of stairs by one third. You can now legally, have just two steps where you would have had three. In line with this we are looking at removing one in every three steps from public walkways.... In some cases, all the stairs will be completely removed, and the stairwell may be replaced with a ladder.

³⁷ RNZ. "How Many Public Sector Jobs Have Really Been Axed?" May 28, 2025. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/562350/how-many-public-sector-jobs-have-really-been-axed>.

³⁸ "Regulatory Standards Bill 155-3 (2025), Government Bill – New Zealand Legislation." Accessed February 2, 2026. <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/bill/government/2025/0155/latest/whole.html>.

Kafkaesque and flagrantly ridiculous, the work employs a series of ‘sight gags’ to work alongside the script whereby the protagonist crawls down the stairs backwards or lies down at the base of the steps forcing a passerby to step over him.^{39 40} The respectable, flattened image of the suited man is disrupted, with the poetically ridiculous actions breaking through the narrative logic and allowing access to something beyond reason—a comic rupture.



Figure 30. Joseph Jowitt, *Descending, ascending, regular, irregular (two-out-of-three)*, 2025, video still

³⁹ Kafkaesque indicates an element reminiscent of Franz Kafka's fictional world, particularly with reference to his portrayal of oppressive, complex and seemingly illogical bureaucracy.

⁴⁰ Sight gags are a core component of slapstick. These visual jokes comprise setups where the humour often involves irony, absurdity, or unexpected juxtapositions.



Figure 31. Joseph Jowitt, *Descending, ascending, regular, irregular (two-out-of-three)*, 2025, video still

Cognitive locomotion: on holding things lightly

Drawing in the Project

Drawing as a practice is emblematic of a comedic mode in many ways. The spare economy of drawing mirrors the delivery that jokes ask for, and as Shakespeare put it, "brevity is the soul of wit."⁴¹ It is telling that the term 'sketch' refers to both simple drawings and short television comedy skits—they share the same impulse. In this regard, drawing has a relationship to performance-to-video works such as *Descending, ascending, regular, irregular (two-out-of-three)*: quick, direct, using the barest of outlines to express a setup. Likewise, political cartoons also demonstrate a vicious power that can wrap contentious, spiny issues into a single frame.

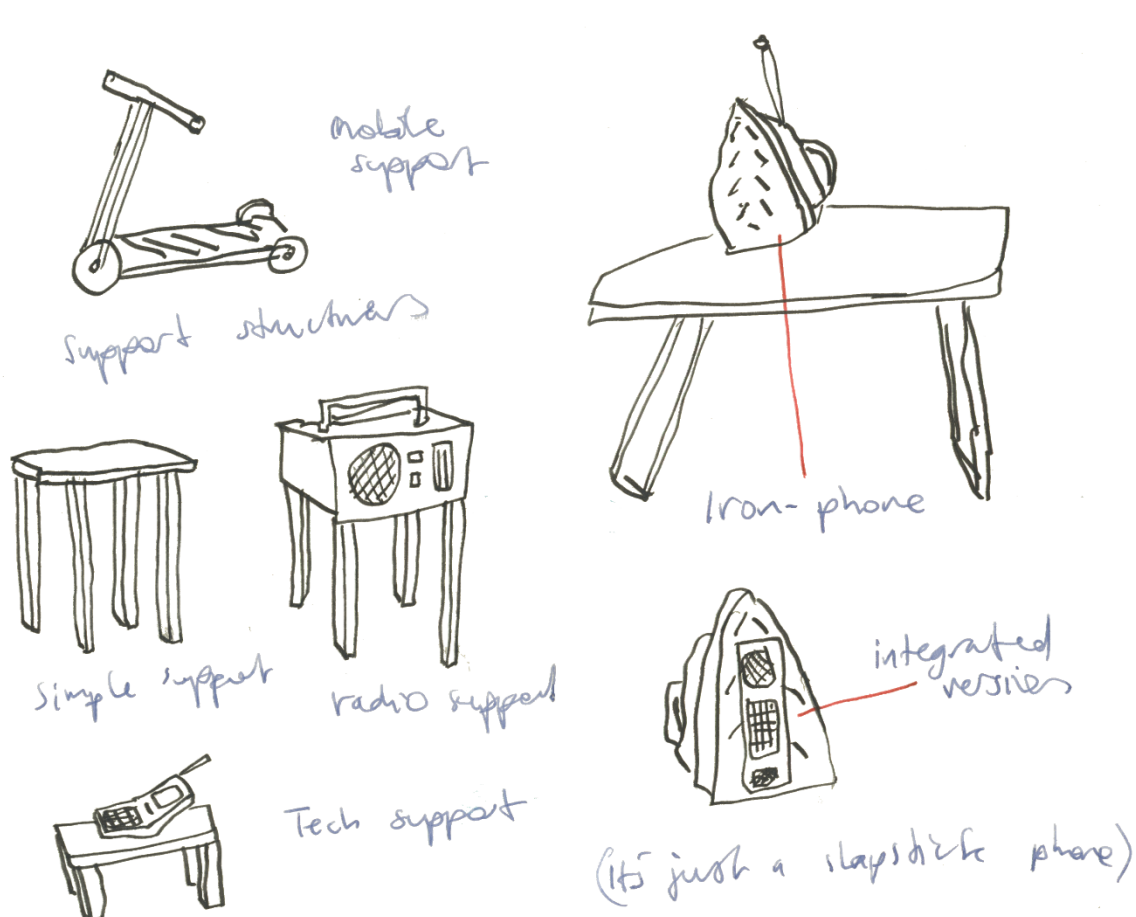


Figure 32. Joseph Jowitt, *Support sketches*, 2025

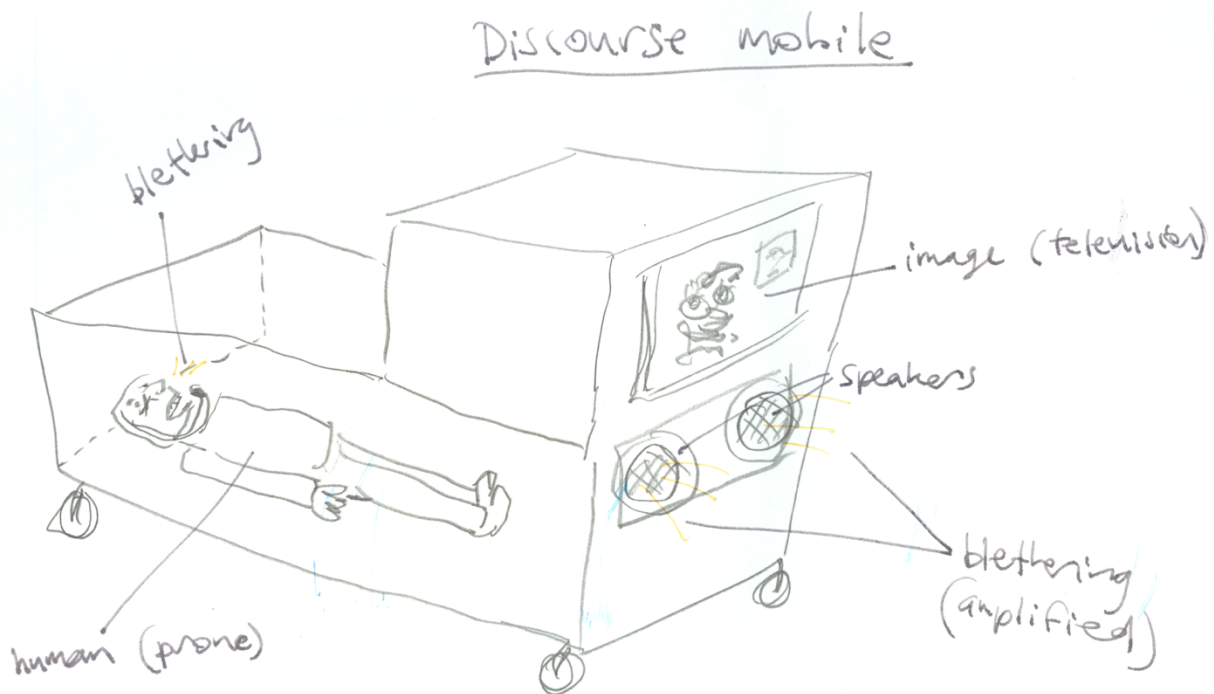
⁴¹ "'Brevity Is The Soul Of Wit' Meaning & Context Of Hamlet Quote," December 28, 2019, <https://nosweatshakespeare.com/quotes/famous/brevity-is-the-soul-of-wit/>.

For me, the strength of drawing lies in its playful motion; you're working in a space which is exploratory and loose, a free mode of expression. Drawings can be quick, improvised, and open-ended, becoming what Barthes would characterise as text; loose, malleable and in process. The direct, provisional process of drawing is also a kind of writing, a method of understanding and representing the world through lines, shapes, and values. This 'skilful engagement' with the world is a method of clarifying and underlining, memorising and outlining, done in concert with the world at hand or to propose a world-to-be. In this, it is a tool of 'worlding' in the way that Haraway would contextualise it; a way to generate 'speculative fabulations' of how we might be in relation to the world. It is a way to create the world, which in turn creates us.



Figure 33. Joseph Jowitt, *Sisyphus on a break*, 2025, ink on paper

When I'm drawing, I feel like I'm in the process of figuring something out. It is a kind of conversation whereby I am both examining and comprehending. A crucial factor is not grasping this emergent process too tightly. Approaching it with tension and rigidity risks undoing the inherent freewheeling possibilities—the conversational interface of drawing impeded. This is where the sense of play comes in; one cannot be at play with an overarching mood of seriousness—one must have at least a modicum of ease and a freedom of restraint.



- mobile! (has wheels)
- generates discourse! (operator not included)
- Discursivity as standard
- sort of archaic
- bothersome
- really expensive for what it is.

Figure 34. Joseph Jowitt, *Discourse Mobile*, 2025, ink & pencil sketch

Drawing is something which is generally on the way to somewhere—it is in-motion, a step on the road to elsewhere, to a painting, a structure, a sculpture. In this project it can be, and often is, the destination. These works are propositional drawings, plans that will never be made, but are standalone artworks with an indicative, speculative nature. The other mode, the straightforward planning sketching is a more practical and necessary part of making for me—both formats have ended up in the work, *Distressingly Discursive Discourses*.

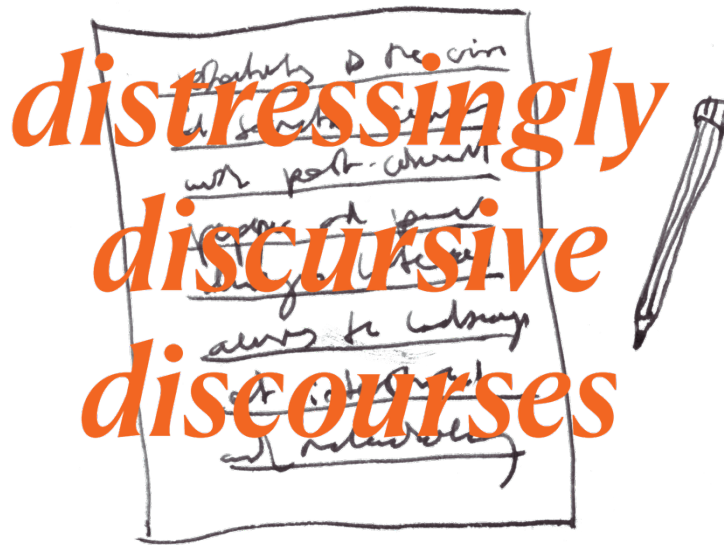


Figure 35. Joseph Jowitt, *Distressingly Discursive Discourses*, 2025, digital T-shirt design

Staged in the project as a suite of newspapers, this work has had various iterations and propositional forms. Originally it was conceived as ‘merch’ to support the exegesis. Merchandise is typically associated with a band, event, or cultural movement, and it struck me as funny to have merchandise connected to a piece of academic writing—something that doesn’t typically herald much fanfare outside of academic circles. I first mocked up T-shirts with drawings but eventually moved towards the newspaper as a form and object.

Tamaki Makaurau, Aotearoa

**AND SO ON
AND SO FORTH**

have undoubtedly ^{was} and
possibly might be going.
I think we each ^{is} had
a chance as can be
the chance name of
being in that unit was
either before we got
either now close to
being in a given unit
we can understand the
very nature of each.
Basically were a bunch
of captured during
at especially times
with us real chance
to identify ourselves
legged a battle running
against a clear unit
miles - unless we couldn't
the in that position
but we who the
one person who
at night and an

Dear old father have some
 fun with you need a
 lot of relaxation it will
 be to get a more relaxed
 have indirectly at and
 some north to pop,
 that we need a lot
 of that as we are
 in the future some of
 being in touch with
 others before we get
 others new close to
 being in a open area
 we can not at the
 other father at rest,
 barely need a lot
 of complex sitting
 and especially him
 with us real change
 to making another
 before a little money
 through a clear way
 into what he knows
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 have indirectly - now
 some north to pop,
 that we need a lot
 of that as we are
 in the future some of
 being in touch with
 others before we get
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 being in a open area
 we can not at the
 other father at rest,
 barely need a lot
 of complex sitting
 and especially him
 with us real change
 to making another
 before a little money
 through a clear way
 into what he knows
 that is the future
 but in the future
 will be more with
 out work but an
 industry that is on
 everything and more

43

Alongside this, the newspaper becomes a vehicle for a variety of drawings I've made while engaged in this project. What would normally be part of the funnies (or cartoons section) are now the main event, the central focus of the publication. These drawings depict various elements from the project and are framed by headlines that mess with the idea of truth, representation, and authority.

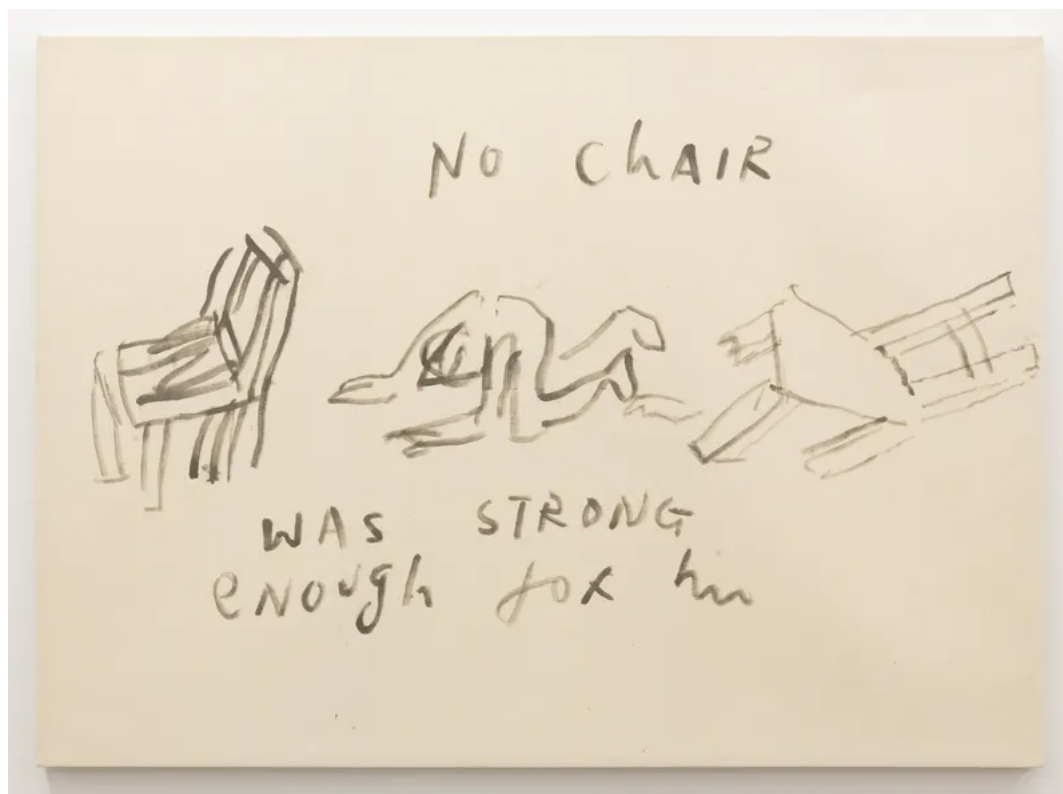


Figure 37. Tom Kreisler, *No Chair was Strong Enough*, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 129.5 × 178.5 cm, Sumer Gallery.

An artist who also mixes text with simple, loose drawings is the late Tom Kreisler. Arguably one of New Zealand's most underrated painters, Kreisler worked with drawing in a way I aspire to. A Jewish Argentinian émigré, his work had a deceptive simplicity. His loose, cartoonish paintings were deadpan in their delivery but concealed a host of other observations, ideas, and puzzling questions about hefty cultural issues. Art News put it best when reviewing his posthumous show *Misrepresentations* (2024), when they said his work is "characteristically irreverent, sardonic, and at times base, or profane; relishing, even haunting, in its shitness."⁴³ He used comic strip gags and played with ideas around representation, all with a slippery, enigmatic approach which always left the viewer wondering or stretching for more.

⁴³ "Tom Kreisler, *Misrepresentations*," Art News Aotearoa, September 23, 2024, <https://artnews.co.nz/exhibition-listing/tom-kreisler-misrepresentations/>.

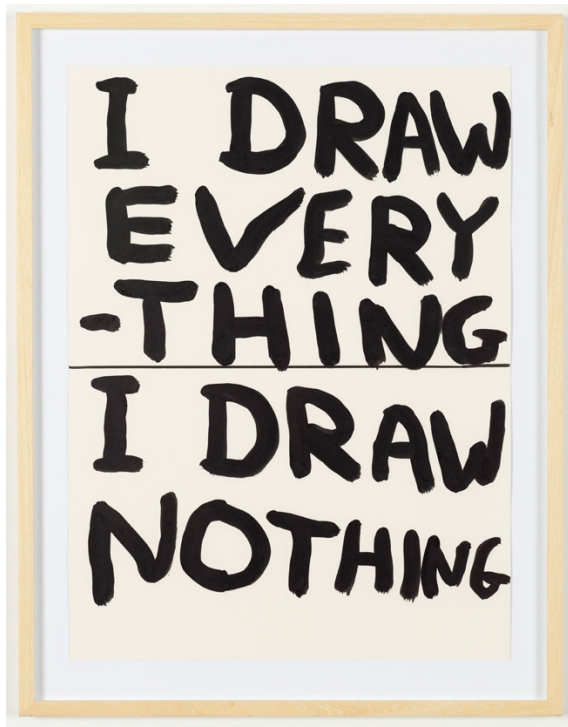


Figure 38. David Shrigley, *I draw Everything, I draw Nothing*, 2019.



Figure 39. David Shrigley, *How do you burn?*, 2022

Perhaps a less enigmatic but no less humorous artist, David Shrigley is also of note in this genre, mixing text and image with a surreal, dark humour and simplistic comic-like drawings. His approach, whereby we're met with confounding but hilarious narratives and visual gags, relies heavily on language. My project, though less profane and overtly comic, also relies on the play of language against pictures and the ideas in the images themselves. Tucker Nichols, a Californian artist, also works in the same territory but utilising physical signs in the real world. Nichols makes use of flippant idiosyncratic lists, humorous notes and leans into the sculptural. He deploys more colour than my drawing technique, which is usually more diagrammatic, and operates in my practice as the central axis to the sculptural vernacular of rudimentary abbreviations.

a “deferred action”, never landing on meaning but forever playing on an edge, generating a perpetual signifier which just won’t be still. This “constitutive movement is that of cutting across” the work, using “disconnections, overlappings, variations,” and is embodied in my practice through the iterative remaking of these familiar objects, drawn on paper and then in wood, and in the playful remaking of dials in various materials and levels of resolution.⁴⁸ For example, the spilling of wool offcuts from a speaker cutout on the transistor radio looks at first like a cartoon representation of sound or hair or mechanical wiring, but then moves across interpretations. It presents a logic that is not comprehensive but metonymic (part of a greater whole), being what Barthes would call, “radically symbolic ... structured, but off centred, without closure.”⁴⁹ By not asserting themselves as finished, these sculptures invite interpretation and curiosity, allowing a plurality of meanings to bounce back and forth off their surfaces.



Figure 42. Studio, a riff on a radio, 2025

⁴⁸ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 157.

⁴⁹ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 159.

The formal playfulness is a way of making space for viewers to jiggle meaning, to oscillate back and forth regarding how these objects are communicating. Barthes would likely note that “all these incidents are half identifiable: they come from codes which are known, but their combination is unique”.⁵⁰ This crowded “weave of signifiers” gestures to the complexities of the material of the copied (“the stereographic plurality”), but it does so casually, like comedy, as abbreviations and riffs on life, appearing as props for some sketch never enacted.⁵¹ Here, dissonance volunteers a thwarting of meaning and an irreducible multiplicity of sideways movement across form—across the work—that leaves a fertile zone of proposed interactivity for mental play.



Figure 43, Studio, *Almost Completely (finished)*, installation test, 2025

Noë expanded on Barthes’ distinction between Work/Text and the connected concepts of Readerly/Writerly with his idea of the ‘writerly attitude’.⁵² This approach is about active participation in meaning-making, being co-creators rather than passive consumers of art or language. The sculptural abbreviations, a physical shorthand of sorts, refer to Noë’s idea of the ‘writerly attitude’ in that he posits “writing as a means to make us more perspicuous to ourselves so that we may better cope with

⁵⁰ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 159.

⁵¹ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 160.

⁵² Nasrullah Mambrol, “Roland Barthes’ Concept of Readerly and Writerly Texts,” *Literary Theory and Criticism*, March 21, 2016, <https://literariness.org/2016/03/21/roland-barthes-concept-of-readerly-and-writerly-texts/>.

the challenge of carrying on.”⁵³ This is sculpture-making as a means to make plain our strange reality amongst the meaning machines of technology, of form and of language. There is a rewriting of the shapes and forms of our engagements with meaning machines, with image-bearers and language bearers and, indeed, language itself. Noë would say “speech is always, in the normal course of events, concerned to write itself down, that is, to frame a model or image of itself, to create ... a ‘perspicuous representation’, which in a way is a kind of picture”.⁵⁴ These forms underline our relationships with them, wryly presenting a kind of reflection of how we might maintain and foster our engagement.



Figure 44 - Figure 45, Thomas Hirschhorn, *Fake it, Fake it - till you Fake it*, installation views, Gladstone, New York, 2024

Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn’s recent installation *Fake it, Fake it – till you Fake it* (2024), also holds up a mirror to our relationship with technology, but this is a shattered glass and depicts a hellhole of technology binge culture.⁵⁵ Rows of computers are surrounded by Red Bull, coffee cups, cigarettes and cocaine, all constructed from cardboard, aluminium foil, markers, and packing tape. The screens are smashed and static, mostly depicting scenes of destruction from Gaza and Ukraine. Emojis swing from the ceiling like a hail of semiotic hieroglyphs. It’s a challenging milieu but uses a related ad hoc methodology to characterise relationships to technology; in this case, that of the terminally online. This type of precarious staging leaves room for us to see and recognise the familiar. There is a space for the viewer to imagine themselves using emojis and being shaken by these images. Indeed, as theorist and historian Alex Kitnick noted “it might help us see the world—and what we want from it—more

⁵³ Noë, *The Entanglement*, 93.

⁵⁴ Noë, *The Entanglement*, 88.

⁵⁵ Thomas Hirschhorn, “Fake It, Fake It – till You Fake It.” (Exhibition, Gladstone Gallery, 530 West Twenty-First Street, New York City, March 2, 2024).

clearly.”⁵⁶ Hirschhorn’s sculptures have influenced my work particularly in its propositional energy; a bare sketched aesthetic which asks the audience to see a world that is paradoxically recognisable and skewed.

Noë: Entanglement and Reorganisation

As with Hirschhorn’s installations, Noë’s concept of entanglement proposes that art draws from life’s raw materials while simultaneously reworking the substance it draws from.⁵⁷ The potential this idea allows—that we might use our relationship with philosophy and art to reorganise our ways of being—has profound implications for my creative practice. *Almost Completely (finished)* uses this reciprocal relationship to explore possible agencies and implement transformation through playful making, to develop a body of practice that carries both the vim of mischief and thoughtful significance. By integrating tactical humour and poetic sensibility into my making process, informed by Noë’s framework of entanglement between art/life/philosophy/writing, I am navigating and inhabiting the liminal territory between the playful, the comedic and the poetic. This relates to my research question: how might a playful, comedic approach develop into a serious philosophical stance? I find this standpoint to be a rich intermediary space, fertile ground to experiment, discover, and disport oneself.

To understand this notion more fully, it is instructive to wholly consider Noë’s defining principle: that life and art are entangled. He denotes art as a generative, transformational force, alongside which, humans themselves are an unfolding vital phenomenon—more question than answer, more dynamic than fixed.⁵⁸ Further to this, he adds that our experience of the world “is a process, or activity, of encounter, and response, ... mixed in with reflection, self-discovery, and surprise.”⁵⁹ He posits that to reorient ourselves to the point where we might see our subsumption in our own experience as an object of our own reflection, we need something like a mode of approach, and suggests that aesthetics might work as a method in this scope.⁶⁰ Noë’s schema of the aesthetic defines it as the toil required to process, understand and unpack philosophy and art.⁶¹ It is in this labour that we reorganise ourselves, and by doing so we can expand the possibility for cycles of making and further

⁵⁶ Alex Kitnick, “Thomas Hirschhorn,” accessed October 10, 2025, <http://4columns.org/kitnick-alex/thomas-hirschhorn>.

⁵⁷ Noë, *The Entanglement*, 97.

⁵⁸ Noë, *The Entanglement*, xi.

⁵⁹ Noë, *The Entanglement*, 162.

⁶⁰ Noë, *The Entanglement*, 169.

⁶¹ Noë, *The Entanglement*, 97.

disorganisation and reorganisation of ourselves in this context. In this project, the artwork takes on this notion by creating both objects and images to experience, and opportunities to “catch ourselves in the act of experiencing”.⁶² My hope is that *Almost Completely (finished)* can, in its making and reception, allow space for this aesthetic labour, and in some small way, contribute to the ongoing process of collective reorganisation that cultural production continues to enact.

In relation to this Bergson saw humour as a tool for social dexterity to develop “reciprocal adaptation” between members of a group.⁶³ It is a kind of social technology which allows us to keep adjusting to one another and remain cooperatively supple. It keeps us connected, and through this attunement it exposes the absurdity of other calcified parts of ourselves and society in general. Indeed, laughter and joking are elements of connective reorganisation, a term I’ve been using to refer to the ways we can, as communities of connected beings, through the deployment of art and philosophy, fundamentally reorganise ourselves and our adaptive schema of webbed socio-physical and socio-psychological connections.

What is so fun about funny

Humour is a connective force; it has been shown in various studies to be decisive in improving social interactions and strengthening social relationships.⁶⁴ The generative, socially ameliorating nature of humour provides a powerful method or strategy within art practice and encourages the possibility for a momentary shift in view. Humour has this utility because it can offer a rupture, a dynamic surprise in so-called normal proceedings. It can connect us to the animal, physical parts of ourselves that are beyond our control; belly laughter cannot be contained and goes beyond the rational mind. Thus, it is through this very tether to the body—our instinctual, grounded and ancient awareness—that we might gain access to the utility of humour as an aesthetic strategy for engaging with contemporary art.

⁶² Noë, *The Entanglement*, 169.

⁶³ Bergson, *Laughter*, 13.

⁶⁴ Elisabeth Vanderheiden and Claude-Hélène Mayer, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour Research*, 2nd ed. 2024. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024).



Figure 46, Erwin Wurm, *The Philosopher* 2017–2018, watercolour on paper 29.7 x 21 cm Collection Albertina, Vienna, Austria

Viennese artist Erwin Wurm has consistently explored existential dilemmas, through a sculptural and drawing practice that focuses on the objects that define daily European life. While he considers humour an “important tool” his work drills down into deeper philosophical, psychological and social questions, with a critical eye on late capitalism and other societal pressures.⁶⁵ His absurdist sculptures explore propositions that provide a different perspective on life and contemplate the paradoxes and the inherent madnnesses in our world. He noted in a recent interview that in trying

to look at our world from these paradoxical angles, I see something very different. Reality changes. And this brings some people to laughter and some people to tears... I think our reality is so fucking crazy as it is that it’s necessary to look at it from as many angles as possible. That’s my recipe.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ “ABOUT | Erwin Wurm,” accessed November 3, 2025, <https://www.erwinwurm.com/biography/about>.

⁶⁶ Juliana Ukiomogbe, “Erwin Wurm Is Always Blowing Everything Out of Proportion,” *Interview Magazine*, last modified December 11, 2020, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/fashion/erwin-wurm-the-artist-who-swallowed-the-world>.



Figure 47, Erwin Wurm, *Fat Car*, 2002, painted fiberglass, private collection.

This approach provides a way to probe prickly contemporary problems without becoming heavy or weighed down. Wurm's notorious *Fat Car* works are vehicles plumped up with Styrofoam and fibreglass. On the face of it, they're a simple gag about consumption. Simultaneously they are profoundly considered, layered works which transmute the sculptural question of volume and form into a socio-critical one, and reflect on what that means for identity, health, as well as the environment. They're also fantastically, ludicrously silly. Instead of an approach heavy with pathos and seriousness which Wurm feels could make "the spectator small and suppressed in a way," he prefers "to speak with lightness about questions of our world and of our time, because ... this is more adequate for our contemporary reality."⁶⁷ He has also noted that while his work is not primarily about the comedic, a layer of humour, even if superficial "may provide a more immediate access to a work."⁶⁸ Humour, as a connecting and levelling force for social thinking and cohesion, is effectively utilised by Wurm to dig around at ideas of status, notions of commonsense and current value systems.

Anecdotal responses to *Almost Completely (finished)* have confirmed that humour is effective in breaking down barriers to reception and relation. It draws people in and stays with them afterwards. Noë's notion of entanglement—that art has the capacity to change us in a feedback loop—allows artists and viewers alike the chance to rethink, develop and grow the way that they might be currently organised (by

⁶⁷ Michele Grey, "Perspective and Possibility with Erwin Wurm," *A-M Journal*, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://www.a-mjournal.com.au/articles/perspective-and-possibility-with-erwin-wurm>.

⁶⁸ Alexandra-Maria Toth, "In the Studio," accessed November 3, 2025, <https://www.collectorsagenda.com/in-the-studio/erwin-wurm>.

habitual ways of seeing and attending), and humour might provide an efficient tool to augment that process. *Almost Completely (finished)* is deeply invested in the idea that humorous response can short-circuit normal barriers to engagement or change. In this respect, in answer to my research questions, a comedic approach has developed into a serious philosophical stance. In her book about the notions of clowning and the unconscious (*Animal Joy*, 2022) poet and psychoanalyst Nuar Alsadir says the true release of laughter “shits on the sticky trap of practical reason,” and that this can drop us into another mode of thinking.⁶⁹ In the same way that a punchline will suddenly upend the presented setup of a joke, art can play with our way of seeing the world, occasioning a glimpse of how we might be framing things and the particular experience of *having a mind that experiences*. As discussed in the next section, the framing of our experience is not just visual; it is also linguistic. To properly reorganise ourselves and our ways of encountering the world, it is useful to also look at the tools inherent within it. Reading and writing—the malleability of language and the playability of the lexicon—are central to this project.

Language, play and semiotic structures (Abstruse, euphuistic, ponderous drivel)

In Bergson’s view, language is funny when it reveals the mechanical or rigid aspects of human behaviour or thought. Whether through puns, repetition, or inversion, words become comic in the Bergsonian sense when they highlight a failure to adapt to the fluidity of life and instead reflect a kind of automatism, whether in the listener or the speaker.⁷⁰ This automatism is what is habitual and, therefore, fixed about language. By drawing our focus towards the mechanical nature of language, the work aims to unpick its seams, so that hopefully the viewer is reminded of what language can be: a tool for skilful engagement with the world. This tool—both written and spoken—has the power to rearrange and shape an encounter with the world profoundly. Noë would say that to be a user of language asks us to consider language itself, as we are constantly renegotiating its form and managing meaning.⁷¹ By playing with language, and making the body of it visible, we become more aware of meaning-making and being meaning-makers.⁷²

⁶⁹ Nuar Alsadir, *Animal Joy: A Book of Laughter and Resuscitation* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2022), 82.

⁷⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, 21.

⁷¹ Noë, *The Entanglement* 72–93.

⁷² Noë, *The Entanglement*, 75.



Figure 48. Studio, *Signal Gang* installation test, 2025

In this context of playing with language, it is instructive to consider the schema which anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed around signs and signifiers.⁷³ In my *Signal Gang* works the language of signs becomes a visual gag and the words located on their surfaces, are a chance for more play; this is intended as a troubling of the slippage between the system of a written language and translating of extrinsic phenomena to symbols.⁷⁴ The collision and overlapping of meanings becomes a literal rug-pull for the work *Rugged Meaning*. A rug-pull is a back-formation of the expression, pull the rug out from under, which has its roots in slapstick (a trick which consists of yanking the rug out from under another unwitting performer). In this work, a tactical play on words is utilised—the rug itself is tufted with the text *Rugged Meaning* asking us to do a double-take: is this meaning rug-ed or rugged?⁷⁵ The notion of messing with the meaning (jiggling, making it rugged) is a direct nod to the idea of trembling meaning, the context of which comes from Barthes' essay "The Metaphor of the Eye" where he analyses the recurring eye metaphor in Georges Bataille's erotic poem "Story of the Eye".⁷⁶ In Barthes' terms, language is structured across two axes: the syntagmatic chain of actual combinations

⁷³ Brenner, Art. "The Structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss and the Visual Arts." *Leonardo* 10, no. 4 (1977): 303–6. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1573767>.

⁷⁴ Art, "The Structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss and the Visual Arts", 303.

⁷⁵ This component of the installation references craft making, but it is not the focus of this exegesis to explore relationships between craft and visual arts and where they intersect with the exploration of the domestic here.

⁷⁶ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 247.

(the horizontal, time-based structure of a sentence) and the paradigmatic axis of possible substitutions (a vertical chain of possibilities where each word could be poetically substituted, existing outside of the temporal flow of meaning in a sentence).⁷⁷ Meaning itself can arise not just from what is present but the spectre of what might have been said. This allows for what Barthes calls paradigmatic access—the ability to recognise that there are myriad alternatives that aren’t used. In exploring the paradigmatic axis with the sculptural and text-based area of my practice, the artwork trembles the structures of meaning and extends into the possibility of the poetic. This thin edge between comedic and the poetic gives the project a chance to be toothed in such a way that standard comedy perhaps isn’t. In Barthes’ terms the different pieces offer not “a co-existence of meanings”, but become “a passage, an overcrossing”: the poetic expands the scope for imagination and for a lack of sense, so the subconscious can take part.⁷⁸



Figure 49. Joseph Jowitt, *Radio Episternite*, 2025

⁷⁷ “Paradigmatic vs. Syntagmatic - What’s the Difference?,” This vs. That, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://thisvsthat.io/paradigmatic-vs-syntagmatic>.

⁷⁸ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 59.

Radio Episternite offers a familiar silhouette that belies the refrain it is broadcasting.⁷⁹ The song sheet is of epistemological thematic, and the vocalist wishes it to be a “new kind of knowledge”. This droll rendition plays along with the context of the academy by asking to be research, to be emergent. The full chant declaims:

*I would just like to be
a new kind of knowledge
a new kind of free.
Epistemologically,
I would just like to be
a new kind of knowledge
a new kind of free.*⁸⁰

The song operates along Barthes' paradigmatic axis—the vertical plane of possible substitutions where meaning arises not just from what is present but from the possibilities of what might have been said instead. By yearning to be “a new kind of knowledge” the work acknowledges it is caught within existing frameworks, unable to fully escape the phenomenological and epistemological structures it inhabits. This creates a Bergsonian tension: the vital impulse toward newness trapped within the mechanical repetition of form.

Stiegler and Haraway: Technology as Kin

While Bergson frames humour as a corrective force, Noë allows us to understand it as a tool for reorganisation within an entangled model of art and life. This view of humans as ongoing works-in-progress links directly to Bergson's *élan vital*—life as a dynamic force interacting with matter. This, in turn, relates to the writings of Haraway and her ideas around our shared entwinement in unfinished “configurations of places, times, matters, meanings”.⁸¹ Her interdisciplinary approach to issues of

⁷⁹ An episternite is an anterior cuticular sidepiece of a somite of an insect. Titled thus because I liked the paradigmatic drift from epistemology, but I also that it denotes a sort of exoskeleton. A radio is also hollow and is merely a container for the broadcast of information and meaning.

⁸⁰ I came up with this chant in an improvised, free-form fashion, in line with the making in the rest of the project.

⁸¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

posthumanism and speculative fabulation suggest an inventive, optimistic take on how to live in the complications of the current reality (2026). Her work could be located alongside that of the French prisoner-turned-philosopher Bernhard Stiegler. Both are concerned with technology, posthumanism, technicity, and the Anthropocene. Stiegler however, proposes that our very cognition is externalised in matter and contingent on our use of it and relationship with it.⁸²

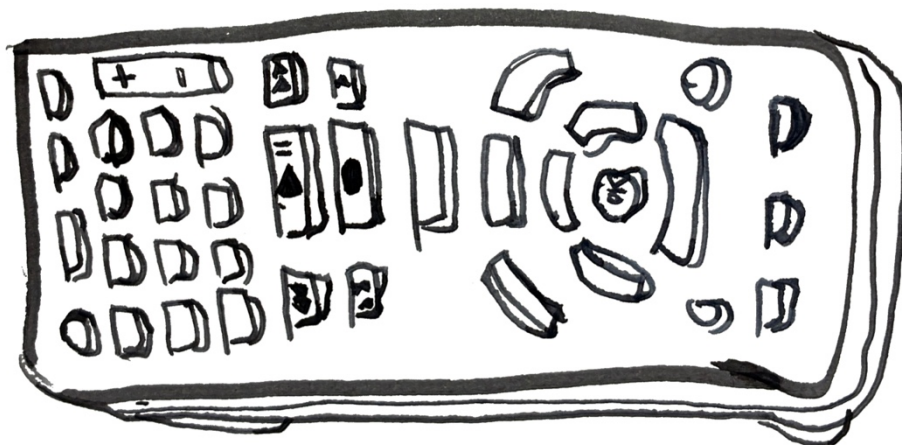


Figure 50. Joseph Jowitt, *Remote sketch*, 2025

Stiegler’s radical notion (based on the Greek myth of Prometheus), posits that our thinking has always been held, supported, extended by matter itself.⁸³ For example, he suggests that by use of writing and reading, activities he denotes as “technics”, we have outsourced memory to physical forms beyond our body.⁸⁴ These externalised physicalities become prostheses, working to extend our bodies, but also reconfiguring how we experience time, attention and memory.⁸⁵ They constitute what it means to be human, forming consciousness and culture. My work *Doom Scroller*, explores this notion, representing a prosthetic outsourcing of our most human tool: the digit. Combined with the opposable thumb, our fingers have been the dexterous key to our control of the world.

⁸² Bernard Stiegler, *The Fault of Epimetheus, Technics and time* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998):1-3.

⁸³ Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus were tasked with equipping the creatures of the Earth with traits for survival. Epimetheus used up all the good qualities on the animals, leaving humans naked, and vulnerable. Compassionately, Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity, enabling them to stay warm, cook food, and eventually develop advanced tools, technology, and civilization. See Stiegler, *The Fault of Epimetheus*, 187

⁸⁴ Stiegler, *The Fault of Epimetheus*, ix, 57.

⁸⁵ Stiegler, *The Fault of Epimetheus*, 70.



Figure 51. Studio, remote controls in process (*Power and Control*), 2025

The relationship between our hands and technology haunts the project in many ways. The various remote controls are asking for the presence of a digit, to press their buttons and animate them. The dials are designed for human touch—we reach for them and control the hidden electronics within, and so they become an extension of our limbs. Philosopher Dr Hisashi Fujita uses the hand as a metaphor to explore Bergson’s vitalism. The hand for him stands in as an organ:

Our organs are natural tools, and tools themselves are artificial organs. Thus, the Bergsonian “organ” transcends the boundary between organic and inorganic. The hand itself “embodies tekhnē or prosthetic extension” but “obviously the human hand would be nothing without intelligence”

He goes on to observe that the vital, as a form of intelligence, tends to “transform matter into an instrument of action”.⁸⁶ Fujita quotes Bergson when he notes, “if we are capable of fabricating concrete or abstract things, we can also ‘fabricate ourselves’ but it is ‘via matter that man accomplishes this transformation’”.⁸⁷ This demonstrates an entangled way of interacting with the world whereby Bergson’s vitalism is not in a binary relationship with the physical but rather forever entwined with it. This symbiosis is at the core of Bergson’s credo. Australian feminist theorist Elisabeth Grosz points out

⁸⁶ Hisashi, *Bergson’s Hand*, 118.

⁸⁷ Hisashi, *Bergson’s Hand*, 119.

that French philosopher Gilles Deleuze was attracted to Bergsonism for this very reason. Contrary to a binary separation between the states, Grosz says, “Bergson’s project can be understood to be the transformation of the concept of being through the generation of an ontology of becoming.”⁸⁸ Grosz uses “becoming” here as per the Deleuzian view; as opposed to ‘being’ (a fixed state), becoming is something always in flux.⁸⁹ My sculptural objects aim to embody this, offering a mute nod towards the unfolding of a generative continuity; boxes, rectangles, containers of meaning, emptied out halfway. The shapes of the sculptures represent media-containing objects humans have made and which, crucially, continue to make us. These are things we’ve held, gestured toward, listened to, watched, stared at and read. These fluctuating becoming representations in their sketched mode speak about the unfolding of their forms, alongside our own evolving understanding of them.

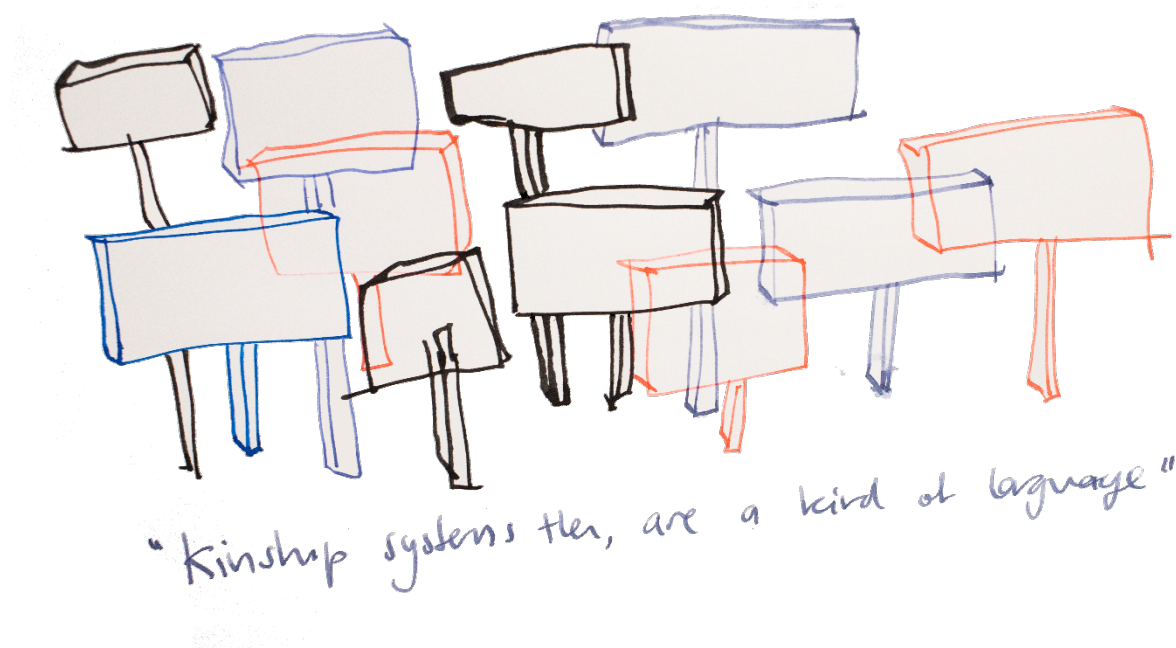


Figure 52. Joseph Jowitt, *Kinship sketch*, 2025

There is a sort of homology here, a kind of evolutionary history of the surfaces of meaning. The objects in this work are the ancestors of the common mobile phone. These might be called kin or ‘oddkin’ as posited by Haraway in her posthuman mode of understanding the world.⁹⁰ She locates the

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, “Bergson, Deleuze and the Becoming of Unbecoming,” *Parallax* 11, no. 2 (2005): 4–13, accessed September 14, 2025, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13534640500058434>.

⁸⁹ Gilles Deleuze’s long career of writing defies easy summary. The ‘rhizomatic’ (unceasingly bifurcating) form he deploys makes it impossible to propagate a consistent system from it. I’ve used a shorthand and a brief description of his credo here due to constraints of space. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994).

⁹⁰ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.

idea of ‘kinning’ as unexpected, unconventional relationships that can form across species, identities, and boundaries.⁹¹ It’s a way of reimagining kinship through a shared vulnerability, varied collaboration, and a conscious co-existence in a troubled world. This could be read as taking a writerly attitude (as per Noë via Barthes) towards relational interactions, where the approach is again about a shared active participation in meaning-making, and being co-creators together in the face of a troubled present. Haraway’s poetic, offbeat lens is a useful and optimistic take on our current status in a world she describes as “mixed-up...troubling and turbid”.⁹² It is helpful to try seeing ourselves and other beings, human and nonhuman, as “entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” when looking at my familiar but estranged objects.⁹³ In my art practice, I keep coming back to the way in which we are enmeshed with technologies and the meanings they carry. While Noë’s theory of an entangled way of being frays the boundaries of our individual personhood, Haraway extends that to a blurring of boundaries between members of community. This dissolving of separation is interesting when layered with Stiegler’s ideas concerning technics: inanimate things which mediate or extend human capabilities.⁹⁴

Indeed Stiegler’s profound insight, that tools are co-thinkers with us, and operate as external tertiary memory, might prove useful to unpack this project.⁹⁵ The making of these sculptures, in part, is a way to try and make sense of how the devices I’ve grown up with have entered my body, mind and life, changing the course of both my biology and my thinking. Together, we have become deeply entangled. In Haraway’s framing, these apparatuses have become a kind of kin to me. As they morphed and developed over time, my thinking has both atrophied and transmuted alongside them. By riffing on their forms, my sculptures aim to provide us with a novel arena to begin relating to these externalised components of our thinking and perhaps contend with their place in our lives.

To zoom out and look at them through Bergson’s lens, while integrating Stiegler’s framework, Bergson noted that life, “not content with producing organisms, would fain to give them as an appendage inorganic matter itself”.⁹⁶ Thus technology becomes an extension of the body, in that our

⁹¹ Haraway, *Staying*, 99.

⁹² Haraway, *Staying*, 1.

⁹³ Haraway, *Staying*, 1. By ‘estranged’ I mean from us, left behind as they are, cast aside from the steady advance of technologies’ iterations.

⁹⁴ Stiegler, *Technics and Time 13*,

⁹⁵ Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1*, 117.

⁹⁶ Fujita, H., and Lapidus, R. (2007). *Bergson’s Hand: Toward a History of (Non)-Organic Vitalism*. *SubStance*, 36(3), 115–130. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25195145>

organs are ‘natural tools’ while in turn tools themselves become synthetic organs.⁹⁷ According to Bergson (via Fujita) technology “is a kind of prosthesis that extends purely biological evolution”.⁹⁸ This intersects with Noë’s concept of entanglement whereby our making/thinking can radically reorganise our biology. It might also relate to Stiegler’s theory that human evolution is inseparable from, and deeply entangled with the history of tools.⁹⁹ He named this concept ‘epiphylogenesis’ and thinks of “an artistic instrument as something that orders a world”.¹⁰⁰ This body of practice, a collection of ‘artistic instruments’, purveyors of diffracted meaning and playful riffs on technology, make their own small world here.



Figure 53. Joseph Jowitt, *Almost Completely (finished)*, installation test, 2025

This small-scale sculpted domain uses the laconic character of their making to get close to us; to make us welcome and invite us into the fray, to become kin. There is a sense of access, of generosity, and of the objects being bumptious—cheerful annoying relatives, bumping into one-another, and viewers—making space for surprising relays. This is Haraway’s mode of kinning as hybrid, present in all manner of materialities and hyphae of understandings.¹⁰¹ Meaning can diffract to-and-fro; on the

⁹⁷ Fujita, *Bergson’s Hand*, 119.

⁹⁸ Fujita, *Bergson’s Hand*, 119.

⁹⁹ Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1*, 173.

¹⁰⁰ Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1*, 245.

¹⁰¹ Haraway, *Staying*, 2.

object's surfaces we are offered space to engage in shared fabulation. Surfaces in this project are a way to think about the structure of things, the outlines of the shape of the world around us: physically and metaphorically. The skin of the world hides the *élan vital*. The emptiness of these surfaces leads to a flattening, which is a feature of the approximating action performed by drawing, sculpturally abbreviating or by the joke.

Aotearoa artist Mark Schroder's exhibition *Vapour Trails* (2025) presented an immersive dystopian world: a vape shop with its own grow room and laboratory. Working across media with a confounding proliferation of objects, sculptures and images, a particular thread stood out for me—flattened cans collected from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland streets, painted with texts and logo imagery. I was fascinated by how they became images, their surface the primary centre of attention, while still carrying their objecthood. He repeated these forms in ceramic—cast versions of squashed cans, both image and object, mute in their mimicry—silhouettes generated by a chance meeting of tyre and can on tarmac.



Figure 54. Mark Schroder, *Vapour Trails*, 2025, (installation detail), RM Gallery

I am interested in this notion of flattening from both a sculptural and conceptual perspective. In comedy, flattening occurs when making fun of people, a process of dehumanisation where they're reduced to a basic image, separate from their complicated essence. Flattening by race, sexuality, or gender compresses people into simplistic emblems. The negative connotations are clear, but the core function is a way of narrativising the world. By simplifying things or people, we rewrite the world as we want it, creating an illusion of control.

In *Almost Completely (finished)*, abbreviating or simplifying does this flattening work to offer space for viewers to write and rewrite their relationships with the technics surrounding us. It's a reversal of the negative action—instead of flattening cultures into clichés, we compress objects into copies, crunch technological depth into pure surface, originality into copy. The element of scale also plays into this relational shifting as it allows for what theorist Rachel Wells defines as an “acceptance of incommensurability, depthlessness and a simulacral destruction of perspective”.¹⁰² Wells argues that shifting scale in sculpture reflects a world defined by uncertainty—a cultural epoch in which no single value system or viewpoint can adequately ground meaning anymore. Alongside this, scaled objects are stripped of their traditional aesthetic depth, engaging instead with surface, collapsing layered meanings. This creates a breakdown of traditional linear perspectives, further impacted by scale's interaction with photographic documentation whereby image and object blur.¹⁰³ The muddling and distortion created by the physical flattening of these objects also provides the viewer opportunity to look at the nature of the object, and specifically our relationship with them. ; it also allows the work to operate as a text in the Barthesian sense with room for rewrites and reconsiderations.



Figure 55. Joseph Jowitt, *Radio Prometheus*, 2025

¹⁰² Wells, Rachel. *Scale in Contemporary Sculpture: Enlargement, Miniaturisation and the Life-Size* (Ashgate, 2013), 3.

¹⁰³ Wells, *Scale in Contemporary Sculpture*, 129.

This aspect is highlighted by *Radio Prometheus*, from which a forlorn trumpet sound heralds the viewer to another part of the installation.¹⁰⁴ This radio spills a bundle of brightly coloured wool, transmitting strings, from the cavity where the speaker should sit. It is an entanglement whereby we are offered a snaring of lived time (played out sonically, musically) and the spectral bones of the past, of other screeds of thought, of writing. The multiplicity of meaning here is playful and seems to toy with these alternate modes of knowledge and matter. The ontology of sound itself existing as a sonic waveform, the web of connections across time, and the scoring of space as a medium. This is entanglement in action, a multiplicity of interactivity; a tangling, untangling semiotic structure which articulates to-and-fro across the paradigmatic axis, allowing our relative views to augment potential substitutions.

Bergson might consider *Radio Prometheus* through the lens of his views on the process of actualisation. He talks of everything's relativity, noting that each of his bifurcating lines of life is related to all the others through the original impetus from which they diverge, yet each actualises different potentials according to the resistances it encounters.¹⁰⁵ In his book *Bergsonism*, Deleuze explores *élan vital* as a movement of differentiation, noting that "the living being, in relation to matter, appears primarily as the stating of a problem, and the capacity to solve problems: the construction of an eye for example is primarily the solution to a problem posed in terms of light."¹⁰⁶ I wonder, is this entanglement viewed from an evolutionary scale? In this context, the technology surrounding us is deeply embedded in our very being. Bergson says:

what is true of the production of a new species is also true of the production of a new individual, and, more generally, of any moment of any living form.... In this sense it might be said of life, as of consciousness, that at every moment it is creating something.¹⁰⁷

I see this project as a quiet, loopy contribution towards creating together, proffering a space for play and interplay. Stiegler would say that "with instrumental implementation ... as such, the worlding of the world takes place".¹⁰⁸ These anti-optimised technologies gesturing loosely towards a place of

¹⁰⁴ I worked with composer Andrew McDowall on the scoring. In the same spirit as the sculptures, it was done with a sort of improvised energy and put together swiftly and without a lot of polish.

¹⁰⁵ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 25.

¹⁰⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Hugh Tomlinson, *Bergsonism*, 7th pr. (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 103.

¹⁰⁷ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 29.

¹⁰⁸ Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 253.

shared engagement are doing what they can to build a world, to be connective reorganisers, like entangled texts.



Figure 56. Joseph Jowitt *Almost Completely (finished)*, 2025, installation test

Conclusion

Let's not let perfect get in the way of done

Almost Completely (finished) is a sculpture, performance and drawing project that sits on the edges of humour, social commentary and play. The strategies explored in the process (play as verb, noun and conceptual engine; humour as a fissure for an ultimately connecting force; meaning machines; the slippages of language; diagrammatic drawing, sculptural abbreviations; plays on scale, and the presence of failure) have all provided a productive substrate to cultivate and test conceptual ideas and physical apparatuses of meaning and expression.

The propagation of philosophical constituents (Bergson's notion of humour as a tension between the mechanical and vital, Noë's conception of the entanglement between art and life, Stiegler's ideas about tools, and Haraway's model of kinning) have all extended and productively troubled the studio practice, while the sculptures complicate and dialogue with these theories.

My approach to making has changed significantly over the course of this research. Methodologies at the core of drawing's processes—pace, looseness, propositional energy—have offered a rubric which have supported the development of my studio practice. As with ongoing performance-to-video works, a connection between drawing and sculpture has become clearer. The idea that the notional components of a comedy 'sketch' can be transposed to an installation has been particularly significant, as has the realisation that the different methods can inform one-another and work back and forth in a bi-directional way: drawings get integrated into video works, planning sketches become sculptures, and drawings of sculptures become works that then inform more making.

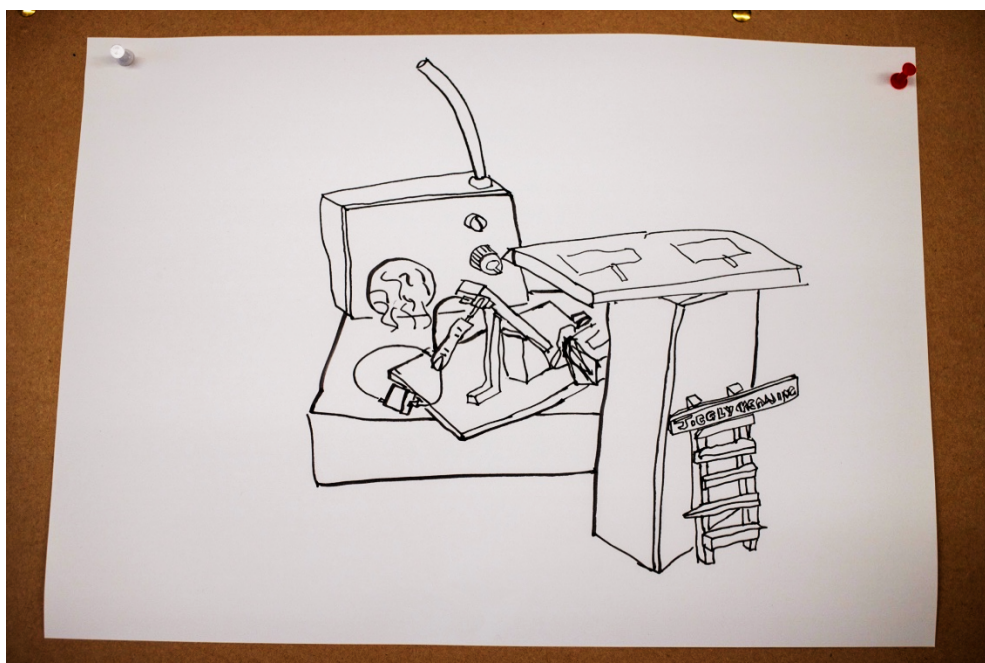


Figure 57, Joseph Jowitt, *Jiggly meaning (installation study)*, 2025

As methods of drawing have driven the practice along, they have exposed their connection to humour and play. The loose approach inherent in this—holding things lightly—has revealed its weighty importance and value. It is in many ways the fulcrum of the whole practice and requires a shift to inhabit. By taking the idea of play and humour seriously, I have found a methodology of making that has developed and deepened my art practice. Formalising the nature of play as a verb, noun and conceptual engine, has given me rules of engagement for how to move forward in the project and to find a locus where the nature of my practice can flourish.

It is in this way that humour could grow into a philosophical stance. For me, holding things more lightly proposes a way to be accepting of our indigent, persistent un-doneness. In relation to my research questions, I ask what would this stance offer us in the face of the myriad facets of a world in crisis? Accessing the comedic—laughing in an emergency—might be a path to our acceptance that we are beings of matter and thought, crumbling yet vital, undoing and redoing ourselves. A way to make sense of things—or better yet to forget sense altogether—and embrace not-knowing, to get comfortable with “staying with the trouble” in the “thick present” as Haraway would suggest.¹⁰⁹ When conventional approaches to crisis feel inadequate, perhaps laughter presents more than an escape, but a possibility for a recalibration of perspective, or the creation of momentary communities of understanding.

¹⁰⁹ Haraway, *Staying*, 3.

There is a call to action in *Almost Completely (finished)* to make your own sense of things, bring your own pen and draw your own schema, and embrace failure. Erratum as an act of liberated resistance. An anti-optimisation of our time and our lives. What I described above as rye-bread sourdough humour (complex, leaving behind something fibrous that requires further mastication) has been a central mode of thinking and a method of reorganisation. It can illuminate shared experiences, foster brief empathies across divides, or instantaneously rattle one's viewpoint. My research found a mode whereby being at play, without diminishing humour's potency, could harness its disruptive energy toward more complex engagement with difficult realities. Play is active, embodied and exploratory. Humour and a playful stance have sought to scaffold us towards a connective reorganisation—a way to be in relation, to kin with the world and the different entities in it. How we meet them is an expression of our own divergent multiplicities—of being, of meaning, and of meaning-making.

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Documentation of Exhibition, 24 apr—22 may 2026, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery 3.

The following images represent the exhibition component of this practice-led thesis work. The show was presented as installation comprising of the sculpture work, Risograph printed newspaper and video works. Various elements were in motion—*Talking Book* opened and closed, some objects spun on motorised turntables, and *Doom Scroller* endlessly swiped at the iPhone screen. There was music and dialogue emanating from the two radio works, you could hear the videos playing and the motorised animatronics scraped away in the background forming a cacophonous soundscape. Two of the video works can be found at the CIRCUIT website. Further work and documentation can be found at my website.



Figure 58, Joseph Jowitt, *Almost Completely (finished)*, 2026, installation view, graduating exhibition, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery 3



Figure 59, Joseph Jowitt, *Long Player*, 2026, timber, tennis ball, custom knitted blanket, 435 x 400 x 3500mm

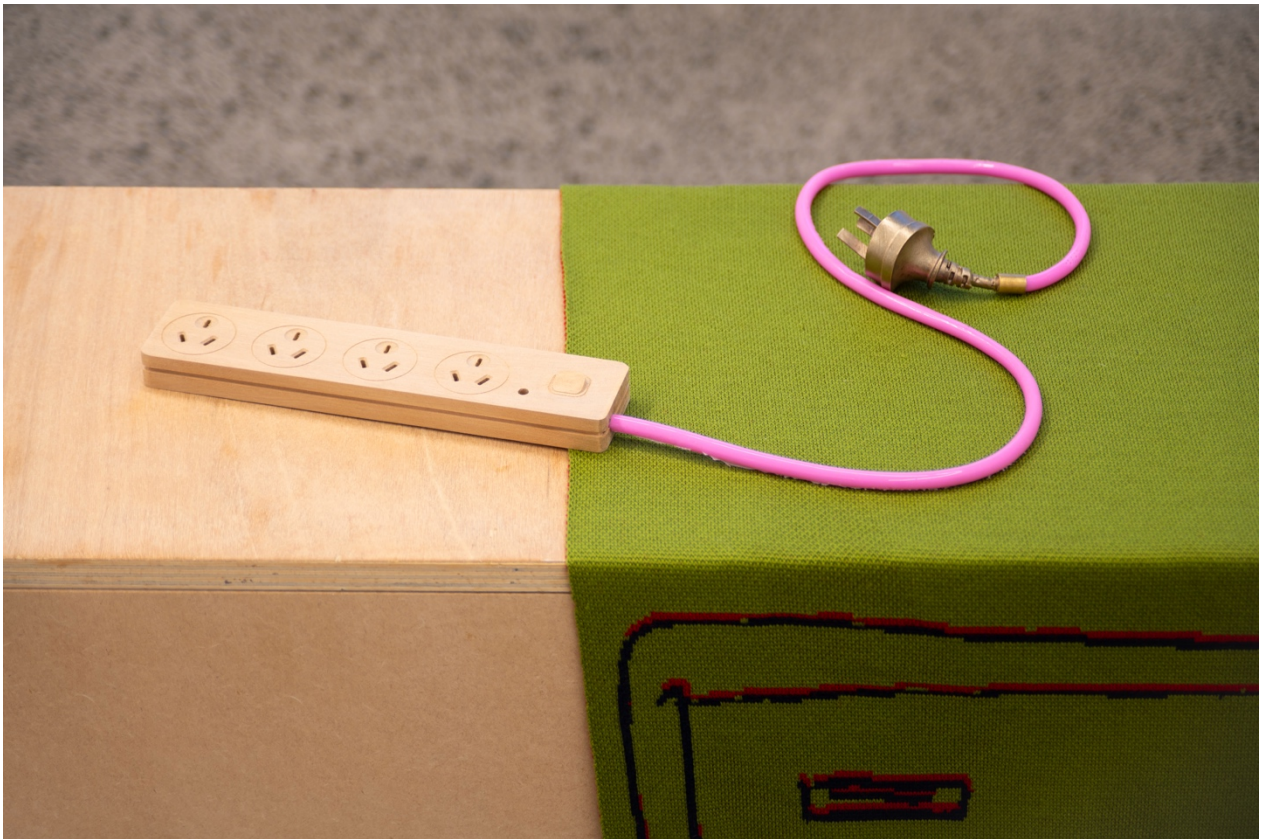


Figure 60, Joseph Jowitt, *Power and Control (Pinkysil)*, 2026, recycled Rimu, Pinkysil, bronze, 25 x 60 x 580mm



Figure 61, Joseph Jowitt, *Power and Control (OK then)*, 2026, ceramic, glaze, ceramic pencil, 150 x 40mm



Figure 62, Joseph Jowitt, *Signal Gang (Mildly Metonymic)*, 2026, timber, acrylic, 335 x 300 x 60mm

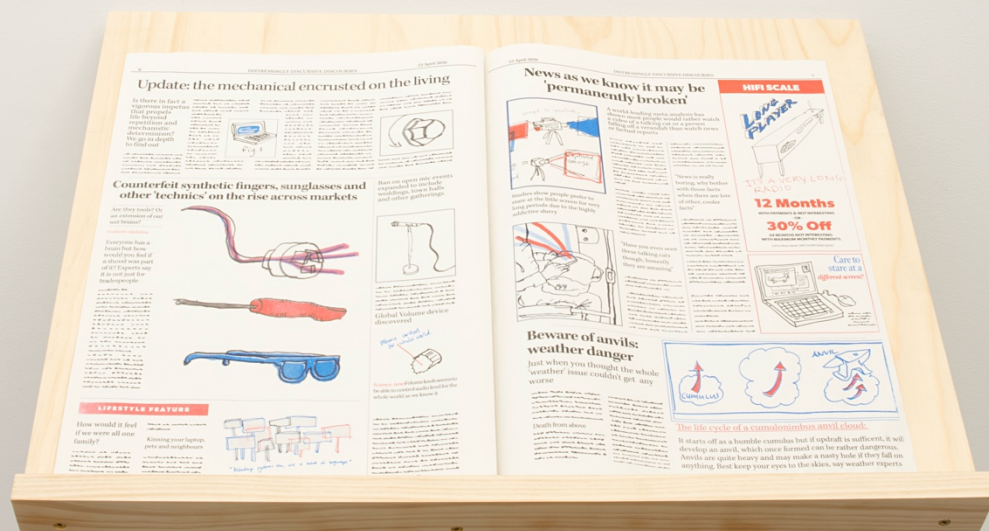


Figure 63, Joseph Jowitt, *Distressingly Discursive Discourses*, 2026, printed Risograph newspaper, Eco100 A3 90gsm paper 594 x 420mm



Figure 65, *Almost Completely (finished)*, 2026, installation view (*Broken News, Working III*), graduating exhibition, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery 3



Figure 64, Joseph Jowitt, *Almost Completely (finished)*, 2026, installation view (*Descending, Ascending, Regular, Irregular (two-out-of-three), Broken News, Working III*), graduating exhibition, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery 3

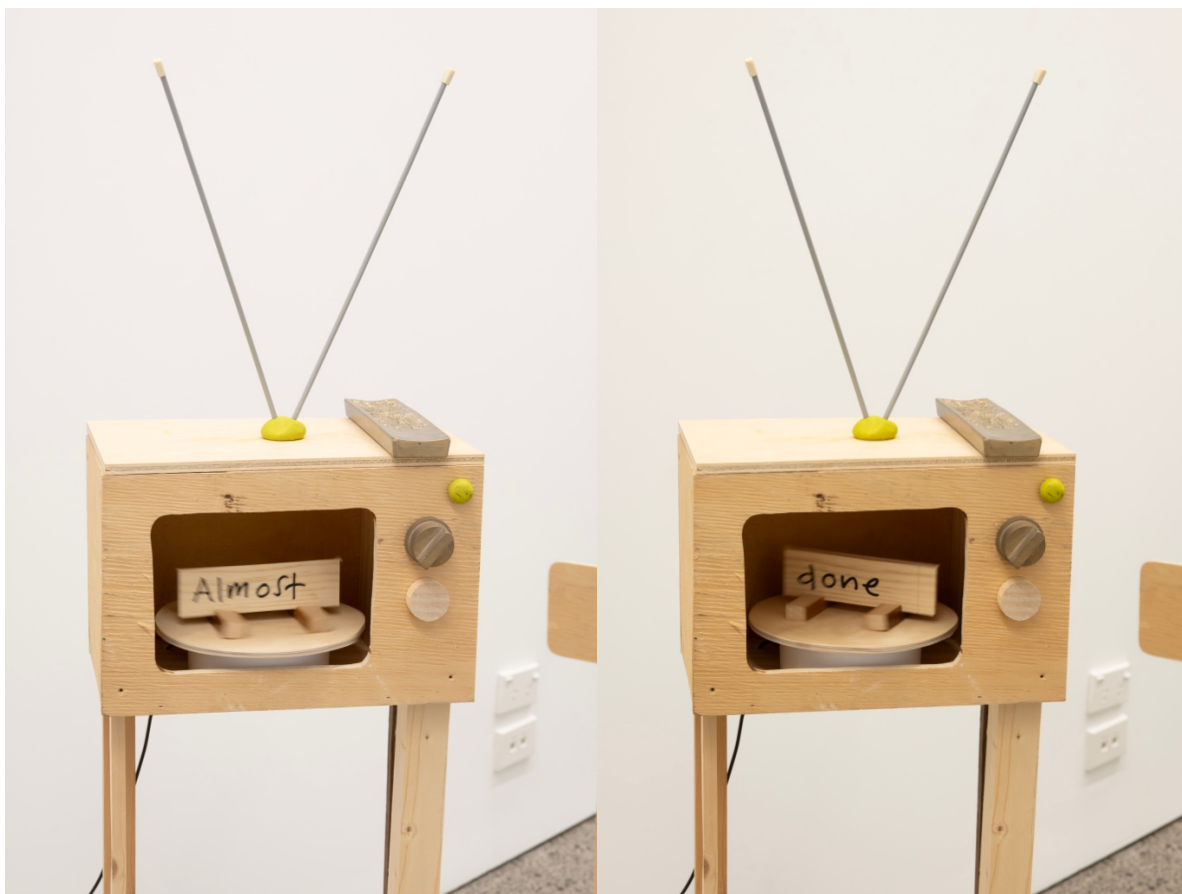


Figure 66, Joseph Jowitt *T.V. Dinner*, 2026, wood, bronze cast dial, rotating display stand, marine epoxy, knitting needles, 1100 x 300 x 200mm



Figure 67, Joseph Jowitt, *Almost Completely (finished)*, 2026, installation view, graduating exhibition, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery 3



Figure 68, Joseph Jowitt, *Talking Book*, 2026, found book, Arduino, motor, custom wooden plinth, plaster, found rope, 350 x 350 x 550mm



Figure 69, Joseph Jowitt, *The Matter with Things (Tabled)*, 2026, variable materials, rotating display stand, custom table, 900 x 750 x 650mm



Figure 70, *The Matter with Things (Tabled)*, 2026, installation detail



Figure 71, Joseph Jowitt, *Rugged Meaning II*, 2026, 2026, hand tufted rug, 600 x 550mm



Figure 72, *Doom Scroller*, 2026, Pinkysil, wood, motor, iPhone, scanned drawings, custom wooden plinth, 600 x 600 x 200mm



Figure 73, Joseph Jowitt, *Power and Control (Philips)*, 2026, bronze, 150mm x 50mm



Figure 74, Joseph. Jowitt, *Signal Gang (ruthlessly provisional)*, 2026, plywood, pine, acrylic ink, 700 x 200 x 100mm



Figure 75, Joseph Jowitt, *Power and Control (Ingot)*, 2026, bronze, 175mm x 50mm

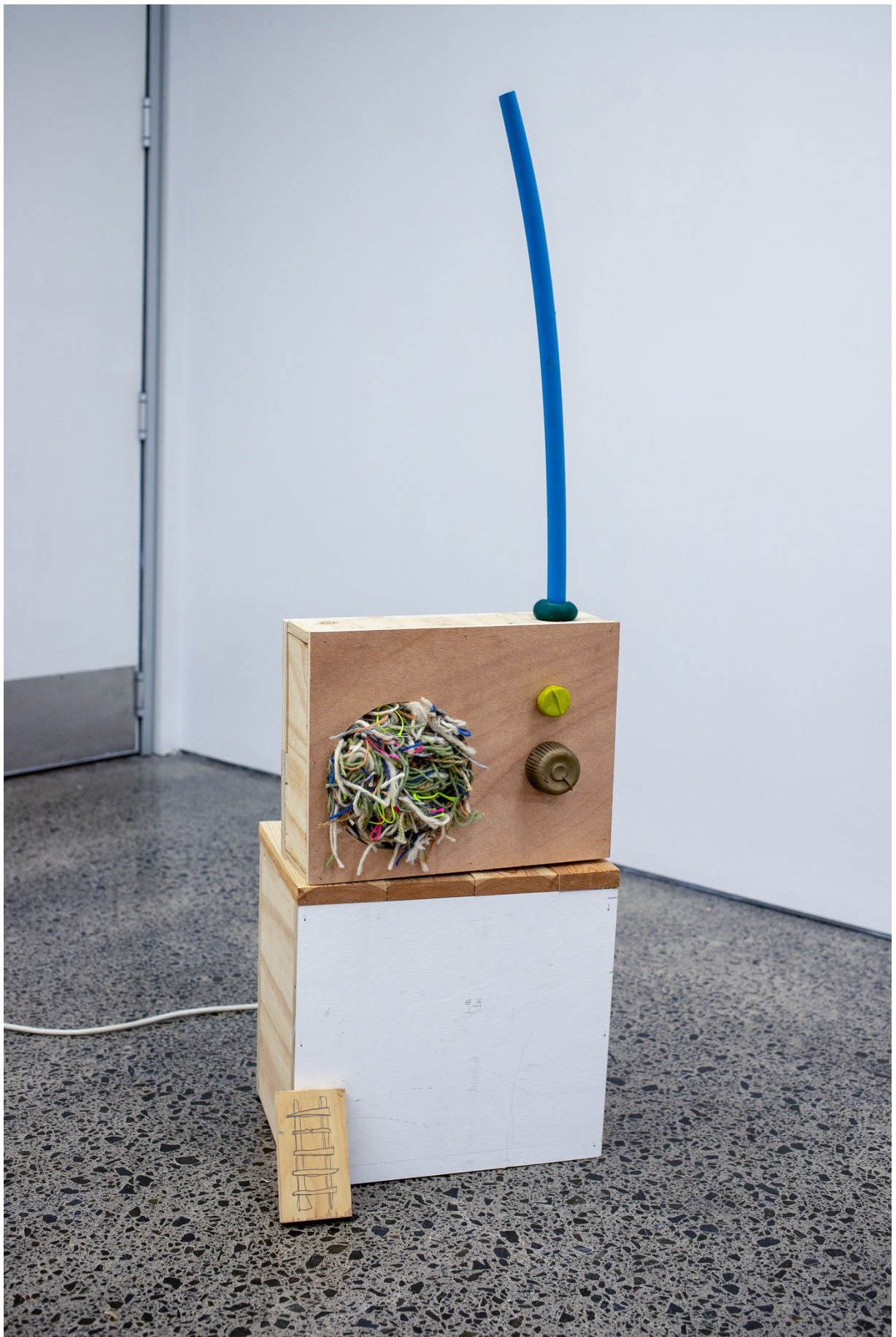


Figure 76, Joseph Jowitt, *Radio Prometheus*, 2026, wood, tufted wool, bronze, marine epoxy, 350 x 350 x 650mm



Figure 77, Joseph Jowitt, *Distressingly Discursive Discourses*, 2026, Eco100 90gsm paper printed Risograph newspaper stack, plastic strips, 125 x 140 x 210mm



Figure 78, Joseph Jowitt, *Almost Completely (finished)*, 2026, installation view, graduating exhibition, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery 3



Figure 79, Joseph Jowitt, *Almost Completely (finished)*, 2026, installation view, graduating exhibition, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery 3



Figure 80, Joseph Jowitt, *Radio Episternite*, 2026, wood, bronze cast dial, marine epoxy, 100 x 450 x 550mm



Figure 81, Joseph Jowitt, *Power and Control (Puriri)*, 2026, recycled Puriri, Pinkysil, bronze, 25 x 60 x 3080mm



Figure 82, Joseph Jowitt, *Rugged Meaning I*, 2026, hand tufted rug, custom trestle, 550 x 650mm

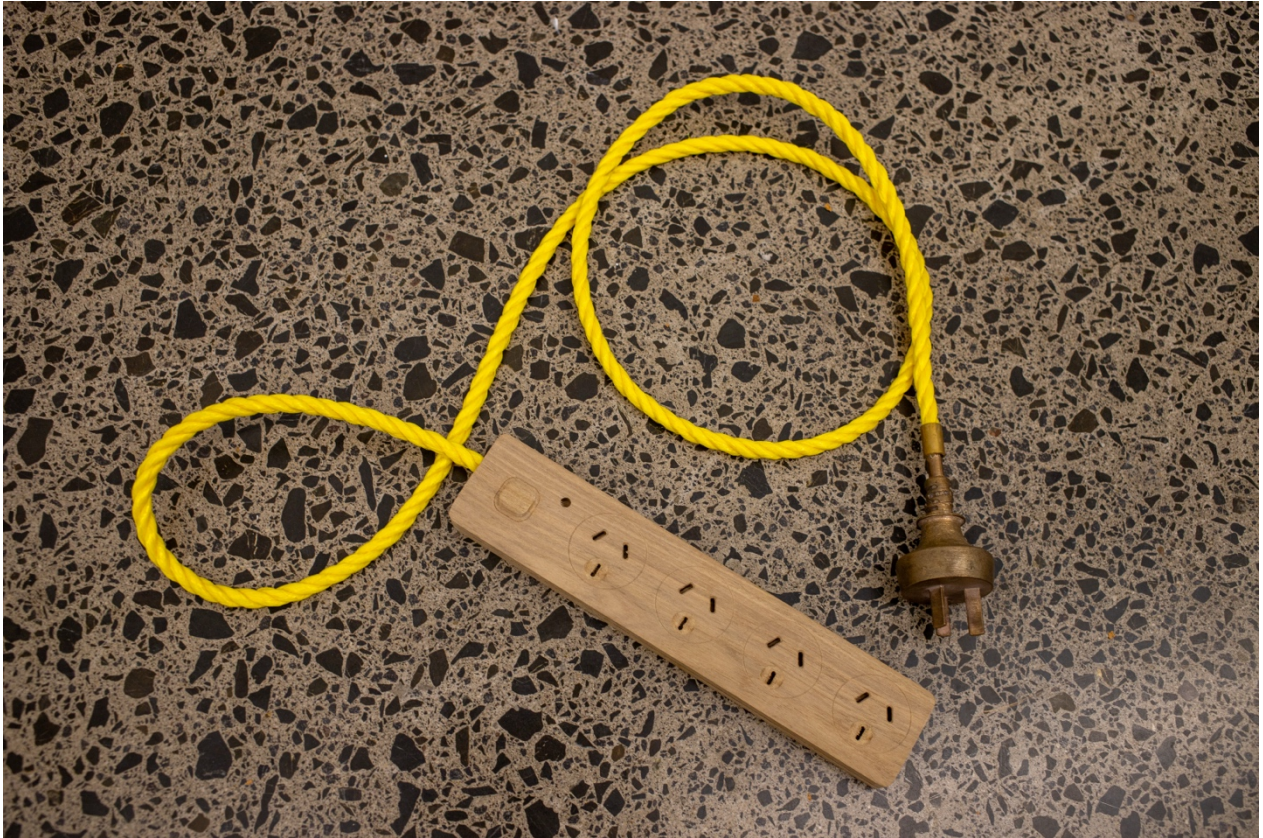


Figure 83, *Power and Control (Yellow Cord)*, 2026, recycled Puriri, Pinkysil, bronze, 25 x 60 x 580mm

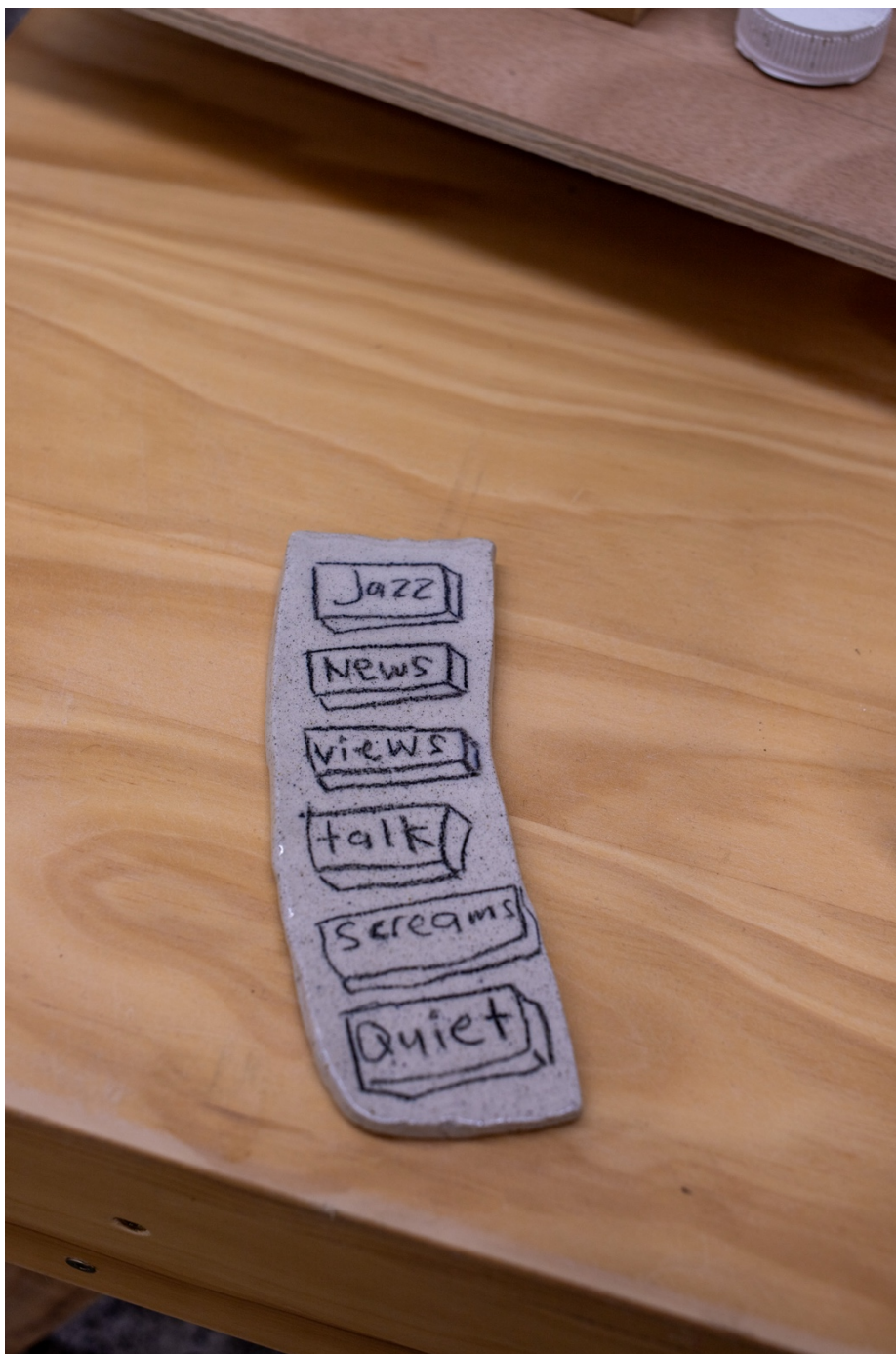


Figure 84, Joseph Jowitt, *Power and Control (News & Views)*, 2026, ceramic, ceramic pencil, 175mm x 50mm



Figure 85, Joseph Jowitt, *Almost Completely (finished)*, 2026, installation detail, graduating exhibition, Te Wai Ngutu Kākā, Gallery 3