

Does a
flower
rehearse
for Spring?

**Does a flower rehearse for spring?
Movements, Comic Objects, and Anti-Smooth**

**Auckland University of Technology
School of Art and Design**

A thesis submitted to AUT in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

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2018

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements | 4 |
| Attestation of authorship | 4 |
| Abstract | 5 |
| Shaking loose | 7 |
| Writing-making | 12 |
| Supplementary supports | 14 |
| Edges | 18 |
| Movements | 21 |
| Wiggling to and fro: Noticing and returning to the untended | 25 |
| Coming-up-against-and-within: Entanglement and care | 39 |
| Faith as a cascade | 55 |
| Anti-smooth | 63 |
| A well-sized brick: Confusing the database | 67 |
| Chamele No.5: Lumpy resemblances | 79 |
| Imagining an elephant: Resyntaxation as resistance | 91 |
| Comic objects | 99 |
| The absurd comic object | 103 |
| A failing resistance, just waiting for a fall: Intentional bathos | 119 |
| Turning | 129 |
| A beta test of little frights | 137 |
| Reference list | 147 |
| List of images | 156 |
| List of works/exhibitions | 165 |
| List of inserts | 166 |

Acknowledgements

This project owes a great debt to those both distant and proximal, from strangers and acquaintances to friends and partners, where knowledge and support is transmitted through books, technical advice, conversations, and care.

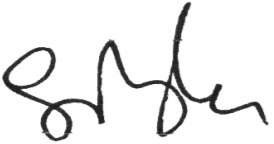
Thank you to the theorists, academics, and artists whose ideas have helped to shape my own. Thank you to AUT, ST Paul Street Gallery, and to the technicians and staff of the university. I would also like to express my appreciation to Marie Shannon, who proofread this thesis.

I am extremely grateful to have had such caring supervisors, who have guided me through this process so well, with their thoughtful critiques and insightful advice. Thank you Janine Randerson, Zara Stanhope, and Paul Cullen. Thank you also to my advisors Monique Redmond and Andy Thomson, for the conversations, for the knowledge freely shared, and for the encouragement but also the questions. Immense gratitude to my friends, who have given their love, time, and listening ears. Thank you Hannah Reynolds, Rebekah Chown, Sam Behrend, and Erin Luker. To those friends within the practice-led PhD cohort, I have been moved by your support - it strengthened my resolve when it is was most needed. Thank you Ngahuia Harrison, Emily O'Hara, Layne Waerea, Elliot Collins, and Olivia Webb.

To my mum Margaret, my dad Ian, my brother Cole, and my partner Ziggy, your love and belief are my guides. My deepest gratitude and love to you.

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: 27/2/18

Abstract

This practice-led PhD operates across modes of installation, drawing, video, publication, and sculpture, utilising quotidian materials with excessive enthusiasm. The research explores the potential of three conditions: *wiggle room*, *anti-smooth*, and *comic objects*. In this research wiggle room calls attention to the untended by working through an ethics of support, responsibility, and collaborative modes of making. Wiggle room is an agitating movement that is a purposeful attempt to create more space, for bodies, neglected ideas, or ways of being, within codes and structures that already exist. The concept of anti-smooth sits as a counterpoint to the filing away or sanding down of difference. It takes into account the acceleration and deceleration of images, the possibilities for lumpy resemblance, and the rearrangement of sense and syntax. These temporary conditions are explored through assorted imaging and imagining, in particular the filtering of the digital domain, semi-sketched details, amateur craft processes, and the disordering of anticipated rhythms. Prop-like comic objects operate within this research project as absurdist visual jokes, where prolonged uncertainty and variable resolution 'prop' open entrances into alternate politics. The practice emerges from an entangled research field, sources are pulled from TV, memes, medieval manuscripts, anecdotes, and shopping experiences. Threaded through a helical methodology, this project explores the political inflection of specific movements that are able to re-orientate our relationships to the familiar. This processual helix encompasses different sites of research as it moves around and through them, turning and returning to the overlooked. By making present the strange or seemingly impossible, this research invites sensitivity towards small, familiar (but nonetheless important) things. The agitations of the practice facilitate a continual drawing and re-drawing of the bounds of the known and unknown; where the untended borders of objective reason open via the co-operative flexing of the absurd and the familiar.

Shaking

loose

Shaking loose

Does a flower rehearse for spring? positions an art practice in which sculptural objects, supplementary publications, everyday items, installations, and relationships are considered within a shared field of possibility. The artworks developed in this project oscillate between being dramatically oversized and gently peripheral; between a lumpy too-much-ness and a careful reflexivity, within spaces institutional or casual. The untended or inconspicuous, the slightly 'wrong', is propped up here, supported and cast in starring roles. Humour and playfulness form key aspects of these sculptural, installational, or publication-based artworks, acting to re-orientate perspectives or subjective interpretations through absurd propositions. Making itself is a primary concern, pitched towards openness and care.

This introductory matter traces the contours of the thesis text, beginning with a brief outline of the conceptual terrain that is threaded through the research; then an exploration of the form of this document; a discussion of the relationship between writing and making; and a rationale for the research. The larger text consists of three main sections, *Movements*, *Anti-smooth*, and *Comic objects*. At the greatest distance from here (through this text or down into the paper) there lies a conclusory section, *A beta test of little frights*. Because the context of the research is bound into the methodology as well as being a preoccupation of the research itself, the three main sections are conceptually driven. Methodology, literature review, and evidence of practice-based research are woven together in writing, image, and supplement. By resisting the idea of a solid and complete research outcome, or even project-based sequence of renewal, I focus on collaborative processes as a continual turning and returning.

Movements

Considered within both artwork and writing, *movements* are the methodological motivation in this research. Movements are a condition for making works, and are inherent in this text and the supplementary exhibition publications. The project recasts feminist writer and independent scholar Sara Ahmed's concept of 'wiggling',¹ as an insistent action both within the research-in-process and also as a larger, more reverberant disruption. This field of disruption widens when the work is installed or exhibited, becoming more capable of affecting political, social, and spatial structures. Wiggling is thought of as a movement that occurs within these particular structures, and

1. Sara Ahmed, "Wiggle Room," *Feministkilljoys* (blog), September 28, 2014, <http://feministkilljoys.com/2014/09/28/wiggle-room/>.

also with others, amongst the crowd, and up-against-and-along-with the matter around us. Drawing from theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad's notion of intra-active entanglements,² the entanglement of wiggling requires a nuanced consideration of any ethical implications of coming-up-against-and-within. The politics of care are thought of as a critical lens on ethics-in-action, with a particular focus on environmental and feminist theorist María Puig de la Bellacasa's complex notion of care as essential to widening the purview of ethical relations.³ Finally, this section questions the purpose of a project that seemingly has no set direction—just an insistent and continual movement. Feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway's reminder to “stay with the trouble”⁴ echoes as a call to remain committed to acting in the now. Heading towards ‘nothing’ is discussed as a viable and hopeful option, as it leaves room for an undecidable multitude of things-to-come.

Anti-smooth

The anti-smooth is a condition of the research that is sited both materially and experientially in artworks. Within sculptures, installation, moving image, and publication, the anti-smooth is a wilful re-syntaxation of the known. Giving new, uneven rhythms to the familiar, the anti-smooth blocks easy movement through installational space, the interpretation of images and information, and the categorisation of objects and things. The infinite cascade of digital images we are now in touch with daily affects the way we relate to the non-digital. We have become more adept at determining temperatures and qualities of these images, and we move on with incredible speed. This is not limited to how fast we scroll through newsfeeds but also our attention spans to other things that are materially situated off-screen. How might an anti-smooth object or image clog up this filter? Rather than being ‘difficult’ and so perhaps easy to ignore, this research suggests a sly kind of interference with the availability of information held within objects. Lumpy or ‘bad’ resemblance is thought of as a material anti-smoothness, where ‘original’ referents (like commercially harvested fruits and vegetables or branded consumer goods) are drawn into a relation that questions completeness, authority, and function. The anti-smooth roughens the movement of interpretation and experience, constituting wilful disruptions to the status quo. By refusing to play along, by disorienting through a perhaps inappropriate application of form, material, or information, the anti-smooth curves toward the political. By being against, the anti-smooth has the ability to rearrange and re-image what we know, to re-route us towards more careful or sensitive alternatives.

2. Karen Barad, “Intra-Active Entanglements,” *Women, Gender, and Research* 1, no. 2 (2012): 20.

3. María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 219.

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



A

Comic objects

Comic objects are humorous things that rely on their material qualities as critical parts of their funniness.⁵ As non-fictional things, comic objects *do* the joke rather than become part of a fiction where the context of the joke is away-from-here. The concrete quality of the comic object reinforces its own non-fictionality, even as an oppositional line of absurd possible-narrative runs through it. Because of its variable fuse for comedic closure, the tone of absurdity leans into uncertainty, while the physicality of comic objects bolsters their believability. The comic object undermines its own credibility again through its shonky materiality, refusing to assemble itself into anything resembling a complete object—even high-effort fabrication slides down into a generalised crap-ness. The concept of bathos is utilised to suggest a possible bathetic turn from laughter, into a more pointed contrast between reason and nonsense, taste and poor taste, and the received institutional or social contracts that enforce these boundaries. The non-fictional presence, absurdity, and the bathetic rotation of the comic object, constitute a series of refusals. This repeated ‘turning’ has a power to re-orient the sensical and non-sensical, throwing itself against reason and what is considered reasonable, rocking it away and then back into place. Hopeful and also knowingly futile, the comic object makes ready for critique the dominant discourses by committing decisively to what seems impossible, pratfalling again and again, rotating and re-adjusting the boundaries of the ‘possible.’

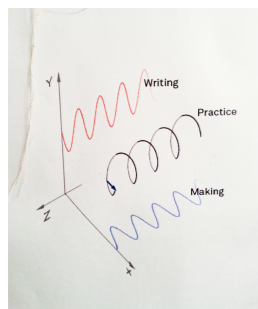
A: A ceramic snake (smiling) in my studio, December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

5. David Robbins, *Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy* (Copenhagen: Pork Salad Press, 2011), 36–37.

Writing-making

To me at first, words seemed much less flexible than paper or cardboard, and so one formed around the other.⁶ But this asymmetric division belies how writing about making can become writing *as and with* making, too. Writing can shape and be shaped by the process of studio making, becoming part of practice. The adventurous qualities of my own studio-making—material experimentation, unexpected positions and pairings—flow into writing. Digression, tonal differences, narratives, and anecdotes used as part of this experimentation then influence the direction of making. Both aspects of the practice become co-formed through the other. There is an ambidextrous capacity of this relational writing-making, each hand more adept at originating different parts of the research. In a reflection of this relationship, this writing uses narrative or anecdotal digression and an associated variation in tone as material paths for invention.

I don't actually go looking for digressions, digressions find *me*. I'm on track, thinking about 'my main point', when they walk up beside me and steer me off towards some minor distraction, down some unrelated avenue. Digressions might also be called distractions, divergences, disruptions—*di* every one of them—all doubled-over in two directions. Writing through these digressions is like mapping new territory; and it can be disorienting as the text sways between points, like being languorously drunk and on a bicycle. Doubled-over laughing, double-happy, double-dutch, digressions can be a kind of frivolous and unnecessary *fun*. They move me in different ways, they move me into surprising and productive terrain. It is only via the circuitous and wobbly route which playfulness opens up, that this new territory is made accessible to me. As writer Laurence Sterne said, through his character Tristram Shandy: "Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading!—take them out of this book, for instance, you might as well take the book along with them."⁷ In this document narrative, anecdote, and non sequitur are active modes of uncovering ways into ideas within the practice of writing and making (hopefully they are also of aid to the reader). Allowing the writing to range in the same way the practice might—words and stories are materials, after all—is to be open to making bad sentences on the way to better ones, falling into traps and discovering imaginative ways out.



6. A reminder to myself about writing. Photo by Lucy Meyle.
7. A very large portion of the writing in *Tristram Shandy* could be considered digression, so his statement is particularly accurate. Laurence Sterne, "The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman," in *The Works of Laurence Sterne: In One Volume* (Philadelphia: John Grigg, 1831), 36.

Addressing novelist and poet Charlotte Brontë's work *Jane Eyre*, writer Virginia Woolf remarked: "She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters."⁸ For Brontë to include anger and foolishness into writing was—to Woolf—to allow the grievances of the world to intrude upon the text, to allow the art to become, as writer Mary Gordon describes, "muddied and cracked."⁹ Yet Woolf also predicted criticisms of her own, highly political 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*, writing in her diary—"the press will be kind and talk of its charm & sprightliness [...] It is a trifle, I shall say; so it is, [...] as usual much is watery & flimsy & pitched in too high a voice."¹⁰ To be indignant and forceful is to confuse the point of a text, and yet a woman's conversational tone is simply charming, flimsy, "pitched in too high a voice"¹¹ (code for annoying or aiming-to-please perhaps), the content not worth bothering with. Tonally, this text might be described as both. The tone of this thesis rises and falls dependent on the context, at some points it can be indignant, at some points silly. What can be expressed via tone one way is different from another, which is why this text employs a range of modulations. To me, to be conversational is to be invitational, an easing-into a denser text that follows. Foolishness and silliness too, are modes of response that are not just about welcoming a reader but are concerned with transmitting emotion in place of hand gestures and facial expressions. This doesn't have to preclude forcefulness, rage, or sadness—which are here too—they are likewise preoccupied with accurately pitching my meaning as faithfully as possible. In her essay *Upspeak*, Durga Chew-Bose notes that:

My voice is, contrary to whatever insight accommodates how others think *I should* sound, the most *like* me. My least restrained quality, it rises and rejoices when the mood suits, and tendrils even when I'm doubtless. It's how I deliver. How I divulge. It's my noise.¹²

Though tonally diverse, the writings in this thesis are all parts of my voice—'my noise'—entangled as they are in the different textures of source material, artworks, and experiences.

8. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), quoted in Mary Gordon, "The Fate of Women of Genius," *New York Times*, September 13, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/13/books/the-fate-of-women-of-genius.html?>
9. Mary Gordon, "The Fate of Women of Genius."
10. Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 2003), 145.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Durga Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 211.

Notes on the format of the text:*Sidenotes*

As a motion towards a destabilisation of academic norms of referencing—textual citations, historical and reference images, digressions, and intra-textual linking are sidenoted.

Images

The *List of images* can be found at the back of the document, referencing the images that appear in the body of the text and also the footnotes.

Exhibitions and works

The exhibitions and works that were made during the course of the research are listed chronologically in a *List of exhibitions and works*, at the back of the document.

Inserts

Along with the insert just mentioned, there are a number of other loose inserts that form part of this text. They are listed and given some context in *List of inserts* table at the back of the document.

Supplementary supports

Support and supplementarity are co-operative, guiding concepts for understanding the role of publication in both the design of this thesis document and in my practice more generally. Room sheets, small publications, title or materials lists are familiar elements of exhibitions, and are usually recognised as ancillary to the ‘main part’ of the installation. And yet these are often the documents that visitors seek out in order to explain or to decipher, as necessary elements of the works themselves. The paper ephemera that is seemingly peripheral and supplementary is in fact a key support to the work itself, transformative in its adding-to.¹³ Additionally, these ephemeral publications are more mobile, and more able to be physically disseminated, than whatever objects or works were part of the exhibition or installation. Publications created in the process of this research project have been collected and inserted into this document as a continuation of their supplementary mobility. There are also some supplementary publications that have been made specifically for this document, which negotiate as well as complicate the relation of writing and making. All can be found throughout the larger body of this text, inserted loose and unbound. These are roughly in the places where they might

13. Céline Condorelli, “Directions For Use,” in *Support Structures* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), 11.

be of particular use or interest, but the publications don’t have to remain in those places.

In the book *Support Structures*, writer and artist Céline Condorelli describes support as a relational condition that aids, frames, cares for, and emphasises. It “does not fall either in or out”,¹⁴ and in order to function must remain “on the periphery, on a permeable edge working within from without”.¹⁵ Support is applied to the ‘exterior’ of a principal thing, but soon becomes locked in an altering embrace that affects both supported and supporter at their core. The moment of supporting (or not) causes a “sudden, initial erasure of distance demanding a decision which cannot in any way be impartial”,¹⁶ drawing the supported and the possible supporter into close proximity. In this way support is a commitment, a kind of actualisation of investment in this-way-or-that-way present even at the very beginning, within the original decision to support. Deciding to support pitches oneself in favour of the thing supported, and this is where it becomes politically inflected. Condorelli traces support as a supplementary force, one that is applied to something that is seen as needing it, “applied to, added on, inflicted upon, and therefore entails an external operation, seemingly independent from the object to be supported”.¹⁷ Support in this conception is a paradoxical, exterior *against*, in that it is propping up or providing care to the thing supported and is also “competitive, jurisdictional, and resistant”¹⁸ to its relation. It can alter “the most intimate, internal workings of a thing”¹⁹ and so in this way it is also partially an interior *within*. Exterior and interior in this sense is in relation to being distinguishable from, or ‘different to’, rather than a straightforward physical inside/outside.²⁰

This dual nature of support echoes philosopher Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the supplement as “substitution and accretion”,²¹ as something that adds on only to highlight a prior lack. The supplement—like support—is a curious condition that insinuates itself into what is supplemented. The supplement is not just inside or outside, but evokes “a certain ‘internal’ indetermination”²² in the thing supplemented, changing it irreversibly. By highlighting the lack in the thing supplemented, the supplement suggests a never-ending sequence of insufficiency or need. Derrida writes that through this sequence, “a necessity is announced: that of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception.”²³ That

14. *Ibid.*, 17.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 15.

17. *Ibid.*, 19.

18. *Ibid.*, 17.

19. *Ibid.*, 19.

20. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, Corrected Edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 145.

21. *Ibid.*, 200.

22. Jacques Derrida, “The Parergon,” trans. Craig Owens, *October* 9 (1979): 33.

23. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 157.

is to say, there is an inevitable and infinite line of supplements that mediate, fluctuate, the never-existed and never-to-exist graspable ‘whole thing’. In supplementing, in *giving*, this kind of support voids the possibility of *any* type of completeness. Supplementary support continues to skirt the edges of what it supports, as different-from and yet also part-of.

In his 2017 show at RMIT Design Hub, *Colouring Impermanence*, artist David Thomas included printed supplementary material of both the usual bio/blurb/works list, but also more unusual additions, like a small newspaper and a series of archival documents stapled in the corner. These ‘extra’ documents—full of hand-written notations, photocopied texts and casually snapped phone photos (which could be collected inside the manila envelope-like centre page of the more official looking blurb text)—add to the exhibition by providing background, funny thoughts, and notes that seem to firm up the ground of the exhibition into an identifiable landscape. However, these documents are also tonally quite removed from the more painterly works on display in the body of the exhibition, their extraneous quality underlined by their quantity, mode of installation, and in the amount of different information present within them.²⁴ Sitting within the show, slightly apart from it, and also in much more mobile manner (a set of the publications are sitting on my desk now as I write this), these supplements intimate that Thomas’s practice won’t be hemmed in by either the gallery’s structural edges or the more dispersed edges of his works past and present. This kind of supplementary support is unabsorbed, and refuses to be consumed and appropriated completely by the perceived ‘main actor’ (in this case the paintings). Condorelli writes that the support mechanism is “constantly defined in negation: it must not become the object, is not inside nor outside, not autonomous, nor object-bound, not fixed, not closed, un-limited, and never finished.”²⁵ This undecidable quality is then transferred, through proximity and *against*-ness, onto what is supported.

Within this document *and* my making practice, publications do the support-work of adding to and propping up what could normally be considered the ‘main body’ of the work (whether in a text, publication, or exhibition). At the same time, these publications—in their paradoxical *against*-ness and the logic of the supplement—degrade the autonomy of the work. The publications are arched *towards* the research and the work, giving ‘extra’ information both textual and experiential; at the same time they undermine any suggestion of comprehensiveness. I see this as a powerful and transformative action, rather



24. At Thomas’s show at RMIT Design Hub in 2017, publications were housed in stand-alone ‘trays’ with metal legs. Photo by Mon Redmond.

25. Condorelli, “Directions For Use,” 18.

than something to be overcome. Some of the publications in this research were tied into earlier processes of making, and others were produced later during installation of exhibitions (similar to room sheets). Some were situated on sculptural works or on installational elements, others were placed on the floor or on the more expected space of the gallery desk near the door. All were in unlimited numbers and free to take away should visitors choose. That these publications were all treated, knowingly by the public, as *different* from whatever else was part of the work (rather than their place in an order of making or their place in the gallery) is what points to them as supplementary. Even works that are sited mainly as publication (*Various Sources*, 2015-) are supplemented through an endless serialisation of issues.

The presence of supplementary publications in *this* document is twofold. Firstly, there is an inclusion of new publications, made especially for, and as part of, this document. This is intended as gesture towards the impossibility of completion, of the never-ending supplementation inherent in this research. It is also a specific attempt to retain the textural and spatial qualities of experiencing sculptural works physically, and to deal with the sometimes monotone bodily experience of reading a flat document—where shifts in posture are usually in service of comfort rather than exploration. Secondly, there is the inclusion of publication material that supported works and exhibitions (and not, say, sculptures themselves—images of sculptures are provided instead). This action re-sites the mechanism of support from something that *follows* to something that *carries* the physicality of sculptural or installational works in the experience of reading. That these objects might need to be supported in their movement from spatial arrangements to flat images through haptic materials—and by something as temporary as ephemeral publications—is a continuation of the erosion of self-sufficiency in the ‘original’ works. Condorelli writes that support “reveals the occurrence of a point of jeopardy”, where it is made more obvious to us the “now inherently incomplete state of the supported object, as well as its own somewhat inappropriate and fragile nature.”²⁶ The inclusion of supplementary material into this document makes visible the fact that my works and exhibitions were never, and could never be, autonomous objects or authoritative installations divorced from the support that they might appear as (especially when they are inserted into this document as images).

26. *Ibid.*, 21.

In *On Support*, cultural critic Mark Cousins remarks that “an object always has systems of support”²⁷ anyway—but why can this sometimes be a blind spot? That title lists are sometimes denigrated as crutches for difficult or not immediately rewarding works, suggests that there is an ideal of completion and autonomy that causes support via these means to be seen as lesser-than. Perhaps more than this, the supplementary support is a kind of threat to our own “unconscious fantasy”²⁸ of completion. That a flower might need to ‘rehearse’ for its big springtime entrance is silly and strange, and also undermines the idea that what seems natural and unaffected requires no support, no rehearsal, at all. Sculptures sometimes need supports, publications often need tables to lie on, and video projections usually require surfaces on which to rest (however briefly). Artwork generally requires support in some manner, even though Cousins suggests that “We do not like admitting that objects have conditions”,²⁹ and so support is often elided, separated completely from the object, or considered a temporary condition that will soon vanish. An imperilment of the free-standing object has been consciously inscribed here, by placing supplementary publication as more physically imposing and demanding in this document than the supplemented work it originally accompanied.

Edges

Writer Haley Mlotek remarks that sometimes it seems as if “the purest line of vision is one that looks to an agreed-upon horizon; as though hills and valleys of thought are too dangerous to contemplate.” She continues, asking “when did we decide what everything and everyone was worth?”³⁰ Indeed, many questions sometimes lie fallow, unasked and unanswered: Who is deserving of care? Why is something funny? Either we think we know the answer to the question already, don’t wish to hear we are wrong, or have never thought about it and so remain walking flatly onwards, repeating the same cycles over and over again. As foregone conclusions or knee-jerk reactions, our unconscious fantasies—those which re-inscribe completion or divisions as sure things—do more than just valorise the art-object. They duplicate the horizon-by-committee, smooth down the landscape into a safe and unsurprising road into the future. The supplementary supports within this document hint at a more generalised dissolution of what feels decisive, be that objects, or notions of taste, or hierarchies between humans and the more-than-human.³¹

27. Mark Cousins, “On Support,” in *Support Structures*, ed. Celine Condorelli, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 72.

28. *Ibid.*, 71

29. *Ibid.*

30. Haley Mlotek, “Searching for the Self-Loathing Woman Writer,” *Hazlitt*, 2018, <https://hazlitt.net/longreads/searching-self-loathing-woman-writer>.

31. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 1.

The wiggling motion at the core of this research is pitched *against* that decisiveness, as a movement that ceaselessly moves in relation to the structural, institutional ‘main’, sensitising us to what lies untended within. Knowingly moving up-against-and-within, wiggling also requires thinking through how to move with care and in an ethical relation. This movement involves taking account of doing, whether that be in collaboration with others, in the making of artwork, or in the wider dissemination of the same. Decisiveness in process and practice is traded in for openness to response, and an ongoing attention to the liveliness of others.

As a small movement, the wiggle sits *contra* to epic narratives or heroic gestures. There is a special kind of evasiveness to the works in this research, that pretends towards weakness and failure then doubles back into strength through their anti-anti-heroic stance. Even if works are oversized, they remain materially unsure of themselves. Soft bricks, sagging papier-mâché walls, foam bananas, bent coloured paper, lint-rolled peaches, floors made from Sellotape. Knowing the rules and circumventing them, the works misuse materials, widening and diminishing the intervallic differences between codified forms and their lumpier versions at will. The absurdity of their suggestion works in tandem with their physical presence, bathetically striking against the possibility of absolutism either in the object itself or in the general framework of rationality or sense in which they (don’t) belong.

This project contributes to contemporary art engaged in questions of materiality and the importance of ethical relations, instancing a kind of wilful *against* through publication, sculpture, installation and their evasive wiggling movement back and forth in the field of exhibition or dissemination. To be *against*, again and again, is to think a different horizon, one that has not yet been imaged or described. To be against is to know for certain that there are edges, but to ask why edges appear unbreakable and authoritative, like bricks, ceilings, walls. Acting in mind of how very real the material effects of these hard edges are, their perceived naturalness becomes questioned and questionable through the repeated movements of the practice, whether through actions of care, altered intervals of the anti-smooth, or the bathetic turn of absurdist humour.

Movements
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There are any number of ways to go in a drawing, choosing one amongst many doesn't preclude the rest. Letting things flow, breaking the flow, making decisions and then changing my mind, returning to works and materials left to lie. Writing can be like this too. In recommended deletions or insertions, by trying to clarify meanings, I often have a sense of moving but not a sense of towards what. Everything is open to this movement—what I might have cordoned off as separate disciplines or domains are mixed through each other by moving across them. Cultural theorist Stefano Harney describes his speculative practice³² as motion too, saying it is:

to walk with others and to talk about ideas, but also what to eat, an old movie, a passing dog, or a new love, is also to speak in the midst of something, to interrupt the other kinds of study that might be going on, or might have just paused, that we pass through, that we may even been invited to join, this study across bodies, across space, across things, this is study as a speculative practice, when the situated practice of a seminar room or squatted space moves out to encounter study in general.³³

In this research, movements are considered to be bound into artworks and writing. There is a minor movement—the 'wobble'³⁴—that exists as action within the research-in-process. This wobbling is also a larger political condition of the artwork, when installed or exhibited, that becomes capable of vibrating the expanded web of surroundings. As a movement that comes-up-against-and-within, wobbling necessitates an exploration of the ethical implications of altering these entangled relations, reading through discussions of care and support. The purpose of these movements is also considered: is there some kind of dream future in mind that I am moving towards?

Movements

There are any number of ways to go in a drawing, choosing one amongst many doesn't preclude the rest. Letting things flow, breaking the flow, making decisions and then changing my mind, returning to works and materials left to lie. Writing can be like this too. In recommended deletions or insertions, by trying to clarify meanings, I often have a sense of moving but not a sense of towards what. Everything is open to this movement—what I might have cordoned off as separate disciplines or domains are mixed through each other by moving across them. Cultural theorist Stefano Harney describes his speculative practice³² as motion too, saying it is:

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32. Harney has described his speculative practice as a more relaxed form of 'study' which is "spending time with each other, without any objective, without any end-point", as a type of movement-practice that happens "all the time, in the university, for the university, but against the university". Speculative practice, like study, "gently works against" capitalist productionism by moving through spaces with each other in non-normative way. See Stefano Harney, *Stefano Harney on Study (Interview July 2011, Part 5)*, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wloBdY72do>.

33. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "The General Antagonism: An Interview with Stevphen Shukaitis," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 118.

34. Ahmed, "Wiggle Room."



B

B: My studio in December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle.



C

C: My studio in December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle.



D

D: My studio in December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

Wiggling to and fro: Noticing and returning to the untended

I don't like the red wiggly line that Microsoft Word puts under the words I misspell. The red squiggle is a distraction to me, a reminder of being wrong. Breaking my easy flow of writing and of reading, I find it incredibly annoying. Always it calls at me to turn around and go back to the underlined words and to give them another go. Even then it's sometimes a false alarm, an algorithm's imperfection highlighting words that are spelled correctly, making me wobble a bit in my sureness, and then I can't get the wiggly red line to just go away and leave me alone—unless I add a hundred strange words to its dictionary. But in this way the red squiggle endears itself to me. The wiggle doesn't simply let me go forwards, it says, "Go backward. Turn and return."³⁵ Irregularly bunched, it pushes up at the supposedly misspelled word and down at the other words below. I don't turn Word's spell-check off anymore.³⁶ I see wiggly lines everywhere: signs, patterns, sticks. There are also lots of invisible wiggles at play: the vibrations between atoms; the warp and weft of fabric; sonic vibrations. Their noise breaks the silence as an eddy breaks the surface of water. Rippling through space-time, these waves break the flat line of stillness and quiet. They then bounce back around, change direction, amplify themselves. They call attention to themselves because they are *against* in a way I'm not used to. Maybe it's a stone in my shoe, or an itchy sweater on my neck. This small movement *against* tunes me into the tightness of the shoe, the roughness of the rock, the temperature of the day, and my irritation at having double-knotted my laces. One small movement sets off a range of sensations and thoughts that were probably already present, but I am only now aware of them.

Wiggling is a movement *against*, breaking the flow and switching directions, at the same time calling attention to or pushing apart, showing a bit of extra space where there wasn't before. Wiggling is generally based around a single 'thing'—people wiggle against each other, rather than in a synchronised manner. If there is nothing to struggle against, there is no need to wiggle. If you have enough space, there is probably less of a compulsion to agitate in order to be more comfortable. A wiggle movement is an agitation then, by definition done within the confines of some kind of structure. This movement can then stretch its surroundings somewhat, making the structure a bit looser, or a little less stable. Wiggling is also not a grand movement, or a violent one, but it is an opposi-

35. Ursula K. Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be," in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 85.

36. An example from this very text! Screenshot by Lucy Meyle.

tional and insistent movement. It exists within, and as, what it wiggles against. To Ahmed, this wiggling is a political, bodily movement: “Sometimes to create space we have to wiggle about. You know those moments when you try and fit in a space that is smaller than you are. You wiggle now with purpose; by wiggling you make more room for yourself.”³⁷ This research project enacts wiggling during the process of making, which then resonates politically in its entangled context when in an exhibition or installation. Drawing together references and materials in artwork and writing is an iterative re-turning³⁸ to difference, taking note of what seems incongruous becomes a way of sensing the edges of prescribed categories and how much room is allowed for them in daily consideration. Giving what seems to be outsized care and attention to small things like fruits and worms repeatedly agitates where their perceived qualities, value, or sentience (and the room we allow them to take up both physically and categorically) rub up against hierarchies of value and meaning. What gets squeezed into the margins is made more noticeable in this movement. A sustained wiggling is also a purposeful widening of space for bodies, ideas, or ways of being—within codes and structures that already exist—by calling attention to the periphery; sensitising us to the untended; and irritating the continuity of the text.

Making noticeable what is usually un-noticeable

What we move through in study and in practice moves through us. Research doesn’t exist in a bubble separate from life, it is like a light wave that changes and is changed by its surroundings. Red or blue: it depends on the surfaces it encounters. Like light waves, the movements made in this research project are positioned as entangled in the world and of the world, traversing and being traversed by a multitude of sources, relationships, and conditions. Changeable yet insistent, minor while also hoping to resonate, wiggling within this process is an irregular movement that ranges across studio making, letter-writing, internet trawling, reading novels and theoretical texts, and thesis writing at the same time it responds to and with the feel of pavement and paper. This methodology-as-movement draws aspects of contemporary life—such as memes, anecdotes, Instagram, things seen while walking through a park—into the research as crucial sources that have real consequence. The research sometimes moves back into colloquial places, via the dissemination of publications. Including what is part of my everyday life still feels like moving against the current of commonly received directives, specifically regarding what *should* be included in academic research or

37. Ahmed, “Wiggle Room.”

38. Karen Barad, “Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart,” *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 168.

study³⁹ (even following in a lineage of academics or writers who use their immediate surrounds as material). Including flows from two related, wiggly tributaries—the subjective and the ‘popular’—this research project directly implicates itself into and of-the-midst.

If “the personal is political”⁴⁰ now sounds like a cliché, perhaps we might understand the importance of the subjective in the way that Ahmed describes it: “I am, as it were, laying my cards on the table. I am giving you my hand. I have no doubt that some would conclude that my hands cannot be impartial. They are not; I fully intend this not. I write this [...] with partial hands. Impartial hands would leave too much untouched.”⁴¹ ‘Impartial hands’ are those which cannot discern the very real texture of things desired or lost, where through outspread fingers—a Trump-esque gesture if there ever was one—fall the large and small differences that really matter. ‘Partial hands’ are those that are committed and responsive to what Barad has called the world’s often imperceptible “patterings and murmurings”,⁴² and how these might guide our navigation through it.⁴³ In the introduction to *The Politics of Study*, artist Sidsel Meineche Hansen accounts how “the personal is researchable” and “research can be personal”,⁴⁴ as indeed this research is. But wiggling is also about my own re-thinking of received ideas about what is acceptable within academic discourse. Ahmed pinpoints this when she says: “Dialogue is not simply about ‘who speaks’, but about whose speech *gets heard as authorising the dialogue* or, [...] whose speech gets heard and authorised as ‘theory’.”⁴⁵ Writing subjective stories about shopping with my mum;⁴⁶ the velvet couch we had when I was a child;⁴⁷ and how I feel when Microsoft Word insists on putting red lines under words I’ve spelt correctly;⁴⁸ are examples in this text of wiggling against the false (inside)outside dichotomy of the (academic)personal. The inclusion of the ‘popular’ in this research—by which I mean things that are disseminated or created not within the bounds of either the personal and/or the academic—is thought of similarly. Popular culture has flowed ‘upstream’ into modern art for decades, and yet the majority of art writing—aside from that which is focused on works directly citing popular culture—is characterised by a tone of literary gravity. In this writing I reference the worst movie of all time;⁴⁹ talk about Facebook’s server farms;⁵⁰ and include screenshots of a plastic elephant on fake-foods.com.⁵¹ Setting aside this specific text, there is image-trading and on-the-street photo collection within my publications for *Working Together* and *Looking Forwards and Backwards*;⁵² bananas and net bags from the supermarket in *Boyfriend Pillow* and *Souvenir Stand*;⁵³

39. This is particularly felt in written research.

40. Second-wave feminist activist and writer Carol Hanisch, along with her editors Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, is believed to have originated the phrase as a title for an essay in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, 1970. See Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political,” *Carol Hanisch Writings* (blog), 2009, <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>.

41. Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 18.

42. Karen Barad, “On Touching - The Inhuman That Therefore I Am (v1.1),” in *Power of Material / Politics of Materiality*, ed. Susanne Witzgall and Kerstin Stakemeier (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2014), 154.

43. The question of touching naturally brings up ethics, which is explored further in the next sub-section.

44. Sidsel Meineche Hansen and Tom Vandeputte, “Introduction,” in *Politics of Study*, ed. Sidsel Meineche Hansen and Tom Vandeputte (London: Open Editions, 2015), 12.

45. Sara Ahmed, *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 18.

46. See page 79.

47. See page 65.

48. See page 85.

49. See page 88.

50. See page 71.

51. See page 91.

52. See publication inserts.

53. See pages 29 and 105.

rick-rack, upholstery tacks and packing tape. These material⁵⁴ and textual wiggles form part of the threaded process of explicitly connecting work in the studio or gallery to what surrounds it. Pushing against perceived divisions between serious and frivolous, high and low, the research plays with their dissonances and consonances, becoming more situated in the world it hopes to affect and be affected by.



E

Wiggling in this way is incorporated into the expanded research terrain of passing dogs and new loves, perfumes and fake display foods, studio making of sculptures and drawings, publications and installations. Swithering between sources that are unusual neighbours calls attention to the acute ways our categorisation of this-versus-that are always subject to change: how the 'borders' between them are drawn but always crossed; how, as Barad outlines, "Matter is never a settled matter",⁵⁵ and furthermore how our *decisions* about what matters contribute to their very 'mattering'. This is how wiggling as an action-in-process continues to agitate when parts of the research are installed or exhibited. The vibrational movement that resists stasis opens wiggle room in the always-already connected discourses surrounding art institutions, art histories, and other sense-making practices.

Here I return to the descriptions of wiggling. It is an irritation to the continuity of the text. It is breaking the flow. It is an agitation, an oscillation. But what is a more specific description of this mechanism within an artwork? Two things, close to each other. One that—based on previous experience—we believe will refuse to yield to even the most forceful push, so static does it hold its place or meaning against our hands or in our minds. A second—though appearing similar to something we have seen

E: Lucy Meyle, *Souvenir Stand* (detail) (2017). Net bags, fruits and vegetables (real and unreal), plywood, sand, scoria, paint, cardboard, stainless steel fixtures, ball chain, bic pen, stainless steel chain. Dimensions variable. In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

54. There is further discussion of materiality and material choices in the section *Anti-Smooth*.

55. Barad, "On Touching," 160.

before—has begun to move irregularly against the first, tentatively at the beginning and then more and more insistently. The first is resolute in its right to occupy space⁵⁶ and transmit meaning. The second deviates from its original appearance, opening up a different path, previously unseen. The first may be an invisible structure or a very visible one, rooms or 'rooms', walls or 'walls' (see *Extension* on page 119). The research makes up the second thing, deviating against the first, pushing it incrementally.



F

What started as a wiggling in methodology takes on an agency of its own when it vibrates outwards from the research. Rather than suggesting that there is a 'space' outside of our perception that wiggling might reveal, this research project proposes that wiggling might allow us to distinguish nuances within what we think we already understand with certainty. This wiggling might happen without our knowledge (out of the corner of our eye) or might be always-already happening on its own. Perhaps this research is simply letting these things wiggle as they already do. Wiggling happens in the insistent movement *between* and *amongst*, coming up against things that seem immovable and still moving anyway. Through the agitating wiggle—and the sensitisation that it creates—wiggle room can be distinguished for the peripheral things that get shunted to the edges because of their perceived value, their (un)desirability or even their assumed non-sentience. In this case, wiggling opens a bit of extra room specifically within institutional structures and discourses that condition our movement through

F: Lucy Meyle, *Boyfriend Pillow* (detail) (2016). Banana, high-density foam, masking tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.



56. Anonymous, *Los Angeles* (June 2014). From the (now defunct) Tumblr "Men Taking up 2 Much Space on The Train".

gallery spaces; that are present in how we try to discern the exact edges of an image; or the rigidity we might feel in interpreting that image. Perhaps our understanding of the world might be altered if we could become more sensitive to a particular wedge of light, the drape of dust in the air, the way the street passes through the glass window. Or maybe the swaying installational wiggle might allow us to move in a wayward manner ourselves, un-stiffening our limbs as we welcome un-sureness.

In the show *Looking Forwards and Backwards* (part of the collaborative project *Knowing You're Wrong* with Ziggy Lever), shown at Blue Oyster Art Project Space in Dunedin in 2017, a plywood ramp is circling around the periphery of the gallery. Each side of the ramp raises or lowers the viewer slightly as they walk its edges. Looking inward, there is a projector and two mirrors that are themselves rotating, clockwise (a video of which can be found at <http://vimeo.com/223389521>). The mirrors are mounted on metal poles like signs and sit perpendicular to each other. One of the backs of the mirrors is grey, the back of the other one is blue-green. Both colours have a quality that makes me think of a smooth and absorbent wetsuit, damp from the sea. The rotation of the mirrors reflects a projected image of an aster bush around the room. The ramp slices, at an angle, the projected aster's edge. The asters are also split into more parts: one part staying on the wall, part on the ramp, under the ramp, on the people walking on the ramp. Traversing the ramp, literally circling the mirrors, is like playing a game of catch-up. Moving is required in order to 'view' an image in their surfaces, and even then it is a silver sliver that escapes faster than expected. Looking at the mirrors themselves, you can see under the ramp, the back of the other mirror, snaked extension cords. These images seem strange too, a slice of something seemingly hidden that actually lies directly in view. The bright cast of the projector catches on the dust freckling the mirror surface. Where a wedge of light from the projection reaches the back wall, it shies into an alcove and briefly grazes the light bleeding out from the edge of next room. This new light is shifting in shades of blue, yellow, orange, purple.



G



H

G: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *From wall to wall and moving to the centre* (2017). Plywood ramp, mirrors, motors, projected photograph of tree asters. Dimensions variable. In *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Alex Lovell-Smith.

H: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *Looking Forwards and Backwards* (2017). Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Alex Lovell-Smith.



I

How shading flows into edges, the video in the next room, was made using bent and folded coloured paper (bought from the \$2 shop across the road from the gallery). The light and the camera move gently in the video, highlighting edges and then erasing them. The colours shift as the strength of the light or closeness of the camera changes. A piece of yellow paper over blue becomes the edge of a David Hockney pool,⁵⁷ then paper again. On a large table in the middle of the same room, a tri-partite soundtrack is played on three sets of headphones and DVD players. In listening, you can hear a recording of some asters at Sandfly Bay (*The Asters at Sandfly Bay*), which is mostly the sound of crashing wind and waves; the audio to a YouTube video dramatising nineteenth-century mathematician Ludwig Schläfli's concept of the 4th Dimension (*The 4th Dimension Explained*); and a found text about English floral borders altered slightly to refer both to gardens and to exhibitions, that is read aloud by Ruth⁵⁸ from the Dunedin Hard-to-Find Bookstore (*The Growing Requirements of Works*). Shifts in tone and shading constitute edges and then reconstitute them, you have to keep moving, watching, listening, in order to try to discern them, perhaps noticing that their mutability seems certain before it turns doubtful too.

I: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *How shading flows into edges* (2017). Video, plywood, sound, publication. Dimensions variable. In *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Grace Ryder.

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57. David Hockney, *Diving Board with Shadow* (1978). Coloured and pressed paper pulp. 183 x 217cm. From the *Paper Pools* series. <http://www.davidhockney.co/works/etcetera/pools>.

58. She wished to remain somewhat anonymous, hence the exclusion of her surname.

Like our other collaborations as part of the project *Knowing You're Wrong*, Ziggy and I started with a structure. For *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, this took the form of functional, built structures. Aside from the ramp in the front room and the table in the back room, there was no work that was certain until it was installed. We vacillated. We wrote emails back and forth. We were interested in the photograph of the aster bush but unsure whether to use it. We walked to and from the Hocken Library. We thought we wanted objects on the table and then we didn't. We extended the sensitivity required of our ongoing practice of letter writing into the field of installation, letting sounds and images come to us through recommendation or donation, moving against our singular 'autonomy' as artists. Someone let our friend Grace know there were asters at a beach nearby, the woman in the bookshop directly upstairs read out a found text about floral borders in country gardens and how to trim them back so the weeds don't overgrow. The peripheral, re-turning ramp pushed outwards against the walls, and the rotating mirrors walked the image around the room and out into the street.



J



K

J: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *From wall to wall and moving to the centre* (2017). Plywood ramp, mirrors, motors, projected photograph of tree asters. Dimensions variable. In *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Grace Ryder.

K: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *From wall to wall and moving to the centre* (2017). In *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Grace Ryder.

No destination, simply a movement

In their 1978 animation *The Hypercube: Projections and Slicing*, mathematician Thomas Banchoff and computer scientist Charles Strauss elegantly describe three dimensions as a ‘slice’ of four dimensions, two dimensions a ‘slice’ of three dimensions, and so on.⁵⁹ In this example, all triangles are cross-sections of pyramids, every circle is a cross-section of a sphere. Applying this viewpoint to Word’s wiggly line at the beginning of this section, I have begun to think of wiggling as a ‘slice’ of a three-dimensional shape—the helix. It is a curly fry or a curled ribbon twisting in space. Seen from one side it appears as a wiggly line, but tipped slightly it can be seen in perspective. The motion of the helix describes open-endedness, movement without end point, not really “going forward, but only roundabout or sideways”.⁶⁰ The wiggle might be thought of as a helical threading, where the once two-dimensional line drawing becomes a spiral of entanglement.⁶¹ This helical movement—the wiggle dimensionally complicated—is not interested solely in progress towards a goal, in fact, it almost seems bound to become tangled even as it continues its motion. In novelist Ursula K. Le Guin’s text *A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be*, she articulates that moving into the future is “not a progress towards achievement, followed by stasis, which is the machine’s mode, but an interactive, rhythmic, and unstable process”.⁶² It is neither movement for movement’s sake, nor movement with a linear plan. The helix-wiggle relies on turning and returning, revising, never being ‘correct’, acknowledging its entanglement in the material of the world and moving within it.

In both her installation and publication, artist Ruth Buchanan’s practice is one that seems engaged in this kind of re-turning, where an attentiveness to movements and touching is seen through their potential for interference and encounter. The breezy, curved (sometimes fan-assisted) sweep of a curtain billows back and forth (*A Wavy Line*), re-forming the paths of viewers as they angle away from being caught in the sheer material. The curtain’s division of space is flimsy, and yet nonetheless conducts movement and air in particular patterns. People walking through the gallery are channelled by the fabric; at the same time, their movements in the room alter the air pressure, moving the curtain with only their bodily presence. In *Screen: 1, Screen: 2, Screen: 3* (2014), what looks like gridded security fencing—imposing and industrial—is translated through colour and paralleled separation into display mechanisms—spindly and mobile—for drawings, watercolours,

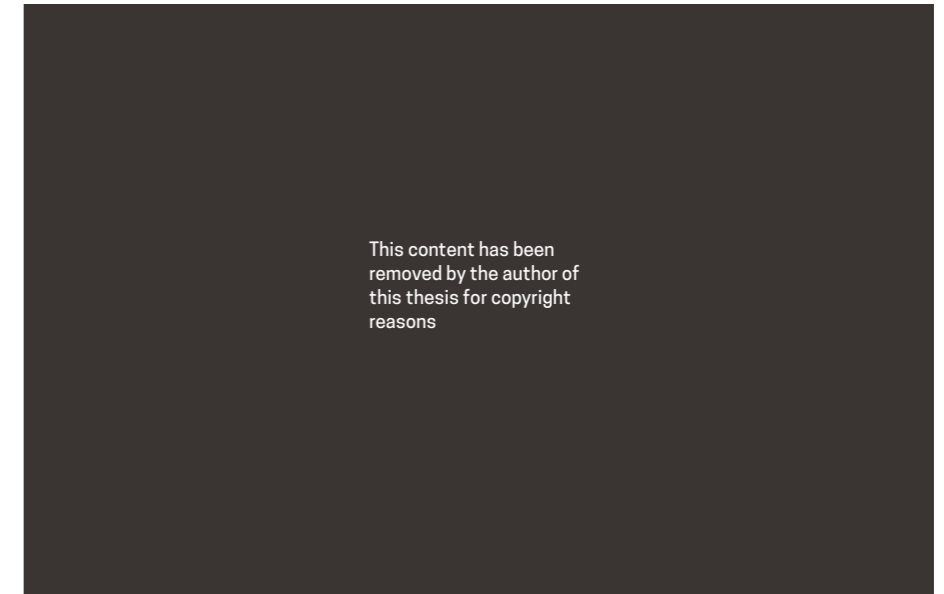
59. Thomas Banchoff and Charles Strauss, *The Hypercube: Projections and Slicing (S)* (1977), accessed November 29, 2016, <http://www.filmaffinity.com/en/film744008.html>.

60. Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View,” 98.



61. In fact, keep twisting a helix and you get a torus (the shape of a cruller donut!), postulated as the shape of the universe. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

62. Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View,” 91.



paintings. These float on them easily, with parts of their frames drifting over the edge. The cross-hatched metal of the fence draws whatever is in the background through them, circumnavigating the structures re-focuses these details through each small square. Changing proximity and position is the decider in what becomes framed as part of the image, the structural accommodations of the display remaining rigid only if the viewer also remains static. In her book, *Lying Freely*, Buchanan writes: “Now I may consider the small things, the details, like how the curtain moves when the window is left slightly open, how rooms change when people occupy them or how what appears as fixed may shift depending from which point you view.”⁶³ In the same book she also notes the route for her tours through the Rietveld Schröder House⁶⁴ in Utrecht (a work titled *Nothing is Closed*, 2009). The traditionally laid out floorplan of the lower level of the Rietveld Schröder house is paired with a radical open-plan top level. The backyard that used to be an unenclosed meadow at the edge of the city is now cut through very close to the house by an imposing overpass.

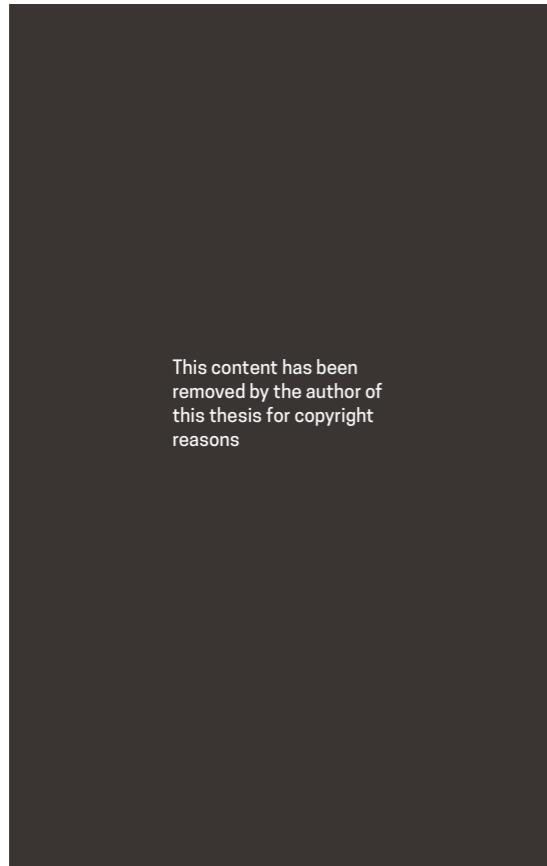
Buchanan directs visitors to remove shoes, look down, go up some stairs. She also reminds herself to stand beside a table, open some windows, hook back a door. These directions seem

L: Ruth Buchanan, *Screen: 1, Screen: 2, Screen: 3* (2014). Powdercoated steel, framed watercolours, screenprints and photograph. Dimensions variable. Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland.

63. Ruth Buchanan, *Lying Freely* (Utrecht: CasCo, 2010), 30.

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64. The open-plan area on the second floor of the Rietveld Schröder house, in Utrecht, The Netherlands. Red 5, “Interior Photographs of the Schroder House,” *The Rietveld-Schroder House* (blog), accessed February 7, 2018, http://rietveldschroderhouse.blogspot.com/2012/12/interior-photographs_6.html.



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flatly instructional, patient, expectant. The text in between these directions is the tour text delivered verbally to the visitors by Buchanan, and is more narrative and suggestive, obliquely abstracted from the space of the house. Writer Sarah Farrar describes the experience of the tour to be disorienting, Buchanan's presentation purposefully engaging with the unique demands of the house (shoe covers to protect the floor, a number of folding table and window demonstrations, actions that block free-roaming visitor movement) and also sidestepping it completely in her verbal text.⁶⁵ Buchanan's performance becomes a deliberate frustration of the received historical and architectural narratives around the Schröder House, allowing for a suggestively personal experience predicated on the feeling of being allowed to freely do some things and being specifically directed to do others.

Turning the pages in *Lying Freely*, each new page seems to be on a different paper stock. On one spread there is a very

M: Ruth Buchanan, *A Wavy Line* (2011). Crepe curtain, powdercoated steel frame. Dimensions variable. In *Furniture, Plan, Rival Brain*, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland.

65. Sarah Farrar, "Rietveld Sidestepped: A Performance by Ruth Buchanan," *Metropolis M*, July 17, 2009, http://www.metropolism.com/nl/reviews/22252_ruth_buchnan_rietveld_sidestepped.

shiny green page (a vivid and deep green, not light enough to be a Kermit-green, though not dark enough to be forest green. Perhaps it is a Kelly green) on the right next to a creamy, dry textured page on the left. The shiny page reflects its facing partner when the book is closed, but when open it reflects a green-lit version of my own face, and holds a little bent well of darkness where my thumb presses into the page. On the page facing the Kelly green page, the text begins: "there is more than one way to a notion",⁶⁶ continuing:

and it is at this very point of exceeding their roles that the two can meet – one addresses the other and says:

"is this yours?" The other replies,

"No, it's wild."⁶⁷

Buchanan's works are a reconfiguration of exhibition, private, public, and publication space—through curtains, fences, direction, paper, arrangement of words—and also of what she calls the "vernacular of appearance" or "vernacular of sensing".⁶⁸ She effaces the straight-line of familiar interpretation by diffracting it through the wavy line of a shifted perspective, a change in proximity, syntactical oddities, narrative tone, or gauzy light. Buchanan's discursive practice re-sites familiar structures (like the curtains and the fences) and substitutes similar things in inappropriate places, causing—as critic and cultural theorist Jan Verwoert notes—"the abstract and concrete [to] trade places".⁶⁹ Turning and re-turning to an experiential openness, through a re-siting of works within publication or iteratively in new installations, is a kind of wiggle movement that flexes within the structures themselves. Through this, writer and art critic Federica Bueti remarks, "bodies, objects, architectures and meanings collide, produce frictions and generate new spaces and modes of relations."⁷⁰ In these frictions, Buchanan's practice begins to rhythmically wiggle open a space, claiming messiness and unpredictability and interference as hopeful assets.

This kind of wiggling might be able to produce larger-scale shifts within socio-spatial and art-institutional hierarchies by sensitising us to unattended spaces within our current structures, making them slightly looser. Ahmed writes:

Sometimes that is what we struggle for: wiggle room; to have spaces to breathe. With breath, comes imagination. With breath, comes possibility. We might in spilling out of the rooms we have been assigned, in our struggle with an assignment, mess things up.

What a spillage. Things, persons: flying out of hand. And that: is hopeful.⁷¹

66. Buchanan, *Lying Freely*, 56.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid., 36.

69. Jan Verwoert, "In Focus: Ruth Buchanan," *Frieze*, January 1, 2013, <https://frieze.com/article/focus-ruth-buchanan>.

70. Federica Bueti and Ruth Buchanan, "Review: Ruth Buchanan 'Lying Freely' and 'The Weather, a Building,'" *Three Letter Words* (blog), 2014, <http://threeletterwords.org/ruth-buchanan-lying-freely-and-the-weather-a-building/>.

71. Ahmed, "Wiggle Room."

72. The wiggle movement, both in process and in installed works, might find a companion in what philosopher Karen Barad calls 'diffraction', a study of shifting entanglements and how to ethically move amongst them. Though Barad draws on a physics term for what occurs when a light wave encounters an obstacle, she distinguishes it from 'interference', calling diffraction a method of "reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement." [Karen Barad, Rick Dolphijn, and Iris van der Tuin, "Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers: Interview with Karen Barad," in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 50]. Karen Barad's conception of diffraction is a useful tool in seeing how to read through these differences, and to speculate on what (or where) any wiggle room might exist, and how to ethically approach what wiggling moves against and within.

By flexing in these rigid spaces, by pushing against, we are likely to begin to understand the possibilities within, and for, difference. It also isn't about replacing those hierarchies with new ones, but rather about becoming sensitive to the entangled complexity of those spaces. In this way the helix-wiggle is predicated not on some end point of clarity but on its irritating and messy entanglement, by being of-the-midst as much as in it,⁷² by being committed to the mess, the spillage, and to the hopeful breath that Ahmed describes.

Coming-up-against-and-within: Entanglement and care

What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.⁷³

As a methodology predicated on encounter, the wiggle movement is also a movement of coming-up-against-and-within, an entangled to-and-fro, a being moved-by as well as moving-against. The nature of this methodology calls for a consideration of responsibility and of the ethical relation of response. If wiggling is a motion that affects and effects—not just the research project itself but amongst the things with which it is entangled—then what are those relations, how are they made, and how might I ethically move within them or think through them, as political theorist Hannah Arendt encourages? Barad says there is no "knowing from a distance",⁷⁴ research is not just in-the-midst of it all, but also of-the-midst. Barad's concepts of intra-action and entanglement are guides to how wiggling can materially affect the world with every relation. This intimate participation in the making and re-making of the universe requires a consideration and commitment to moving ethically.⁷⁵ In this research, care is thought of as a mechanism for an ethics-made-concrete. It is discussed in reference to collaboration with other artists and with material, taking account of the inherent problems of thinking and acting with care in relation to "more than human"⁷⁶ worlds. Lastly, as a complicated practice that can both reinforce and disrupt power structures, what might the difficulties and complexities of care be able to propose?

Lizards, electrons, and humans⁷⁷

In her 2007 book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad proposes that reality is not made by "things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena."⁷⁸ That is, things in the universe are made through relations *with* and also *in*. The outline of things is drawn through the action of relation. Borders, values, shapes, meanings, are all mutually constituted and implicated through what Barad calls intra-actions,⁷⁹ *with(in)* relationships. As Barad notes, "there are no independent relata, only relata-within-relations".⁸⁰ Intra-activity is a continuous making and re-making that causes real, material, "boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies."⁸¹ Rather than taking place in space or time, intra-actions are part of the very making of spacetime,⁸² the determination of matter and meaning is an effect of the "ontological

73. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.
74. Karen Barad, Rick Dolphijn, and Iris van der Tuin, "Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers: Interview with Karen Barad," in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 52.
75. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007), 246.
76. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 1.
77. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 353.
78. *Ibid.*, 140.
79. "Intra-action is not the classically comforting concept of 'interaction' but rather entails the very disruption of the metaphysics of individualism that holds that there are discrete objects with inherent characteristics." *Ibid.*, 422.
80. *Ibid.*, 465.
81. *Ibid.*, 140.
82. *Ibid.*, 430.

inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting ‘agencies.’⁸³ Intra-action doesn’t mean individuals can simply think or will our way out of structures or out of systemic oppressions.

The agency within intra-actions is non-assigned (to or by humans or non-humans) and exists not as a localised, inherent property but as an enactment.⁸⁴ Agency in this case is about understanding “possibilities of mutual response”,⁸⁵ accounting for imbalances of power within a complex field of intra-actions and the cuts that demarcate and constrain. This is how matter attains meaning, by many actions of “cutting together-apart”,⁸⁶ the act of distancing and differing being the thing that makes the difference. Though constrictive in one instant, intra-actions are subject to change in the next. We (“lizards, electrons, or humans”⁸⁷) are all responsible for making the new and different cuts, that make reality whenever we say ‘me’ and ‘you’ or ‘then’ versus ‘now’. Feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti describes this as a way of thinking which “privilege[s] neither the material nor the cultural”,⁸⁸ instead focusing on how they ‘intra-act’. This thinking sees distinctions, like subject/object, cause/effect, as temporary decisions which aren’t inherent or predetermined. Knowledge is constructed only temporarily, and is only a slice of a complex set of relations, all of which affect the others. Why does this matter? Because there is always a decision to slice, which could have happened differently. Thinking about what we are actually doing is to take account of the possible different effects that these decisions can have.

If things in the universe are mutually constituted through their intra-actions *with(in)*, what follows is that all things are always-already uniquely entangled with each other. Rather than “interconnectedness of all being as one”,⁸⁹ entanglements are “specific material relations of the ongoing differentiating of the world”,⁹⁰ and to this they are bound in obligation.⁹¹ Our actions have actual consequences, which are felt materially. Within this conception of the universe, instead of an attempt to escape responsibility, the question—why care? —just feels short-sighted. How can you *not* care? Barad speculates that by understanding these entanglements of matter—which includes the smallest, fastest particle as well as things that cannot be sensed or felt—we are impelled to act ethically. The “irreducible relations of responsibility”⁹² that these entanglements entail exist in the quotidian as much as the cosmic. They are present in quarks and electrons, in moving backwards and forwards within time, over variable distances, into discussions with friends, then out into the street with the sunshine, with animals, with the dead plants on my patio, the live plants inside, and their memories, their wishes. It is in science as much as music, art, writing,

83. Ibid., 139.

84. Barad, Dolphijn, and van der Tuin, “Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers,” 54.

85. Ibid., 55.

86. Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction,” 76.

87. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 353.

88. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 135.

89. Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/Continuities, Space Time Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come,” *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010): 265.

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid.

cooking, talking, walking, sleeping, dreaming. Barad writes that there is “no getting away from ethics on this account of mattering”,⁹³ and indeed the idea of an entangled universe being marked and mattered in every instant (and even in the making of instants themselves) seems to call for a radical commitment to ethical movement with(in) it.

If we might consider wiggling as an iterative response, then how does it specifically deal with the ethical requirements of response-ability? Barad’s energising call for an ethics based on entanglement could easily become a paralysing torrent of possible intra-actions and ‘cuts’. But believing or thinking of actionable ethics and ethical movements means little if there are neither actions nor movements. Barad writes:

Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world’s ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming. It is an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness. Not through the realisation of some existing possibility, but through the iterative reworking of im/possibility, an ongoing rupturing, a cross-cutting of topological reconfiguring of the space of respons-ibility.⁹⁴

Moving towards what is to come, “in ways that are accountable for our part in the world’s differential becoming”⁹⁵ is to put our ‘partial’ hands into action, by participating in making the world and so making ourselves along with it. To act ethically has a lot to do with Arendt’s simple proposal cited at the beginning of this section,⁹⁶ by taking account of and accountability for what it is we are *really* doing. If, as Barad says “All real living is meeting. And each meeting matters”,⁹⁷ then each movement must be thought, done, and made, with care.

Thinking and acting with care

To return to the development of our collaborative show *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, Ziggy Lever and I traded messages. We had done something similar for another collaborative show, called *Working Together*, which was shown in 2015 at St Paul St Gallery III. In both instances, these messages then were published (mostly verbatim, though with some editorial changes) as a free publication as part of their respective exhibitions. For *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, we had started simply with talking via email. This was a doubled conversation, as we had decided each of us were to start a thread that the other then replied to.⁹⁸ The two conversations could then run parallel, the text from one strand touching the other, or strands of the conversation splitting off completely. One thread relied heavily on the sharing of images, while the other

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 353.

96. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.

97. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 353.

98. This was a structure adapted from a double interview by Tauba Auerbach and Carol Bove. See Tauba Auerbach and Carol Bove, “Helical Motion: Tauba Auerbach and Carol Bove in Conversation,” *Mousse*, 2016.

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N

involved communicating more abstract impressions. In this second thread there was only one image, that Ziggy had found browsing the Hocken Collection (Uare Taoka o Hākena)⁹⁹ of historical photographs. It was a silver gelatin photograph of two aster plants (an old-fashioned flower, related to the daisy, that was popular in the Victorian era) that take up the whole frame. In the centre they barely touch and at the edge of the image the asters are distorted slightly, growing blurry and stretched. This was something we kept returning to, as a visualisation of how to stretch our peripheral visions into different dimensions by expanding outwards from an object or idea that we shared. This way of conversing didn't feel like sliding notes back and forth, with a response coming down a single line and then returning. Replying and being replied to down a helical path felt like bouncing two balls around a room—each springy and uncontrollable, their actions inevitable but also unpredictable. I found myself annoyed at times when Ziggy was responding to me in a way that felt too theoretical. Writing quite casually, I couldn't understand why he wouldn't be as informal in his response. He also thought that the aster bushes were growing towards each other, and I couldn't shake the idea that they were once one plant—that while walking through, someone had bent them gently apart. In *A Lover's Discourse*, philosopher Roland

N: H.D Skinner, *Tree Asters, Chatham Islands (1924)*. Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago.

99. A part of Dunedin's Otago University Library that deals mainly with New Zealand history.

Barthes talks of being “struck by the obvious fact that the other is impenetrable, intractable, not to be found; I cannot open up the other, trace back the other's origins, solve the riddle. Where does the other come from? Who is the other? I wear myself out, I shall never know.”¹⁰⁰ About halfway through our email trading I was struck by the fact that this part of the collaboration, like all parts, required a commitment to responding as much as an openness to being responded to, in whatever form it came.

Working collaboratively with another artist feels like a very orderly example of entangled relations: the idea of two humans working together doesn't exactly bend the mind to imagine. And yet even in that relation it was easy for me to forget my ethical responsibility to care for an other's ability to respond. Thinking and acting with care feels risky: in order to be supported or to support, I have to give in to the unknowability of what that entails, to negotiate with the “impenetrable, intractable”¹⁰¹ other (and they with me). It also requires a redefinition of expectations, because, as Lore Segal wrote of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy's friendship, “It's not that they “think so much alike,” but that they did [...] “this thinking-business” for and with each other.”¹⁰² Relationships that are sensitive to the others within them have to tackle these inevitable differences that make the relationship dynamic. This can mean that a collaboration based on care will sometimes be difficult, haphazard, and clumsy, because in taking up the responsibility to pay attention to others' responses we must necessarily also hear what we do not wish to hear. We must be accountable and responsible to what we authorise as ‘mattering’ and ‘meaning’ and what is excluded from the same.¹⁰³ The desire for a smooth and perfect union between two collaborators is one that can cover up this difference.

In his 2011 book *The One and The Many*, art critic Grant Kester describes these effects: “Knowledge is reliable, safe, and certain as long as it is held in monological isolation and synchronic arrest. As soon as it becomes mobilized and communicable, this certainty slips away and truth is negotiated in the gap between self and other, through an unfolding, dialogical exchange”.¹⁰⁴ Continuous certainty is disrupted in a research project that involves thinking with care in relation to our intra-active entanglements. Even if this is a difficult idea to apply to our personal relationships, this kind of care is about understanding that every movement together is a re-drawing of what is possible, that “Our (intra)actions matter—each one reconfigures the world in its becoming”.¹⁰⁵ We can no longer ignore the real effects that that reconfiguration has on ourselves (“lizards,

100. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 134.

101. Ibid.

102. Lore Segal, “The Group of Two,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 1995. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/26/specials/mccarthy-friends.html>

103. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 394.

104. Grant H. Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 19.

105. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 394.



O

O: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *Storage Solutions* (2015). Rocks, sound, latch-hook rug, newsprint, crayon, plastic strapping, canvas, wood, dirt, plastic bag, photograph, plants, fluorescent tubing. Dimensions variable. In *Group Shower*, FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

106. Ibid, 353.

107. Ibid.

108. Shumon Basar in Céline Condorelli, ed., *Support Structures*, 2nd ed. (Sternberg Press, 2014), 79.



109. A very extreme example of my old neighbours trying to keep their Persimmon tree upright. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

electrons, or humans¹⁰⁶) and others (“lizards, electrons, or humans¹⁰⁷), and that annoyance, harm, and irritation are all possible effects as much as are happiness, escape, or surprise. Perhaps by attempting to make known and make visible these effects, and taking account of them, we might be able to move more ethically and imaginatively in our entangled relations. Cultural critic Shumon Basar describes support as “belief made concrete amidst abstract relations”,¹⁰⁸ and this is equally applicable to care. If an intra-active universe feels somewhat distant—even if we are intimately involved in its very making—acting ethically in care is a way to make concrete our belief in that closeness.

Like a hand underneath a box to stabilise the weight inside, or a too-bendy plant tied against a garden stake,¹⁰⁹ an idea of care can seem simple. One thing holding another thing up, something helping something else into being, being attentive to the growing requirements of others. In *Storage Solutions* (with Ziggy Lever, 2016) at FUZZY VIBES Gallery on Karangahape Road, I made rugs on which Ziggy then placed rocks, a soft bed for them in their outdoor home. We also hung bright crayon rubbings featuring the non-descript textures of the surrounding walls, made sounds which then played as ambient tracks (amplified by buckets), hung a plant in a bag of dirt over a canvas so when it rained it would make its own imprint. But what care looks like changes in different lights. Did the rock prefer to be in the garden instead? No one way to care is correct, and care on its own is neither positive nor negative. It can exist within and without economic bounds, it can be damaging or uplifting by turns and even both at the same time.

In *Matters of Care*, Puig de la Bellacasa describes care as the “concrete work of maintenance, with ethical and affective implications, and as a vital politics in interdependent worlds.”¹¹⁰ In this research it is doing and making of artwork that constitutes this ethico-political investment in the making of the world. Thinking *through* care in order *to* care is an important step in a research project interested in giving and receiving care as an ethical and political action. Exploring the wavering qualities of care as applied within this research is part of reckoning with the entangled qualities of matter, by acting with(in) them. In the book *Support Structures* Condorelli talks about how foregrounding this kind of support “invites us to rethink our relative positions in the world, to reveal their latent or possible political alliances and resistances to people, concepts, ideas or projects, institutions and organisations with our full critical faculties, through the conditions of active participation and intervention in an affirmative politics.”¹¹¹ Condorelli positions support as an active condition that requires a stated position, whether that be political, social, or personal. Support made concrete necessitates placing oneself directly into relationships, rather than acting at a distance.¹¹²



P

P: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *Storage Solutions* (2015). Newsprint, crayon. 59.4 x 84.1 cm. In *Group Shower*, FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

110. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 5.

111. Condorelli, “Directions For Use,” 12.

112. Ibid.



Q



R

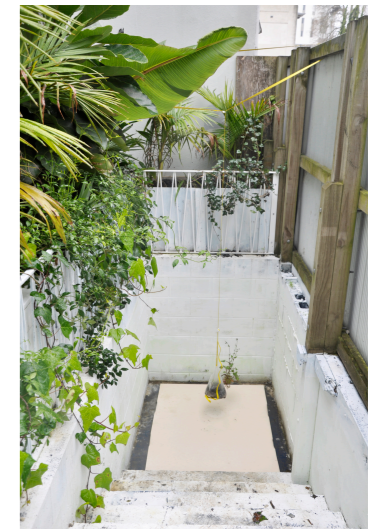
In this research, care in artwork (process or ‘outcome’) is an active, explicit way in which the iterative making and remaking of the world is ethically considered and acted upon. As Puig de la Bellacasa states, “vital maintenance is not sufficient for a relation to involve care, but that without maintenance work, affectivity does not make it up to care and keeps it closer to a moral intention.”¹¹³ There has to be a *doing* of care at the same time as there is an affective investment in its outcome. As the wiggle movement comes-up-against-and-within the entangled relations of things, collaborators, sources, and exhibition spaces, acting with care is a condition of those materially situated relations. It consists variably of listening, being close to, responding to and with, being accountable to effects, and caring for others’ response-ability, as well as questioning the boundaries of care itself. Considering these relations are not about reaching an end—where the perfect amount of positive care has been attained—thinking through care calls on us to “lose the plan [and] throw away the map.”¹¹⁴ Taking the intra-active dynamism of relations as a guiding principle, care reinforces the necessity to act according to the particular relations-at-hand, rather than applying any universal method of support.

Q: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *Storage Solutions* (2015). Rocks, sound, latch-hook rug, newsprint, crayon, plastic strapping, canvas, wood, dirt, plastic bag, photograph, plants, fluorescent tubing. Dimensions variable. In *Group Shower*, FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

R: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *Storage Solutions* (2015). In *Group Shower*, FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

113. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 5.

114. Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View,” 98.



S



T



U

S: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *Storage Solutions* (2015). Canvas, wood, plant, plastic bag, dirt, plastic strapping. Dimensions variable. In *Group Shower*, FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

T: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *Storage Solutions* (2015) (detail). In *Group Shower*, FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

U: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *Storage Solutions* (2015). Rock, plastic strapping, newsprint, crayon. Dimensions variable. In *Group Shower*, FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.



V

The problems of care

At Lim Supermarket on New North Road (just past the Mt. Albert shops), I noticed on one of the top shelves in the fruit and vegetable section a neat pile of Ya pears. This supermarket is always quite busy and the single-lane aisles don't tolerate unnecessary delay, especially for the purposes of examining a single pear. The reason for lingering was the pear's wrapping, something that seems to be a peculiarity of Ya pears and other easily damaged fruits like pawpaws and mangoes. The pear I was holding was wrapped in a doubled-over square of white tissue paper—twisted at the top—and around this was an open-ended foam net.¹¹⁵ Each pear on the shelf was sitting on a purple moulded paper-pulp tray in a shallow indentation. The wrapping of the pear struck me as a caring gesture, one intended to protect the fruit from harm.

This encounter formed the central idea for *Serving Suggestions*, a solo show that ran during April 2016 at RM Gallery in Auckland. Alongside an oversized version of the foam net that had so well protected the pear, was a pair of bananas (one made with masking tape and marker pen, one that wasn't) spooning on the floor; two large paintings made from dried orange peel; and a stretched piece of newsprint with tan lines from being faded in the sun using its own stretcher bars as a stencil. The paintings and the newsprint were held taut using closely spaced pink upholstery tacks. One of the bananas aged to black over the course of the show, while the other remained as perky and yellow as ever. The pear protector relaxed near the windows, the newsprint evened its colouring. One of the orange paintings hung out of the window, getting some sun.

V: Lucy Meyle, *Pear Protector (detail)* (2016). Foam window-worm. Dimensions variable. In *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

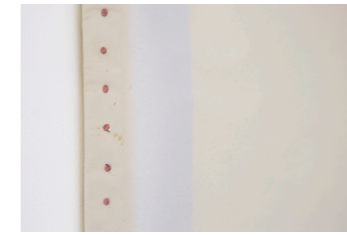
115. I also associate this foam net with Gordon's Gin bought duty-free, my parents would keep it in this little protective wrap, in a cupboard above the fridge.



W



X



Y



Z



A2

W: Lucy Meyle, *Orange Painting (sunning)* (2016). Canvas, stretcher bars, C clamps, oranges, upholstery tacks. Dimensions variable. In *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

X: Lucy Meyle, *Serving Suggestions* (2016). RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

Y: Lucy Meyle, *Tan Lines (detail)* (2016). Newsprint, sunlight, stretcher bars, upholstery tacks. 30 x 40cm. In *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

Z: Lucy Meyle, *Orange Painting (sunning)* (2016). In *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

A2: Lucy Meyle, *Serving Suggestions* (2016). RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.



B2



C2

B2: Lucy Meyle, *Orange Painting (sorry snail)* (detail) (2016). Canvas, stretcher bars, oranges, snail, upholstery tacks. 80 x 115cm. In *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

C2: Lucy Meyle, *Orange Painting (sorry snail)* (detail) (2016), in *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

Making the orange paintings involved peeling kilos of oranges, drying the peel, crushing it to form a pigment, rubbing the pigment into the canvas, then laying the whole thing out in the sun with objects (a bucket, a brick, a plant pot) on it to fade certain areas. I was thinking about what it might mean to let the oranges be the colour orange in a painting—since historically they had lent their name to the colour itself—and this idea was in the front of my mind when I was placing the garden objects onto the canvas. One of the bricks I was laying onto the painting had (unknown to me) a snail suckered onto the underside of it. Placing it down, I accidentally crushed it. Poor snail. Its green-brown blood can now be seen on the edge of

one of the paintings. The sculptures in *Serving Suggestions* were an attempt at making concrete actions of care, and in trying to care for the oranges and our possible artistic collaboration I had killed the snail. By directing care towards one thing we are always turning away from something else, or from some other way of caring. In regards to the Ya pear, what had struck me as a caring gesture could also have been easily determined as a suffocating one, based on false consideration (the wrapping actually intended to shore up the economic value of the fruit to the customer) and one that could be damaging environmentally (the foam material is incapable of bio-degrading even over thousands of years, dwarfing the life a pear by many orders of magnitude).



D2



E2

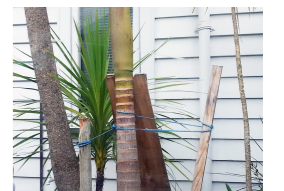
Sometimes it is difficult to know whether actions are helping or hindering what you wish to care for. Starting as a simple idea—a hand under a box, the bendy plant tied to a stake,¹¹⁶ care is soon problematised. Diminishing a plant's movement or attempting to stabilise it might by turns be supportive or restrictive, or somewhere in between. Verwoert has suggested: "The act of making such an offer of care and support would only be appropriate and justified if the needs of the other could be truthfully determined."¹¹⁷ What if that is impossible to do? Verwoert writes:

Usually when we think about what it means to act, we do so in terms of what is within our own powers. The peculiar thing about caring, however, seems to be that while it is a demanding activity, strangely enough the power to care comes to us *from someone else*.¹¹⁸

This is the ambivalence inherent in care—who is the carer and who is cared for? Does the rug like to be combed? Are the trees

D2: Lucy Meyle, *Comb* (2015). Latch-hooked wool rug, apple, miniature plastic comb. Dimensions variable. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

E2: Lucy Meyle, *Comb* (detail) (2015). Photo by Ziggy Lever.



116. Another plant enthusiastically staked. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

117. Jan Verwoert, "Personal Support: How to Care," in *Support Structures*, ed. Céline Condorelli (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), 165.

118. *Ibid.*

entertained? If I can't ask, verbally, how can I know? Am I given agency to care by the plant or I am giving it to the plant? In this it pays to be careful, as Barad asserts: "the notion that there are agents who have agency, or who grant agency, say, to more-than-humans (the granting of agency is an ironic notion, no?), pulls us back into the same old humanist orbits over and over again."¹¹⁹ Perhaps a better angle, and again echoed in Verwoert's questioning of support, is in being open to the possibilities for care or support, in being open to that which is more-than-human.¹²⁰ For some reason the threshold for an over-the-top level of care or attention seems to be lowered (to humans) in relation to more-than-humans. Proposing care to rocks and bananas seems ridiculous to some, but why is this? We determine what are 'normal' levels of care, and in applying those levels, there lies the undercurrent of care—the division of social and political power. By responding to the ethical questions central to care and caring, we might be able to draw and redraw those divisions of power.

Puig de la Bellacasa suggests that exploring the deep uncertainties of care and caring, through touch, is "a way to keep close to an engagement to respond to what a problem 'requires'".¹²¹ Touch is a possible way to "resist inflated virtual (future) possibility detached from (present) material finitudes",¹²² by coming up close to what we are situated within, and by being co-formed by the reversibility of touch.¹²³ We are touched by the same things that we touch, what is wiggled against is necessarily up against us too. Through this close engagement with materials in and of the world, collaborators human and more-than-human, we are better able to open up our held distinctions between the 'us' and the 'other', and who is more or less deserving of our care. Again, this is not to suggest that more-than-humans and humans can exist in a relationship outside of their power imbalances, but by beginning to think of how we are made through our relation to an-other, how "Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other."¹²⁴ The relational action of care to/with human and more-than-human entities can become a political movement *against* what might be considered the 'normal' ways to care. We are fine with wrapping pears but somewhat less understanding when we think of souvenir stands for worms (as in *Souvenir Stand*, 2017). There are obvious difficulties in determining whether entities wish for care, what type of care to give/be given, and whether the ramifications of such care are positive or negative.

This research does not seek to give definitive answers to any of these complications, but rather to explore these questions as

119. Barad, Dolphijn, and van der Tuin, "Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers," 69.

120. This is a term used by María Puig de la Bellacasa to speak of an expanded realm of action not limited by the 'non' linguistic structure (non-human, etc). Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 1.

121. *Ibid.*, 110.

122. *Ibid.*, 112.

123. *Ibid.*, 20.

124. Barad, "On Touching," 161.

openings for new possibilities of care without smoothing over care's complexities. The absurdity of paintings sunning themselves becomes a point on which our conceptions for what care can and should be revolves. Puig de la Bellacasa writes that "for more caring affective ecologies to become possible, we need speculative thinking, and a fair amount of fabulation",¹²⁵ so that we might be able to flex our ethical imaginations. Care outside the bounds of current norms is a way to expand our notions of what radical care might be. Barad emphasises the importance of being exposed to 'the other' and asks "How would we feel if it is by way of the inhuman that we come to feel, to care, to respond?"¹²⁶ Being alive to these possibilities means seeing that we are co-formed through care, and that acting in care with the more-than-human might be something that changes our understanding of 'feeling' itself.

125. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 219.

126. Barad, "On Touching," 162.



F2

F2: Giving the hand a manicure, for *Yes yes yes yes yes* (2015). In *Wearing Out*, Pilot Space, Hamilton. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

Faith as a cascade

If the movements in this research are ever-moving, then what, if anything, are they moving towards? Some ‘better’ future? The wiggle movement as a methodology is un-oriented; it calls attention to the untended within normative discourse; it moves and it seeks to be moved by what it is entangled with, it thinks and acts within the difficulties of care, rather than towards any particular future. Yet at the same time there is a desire to orient myself, to do what is ‘right’, to do ‘good’. The previous sections have used the words ethics and care, and these are not means-to-an-end but acts that matter as themselves. But how can a methodology do anything—and especially anything ‘good’ or ethical—if it has no set direction; if we are heading towards... nothing in particular? What comes after ethics?

Cultural sociologist Pascal Gielen has outlined a sequential arc: “justice comes after ethics and before utopia.”¹²⁷ So perhaps we might think of an orientation towards a more ‘just’¹²⁸ future, a broad application of entangled ethical relations. In this sequence, by speculating on an ideal ‘just’, or egalitarian future we can work backwards to shape our ethics in the now. To Gielen, whereas ethics might signpost the direction, “acts of justice actually go in a certain direction and thus ‘realize’ the way to a desired outcome and future.”¹²⁹ He writes: “justice shapes that teleological path between now and later, between here and a better yonder. [...] Without such a horizon, justice would be ‘pointless’ in both meanings of the word: it would have neither meaning nor direction.”¹³⁰ But the auxiliary function of an ethics shaped by an imagined future is the narrowing of that horizon, a reduction of possibility. The TV show *Star Trek*, in its vibrant and popular imaginings for the future of humanity, has been said to predict certain technological advances¹³¹ like Bluetooth headsets,¹³² tablet computers,¹³³ and universal translators.¹³⁴ However, *Star Trek* has actually shaped the invention of many of these same technologies, by influencing the techno-futurist imaginations of scientists, computer programmers, and entrepreneurs.¹³⁵ If *Star Trek* had never aired, what are the possible technologies that might have been made instead? What if justice as imagined doesn’t go far enough, or doesn’t provide for those who need it? Trying to conceive of a better and more ‘just’ future, then acting to put that (and only that) future in motion can perhaps work to constrain us to those imagined outcomes. Walking backward from the future to the now bends apart the grass, it blazes the imagined trail that we eventually follow. What if the future

127. Pascal Gielen, “Walking Straight from the Imaginary into the Common Here and Now: The Matter of Aesthetic Justice,” in *Aesthetic Justice: Intersecting Artistic and Moral Perspectives*, ed. Pascal Gielen and Niels Van Tomme (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015), 26.
128. In this case, justice is separate from law.
129. Gielen, “Walking Straight from the Imaginary into the Common Here and Now,” 27.
130. *Ibid.*
131. Mun Keat Looi, “Here Are All the Things Star Trek Accurately Predicted,” *Quartz* (blog), September 8, 2016, <https://qz.com/766831/star-trek-real-life-technology/>.
132. Spock wearing a wireless communication device. “Earpiece,” *Memory Alpha*, accessed February 12, 2018, <http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/Earpiece>.
133. A PADD, or Personal Access Display Device, from *Star Trek*. “PADD,” *Memory Alpha*, accessed February 12, 2018, <http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/PADD>.
134. Starfleet issue universal translators. “Universal Translator,” *Memory Alpha*, accessed February 12, 2018, http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/Universal_translator.
135. “Trek Talks: NASA & Star Trek Boldly Go at SDCC,” *StarTrek.com*, accessed December 12, 2017, <http://www.startrek.com/article/trek-talks-nasa-star-trek-boldly-go-at-sdcc>.

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deserves more than we can imagine? Gielen notes the difference between “rational-scientific, religious, or legal-technical”¹³⁶ types of justice, and the considerations of justice within artwork. However, he does suggest that considering justice within contemporary art making can be a way to question the idea of a single correct way of moving towards the goal of justice itself.¹³⁷ He writes that this kind of non-directional questioning¹³⁸ of the application of justice: “irritates its object, challenges it to discard its identity without offering a well-defined path to take”,¹³⁹ siting it in contrast to political-activist artwork. He continues: “artists do point out that everything that is can also always be different, but without knowing whether the alternative roads are better.”¹⁴⁰ Our direction is always yet to be decided, justice is yet-to-come¹⁴¹ and so must be fought for in the here and now, down many possible roads that are impossible to choose between. The grass is bent apart neither here nor there, the wind moves across it in waves, and we are free to walk many paths with no specific destination in mind.

Derrida writes that the “undecidable is not merely the oscillation of the tension between two decisions; it is the experience of that which [...] is still obligated [...] to give itself up to the impossible decision”,¹⁴² it’s the “nonpassive endurance of the aporia”,¹⁴³ a kind of revelling in the undecidable, that makes our decisions responsible. For Derrida, justice is “an experience of the impossible”,¹⁴⁴ when ‘applied’ it ceases to be just, though we are called upon to make just decisions with some urgency.¹⁴⁵ This doesn’t undermine our actions in the here/now. Rather, this position calls to us—like Barad’s intra-active entanglements—to engage with making responsible decisions, at the same time as we understand that justice will never be ‘done’, that there is no one direction to justice once-and-for-all, and that a final, future justice is an impossibility yet one that we should continue to act in mind of. Wiggling and movements, as we began this section, are about a destination-less movement, a disruptive commitment to responsibility *now*.

Resisting linearity and stasis

Leaving open the possibilities of the future, and still being affectively invested with care in its making, can be a difficult road to navigate. Haraway implores us to consider balancing on a knife edge—understand the serious problems of the present but resist sliding into despair for the future.¹⁴⁶ She suggests that “staying with the trouble”,¹⁴⁷ is a way in which we might retain our commitment to acting with the now. In research it is tempting to trace a path to a high point of achievement, to a solution-contribution that can be accurately outlined in

136. Gielen, “Walking Straight from the Imaginary into the Common Here and Now,” 31.

137. *Ibid.*, 40.

138. Perhaps Gielen might be considered as echoing Jacques Rancière, who writes in *Dissensus*: “it is possible to define a certain dissensual practice of philosophy as an activity of de-classification that undermines all policing of domains and formulas. It does so not for the sole pleasure of deconstructing the master’s discourse, but in order to think the lines according to which boundaries and passages are constructed, according to which they are conceivable and modifiable. [...] Engaging in critique of the instituted divisions, then, paves the way for renewing our interrogations into what we are able to think and do.” Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: A&C Black, 2010).

139. Gielen, “Walking Straight from the Imaginary into the Common Here and Now,” 40.

140. *Ibid.*

141. Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michael Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson, trans. Mary Quaintance (New York: Routledge, 1992), 27.

142. *Ibid.*, 24.

143. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 16.

144. Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” 16.

145. *Ibid.*, 27.

146. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.

147. *Ibid.*

an abstract’s worth of words (plus or minus 10%). There is a pragmatic thread of my nature that says: “we can fix this, if we just follow this list of instructions.” In focusing on immediately ‘fixing’ things and rolling-up-my-sleeves, I have helped my brother with his mountains of dishes but I have failed to be able to fathom the depth and texture of his depression. Relatedly, my anxiety about the future—and the cosmically different timescales of mine, the environment’s, and the universe’s—can on certain days dissolve my belief in trying at all. Some things just seem too much to comprehend, much less encourage a situated being-there where difficulty and trouble aren’t smoothed over by either anxious passivity or reductive pragmatism. In staying-with, we should try to withstand sliding into either simple fixes or fixed paralysis, wavering in the much more difficult space of (in)action that lies between. Haraway writes that staying with the trouble is not “a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures”, but rather something that we must do “as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”¹⁴⁸ This staying-with involves moving against anxious stasis and solutions-based action.

In the economic-productionist climate of the current time, these solutions are often pitched forwards, as if moving forwards is the only option, an arc of possibility that jumps over difficulties or circumvents them. We must never regress,¹⁴⁹ never go back, we must push forward in innovation and creation—art becomes an industry of creativity. There is never seen to be a problem in these worlds that cannot be overcome by *the next*. Puig de la Bellacasa points out that we must hold ground against the pressures of “progressive timescapes of anxious futurity”¹⁵⁰ as imposed upon us by this economic-productionist ethos, as they deny what is immeasurable and incalculable in the production of organised ‘forward-thinking’ solutions to complex problems. There isn’t some easy ‘way out’ of the economic-productionist miasma that we just haven’t thought of yet—being in a position to eschew monetary reimbursement, or having to working for ‘free’, are social outcomes of an uneven system that relies on timely outcomes and products. What refuses to become part of a calculation of value or efficiency is “untimely and worthless”,¹⁵¹ resigned to be overlooked by the linearity of capitalism. Puig de la Bellacasa suggests we decentre “unilinear, anthropocentric temporalities in order to make time for a multiplicity of others.”¹⁵² In staying with the trouble, and indeed in *causing* trouble, we might hope to disrupt the linear arc towards the future, to “rearrange and rebalance relations between a diversity of co-existing tempo-

148. *Ibid.*, 1.

149. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 210.

150. *Ibid.*

151. *Ibid.*, 221.

152. *Ibid.*, 214.

ralities.”¹⁵³ Moving with/within, by disrupting,¹⁵⁴ by fathoming depths and textures without trying to apply neat solutions, we can remain in touch and in trouble with the threaded complexities of the universe. Making multitudes of objects, publications, and installations, that are heterogeneous in their proposals rather than presenting a closed-world version of the future, can constitute a refusal of a linear timeline. To recall Le Guin; we can’t think of the future as “progress towards achievement, followed by stasis, which is the machine’s mode”, rather we should we be disrupting it as “an interactive, rhythmic, and unstable process”¹⁵⁵ that doesn’t run smooth. Conflicting logics, unstable materials, and fuzzy-edged images become a way of disrupting stable readings and interpretations, as questions are thrown up, and works are subject to change. There is no set direction, no road map. Moving-towards, now means moving towards...nothing. This ‘nothing’ is “not absence, but the infinite plenitude of openness”,¹⁵⁶ instead of a point like the blob of ink at the end of a line drawing, it is like the wind blowing through the grass, as it traces many possibilities.

Moving towards nothing

There are a few lines by poet Alice Fulton that go:

Nothing will unfold for us unless we move toward what
looks to us like nothing: faith is a cascade.¹⁵⁷

The threshold of ‘something’ for humans is generally congruent with our ability to observe that something, whether directly or through its effects and interactions with other ‘somethings’. The ruptures between somethings and nothings are so often aligned with what humans have the capability to determine.¹⁵⁸ Lots of things look to me like nothing—the void of space for example, the vacuum, isn’t that zero-energy, and so it is nothingness? But a vacuum, writes Barad “isn’t empty, but neither is there anything in it.”¹⁵⁹ Nothingness is an indeterminacy that is made up of indeterminacies and openness. Barad traces the void as full of:

[...] lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/ becoming. The vacuum is flush with yearning, bursting with innumerable imaginings of what could be. The quiet cacophony of different frequencies, pitches, tempos, melodies, noises, pentatonic scales, cries, blasts, sirens, signs, syncopations, quarter tones, allegros, ragas, bebops, hip-hops, whimpers, whines, screams, are threaded through silence, ready to erupt, but simultaneously crosscut by a disruption, dissipating, dispersing the would-be sound into non-being, an indeterminate

153. Ibid., 214–15.

154. Disruption has also been co-opted and absorbed by the tech industry as a descriptor for products and services that open up new revenue streams or markets.

155. Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View,” 91.

156. Karen Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice*, 100 Notes 100 Thoughts 99 (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 16.

157. Alice Fulton, “Shy One,” in *Cascade Experiment: Selected Poems* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 60.

158. In his text *The Third Table*, object-orientated ontologist Graham Harman describes three tables. The ‘first’ table is what we can understand scientifically (even if we can’t experience it), as made up of molecules. The ‘second’ table is the everyday table that we understand through memory, experience, and touch. To Harman, art might be able to describe the third table, that which is the table ‘itself’. The problem with Harman’s characterisation, is that it focuses on a physical and ontological division in the world as it exists for humans. This division, which relegates things which move differently to what we are accustomed (atoms, quarks, etc.) to a sub-human level, is seen by Karen Barad as convenient (and questionable). Put another way, the rupture between Harman’s first and second table just happens to be along the line to which humans are attuned. Graham Harman, *The Third Table*, 100 Notes - 100 Thoughts 85 (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

159. Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness?*, 12.

symphony of voices. The blank page teeming with desires of would-be traces of every symbol, equation, word, book, library, punctuation mark, vowel, diagram, scribble, inscription, graphic, letter, inkblot, as they yearn toward expression. A jubilation of emptiness.¹⁶⁰

What looks like nothing is in fact a “radical openness, an infinity of possibilities”.¹⁶¹ This liveliness cannot be felt if the same divisions are re-inscribed over and over again. If we can move in a way that assumes the impossible to be, in fact, possible, then perhaps this belief might set off a cascade of occurrences and understandings. So instead of moving toward an ideal future and moving back from there into the now, what if instead there is a movement towards nothing? Rather than a call to give up, this might be call to remain indecisive and open in our movements, still being insistent as a wiggle, but loosening its joints. The tri-partite soundtrack in *Looking Forwards and Backwards* was a work in irresolution, where neither Ziggy nor I wished to decide on one sound and so all three were chosen as multiple voices of the same video work. Being decisively indecisive is being open to the possibility of the impossible, the “ontological indeterminacy” that constitutes a “radical openness, an infinity of possibilities”,¹⁶² which resides in mattering itself.

Each turn of the mirrors in *From wall to wall and moving to the centre* refracts the light in any number of different ways. The line of ‘progress’ is discombobulated into a drunken circling ramp, steady footing is fleeting, creaking, as the plywood shifts under the changing gaits of those upon it. Forwards and backwards are two of an infinite number of ways to go, and ways of going. The movements of light in *How shading flows into edges* makes and remakes the paper into pools and bridges. Belief in the liveliness of bananas and snails and oranges is made concrete and yet is also troubling because it threatens my sureness in how I might divide care ‘normally’. There isn’t a way out of these conundrums, no suggestion of escape to another place altogether where engagement with matter and mattering could be shaped into universally ‘good’ and ethical actions. Making artwork is to remain with these problems, with the infinite possibilities, making small inroads into our attunement to the same. Derrida asks, “How is an intuition of what is not there possible?”¹⁶³ Perhaps there is a kind of relief in this experience of uncertainty that might allow an intuition of the impossible; to move with nothingness and into nothingness.

160. Ibid., 13.

161. Ibid., 16.

162. Ibid.

163. Jacques Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 97.

Staying as the trouble

The recession of what is decidable can be one of many points of change. When I ask, “which way?” there are endless possibilities for answers. As Ahmed points out, “When the way turns into a question, you become aware of possibility.”¹⁶⁴ Questions, problems, difficulties, troubles, wiggles, all are irritations to a neat linearity of things-as-usual. Care too, and collaboration, both entail some kind of questioning of an isolated certainty. Though taking into consideration the need for *some* kind of proximal position and commitment in order to ethically move in the present, the wiggle movement resists a predetermined arc towards an ideal, nameable not-now. The wiggle movement is an ever-going, sensitising movement. It is a refusal to choose one path, it is a pushing back and forth, a vacillation with no end. It is also directionless, heading towards ‘nothing’. Nothing as an impossible-to-imagine space of infinite possibility and difference, of breathing room and a space of spillage. The manifold materiality of this research smudges a clean line of progress, as it traverses publication, installation, sculpture, drawing, writing, amongst institutional spaces (gallery and university), public spaces, mobile spaces, and static spaces. The wiggle is entangled, its movements constituting a commitment to undecidability and unpredictability. These movements are about refusing to choose, about reckoning with the impossible, the ambiguities and questions, the complexities of care and ethical relations. This research includes work that questions the application of care (and applies it anyway), thinks about the timescale difference of a pear and its foam protector and its ecological impact (then makes a larger version out of the same material), tries to resist closed ‘outcomes’ (and yet engages in exhibitions where for all and intents and purposes, there is an ‘outcome’). Calling these necessary engagements for making work might be letting myself off the hook too easily. But they are a knowing making-trouble for any conception of action without consequence, of making ‘cuts’ in matter without it mattering, of a smooth and easy ride out of the here and now into a shiny future. Acting in the here/now, the movement of this research prefers to messily abrade the present. Wiggling sensitises and gives leeway for various potentialities, affirming the unpredictable and complicated as necessary conditions for imagining any future.

There is no right way to go. But there are ways to go. Maybe also a *long* way to go—an infinitely long way, or perhaps not long at all. Derrida has said, “one cannot decide, and this is the interesting thing”,¹⁶⁵ and here I refuse to decide. It seems like the movement is the important thing, because I’m still

164. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 218.

165. Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Rottenberg, “Declarations of Independence,” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 49.

not exactly sure *what* I am moving towards. The *what* doesn’t lie somewhere dormant or asleep, waiting for me to reach it. Whatever it is, it shifts itself when I get a glimpse, it is always yet-to-come, and what it will come-to is equally undecipherable. Maybe the *what* isn’t simply *what* at all, but a *with what* or a *how what*. And maybe there is no toward but an *untoward*. I am decisive in my inevitable indecisiveness.¹⁶⁶ Haraway reminds us to “stay with the trouble”¹⁶⁷ but what we if don’t just stay *with* but stay *as* the trouble?¹⁶⁸ Stay as the person who won’t decide, who muddies the water, who remains undecidable, who refuses an either/or, especially when the question (to what? for what?) is untenable. Writes Le Guin: “Will you choose freedom without happiness, or happiness without freedom? The only answer one can make, I think is: No.”¹⁶⁹ To reckon with the possibilities that cannot (yet) be fathomed, I wiggle to refuse the linearity of continuity, of a neat academic text with everything in a row, of a consistent logic, of sanded-down smoothness, of care given within normal bounds, of closing myself to the response-ability of others. I move towards what looks like nothing, towards a great breathing space of imagination, where the noisy void calls out to me—turn and return!¹⁷⁰

166. Sean Gaston, *Derrida and Disinterest* (London: Continuum, 2005), 16.

167. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.

168. Haraway mentions this too, on the very first page of *Staying with the Trouble*: “Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.” *Ibid.*, 1.

169. Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View,” 98.

170. *Ibid.*, 85.

Anti-
Smooth

Anti-smooth

At the very beginning of the weekly high school Big Band rehearsal we were asked to tune our instruments to the piano as it sounded a note. We would individually play and the conductor would ask us whether we were in tune or not. Waiting for my turn was a mixture of dread and clammy sweat, as the inevitable moment of reckoning came closer. When my turn for tuning arrived, I could tell when I was off but was never sure how. Too sharp or too flat? And by how much? At least it was always a fifty-fifty guess which one. On the days when I would be in tune immediately and without having to guess whether I was sharp or flat, I got the feeling that in my ease, I was being denied something. To be sharp was to be too high, to be flat was not high enough, to be in tune was to be unremarkable.

Around the same time when I was growing up, my parents had a couch that was made of short, indistinctly beige velvet. Once a friend of theirs house-sat and spilled something on one of the arms. Her mother—as she told my mother over the phone while we were still on holiday—had said to sponge out the stain and then iron the wet patch. When we arrived back there was no stain but there was a neat rectangle of shiny flat velvet. I would sit on that side of the couch and try to move the flattened velvet back to being sharply upright again with my finger, and would hear the sound of the Big Band tuning piano in my head. What was the distance between the velvet fibres' correct position *before* and their wrong position *now*? I would try and calculate it based on the changing height of my knuckle.

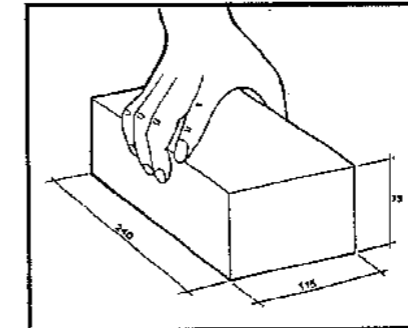
Unexpected variation makes things difficult in comparison to the correctness of being in tune, or the even nap of the velvet couch before spillage. Those ideal things are 'conceptually ergonomic',¹⁷¹ pitched to reduce difficulty, designed for comfort. The flat velvet rectangle was wilfully against the grain of the rest no matter how many times I would try to brush it upright, an out-of-tune instrument so obviously hostile to harmony the band would have to stop playing and tuning would be adjusted. These anti-smooth fragments were less-than-ideal and yet were also too-much, too sticky-out, too obvious. They were a problem to be rectified or risk the forever cringe of being slightly-less-than-a-semi-tone-apart from everyone else. The quality of the anti-smooth¹⁷² is an intentional making-difficult, a roughening of what is conceptually ergonomic, of what is so easy it becomes tonally invisible. In this research the sen-

171. Thanks to Mon Redmond for suggesting this term to me.

172. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of smooth/striated space could be seen as similar to the anti-smooth. However, smooth space in my concept isn't a free-flowing space but one that is a totalising space that denies differences. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 474.

sitising inconsistency of the anti-smooth appears as a *lack* as well as a simultaneous *too-much*. In my practice the absence or ‘wrongness’ of detail and information speaks to a kind of inadequacy, which is also cast as an extravagant, semi-functional excess. Keeping some of the recognisable, delineating ‘edges’ of objects or formats, the anti-smooth inserts a lumpy subjectivity into them. The misuse and miscoding of things becomes a wilful, re-syntaxing *against* the mechanisms (structural, political, institutional) that seek to sand down the uneven or the unexpected for the sake of controlling, tuneful similarity.

A well-sized brick: Confusing the database



A well-sized brick

G2



H2

The width of a brick should be small enough to allow a bricklayer to lift the brick with one hand and place it on a bed of mortar. For the average person, the width should not be more than 115mm. If the brick was wider, the bricklayer would have to put down the trowel while building the wall to pick up the brick with two hands and as a result, time would be wasted. In addition, a wider brick would weigh more and therefore tire the mason more quickly. In terms of brickmaking, a larger brick is also more difficult to fire in a kiln.¹⁷³

Above are instructions for how to make a ‘well-sized’ brick. A well-sized brick works exactly as you expect it to. It performs as a sturdy and reliable building material, it can be held by a mason in one hand (while the other holds the trowel), and its size makes it easy to fire in the kiln. It is an undemanding object, it functions properly: if I drop it, it is affected by gravity, and if it hits my toe it will unsurprisingly hurt. Holding a brick, I am in contact with the roughness of vitrified clay. The physical texture of it abrades the skin of my palm, which is pressed against one of the brick’s faces. I can sense its twelve right-angled edges by pressing against them with the bony margin of my thumb. Looking at a brick is a different experience, where dimensional light and shade is reformatted and reinterpreted into an image. Seeing a brick on-screen is a different encounter again, where those reformatting processes have already happened and instead there might occur an inverse extrapolation of details such as scale, form, or the angle of light.

This section traces the current condition of digital hyper-abun-

G2: Anne Beamish and Will Donovan, *Illustration of correct brick sizing*, in *Village Level Brick Making* (1989).

H2: Lucy Meyle, *A Very Tired Mason* (detail) (2016). Offcut foam. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

173. Anne Beamish and Will Donovan, *Village Level Brickmaking* (Eschborn: GTZ Deutsches Zentrum für Entwicklungstechnologien, 1989), <http://www.nzdl.org/gsdImod?e=d-00000-00---off-0hdl--00-0---0-10-0--0---0direct-10---4-----0-1l--11-en-50---20-about---00-0-1-00-0-4---0-0-11-10-0utfZz-8-10&a=d&c=h-dl&cl=CL1.18&d=HASH-01703882bfe77f-56052da7e0.3.pr>.

dance of images, and the way the torrent has shaped behaviours downstream. How have our experiences of an internet of surplus screen-images had a flow-on effect on our engagement with things? How does this effect those images that exist originally in non-screen-spaces, like installation, sculpture, or drawing? The context of the familiar ‘untouchable’ screen space, and the algorithmic flattening of textural difference that occurs in it, is critical for a practice engaged in resemblance and materiality.

Unlike the experience of holding a brick, the experience of digital images is marked by a wavering between closeness and distance, abundance and lack. On the internet or in the screen-space, there is a sense of infinity within the ‘infinite scroll’; and yet the infrastructure of the digital is materially finite, as are the minerals used to make the infrastructure. Similarly, there is the sense that the digital exists on a plane different and distant to our own, which feels weightless; and yet digital images move easily between these planes, affecting us as we affect them in intimate and violent ways. Digitally, the availability of scale, heat, weight, and density is all located *behind* the screen, where they are relegated to a virtual spectrum. An object’s placement upon this spectrum cannot be decided by touching, by the effects of gravity, or by the bounce of light, but instead by a complex series of imaged resemblances to other things, digital or otherwise.



174. Or even by the people on the internet making memes based on this very idea, see the Ducking or Plaintain? meme, originated by Twitter user @teenybiscuit in 2015 (which spawned a whole host of versions, like Puppy or Bagel? and Chihuahua or Muffin? the latter seen in this footnote). “Puppy or Bagel,” Know Your Meme, accessed February 7, 2018, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/puppy-or-bagel>.

175. Hito Steyerl and Marvin Jordan, “Hito Steyerl: Politics of Post-Representation.” In *Conversation with Marvin Jordan*, Discover (blog), 2014, <http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned-2/62143/hito-steyerl-politics-of-post-representation/>.

The internet (by design) also sorts images largely based on visual similarity or keywords, a convention of comparison and aggregation that is re-inscribed by humans. Through operations like our willingness to hashtag our photos into visually similar Instagram feeds,¹⁷⁴ our recycling of visual similarity is taken by the algorithmic engine of the internet as affirmation. In response it feeds what it thinks we wish to see back to us, a looped and loopy relationship based on surfaces and speed that writer and artist Hito Steyerl identifies as “a very neurotic marriage.”¹⁷⁵ An idiosyncratic, humorous version of these types of arrangements is the open research document *Various Sources* (2015-), which is dispersed amongst these pages. Printed on a single folded sheet of A3, with source captions on the reverse side, there are never more than 15 images per issue. An arbitrarily limited version of Google Image Search, *Various Sources* broadcasts a collection of images that would never appear together via ‘normal’ keyword searching, although they are identifiably related as a satisfying group of images that either appear similar or are in relation to a conceptual theme. *Various Sources* functions like a research document that includes



I2

J2

images from well-traversed sites like Instagram, Tumblr, and MoMA’s website, to less-traffic areas like packaging companies’ digital catalogues. The publication is disseminated for free, originally in the semi-public transitory zone of the AUT WM building foyer (next to the elevators, in a custom-yellow wire display stand), and for all of February 2017 *Various Sources* was hosted by a different inner-city convenience store every week. Printing *Various Sources*—rather than hosting it online—was a way to insinuate it physically within the boundaries of the university, and later into the casual capitalist space of the corner convenience store. Printing also lent the documents a small degree of material authority, the un-editable pages statically reproducing flimsily related images as if their connections are facts. Older issues of the publication were archived underneath the newest issue, so that newcomers or visitors to the building could ‘catch up on their reading’, as if there could ever be such a thing, or that this would be useful in any way. High resolution, meaningfulness, reliable or academic sourcing, are situated side by side with silliness, *The Daily Mail*, and low-quality pixilation. *Various Sources* is a public exercise in feeling out the facets of an idea, how a string of words can be descriptive of very different things, in many different ways. *Various Sources*’ availability and consistent structure (images on one side, caption list alphabetised on the reverse), also makes trouble for the hierarchical differences (text over image, good quality over bad quality, academic over colloquial) that still seem to exist, even in practice-based research projects.

I2: *Various Sources* (2015-) at Tetra Star Convenience Wakefield Street in February 2017. Paper, powdercoated steel. Dimensions variable. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

J2: *Various Sources* (2015-) at Forte Convenience Symonds Street, in February 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

The conditions of the digital call upon our knowledge of referents and references, to assert other images over what we see with a skill borne from practice upon many hundreds of images per day. This effect directly alters the way digitally fluent humans see and experience *all* images and things. To make objects, images, and installations that are physically moved around and through in relation to this condition becomes tricky, and also interesting. What could be a roadblock, an un-consumer-friendly suspension of this referential movement, and what can fall like a brick—fast and predictable—into the space of recognition and understanding? Like the internet, an installation manipulates the speeds of things, organising the experience of velocity and directing navigation to greatest effect. Playing with the changing boundaries of reference and weightiness, gravity and touch, within a non-screen space, is to perhaps get in the way of our newly slicked proficiencies, our familiar responses to things both digital and non-digital. An installation that denied *all* accessibility might invite filtering or dismissal. But an installation that can ir-regulate the field could be a way to snag the filtering instinct, to make un-smooth the physical stroll/scroll within it.

“The cloud is very heavy”: The looped context of images

The digital realm has been described as a “boundaryless domain, a disembodied dimension with an entirely different government”,¹⁷⁶ a smooth screen-space that is apart from ‘real life’. Imagining the edges of the internet sometimes seems on par with imagining limits to the universe. The digital or online space appears as an infinite field with no edges by which to discern a shape and no time in which to understand a zone. It is always ‘on’; it is present-not-present, updating but cached, contemporaneous but ‘forever’. We have difficulty imagining its edges because the horizon of our digital experience is generally limited to the efficiency of personal technology (iPads, laptops, smartphones) and how fast the Wi-Fi is. As a participant in this domain, I exist amongst and as a part of an entangled network of things I see, hear, understand, misunderstand, listen to, and ignore. The images—online or otherwise—that make up a part of this network are marked in their quantity. There are—as is so plainly obvious that it is now banal to say it—so many new images in our surroundings. Because of this uptick I have become more adept at ignoring some and paying attention to others. I think I know immediately what is relevant to me, and what is outside my interest is scrolled past. It is easy to swipe them away into the non-tangible z-space outside my screen. Onto the next, the next, the next.

176. Tara Aghdashloo, “New Skin,” *Real Life*, April 20, 2017, <http://reallifemag.com/new-skin/>.

Though both images and internet might appear weightless and edgeless, the digital realm is still made from *something*. Steyerl points out that the digital image is “made of crystals and electricity, animated by our wishes and fears”,¹⁷⁷ situated in and of the world, as “a fragment of the real world. [...] a thing just like any other – a thing like you and me.”¹⁷⁸ Though digital images seem light in terms of physical weightlessness, they still have an impact and they retain a very real ability to bruise, to injure, to heal, to alter.¹⁷⁹ The crystalline screen-image is also capable of being impacted. Their materiality is as subject to degradation as flesh, chunked pixels becoming chunkier the more times they are squeezed into new files or traded over email. In addition, the apparatus of the internet is hidden from us and so we forget that in fact “The Cloud is very heavy.”¹⁸⁰ We can’t hear the hum of Google and Facebook’s server farms all the way from places like Council Bluffs, Iowa and Luleå, Sweden, but the 75 million servers that function as our current internet infrastructure have edges, they are warm to the touch—Facebook’s data centre in Sweden is sited about a hundred kilometres from the Arctic Circle in order to use the low ambient temperatures as a natural cooling system for the hot machines.¹⁸¹ The internet appears untouchable, remote, and never-ending, but is in fact limited to what humans can physically engineer. The materiality of the digital may be somewhat hidden, but is nonetheless still present.

We are audiences and authors of a multiplication of digital effects and seemingly untouchable surfaces, at the same time that physically beautiful objects, artefacts, and devices have become increasingly desirable, and on an increasing scale of consumption. At this stage, the non-digital is caught up in an ambient (yet false) sense of infinite material supply and infinite scrolling, despite ecological and sociological suggestion to the contrary. In her article *Digital Divide*, theorist Claire Bishop queries the disconnection between contemporary art and the cultural shift of the digital. She detects a lack of discussion about the “endlessly disposable, rapidly mutable ephemera of the virtual age and its impact on our consumption of relationships, images, and communication”,¹⁸² querying how artists use the digital as part of a process and yet also seem to leave it absent in their work. The speed with which we skim the digital has accelerated our interaction with things, and the sensual desirability of things is likewise transferred onto screen-images. Bishop mentions that both unmonumental and precarious forms of sculpture and installation have perhaps become more outwardly provisional so as to “assert subjectivity (and tactility) against the sealed, impregnable surface of the screen.”¹⁸³

177. Hito Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me,” *e-flux*, 2010, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61298/a-thing-like-you-and-me/>.

178. Ibid.

179. Ibid.

180. “The Cloud, the State, and the Stack: Metahaven in Conversation with Benjamin Bratton,” *Metahaven*, December 16, 2012, <http://mthvn.tumblr.com/post/38098461078/the-cloudthetateandthestack>.

181. Luke Harding, “The Node Pole: Inside Facebook’s Swedish Hub near the Arctic Circle,” *The Guardian*, September 25, 2015, sec. Technology, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/sep/25/facebook-datacentre-lulea-sweden-node-pole>.

182. Claire Bishop, “Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media,” *ARTFORUM*, September 2012, <https://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201207&id=31944>.

183. Ibid.

However, in my practice the lumpen precarity of the tactile sculpture and installation are not so much about this type of assertion as much as they are interested in questioning our practised skills of parsing and skimming.

The wavelength of the oscillation between the ‘sealed’ digital screen and the non-screen world varies, but it is a mistake to insist that either the gap is so large it cannot be crossed or that there is no gap at all. On a physical level, the falsely large distance between ourselves and the digital is easy to recognise when too much internet becomes *too much*, which can then be embodied as exhaustion, tired ‘square eyes’, neck spasms, or a headache that slices diagonally over my brow bone. The distance feels even smaller when I consider the haptic experiences willingly engaged with in screen-space like playing video games, watching ASMR videos, or crying along with very sad movies. We spend so much time with the digital and the imagery within it, how can it still seem distant or weightless? How can it lack intimacy? Bishop describes this looping as a “troubling oscillation between intimacy and distance.”¹⁸⁴ The images in a Skype window or over Instagram embody loved ones, screens are as warm (if not sometimes warmer) to the touch. Although not opposites “across an unbridgeable chasm”, Steyerl writes that screen “image and world are in many cases just versions of each other.”¹⁸⁵ Though perhaps a more ambulatory space, an installation is also filled with moving, twisting, double-backing interlocutors who themselves are accelerating and decelerating across any given terrain, like physical 404 errors or quickly loaded Flash entities. Like the screen-space, an installation is also marked by a variable distance between our bodies and the objects and images therein.

Even though the digital is supported by a huge physical apparatus, there is still a planar interval between the screen-space and the other spaces in which we live our lives. The (digital) image and the world aren’t identical, Steyerl continues, “but deficient, excessive and uneven in relation to each other.”¹⁸⁶ Digital images, though able to move off-screen, do not exist in the same way they once did as photographic objects. They become “twisted, dilapidated, incorporated and reshuffled. They miss their targets, misunderstand their purpose, fall off and fade back into screens.”¹⁸⁷ There remains a variance between what exists on screen and our interaction with it, and what is situated in the non-screen space. What writer John Kelsey calls the “old, ideal distance between viewer and object”¹⁸⁸—a safe distance of perhaps an arm’s length—is mangled by how closely we hold our phones, the mistrust we

184. Ibid.

185. Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” *e-flux*, 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.

186. Ibid.

187. Ibid.

188. John Kelsey, “Sculpture in an Abandoned Field,” in *If I Did It*, ed. Heike Munder and Ellen Saifermann (Zurich: Ringier, 2007), 121.

have in images transferred to a mistrust of materials. Perhaps these uniquely Internet-age altered relationships between the screened image and the rest of the world can become the starting point for a productive difficulty.



K2

Asserting temperatures: Guessing size, edges, textures

Though digital images are, as Steyerl says, “things like you and me”,¹⁸⁹ we are still unable to access their forms through touch. We can lap and paw at the screen perhaps, but cannot brush the contour of an image of an apricot directly. Their dimensions and resemblances are planar, the edges of their forms are the thirteen diagonal inches of my laptop screen. Guessing their weight seems not so much foolish as irrelevant, as they are subject to change. In *From wall to wall and moving to the centre*, the image of the aster plant occupied a type of screen-space that merged and altered as it was projected onto different surfaces. The dusty mirror, the slanted edge of the ramp, the wall. On every surface it was variously distorted, its size and resolution changing depending on the distance between projection and plane. The well-sized brick is made in regard to the hand size and strength of the average mason, who feels and remembers the strain on their wrist and the width of their grasp. Interpreting the size or guessing the weight of the brick on screen is determined by referencing a personal brain-library

K2: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *From wall to wall and moving to the centre* (detail) (2017). Plywood ramp, mirrors, motors, projected photograph of tree asters. Dimensions variable. In *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Grace Ryder.

189. Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me.”

of ‘average bricks’ but probably not the mason. Touch, gravity, strength, the hand, all are superseded by a referential image that has been received from who-knows-where. The image of the asters, too, lacking as it was in detail regarding scale or colour, would be rendered by a viewer’s cascading image references of daisies or beaches. This is not to say that the haptic experience is closer hewn to any kind of truth. But perhaps one type of knowledge or information has been largely traded for another. Artist Helen Marten writes that in digital images, “the physicality or surface frictions of images are confused: we must apply our own emotions, assert temperatures and navigate momentums.”¹⁹⁰ We are becoming more and more competent at this guesswork, of using what we know about the non-digital to ascertain the tenor of a digital image. To do this fast, to keep up with the scroll, our speculation is based on an application of a personal algorithm. Made up of emotions, experiences, and back-catalogue of things-that-look-like-this, it’s then used to make a calculation about the type of reality that the image depicts. So practised is the skill it becomes second nature, flowing into the non-screen space.

Now, a highly tuned sensitivity to the degrees of resemblance is the order of the digital day, underpinned by the image-based referential structure that it relies on. It is impossible to test resemblance physically in these digital places, and on such a huge scale. Image references impose and insert themselves on top of other references, so that we can more effectively parse, rather than understand, the large amount of images that we see. Writer Kenneth Goldsmith suggests that reading habits now have more in common with web programs that sort and search instead of reading, that go for key words to get general ideas.¹⁹¹ But we are the authors of these programs, we are the ones who provide the lists of questions that teach the bots how to teach *more* bots how to more accurately tell the difference between apricots and nectarines. We now belong to what Marten calls a “state of generality that assumes surface to communicate reference, or form to communicate content”.¹⁹² Steyerl likewise notes that under this condition a representation’s “relation to whatever it stands in for is cryptic, shiny; unstable; the link flickers on and off.”¹⁹³ ‘Noise’ in data is filtered out and away in favour of reinforced visual references, a hundred perfect orange apricots replacing a million less-than-representative specimens. Because this system of the internet is an immense generality that relies largely on supplementing more and more raw data, Steyerl remarks that “the unforeseen has a hard time happening because it is not yet in the database.”¹⁹⁴

190. “Helen Marten: My Influences,” *Frieze*, December 6, 2016, <https://frieze.com/article/helen-marten-my-influences>.

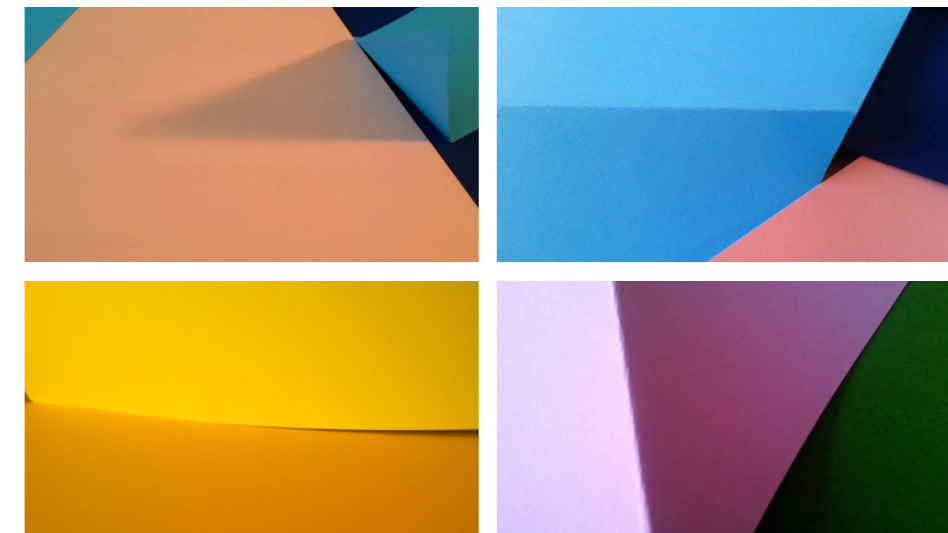
191. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 158–59.

192. Helen Marten, “Flaps, Sticks, Hairs and Bruises: Collage vs. Inlay,” *Public Fiction*, 2012, 6, http://publicfiction.org/HelenMarten_CollagevsInLay.pdf.

193. Steyerl and Jordan, “Hito Steyerl: Politics of Post-Representation. In Conversation with Marvin Jordan.”

194. Ibid.

The internet is organised in response to a huge amount of information, where ambiguity is buried underneath HD, lumpiness is located on Google search page 105, past all the Pinterest links, the obscenity of accuracy becomes the top result. However, it can still be foiled by the capacity for ambiguity and lumpiness that things do still retain. Like the bots, our heightened capabilities of asserting references can be stymied by something that doesn’t fit in the right filter, that makes categorisation more uneven. Low-quality, low-availability information or detail can be coupled with recognisable forms, easily parsed information with information that “is not yet in the database.”¹⁹⁵ An installation or publication can become a zone that refuses these filtered effects through moments of acceleration and deceleration, to draw us into the frame by virtue of being both immediately understandable and also incomprehensible.



L2

In my practice, this misalignment of information can come as gestures towards easily digestible information, that double-back to become extra snags to parsing. The low-availability of categorical sureness is unevenly paired with the sensory deliciousness of brightly coloured paper in *How shading flows into edges* (2017, with Ziggy Lever, part of *Looking Forwards and Backwards*). A beguilingly simple video that seems easy at the start, but the continually shifting nuances of light and shade confuse both the eye and the referential brain. The connection between its three-part soundtrack and the image on screen

L2: Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, *How shading flows into edges* (detail) (2017). Video. In *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin.

195. Ibid.



M2

fraying at times and then strengthening with the next word spoken or sound heard. The varying rhythms of interpretation are regulated by a specific doling out of information and the seduction of the experiential. Room sheets or accompanying publications—which normally purport to aid in readings of works—are actually irregularities, offering up maps (such as in the exhibition *Lonely God*, see page 104) or first-person narratives from a worm (such as in the work *Souvenir Stand*, see page 105)—becoming cross-currents that contour the installational space like choppy waves. The uncanny coupling of recognisable objects and nonsensical gestures (with *Lint-Rolling*, this is an uneasy mixture between the familiar form of a peach and the irregular act of lint-rolling it) declines an easy ride, bouncing back around again (lint-rolling feels like a totally understandable thing to do to a peach!). Material problems create this tension also, where the physical weightlessness of an object we expect to have weight (bricks in *A very tired mason*), literally interferes with that object's speed of movement, doubly so when it strikes against the assumptions of its fabrication.

Marten writes:

So approximation in the real world, in the world we actually move about in, is able to achieve new levels of violence or appeal. This is where there is real pleasure, where interest, excitement and haptic sensation meet with more force than could ever be achieved in the sim-

M2: Lucy Meyle, *Lint-rolling (detail)* (2016). Video. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

ulations of the digital or online. There is active physical flurry and things can be sticky here: we are lumpen forms, we get cold, sweat, have cravings.¹⁹⁶

This becomes especially true when all the things we are used to guessing at (and getting fairly correct) in digital images—like weight, size, temperature—are made wrong in the non-screen space of installation or sculpture. All of the practice we have had in guessing aspects of digital images can become a problem when real-life approximation of referents is categorically wrong. Our digitally applicable algorithmic reference system can become momentarily jammed, in the face of physical lumpiness, sweat, bad posture, touchable edges. The database—whether online or not—has a hard time with what is unforeseen.¹⁹⁷ The un-searchable flimsiness of *Various Sources*, the fluctuating connections between video and sound in *Looking Forwards and Backwards*, the un-predictable weight of *A very tired mason*, all get stuck in the filtration system, their damaged or difficult references becoming agents of the anti-smooth.

196. Marten, "Flaps, Sticks, Hairs and Bruises: Collage vs. Inlay," 6.

197. Steyerl and Jordan, "Hito Steyerl: Politics of Post-Representation. In Conversation with Marvin Jordan."



N2

N2: Lucy Meyle, *Phantom Limb* (2016). Recycled cardboard, packing tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

Chamele No. 5: Lumpy resemblances



02

Browsing a \$2 shop one Saturday with my mum, I found a perfume that on the first scan bore a strong resemblance to Chanel No. 5. On the second scan, the spelling mistakes and inaccurate logo disclosed its real character: Chamele No. 5. It was joined on the low shelf by a whole bunch of similarly false friends:

Boos by Hogo Boos
 GK be by Gal Klein
 Qpium pour homme
 Cooc Mademoiselle by Chamele
 Goocl poor homme

I know that Chamele No. 5 is supposed to be Chanel No. 5, but it is a bad copy that would fool no one after repeated viewing. Perhaps it would be better described as an impersonation, because each separate component might work: it's got a sort of correct font; right colours (but no gold foil); there is a bit of French on the bottle. But overall it just can't convince and it falls short. It's like a Britney Spears impersonation that only works if you squint your eyes a bit, it only works in poor resolution when the pixels get a bit chunky. Chamele No. 5 resembles

02: 'Perfumes' in the \$2 shop, photo taken in 2015, Auckland. Photos by Lucy Meyle.

its namesake just enough to be recognisably related, but it is savvy enough to step away from being an outright rip-off towards being something like a knowingly bad homage.¹⁹⁸ Seeing it in the shop, sniffing the tester bottles, there is also a question of purpose. Buying an authentic bottle of Chanel No. 5 would presumably give the customer access to two things: a quantity of perfume that is pleasant to many;¹⁹⁹ and a sense of identification with a brand associated with luxury. A well-made rip-off would mostly fulfil these criteria, but Chamele No. 5 isn't a good rip-off, it's just wrong. Aesthetically, it sits a considerable distance from actual Chanel, and the function of perfume as a nice-smelling liquid is barely accomplished—Chamele's odour doesn't actively melt my face off, but I wouldn't call it *nice*.

Resemblance is inherently a relational process. One thing has to be like something else in order to draw commonalities, and this can involve more than a pair, can span over genres and categories, multiples and versions. This relationship does—as philosopher Michel Foucault has described—assume “an original element that orders and hierarchizes the increasingly less faithful copies that can be struck from it. Resemblance presupposes a primary reference that prescribes and classes.”²⁰⁰ What is resembled is drawn into a relation with something that resembles it, a process that can continue down the line of less and less accurate resemblances. Chamele No. 5 feels excessive because it labours towards an imprecise reproduction. A certain degree of accuracy in resemblance evenly tranquilises, well executed Chanel No. 5 branding remains at the classy nexus of ‘real’ understatement and luxury. Chamele is vulgar and funny in its weak attempts to reach the same, zig zagging up into excessiveness, through insufficiency and back again. By holding close to a ‘primary reference’, a lumpy or *bad* resemblance is able to do damage to that reference—and its supposed place in a hierarchy of originality—through this closeness. What falls off the back of a truck gets sold alongside the ‘real deal’. That is, while the counterfeit resembles the authentic, the authentic begins to resemble the counterfeit, and any questions we have about the purpose of the counterfeit get passed on to the authentic. Philosopher Jacques Rancière notes:

We should start by recognizing that there is an interval in every identity, that even resemblance is an interval. An image of something that isn't there already spells out an interval. Differently put, there's dissemblance at the very heart of resemblance. Art tends to widen that gap further, it tends to complicate the relation between the similar and the dissimilar.²⁰¹

198. Toeing the line between an accurate rip-off and a less-than-accurate one can make it easier to form a legal defence, based on aspects like: intention to deceive; infringement on trademarks; and actual damage caused to business or sales. World Intellectual Property Organisation. “The Enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights: A Case Book,” 2012. http://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/intproperty/791/wipo_pub_791.pdf.

199. In 2016, roughly 2.06 million women used Chanel No. 5 in the UK alone. “Chanel: Leading Perfumes for Women in the UK 2015-2016.” *Statista*, May 2017. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/305095/leading-chanel-perfume-and-eau-de-toilette-brands-for-women-in-the-uk/>.

200. Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 44. Foucault sets resemblance apart from similitude: “The similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end, that can be followed in one direction as easily as in another, that obey no hierarchy, but propagate themselves from small differences among small differences.”

201. Jacques Rancière, “The Indecisive Affect. With Patrice Blouin, Elie Doring, and Dork Zabunyan,” in *Dissenting Words: Interviews with Jacques Rancière*, ed. and trans. Emiliano Battista (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 210–11.

In this research project, the relationship is complicated by objects and things that both physically resemble the things they stand in relation to, and that also retain their own function. Refusing to fade into the middle ground, lumpy things undermine their non-lumpy cousins by exacerbating the inherent problems and questions of practicality or function within them. In my practice an excessive insufficiency is situated in the use of traditionally inappropriate materials or amateurish fabrication (in relation to what they are resembling), and a humorously degraded relationship to practicality and function. Lumpiness can also be found in the reduction of detail, a loose semi-rendered cartoonish quality that draws a strong visual link to ‘general’ images. At the same time the object's quirked physicality gives it an individuality. The lumpy resemblances of sculptural and installational elements in the practice waver between this subjectivity and generality, and can briefly conceptually replace their referents by retaining a warped relation to familiar objects and structures like floors, trees, and display materials.



P2



Q2

P2: Lucy Meyle, *Phantom Limb* (2016). Recycled cardboard, packing tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

Q2: Lucy Meyle, *Phantom Limb* (detail) (2016). In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

Flaunting wrongness

My parents have been renovating, adding to, and rebuilding various parts of their house for almost my whole life. For what seemed like a long time when I was a child, the kitchen floor had a huge hole in it that had to be crossed via a plank. Over my childhood and teenagehood, I absorbed a few construction techniques and processes. In some cases, this was via osmosis and in others it was learned from casual on-the-spot teaching. This has imprinted a patchy and mostly unpractised knowledge on me, which I apply to my installations with a determined enthusiasm. ‘Building’ walls, ‘installing’ floors, and ‘laying’ bricks in exhibitions are all examples of confident, flaunted incompetence, that still retain aspects of codified construction methods (for example semi-sturdiness, pattern of laying bricks and floorboards), still appear somewhat like the things they mimic, and are still functional (if not altogether practical).

A particular material lumpiness has developed in importance over the course of this research. Though starting as sincere-yet-failed attempts at making non-lumpy things, material lumpiness is now purposefully applied. Making *Phantom Limb* (2016), part of *Lonely God* at St Paul St Gallery III—a tree made from cardboard, brown packing tape, and a broad-tipped black marker—there had to be an awareness of a certain level of technical restraint that was required. Make it too good and it will be too tree-like, too perfect. Too misshapen and it will definitely appear as a failed children’s project. In her book *Nonsense*, literary critic Susan Stewart makes a comment that to me seems applicable to lumpiness: “nonsense often involves a kind of flaunted, a *skilled*, incompetence, an incompetence that depends upon a consciousness of the boundary between incompetence and competence.”²⁰² Willful shonkiness relies on at least being conversant with those general boundaries, a level of knowledge that is similar to that of the skilled amateur but doesn’t quite reach that of the professional.

Veneer was a work that was part of *Bad Actors*, at MEANWHILE gallery in Wellington in July 2017. It consisted of brown packing tape laid in strips onto sheets of newsprint, that were then cut into boards. Each board was patterned *faux-bois*, in a cartoonish kind of way, a non-specific wood grain with dots for hammered-in nails. At the gallery, I laid and fitted the boards—kneeling and reaching like the men in Caillebotte’s *Les raboteurs de parquet*²⁰³—smoothing bent edges with clear tape. There is an almost unredeemable quality to brown packing tape as a material. It has a tendency to be statically attracted to itself and is too thin to cover over mistakes—showing the

202. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 206.



203. Gustave Caillebotte, *Le raboteurs de parquet* (The floor scrapers) (1875). Oil on canvas. 1.92 x 1.46m. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



R2



S2



T2

R2: Lucy Meyle, *Bad Actors* (2017). MEANWHILE, Wellington. Photo by Sean Burn.

S2: Lucy Meyle, *Bad Actors* (2017). MEANWHILE, Wellington. Photo by Sean Burn.

T2: Lucy Meyle, *Veneer* (detail) (2017). Packing tape, marker pen, newsprint. Dimensions variable. In *Bad Actors*, MEANWHILE, Wellington. Photo by Sean Burn.



U2

U2: Lucy Meyle, *Veneer* (detail) (2017). Packing tape, marker pen, newsprint. Dimensions variable. In *Bad Actors, MEANWHILE*, Wellington. Photo by Sean Burn.



204. Veneer and 'thin' parquet floors used to be called "wood carpeting", as seen in this detail from a 1886 catalogue from Boughton & Terwilliger, *Boughton & Terwilliger, Manufacturers of Parquetry, (Wood Carpet), for Floors, Wainscots, Walls and Ceilings: Wholesale and Retail*. (New York: Boughton & Terwilliger, 1886), 7, <http://archive.org/details/catalogueboughto00boug>.

205. For example I don't see an orange as excessive, but a fake orange seems to be.

rips in the newsprint underneath it. But it is also, in its own way, hardwearing and durable. It can be wiped clean, it is flexible. When complete, *Veneer* functioned perfectly well as a floor—though it reflected light in a funny way and was crinkly to walk over, and the faux-boards lifted slightly when tension was applied. In retaining a function, *Veneer* slid uncomfortably between a being lumpy, specific version of a floor to being simply *another type of floor*. This caused a semantic jostling within the category of 'flooriness', where *Veneer* is part peculiarly excessive individual and part cartoonish generality. Some viewers had seen images of *Veneer* before they arrived at the space, and had commented before walking on the floor that it looked great—and it must have been expensive for a small artist-run space to buy—but where was the artwork? Laying a new floor (or actual wood veneer, itself a surface-only version of hardwood floors)²⁰⁴ would be an acceptable refurbishment. Laying the tape floor (cheaper by far, still somewhat functional) was seen as being excessive, a bit *much*. There is a sense of immoral indulgence ascribed to what is seen as a 'fake' version that is not generally attached to examples categorised as the 'original', 'natural', or 'real' versions of the same.²⁰⁵ *Veneer* very obviously under-reached 'real wood' and yet became enthusiastically over-the-top in this deficiency. That I had made and laid the tape veneer floor became a point of excess too—as if labour isn't normally exerted to lay complex tiled or inlaid floors—seemingly only because *Veneer* was made from the 'wrong' materials or in the 'wrong' way.

This kind of enthusiastic, amateur impropriety is something that returns like a refrain in the work within this practice. Amateur making (in both the sense of non-paid work and a lack of practised skill) interlaces the mistakes of being unfamiliar

with a process along with the tendency to excitedly overdo it. Being untrained in certain construction and craft techniques necessitates a diagonal thinking during making, an improvisational looseness that doesn't get hung up on complete accuracy or the ability to apply proper technique. Ahmed notes that assumptions regarding particular abilities and possibilities are:

A wall: what stops you from doing something; what stops you from being something. A wall can feel internal, like a voice inside your own head that says don't go there; you can't do that. Even when a wall feels internal it does not begin there. You might have been told: you can't do that. You won't be able to do that. This lack of confidence might be attached to you being a girl, or you just being the being you are; not good enough, not smart enough, or just not, not enough; or too much, it is too much for you, you are too much; that too. You might be defiant in the face of this lack of confidence. I can do that. I will be able to do that. But if those words are repeated, you can't do that, you won't be able to do that; they can become a wavering of your own will, a doubt; an uncertainty.²⁰⁶

Ahmed's words feel true in relation to my making—I have disbelief in my ability to build a truly well constructed wall, or to lay a 'real' floor. But confidently flaunting 'wrongness' in the face of this disbelief, the lumpy fabrication of *Veneer* and *Extension* (2017, see page 119) changes the rules for success, striking against 'the wall' of presumed inability. These things are still floors, are still walls, but they (and I) refuse to adhere to the codes and processes of professional construction—which is itself a male-dominated industry with rules and correct ways of doing things. Flaunting the *wrong way*, in terms of material, function, technique, is not only wrong but *too much wrong*, a wilfully superfluous deficiency that celebrates the intervallic, uneven *mis* of mistakes.

American artist Jessi Reaves makes work in relation to a canon that might similarly be regarded as masculine, a genre based around exacting construction methods and smooth, hard edges. Reaves makes sculptures that are also furniture, working in and around the design tradition of glossy fabrication by introducing modernist icons and mass-produced vernacular forms to their lumpier, 'kludgier',²⁰⁷ uglier, more stained, more disturbing siblings. Reaves' style of over-zealousness transmits a sincere enthusiasm for the forms of modernism she riffs off, complicating the plainly satirical. She piles materials onto and over stripped-back frames of *Cesca* chairs²⁰⁸ and 'Faux-guchi'²⁰⁹ tables, taking care to give a shelf a rain-cover, or making a mantelpiece for a log. She has woven driftwood and nylon webbing

206. Sara Ahmed, "Losing Confidence," *Feministkilljoys* (blog), March 1, 2016, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/03/01/losing-confidence/>.

207. The term kludge is used on internet forums to refer to DIY, semi-ineffectual 'fixes' for machines or technology that often use discarded parts or inappropriate materials to make very inelegant workarounds.



208. The Cesca chair, designed by Marcel Breuer in 1928. It was the first mass-produced chair, manufactured by Michael Thonet (as the B32), then Dino Gavina (who re-named it after Breuer's daughter Francesca), and is now manufactured by Knoll. Elaine Louie, "The Many Lives of a Very Common Chair," *The New York Times*, February 7, 1991. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/07/garden/the-many-lives-of-a-very-common-chair.html>.



209. The Isamu Noguchi IN50 coffee table, designed in 1947. Still produced by the original manufacturer Herman Miller, it is marketed by the company as "the perfect balance between art and furniture." "Noguchi Table," accessed September 14, 2017, <http://www.hermanmiller.com/products/tables/occasional-tables/noguchi-table/>.

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V2

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W2

V2: Jessi Reaves, *Idol of the Hares* (2014). Oak, polyurethane foam, silk, cotton, aluminum, ink. 96.52 x 71.12 x 121.92 cm. Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo by Marc Brems Tatti.

W2: Jessi Reaves, *Mind At the Rodeo (XJ Fender Table Noguchi Knockoff #2)* (2016). Jeep Cherokee fenders (steel, plastic, auto paint), table top: glass. Dimensions variable. Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo by Marc Brems Tatti.

210. "Introducing: Jessi Reaves and Gaetano Pesce," The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, accessed September 13, 2017, <https://www.moca.org/stream/post/introducing-gaetano-pesce-and-jessi-reaves>.

into plastic deckchairs, giving a Frankenstein-at-the-summer-house impression. It feels like there is *too much* added—too much upholstery foam is grasped in place by too many upholstery staples. Rough sisal and the broken caning of old chairs abrade materials like velour and silk chiffon. Pearls and silk cording are tacked to sheer fabric covers of foam cushions that are themselves marked by felt-tip pen and stained by... something liquid. The *too much* almost overwhelms the function of the chair itself—and these are very much chairs as well as sculptures, as Reaves' work is intended to be used by gallery visitors. Reaves has said that in making, she likes to "take all of the practicality out of an object and then try to put it back in. Even if the function isn't as generous, there's something else that's happened."²¹⁰ The reduction of practicality in Reaves' work often comes via 'dressing' objects, like clothing

them in custom raincoats or in sheer lingerie, that as writer Eliza Barry notes, "effectively lends the chair subjecthood and pulls it away from its status as object."²¹¹ It also comes by way of increasing the repetition of furniture-related vocabulary, more shelves, more staples, more foam, so that the furniture "transforms into the notion of furniture while still being furniture [...] through its hyperbolic presence as furniture, so hyperbolic that the furniture feels as though it is living and might move."²¹² In Reaves' works, functionality is still somewhat present, but has been limited by the *practicality* of its form or materials. The influence of function becomes overshadowed and undermined by questions of function's usefulness in delineating furniture-as-genre—as Reaves herself states "if you have a chair in your bedroom that you only throw dirty clothes on, is it still a chair?"²¹³ Reaves sculptures have what Barry calls "a wavering status, treading lines between art and design, art and craft, functional object and representation of functional object."²¹⁴

The method and material of construction makes the traditional processes of furniture 'finishing'—in the sense of sanding down (something Reaves says she hates more than any other part of the process)²¹⁵, of sealing completely (even the 'clothed' chairs and shelves are half unzipped or have the potential to get ripped through use)—incidental. The roughness of some of Reaves' construction, paired with her sharp sense of materials, move the works from reading simply as 'unfinished', to being *undone*, like a shirt collar loosened at the neck or a pair of tights bunching, then slipping down a leg and pooling at the ankle. Their charisma lies in how their very tangible materiality is undisguised. As Barry pinpoints in Reaves' work: "The coolness of perfection in both modern and minimal forms is undone by the warmth of imperfection",²¹⁶ restraint and impermeability are traded in for a relaxed material eroticism and an endearing, enthusiastic *too much*.

Becoming an idea

The lumpy object relies on occupying this space of *undone*, of a loose and improvisational imperfection, which is also pointedly willful. We can hear echoes of Ahmed again here, about being seen as *too much*, not just as an object but as a force, a figure. Ahmed notes that someone (or, something) "becomes willful insofar as they will too much, or too little, or in 'the wrong way'."²¹⁷ Carved foam off-cuts, recycled cardboard boxes with the chip packet branding still on the side, wobbly felt-tip pen drawings, over-the-top and inappropriate upholstery tacking on the edges of paintings, the excessive use of badly-applied masking tape. The 'wrong way' of these material choices seems

211. Eliza Barry, *A Chair Is a Chair Is a Sculpture: On Jessi Reaves and the Decorative Unconscious*, New York: Columbia University, 2017, 4.

212. *Ibid.*, 3.

213. Jessi Reaves, "Jessi Reaves with Bridget Donahue," *Foundations*, 2015, 31.

214. Barry, *A Chair Is a Chair Is a Sculpture: On Jessi Reaves and the Decorative Unconscious*, 2.

215. Reaves, "Jessi Reaves with Bridget Donahue," 31.

216. Barry, *A Chair Is a Chair Is a Sculpture: On Jessi Reaves and the Decorative Unconscious*, 7.

217. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 245.

to assert itself over and over again, sometimes in opposition to my intentions. Physical sleekness in my objects and sculptures (only attained sporadically) can sometimes work to sand down possible productive frictions. The enclosed fabrication of my occasional well-executed work successfully transfers attention to the thing it is referencing, smoothly directing the flow of citation. However, it also retains less of a peculiar materiality by virtue of being made seamlessly and of the appropriate type and amount of materials. *Pear Protector* is one of these types of works. As a scaled-up iteration of a pear protector it convincingly plays its act as the ‘real’ thing (albeit much larger), pointing to itself but also to its other ‘real’ counterpart.²¹⁸ If viewed on its own, it acts a bit too well, and at its best it is letting me suspend my disbelief because the contrivance blends into the narrative.



218. Pawpaw protectors, photo by Lucy Meyle.

219. Steve Rose, “Is This the Worst Movie Ever Made?” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2009, sec. Film, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/sep/10/cinema-the-room-cult>.

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220. Claes Oldenburg, *The Store* (1961). Photo by Robert McElroy. / <https://www.mumok.at/en/store-4>.

221. “Claes Oldenburg,” MoMA, accessed January 29, 2018, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/oldenburg/>.

222. “Revisiting The Store by Claes Oldenburg,” MoMA, accessed January 29, 2018, https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2013/06/26/revisiting-oldenburgs-the-store/.

223. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 26–33.

The lumpy resemblance, on the other hand, is both in reference to something, but also failing at plausibility. A lumpy object is like Tommy Wiseau in the terrible movie *The Room*²¹⁹—is he acting at all or is this just him? I can see the cogs turning, the plots holes are glaring, the script is awful, the editing is truly bad. The lumpy resemblance plays its role so badly; it is no longer playing a role... or is it? Lumpiness becomes sticky, attracting all sorts of things, it snags at expectations or intentions or possibilities. The thing’s undeniable materiality enters, stage left, pointing mainly to itself. However, the lumpy object does still require something to kick against. A field of irregularities is another form of smoothness, after all. Even the for-sale dripping and saggy plaster objects in Claes Oldenburg’s 1961 New York installation *The Store*²²⁰—all “heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself”²²¹—were specifically modelled off ‘real’ versions of the same objects that were to be found for sale in the shops nearby.²²² Reaves’ works are situated against the neatness of a gallery space, even when they are in a large group. When sitting next to the clumsy banana in *Boyfriend Pillow*, the elegant droop of *Pear Protector* works as counterpoint to heighten the textural irregularity through comparison. The lumpy resemblance looks the starkest in relation to that which is read as less ‘excessive’, like ‘real’ bananas, and smoother sculptures. The difference between them frustrates evenly applied acceleration, marking instead an odd, fits-and-starts rhythm across the field of exhibition.

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud suggests that with the decrease of verisimilitude, comics begin to approach concepts rather than depicting specific images.²²³ Steyerl writes that “The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the



X2

originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence”.²²⁴ The zig-zagged quality of the lumpy resemblance allows it to stand in for a general concept and yet it also cannot let go of its material individuality. The lumpy resemblance is both about its own individual existence, and in its semi-rendered state, approaches the level of an image-concept that McCloud sets forth, doing damage to its ‘original’ referent. Standing in relation to its smoother siblings, either referenced or present in the gallery, the lumpy object uses its oddly general specificity to insert itself (even just for a moment) over the concept we have in our minds of that very thing. When I think about this, I think about seeing my mother make props and costumes for primary school plays. She was always considering the effect from the back-row—did it look like a parrot, in the shape, in the colour? Never mind the exact beak shape, what did the audience expect to see for a parrot? She wanted the audience to think the word PARROT and then work with that idea in their mind for the rest of the performance. An economy of information can ease the movement from reality into the reality of a child’s performance. Less information of a certain kind can translate into more information of another kind. The

X2: Lucy Meyle, *Pear Protector* (2016). Foam window-worm. Dimensions variable. In *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

224. Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *e-flux*, 2009, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

lumpy parrot, through a deficiency in detail, becomes an image of the ‘general’ concept of a parrot. Marked by an uneven, idiosyncratic materiality, it simultaneously replaces that very same image-concept of the ‘general’ parrot. Jessi Reaves’ blobby furniture overdoes the details (but ‘wrong’) and yet is still functional, taking the ‘concept of furniture’ to a hyperbolic extreme. *Veneer*, in its shonkiness, feels excessive. It never attains the level of ‘natural’ detail inherent to regular wood, and so feel less like a certain type of wood, situating itself squarely in the category of ‘wood-as-concept’. Instead of a fake tree being so realistic it points to a certain tree, a named species of tree, its semi-rendered, vague outline references ‘trees in general’, while snagging on exactly what that means. The lumpy object can be what Steyerl describes as “a visual idea in its very becoming”,²²⁵ that doggedly re-makes what it resembles through its lumpiness. The idiosyncrasy of lumpy things lends them a material subjectivity, their excessiveness hyperbolically achieving the conceptual categories of floor-ness or chair-ness, or parrot-ness. In addition, it is their lack of ‘correct’ detail that similarly maintains in them an ability to warp those concepts in their image, to wilfully refurbish familiar conceptual ideas (perhaps only momentarily) with their own ‘wrong’ lumpiness in direct relation to the conditions that surround them.

225. Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image.”

Imagining an elephant: Resyntaxation as resistance



Y2



Z2

In the illuminated manuscript the *First Bible of Charles the Bald* (845 CE), there is a drawing of an animal that resembles an elephant, except that it feels wrong in many ways: the ears are far too small; the mouth appears sort of beak-like; the tail is too long; it has a horse’s legs; the head is indistinct from the body; and the trunk seems like an afterthought, like a semi-attached saxophone. It is an elephant mis-drawn by someone who had probably not seen an elephant before, given that the only one in Western Europe in the seventh century was Charlemagne’s pet Asian elephant Abul-abbas²²⁶—and both he and his owner had died over thirty years prior to the drawing’s creation. The elephant in Charles the Bald’s bible is a very odd resemblance, the artist perhaps working from second-hand description, putting down on paper a possible arrangement of elephantine features.

On the website www.fake-foods.com, under the category “Fruits” and in the subcategory “Garnishes”, there is another version of an elephant. This one is made from plastic fake lemons and a bit of plastic fake orange rind, arranged into the shape of an elephant. It is a replica gone wrong, moulded plastic made to look like a lemon made to look like an elephant, sort of. The Citrus Elephant (as it is named on the website) is an OK impersonation in its broad strokes—after all, it must be hard to carve a convincing elephant out of a lemon and still have it look like a lemon too—but the individual details make it absurd.

Y2: Image of elephant in the *First Bible of Charles the Bald* (845 CE), Folio 327V, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8455903b>.

Z2: Citrus Elephant, from Fake Foods, http://www.fake-foods.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Store_Code=F&Category_Code=FRU002.

226. Pavel Voronin, “Elephant in the Book,” *List of Figures* (blog), accessed May 17, 2017, <https://listoffigures.wordpress.com/tag/first-bible-of-charles-the-bald/>.

The elephant's trunk points out from its face like a shrivelled finger, it has an oval head, basset-hound ears, teeny tiny eyes, a flatly round body, very short legs, and a stubby pig-like tail. It fails at being convincing either as an elephant or a lemon, or even a lemon garnish shaped like an elephant. Yet it is somewhat endearing in its misshapen strangeness.

Both the Citrus Elephant and Charles the Bald's elephant appeared in a room sheet (with a version of the above text) alongside *Veneer* during *Bad Actors* at MEANWHILE. Two 'wrong' elephants in the mainly empty gallery room, their apparitions moving over the not-quite-right floor via a grainy printout. In them there is a bumpy feeling of the recognisable speeding toward the strange, a still figure blocking the path. The elephants aren't completely strange, because in their lumpy resemblance they maintain their hold on their reference. A level of recognisability is at play, but one which is only half there. Both elephants retain known fragments, but they still seem remarkably altered. They mis-use and mis-code the recognisable grammar in our received images of elephant-ness and create an unexpectedly re-syntaxed version that obstructs a smooth mechanism of interpretation. In language, syntax can be described as the rules and methods of constructing sentences, but syntax can also be thought of as a more general notion whereby the arrangement of detail makes sense and transmits meaning. Syntax presupposes a 'correct' syntax, that accurately communicates meaning, and an 'incorrect' syntax can mix up interpretation. Poetry, Marten writes, is "somehow unhinged from the parameters of everyday speech",²²⁷ a re-syntaxation of language whereby "something colloquial is provided with new rhythms."²²⁸ The textural and textual bumpiness of the anti-smooth re-syntaxes typical languages of aesthetic form or visual representation, rearranging their grammar and creating new and unpredictable rhythms that shake off the routine. The re-syntaxation that Marten describes circumvents the sense-making or structural rules of 'good sentences', creating instead changes in rhythm that we are not accustomed to. The re-syntaxation in the anti-smooth is a re-arrangement of expected forms or formats within art making. Images that are steady and slow, or have a predictable four-on-the-floor beat, act in foreseeable ways, and they are easy to dance to. Images, sculptures, installations, accelerate and decelerate as their syntax jumbles what we expect to come next, to come where, to come when. The new syntactical intervals between resemblance and origin disrupt the functional operations of language and recognition. They become disruptions to an idea of continuity in

227. Helen Marten, Beatrix Ruf, and Polly Staple, "A Cat Called Lettuce: A Conversation Between Helen Marten, Beatrix Ruf, and Polly Staple at Kunsthalle Zurich," in *Helen Marten*, ed. Tom Eccles (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2013), 64.

228. *Ibid.*

much the same way as the annoying wiggly lines in Microsoft Word. Might they be wilful resistances to authoritative modes of organisation of reality, or what Barad calls, "*the continual reopening and unsettling of what might yet be, of what was, and what comes to be?*"²²⁹



A3

If our experience of something is easy, we see it as untroubled, as Ahmed notes in *Willful Subjects*: "We tend to notice categories when we come up against them: when they do not allow you to flow through space."²³⁰ A brick that falls according to the laws of gravity—rather than floating upwards out of my grasp, to bob up against the ceiling—is not astonishing. An elephant that correctly aligns with my expectations—rather than one with elongated basset-hound ears—allows me to continue on with my thinking quite easily. In his text *Approaches to What?* writer Georges Perec comments that "'Social problems' aren't 'a matter of concern' when there's a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year."²³¹ Though the strike is the difficulty, is it merely an action that irritates and roughens an ignored condition that prevails the rest of the time. Perec also articulates the exigency of questioning "bricks, concrete, glass, our own table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us."²³² The anti-smooth object operates as this irritation amongst both the field of the installation and within its own category of reference. In one register, it is the organic banana that comes to us quickly, there is no doubt to us that it is what it seems. It has a specific material smoothness, and its natural banana-ness arrives quickly. Approaching the masking tape banana in *Boyfriend Pillow*, there is an uncertainty about its material makeup, its properties, its purpose. The foam one lags behind the organic banana, sluggishly catching up to it. Between these two bananas, we are taken on an uneven ride, accelerating and decelerating as

A3: Lucy Meyle, *Boyfriend Pillow* (2016). Banana, high-density foam, masking tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

229. Barad, "Quantum Entanglements," 264.

230. Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 150.

231. Georges Perec, "Approaches to What?" in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), 203.

232. *Ibid.*, 204.

we move towards them (or are they moving towards us?). The foam banana wilfully holds to its ‘real’ banana friend, dragging the generally untroubled question of ‘banana-ness’ from its state of un-remarkability and putting it front and centre. At the same time, the organic banana ripens to the point of sludginess, the typical fruity banana fragrance deepening into rot. These things might appear trivial, of course²³³—because what is the purpose of questioning how we interact bricks and rocks, worms and bananas? They feel like minor stuff in the scheme of things, small fixtures in the general composition of the field. Poet Alice Notley said, “A rock’s as good as anything”,²³⁴ and I think a banana is a fine place to start.

Strange versions of floors or chairs or coffee tables, in their lumpy resemblance, still resonate as things that are part of the normal texture of the everyday. Even if they might appear as absurd or impossible, as mentioned in the next chapter—they do still resemble things we are in touch with relatively frequently. These things can hide their snags between triviality and habit, their alteration can come as a complete surprise as they wilfully make waves or are made more difficult to traverse easily. In Le Guin’s science fiction story *The Author of the Acacia Seeds*, based around the missives of a future scientific organisation, it is said by the President of the Therolinguistics Association that: “It is simply not possible to bring the critical and technical skills appropriate to the study of Weasel murder mysteries, or Batrachian erotica, or the tunnel sagas of the earthworm, to bear on the art of the redwood or the zucchini.”²³⁵ The story continues: “‘Do you realize,’ the phytolinguist will say to the aesthetic critic, ‘that they couldn’t even read Eggplant?’ And they will smile at our ignorance, as they pick up their rucksacks and hike up to read the newly deciphered lyrics of the lichen on the north face of Pike’s Peak.”²³⁶

Le Guin’s rippling disturbance of the seemingly minor or inconsequential beings in her story is a version of new rhythms applied to things colloquial. She pairs earthworms with the complex literary form of Nordic sagas, suggests that lichen write songs (I like to think something like pop songs) and that toads write erotica. Her choice of being is not by mistake, but a playfully trenchant recycling of our own biases. The interval of distance between her suggestion and our prior beliefs feels less like a hypothetical gap and more like the sharp intake of breath when you know you’re wrong about something. Asserting their subjectivity, she rearranges the ‘rules’ not just of the images we might have in mind of these beings, but the held ideas we have regarding what they are capable of. Concealing and revealing

233. Ibid., 205.

234. Alice Notley, “As Good as Anything,” *Poetry Foundation*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58192/as-good-as-anything>.

235. Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics,” in *Unreal and the Real: The Selected Short Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 624.

236. Ibid., 625.

the gently jarring within the pleats of the known, she hints at the ingrained anthropocentrism in certain types of thinking. In this there are echoes of Barad’s notion of intra-active entanglements and the ethical responsibilities that being in touch with the world entails. In fact, the ‘new rhythms’ of things are happening all the time, writes Barad:

Electrons, molecules, brittlestars, jellyfish, coral reefs, dogs, rocks, icebergs, plants, asteroids, snowflakes, and bees stray from all calculable paths, making leaps here and there, or rather, making here and there from leaps, shifting familiarly patterned practices, testing the waters of what might yet be/have been/could still have been, doing thought experiments with their very being.²³⁷

The possibilities that Barad’s philosophy argues for, and Le Guin’s fiction hints at, might already be happening, we are perhaps just unattuned to them. Their disturbances are underneath our radars. Worms, bananas, bricks, eggplants, lichen, rocks, these are the things that accrete—silently, invisibly, profoundly—whatever particular politics we continue to apply to the larger, seemingly more important aspects of life. To re-syntax and rearrange the human experience of bricks, bananas, rocks, and worms, is an insistent attempt to make the small yet cumulative effects of such actions harder to disregard.

Though the uneven disturbance of the anti-smooth traced in this section might be an optimistic project, to pitch yourself *against* can feel difficult to do, too difficult, too much. Is the wall of inability shaped and made concrete by throwing yourself against it? To make trouble (even modestly) is sometimes to invite trouble, and there are plenty of examples close at hand.²³⁸ One perhaps could be the higher educational institution (of which I have been at several as a student, one as an employee, and these comments are not limited to those institutions)²³⁹, with its multi-layered politics and hierarchy, it seems to be easier to go along to get along.²⁴⁰ Easier, that is, until it is not. Until it seems barely possible to arrive at work and do what is required of you, so as to remain employed or secure further employment or remain in the good graces of an institution that sometimes feels pitched against you. Yet in making difficult—raising problems, asking to be paid, querying language—you are the one seen as *against*, as disagreeable, in Ahmed’s words:

[...] it is as if she disagrees because she is disagreeable; it is as if she opposes something because she is being oppositional. To be filled “with will” is to be emptied “of thought” as if speaking about injustice, about power, about inequality, is just another way of getting your way.²⁴¹

237. Barad, “On Touching,” 2.

238. The sexual assault, misconduct, and harassment committed by powerful men in industry (Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Artforum’s Knight Landesman, former prime minister John Key’s ‘ponytail incident’), would be other recent examples, where speaking out *against* harm was seen by some as needlessly making waves.

239. See “Laboring Academia,” by Maximilian Alvarez, *The Baffler*, July 20, 2017, and any number of union disputes regarding staffing, particularly part-time (as an example, see “Save Columbia Resurrected to Create Student, P-Fac Coalition,” by Tessa Brubaker in *Columbia Chronicle*, November 6, 2017, <http://www.columbia-chronicle.com/campus/article.74f47558-c100-11e7-91ea-dbb25765c451.html>).

240. Which can be part of working in any large institution, the structure of an institution works to limit all those involved: “formal education obviously imposes constraints on what one can do in a political sense” (Suhail Malik, “Art Education and the Predicament of Professionalised Criticality”, *Politics of Study*, 65), but sometimes limitations are applied in a recognisable or punitive pattern to particular groups.

241. Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 154.

Despite the format of my sentences and the syntax of my headings (*Anti-smooth*, do not, cannot, will not), I don't oppose so as just to be oppositional. The anti-smooth, like wiggling, is an *against*. But I am not for being against, as if being against can only be a token *against-ness*. The insistence of my disagreement, if it appears that way, has a purpose. The modest proposals in the anti-smooth are assertions of possibilities for space within the general, within the easy flow, where you are too much or too little, too something. Willingly inhabiting difficulty is not eliminating the bumpiness of it. Disturbance is, Ahmed notes:

[...] what is created by the very effort of reaching, of reaching up, of reaching out, of reaching for something that is not present, something that appears only as a shimmer, a horizon of possibility. When the arms refuse to support and carry, they reach. We do not know what the arms can reach.²⁴²

The anti-smooth is refusing the attempt to be in tune, and seeking the troublesome, un-harmonic disturbance that might show how things *could* be. A material wiggle, it is lumpy, silly, different, it is familiar fingers on the flattened-down bit of velvet on the couch. The anti-smooth is a roughening *against* a falsely sealed and monolithic conception of things, and the ways this flows onto our ways of looking, and ways of thinking.

This opposition is evident even in its naming, the snagged difficulty of the prefix *anti*, againstness is signalled from the outset. Like the *anti-* in anti-smooth, there is also the *mis-* inherent in the elephants. Their misshapeness, their misdrawn qualities. This *mis-* is in lumpy resemblances too, in their misuse of materials, mismanagement of features, their misapprehension, misbehaviour. The prefixed *againstness* is a flexing, an uneven ground that jolts recognition. It makes itself known and refuses to act as it 'should'; getting it wrong becomes resistance to smooth passage. It is what Chew-Bose calls "what is detectable but dislodges you."²⁴³ It is in mishearing my own murmured tally of counted paper, and having to start over again. It is in thinking there is one more stair to come and misstepping, jarring an ankle. It is in mistaking a stranger for my father at the airport, closeness turned ravine-like once the error is exposed by the stranger's impossible youngness—that in my father can now only be recalled. It is in misdiagnosing the colour of my childhood couch as an indistinct beige, only in adulthood to flip over the cushions and find it really salmon pink.

242. Ibid., 204.

243. Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 19.

Mis- and *anti-*, are againstness in four-letters-or-less, a syntactical alteration that gets out ahead, even if the recognition of distance can only come *after* hearing both notes. The second chord makes up the cadence at the end of a piece of music, determining an emotion or an incompleteness, a withheld resolution. The anti-smooth as charted in this section, and in works like *Veneer*, *Phantom Limb*, and *Lint-Rolling*, is a purposeful making-difficult of what is known or the mechanisms of that knowing. Rather than a binary construction of right/wrong, the (un)fixed *againstness* of the anti-smooth are a kind of misuse of infrastructure and rules, a miscoding that seeks to trouble (and be trouble *for*) the delineating edges of objects or categories of objects. It is this *against* that constitutes the resistance of the anti-smooth, an unevenness that wilfully sings the intervals between resemblance and origin, impeding authoritative operations of interpretation and recognition, and resisting a cadence of finality. In this way the anti-smooth echoes the refusal of an end to wiggling or the resistance to a pinnacle of ethical relation, where the anti-smooth is ground that shifts with every step and so should be attentively walked.

Comic
objects

Comic objects

To write about funny things can feel like running uphill. The second a good definition of humour or comedy comes into my mind it already seems too-tightly bound—it leaves out swathes of funniness, it crops the comic so tight it cannot breathe, cannot laugh. The mechanisms of humour have been so variously described and theorised by scholars and philosophers that listing them is like a bus tour through the history of Western thought. On our right we've got Plato ('clownishness' is an evil, the ridiculous is a vice)²⁴⁴ and Aristotle (who thought that a joke is "a kind of abuse",²⁴⁵ but also that amusement is a "necessary part of life");²⁴⁶ turn your head and there is Hobbes (the supremacy theory: humour is when we realise we are better than someone else, so we laugh);²⁴⁷ on the left is Kant (the incongruity theory: humour is when we see something that doesn't 'fit', so we laugh);²⁴⁸ in the distance is Freud (the relief theory: we use humour to let go of whatever it is we have repressed);²⁴⁹ quick—there on the right is Bergson (the mechanical theory: humour is derived from our inability to change);²⁵⁰ and on and on. Running after all these theories—I'm gasping for air—what is there left to suggest?

Firstly, it is unsurprising to me that humour is too slippery to nail down into theory. If theories of humour are tangled, once we enter the everyday world of relationships and shared experiences, mis-hearings, and mistakes, it gets more complicated still. It is obvious enough that one person's notion of a side-splitting joke can be another person's idea of something cruelly unfunny. That even within the same age range, the same language, our senses of humour can skew so wildly illustrates how personal, local, and social humour is. There is no consensus on what makes something humorous to one person and tragic to the next, since a large part of humour is dependent on culture, linked to histories and memories of groups. Humour is also social because part of a joke is about *being there*—where laughter is a chorus of shared amusement²⁵¹—whether this occurs in person or over the internet in comment sections. The many different categories of humour can well perform different functions; visual, verbal, and written variants of the same type of humour are most likely made up of different elements; jokes within certain frameworks (a gallery, for example) work differently again. Any concept of the exact mechanism of humour can hold true for one type of humour, but then slip over when applied to another. Given its diverse application, it is unsurprising that overarching

244. Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato: Parmenides. Theaetetus. Sophist. Statesman. Philebus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, vol. 4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1892), 621–22.

245. Aristotle, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 77.

246. *Ibid.*

247. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

248. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), First Part, sec. 54.

249. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin, 1974).

250. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on The Meaning of The Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911).

251. Simon Critchley, *On Humour (Thinking in Action)* (London: Routledge, 2002), 21.

theories on humour end up running into problems somewhere. Perhaps, with humour, we just know it when we see it. Or rather, we know it when we laugh at it. The changeability of humour in our everyday lives, across history and culture, whether spoken or written or drawn, makes the idea that one of the figures listed above²⁵² would be able to successfully define the mechanism for some monolithic kind of humour seem less and less believable.

As will be clear by now, I am wary of trying to strictly outline the humour in this research project, because even though there is a general type and tone, its context and application vary enough so as to not quite fit into any one theorised formula. Pinpointing the workings of humour in each work would probably entail listing jokes and explaining their perceived (to me) funniness—and there is nothing that can kill laughter quicker than explanation. Instead, this text deals with what a particular kind of humour *does* in the research and the possible political and social effects it might have. The key aspects of absurdity, bad props, bathos and ‘turning’ in this practice will be discussed in detail within this section. *Comic Objects* traces the conditions of ‘comic objects’—a term originated by writer and artist David Robbins²⁵³—emphasising the integral materiality that situate them as non-autonomous relata within an entangled world. These objects rely largely not on the comic timing of verbal humour but on a durational comic positioning, which is mobile and flexible. In my practice, the comic objects’ absurdist prop-like quality and non-fiction presence allow them to function as both a support or a welcome, and as a threat to ‘sense’. The comic objects’ specific rejection or contradiction of some structures of this entangled world—rationality, sense, high aesthetics—are constituted through a knowing bathos, an iterative commitment to futility and failure.

252. That many of the most well-known theories on humour are written by men from Western countries, and who are all now dead, seems like an obvious secondary point.

253. Robbins, *Concrete Comedy*, 36–37.

The absurd comic object

In her 2008 essay *Men Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit writes: “billions of women must be out there on this six-billion-person planet being told they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives, that the truth is not their property, now or ever.”²⁵⁴ Solnit speaks to how a woman’s accreted experiences of men interrupting or talking over her reiterates a “belief in her superfluity, an invitation to silence”,²⁵⁵ that can resound internally, too. Correspondingly, to me there seems to be an unrelenting invitation to silence, an endless series of cold rooms and doubtful crowds, that awaits women who are markedly humorous. Funniness certainly doesn’t feel like *my* property. Simply mentioning humour’s part in this research during conversation with acquaintances can provoke, in the first instance, interruption and repudiation: “but humour can sometimes be so *mean*, and you wouldn’t want to be mean, *would you?*”²⁵⁶ In the second instance I’m met with a pleading application to tell a joke, which causes me to tell the only one I know:

Q: What is the difference between an oboe and an onion?

A: No-one cries when chopping an oboe up into tiny little pieces.²⁵⁷

This joke is only funny if you’ve played in a high-school orchestra and can recall the monstrous, keening wail of the un-tuned amateur oboe. It’s a joke that generally doesn’t receive a laugh. Getting someone to tell a joke on command is a request for proof disguised in joviality, it’s a shut window pretending to be open. In both instances, the possible existence of funniness requires instant verification or nullification—and it is usually the latter, because I’m bad at performing on cue. Doubt isn’t held open for very long, soon it turns heavy, and into bad doubt; it becomes unrecoverable. *She is not* funny, now or ever. Verbal humour is ripe for bad doubt because it passes so quickly, and practised jokes are worse still. They require everyone to listen at the same speed—comic timing dictates the swing between the first line and the punchline, and if you miss the pivot you’re lost. But good doubt, though, is a gift. I am happy for good doubt. It’s gentle, it is productively uncertain. Rather than a slamming of a door it is an opening for possibility. Beginning with this kind of uncertainty feels like propping a door open with my foot—is it this one or the next? I lean through and turn my head this way and that. I think I’ve found my way in here, but maybe not, let’s try another. When mixed through with generosity of time and spirit, uncertain-

254. Rebecca Solnit, “Men Explain Things to Me,” *Guernica*, 2012, <https://www.guernicamag.com/rebecca-solnit-men-explain-things-to-me/>.

255. *Ibid.*

256. This is an actual question, almost verbatim.

257. I think it was my friend Sam who first told this to me, though I can’t be sure. It could really have been any of my friends, who all know of my particular dislike for oboes. Whoever told it to me really knew their audience.

ty can be wonderful fun, good doubt can awaken surprise. In this research I refer to the humorous sculpture, installation, or publication-based elements as ‘comic objects’²⁵⁸ that are absurdist in nature. This type of humour has a resolution that is uncertain at best, the absurdist comic object in its physicality becomes like a foot in the door—material support and yet also substantial interference with closure, a refusal of either verification or nullification. Here the tension in the relationship between absurd suggestions and concrete object-ness is traced through two parallel texts.



C3



B3

B3: Lucy Meyle, *New World* (2016). High-density foam, masking tape, marker pen, oasis, paint, plastic bag, receipt. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

C3: Lucy Meyle, *New World* (detail) (2016). In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

258. Robbins, *Concrete Comedy*, 36–37.

Lonely God

NEW WORLD. There is a lot of weird hope bound into the name of that chain of supermarkets. (All the other ones are like *Countdown*, or one that was in my neighbourhood when I was growing up: *Three Guys*). Does a supermarket really count as a New World? If I went to a ‘new’ planet (if there ever was one) I don’t think I would stock it only with different types of potato chip and frozen shrimp (though I would want potato chips to be there, on the new planet). How would I decide what to take to a new planet anyway? Would I start Earth again or would I make some changes?



D3



E3



F3

Souvenir Stand

I walk through a large park on the way to work every morning, and on those days when it rains, there bristle hundreds of earthworms squirming themselves over the concrete tracks. Moving steeply downhill, each step adds another zigzag in an attempted path of avoidance. Even then it is impossible to prevent myself from squishing some by accident—since a worm’s presence is sometimes noticeable only when my foot is bearing down on top of them—their existence snuffed out on the bottom of my shoe. My remorse lasts only a second, as the next step must be navigated more accurately this time, to avoid another death. Worms leave the ground when it rains because they finally get a chance to move easily overground. “Even a worm will turn!” the saying goes, but turn to *where?*²⁵⁹ On the other side of the concrete tracks there lies only more grass, more dirt, equally earthy and surely very similar to that from which they came.

D3: Lucy Meyle, *Souvenir Stand* (detail) (2017). Net bags, fruits and vegetables (real and unreal), plywood, sand, scoria, paint, cardboard, stainless steel fixtures, ball chain, bic pen, stainless steel chain. Dimensions variable. In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

E3: Lucy Meyle, *Souvenir Stand* (2017). In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

F3: Lucy Meyle, *Souvenir Stand* (detail) (2017). In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

259. This saying doesn’t actually mean a literal turning, instead referring to an idea that even the meekest animal or person will eventually have enough of being put-upon and bite back.



H3



G3

G3: Lucy Meyle, *Lint-rolling leftovers* (2016). Paper, peach pit, masking tape. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

H3: Lucy Meyle, *Pidgey* (2016). Masking tape, high-density foam. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

Sitting upright on the floor of St Paul St Gallery III in the installation *Lonely God* (2016), there is a white plastic bag with NEW WORLD on the side. Its handles are arched up and slightly over, like it is stretching. The bag is translucent and through the plastic you can see a yellow blob, a bunch of bananas. Standing over the bag, through the arched handles you can now see that lying on top of the bunch of bananas—nestled in like it belongs—is a single, curved red-brown sausage. It seems like it is lying face down, though of course sausages don't have faces and neither do bananas. Looking up from the bag, towards the window, there is someone watching you. It is a pigeon. He is sitting on the outside ledge towards the right side of the window. The pigeon is also yellow, and like the bananas he is made from masking tape. The pigeon is definitely watching you though he too doesn't have a face, no one thought to draw him any eyes. Across the room—embedded in a large shonky papier-mâché wall—is a tiny screen where a video is playing on loop. In the video someone is gently yet firmly lint-rolling a peach with a mini lint roller. Both the peach and the lint-rolling are harder than they look. Down on the floor again (near the plastic bag) is a peach pit from which all the fruit's flesh has been eaten.



I3



J3



K3

The leisure life of these worms re-turned in an installation *Souvenir Stand* (2017) installed in Silo Park in Auckland's Artweek. There are three decoratively crusty, plywood souvenir racks stationed around the edge of the room. The room itself is damp and dark. One rack is covered with fruits and vegetables in colourful net bags; another in lumpy hand-printed postcards—WISH U WORM HERE—four different kinds; the last is hung with a number of carved wood signs, with different slogans, one declares: *Six Feet Under and Lovin' It!* Some of the bagged fruits are shrivelling up, some are still shiny and perfect. There is a pen Sellotaped to a very long ball-chain draped over the postcards—like the ones you use at the bank to fill out deposit slips—which is attached by a stainless-steel hook to the edge of the pistachio-green, burlap-and-sand-sedimented stand. On the room sheet, there is a brief blurb: *I've always wanted to go, you know, saved up for years. And now I'm here! hah! can't believe it. Maybe I'll get a little something to remind me of what a good time I've had, something just to say hey! you! hardworking worm! take that vacay, take a load off, put your foot up, you deserve to take a break ;)*

I3: Lucy Meyle, *Souvenir Stand* (2017). Net bags, fruits and vegetables (real and unreal), plywood, sand, scoria, paint, cardboard, stainless steel fixtures, ball chain, bic pen, stainless steel chain. Dimensions variable. In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

J3: Lucy Meyle, *Souvenir Stand* (detail) (2017). In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

K3: Lucy Meyle, *Souvenir Stand* (2017). In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

Drag a red-herring, tied to a string, four or five miles over hedges and ditches:²⁶⁰ **Duration, materiality, and position**

The comic object is absurdist and improbable. In this research, this absurdism is fused with its concrete object-based presence. In his book *Concrete Comedy*, Robbins puts forth an alternative history of humour and comedy, traversing genres like fashion, performance, music, and art. The connecting factor in his irregular landscape is the concept of “comedy done for real.”²⁶¹ In this conception, the concrete comedian “allies with the integrity of physical materials, real space, and real time. ‘Non-fiction’ is concrete comedy’s special distinction as well as its core definition.”²⁶² To Robbins, conventional mainstream comedies—in particular stand-up comedy, theatre, or TV, though also jokes that rely on known formulae—are based on a level of remove from our lived world. We see the stage or the screen and can feel the distance that fiction (or perceived fiction) provides. Concrete comedy is created as a conscious narrowing of that distance, or by making it non-existent.²⁶³

Though still framed and experienced in certain ways by bodies, galleries, museums, or screens, concrete comedy uses existence with/in the world—instead of solely spoken word or textual description—to form the basis of its humour. This is a type of comedy that is formed from *doing* and *being* rather than saying, *things* rather than words. Within Robbins’ survey of concrete comedy he also outlines the concept of the ‘comic object’. Rather than a joke encapsulated in or illustrated by an object, these objects are physical comedy in which materiality is a central rather than peripheral condition.²⁶⁴ An object here can refer to images and videos, and even objects that recede from view, as long as the material non-fictionality of the humour is still a central concern.²⁶⁵ In describing the comic objects of this research, I can give verbal shape to them, but their comic potential is somewhat missing. It is their material quality, rather than verbal or textual issuance, that makes them humorous. The silly cocked head of the pigeon and his chubby body, the shiny curve of the sausage hugging the bananas for dear life, the difficulty of neatly lint-rolling a peach and the absurdity of the task, inset into a complete sham of a wall. The spongy tightness of the yellow masking tape wrapped around and around the bananas and the pigeon, the crinkled painted-paper covering of the wall flapping at the edges of the video screen and the flimsy sheerness of the plastic bag. In the same way that verbally describing music instead of hearing notes is a translation that lacks the experiential qualities of sound, the vibratory amusement of comic objects is difficult to convey when their materiality cannot be encountered in some way that retains this quality. The ‘comic object’ is not “art with a

260. This is supposedly the origin of the term “red herring”. William Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Political Register*, vol. XI (London, 1807).

261. Robbins, *Concrete Comedy*, 87.

262. *Ibid.*

263. *Ibid.*, 23.

264. *Ibid.*

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265. An example of this is David Shrigley’s *Leisure Centre* (1992), where the non-fiction quality of this static photograph image fixes the flimsy and pathetic cardboard structure into the centre of a desolate lot with a kind of contradictory permanence. Chromogenic print on paper. 25.4 x 25.9 cm. “Leisure Centre”, David Shrigley, 1992,” Tate, accessed February 7, 2018, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/shrigley-leisure-centre-p79243>.

A few well-frozen worms:²⁷⁴ **Absurdity, nonsense, and narrative**

The comic object is prop-*like* and definitely non-fiction. In this research, their concrete-ness is fused with the absurd tone of the fragmentary possible-narratives and situations suggested by them. Writer Sean Gaston remarks that absurdity “denotes that which is out of harmony, out of tune, ridiculous, inappropriate, incongruous and, most of all, without or taken away from a symmetrical relationship to reason”.²⁷⁵ *Comic* absurdity is when this kind of existential, Sisyphean absurdism²⁷⁶—based on incongruity or nonsense²⁷⁷—also generates a hybrid funny-strange/funny-haha reaction. Our identification of incongruities depends on what we deem to be possible, what makes sense to us based on previous experience versus something that is unforeseeable.²⁷⁸ By proposing what feels improbable, the absurd is capable of altering our relationship to sense or reason.

How do we decide what is possible? These categories are not inherent, but created—we organise the world and so we think of it as being organised. I think of certain things as types or in categories and so this shapes what category I believe it ‘naturally’ belongs to. The same goes for relevance or usefulness—in selecting for relevance I am manufacturing what is relevant. Stewart writes: “the employment of typification and relevance serves to substantiate our notion of ourselves as historical beings, our confidence in social categories and hierarchies in a system of rationalities based upon typification and relevance, and finally, our confidence in a taken-for-granted world in terms of these same rationalities.”²⁷⁹ The procedures of this interpretation are occurring continuously, as we re-organise in the face of momentary disorganisation. Even though we might understand sense (as in common sense) as ‘things which happen’ and nonsense as ‘things which don’t happen’ or even ‘could never happen’, there are interpretive procedures at work in every instance that we make those divisions.²⁸⁰ The idea of holiday souvenirs for worms is a kind of nonsense, because of the agential ‘cuts’ that are easy to apply to animals like them, such as: Do worms even *have brains*? The question itself is a categorisation based on removing a threat to my world-view. *What does it matter* if worms have brains? Is a human-like brain a requirement for a holiday? This kind of nonsense isn’t the opposite of sense. Rather it is a kind of inner *againstness* that pulls and grasps at sense, getting it messy. In this relation, “hierarchies of relevance are flattened, inverted, and manipulated in a gesture that questions the idea of a hierarchy itself, a gesture that celebrates an arbitrary and impermanent

274. “Good evening. I am the president of the Loyal Society for the Relief of Sufferers from Pismronunciation, for the relief of people who can’t say their worms correctly, or who use the wrong worms entirely, so that other people cannot underhand a bird they are spraying. It’s just that you open your mouse, and the worms come tumbling out in wuck a say that you dick not what you’re thugging to be, and it’s very distressing.” Ronnie Barker, “Ronnie Barker Monologue: Pismronunciation,” *The Guardian*, October 4, 2005, sec. Media, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/oct/04/bbc.arts>.

275. Sean Gaston, *Derrida, Literature and War: Absence and the Chance of Meeting* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 129.

276. Absurdity here as reflection of both the ‘purposelessness’ of human life or even the universe itself and the philosophical responses to this ‘meaninglessness’ that are seemingly easily deconstructed into nonsense and contradiction. See Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 13.

277. The BBC TV show *The Mighty Boosh* is comically absurd, a particular example being the recurring “Moon” sketch, where Noel Fielding’s face is covered in shaving cream and super-imposed over a lumpy white circle in the night sky. He then holds forth on some trivial matter like: “Saturn, Jupiter, Pluto, Mars, Venus... George... Chrissie. That is a list of my best friends, in order. Order of preference.”

278. Mary K. Rothbart and Diana Pien, “Elephants and Marshmallows: A Theoretical Synthesis of Incongruity-Resolution and Arousal Theories of Humour,” in *It’s a Funny Thing, Humour*, ed. Anthony Chapman and Hugh Foot (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977), 37.

279. Stewart, *Nonsense*, 11.

280. *Ibid.*, 13.

humorous dimension’, it is rather to be thought of as comedy that is material in form.”²⁶⁶ The comic object relies on the experience of that form as an essential part of what makes the work funny, and it is an integral part of what gives the objects a direct and often non-verbal resonance.

Alongside the distinct material qualities of the comic object, there is a temporal experience that is part of them too. It is one that has no start or end, or any linear order to it. Even the criss-crossing farce of the *Who’s on First*²⁶⁷ routine as performed by comedic double act Abbott and Costello—tail-chasing though it is—traces a climactic trajectory, introducing the situation at the beginning and getting more and more absurd towards the end. Absolutely required for *Who’s on First* is comic timing, the increasingly fast tempo of Lou’s frustration batting at Bud’s incredulity, managed against the audience’s comprehension of Who on first, What on second, and I Don’t Know on third. Instead of verbal comic *timing* the comic objects in my practice have a concrete, materially-based humour that relies on comic *positioning* that is durational in nature.²⁶⁸ Approaching the pigeon from behind would make no difference, and even now the bananas and sausage still exist, alone, in storage under my desk. Part of an exhibition, they can be viewed in any order, in any arrangement, and still be funny. As objects they are mobile and flexible, and yet they are also co-dependent. The comic object’s humour isn’t a spectral element that hovers over it untethered, it will always be read within the field of the exhibition at hand. The comic *positioning* of the objects in spaces becomes important in laying out what points of contact that the viewers and the other installed elements have, and this is what causes the relational experience of their comic capabilities. The cumulative elements of the lint-rolled peach video were dispersed around the gallery, with aspects both labelled and unlabelled on the room sheet. The video was played on a tiny screen in the middle of a soft wall. At some distance, in the corner, was a peach pit on the floor. Haphazardly taped up to the wall near the peach pit was a piece of lilac paper, the same colour as the backdrop of the video itself. There is a durational longevity to the comic objects’ humour, which is mainly materially sited, and yet which is also altered according to its relation with other things. Abbott and Costello’s *Who’s on First* routine can’t be told at the same time as another skit and still be heard, it must come to an end before another can be told. Comic objects, on the other hand, are non-linear related within a web of other objects, their meaning and funniness cannot be extricated from the ensemble of other similarly entangled things that alters with every different arrangement.

266. Robbins, *Concrete Comedy*, 7.

267. A sketch wherein Abbott tries to tell Costello (a new baseball team member), what the names of his team members are. Confusion reigns because the first-baseman is named ‘Who’.
Costello: Well, then who’s playing first?
Abbott: Yes.
Costello: I mean the fellow’s name on first base.
Abbott: Who.
Costello: The fellow playin’ first base.
Abbott: Who.
Costello: The guy on first base.
Abbott: Who is on first.
Costello: Well, what are you askin’ me for?
Abbott: I’m not asking you—I’m telling you. Who is on first.
Costello: I’m asking you—who’s on first?
Abbott: That’s the man’s name.
Costello: That’s who’s name?
Abbott: Yes

Script from <http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10.110/inart10/whos.html>
The full sketch can be viewed at: NYGehrig, *Abbott & Costello Who’s On First*, accessed December 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTcR-RaXV-fg>.

268. By virtue of both their material presence and their type of humour, which is outlined in the next sub-section.

hierarchy.”²⁸¹ Nonsense is an open question to these hierarchies, diminishing their hold on the arrangement of the world.

That which is deemed ‘sensical’ is what is deemed ‘of this world’; that which is deemed nonsensical is supposedly from some other world, a world of improbability or even impossibility, though it still bears a strong resemblance to the ‘real’ world.²⁸² Stewart writes:

The discourse of common sense refers to the ‘real world.’ The discourse of nonsense refers to ‘nothing.’ In other words, it refers to itself, even though it must manufacture this ‘nothing’ out of a system of differences from the everyday world—the common stuff of social life—in order to be recognized as ‘nothing.’²⁸³

In Stewart’s description, what is nonsensical takes its cues from the ‘common stuff’ that surrounds us, as well as referring to the space of possibility and potentiality that is ‘nothing’. In my practice the use of common things—like fruits and vegetables—binds the artwork to the ‘real’ world, no matter how nonsensical the proposition. These familiar forms and aspects are also invitational. Their recognisable common-ness is like a friendly embrace that can occur before, during, or after their strangeness registers. This familiarity is variously constituted via materiality (the pigeon’s masking tape), and through the referencing of familiar forms and functions (bananas, bricks, walls). It is through these invitations that the artwork becomes what Stewart might describe as “a field where one can critique the interpretive procedures used in manufacturing the world, and, with increasing self-consciousness, a critique of the interpretive procedures by which nonsense itself has come to be.”²⁸⁴ Incorporating what is ‘sensical’ (by way of being familiar), into the ‘impossible nothing’ of nonsense, the comic object wiggles against the presumed naturalness of the sense itself.

The comically absurd uses the interpretative procedures of sense-making to summon humorous incongruities, yet remaining critical in its pointed manipulation of those relations. Absurdist humour has a unique durational aspect to it that relies on an extension and complication of its own resolution. It has been suggested that resolution is absent in absurdist humour,²⁸⁵ in contrast to other types of jokes (like puns and witticisms) in which some of our amusement is probably related to being able to work out what it is that is funny. Never completely of course, since “a joke that is fully comprehensible is a dead one”,²⁸⁶ but the resolvability of humour is generally part of its life cycle. However, instead of being absent, perhaps the durational timeline for resolution

281. Stewart, 209.

282. *Ibid.*, 13.

283. *Ibid.*

284. *Ibid.*, 206.

285. Salvatore Attardo, “The Semantic Foundations of Cognitive Theories of Humor,” *Humor* 104, no. 4 (1997): 395–420.

286. Christopher Hsu, “Spasm to Spasm,” *Paper Monument* (blog), 2013, <http://www.papermonument.com/web-only/spasm-to-spasm/>.

The constellational aggregate of comic objects, and the importance of their positioning and materiality, puts the comic object in relation to the theatrical prop. The boundaries of the gallery as a physical and an institutional space might be considered a staging space not unlike a theatre, but while the comedy of the stage or screen is distanced via the proscenium arch²⁶⁹ as ‘away from here’, the border of the gallery is a porous one. We track what lies outside of the gallery over its edges, ‘real life’ envelops and is enveloped by the gallery, and here it is understood as space that resists being cast as solely a theatrical one. As Robbins writes, “Were life theater, the comic object would be a prop. Since life is not theater (theater is correctly regarded as a subset of life, not the other way around), the comic object is not a prop but is instead prop-like.”²⁷⁰ Comic objects only manage to be prop-like because they are thoroughly non-fiction. They circumvent the theatrical, and any buffering fictionality that it can provide. The proscenium arch (either physical or conceptual)²⁷¹ present in conventional stage and screen comedy is noticeably absent; here is no “window of illusion”²⁷² through which the comic object can be viewed as if it illusionistically represents a real thing, it simply *is* a real thing. Still, the function of a prop, which the comic object might resemble, is refused by its lack. The conventional prop generally reduces the amount of effort required to suspend our disbelief as we watch a TV show or a movie, its presence bolsters believability by functioning as it ‘should’ according to whatever is expected within the genre. This functionality remains unchanged whether the prop was made by a prop department or commercially manufactured and bought from a shop. A functioning prop is one where theatricality is maintained, and a non-functioning or ‘bad’ prop is one which bounces the viewer out of the narrative, when doubt creeps in about the reality of what is being depicted. What the bad prop also does is accidentally allow the viewer behind the veneer,²⁷³ it snags at the curtain rather than allowing it to sweep closed. The comic object becomes this snag too, except it does it outside of fiction.



269. Anonymous, *Design for the Proscenium Arch of a Theatre with Two Trumpeting Angels Holding a Cartouche* (1700-1780). Pen and black ink, brush with gray, brown and pink wash, over lead point or graphite. 27.9 x 21.5 cm. The Met, eighteenth century, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/340397>.

270. Robbins, *Concrete Comedy*, 36.

271. Or even the structure of told joke that signals its form.

272. Robbins, *Concrete Comedy*, 32.

273. This is intentionally done by breaking the fourth wall in TV shows like *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006), but this is itself a recognisable narrative device that is intended to strengthen a claim to realism.

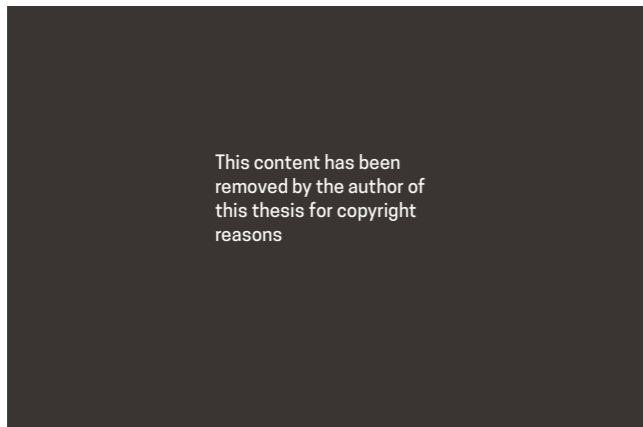
in absurdist humour is simply variable. The period of puzzlement might last for longer, there is no order to follow, or there is no surety that a resolution will arrive. These aspects of absurdist humour can cause it to come across laugh-out-loud funny or ‘funny’ (strange),²⁸⁷ as it slows the rate from which puzzlement slides into amusement or the other way around. Instant resolution isn’t pivotal in determining a joke’s power. Part of absurd jokes is the slipperiness of the thing to ‘get’, and this can cause us to abandon the attempt and move into an alternative kind of resolution. The alternative is giving in to *not* understanding a feeling, of *not* working to resolve an answer, and instead hovering in a moment (or longer) of suspension. This doesn’t mean absurdist humour is meaningless, but that its meaning comes from breaking down our “everyday understandings, purposes, and attachments”²⁸⁸ through amusement. The variability of resolution, specific to the absurd,²⁸⁹ holds open the boundaries between sense and nonsense, with the comedic fuse set to burn for an unknown amount of time as we waver in uncertainty. The comically absurd suggestions (like the worms on holiday), or their absurdist presence (the pigeon at the window) individually put forward partial narratives that can be drawn differently depending on the objects’ arrangement in space or their context. For example, the blurb for *Souvenir Stand* seems to put forth a narrative of a worm who has scrimped and saved for years to go on a particular vacation. Worms don’t have hands, so I believe they probably couldn’t use a normal sized Bic ballpoint pen. Why then are there postcards for them to write on, with a pen which is definitely too large? I’m also unsure whether they can speak English. Why then are the postcards inscribed with THE BIG APPLE? The comically absurd is doubtfully resolvable and has a dodgy internal ‘logic’ that serves to undercut any narrative links viewers might make. In this sense, the comically absurd objects in this research prop up and support narratives that they also inherently sabotage.

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287. As in artist Nick Austin’s works, which depict absurd things like envelopes hitch-hiking and the various ‘houses’ of sugar, seen in this footnote. *Where Sugar Lives* (2015). Coloured pencil on paper. 59.4 x 42cm. “Nick Austin - Where Sugar Lives - HOPKINSON MOSSMAN,” <http://hopkinsonmossman.com/artist/?artist+Nick+Austin&work=Where+Sugar+Lives&id=1797> tist=Nick+Austin&work=Where+Sugar+Lives&id=1797.

288. Matthew H. Bowker, *Rethinking the Politics of Absurdity: Albert Camus, Postmodernity, and the Survival of Innocence* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1.

289. Attardo, “The Semantic Foundations of Cognitive Theories of Humor,” 409.



L3

Bad Props

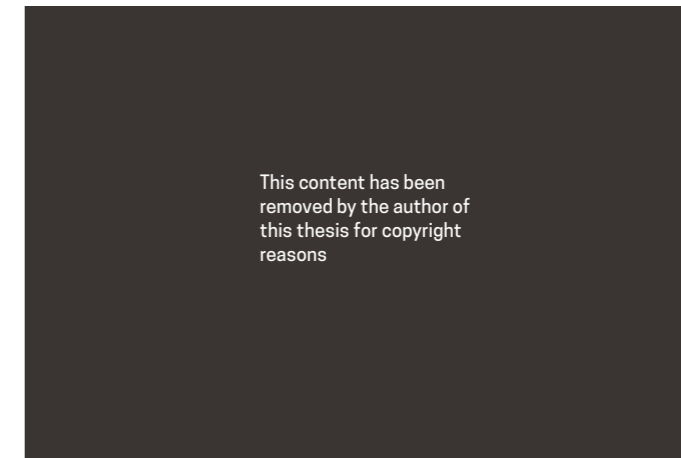
Cosima von Bonin's exhibition *Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea* (2016), at SculptureCenter, is populated heavily by what I would call absurdist comic objects. Plush sea animals drape themselves over furniture. A droopy green hermit crab is poised to make an announcement; he is sitting on a tall wooden lifeguard seat facing two microphones. A floppy shark sits at a miniature office desk, its tail bent (uncomfortably?) underneath it. There is also a gigantic tiny white bikini, with decorative ties at the side, stretched in that saggy-shiny Lycra-only way against a wall, like a summer spider web. These absurd renderings are amusing during our first few moments of encounter. In their pathetic repose and wall-eyed semi-cuteness, the marine animals seem exhausted by their human-like occupations. Where at first the sea creatures seem out of place on the beach, or in the office, in fact we soon feel that we are the ones out of place. They're just taking a break, man, stop staring and let sleeping hermit crabs lie. These animals have turned the tables on us: we've arrived in the off-season and it's the sea that has authority and not the other way around.

Curator Ruba Katrib asserts that this movement is key to von Bonin's work, as "Nothing is what it seems, as roles can rotate".²⁹⁰ That this is a rotation and not a flip seems important, that the rotation pushes us by way of humour seems equally so. What is it about lounging lobsters that are amusing? I know it is funny, but the moment I ask why, it suddenly seems very serious. Suppose lobsters are able to relax, are able to be lazy. Entire Pixar and Disney franchises are based on these ideas and yet I've never really thought about why the concept of a talking dog or a sentient ant is funny. Their plushy velvet skins and

L3: Cosima von Bonin, *Hai am Tisch* (Shark at desk) (2014). Iron, blockboard, lacquer, rubber, cotton, terry, foam material, polyfill, bulb with fitting, cable, galvanized steel. Dimensions variable. In *Cosima von Bonin: Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?* (2016), SculptureCenter, New York. Photo by Kyle Knodell for The New York Times.

290. Ruba Katrib, "Off Season," in *Cosima von Bonin: Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?* (New York: SculptureCenter, 2016), 4.

googley-eyed attitudes are like a material shrug—So? Didn't you know already? Oh well, try another beach. The heavy swerve of these comically absurd objects marks us, changes us, as they rotate from props in a beachside narrative to pincering off their support for the way we currently construct reality.



M3

In this rotation, the absurdist comic objects act similarly to bad props. They do it without the arch of fiction, muddling around in their own sabotaged narratives. Their target isn't the believability of a particular narrative but the believability of any narrative at all. Absurdist comic objects like the pigeon and the bananas are made from solid(ish) materials and require no real linear path from first line to punchline (because there really isn't one). They are invested in *being there*, in evidencing one idea or another, under the weight of gravity, like other things. Even the most ephemeral or badly made comic object can never be glib, or be waved away. It's their posture that is amusing, their relationship to one another, their very existence as physical things. The pigeon is prop-like in the sense that it, as a concrete object, is somehow actually supportive of an idea or image. The pigeon resembles a pigeon. And yet from this solidity it recedes, by virtue of its absurd suggestion. If a comically absurd notion is that which is seemingly impossible or illogical in the extreme so as to become funny, then the comically absurd object is at least part way to evidencing its possibility, after all. Because it questions itself as well as the context in which it is funny, the absurdist comic object is

M3: Cosima von Bonin, *The Bonin/Oswald Empire's Nothing #05* (2010). Mohair velour, polyfill, styroplast, brass. Dimensions variable. In *Cosima von Bonin: Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?* (2016), SculptureCenter, New York. Photo by Michael Nagle for The New York Times.



N3

N3: Lucy Meyle, *Hedge Comb* (2015). Plywood, paint. 2.4 x .6m. In *Working Together* (with Ziggy Lever), St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

291. Lauren Berlant and Bea Malsky, "Pleasure Won: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant," *The Point Magazine*, February 21, 2017, <https://thepointmag.com/2017/politics/pleasure-won-conversation-lauren-berlant>.

292. Jacques Derrida, "Majesties," in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. and trans. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 114.

a "disturbance of the shared object", as writer Lauren Berlant notes. She continues: "you think you know what it is but you don't, and you get to delight in that. It allows in the room a multiplicity of kinds of possible effects and affects, and that flooding itself is funny."²⁹¹ These things disarm you through the initial strangeness and incomprehensibility, inviting a whole host of questions to enter into the same space that you inhabit, changing that landscape irreversibly. It changes it into a place where the vacationing non-arthropod invertebrate (as in *Souvenir Stand*) or marine crustacean (as in Bonin's *Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea*), lint-rolling a peach (as in *Lint-Rolling*), needy sausages (*New World*), and hedges needing combs or special stencils (as in *Topiary Stencil* and *Hedge Comb*, right and above) are entirely logical propositions. Once we are there, together, thinking about worms writing postcards and lobsters overseeing the swimmers, have we accessed something that was there all along? Derrida has remarked that "the absurd shows up in manifesting nothing";²⁹² the comically absurd object manifests that nothing as a rich and reverberant potentiality that is present yet doubtful—contradictorily impossible and yet probable, hilarious and yet also questionably so. Calling attention to themselves because of this lumpiness or



03

03: Lucy Meyle, *Topiary Template* (2015). Plywood, paint. 2.4 x .6m. In *Working Together* (with Ziggy Lever), St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

absurdity, the comic objects in this research purposefully fail to uphold believability in whatever idea they are suggesting, and at the same time materially confirming that same possibility. Even in a group, where their believability might be strengthened in the same way that a well-dressed set on TV is convincing, they are part of a shifting web that never coalesces into one joke, let alone supporting one logical reality or world view. Why are the bananas and the sausage tenderly considered and yet the peach (just another fruit, after all) is devoured, its pit licked clean and lying on the floor? With its solidity and duration on the one hand and its ultimately leaky boundaries on the other, the power of the comic object is that it generates internal contradictions. The objects sort of stick in the door, they warm up the room. They lie and stand and move and all are somehow uncertain at the same time they are generously present without start or finish. They bask in a good, productive doubt; it is laid out like a happy welcome mat. The comic objects in this

research hold open uncertainty for an indeterminate period, they refuse to perform on cue—because there isn't one, timing is irrelevant—they cannot be interrupted, they cannot be either verified or nullified. As Berlant writes “The comedy is that you get up again after you fall off the cliff, and have to keep moving. You have to live with the brokenness, and you have to live with surprise, and you have to live with contingency. And you have to live with the pleasure of not knowing, if you can bear it”.²⁹³ As a prop-like presence the comic object is both support a of and an interference in the experience of a world as previously understood, allowing a degree of uncertainty and possibility.

293. Berlant and Malsky, “Pleasure Won: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant.”

A failing resistance, just waiting for a fall: Intentional bathos



P3

The extension wall in *Lonely God* was very close to failure. The convenience store over the road had let me take all of their used cardboard boxes that were out on the footpath for recycling, and so I had a lot of raw materials with which to cobble together some kind of structure. But there isn't a manual or an internet tutorial for how to make a wall from used, folded, slightly stained cardboard and packing tape, which are very different materials from straight pieces of wood, Gib, and nails. First I tried a flat plane several thicknesses of cardboard deep (for strength), running tape horizontally across it like an emergency belt. This was a failure that I should definitely have seen coming. Consequently, I forged on to a new idea. I thought about a two-part structure, where I would fashion a bottom half that was slightly angled inwards, and a top section could then slot over the top. This seemed like it would need more rigorous planning and probably some maths, so it was abandoned. Next I rolled up cardboard into thick and tight tubes as a version of a stud—taping them together into a larger support structure—that I was then going to clad with more cardboard. But these tubes were still way too flexible to stand on their own, and, not wanting to ask for help with my ridiculous wall, I was trying to hold up what was basically a floppy trellis that was about

P3: Lucy Meyle, *Lonely God* (2016). St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

two metres tall and four metres wide. The structure would stand straight for a second before peeling, arc-ing, over my head as I tried with my arms—and, at times, legs—to flap it back up again. Eventually I just let it sag over me, the weight of it dragging me down onto the floor. From my newly sunken position, it occurred to me that cardboard boxes are shaped the way they are in part because it gives them structural integrity, and because it makes them stackable. Rising out from under my sad cardboard defeat, I re-made and stacked the boxes like big bricks, with packing tape forming the mortar. The wall was then covered in papier-mâché newsprint and painted the same white as the rest of the gallery with its generic paint. Using a craft knife, I hacked a rectangular hole into the front of the wall for the video screen, then bored a tunnel through the boxes so the extension cord could be plugged in the back. The newsprint ripped a bit more every time I turned the screen on or off, revealing bits of the unpainted paper. Sellotape had to be used to keep the screen in the wall, extra sticky stitches done on the fly. *Extension* remained in place (and standing) for four days, until the end of the exhibition.

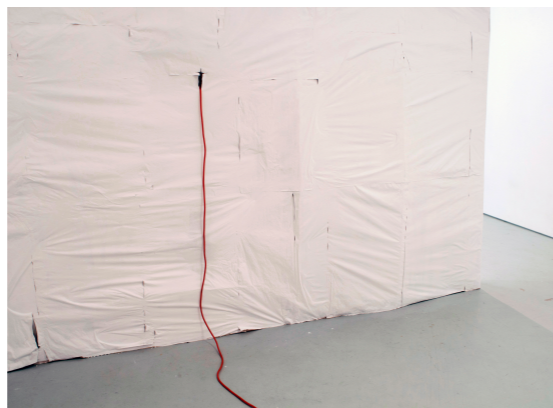


Q3

Q3: Lucy Meyle, *Extension* (2016). Recycled cardboard, packing tape, newsprint, glue, paint. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

R3: Lucy Meyle, *Extension* (2016). In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

In this research some of the power of comic objects comes from a tension between their durational, physical comic form and their inability to affirm their own believability because of their absurd suggestion. Their internal ‘good doubt’ shifts us between verifying or nullifying complete truthfulness either materially or narratively within them. The confirmation doesn’t come, and in fact what is most certain is the objects’ posi-



R3

tively demented investment in never letting the door swing closed. The objects’ secondary source of power comes from their similarly unhinged investment in a type of non-heroic ‘failure’, that is labour-intensive and quite probably futile. Not reaching the supposed pinnacle, the sublime, nor appealing to pathos and nothing else, the *intentionally bathetic* playfully rotates these attributes on a (very) Lazy Susan alongside bad taste, failure, and irrationality. This rotation is a bathetic one, as it lowers the ‘high’ and raises the ‘low’,²⁹⁴ dragging it all down into the mud with it.²⁹⁵ In this different tension, the absurdist comic object is capable of moving some of the entangled structures surrounding it. Knowingly committing to this seemingly fruitless and never-ending motion, through intentional *bathos* the absurdist comic object specifically contradicts these structures by obviously ‘failing’ to reach them; then also failing to ‘fail’ completely, resisting the comfortably kitsch or the commodifiably (anti)heroic.

The origins of sinking

The lineage of bathos charts a series of reversals and inversions. *On the Sublime* (Peri Hypsous) was a text outlining ‘good’ literary styles alongside ‘bad’ literary styles, written by Longinus²⁹⁶ in the first century CE. Longinus used βάθος (bathos) as a synonym of ‘depth’, which in turn has been interpreted by scholars as a synonym for the ‘sublime’. But it is in Alexander Pope’s *Peri Bathous, Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1727), that bathos originated as the concept in use today.²⁹⁷ Pope’s use of the Greek βάθος—and one of the main points of his treatise—was an intentional skewering of the highfalutin application of Greek concepts, and their intended appeal to the enduring authority of Greek philosophy. It was also a comic critique of what Pope saw, as writer Keston Sutherland describes, as the “pretentious, clumsy and undigested”²⁹⁸ neoclassicism of his literary contemporaries.²⁹⁹ *Peri Bathous* is a parody of poetic manuals, inverting their directions while borrowing their structure and style. Writing as the character Martinus Scriblerus,³⁰⁰ Pope sets out a ‘how-to’ for writing bad poetry, presenting *Peri Bathous* as a supplement to Longinus’ *On the Sublime*. It suggests that “modern writers are so bad that they must be trying to be dull, even following a set of rules for sinking.”³⁰¹ The rules in *Peri Bathous* deal with imitation, inversion, hyperbole, vulgarity (among others), and are in “effect an inversion of Pope’s own rules for writing well.”³⁰² Literary critics Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls write that Pope’s rules for bathos are all:

[...] ways of *over-working* their subject, of making the poem something which bears the signs of excessive man-

294. Sara Crangle, “Dada IS Bathos! Or: Of the Hobbyhorse Endlessly Rocking,” in *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, ed. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010), 28.
295. In this sense, bathos is related to nonsense, although nonsense is one of several mechanisms of bathos, others of which include exaggeration and anti-climax.
296. The actual author of *On the Sublime* is unconfirmed. Longinus is sometimes called Pseudo-Longinus, and the work has also been attributed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus. “From ‘On the Sublime’ by Longinus,” text/html, *Poetry Foundation*, February 11, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69397/from-on-the-sublime>.
297. Alexander Pope, *The Art of Sinking in Poetry: A Critical Edition*, ed. Edna Leake Steeves (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968).
298. Keston Sutherland, “What Is Bathos?” in *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, ed. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010), 13.
299. It was also a shot taken at a particular translation of Longinus’ *On the Sublime*, published by his literary rival Leonard Welsted, which rather than an original translation from the Greek, was an English translation of an earlier French version by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (a writer whom Pope admired).
300. Martinus Scriblerus, which was a collective persona invented by members of the Scriblerus Club as a vehicle for political and social satire. Members of the club included Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, John Arbuthnot, John Gay, and Thomas Parnell. Melvyn Bragg, “In Our Time: The Scriblerus Club,” *BBC*, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003k9cm>.
301. Dustin Griffin, *Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 104.
302. *Ibid.*

ufacture on its face. The effect is vulgar—of the *vulgus*—when such laboured artifice has too obvious designs upon us and makes its egregious case by a sort of deliberate *under-reaching* of trope and register.³⁰³

The bathos of Pope's conception can be understood as an unknowing descent to an 'aesthetic low' through the application of an inflated pretension to knowledge. The bathetic author's attempt to scale aesthetic highs is undone by their lack of skill and their overripe tastes, magnified by the "huge investment of craft and energy required to produce 'true' bathos, an investment which at the same time, of course, registers the blindness of the poet [...] to his own painful lack of 'genius'."³⁰⁴ Pope's writing engages in the very thing he seeks to make fun of, utilising the doubling of the bathetic to his advantage. Sutherland calls Pope's use of the bathetic to describe bathos as a *diagnostic* production.³⁰⁵ As satire, Pope's pen jabs not at the bathetic poet's blindness to truth, but rather the "compulsory destitution of truth in the accounts they produce of it."³⁰⁶ However, Pope's use of bathos as a *diagnostic* tool for the bathetic in others, seems to hold bathos at arm's length. Because his judgements on what is 'bad' are based in a set of values that hold clarity in highest regard,³⁰⁷ Pope's usage of bathos is altered by his use of a satirical ladder. This allows him to distance himself from what he describes (bad taste) via satire's inherent alienating function.³⁰⁸ To be intentionally bathetic without distance, to use a non-satirical yet still knowing bathos would presumably look different to Pope's sharp idiot Martinus Scriblerus, but what exactly would that sort of bathos appear like and how does it operate in art practice?

The intentionally bathetic

If we were following directly from Pope's definition, bathos would be only an accidental low—involuntary like a bodily spasm—with definable, literary, features. However, art, sitting in close proximity to literature and poetry, has absorbed characteristics of bathos over its history. Bathos' recent lineage has become even more tangled. Firstly, whatever conception Pope might have had about aesthetic 'highs', has mutated over time into something less recognizable. Bathos is again marked by a doubling back. As Sutherland writes, "Every feature of language identified by Pope as bathetic, is now a defining feature of our poetry."³⁰⁹ Secondly, there has been a rejection of the notion of 'good taste' and aesthetic 'highs' as separate from social and cultural context, through questioning the purpose behind the application of such divisions.³¹⁰ Additionally, bathos has shifted from being generally an unconscious stooping to something

303. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls, "Introduction," in *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, ed. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010), 4.

304. *Ibid.*, 2.

305. Sutherland, "What Is Bathos?" 22.

306. *Ibid.*

307. Christoph Henke, *Common Sense in Early 18th-Century British Literature and Culture: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics, 1680–1750* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 121.

308. Massih Zekavat, *Satire, Humor and the Construction of Identities* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017), 57.

309. Keston Sutherland, "The Trade in Bathos," *Jacket*, 2001, <http://jacketmagazine.com/15/sutherland-bathos.html>.

310. As in Pierre Bourdieu's text *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

that can be attained intentionally, a calculated application being "not so much a register of the failure to achieve a sublime effect", but rather robbing "ideological formations of their compelling plausibility and naturalness, their pathetic aspect."³¹¹ An early example of this is the Dadaists who "effectively, deliberately razed" the idea of Pope's "aesthetic standards"³¹² which supposedly separated the sublime from the bathetic, the heavenly from the banal. Dismissing what poet André Breton called "the dogma of morality and taste",³¹³ the Dadaists instead wanted an aesthetics in favour of "everyone fall[ing] metaphorically on his backside",³¹⁴ as writer Walter Serner wished. In a kind of double act, they inverted Pope's mockery³¹⁵ of the bathetic, showing what seems to be a non-satirical love for childishness, vulgarity, and nonsense, yet still keeping hold on the critical potential of intentional bathos as capable of subverting the hierarchies of rationality and 'good' taste. The intentional rotating of these qualities is how bathos can skew "a culture's ideological imperatives" and the pretensions to truth or knowledge that go along with them.³¹⁶ An intentional bathos holds close to the body (not at a distance as satire might), an incongruity that seems to strike, in a weak and tender manner, at the centre of what we understand to be truthful or true. Through an oscillation between the elevated and the 'low', the meaninglessness and the meaningful, the impersonation and the impersonated slosh around together. The *non-satirical* kind of intentional bathos is one that remains critical, yet also good-naturedly sets itself amongst the dross, knowing that all things are entangled with the hierarchies it seeks to poke at, seeking movement rather than the distancing stasis of plain mockery.

Peter Fischli and David Weiss's first work together is a series of ten colour photographs, taken in 1979. Depicted in them is a fashion show, a car crash, the Swiss Alps, the North Pole, an Italian road-side restaurant, cave people around a fire, a still from the 1979 James Bond film *Moonraker*, the Titanic (sinking) with icebergs surrounding it. One photo depicts an 1832 fire³¹⁷ set in the Swiss town of Uster at the newly built Corrodi & Pfister weaving factory, which was the first factory in the region to have mechanical weaving machines.³¹⁸ The fire was started by a group of local weavers—most of whom were employed in the cottage industry—in opposition to increasing industrialisation and the mechanisation of their labour.³¹⁹ The fire didn't stop the development of mechanised weaving in Switzerland, and within 20 years the area where the fire was started had one of the highest rates of such factories across the whole country.³²⁰ Another one of the photos is a scene from the inside

311. Doug Haynes, "She Disappeared into Unhappy Consciousness: Louise Bourgeois and the Bathos of Surrealism," in *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, ed. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010), 105.

312. Crangle, "Dada IS Bathos! Or: Of the Hobbyhorse Endlessly Rocking," 30.

313. André Breton, *The Lost Steps*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 44, quoted in Crangle, "Dada IS Bathos! Or: Of the Hobbyhorse Endlessly Rocking," 30.

314. Walter Serner, "Last Loosening Manifesto," in *Blago Bung Blago Bung Bosso Fataka! First Texts of German Dada by Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, and Walter Serner*, ed. Malcolm Green (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 159, quoted in Crangle, "Dada IS Bathos! Or: Of the Hobbyhorse Endlessly Rocking," 44.

315. Crangle, "Dada IS Bathos! Or: Of the Hobbyhorse Endlessly Rocking," 34.

316. Crangle and Nicholls, "Introduction," 5.



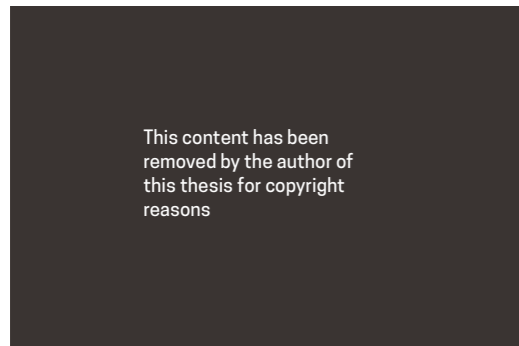
317. An etching of the 1832 Uster fire by G. Werner. From Zentralbibliothek Zurich, Accession Number: 000006064.

318. Theodore M. Vial, *Liturgy Wars: Ritual Theory and Protestant Reform in Nineteenth-Century Zurich* (London: Routledge, 2004), No page numbers.

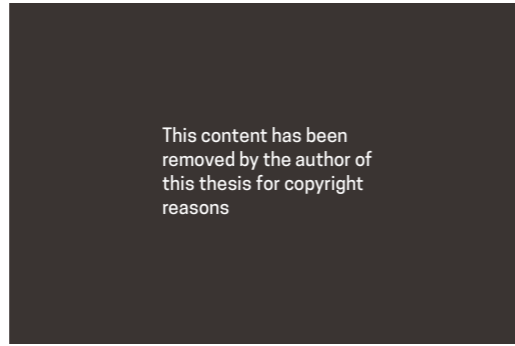
319. Marcel van der Linden and Jürgen Rojahn, *The Formation of Labour Movements, 1870–1914: An International Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 271.

320. Clive H. Church and Randolph C. Head, *A Concise History of Switzerland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 152.

of a carpet shop. There are casual piles of carpets all around, with a couple of big patterned ones and some stacks of smaller, flecked rugs. Amongst them are a few throw pillows. Near the back of the scene there is clustered a small group—possibly a family with a small child—with a salesperson near them. They are looking at a particular pile of square-ish rugs and one of the group is bent over them to get a better look, or maybe to check the price.



S3



T3

All of the scenes in the photographs are made from things Fischli and Weiss had around them—egg cartons, bottles, the inside of an oven, bed sheets and pillows, stacks of plastic fake-crystal glasses, sausages. The buildings in *The Fire of Uster* are cardboard boxes with little windows cut into the sides, set on fire for real. There is a kitchen whisk standing up inexplicably in the back, and the quality of the light dousing the upper edge of the image places the action in the late afternoon, probably in someone's living room. In *At The Carpet Shop*, there are greasy fingerprints visible on the piece of paper that forms the background. The carpets in the carpet shop are stacks of deli meats (salami, mortadella); the family is a set of cornichons; the salesperson a small, tapered cylinder of cheese.

Fischli has spoken of sausages as a forbidden material, a triviality never to be associated with high art³²¹ (like unfired clay, which Fischli and Weiss used extensively in *Suddenly This Overview*, 1981-). Artist and writer Patrick Frey writes that Fischli and Weiss's actions in this regard are part of their "determination to seek for the truly sublime in the banal: not by glorifying banality (whether kitsch, trivia, bad taste, or just ordinariness), but by imposing comparisons."³²² A knowingly

S3: Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Im Teppichladen (In the Carpet Shop)* (1979). C print. 17.7 x 25 cm. From *Wurstserie* (Sausage Series).

T3: Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Der Brand von Uster (The Fire of Uster)* (1979). C print. 17.7 x 25 cm. From *Wurstserie* (Sausage Series).

321. Peter Fischli and David Weiss, "Fischli and Weiss: Between Spectacular and Ordinary," *Flash Art*, 2006, 75.

322. Patrick Frey, "Friendship Is Unstable Equilibrium," trans. David Britt, *Parkett*, 1988, 35.

bathetic rocking between things like "The high and the low, the large and the small, theory and practice, the theoretical and the practical, the known and the intuited, the immanent and the transcendent."³²³ Instead of a cynical mocking of the self-seriousness of contemporary art, Fischli and Weiss instead playfully "subvert the formal value of artistic construction,"³²⁴ as art historian Germano Celant writes. By employing obvious or colloquial modes of construction, they rid themselves of "a complicated and abstruse process"³²⁵ where "Seriousness is not unmasked but evaded; we are simply shown how it works."³²⁶ The *Wurstserie*, with its shonky construction, humour, and sense of freedom might be understood as a movement against the idea that seriousness in form and content is the *only* way that artwork might act in the world. Celant notes that Fischli and Weiss's goal is to "contest the claim to truth, to contest the absolutism of the art process, repudiating cleverness and replacing it with inept intentions [...] or removing its core [...] or even collapsing it."³²⁷ The knowing bathos of *Wurstserie* is sunk into by way of its purposeful, committed ineptitude, the photos plainly a bit crap and yet also indicative of a playful devotion (no matter how short the commitment). They lurch between being ridiculous and yet also perceptive, imposing comparisons by tipping the historical, casual, political scenes into each other by way of sausages and cardboard boxes without a care to upsetting a supposed hierarchy that they themselves are part of.

Anti-anti-hero

Fischli and Weiss's *Wurstserie* manages to sidestep one of the key problems of an intentional bathos: failing too well so as to become heroic in defeat. Even knowing failure has become part of the mainstream, lumpiness and 'bad craft'—previously related to kitschiness—has become indicative of 'authenticity'. What is previously radical gets subsumed into the main, the avant-garde stops moving and becomes just the regular garde. Writer Martin Crowley comments that "The avant-gardist object was defeated not by opposition [...] but by absorption: in the complete equation of the art object with its commodity status."³²⁸ In this action art not so much enters life but rather becomes life-less, the Dadaists' or Pop artists' notion of the everyday object as art later became repackaged as a product. Crowley suggests there can be no true "dream of escape" from this cycle, but that perhaps there might be a "kind of sideways leakage"³²⁹ that bathos can provide. Intentional bathos should neither heroically 'save' supposedly lowly aesthetics from themselves, adopt them wholesale as another type of valorisation, or *heroically* fail at either. But if heroics are too easily

323. Ibid.

324. Germano Celant, "Fischli/ Weiss In Appearance," *Parkett*, 1988, 45.

325. Ibid.

326. Ibid., 48.

327. Ibid., 45.

328. Martin Crowley, "Low Resistance," in *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, ed. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010), 149.

329. Ibid., 160.

absorbed as a performance,³³⁰ and so too is the heroic failure, what is left? Perhaps it is a refusal to be absorbed into either category, a never-ending refusal to fail or succeed completely, and then contradicting them with a wink.

The intentionally bathetic refuses the “easier consolations”³³¹ of a reactionary wholesale adoption of kitsch, bad taste, or pathos. Yet it also involves those things as context for comparison, finding the difference between high and low to be completely false. The bathos of an artwork is the “moment when pretension is punctured,”³³² both of the structures and hierarchies with which it is critically engaged and of itself. The objects own high-effort futility is revealed, revelled in, judgement is stymied as it shows an absolute dedication to pointing out the impossibility of a constancy or an absolute. This bathetic turn sharpens focus onto the unstable logic that surrounds ‘high’ discourse on what constitutes taste or reason. It pokes and shakes the un-naturalness of the divisions, the mechanisms that surround the production of those same hierarchies, and what might be required to challenge them.³³³

I built *Extension* both because I wanted a place to put a video, and because I thought the gallery needed a wall there. Otherwise the space was too long and straight, like a tunnel. *Extension* functioned perfectly well as a wall, it stood for four days, held the video screen, didn’t catch fire, didn’t fall on anyone. It also bore very little resemblance to any of the others in close proximity. The texture on the outside was saggy but also rigid, the glue of the papier-mâché had frozen the newsprint like a sheet pulled not-quite-tight-enough over a mattress. Part of the wall’s edge hung from the connected non-cardboard wall, the weight of itself pulling down and away, leaving a triangular, shadowed gap. It certainly didn’t look like it took much skill but it did look like it took a lot of effort. Looking down the gallery at first glance it looked like a strange little sister to the surrounding walls, but then those began to look preposterously straight and even. Ridiculousness and authority traded back and forth between them. The gallery wouldn’t be the same once *Extension* was gone. Quite literally too, since five months after I pulled *Extension* down and tipped it into a nearby skip, the university built its own version. It was built in almost exactly the same place, though slightly closer to the door and almost completely full height. It is still painted the same generic white though, and I bet I could hack a hole in it, too. The university’s new ‘real’ wall is haunted by the presence of my bathetic, sagging cardboard one. Their sidestepping codification of something as perishable and unreliable as

330. Ibid., 149.

331. Crangle and Nicholls, “Introduction,” 5.

332. Haynes, “She Disappeared into Unhappy Consciousness,” 91.

333. Ibid., 106.

Extension into official infrastructure only serves to underline the phoniness of any claims to institutional permanence or authority. The university superseding my wall with its own is also a re-demonstration of both its predilection for dividing spaces into smaller and smaller units, and the complete replaceability of the individual student within the institutional equation. The bathetic *Extension*, in pointed contrast to the strictures of its surrounding, authoritarian cousins, marks itself out as absolutely futile and ridiculous. It commits itself to the pretension of stability and dominance (that the university unknowingly also buys into), but instead of shoring up its own power by concealing its labouring, *Extension*—in its bathetic rotation of refusal—reveals itself to be always-already fragile and silly, and completely fine with it.



U3

U3: Lucy Meyle, *Extension* (2016). Recycled cardboard, packing tape, newsprint, glue, paint. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.



V3

V3: Lucy Meyle, *Pidgey* (2016). Masking tape, high-density foam. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

Turning

Again I come up against what it means to turn away from the path, to reject a destination and instead accent the movements of indecision. Is the banana skin so slippery it diminishes its own power? Is the flimsy prop-like wall too transitory, too split between being a wall and not-being a wall, to have effect? Even if it still haunts the gallery, what good does that do? How silly and inconsequential it feels, how perishable seems laughter. It's as perishable as the lint-rolled peach, the non-masking-tape banana. Even the pigeon perished, his constituent foam bound too tightly with the masking tape and so over time, hidden in the cupboard, his innards fizzed outwards, wings popping off, beak a bit warped. In their 2013 book titled *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?* design collective Metahaven describes the use of cat imagery next to leftist tracts in the socialist political journal *Kittens*. They make the case that a joke's potency isn't diminished by its unpredictability or its silliness, rather this strengthens its ability to mutate and evade corroboration.³³⁴ In *Spasm to Spasm*, writer Christopher Hsu remarks that: "the basic opacity of meaning and intention in any humor object deflects efforts to analyse it, dissipating critique or interpretation that would probe much beyond its initial inchoate funniness. What is absurd isn't falsifiable, puns register no truth value."³³⁵ Hsu is right—what is absurd isn't falsifiable—and this can be a good thing. The impossibility for the comically absurd and its bathetic turn to be proven true or untrue means that it might be able to suggest alternative ways of thinking, wiggling open a "gateway to a world of doubt",³³⁶ or by keeping that doorway open to begin with. Triviality is the place where many roads meet, where options are open. There is a tendency to underestimate the leverage of this evasion, to see the ability to side-step definition as a marker of humour's ineffectualness.

Seemingly unique to humour in all its forms is a chronic underestimation of its power. A comedian's worst trick is the deflection of effects, evidenced in the buffering insurance of "but it's just a joke!" In this conception, the banana or the pigeon could not possibly do anything because they are comically absurd. This excuse, most often heard as defence of poor or hurtful 'humour', mistakes real, meaningful effects with meaning itself. A corollary of this underestimation is when someone poses the question: "What happens after the joke?" As if there is some other effect that occurs when a joke is done, some magical intervention into the assumed meaninglessness of humour to legitimise it as a political, social, or emotional effect. These two reactions seem like opposites: one assumes humour has

334. Metahaven, "Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics," 2013, no page numbers.

335. Hsu, "Spasm to Spasm."

336. Linda Yablonsky, "What's So Funny About Contemporary Art?" *ArtNews* (blog), 2004, <http://www.artnews.com/2004/09/01/whats-so-funny-about-contemporary-art/>.

no meaning because it is unserious, whereas one assumes humour must be followed by something more serious. But the problem with both of these notions is that they suspect that the object of humour *itself* is so inherently meaningless it cannot, on its own, cause change. What happens after the joke? Nothing in particular. *The joke is the thing*. The bathos of the absurd *Extension* wall, its threat to sense and rationality, comes as part and parcel of its humour. More than this, it is because of its absurd presence, its bathetic effort, that it has an effect. Humour doesn't sit down and let seriousness do the hard work. A bad joke does the hurting, a good joke causes laughter, a great joke makes the changes, makes us cry, makes us sad. These are all aspects of humour, rather than something that happens after it: humour matters because it is a tangle of these different effects.

And yet again humour turns on its axis. Confusingly, absurdist humour can impede the question of mattering by its ability to pretend (often convincingly) *not* to matter, through those same motions of nonsense or absurdity. Worms on holiday is not an immediately political topic, its first face may be a sense of cheerfulness, or maybe tenderness. Pickles individually placed into a custom travel case (as in *A Case for Pickles*, 2016) don't seem threatening. In this research, *not* mattering is played through the tone of the humour (absurdity), through the material quality of the objects (badly-made, from quotidian materials), their perceived durability (not long), their irreverence, their clear silliness. By playing at *not* mattering, at meaninglessness, the absurd comic object in this research allows us to draw objects and structures into an asymmetric relationship. The management of reality (that is, sense-making practices) is concerned with establishing power, through the rational ordering of experience. Absurdist comic objects disrupt this top-down order, by responding to sense with nonsense, leaving the path open and the way variable. Silliness in the face of seriousness, low resistance in the face of 'high aesthetics', can be "an effective tool to negate the politics of the frame in which the question was posed."³³⁷ Dissolving that frame through absurdity, through the bathetic turn, is where we can enter into what philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin calls a "free experimental fantasy"³³⁸ with objects, with the world. Bakhtin writes that laughter allows us to touch something "familarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below; break open its external centre, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it."³³⁹ But perhaps the absurd comic object and its bathetic turn is also something that re-orientates *us*.

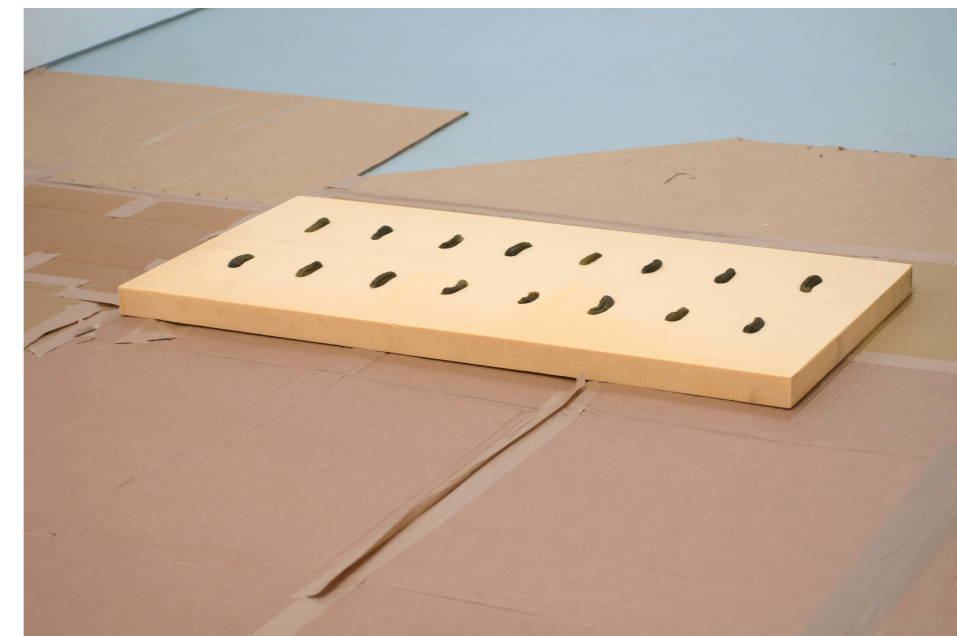
337. Metahaven, "Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?"

338. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), 23.

339. *Ibid.*



W3

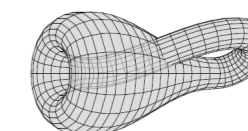


X3

Turning again and again, away from attempts to define it, the humour in this research becomes almost non-orientable. It is like a Klein bottle³⁴⁰ or a Mobius strip. There is no 'right' way up, it is a zone that changes with every boundary it redraws. We are also re-oriented and re-framed along with it, our zones are drawn and re-drawn, between ourselves and others and between the possible and the impossible. This kind of reorientation occurs following a destabilisation of what is comfortable or known, when laughter ends. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is an optimistic and curious investigation of the universe, disseminated out via TV to millions of people. In addition to this interest in new dimensions, planets, and cultures, there is also a continual reframing of human behaviour in relationship to

W3: Lucy Meyle, *A Case for Pickles* (2016). Insulation foam, complete jar of pickles. 5 x 120 x 60cm. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

X3: Lucy Meyle, *A Case for Pickles* (2016). Photo by Lucy Meyle.



340. A diagram of a Klein bottle. Daniel Müllner, "Manifolds," *Manifold Atlas*, accessed February 4, 2018, <http://www.map.mpim-bonn.mpg.de/2-manifolds>.

alien cultures. One of the characters, Data, is an android who lacks the emotional capabilities of a human, and so takes on an almost Spock-like role in the Enterprise crew. He is a conduit through which the audience might experience human quirks from the ‘outside’. This is most often accomplished through humour as Data acts as the ‘straight’ man in comedy about (mis)understanding human behaviour. When Data’s good-natured confusion is in focus, in the background lies the viewer’s understanding of what he does not. Shifting from foot-to-foot between Data’s distance and my familiarity, I am set off balance about what it is that I think I know. It delays my return to the ‘usual’ as I apply Data’s disorientation to re-orient myself in a new direction (if only for a short while). The comfort of understanding is the bedrock on which a good joke is founded. Things I recognise, like pigeons and pickles, draw me into the circle of understanding. And yet it too is simply a lure that comes away like an unmoored dinghy. The absurdist comic object sinks into bathos, inverting the relationship between knowing and not-knowing, turning and eluding definition yet again. Sureness can give way to a question: what is so funny about that, after all?

The object of a joke is often excluded from laughing (even though we might try to good-naturedly chuckle along, as Data does). According to psychologist John C. Meyer, this is humour’s ‘double edge’, at the same time humour can unite a group; it also it has a capacity to divide.³⁴¹ It is in this division that we draw and re-draw the boundary between each. If the banana in *Boyfriend Pillow*, being spooned by a second banana, is funny because of the incongruous idea of a banana needing intimacy or care, we have divided the banana (not deserving of care) from ourselves (deserving of care). Barad writes:

Who gets to count as one who has the ability to die? A rock, a river, a cloud, the atmosphere, the earth? How about viruses, brittlestars, and other boundary-crossers? What about the fate of carbon and phosphorous? And if these concerns sound silly, why? And I don’t mean some kind of strategic welcoming of the other into representationalist forms of democracy in order to get people to pay attention to “the environment”. This is about boundary drawing practice and how they matter, and who and what gets to matter.³⁴²

Barad’s question at the centre—why do these concerns sound silly? —is the axis on which we turn once more. Barad’s choice of word here could easily be replaced with absurd, or nonsensical. All are words I use without thinking to distance myself from what I don’t want to consider. Silliness is often a code

341. John C. Meyer, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication,” *Communication Theory* 10, no. 3 (August 1, 2000): 310–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2000.tb00194.x>.

342. Barad, “Intra-Active Entanglements,” 21.

word for these things, as we dismiss what *cannot be*, what we cannot even think *could be*. It is my tightly held ideas about my responsibility to the planet or to my pets or my friends that is examined and redrawn by the comic object. These things are holding me to account. After all these refusals that the comic object enacts, with or without us, we reach another: and it is the refusal to let us off the hook. This is the moment the absurd comic object, in its bathetic repose, and its limp resistance, suddenly becomes rigid in our grasp and flexes open our grip on what we think cannot be, turning away from laughter—with laughter—into laughter, dissipating what was sure before.



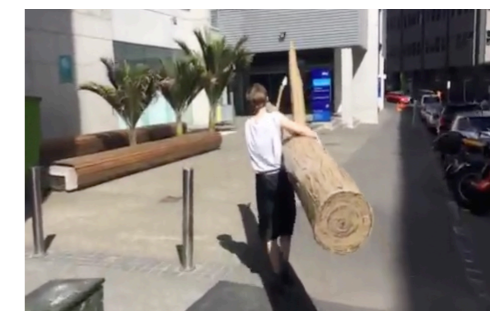
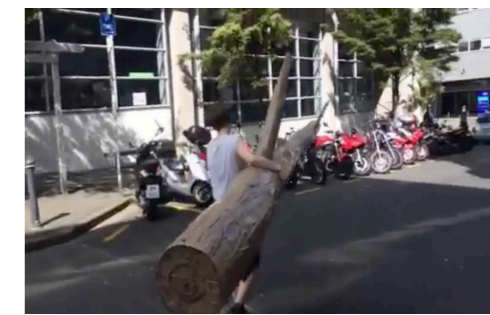
Y3

The absurd comic object and its bathetic rotation seem to be constituted by a series of refusals, of an unrelenting turning. Like the anti-smooth, it is wilfully *against*, the comic object constantly confounds explanation, meaningfulness, and claims to truth. Functionally, the comic object acts as a prop and pivots against it, becoming only prop-like and intentionally difficult to place or use. The absurdity of the narratives proposed by the comic object’s physical presence (or suggested possible presence, as in the case of video) draws the sensible into an intimate relation with the nonsensical, transgressing

Y3: Lucy Meyle, *Boyfriend Pillow* (2016). Banana, high-density foam, masking tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In *Serving Suggestions*, RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever.

the borders that we apply to order the world. Sinking to bathos, the comic object bounces back and forth between the high and the low, taking with it our perceptions of the value of aesthetics and effort. That the comic object both sits as a ‘real’ thing and threatens that very division between itself and any other fictional object is part of its power. Through the bathetic turn, the comic object can re-orient sense and nonsense, then rock it back again. Through its status as an object refusing to either succeed or fail according to the rules of rational narrative, the comic object strengthens its modest resistance through this refusal, inserting and flexing itself into the ‘real’ and propping, popping, it open. This kernel of effect in humour dodges description and then plays dead when we try to catch it in explanation. For all its slipperiness, humour itself is a medium that restrains and re-trains. It draws a circle around those who ‘get’ a punchline and one around those who don’t, it tugs our focus from a thing to the structure of that thing. It pokes at the institution while acknowledging its place in it too. There is a pointed end to the humour in this research project, it is the “narrow end of the wedge”,³⁴³ it gently pokes and punctures, it draws lines over terrain. Yet even from this claim, it rotates. It turns and turns and turns again. The bathetic, absurd comic object, sinking into bathos, evades an easy catch in the net of ‘mattering’ and meaning in any unit of measure by this turning. Perishable, unpredictable, playful, weak and yet also effective and ceaseless, these objects are heavy with meaning that nevertheless dissipates like condensed breath. Even now, I am still running after clarity and definition, forgetting that I claimed it impossible at the beginning of this section. What happens after the joke? Nothing, *in particular*, it just keeps turning.

343. Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me*, Updated edition (London: Haymarket Books, 2014), 15.



Z3

Z3: *Moving Phantom Limb* (2016). Screenshots from a video by Elliot Collins.

A beta
test of
little
frights

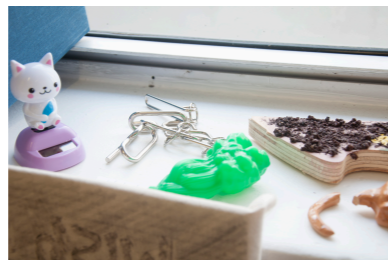
A beta test of little frights

This research and practice is made up of movements, movements that are not just necessary actions to make work, but comprise a sensitivity to what surround all actions. Walking through the supermarket and seeing a pear in its wrapping. Rubbing orange peel onto canvas. Putting a brick down and accidentally killing a garden snail. Walking around and around a slanted ramp. Sending emails back and forth from the same room. Zig-zagging down the path trying to not step on worms. Trying again and again to make a cardboard wall, sinking onto the floor in failure. Issuing publications by the multiple, every second week. Reaching and stretching my arms to make a floor. Recalling the unharmonious sound of an untuned Big Band. Wiggling this way and that, these movements are resistance to what feels too restrictive and limiting. The hierarchical relationship between humans and more-than-humans, rationality and emotion; academic strictures and institutional authorities; the experience of being a young woman in the workplace, or anyplace. These are the experiences and structures that can feel binding, their prior authority unyielding. Who, and what else, and where else feels this way? The wiggle movement is with and against and amongst other things—am I unyielding to them also? To be entangled is to be involved, in varying degrees, in decisions made and not made that affect humans and more-than-humans in differing ways.

By thinking about this ‘doing’, in keeping track and taking account of this entanglement, a call to ethical relations begins to ring louder. It is a call not simply ‘to arms’ but ‘to hands’, hands that are sensitive to the response-ability of others and can bear out the responsibility to act with care and commitment. Acting in care and support is a kind of ethics-made-concrete, where the complexities of wiggling up-against-and-within are considered through the co-formation of being in touch with another. As a conceptual grounding, these ideas form the motivation for the research. As a methodology, this ethical relation and open-ness to many paths is embodied in the collaborative relationship with Ziggy Lever, as well as the ones that occur much more spontaneously or briefly with interlocutors or materials. This ceaselessly generative methodology has been productive because it allows for a loosening of my own held ideas about the autonomy of objects and things.



A4



B4

By refusing the strictures of either a mono-directional movement into the future or a fixed inscription of the status quo, this practice troubles the path by moving indecisively while still considering ethical relations as an integral guide to acting in the now. What is possible to imagine? Should energies be directed towards bringing a totalising version of the current now, transposed onto later? Through alternative encounters with objects and materials, this research eschews such a totalisation. Instead it suggests remaining decisively indecisive, to be open to many possible ways, or many *impossible* ways of being with and in the universe.

Cardboard, papier-mâché, coloured paper, newsprint, string-on-card printing plates, haphazardly hewn pieces of foam, masking tape, packing tape, Sellotape, rick-rack, upholstery tacks, sand, rocks, orange peel, poorly laid floors, badly made walls, flimsy publications. All slightly wrong and a bit lumpy, these things misbehave. Knowing they are wrong, flaunting their ineptness and inappropriateness, these anti-smooth qualities of artwork purposefully work against

A4: My studio in December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

B4: My studio in December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

smooth function, resemblance, and purpose. In the context of an internet-age condition of images whereby a flat horizon is aggregated through visual similarity, key words, hashtags, and algorithms of averageness—a system that flows offline too—the anti-smooth confuses the filtration system of reference and speedy scrolling. In *Various Sources* for instance, possibility resides in being an off-screen version of a pixelated mass, a poor image, or a degraded piece of information that cannot be accurately categorised. Taking techniques and materials and misappropriating them foments a material lumpiness, a semi-rendered image made off-screen. Squint a bit and they work, get closer and they are obviously a bit muddled. These sculptures and publications are slightly ‘off’ and a bit ‘wrong’. The lumpy object’s material uniqueness, inappropriate fabrication, and too-much-wrongness is sited in comparison with its lack of correct detail or practicality. This excessive lack and vague specificity allows the lumpy wall or chair to point not just to itself but to the entire category of walls or chairs to which it both does and does not belong. Being demonstrably neither this nor that—emphasising complexity and roughness, where images and things are more complex and divergent than perhaps previously thought—confuses a database that can’t imagine beyond the data set that is given to it.

The rearrangement of characteristics that are known to us—like fabrication, scale, function, practicality, sturdiness—in things that we come into contact with regularly turns into a cascading re-syntaxation. New rhythms roughen the predictable smoothness that gets laid over the familiar by our accreted actions. The intervals between resemblance and origin, between should-be and could-be and will-never-be, are widened and narrowed at will by the anti-smooth. They make trouble for the authoritative modes of recognition and interpretation that are so seamless that they become invisible. Though materially flimsy, the anti-smooth can sensitise us to the small, abrasive actions that take place in the everyday; the repetitious sanding-down of possibilities for difference because they threaten a particular world view. The anti-smooth becomes a way of acting *against* the database or the ‘main’. Its oppositional mis-use of material and form, and its prefixed *anti*, syntactically alter the predicted rhythms of thinking, filtering, and moving in relation to categories or divisions that seem fixed.

A kind of continued, altering movement is part of the comic object too. Chasing after humour’s definition becomes a farcical pursuit, as it turns and turns again in an evasive manoeuvre that forms part of its strength. The practice utilises the term

‘comic object’ to site the enactment of humour in a material sense. Rather than comic timing, the comic object relies on a comic duration and position that is alterable and mobile, working as a non-autonomous agent within the installational field. These comic objects present strange narratives and questions that skirt the edges of believability. The divisions between sense and nonsense, rationality and irrationality, are troubled by the comic object’s absurdity as it refers to things we believe to be impossible. It also gestures toward the possibility of these impossibilities, through their tangible presence. Doubling back on itself, the comic object is also demonstrably *unsure* of its concrete nature, because of its lumpy contingency and lack of internal logic. Spooning bananas, masking-tape pigeons, souvenir stands for worms along with a worm’s testimonial, a packing case for individual pickles, a painting hanging out the window for some sun, a pear-protector for a giant pear, lint-rolling a peach, a papier-mâché wall, a bendy cardboard ladder. Non-fictional, ‘bad’ props every one of them. Rather than upholding a master narrative they materially shrug, unsure. Their failure in this regard is echoed in their sunken, bathetic repose.

By striving to become real in a materially laboured fashion, the absurdist comic object overshoots its aesthetic mark, by radically under-performing. Its triviality and shonkiness is married with ‘high’ art and self-seriousness, inverting any sense of authority or value in these relations. By turning away from heroic failure, the non-satirical and intentional bathos of the comic object instead emphasises a kind of anti-anti-heroics. Refusing the simple championing of ‘lowly’ kitsch, the bathetic turn rocks between the high and the low, skewering all pretensions to a constant category of sense or of definable aesthetic truths. In turning, yet again, the comic object underlines its power. Pretending towards seriousness (as part of its mechanism) and then swerving away, humour in this practice marks out an uneven, shifting terrain that turns mattering on its head. What is funny? It flexes this doubt like a threat, and then recedes into laughter again. The comic object is unable to be proven true or untrue, and in fact points out that neither of these categories are fixed or fixable. Turning and turning again, the comic object refuses stasis or definition, and in this committed non-committal repose it opens up many possible paths for experimentation.

The installation operates as a field that holds things briefly together, a suggestion of completion undone by the looseness of the internal logic and the contingent material quality of

the things that make up its landscape. Materially familiar structural forms of support (floors, walls, ramps, table display mechanisms) are re-imagined within the institutional space of the gallery and the university. Prior conditions for care and support are made more visible through a redistribution of attention towards the untended. Absurd narrative suggestion becomes evasively concrete in form. Ideas that are laughable in their sheer silliness might somehow materially extend their own potential. Turning away from either verification or nullification, they also refuse to substantiate their own claims to truth or possibility by their own incoherence. The continuing inadequacy and incompleteness of works is brought forth through supplementation, by including publications and re-sited works, significance and meaning are repeatedly altered. This practice re-images and re-syntaxes the organisation and arrangement of features within things that make up our everyday worlds, as a making-visible of those structures (such as the hierarchical relationships between humans and more-than-humans; between rationality and emotion; academic strictures and institutional authorities) that are often concealed in plain sight. Wiggling within those structures by insistently moving against them—either through bad imitation, a re-application of care, or the striking bathetic rotation from high to low—makes their leaky borders more obvious.



C4

C4: Drawing of worm with hat on the wall of my studio, December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle.

By inviting consideration of why and how social or structural borders are drawn, these works materially question through their gentle yet ceaseless *againstness*. There is possibility for this *against*, as made up of small movements, to effect, or at least make discernible, whatever structures they move contra to. This is through taking account of decisions made and not made, thinking about responsibility towards acting together with(in) the world, by positioning care as a radical act that resists flattening into either solely a moral 'good' or a consumer product. Responsibility is made visible through re-imagining what our collective future (with a host of human and more-than-human others) could be, as a space of positive impossibility that must be worked towards, with difficulty and care, in every instant. With Ahmed, Barad, Condorelli, Haraway, Arendt, and Puig de la Bellacasa, I have found that by thinking through (and making with) care in order to invite care in return is an important and complex ethico-political action. In addition, that this kind of action resonates powerfully within practice, wiggling open spaces where difference is not smoothed over, but re-turned to over and again.

There are lots of different ways to go next, some of them with, all of them *against*. Not only in an oppositional way but also in an *amongst* kind of way. In examining a horizon its even-ness seems to be a symptom of distance. How to be truly responsible if the innumerable differences within a landscape are flattened into one single edge? Though it moves with every step, a horizon is not *amongst*. It is detached and literally unapproachable, up against nothing but the sky. Perhaps instead to wander attentively—in circles maybe, or on a wavy path—taking note of what lies in close proximity, pressing a thumb to the edge of a brick, a page, a snail, and feeling it push *against* in response. Running, turning, wiggling, flexing, wading through the grass. Back around again! Refusals, *antis-*, 'no'. Issuance and dissipation of laughter. Humour's turning to and from and around again. There are lots of different ways to go, lots of surprises and slip-ups and mistakes. In her essay *At my least and most aware*, Chew-Bose writes "I still think being startled, for instance, by a Post-it unsticking from my wall or by fluff flying in front of my nose is a subliminal reminder that I am alive and that being alive is a beta test full of little frights."³⁴⁴ These things can accumulate like a string of beads. The point is not to collect them up but to be reminded in every instant—by their connected weight and slippery unpredictability, the way they press against us, the way they wiggle—of the insistency of what seems small, of the possibility within small frights and minor movements.

344. Chew-Bose, *Too Much and Not the Mood*, 215.

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List of images

| | | |
|--------------|---|----|
| Image A: | A ceramic snake (smiling) in my studio, December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 11 |
| Footnote 6: | A reminder to myself about writing. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 12 |
| Footnote 24: | David Thomas. <i>Colouring Impermanence</i> . Photo by Mon Redmond. | 16 |
| Image B: | Studio, December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 24 |
| Image C: | Studio, December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 24 |
| Image D: | Studio, December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 24 |
| Footnote 36: | Screenshot of wiggly line in word. Image by Lucy Meyle. | 25 |
| Image E: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Souvenir Stand</i> (2017). Net bags, fruits and vegetables (real and unreal), plywood, sand, scoria, paint, cardboard, stainless steel fixtures, ball chain, bic pen, stainless steel chain. Dimensions variable. In <i>Shifting Ground</i> , Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 28 |
| Image F: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Boyfriend Pillow</i> (detail) (2016). Banana, high-density foam, masking tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 29 |
| Footnote 56: | Anonymous. <i>Los Angeles</i> (June 2014). From the (now defunct) Tumblr “Men Taking up 2 Much Space on The Train”. | 29 |
| Image G: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>From wall to wall and moving to the centre</i> (2017). Plywood ramp, mirrors, motors, projected photograph of tree asters. Dimensions variable. In <i>Looking Forwards and Backwards</i> , Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Alex Lovell-Smith. | 31 |
| Image H: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>From wall to wall and moving to the centre</i> (2017). In <i>Looking Forwards and Backwards</i> , Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Alex Lovell-Smith | 31 |
| Image I: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>How shading flows into edges</i> (2017). Video, plywood, sound, publication. Dimensions variable. In <i>Looking Forwards and Backwards</i> , Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Grace Ryder. | 32 |

| | | |
|---------------|---|----|
| Footnote 57: | David Hockney. <i>Diving Board with Shadow</i> (1978). Coloured and pressed paper pulp. 183 x 217cm. From the <i>Paper Pools</i> series. http://www.david-hockney.co/works/etcetera/pools . | 32 |
| Image J: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>From wall to wall and moving to the centre</i> (2017). Plywood ramp, mirrors, motors, projected photograph of tree asters. Dimensions variable. In <i>Looking Forwards and Backwards</i> , Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Grace Ryder. | 33 |
| Image K: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>From wall to wall and moving to the centre</i> (2017). In <i>Looking Forwards and Backwards</i> , Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Grace Ryder. | 33 |
| Footnote 61: | Cruller donut, May 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 34 |
| Image L: | Ruth Buchanan. <i>Screen: 1, Screen: 2, Screen: 3</i> (2014). Powdercoated steel, framed watercolours, screenprints and photograph. Dimensions variable. Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. http://hopkinsonmossman.com/artist/?artist=Ruth+Buchanan&work=Screen%3A+1%2C+Screen%3A+2%2C+Screen%3A+3&id=1245#btm | 35 |
| Footnote 64: | Rietveld Schröder house, Utrecht, The Netherlands. Red 5, “Interior Photographs of the Schroder House,” The Rietveld-Schroder House (blog), accessed February 7, 2018, http://rietveldschroderhouse.blogspot.com/2012/12/photographs_6.html . | 35 |
| Image M: | Ruth Buchanan. <i>A Wavy Line</i> (2011). Crepe curtain, powdercoated steel frame. Dimensions variable. In <i>Furniture, Plan, Rival Brain</i> , Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. http://hopkinsonmossman.com/exhibition/?past&year=2011&exhibit=Furniture%2C+Plan%2C+Rival+Brain&id=13&work=A+Wavy+Line&id=400#btm | 36 |
| Image N: | H.D Skinner. <i>Tree Asters, Chatham Islands</i> (1924). Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago. | 42 |
| Image O: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>Storage Solutions</i> (2015). Rocks, sound, latch-hook rugs, newsprint, crayon, plastic strapping, canvas, wood, dirt, plastic bag, photograph, plants, fluorescent tubing. Dimensions variable. In <i>Group Shower, FUZZY VIBES</i> , Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 44 |
| Footnote 109: | Persimmon Tree. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 44 |

| | | |
|-----------|---|----|
| Image P: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>Storage Solutions</i> (2015). Newsprint, crayon. 59.4 x 84.1 cm. In <i>Group Shower</i> , FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 45 |
| Image Q: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>Storage Solutions</i> (2015). Rocks, sound, latch-hook rugs, newsprint, crayon, plastic strapping, canvas, wood, dirt, plastic bag, photograph, plants, fluorescent tubing. Dimensions variable. In <i>Group Shower</i> , FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 46 |
| Image R: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>Storage Solutions</i> (2015). In <i>Group Shower</i> , FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 46 |
| Image S: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>Storage Solutions</i> (2015). Canvas, wood, plant, plastic bag, dirt, plastic strapping. Dimensions variable. In <i>Group Shower</i> , FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 47 |
| Image T: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>Storage Solutions</i> (2015). In <i>Group Shower</i> , FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 47 |
| Image U: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>Storage Solutions</i> (2015). Rock, plastic strapping, newsprint, crayon. Dimensions variable. In <i>Group Shower</i> , FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 47 |
| Image V: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Pear Protector</i> (detail) (2016). Foam window-worm. Dimensions variable. In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 48 |
| Image W: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Orange Painting (sunning)</i> (2016). Canvas, stretcher bars, C clamps, oranges. Dimensions variable. In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 49 |
| Image X: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Serving Suggestions</i> (2016). RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 49 |
| Image Y: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Tan Lines</i> (detail) (2016). Newsprint, sunlight, stretcher bars, upholstery tacks. 30 x 40cm. In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 49 |
| Image Z: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Orange Painting (sunning)</i> (2016). In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 49 |
| Image A2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Serving Suggestions</i> (2016). RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 49 |

| | | |
|---------------|---|----|
| Image B2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Orange Painting (sorry snail)</i> (detail) (2016). Canvas, stretcher bars, oranges, snail, upholstery tacks. 80 x 115cm. In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 50 |
| Image C2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Orange Painting (sorry snail)</i> (detail) (2016). In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 50 |
| Image D2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Comb</i> (2015). Latch-hooked wool rug, apple, miniature plastic comb. Dimensions variable. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 51 |
| Image E2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Comb</i> (detail) (2015). Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 51 |
| Footnote 116: | Another plant enthusiastically staked. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 51 |
| Image F2: | Giving the hand a manicure, for <i>Yes yes yes yes yes</i> (2015), in <i>Wearing Out</i> , Pilot Space, Hamilton. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 54 |
| Footnote 132: | Spock wearing a wireless communication device, <i>Star Trek</i> . "Earpiece," Memory Alpha, accessed February 12, 2018, http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/Earpiece . | 55 |
| Image G2: | Anne Beamish and Will Donovan. Illustration of correct brick sizing. In <i>Village Level Brick Making</i> (1989). http://www.nzdl.org/gsdldmod?e=d-00000-00---off-0hdl--00-0---0-10-0---0---0direct-10---4-----0-11--11-en-50---20-about---00-0-1-00-0--4---0-0-11-10-0utfZz-8-10&a=d&c=hdl&cl=CL1.18&d=HASH01703882bfe77f56052da7e0.3.pr | 67 |
| Image H2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>A Very Tired Mason</i> (detail) (2016). Offcut foam. Dimensions variable. In <i>Lonely God</i> , St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. | 67 |
| Footnote 174: | @teenybiscuit. <i>Chihuahua or Muffin?</i> "Puppy or Bagel," Know Your Meme, accessed February 7, 2018, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/puppy-or-bagel . | 68 |
| Image I2: | <i>Various Sources</i> (2015-) at Tetra Star Convenience Wakefield Street in February 2017. Paper, powdercoated steel. Dimensions variable. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 69 |
| Image J2: | <i>Various Sources</i> (2015-) at Forte Convenience Symonds Street, in February 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 69 |

| | | |
|---------------|---|----|
| Image K2: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>From wall to wall and moving to the centre</i> (2017). Plywood ramp, mirrors, motors, projected photograph of tree asters. Dimensions variable. In <i>Looking Forwards and Backwards</i> , Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. Photo by Grace Ryder. | 73 |
| Image L2: | Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever. <i>How shading flows into edges</i> (detail) (2017). Video. In <i>Looking Forwards and Backwards</i> , Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. | 75 |
| Image M2: | Lucy Meyle, <i>Lint-rolling</i> (detail) (2016). Video. In <i>Lonely God</i> , St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 76 |
| Image N2: | Lucy Meyle, <i>Phantom Limb</i> (2016). Recycled cardboard, packing tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In <i>Lonely God</i> , St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 78 |
| Image O2: | 'Perfumes' in the \$2 shop. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 79 |
| Image P2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Phantom Limb</i> (2016). Recycled cardboard, packing tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In <i>Lonely God</i> , St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 81 |
| Image Q2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Phantom Limb</i> (2016). In <i>Lonely God</i> , St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 81 |
| Footnote 203: | Gustave Caillebotte. <i>Le raboteurs de parquet</i> (The floor scrapers) (1875). Oil on canvas. 1.92m x 1.46m. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. | 82 |
| Image R2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Veneer</i> (2017). In <i>Bad Actors</i> , MEANWHILE, Wellington. Photo by Sean Burn. | 83 |
| Image S2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Veneer</i> (2017). In <i>Bad Actors</i> , MEANWHILE, Wellington. Photo by Sean Burn. | 83 |
| Image T2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Veneer</i> (detail) (2017). Packing tape, marker pen, newsprint. Dimensions variable. In <i>Bad Actors</i> , MEANWHILE, Wellington. Photo by Sean Burn. | 83 |
| Image U2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Veneer</i> (detail) (2017). Packing tape, marker pen, newsprint. Dimensions variable. In <i>Bad Actors</i> , MEANWHILE, Wellington. Photo by Sean Burn. | 84 |

| | | |
|---------------|--|----|
| Footnote 204: | Boughton & Terwilliger. Boughton & Terwilliger, <i>Manufacturers of Parquetry, (Wood Carpet), for Floors, Wainscots, Walls and Ceilings: Wholesale and Retail</i> . (New York: Boughton & Terwilliger, 1886), 7, http://archive.org/details/catalogueboughto00boug . | 84 |
| Footnote 208: | Marcel Breuer. <i>Cesca</i> chair (1928). Elaine Louie, "The Many Lives of a Very Common Chair." <i>The New York Times</i> , February 7, 1991. http://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/07/garden/the-many-lives-of-a-very-common-chair.html . | 85 |
| Footnote 209: | Isamu Noguchi. <i>IN50</i> coffee table (1947). "Noguchi Table," http://www.hermanmiller.com/products/tables/occasional-tables/noguchi-table/ . | 85 |
| Image V2: | Jessi Reaves. <i>Idol of the Hares</i> (2014). Oak, polyurethane foam, silk, cotton, aluminum, ink. 96.52 x 71.12 x 121.92 cm. Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo by Marc Brems Tatti. | 86 |
| Image W2: | Jessi Reaves. <i>Mind At the Rodeo (XJ Fender Table Noguchi Knockoff #2)</i> (2016). Jeep Cherokee fenders (steel, plastic, auto paint), table top: glass. Dimensions variable. Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo by Marc Brems Tatti. | 86 |
| Footnote 218: | Pawpaw protectors. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 88 |
| Footnote 220: | Claes Oldenburg, <i>The Store</i> (1961). Photo by Robert McElroy. https://www.mumok.at/en/store-4 . | 88 |
| Image X2: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Pear Protector</i> (2016). Foam window-worm. Dimensions variable. In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 89 |
| Image Y2: | Image of elephant in the <i>First Bible of Charles the Bald</i> (845 CE). Folio 327V. http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8455903b . | 91 |
| Image Z2: | <i>Citrus Elephant</i> . Fake Foods, accessed 27 June 2017, http://www.fake-foods.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Store_Code=F&Category_Code=FRU002 | 91 |
| Image A3: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Boyfriend Pillow</i> (2016). Banana, high-density foam, masking tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 93 |

- Image B3: Lucy Meyle. *New World* (2016). High-density foam, masking tape, marker pen, oasis, paint, plastic bag, receipt. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 104
- Image C3: Lucy Meyle. *New World* (detail) (2016). In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 104
- Image D3: Lucy Meyle. *Souvenir Stand* (detail) (2017). Net bags, fruits and vegetables (real and unreal), plywood, sand, scoria, paint, cardboard, stainless steel fixtures, ball chain, bic pen, stainless steel chain. Dimensions variable. In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 105
- Image E3: Lucy Meyle. *Souvenir Stand* (2017). In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 105
- Image F3: Lucy Meyle. *Souvenir Stand* (detail) (2017). In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 105
- Image G3: Lucy Meyle. *Lint-rolling leftovers* (2016). Paper, peach pit, masking tape. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 106
- Image H3: Lucy Meyle. *Pidgey* (2016). Masking tape, high-density foam. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 107
- Image I3: Lucy Meyle. *Souvenir Stand* (2017). Net bags, fruits and vegetables (real and unreal), plywood, sand, scoria, paint, cardboard, stainless steel fixtures, ball chain, bic pen, stainless steel chain. Dimensions variable. In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 107
- Image J3: Lucy Meyle. *Souvenir Stand* (detail) (2017). In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 107
- Image K3: Lucy Meyle. *Souvenir Stand* (2017). In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 107
- Footnote 265: David Shrigley. *Leisure Centre* (1992). Chromogenic print on paper. 25.4 x 25.9 cm. Tate, accessed February 7, 2018, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/shrigley-leisure-centre-p79243>. 108

- Footnote 269: Anonymous, *Design for the Proscenium Arch of a Theatre with Two Trumpeting Angels Holding a Cartouche* (1700-1780). Pen and black ink, brush with gray, brown and pink wash, over lead point or graphite. 27.9 x 21.5 cm. The Met, eighteenth century, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collectioin/search/340397>. 112
- Footnote 287: Nick Austin. *Where Sugar Lives* (2015). Coloured pencil on paper. 59.4 x 42cm. <http://hopkinsonmossman.com/artist/?artist+Nick+Austin&work=Where+Sugar+Lives&id=1797> 113
- Image L3: Cosima von Bonin. *Hai am Tisch* (Shark at desk) (2014). Iron, block-board, lacquer, rubber, cotton, terry, foam material, polyfill, bulb with fitting, cable, galvanized steel. Dimensions variable. In *Cosima von Bonin: Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?* (2016), SculptureCenter, New York. Photo by Kyle Knodell for The New York Times. <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/57978/cosima-von-boninwho-s-exploiting-who-in-the-deep-sea-aki-sasamotodelicate-cycle/> 114
- Image M3: Cosima von Bonin. *The Bonin/Oswald Empire's Nothing #05* (2010). Mohair velour, polyfill, styroplast, brass. Dimensions variable. In *Cosima von Bonin: Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?* (2016), SculptureCenter, New York. Photo by Michael Nagle for The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/23/arts/design/cosima-von-bonin-swimming-against-the-tide.html> 115
- Image N3: Lucy Meyle. *Hedge Comb* (2015). Plywood, paint. 2.4 x .6m. In *Working Together* (with Ziggy Lever), St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. 116
- Image O3: Lucy Meyle. *Topiary Template* (2015). Plywood, paint. 2.4 x .6m. In *Working Together* (with Ziggy Lever), St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. 117
- Image P3: Lucy Meyle. *Lonely God* (2016), St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 119
- Image Q3: Lucy Meyle. *Extension* (2016). Recycled cardboard, packing tape, newsprint, glue, paint. Dimensions variable. In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 120
- Image R3: Lucy Meyle. *Extension* (2016). In *Lonely God*, St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. 120

| | | |
|---------------|---|-----|
| Footnote 317: | G Werner. <i>Uster fire etching</i> (1832). Zentralbibliothek Zurich, Accession Number: 000006064. | 123 |
| Image S3: | Peter Fischli and David Weiss. <i>Der Brand von Uster (The Fire of Uster)</i> (1979). C print. 17.7 x 25 cm. From <i>Wurstserie</i> (Sausage Series). http://www.matthewmarks.com/new-york/exhibitions/2017-09-08_trisha-donnelly-vincent-fecteau-peter-fischli-david-weiss-nan-goldin-martin-honert-michel-majerus-paul-sietsema-rebec/works-in-exhibition/#/images/17/ | 124 |
| Image T3: | Peter Fischli and David Weiss. <i>Im Teppichladen (In the Carpet Shop)</i> (1979). C print. 17.7 x 25 cm. From <i>Wurstserie</i> (Sausage Series). http://www.matthewmarks.com/new-york/exhibitions/2017-09-08_trisha-donnelly-vincent-fecteau-peter-fischli-david-weiss-nan-goldin-martin-honert-michel-majerus-paul-sietsema-rebec/works-in-exhibition/#/images/17/ | 124 |
| Image U3: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Extension</i> (2016). Recycled cardboard, packing tape, newsprint, glue, paint. Dimensions variable. In <i>Lonely God</i> , St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 127 |
| Image V3: | Lucy Meyle, <i>Pidgey</i> (2016). Masking tape, high-density foam. Dimensions variable. In <i>Lonely God</i> , St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 128 |
| Image W3: | Lucy Meyle. <i>A Case for Pickles</i> (2016). Insulation foam, complete jar of pickles. 5 x 120 x 60cm. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 131 |
| Image X3: | Lucy Meyle. <i>A Case for Pickles</i> (2016). Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 131 |
| Footnote 340: | Daniel Müllner. <i>Klein bottle</i> . "Manifolds," Manifold Atlas, accessed February 4, 2018, http://www.map.mpim-bonn.mpg.de/2-manifolds . | 131 |
| Image Y3: | Lucy Meyle. <i>Boyfriend Pillow</i> (2016). Banana, high-density foam, masking tape, marker pen. Dimensions variable. In <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. Photo by Ziggy Lever. | 133 |
| Image Z3: | Moving <i>Phantom Limb</i> (2016). Screenshots from a video by Elliot Collins. | 135 |
| Image A4: | My studio in December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 140 |
| Image B4: | My studio in December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 140 |
| Image C4: | Drawing of worm with hat on the wall of my studio, December 2017. Photo by Lucy Meyle. | 143 |

List of works/exhibitions

2014

| | |
|-----------|--|
| September | <i>Knowing You're Wrong</i> (with Ziggy Lever), ST Paul Street Gallery III, Auckland. (The show marked the beginning of our ongoing collaborative project <i>Knowing You're Wrong</i>). |
| November | <i>Knowing You're Wrong (II)</i> (with Ziggy Lever), ST Paul Street Gallery I, Auckland. (Part of the ongoing collaborative project <i>Knowing You're Wrong</i>). |

2015

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| February | <i>Yes yes yes yes yes</i> , in <i>Wearing Out</i> , with Ziggy Lever and Lance Pearce, PILOT space, Hamilton. |
| August | <i>Comb</i> , part of Talk Week AUT. |
| September | <i>Storage Solutions</i> (with Ziggy Lever), part of <i>Group Shower</i> , group show at FUZZY VIBES, Auckland. (Part of the ongoing collaborative project <i>Knowing You're Wrong</i> . This installation marked the end of a 2 week 'residency' in the garden area of FUZZY VIBES gallery). |
| October | <i>Working Together</i> (with Ziggy Lever), ST Paul Street Gallery III, Auckland. (Part of the ongoing collaborative project <i>Knowing You're Wrong</i>). |

2016

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| April | <i>Serving Suggestions</i> , RM Gallery, Auckland. |
| August | <i>A Case for Pickles</i> , part of Talk Week AUT. |
| September | <i>Lonely God</i> , ST Paul Street Gallery III, Auckland. |

2017

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| February | <i>Drawing from Memory</i> (with Ziggy Lever), part of <i>The City Loop Project</i> , Newmarket Park, Auckland. (Part of the ongoing collaborative project <i>Knowing You're Wrong</i>). |
| May | <i>Looking Forwards and Backwards</i> (with Ziggy Lever), Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin. (Part of the ongoing collaborative project <i>Knowing You're Wrong</i>). |
| August | <i>Bad Actors</i> , MEANWHILE Gallery, Wellington. |
| October | <i>Souvenir Stand</i> , part of <i>Shifting Ground</i> , group show in Artweek Auckland, Silo 6, Auckland. |

List of inserts

Inserted between pages 26-27: *Working Together* publication (with Ziggy Lever) (2015). Free publication as part of *Working Together* at Paul St Gallery III, Auckland.

Inserted between pages 42-43: *Looking Forwards and Backwards* publication (with Ziggy Lever) (2017). Free publication as part of *Looking Forwards and Backwards* at Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin.

Inserted between pages 68-69: *Various Sources #1-15* (2015-). Free publication available from AUT WE Building Foyer and select Auckland CBD convenience stores.

Inserted between pages 92-93: *Two of the elephants in the room* (2017). Free flyer as part of *Bad Actors* at MEANWHILE, Wellington.

Inserted between pages 104-105: Souvenir postcards, four styles (2017). Part of *Souvenir Stand*, free to visitors. In *Shifting Ground*, Silo 6, Auckland.

Inserted between pages 104-105: *Lonely God* Map/Poster (2016). Free publication as part of *Lonely God* at St Paul St Gallery III, Auckland.

Inserted between pages 142-143: *Specialty Supports* (2018). Catalogue of 'custom and customisable supports', made for this document.