ABSURDITY ONLINE

VISUALISING DIGITAL ABSURDITY THROUGH NEW MEDIA AND DRAWING

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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.

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ABSTRACT

This project explores the nature and influence of digital absurdity. It offers drawing as a tool to navigate and visualise the complex status of human/digital interaction, with particular focus on the instances when this interaction results in moments of potential absurdity.

Digital absurdity is proposed as a ubiquitous aspect of digital technology. This project suggests that, new media, due to its primary position as a liminal space between human and computer, materiality and immateriality, and abstraction and referentiality, provides a useful location to examine digital absurdity at work. Through an investigation of several qualities, unique to new media, and understood according to Hodges' (2010) conceptual framework of "the digital absurd", this project offers a contemporary drawing practice as a means of articulating, visualising and potentially navigating the terrain of digital absurdity. Through an investigation that highlights drawing and new media's similar and equally ambiguous attributes, an approach to image making, that combines the emotive and material immediacy of traditional drawing, and the potentially absurd computational nature of new media, is offered as a way to synthesise the two technologies of drawing and the digital, with the aim offering an evocative and human centred visualisation of the current technological landscape.

INTRODUCTION

The overarching motivation for this project was a nagging sense of confusion and conflict, frequently encountered during interactions with digital technologies. These moments of confusion were often subtle, such as a misbehaving computer program, a file saved in the wrong folder, or a distorted digital video, but they seemed to be constant and unavoidable aspects of a digital encounter. Adding to the sense of confusion was my inability to clearly articulate this vague feeling or even see a commonality between the various inconveniences, glitches, user errors, and algorithmic oddities. They simply became the familiar background noise of contemporary digital life.

Steve Hodges' (2010) concept of the "digital absurd" allowed my project to contextualise and solidify these otherwise vague and diffuse feelings of confusion. Hodges' insights into the digital absurd gives a useful and open ended explanation of the strangeness felt during digital encounters. Contextualising my experiences as absurd allows me to explore this disparate range of encounters and emotional responses under one, flexible framework.

The broad and ubiquitous nature of digital absurdity, as identified by Hodges (2010) describes an entity that straddles the notions of materiality and immateriality, and as such, my project frames the digital absurd as an immaterial concept, an object, and, recursively, as a tool with which to examine its self. New media is conflated into this investigation as a potential example of digital absurdity materialised.

Concurrent with and complementing my digital absurdity investigation, drawing is also examined for its transgressive and apparently paradoxical attributes. Drawing is shown to harbour a number of inherent contradictions, of a similar quality to the sorts of paradoxes that lead to digital absurdity. As a result of their sympathetic attributes, drawing is proposed as a flexible and uniquely appropriate tool to explore digital absurdity and subsequently visualise the sense of dislocation and absurdity that is being investigated. The methods of this project reflect a number of trials made in order to test various ways of encountering, and ultimately visualising and communicating the concept of digital absurdity in a material, handmade drawing.

SECTION 1: CONTEXT

THE DIGITAL ABSURD

My main source of scholarship on this subject is Steve Hodges' (2010) thesis, entitled "*The Digital Absurd*". There are vast bodies of work on absurdity as a human experience, and similarly there is a growing body of work within the Digital Humanities, dealing with a range of topics related to aspects of the human/computer relationship. However, Hodges provides my only example of an acute disconnect between human experience and digital technology, framed within a discussion of the absurd.

Borrowing and expanding Hodges' concepts, my project uses the term digital absurdity in several distinct yet related ways: as an emotional encounter, as an object, and as a tool. Treating digital absurdity in these ways allows for a holistic representation of the digital absurd, one which allows my project to investigate digital absurdity as it operates on a human level, a technological level and the liminal spaces in-between.

AS AN EMOTIONAL ENCOUNTER

In his thesis, '*The Digital Absurd*', Hodges (2010) invokes Albert Camus' conception of the absurd in order to contextualise his experience of various confusing digital interactions. Hodges (2010) summarises Camus' "absurd" as arising "at the most fundamental level from a rift between human and world; in his view, there is a core human appetite for metaphysical explanation and the world stubbornly refuses to satisfy this appetite" (p. 21).

Camus' understanding of the absurd is shown to result from an incompatibility between the human desire to know the world, and the world's complex and unknowable reality. In a similar fashion, when the underlying and alien code at the heart of digital technologies is revealed, the typical computer user is confronted with "complex feelings of confusion, uncertainty, humor[sic], unexpected juxtaposition, and loss of meaning" (Hodges, 2010, pp 5-6). The alienation and emotional responses to digital absurdity, identified above, provide my project's main criteria for identifying digital absurdity. When "confusion, uncertainty, humor[sic], unexpected juxtaposition,

and loss of meaning" are evoked, during digital interactions, these interactions are earmarked as potential examples of the digital absurd and positioned as encounters to be investigated further.

By utilising Hodges' definition of digital absurdity, this practice can locate and examine examples of absurd technological processes, and their effect on the human psyche. If it is understood as a challenge to human sensibilities, digital absurdity attracts claims such as Petrovich's (2013) assertion that "human findings have accumulated into something humanly impossible to comprehend" (p. 88). This idea alludes to a general anxiety, born from the incessant march of digital progress and the sense that, rather than simplifying and organising human knowledge, digital technology has gathered it together in a confusing sea of data, something that overwhelms those who attempt to understand or even engage it, or as David Shenk (1998) describes it, the digital landscape has become "a library without walls, containing more information than one person could ever hope to process" (p. 20).

My projects' encounters with digital absurdity, based on Hodges' criteria, encompass simple interactions during normal computer use but also include more deliberate misuse of digital technology in order to force acute examples of alienation and confusion, as seen in later examples (see "Glitching" section). The purpose of these encounters was to enable my project to investigate digital absurdity at will, without relying on sporadic and ephemeral instances of absurdity arising organically, and to also provide a degree of control over the potentially chaotic and overwhelming tendencies of absurdity.

AS AN OBJECT

By localising my investigation of digital absurdity to a particular object – an artefact that embodies digital absurdity, I can begin to narrow the otherwise overwhelming vastness of potential places that digital absurdity could be encountered. By proposing new media as an absurd digital object, I can bring my investigation to a more human comprehendible area of digital technology. New media is an entity that features the evocative and human-relatable façade of photography, video, text and numerous other media, but which conceals a potentially absurd and alien digital code at its core. By showing that even a simple definition of new media is open to complex and potentially absurd interpretations, and that new media has an ambiguous material presence,

oscillating between immaterial and material, new media is presented as a potential example of a digitally absurd object – a confusing entity that can provoke a sense of dislocation and uncertainty for the human interacting with it.

Media theorist Lev Manovich (2003) defines new media as "the mix between older cultural conventions for data representation, access, and manipulation and newer conventions of data representation, access, and manipulation" (p. 19). Manovich (2003) clarifies: "The "old" data are representations of visual reality and *human experience* [emphasis added] i.e., images, text based, and audio-visual narratives – what we normally understand by "culture". The "new" data is numerical data." (p. 19). Understood using Manovich's definition, a photograph, recorded by a film camera is not new media, but that same photograph becomes new media once it is represented by a numerical abstraction i.e. binary code. This idea is further examined by Aden Evens (2012) who suggests a kind of new media spectrum of representation, ranging from the numerical abstraction of binary code, to the representational image, audio, or text of the "phenomenal word" (para. 21). Evens (2012) states:

> … The ontology of the digital includes multiple levels of abstraction between the binary code and the phenomenal world, layered planes of abstraction, in which objects and ideas are abstracted more and less, now closer to the actual, now closer to the binary… (para. 21)

Here Evens suggests that the numerically represented object exists somewhere between the abstracted, immaterial digital world and the representational, material world. Evens gives the example of a digitized photograph evoking many of the same responses in the viewer that a material and non-digital photograph may cause, despite its digital nature. In both instances the photograph is effectively recognised as a "concrete" (2012, para. 21) entity, whether viewed on a computer screen or held in one's hand. However, when the digital photograph is understood as "a file on a hard disk…a set of numbers that represent colours" (2012, para. 21), the viewer is confronted with the "significant abstraction" (2012, para. 21) of the digital photograph – an experience that results in a "formless anxiety" (Foucault, as cited in Hodges, 2010. p. 12) for the viewer who recognises that the familiar image is in fact an unfamiliar abstraction, a numerical representation.

In a related discussion, Manovich illustrates the difficulty faced when attempting to delineate the boundary between the digital and the material world, and suggests that even the seemingly obvious immateriality of new media can be questioned. Manovich (2001) writes:

> …what about television programs which are shot on digital video and edited on computer workstations? Or what about feature films which use 3D animation and digital compositing? … [W]hat about all images and text-image compositions —photographs, illustrations, layouts, ads —which are also created on computers and then printed on paper? Where shall we stop? (p.43)

My project posits these indistinct boundaries of new media, its questionable place between abstraction and representation, and between materiality and immateriality, as potential examples of digital absurdity materialised. As a result of new media's tendency for absurdity as well as its ambiguous but visually rich nature (it exists as photograph, video, 3D animation, audio, drawing, and numerous other hybrid variations of these categories) it is offered as the main site of my project's inquiry through drawing.

AS A TOOL

Once new media has been established as a potential embodiment of digital absurdity, my project is able to co-opt various qualities of new media and use them as tools in my continuing investigation. To clarify this point, my project uses several attributes of new media, as defined by Manovich, in order to conduct its inquiry. These are: numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding (Manovich, 2001). My practice specifically focuses on the numerical representation and automation aspects of new media and uses them as methods for encountering and exploring digital absurdity. Manovich (2001) defines numerical representation as new media's ability to be "described formally (mathematically)" (p.49) and "automation" as new media's ability to "automate many operations involved in media creation" (p. 49)

An in-depth exploration of my use of "numerical representation" can be seen later, in the "Glitching" section. This process involved revealing and randomly re-arranging aspects of the binary code of digital files – in other words: actively and blindly (because

the code was essentially unreadable to me) changing the numerical representation of digital files.

The "automation" aspect of new media was used as part of my "Gibberish" search method (see section "Gibberish" searches). Here automation was achieved by way of the computational power of Google image search. These "Gibberish" searches consisted of typing non-sense words into Google image search. The blindly obedient digital technology made no value judgements about the search term's lack of meaning and it followed its automated algorithmic processes in order to display images that it deemed related and relevant to my initial non-sense phrase. Evens (2012) suggests that Google's (and new media in general) "indifference to content" (para. 28) results from the numerical code at the heart of digital process and its "ontology of leveling (sic) abstraction" (para. 32). The appropriation of automated processes and non-meaning, allowed me a degree of freedom from the inherent human need for sense and meaning in the world. Contrasted with a *material* world that "stubbornly refuses" meaning (Hodges, 2010, p. 21), the automation of new media illustrates that the digital is happy to swamp me with meaning, even when I asked for none.

Both of these methods reveal the potential for my practice to recursively use properties of new media to examine digital absurdity. This approach was made in order to acknowledge my projects dependence on digital technology but also to co-opt digital absurdity into the working processes of this project.

DRAWING

In this section, I will contextualise my project's use of drawing as a tool of investigation of digital absurdity. I will highlight areas of similarity and overlap between the otherwise divergent technologies of drawing and new media. The purpose of showing the analogous nature of drawing and new media is ultimately to position drawing as an appropriate and sympathetic means of investigating and visualising the digital absurd. This is achieved by illustrating significant similarities between new media (previously established as an absurd "object") and drawing, in particular their similar ability to consolidate potentially conflicted states of being. In new media's case I previously illustrated its indeterminate material status, and that it can simultaneously exist as a

numerical abstraction and an evocative representation. In the case of drawing I will illustrate the mediums ability to simultaneously exist as abstract mark and referential and emotive object, without apparent contradiction.

Like new media, drawing definitions also spans the prosaic and formalist, to the problematic and paradoxical. Exemplifying the former, drawing can be simply defined as: "Manipulating line, form, value and texture, with an emphasis on line and value rather than colour" (Schreiber-Jacoby & Shelley, 2009, para. 1). Contrast this basic definition with more nuanced concepts of drawing, such as Dexter's (2005) assertion that drawing is "balanced equally between pure abstraction and representation" (p. 10) and it becomes obvious that there is a complex and occasionally paradoxical range of qualities that a drawing can exhibit.

AS ABSTRACT CODE

My project uses Dexter's dichotomous conception of drawing. Dexter shows drawing's ability to be a coolly rational and abstracted media "in which line, as an abstract mark, and its relation to the ground enjoy a symbolic potency" (2005, p. 6). This idea can be viewed as analogous to descriptions of new media's numerical abstraction of the world, into binary code, an idea echoed by Petherbridge (2010) who states:

> ..Although gestural lines and marks carry the imprint of the bodies that have made them, and therefore seem to be part of the phenomenal world, nevertheless, line itself - abstract, directional or imitative - does *not* exist in the observable world… (p. 90)

Here Petherbridge is suggesting that, although drawings can retain a level of referentiality to the material world, they invariably consist of largely abstract elements that do not refer to anything real. Petherbridge is suggesting that drawing operates on a spectrum between abstraction and referentiality, and between the material and immaterial, an argument that bares a close resemblance to Evens' earlier description of new media.

AS A HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Dexter makes the further claim that drawing is also capable of exploring and representing uniquely human conditions, Dexter (2005) states that "the other,

elaborately cultured aspect of drawing [is]…the areas of human experience that drawing has come to be associated with: intimacy, informality, authenticity (or at least authentic inauthenticity), immediacy, subjectivity, history, memory, narrative" (p. 6). As well as exploring the abstract and (absurdly) mechanistic workings of new media this project ultimately aims to visualise the emotional and irrational human reaction to digital absurdity. As such, drawing, as a tool that can operate in an abstract and mechanistic way, while still maintaining the ability to convey human emotion and irrationality, is ideally situated to explore both the technological and human aspects of my investigation of digital absurdity.

SECTION 2: ABSURD EXPLORATIONS

In this section I will discuss three separate attempts at evoking digital absurdity as an emotional encounter, through an exploration of new media. These explorations should be understood as my attempts to encounter digital absurdity in a repeatable and consistent fashion, in order to examine and eventually attempt to visualise digital absurdity through drawing. I will also provide an evaluation of the relative success or failure of these explorations with regard to their ability to evoke digital absurdity and their ability to be reimagined as visualisations of the digital absurd.

"GIBBERISH" SEARCHES

This section focuses on my attempts to encounter digital absurdity via the massive data collections available online. Google image search is one such example of a large digital image archive. As well as its size, this site was selected due to its presence within the contemporary visual landscape – an idea expressed by Christian Rattemeyer in the preface to *Vitamin D2*. Rattemyer (2013), suggests that the very ubiquity of this mode of image encounter has become so commonplace that it has lost its "critical relationship to the means of technological reproduction and the autonomy of images" and which "simply points to the realities in which images are produced and consumed today" (p. 11).

My main method of engaging with Google images, was to search the internet using randomised or non-sense phrases. This was done in order to reflect the "chaos and a random play of blind forces" of absurdity (Deranty, 2009, para. 29), and to maximise the chance of encountering some of the signposts of absurdity as described by Hodges (2010) - in particular, the chance of encountering images with "identity and naming problems" (p. 72) due to the non-sense and absurd nature of the search terms themselves.

A number of trials in order to generate non-sense phrases were undertaken, however, the method that generated the most "absurd" results (again deferring to Hodges' (2010) categories) was simply mashing on my keyboard and searching with the

resulting "Gibberish" word (it should be noted that the following (Figures 1 – 3.6) all use this process). This process relied heavily on the automated search processes of Google images, with my only real input being the gibberish search terms – the rest of the process was wholly reliant on the computational power of new media.

Figure 1 illustrates the sort of juxtaposed imagery that typically resulted from this method (in this instance the "Gibberish" search was the word "Jrjrg"). From this stage, I would select the individual image that was deemed the most absurd. Absurdity was judged according to Hodges' (2010) criteria of: encounters resulting in "confusion, uncertainty, humor[sic], unexpected juxtaposition, and loss of meaning" (pp. 5-6). It should be noted that these criteria resulted in a preferencing of images that featured people, due to the fact that Hodge's criteria, for the most part, describe human responses to digital absurdity. As a result, images without people in them did not evoke these signals of absurdity and were therefore not selected.

Figure 1 Example screen shot of a "Gibberish" search based on the term "Jrjrg".

Figure 2 shows the image that *was* ultimately selected and translated into a handmade drawing. In both the photograph and drawing there is a middle aged man staring at the viewer. The character appears to be on the verge of tears or in pain, and this expression evoked a sense of sadness, possible failure, confusion and defeat; qualities consistent with the human reaction to digital absurdity established earlier.
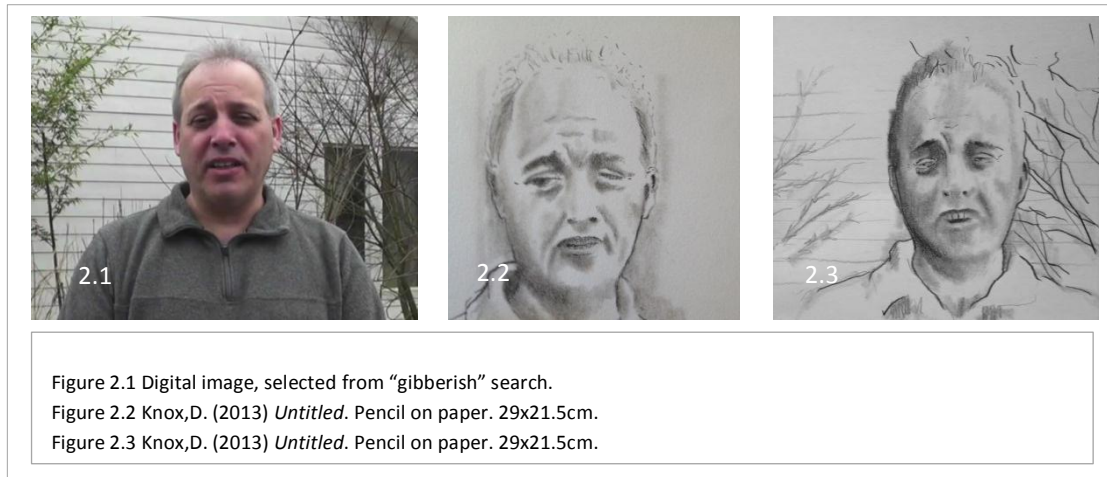
Figure 2.1 Digital image, selected from "gibberish" search.
Figure 2.2 Knox,D. (2013) *Untitled*. Pencil on paper. 29x21.5cm.
Figure 2.3 Knox,D. (2013) *Untitled*. Pencil on paper. 29x21.5cm.

Figures 2.1-2.3 Selected image and resulting sketches, based on the term "Jrjrg".

Figures 2, 3.1, and 3.5 also introduced an unexpected but interesting repetition of various unsmiling and vaugely depressed looking figures that were commonly encountered during this method. Although initially overlooked, the trope of depressed wanderer became an important and recurring character in my later drawings (see section: Unfolding practice).

Figure 3.1 Google search result for the "Gibberish" term 'pegg'.

Figure 3.2 Knox, D. (213). *Untitled.* Aquarelle pencil on paper. 21.5x29cm.

Figure 3.3 Knox, D. (2013). *Untitled.* Pencil on paper. 21.5x29cm.

Figure 3.4 Knox, D. (2013). *Untitled.* Conte on paper 21.5x29cm.

Figure 3.5 Google search result for "Gibberish" term "pegg".

Figure 3.6 Knox, D. (2013). *Untitled.* Conte on paper. 21.5x29 cm.
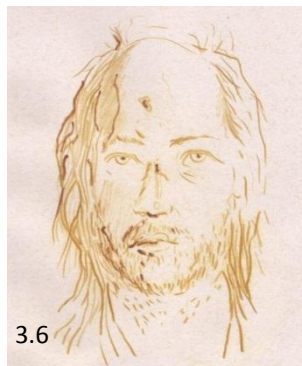
These images illustrate my early experimentations with the "Gibberish "search method. This method did not progress beyond these initial sketches – but even these early drawings convey the sense of failure and depression. Considered use of media and composition is not evident in these drawings due to their preliminary status, and these images are only included for their subjects rather than material qualities.

Figure 3.1 – 3.6 "Gibberish" searches that resulted in depressed looking figures and drawings.

EVALUATION

In terms of encountering digitally absurd objects and processes, I believe this method was successful. In this summary however I suggest that perhaps such an immersive encounter with the digital absurd was ultimately harmful to my project, due to the seductive and distracting nature of new media and an inherent human desire to avoid

absurdity (Deranty, 2009, para. 29); which resulted in my temporary abandonment of drawing.

I had originally intended two parts to this method, engaging with large sets of digital imagery in an effort to encounter suitably evocative examples of the digital absurd at work, and exploring ways to visualise this absurdity through drawing. Almost immediately however my main focus became simply encountering and storing new images, leaving the drawings as an afterthought. This condition can be explained by the notion of 'squirreling' a concept that Schäfer (2009) describes as:

> …a process of coping with the flood of information provided by the Internet by the creation of personalized individual databases of the information retrieved from larger databases… (para. 19)

The tendency for distraction and hoarding in this method eventually led me to abandon it as an approach. The hoarding of images became an end in itself and did not provide any reflection or a visualisation of the digital absurdity; rather, immersing myself in the absurdity of new media images became compulsive and largely fruitless endeavour.

Media theorist Richard Coyne (2001) asserts that narratives about digital technology are promissory and 'ever expectant' (p 19). In essence these narratives obfuscate the reality of the imperfect technology with seductive promises of progress toward perfection. A localised version of this narrative could be seen as driving my incessant collection of absurd objects. Each digital image search had *the potential* to be a part of an idealised and perfect drawing, one that would capture the entirety of my project in a few deft lines. However, my drawings based on this method were invariably abandoned due to their inability to convey the overwhelming immensity and disorientating juxtaposition of the images I encountered through handmade processes alone.

"GLITCHING"

My second method to encounter digital absurdity is through an active engagement with the binary code that drives digital technology. This method derives from Hodges' (2010) claim that the digital absurd arises when the "usually unobtrusive dimension of

code comes to the foreground" (p. 4). This method specifically seeks to engage with this underlying numerical representation, or binary code of new media. New media was chosen as a site due to its previously established similarities with drawing and it was again hoped that this method would lead to a fertile direction to further my aim of visualising new media through handmade drawings.

There are numerous ways to encounter the code which comprises digital media. For the purposes of this exploration, I decided on the use of a "Hex Editor", a computer program which "is a type of program that allows a user to view and edit the raw and exact contents of files...at the byte level" ("Hex Editor Definition," 2006).

The result of inputting a digital file into a hex editor is a large table of numbers and letters that appear as meaningless noise to the typical computer user (Figure 4). By editing these characters (randomly selecting large portions of the hex code, and deleting them) and then saving the original file as a copy (a process commonly referred to as "Glitching" or "databending" (Geere, 2010)), unpredictable and often unexpected distortions occur in the resulting image file. Common distortions include a doubling of elements and desaturation of colours, as illustrated in Figure 5.2, and will be discussed further in the next section.

The flexibility and abstraction of digital code means that any file can be opened with a hex editor. In order to limit the potential sprawl that could result from this flexibility, I limited my hex experiments to the local archive of images I had previously amassed from the "Gibberish" searches. This was done in order to expose a deeper layer of digital absurdity within these specific images, a concealed absurdity which runs parallel to the absurdity that is represented visually by the image files.

Figure 4 Example of an image file as represented by a hex editor.

Figure 5.1 Google image search result for the "Gibberish" term "isje".
Figure 5.2 Result of "Glitching" Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 and 5.2 illustrating the effects of "Glitching".

EVALUATION

Coupled with the absurdity encountered in the previous "Gibberish" search method, "Glitching" the image files illustrates a further, otherwise concealed, level of digital

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absurdity operating at the abstracted binary level of the new media object. The following evaluation of this method discusses the links that can be made between "Glitching" and my drawing practice.

Several qualities of the glitched files suggest a potential visual direction for my drawing practice and also serve to further strengthen links between drawing and absurd new media. These include the tendency for glitched files to unpredictably double parts of an image, as illustrated in Figure 5.2, where a portion of the image appears to have been copied and arbitrarily pasted back into the image. The absurd and alienating quality of this random doubling can be exploited within the drawn image as well. Figure 6 features a figure with doubled eyes and although perhaps not as algorithmically arbitrary as the hex edits, this doubling has an equally disorienting and alienating effect on the viewer, similar to that of the glitched images – effectively drawing the digital absurdity encountered during the glitch experiments into the material world.

Another borrowed attribute of glitched files was their tendency towards garish and unnatural hues also visable in Figure 5.2. Figure 7 shows a drawing in which colour qualities similar to the glitched images are emphasised. The artificiality of the colours in the glitched photos and drawings alike, suggest that they are both removed from the rational and naturalistic dimensions, and operating acording to concealed and absurd rules.
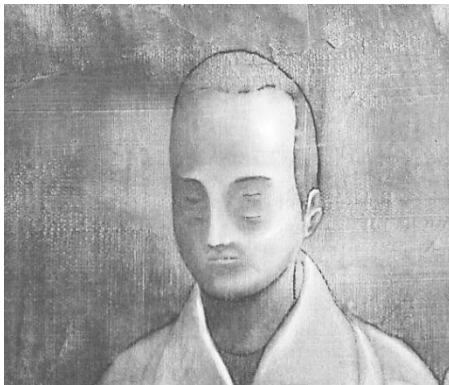

Figure 6 Knox, D. (2013). *Untitled.*

Oil on prepared paper. 29x27cm.

Figure 7 Knox, D. (2013). Teach Yourself How

To Fly Online. Gouache on paper. 9x13cm.

SEARCH LOGS

My final method of encountering the digital absurd involved an investigation of individual internet users search histories. This process involved downloading freely available "Search-Logs" (n.d) which consisted of over 650,000 anonymous internet users search histories – chronicling all of the things that they searched the internet for, over a 3 month period ("About AOL search data scandal," n.d.).

My use of these logs consisted of selecting a user at random (Figure 8 illustrates an example of a section of the search logs) and browsing their searches entries. The majority of these entries consisted of mundane searches for everyday terms and pornography, however I would occasionally select a user whose searches' displayed Hodges' (2010) hallmarks of digital absurdity, such as: "feelings of confusion, uncertainty, humor[sic], unexpected juxtaposition, and loss of meaning" (2010, pp 5-6). For example, User 14586310 searched for: "symtoms [sic], choking sensation, trouble swallowing, trouble swallowing, trouble swallowing, how to prepare for a tornado…" ("Search-Logs," n.d.). In this brief flurry of panicked Google searches, I was drawn to the sense of confusion and anxiety displayed by User 14586310 as they searched for advice about their health concerns. Their sudden shift in tone, from possibly mundane health inquiry's, to life threatening tornados, struck me as an acute example of "unexpected juxtaposition" (Hodges, 2010, pp. 5-6) and provided a humorous, melodramatic twist in this short narrative.

Figure 9 shows my attempts to visualise, through a series of drawings, the anxiety, fear and melodrama of User 14586310's searches. Billowing fabric and curtains feature in two of the series, referencing an approaching tornado, and all the works feature a foreboding, film noir-esque use of stark tonal contrasts, in order to emphasise the heightened and perhaps exaggerated melodrama of the searches. These images feature wandering male figure, dressed in a wrinkled business suit, conveying a sense of failed personal autonomy and authority at the hands of overwhelming absurdity (related to the depressed male figures encountered during the "gibberish" searches. The figures in these images are also faceless as a means of referencing the ultimately anonymous nature of user 14586310, the alienating and abstract code that facilitated

the numerous generations of new media that were involved in creating this series of drawings, and the general alienation conveyed by user 14586310's search history.

```
user-ct-test-collection-02.txt (~\Desktop) - GVIM
File  Edit  Tools  Syntax  Buffers  Window  Help

6464626 lotus war anime 2006-04-10 15:45:40
6464626 memegen 2006-04-11 15:52:14    1       http://memegen.deskslave.org
6464626 quizilla        2006-04-11 16:02:51
6464626 updo's for prom 2006-04-15 03:23:08    6       http://profile.myspace.com
6464626 updo's for prom 2006-04-15 03:23:08    7       http://www.hairfinder.com
6464626 grecian hairstyles      2006-04-15 03:39:40    1       http://www.fashion-era.com
6464626 grecian hairstyles short hair   2006-04-15 03:47:16
6464626 grecian hairstyles.     2006-04-15 03:55:02
6464626 grecian hairstyles      2006-04-15 03:57:24
6464626 do it yourself updos    2006-04-15 04:04:57
6464626 hairstyles prom 2006    2006-04-15 04:23:25
6464626 short hairstyles prom 2006      2006-04-15 04:26:10
6464626 do it yourself prom hairstyles  2006-04-15 04:28:26
6464626 do it yourself prom hairstyles 2006    2006-04-15 04:29:05
6464626 stephen crane   2006-04-18 22:22:40    1       http://www.online-literature.com
6464626 stephen crane   2006-04-18 22:22:40    4       http://www.nagasaki-gaigo.ac.jp
6464626 stephen crane poetry    2006-04-18 22:28:20    8       http://www.theotherpages.org
6464626 stephen crane war is kind       2006-04-18 22:39:11    1       http://www.theotherpages.org
6464626 stephen crane   2006-04-19 20:13:05    1       http://www.online-literature.com
6464626 stephen crane wife      2006-04-19 20:15:33    1       http://en.wikipedia.org
6464626 stephen crane literary device  2006-04-19 20:18:02
6464626 stephen crane literary device poems    2006-04-19 20:18:28    7       http://www.answers.com
6464626 stephen crane drug      2006-04-19 20:20:45    3       http://www.gradesaver.com
6464626 when a people reach the top of a hill stephen crane    2006-04-19 21:37:25    2       http://www.americanpoems.com
6464626 war is kind stephen crane       2006-04-19 21:39:34    3       http://poetry.about.com
6464626 war is kind stephen crane       2006-04-19 21:39:34    1       http://www.theotherpages.org
6464626 impressionism   2006-04-19 22:24:28    4       http://en.wikipedia.org
6464626 dmv     2006-04-24 22:14:13    1       http://www.dmv.org
6464626 dmv     2006-04-24 22:14:13    2       http://www.dmv.ca.gov
6464626 application drivers license dmv california     2006-04-24 22:30:18    2       http://driversed.com
6464626 cache dresses   2006-05-04 22:25:41
6464626 cache dresses   2006-05-04 22:26:30
6464626 theatre news    2006-05-08 18:16:38    4       http://www.thestage.co.uk
6464742 yahoo   2006-03-03 14:32:50    1       http://www.yahoo.com
6464742 -       2006-03-03 15:13:58
6464742 sex     2006-03-03 15:14:16
6464742 sex     2006-03-03 15:15:03
6464742 sex     2006-03-03 15:15:40
6464742 sex     2006-03-03 15:16:34    51      http://www.dimulka.aha.ru
6464742 sex     2006-03-03 15:22:30
6464742 sex     2006-03-03 15:23:36
```

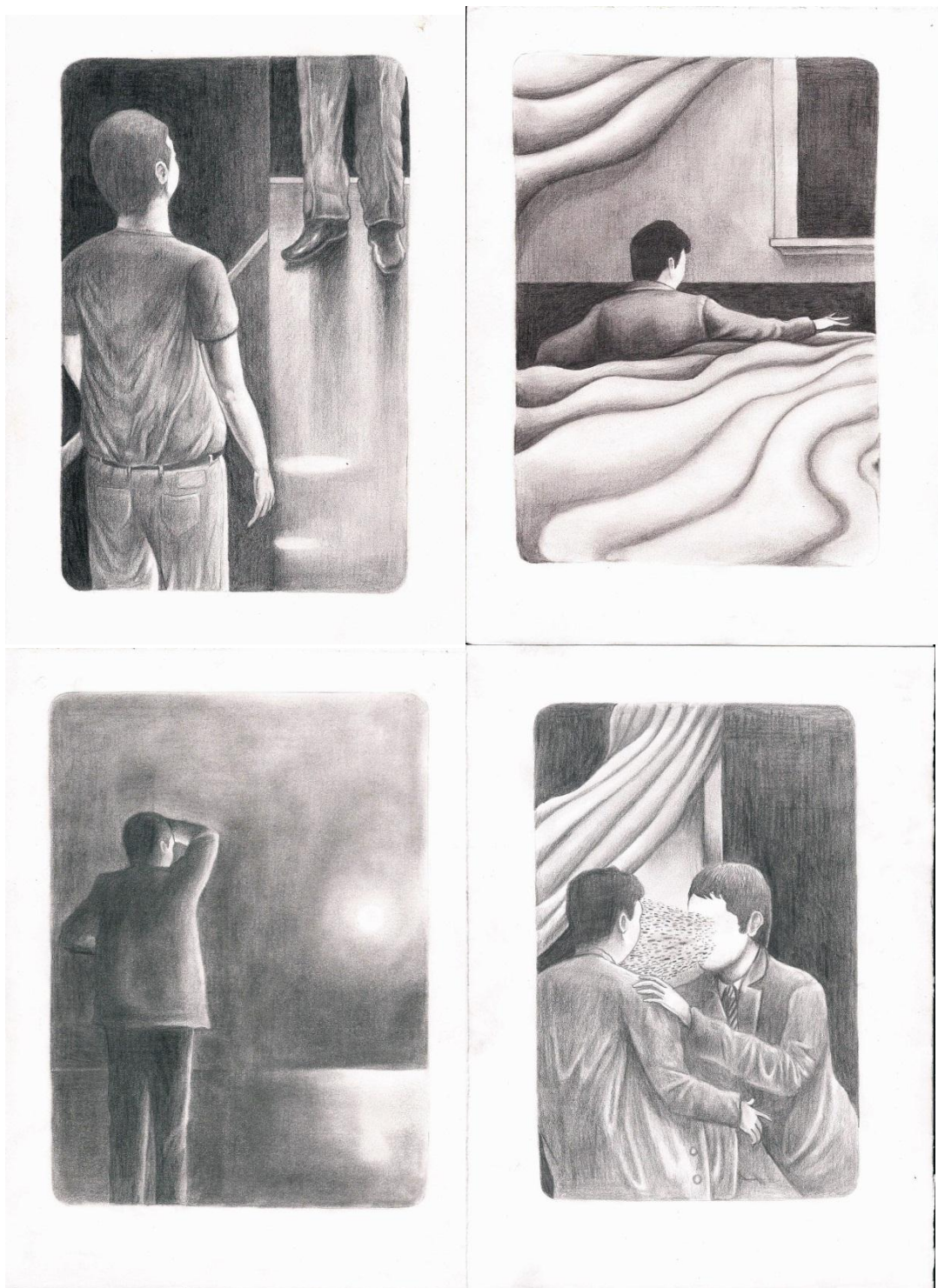Figure 8 "Search Logs" screen shot (*'Search Logs'*, n.d)

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Figure 9 (All works) Knox, D. (2013). *Untitled.* Pencil on paper. 27x20cm

I found this method to be successful with regards to my aim of visualising digital absurdity through drawing. Using the search logs allowed my project to inject a level of imaginary and subjective speculation into my project, a quality that is largely absent in the earlier methods. Previous attempts at encountering digital absurdity, in a non-emotive and objective ways, lead me to encounter useful information about the nature of digital absurdity, but this information was not particularly conducive to producing evocative visualisations of this digital absurdity. However, the search logs still retain some degree of objectivity, due to the diverse and large amount of user data that they contain, but ultimately, this method requires me to make some subjective selections for example: what user's data that I choose to observe, and the way that I interpret this data.

It is my contention that the success of this method is ultimately due to its synthesising of the major themes of my project into one location. The search log data can be seen as an *emotional encounter* with the digital absurd, a new media *object* that harbours digital absurdity (it is after all a computer file consisting of abstract binary code), and a *tool* that can be used to visualise digital absurdity. Furthermore, the search log's ability to be both objective data and subjective narrative – without resulting in a contradiction can be seen as analogous to the similar ability of drawing to operate within conflicted and opposed frameworks, without inherent contradiction.

REFLECTIONS ON ABSURD EXPLORATIONS

Reviewing these three approaches, I can categorise the methods of "Gibberish" and "Glitching" as *technologically* driven, which contrasts with more *human* focus of the "Search Logs" method.

The "Gibberish" and "Glitching" methods both intimately relied on the technological, processes of automation and numerical representation. As a result, the effect of these technological processes flowed into my drawing based explorations. To expand this point, my drawings, based on the "Gibberish" and "Glitching" methods required a strict referral to the source images and data that I was encountering. If I deviated from a literal interpretation of the absurd source material, the fragile materiality of the absurd

digital source object would be lost in the translation to drawing. As a result, these methods, at best, resulted in a sort of mimicry of visualised digital absurdity (Figure 10 to 11) instead of the intended evocative visualisation of an encounter with the digital absurd.
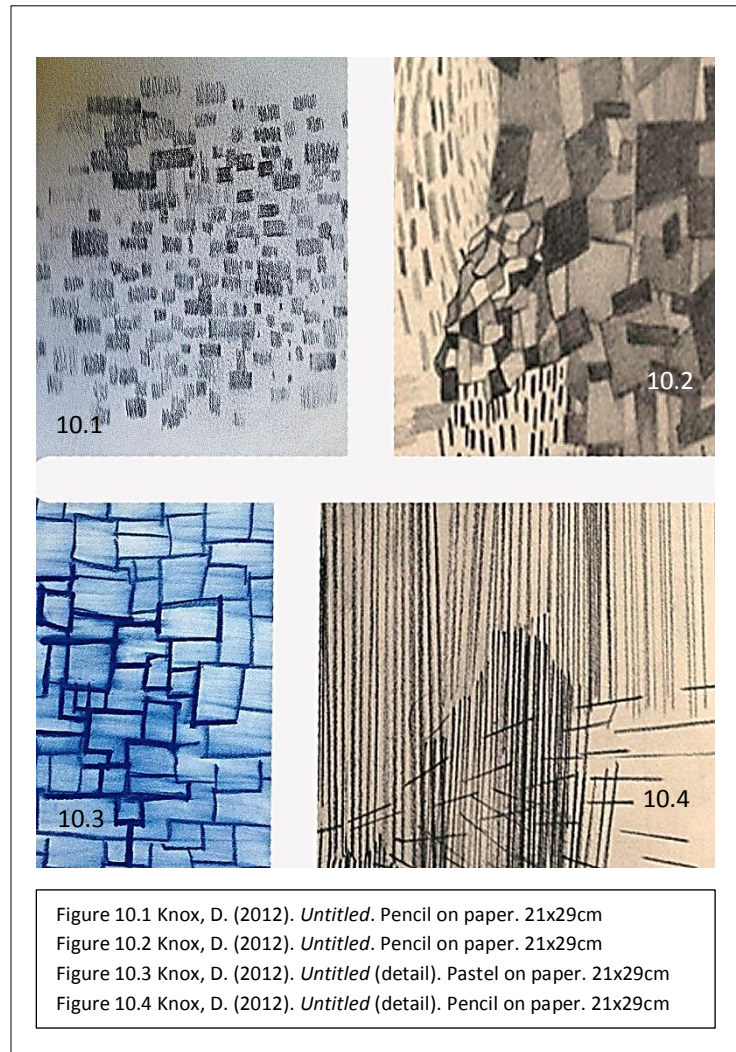

Figure 10.1 Knox, D. (2012). *Untitled*. Pencil on paper. 21x29cm
Figure 10.2 Knox, D. (2012). *Untitled*. Pencil on paper. 21x29cm
Figure 10.3 Knox, D. (2012). *Untitled* (detail). Pastel on paper. 21x29cm
Figure 10.4 Knox, D. (2012). *Untitled* (detail). Pencil on paper. 21x29cm

Figure 10.1 – 10.4 Attempts to mimic "Glitching"

The "Gibberish" searches, although problematic due to the literalness that they engendered in my drawings, allowed for my project to encounter a massive amount of visual data, which, in turn, resulted in a sort of gestalt of the visual nature of digital absurdity. I began to notice a pattern to the images I was observing during these searches and there seemed to be an abundance of confused, defeated and depressed-looking people represented by new media (Figure 12) resulting from the "Gibberish" searches. This mood of defeat and confusion is reflected the overall tone of the drawing output of this method, and this mood of defeat and failure has carried over into more recent works, even though the "Gibberish" method is no longer being employed. Similarly the "Glitching" method, introduced me to a number of unusual visual distortions, which are unfortunately difficult to recreate by hand due to their precise, technological basis. However, rather than attempting a literal interpretation of the hard lines and precise repetitions of glitched images by hand, I can instead represent the sense of disorientation that these distortions cause in me as a viewer. I can use "Glitching" as an aesthetic guide in order to visualise the emotional and psychological impact, rather than the actual appearance, of these absurd distortions.

Figure 12 "Gibberish" search results that returned confused or depressed looking people.

Lastly my "Search Log" method is offered as my most successful encounter with, and means of visualising digital absurdity. Due to this method's reliance on text rather than photographic imagery, and the fact that Google searches are typically concise, the search log method was limited in the amount of descriptive information each query could convey. This lack of contextual information made search terms (which probably had concrete meaning to the original searcher) esoteric and nonsensical when I viewed them. This lack of context had the effect of turning innocuous phrases potentially sinister and sensible phrases into non-sense– leaving the viewer of the search logs with a distinct sense of an absurd encounter.

Roland Barthes suggests that "In front of a photograph, the feeling of 'denotation', or, if one prefers, of analogical plenitude, is so great that the description of a photograph is literally impossible" (1978, p 18). This idea could potentially describe the sense of freedom that the search logs, based on text, had, in comparison to the "Gibberish" and "Glitching" methods, which were based on photographic new media. The lack of *denotation* and an almost total reliance on what was *connoted* by the short snatches of

text offered a more expansive potential terrain in which to visualise the digital absurdity. The lack of context and denotation made the absurdity of the search logs more metaphorical and easier to visualise within my subsequent drawings.

To conclude this section, and provide a sense of direction for developing project, I currently use the search log method, almost exclusively. There are however residual effects from the "Gibberish" and "Glitching" methods, such as recurring archetypal characters in my current drawings, who represent a sort of synecdoche of all of the disoriented figures encountered during the "Gibberish" searches, as well as a non-traditional and often flattened or ambiguous use of space within my picture planes, which relates to the kind of visual distortions encountered in the "Glitching" method - albeit in a non-literal way.

SECTION 3: UNFOLDING PRACTICE

This section discusses a number of developments and changes to my drawing output over the course of this project. The direction of my output has evolved into a consolidation of the three previous methods. The "Search Log" method exerts the most influence on my continuing works (the following drawings all began from entries in the search logs, which are referenced by the work's titles), but visual themes and directions from the Glitching and Gibberish methods can still be recognised in these drawings and the following discussion.

STYLISATION

My drawings all feature a semi realist, graphical sensibility. The decision to work in this way was partially driven by the visual direction of my "Glitching" method, a process which removed information from the byte level of digital images, effectively "stylising" their abstracted digital representation by removing digital code. The visual effect of this process often results in flat colour and line replacing otherwise realistic photographic images (see Figure 13).
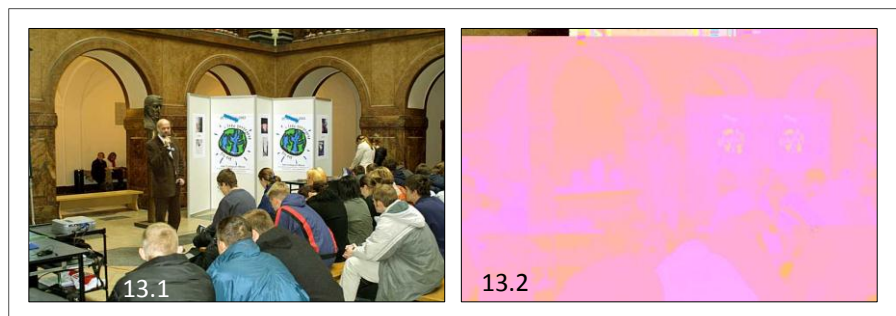
Figure 13.1 Original image and 13.2 "Gitched" edit of 13.1.

Another important motivation for not making naturalistic or photo realistic drawings was a desire to signal the metaphorical nature of my practice's exploration of digital absurdity. I wanted to make the absurdity I had encountered during this research explicit, rather than present a potentially detached and sterilised documentation of events. Restricting my drawing output to a naturalistic mode of representation would have potentially limited my ability to convey the strangeness of things. Corompt (2010) suggests that the graphical simplification of early animation meant that "the audience was not always expected to view the frame as a window or "proscenium arch" into a

realistic space, but instead a metaphoric space that was allowed to continuously play between the abstract and the representational" (p. 2) – and it is in this same metaphoric space that my drawings are attempting to construct through their use of a simplified and stylised visual language.

Lastly, my move toward stylisation can also be seen as a kind of withdrawal from the dominance of the photographic image encountered during my "gibberish" method and also as a reaction to the photographic media's role as the "main social form of the digital image" (Osborne, 2010, p. 59). Manovich suggests that the dominance of the photographic image within new media results in the "paradox of digital visual culture" (2001, p. 164) – the strange condition where digital technology, a technology of abstraction, becomes inextricably conflated with photographic technology, a technology of representation. This paradoxical meeting of photography and the digital could have provided an alternate place to encounter digital absurdity, however, due to my failed interaction with photographic new media during my "gibberish" method, my project has avoided further encounters with photographic imagery, and as a result, my work reflects a move toward stylised and subjective visualisation of digital absurdity, in contrast to the apparently naturalistic objectivity of the photographic image (see Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p. 158). The idea of stylisation is further explored in the later section where I discuss my project's move toward a more limited range of drawing tools and imagery (see section: Simplification of Media and Content).
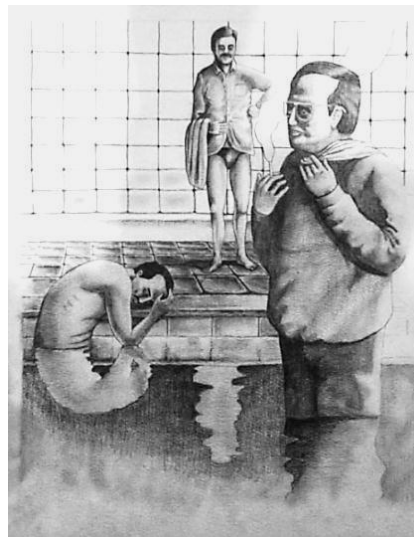
FAILURE AND ABSURDITY

Figure 14 Knox, D. (2013). Health Spa and Diets for Dads. Pencil on paper. 50x70 cm

Figure 14, based on the search log entries: "Health Spa" and "Diet for dads", provides an example of the implicit sense of failure that was often encountered during my research. These two search terms are innocuous enough by themselves but their grouping within the search logs suggested a narrative of depressed, overweight, fathers attending a health spa. The paternalistic failure and depression within this work can be traced back to my "gibberish" method and the large amount of images of vaguely forlorn, middle aged men that these searches resulted in (see Figure 15 for an example of this imagery). The repetition of this non-smiling male figure often encountered during my gibberish searches leads to a sense that the male is represented online as a depressed failure. My drawings reflect this sense and use the depressed male figure as a symbolic representation of defeat at the hands of digital absurdity.

It should be noted that the comparatively realistic depiction of space in Figure 14 is something of an anomaly and I view it as a confusing distraction from the themes of my project at large. The rest of my drawings convey an ambiguous use of the space within the picture plane. Treating the virtual space of the picture plane as ambiguous and indeterminate conveys a stronger conceptual link to my earlier investigations into the ambiguous nature of new media and digital absurdity, and as such, I have tried to avoid any overly realistic depictions of space in the rest of my developing body of work.

Figure 15 A sample of the type of male figure encountered during the "gibberish" search method.
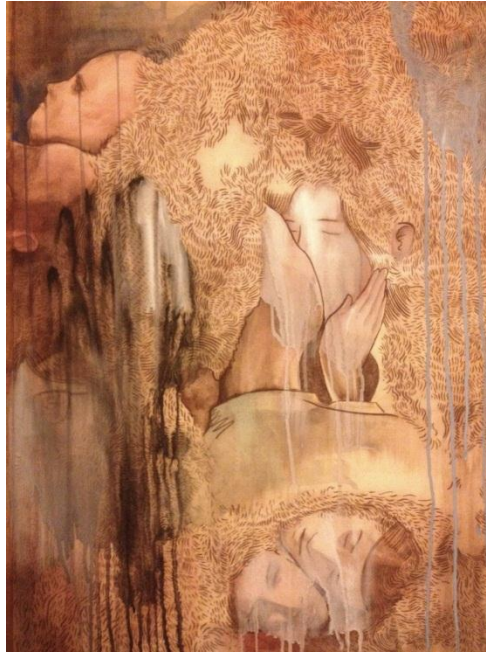
ABSURD JUXTAPOSITIONS AND HUMOUR

Figure 16 Knox, D. (2013). *Is Kissing Safe and Sexy Kissing Picture Couple.* Mixed media on paper. 100x70cm.

Figure 16 shows a drawing that resulted from a combination of the "search logs" and "Glitching" methods. The search queries of "is kissing safe" and "Sexy kissing picture couple" suggested a level of naïve wonder and concern about kissing, and prompted the resulting drawing. I was drawn to these search terms due to the "unexpected juxtaposition" (Hodges, 2010, p. 6) between these awkwardly worded, childlike search queries, compared to the majority of the search logs which consist of precise and sophisticated searches for pornography. Hodges suggests that unexpected juxtaposition during digital encounters is a signpost of digital absurdity and something that could "perversely… inspire humor (sic), play, creativity, and a motivation for exploration and engagement with the world" (p. 20). As such, this moment of naivety within a sea of expert pornography searches provided a refreshing and humorous encounter with potential digital absurdity. The use of humour, as a response to absurd juxtaposition, can be seen as a strategy to navigate the complex and often contradictory content that I encountered during the "Search Log" method and during my projects investigation of digital absurdity in general.

Visually, Figure 16 also attempts to reflect this juxtaposition of content through a dislocation of imagery and composition. The odd arrangement of figures within the image and the repeating marks which link the various parts of the picture can be related back to my "Glitching" experiments, where photographs were re-combined in random ways and the image would become populated with pixilation and digital artefacts.

LACK OF CONTEXT

Figure 17 is based on the search terms: "how historians use maps to predict the future" and "the future of electric cooperatives". I was drawn to these searches for their evocative and esoteric tone. I am sure the original user had reasonable reasons for searching for these terms, however, by the time I encountered the search logs much of the original context had been lost. I personally have no idea of the future of electric cooperatives, or even what an electric cooperative is, so these queries became twisted into a fractured narrative of a dystopian technological society on display in Figure 17 - representing one of many possible interpretations of the original text based searches. This focus on decontextualized and esoteric search terms can be understood in relation to the general sense of dislocation and misunderstanding that interactions with digital technology can engender, however in this instance I am using a fictive and

metaphorical interpretation of the original decontextualized search query in order to navigate what could otherwise be an absurd dead-end of confusion and non-meaning.

SIMPLIFICATION OF MEDIA AND CONTENT

Figure 18 Knox, D. (2013). *A Job in Sports.* Pencil on paper. 50x70 cm.

Figure 19 Knox, D. (2013). *Building a Water Fall and Stream.* Pencil on paper. 100x70cm.

Figure 18 and 19 Illustrate my most recent works and my move toward the traditional drawing media of graphite on paper. Simplifying my project's use of media to graphite was done in order to consolidate my unfolding drawings into a coherent body of works, which together, would suggest a thematic relationship of absurd experiences linking the works. Reducing my media in this way does not reflect the number of experimentations with alternative mediums and grounds that were trialled over the course of this project, but I felt that a mixed media approach, in relation to my project's aims potentially complicated an already confusing exploration of digital absurdity. Originally I wanted to explore a wide range drawing media, techniques, styles, and content (see Figure 20.1- 20.5), in an attempt to exploit the flexibility of drawing as a tool and also highlight the similar flexibility of new media's "indifference to content" (Evens, 2012, para. 40), which would serve to strengthen the links I was attempting to make between the technologies of drawing and new media. This would have resulted in a body of works which purposely obfuscated any clear thematic links or common visual aesthetic from one image to the next, in much the same way that a "Gibberish" search returned a seemingly arbitrary mix of images and content. Due to its potential for a confusing mix of content and styles, this approach could convey a sense of alienation and absurdity. However, the purposeful juxtapositions and indifference to content risked overwhelming the more subtle emotional aspects of my project, and potentially positioned my project as an exploration of the *causes* of digital absurdity rather than an investigation and visualisation of the human *response* to this condition. As a result, my later works pared back the potentially confusing ambiguity in both content and execution, which resulted in a return to simplified graphite on paper drawings and an equally simplified range of characters and situations within the drawings.
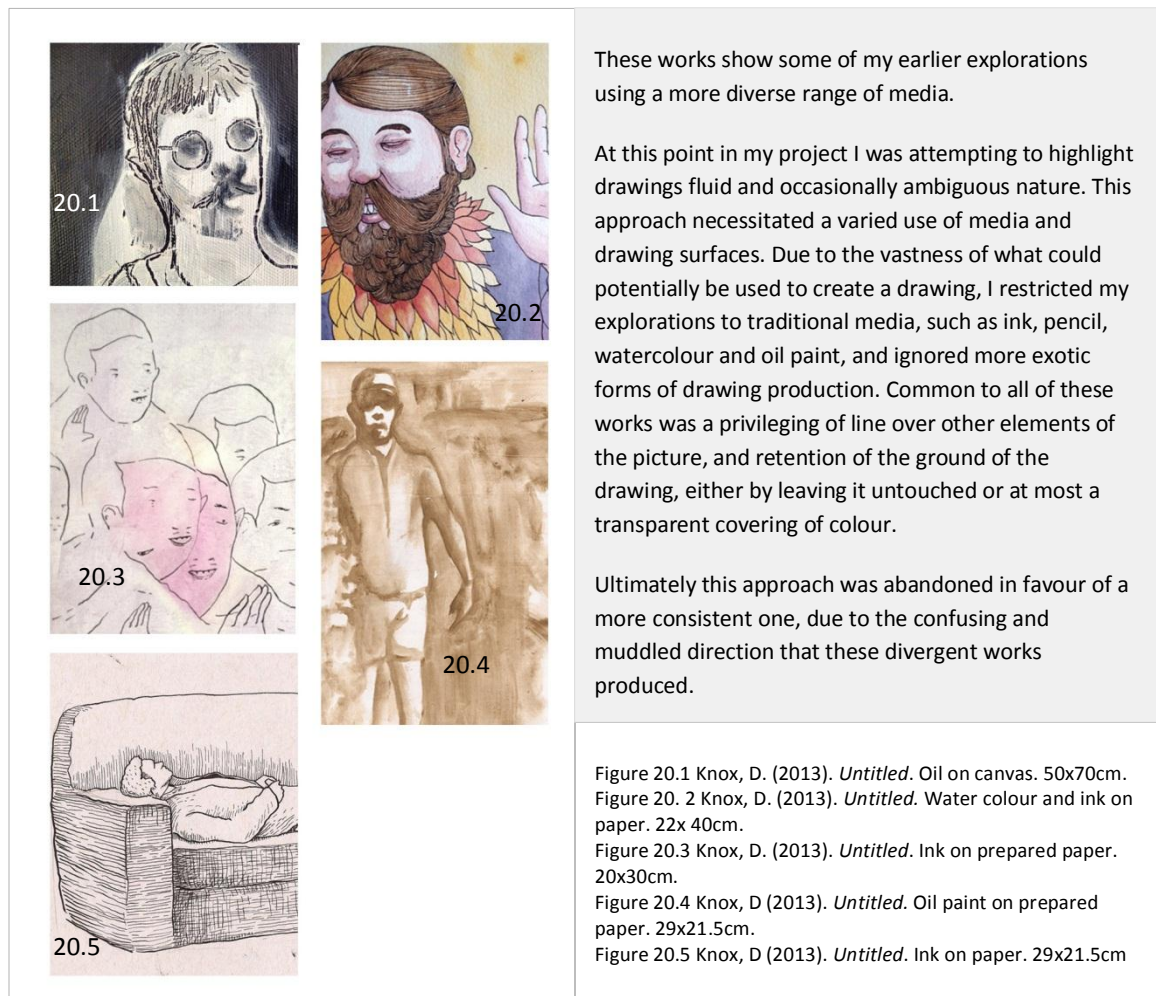
These works show some of my earlier explorations using a more diverse range of media.

At this point in my project I was attempting to highlight drawings fluid and occasionally ambiguous nature. This approach necessitated a varied use of media and drawing surfaces. Due to the vastness of what could potentially be used to create a drawing, I restricted my explorations to traditional media, such as ink, pencil, watercolour and oil paint, and ignored more exotic forms of drawing production. Common to all of these works was a privileging of line over other elements of the picture, and retention of the ground of the drawing, either by leaving it untouched or at most a transparent covering of colour.

Ultimately this approach was abandoned in favour of a more consistent one, due to the confusing and muddled direction that these divergent works produced.

Figure 20.1 Knox, D. (2013). *Untitled*. Oil on canvas. 50x70cm.
Figure 20. 2 Knox, D. (2013). *Untitled.* Water colour and ink on paper. 22x 40cm.
Figure 20.3 Knox, D. (2013). *Untitled*. Ink on prepared paper. 20x30cm.
Figure 20.4 Knox, D (2013). *Untitled.* Oil paint on prepared paper. 29x21.5cm.
Figure 20.5 Knox, D (2013). *Untitled*. Ink on paper. 29x21.5cm

Figure 20.1 – 20.5 Examples of earlier works featuring varied styles, content, and media.

SHRINKING FIGURES

There is also a tendency of later works (Figures 17, 18, and 19) to contain smaller figures compared to earlier drawings (figure 14 and 16 for example.) The smaller stature of these figures provides a greater sense of the alienating effects of absurdity, an idea expressed by Kress & Leeuwen (2006), who suggest that images that feature figures at a "public distance" (p. 125) (defined as the point where "we can see the torso of at least four or five people" (p. 125) convey a sense of the "distance between people who are and are to remain strangers" (p. 125). This impersonal distance between the viewer and the figures of these drawings also reaffirms the fact that these images are

based on the anonymous search queries of strangers and alludes to the implicit yet forceful sense of alienation and dislocation that is engendered by digital absurdity and visualised in these drawings.

Figure 21 Knox, D. (2013) *I think I am a Witch.* Pencil on paper. 50x70 cm

FINAL EXHIBITION

My final exhibition for examination took place in the Gillan Gallery in Blenheim. The works consisted of 12 drawings on paper, presented along the main wall of the gallery (Figure 22). Each drawing was titled after a random Google search term, gathered during the "search logs" phase of my project. The works were broken up into two groups, the first being the set of four larger drawings (100 by 70 centimetres) in a single row (Figure 23) and the second group of drawings consisted of smaller works (70 by 50 centimetres), positioned in two layers (Figure 24). The decision to install the works along only one wall was a practical decision based on my desire to maintain the potential for the works, as a whole, to suggest a loose and viewer driven narrative connection. Separating the works into separate walls and alternate groupings was trialled and rejected due to the interruption this caused to the narrative flow of the works.

Figure 22 View of installed works.

Figure 23 View of larger works.

Figure 24 View of the smaller works.

The idea of a narrative device intended to cohere the works was a late development but one that has its roots within the larger scope of my project. For example, by providing the viewer with a formal arrangement to the works I was able to project a façade of order to what was ultimately a set of absurd and illogical images. This maddening and elusive sense of a larger meaning to the works, suggested by their arrangement and other shared formal qualities (such as the consistent use of graphite pencil and standard paper sizes) was perhaps the most effective means of evoking the

type of confusion and frustration that occurs when the absurd (digital or otherwise) is encountered and when any definitive meaning is tantalizingly out of reach.

The choice to divide the body of works into two distinct sizes was made in order to provide another layer of perceived order and meaning to the works. The larger of the images (Figure 23) were intended to be hierarchically dominant compared to the smaller works. Likewise the larger drawings were generally more labour intensive and intricate, suggesting their importance compared to the often quickly produced and comparatively sparse smaller works (Figure 24). This perception of order and hierarchy however is ultimately betrayed by the fact that all of the works were based on equally contextless Google searches, whose original meaning had been lost in their transition into drawings. Each drawing, despite its level of intricacy and apparent purpose, was ultimately an attempt to express the absurd, and any sense of meaning was an illusory artefact of the absurd.

CONCLUSION

This project aimed to investigate the concept of digital absurdity, with the intention of testing drawing based means of visualising and illuminating its confusing terrain. The digital absurd was investigated with regard to its effect on the human emotional state, its impact on the threshold between human and computer understood as new media, and its use as an absurd tool. A simultaneous and complementary investigation of absurdity inherent to drawing was also undertaken, and drawing was shown to exhibit a number of qualities that were uniquely analogous to the absurd workings of digital technology. Drawing's ability to move between abstract code and referential image with almost no inherent contradiction positioned it as a perhaps the most suited tool to explore the similar conditions of digital absurdity. Additionally drawing was shown to be a tool that has a privileged relationship with the subjective and emotion driven human being, and as such could perhaps convey the complex nature of digital technology where other media would fail.

It was discovered that an immersive exploration of absurdity was a challenging undertaking. Aside from the potential scale of this project, digital absurdity proved to be a frustratingly elusive and insidious subject. Methods and encounters that were too immersive, often lead to tautology and contradiction within my project itself, and conversely, methods that tried to encounter a more innocuous form of digital absurdity failed to convey the complex and infectious nature of the subject.

Ultimately, my project returned its focus on the human component of digital absurdity. By exploring the emotive and subjective human *response* to digital absurdity this project was able to visualise the full and confusing nature of digital absurdity without running into dead ends and illogical contradictions. The resulting drawings provide a human readable visualisation of a subject that can potentially be hostile to investigation. The trade-off for this more human focus, is that my drawings do not immediately and explicitly reference digital technology, but as became evident during this investigation, by examining the human response to the digital absurd I was able to capture a more holistic and nuanced version of events than if I had only considered the objective, logical and technological attributes of the digital absurd.

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