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COMMON SENSE

MICRO DRAMAS AND
OTHER CARDBOARD
CONUNDRUMS!

Abstract

This exegesis, titled *Common Senses: micro dramas and other cardboard conundrums*, examines the often-elusive social etiquette that governs public, shared, and transient spaces. Through handmade photographic tableaux and stop-motion animation, scenes constructed from recycled and cheap materials draw on overheard conversations and ordinary encounters.

Within these recognisable environments, such as supermarkets, petrol stations, and waiting rooms, the work stages these micro-dramas, that reconstruct familiar yet uneasy or unspoken social rules. From navigating self-checkouts to queuing on public transport, narrative scenes reframe personal discomfort as a shared social condition. Using crude materiality, pop-cultural references, and a knowingly naïve aesthetic, each scene operates as a tool for exposing the uncomfortable and invisible structures we live under.

The ideas that form the foundation of the work reflect contemporary anxieties around automation, assisted technologies, and surveillance. Photography here is used not as a recording device but as a false documentary, capable of exaggeration, speculative narrative and humour. Responding to the rise of automation and self-service technologies, the work investigates how public behaviour is increasingly shaped by efficiency-driven systems of power. In doing so, it situates photography within a longer tradition of responding to technological change, using constructed imagery to question the invisible codes governing contemporary public life.

A conversation:

Mate:

"What are you reading?"

Me:

"Something on the end of 'art'"

Mate:

"Oh god, when is that gonna happen?"

Me:

"Apparently, it happened ages ago..."

Mate:

"Oh, what are we doing bugging around here for then?"

The end.

Breaking Etiquette

I construct images with recycled cardboard and tape, which are painted crudely and then photographed. I also make stop motion animated vignettes. The works build off things I see, overhear, or encounter in everyday scenarios, at the supermarket and petrol station or miscellaneous waiting room. There's a commentary on the predicaments of assisted and automated technologies lingering in the scenes I stage and construct. I think of photography as a medium that performs, rather than records. This exegesis, "*Common sense: micro dramas and other cardboard conundrums*", is a conversation with ideas: it explains the work I make, my relationship to it, the processes I use and the ways I think as an artist.

The often-elusive social etiquette that governs public, shared, and transitory spaces fascinates me. I reconstruct how etiquette plays out in scenarios as handmade scenes, photographic tableaux. and stop motion animation. Re-making these environments prompts my audience to reflect upon shared experiences or anxieties within them. Each scene I have constructed as a photograph represents an unavoidable public place, full of its own set of evasive social rules. For example, the supermarket checkout and its blaring security alarms are necessary, unavoidable evils in our daily routines. The work here aims to question these uncomfortable structured moments and the social tensions which arise within them.

For me, photographs and short animated sequences can operate as both overactive daydreams and cautionary tales. By using humour, references to pop-culture and a knowingly naïve approach to construction, I characterise the artworks I produce as imagined exaggerated consequences for missteps in the expected every day. Full of whimsy, my works propose questions about navigating our weird world of automated assisted technologies and the unwritten rules, cultural judgments and constant surveillance we are subjected and exposed to. What are the unspoken rules for queuing on the bus? What is the most efficient yet inconspicuous way to use the automated self-checkout at the supermarket? Why has filling up at the petrol station become so confusing?

Each photograph or stop motion vignette, exposes unanswerable questions, like navigating our strange cultural rules, elusive but firm. The work reframes these anxieties, not as personal failures but societal - questioning the function of these invisible codes and exposing public space as a site of uneasy performance.

In part, my work is a response to self-service technologies and retail automation. It investigates how consumers are implicated in new streamlined purchasing, where there's a reduction in labour costs and increased efficiencies in our day to day live. There are also emergent social interactions that moderate our behaviour in public. Automated technologies are developing a new type of nascent public interactions. Interestingly the tradition of photography has always been responsive to emerging technologies, to bear witness to the everyday.

The Work of Cheap Materials

My art practice sits across both sculpture and photography. I use cheap craft materials (the kind kids might use with deliberately suspect technical skills) including recycled cardboard, clay and discarded items to re-make rough-hewn environments and objects.

Photographic tableaux and short experimental stop motion animations each reflect a wonky, sagging version of our seemingly mundane realities. Re-framing and (literally) labouring over everyday experiences that are awkward, or at least, less than ideal. My work exposes the tensions between authenticity and social expectations. Narrative scenes, both static and moving, aim to serve as a window into a cardboard parallel universe where serious spaces don't take themselves too seriously.

From this vantage, I became intrigued and most interested in how photography and moving image can perform, rather than record. Working with craft techniques, focuses on revealing the constructed nature of public behaviour.

Through mismatched, kitschy image-making, the work also aims to propose a counterpoint to increasing automation and advancing technology - things like AI, and some 'cultural authority's' obsession with making things quick and easy. It reflects on how these processes echo broader cultural tendencies toward efficiency and control, and suggests that slow making, humour, and imperfect reconstruction can open space for different interpretations of our tech-fused futures, or the way we interact with public spaces, and in turn how this effects our behaviours within them.



Fig 1. Still from video work, *Common Sense*.

“Be Kind Rewind”

As a child of the ‘noughties’¹ my early forays into the world of popular visual culture began at the video store. Blockbuster™ and Video Ezy, both of which were a 5-minute drive from my childhood home. These were hallowed and frequented grounds. The visits there to wander isles of tapes and disks gave me a maximalist experience; more is more, row upon row, disk upon disk. Looking back, I appreciate how these routine experiences gave me a foundation into visual storytelling, cover blurbs and synopsis – to which I am continually drawn to.

I continue to have an interest with movie hire stores; the grandiose movie posters, gaudy branding, and the shorts and trailers played on TV screens. Like many, I also find myself suspiciously drawn to observing people going about their lives. Revelling in the juxtapositions that exist in make-believe between the interactions the video store workers have, or the various carpark dwellers, and those fantastical lives and stories contained within the shining curves of the DVD.

My work aims to close this gap between fiction and reality. Looking at how seemingly banal aspects of our everyday life can be made interesting through the legitimizing and elevating powers of the screen. As well as the self-consciousness that seems to go hand in hand with social observation. So, making sense of humble anecdotes and overheard conversations form a basis of my art practice: from awkward staff morning teas, commute dramas, to public pool etiquette and petrol stations confusions. Each vignette exposes our abilities to tackle practical problems, social dilemmas and the daily slog.

Commuter Mindset (Grind-set)

My interest in everyday exchanges, and the transient and uncomfortable settings for this project, began on Wellington’s public transport. As a ‘frequent flyer’ on Metlink’s services, I have had lots of time to reflect on the etiquettes which dictate this environment. Observing its tense and unwavering social rules, hilariously juxtaposed by its utter boringness. For me, the bus, often a marker of the beginning and end of people’s working day, inhabits an anti-social space, even though it’s filled with people.

After watching several people fail, one after the other, to correctly snap onto the Wellington public transport system, mistakenly using their red EFPOS card instead of the tricky red Snapper card, with no help from anyone around them (including myself), I became obsessed with the hilarious and perhaps disturbingly awkward nature of these environments.

These events have narrowed down the scope of the project to highlighting a seemingly elusive social etiquette, or the spaces we use to observe one another.

Picture it a bit like this:

Monday 7:00am ish

For some reason, your bus card doesn’t work.

A man standing in the queue behind you eventually lets you know that EFTPOS doesn’t work on Wellington buses.

This leaves you looking extra stupid. It was a mistake, of course!

A lady sitting close by gives you a look of disdain as you struggle to hold your bus card, coffee and phone in two hands. You feel your face heat up.

You think you catch the bus driver rolling his eyes.

You make it to work on time, with a slightly bruised ego.

¹ The Noughties refers to the period 2000-2010 ish - having grown up alongside many of these technological changes this period of time has formed a generation of (generally) computer literate people.



Fig 2. Ruby Millichamp, *Please check your balance.*

When discussing this idea in the studio early in the year, the conversation quickly dissolved into a confessional. People began sharing their anxieties, or the ‘micro dramas’, they have experienced on Wellington public transport. I was particularly surprised by the hang-ups people had with the recorded female voice on the Snapper card reader. What did ‘she’ ever do to you? I soon discovered the issue was not the voice itself, but what she dared to expose.

Her script simply reads: “Please check your balance”. While it may seem innocuous and perhaps helpful on paper, to a few, it acts as a mark of shame. God forbid, people thought they were poor. This disembodied voice is only summoned if you have less than \$10 on your card - more of a preventive measure for some of the (arguably) more extreme embarrassments discussed - what if your card declines, what if you get kicked off!

Sound familiar?

This hang-up reveals something else about our everyday culture. For me, it registers as a general disdain for the uncomfortable forced order, or presumed behavioural rules we follow in public, and simultaneously, a deep desire to uphold these rules and regulations as well. The anxiety comes from a presumed judgment, rather than an uncomfortable past interaction. It’s all about our self-conscious *image*. And the question we are asking ourselves in these spaces: are we doing it all right?

How to be Good

While I was daydreaming about these socially anxious situations we can find ourselves in, I pondered where unwritten social rules even come from? And more importantly, why do they impose themselves on our lives? What would an ideal example of behaviour look like? The idea of *politeness* strikes at our behaviour in public spaces, unwritten rules and codes of acceptance.

Linguist Richard J. Watts has some answers. He states polite behaviour is what is perceived to go beyond what is expected - situations which are “reproductions of discursive formats that have become institutionalised as expected”². Watts outlines the issues with trying to define polite behaviour as an impossibility to avoid disagreement. Generalised statements or vague outlines of politeness will split opinions and render the politeness blueprint useless.

“We might make statements like ‘He always shows a lot of respect towards his superiors’, or ‘She’s always very helpful and obliging’ ...There are even people who classify polite behaviour negatively, characterising it with terms as ‘standoffish, haughty, insincere, etc.”³

Politeness, or more specifically, different ideas surrounding what is deemed polite, seem to be the source of most awkward interactions especially within semi-public or transitional spaces. Spaces like public transport, waiting rooms, staff rooms, supermarkets and pharmacies. Hell, even the lines at the warehouse are governed by the same rules. Elusive, but confusingly firm ones.

In my work, *Please check your balance*, the snapper card reader stands tall – perhaps standing in as a bouncer. The presence of the cold unfeeling robot, unsympathetic to your transport plight, combined with the weighty glare of traitorous fellow passengers can be felt through crude representations. In opposition to its mechanical horrors.

² Watts, *Politeness*, 19.

³ Watts, *Politeness*, 2.

Postmodernism, Post Documentary and Photography or the Trap of Non-fiction

While I draw from real everyday scenarios my works are highly constructed, the techniques and materials used suggest a make-believe and exaggeration. They also suggest content has been edited and compiled for their audience to digest.

By choosing to use photographic technologies, I am in fact creating a false documentary and to some extent debunking the documentary traditions of the medium. My images directly and literally construct reality without claiming photographic objectivity. Photographs here do not pose as mirrors of the world but as producers - creating reality-like scenes. Images, however, sit firmly within the handmade, resisting generative technologies by sticking to analogue ways of making. The intersections of DIY with photography alter the way images are perceived as tableaux and 'windows'.

These ideas have precedents in Dada, Surrealist photcollage, and Walter Benjamin's concerns with mechanical reproduction, aura and audience. Postmodern reflexivity, and the montages of the Pictures Generation are also key precedents, and more recently, how AI blurs the line between what is real and (deep) fake. I turn to locate my work within 'documentary' lineages and include critical precedents in the form of Aotearoa New Zealand photographic artists Marie Shannon and Ava Seymour. Other New Zealand icons, spanning the world of music and film, such as Chris Knox's low-fi animations and punk spirit, along with film auteur Peter Jackson, are strong stylistic influences for the work. Similarly, the works of Micheal Gondry and his influences, with their use of practical effect, humorous narratives and pastiche also set a precedent for my practice.

I am exploring a position around the psyche of a cultural national identity. Here, my works resist dominant narratives and offer alternate frames of reference. By collapsing outdated types of dissemination—the VHS, the DVD, the movie poster—with a cognisance of streaming platforms and social media—the analogue production of my work doubles down as a statement on how far our everyday lives have become dictated by surveillance. Rather than achieve this through high-tech images and screens, which might be accustomed with such a project, my commentaries are achieved with low budget materials.

In order to unpack these ideas, it is important to highlight photography's fallible ability to record, and its tense relationship to objectivity and truth. The medium has historically been understood as objective, due to its mechanical ability to record. This, however, ignores the tangled relationship image making has with the inherent constructed meaning of photographic images, through framing, circulation and context. "Photographs furnish evidence"⁴. It makes me think of Henry Fox Talbot and his ironically titled photo book 'The Pencil of Nature'⁵. Photography, despite this title, has never been an objective medium. Like history, it walks the fine line of documentation and narrative.

Photography, when compared to painting for example, is celebrated for its ability to record an *imagined* reality or objective truth. This however has long been debated, with ideas around photographic staging and editing devices questioning photographs' truth-telling credentials. Today, with AI and generative image technologies becoming increasingly more popular, new questions about image credibility are being formed. Now, the first question one asks when looking at a photograph is whether it is made (rather than prompted in some form of AI software) by a person at all.

In his essay 'Photography after Postmodernism' David Bate describes the unfortunate fate of the photograph, specifically regarding the barrier of truth and therefore the relatability of images in his essay 'Photography after Postmodernism'.

"In literature, it is entirely normal to consider 'fiction' as a realm of writing practice completely engaged and immersed in life experiences connected to everyday reality... In photography, however, fiction and staging are often explicitly assumed as negative equivalents of 'false', 'fakery' and 'manipulation' even in an ideological-political context as 'propaganda'. In photography, 'staging' still carries the weight and historical baggage of these old uses."⁶

The concept of *staging* is especially interesting. By constructing and stylizing these documentary-like images, I play with notions of traditional image-making, and therefore truth. The images no longer represent a reality but act as prompts for

⁴ Sontag, "On Photography." 5.

⁵ *The Pencil of Nature* was the first commercially published book to be illustrated with photographs. The images varied, focusing more on the reproducibility of calotypes, which could produce negatives, allowing infinite copies.

⁶ Bate, "Photography after Postmodernism: Barthes, Stieglitz and The Art of Memory", 55.

us to find or remember ourselves and experiences within them. A constructed form or post-documentary. Re-made scenes dissect how images can construct reality and power, using both craft and photography to (ironically) find threads of recognition. Trying to capture the feelings of navigating supermarket checkouts unscathed, rather than a memory or a snapshot of an event.

Born for the Stage - Tableau, Photograph and Narrative.

These public spaces and liminal lingering's morph into cardboard facades – reminiscent of (unglamorous) stage sets. The process of creating 1:1 scale scenes with the intention of recording them photographically, has a clear relationship to the tableau, or *Tableau Vivant*, literally translating to living picture. The arrangements of which represent a scene or an incident—an intentionally constructed image that is theatrical and narrative driven. While historically, tableau vivant were produced to impress audiences and provide a kind of mirror of reality to those who viewed them, my interests are far more derivative, and used for mockumentary ends; to probe and tease through set-ups

The terms of Tableau Vivant were first outlined to describe the experience of theatre or dramatic storytelling by the French philosopher Denis Diderot in the eighteenth century. His ideas called for the "...use of so-called natural theatrical signs, those whose form resembles the thing signified and which are therefore able to foster the kind of aesthetic illusion that was held to be the supreme achievement of the art of painting"⁷. Laying the groundwork for thinking about pictorial composition as a kind of staged event.

In terms of photography, French art theorist and historian Jean Francois Chevrier called for 'photographic pictorialism', in which large-scale photographs are viewed on a wall, posing in a way that might suggest a photograph can have painterly status. As opposed to a small print or an image filed away somewhere in a book. A style in opposition to "habitual processes of appropriation and projection whereby photographic images are normally received and "consumed"⁸.

Today, photographic imagery has surpassed being compared to painting. What interests me most about Chevrier's ideas is the deliberate staging of photography for *narrative* purposes.

The idea of the photographic tableau - or a 'directorial mode' of image making brings fiction and narrative to the forefront. I reflect on the idea of the 'living picture' when creating props and sets with the photographic remake in mind. Tracing the feelings and experiences that occur within them, like other forms of fiction, they reveal something honest about our culture and experiences.

Within this idea of the re-made, recognisable things like posters and kids' toys become props. Animation and editing techniques become stage devices. Then, though sagging cardboard and a rough paint job, our social hang ups and elusive etiquettes are revealed as half-hearted performances.

⁷ Worvill, "From Prose Peinture to Dramatic Tableau", 154.

⁸ Chevrier, "The adventures of the picture form in the history of photography (1989)", 116.

Sometimes it's useful to read the company email newsletters - so you don't look like a fool when you don't bring anything to the shared lunch.



Fig 3. Ruby Millichamp, Shared Lunch.

Dio-drama

Aotearoa New Zealand artist Marie Shannon's photographic work, such as *Phone friends* (1990), uses miniature crafted, staged scenes within her photographic practice. Her work draws on her daily/weekly life, the subject depicting the phone calls she'd have with her partner Julian Dashper—Shannon at home in Auckland, and Dashper trying to make it big as an artist in The Big Apple.

The subject is personal, but the way the image is constructed for the camera plays with the traditional claims' photography has to representation. She re-works these ideas, by presenting images which would be impossible to capture traditionally but can be presented through a process of remaking. Crafted scenes, which take Shannon's real life domestic scenarios as their influence are presented in a way which is clearly handmade, imposing a familiar narrative scene without any of the traditional 'doco' bits and pieces. Pipe cleaners stand in for people and cello tape is on display. Here, photography's decisive moment is dissolved.

When discussing her 2018 exhibition *Rooms Only Found in the Home*, Shannon describes craft in relation to her photographic works as being a "self-limiting thing"⁹. Re-presenting the handmade process within the photographic frame aids in presenting a believable reality. Or a reality that is expected when looking at photographs in general. Shannon's work instead can be viewed through layers of editing and mediation, the constructed nature of the image is on display. As she describes, "The seriousness of photography over the top of something that allows itself to be crappy...completes the fiction".¹⁰

This idea of "completing the fiction", or *process* as a narrative tool is something which aligns with my thinking about photography and its role as a legitimizing tool. There is a clear attention to specificity in the way she constructs, the making process is not hidden in order to make the environment seem more *real*. Instead, she describes walking the line of well-made and badly made or recognising the constructed nature of image making.

Curator and art writer Robert Leonard describes this sentiment, "Nothing is more contrived than the casualness of a documentary photograph".¹¹ Here the reality of the image is not in question, allowing experience or perhaps anecdotal nature of the image to come to the fore.

Within Marie Shannon's work, humour is used as a tool, rather than an end goal. In the podcast conversation discussed earlier, art writer and curator Megan Dunn comments on "the strange fracture between humour and a punchline and is the work a punchline?".

To me, there is an easily accessible wit in Shannon's photographic works, through a playful approach to everyday moments. Rather than the works being jokes themselves, they instead possess humour and dry wit. A tool which dares people to admit something about themselves, these mundane moments, desires, fears and pleasures.

Shannon's process and commitment to revealing everyday truths and unveiling beliefs around the ability of photographic or recording technologies aligns with my practice and its goals. Wielding the materiality and dry wit present within these seemingly domestic and mundane spaces. By foregrounding construction, staging, and artifice, Shannon reveals the ideological frameworks embedded within the everyday itself. This process of making and unmaking, or producing images that both resemble and destabilise reality, informs my own approach to exposing ideology embedded in the everyday and therefore visual culture.

⁹ This discussion was a part of the *Artists in Conversation* podcast produced by Circuit (circuit.org.nz).

¹⁰ Thomasin Sleight. "Marie Shannon and Megan Dunn", in *Artist in Conversation*, 2018, <https://www.circuit.org.nz/writing-and-podcast/artists-in-conversation-3-marie-shannon-and-megan-dunn>

¹¹ Robert Leonard, *Marie Shannon: Something from Nothingness Comes*.

Fig 4. Marie Shannon, *Phone Friends*, 1990, silver gelatine print. 15.75 × 39.37".
<https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/exhibitions/marie-shannon-rooms-found-only-in-the-home>

A Clean(er) and Green(er) New Zealand?

The idea of a photograph as a device, or the photograph as a tool for exposing something true-er about the way we interact with our environments and in turn our relationship to the medium is critical to my creative research. The constructed images in my project aim to highlight the cross-over of the handmade image and narrative shorts, to reveal the nature of our behaviours.

This can be seen in the work of another Aotearoa New Zealand artist Ava Seymour, whose photcollage work “exemplifies the dada tradition of photomontage as a device for rupturing the mythological completeness of normative images”¹². Seymour’s work, specifically the series *Health, Happiness and Housing* (1997/8) features figures in a posed fashion within a surreal version of a 1930s New Zealand state house (a symbol of our faded socialist goals?). The aesthetics of Dada, a 1914 movement in Zurich, Paris, Cologne, and New York, is strikingly transposed over the top of the New Zealand state house.

¹² Robert Leonard, “*The End of Improvement: In Defence of Ava Seymour.*”



Fig 5. Ava Seymour, *Gas Mask Wedding*, 1996, photo collage. 635 x 707 x 44 mm.
<https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/explore-art-and-ideas/artwork/20237/gas-mask-wedding>

Every time I come across this image it reminds me of the whoopie cushion that my uncle broke on a particularly tense Christmas day by sitting down with unsuspecting enthusiasm. The situation's unexpected ridiculousness broke the feud and in my childhood memory - saved Christmas! Something about social rules and subverting them perhaps.... Or maybe crude humour gets a reaction no matter what.

The subjects in the photocollage, a heterosexual bride and groom, seem aware that they are being watched. Rather than demurely responding directly to the camera, kitted out with gas masks worn in the trenches of WWI, the pair confront the viewer. The result is a disturbing, vaguely political, and punchy set of family-like portraits. Robert Leonard has interpreted Seymour's photomontages as messing with our need for reassuring ideological images of social life or the false goals of capturing us naturally or 'getting us where we live'. Her work, he writes, "is less about a violence done to the subjects of the images, here, the actual or imagined occupants of state houses, and more about the violence the photographs do to the viewer."¹³

The way Seymour wields photomontage, calling back to the socially constructed dada works of Hannah Hoch or Raoul Hausmann, results in a wry framing of New Zealand and its messy post-colonial history. State houses, which are the main sites explored in Seymour's photocollage works discussed in this exegesis, are built of land displacement, and stifling Pakeha nuclear family models. This social welfare initiative becomes something much darker. Another tool for control, spatial segregation and cultural assimilation. A trade off which further dismantled communal Māori ways of living, for colonial structures of power.

A (false) symbol of egalitarianism, the state house becomes simultaneously framed as a symbol of poverty, sameness and the southern gothic. Here the grey skies and the aura of an approaching southerly represent the tone of the New Zealand suburb, and the horror which comes with that well known, unglamorous mundane space. Bold humour, combined with the frames slightly mean-spirited journalistic scrutiny. The absurd collage undercuts photographic logic (or the previously discussed ideas around photographic truth). This work reveals the camera as an empirical/observation device - with the outcome or reading of the images at the whim of its user; this reading is reinforced through an analysis of the formal qualities of the work.

The low horizons, familiar grey skies and repetitive street scenes create a flattened effect, which is recognisable but also oppressive. This restraint produces an atmosphere in which humour awkwardly emerges – an uncomfortable laugh. The images feel self-aware, taunting the judging viewer. Seymour's work reflects a distinctly New Zealand mode of scrutiny: understated, dry, and morally loaded, where humour functions less as release and more as an unwanted call-out.

By repurposing imagery, Dada took its aim at forms of high culture. Emerging in the aftermath of the First World War as a means to disempower propaganda, Dada, often associated with chance compositions, collage and photomontage, aimed to disrupt mass media imagery and nationalist rhetoric. Since then, Dada-esque collage practices can be understood as responding to similar conditions: ongoing disillusionment with institutional authority, consumer culture, and capitalist ideas. One reason for its 'return' is because the Dada spirit demonstrates a "...capacity to unmask the structures that make power function...There are no simplistic assertions ...rather careful analyses of the manner in which particular insights into relations among power, repression and representation can be effectively communicated in visual terms."¹⁴ Rather than operating as self-righteous critique, these works function as diagnostic tools, exposing the symptoms of misplaced power that continues to structure everyday life.

Seymour's collages extend this legacy by critiquing the familiar. Her work reframes social systems not as abstract forces but as lived, awkward, and possibly unpleasant experiences.

A similar exchange with place operates within my work. Suburban encounters and everyday anecdotes are presented within a New Zealand context. Like Seymour's photomontages, constructed scenes in my work change between affection and critique. Humour carries judgements which mimic the pressures which are embedded in the spaces themselves. While her works places the viewer as an awkward voyeur, my work, in contrast, aims to wield the same tensions by immersing the viewer in the shared public experience. And, again, like Seymour's, New Zealand centric infrastructure is dispersed throughout my imagery. Te Whatu Ora posters, national treasures like the Pak N' Save stick man,¹⁵ petrol station pump consoles are peppered with the Z Energy™ logos. Each proudly (or forcefully) branded on a crumbling paper model.

My photograph, *Help us to keep brochures germ free*, for example, similarly critiques common institutions and services. While on a different scale, there is a shared Dada-esque sensibility.

¹³ The End of Improvement: In Defence of Ava Seymour

¹⁴ Joanna Drucker, *Review: Dada Collage and Photomontage*, (1993). 83.

¹⁵ Stick man - New Zealand supermarket chain Pak N' Saves 2-D Mascot. Most recognisable for his work promoting their low prices and upholding the *budget friendly* ethos of the supermarket chain.

My images act as both deadpan and institutional satire - the watercooler acts as a symbol for a bureaucratic punchline where the recognisable-ness of the image is found in the advertising and its cookie cutter interior. Healthcare's stretched resources and your mild desperation become part of the gag. With the "man" behind the brochure asking absurd questions - "Is your asthma really under control? Or do you just think it is". The clock continues to tick as the next hour passes in the waiting room - the epitome of liminal.

Paranoid yet?



Fig 6. Ruby Millichamp, *Help us to keep brochures germ free.*

Pictures Generation (Cont.)

Both works discussed by Ava Seymour and Marie Shannon were produced in New Zealand during the 1990s, a period when New Zealand photography was largely preoccupied with gritty documentary realism. This tradition is often associated with photographers such as Ans Westra, whose work sought to represent everyday life more interested in photographs observational authenticity.

Seymour and Shannon's practices, however, are part of a move away from this documentary impulse. Rather than transparently recording reality they instead treat photographs as cultural documents, reusing and employing other referents to construct meaning, and often relying on what audiences bring to the works.

In this sense, their work can be understood as part of a wider shift influenced by postmodern image-makers associated with *The Pictures Generation*. The term originates from Douglas Crimp's 1977 exhibition *Pictures* and refers to a group of artists whose work interrogated images not as reflections of reality but as systems that actively shape how reality is understood. Rather than producing new visual truths, these artists exposed how media, archives, and representation itself, structures subjectivity and perception.

Seymour and Shannon's work are indeed examples of anti-documentary strategies, foregrounding photography as a site of construction, performance, and narrative production. Within this framework, Shannon's constructed scenes bear strong affinities with the work of Laurie Simmons, a prominent figure of the Pictures Generation. Simmons is known for staging photographs using dolls, puppets, and toy-scale domestic interiors. Using these props to draw attention to photography's artificial nature, while exposing the ideological frameworks embedded within representations of femininity and domestic life. Her photograph *Woman/Red Couch/Newspaper* (1978), for instance, depicts a female figure seated alone reading a newspaper, a mundane scenario rendered uncanny through its miniature scale and cinematic framing. Almost like something out of a later David Lynch¹⁶ movie with its voyeuristic framing.

Fig 7. Laurie Simmons, *Woman/Red Couch/Newspaper* (1978), 3 x 5".

https://www.moma.org/collection/works/199607?artist_id=7015&page=1&sov_referrer=artist

¹⁶ This particular image to me speaks to the dark suburban themes often present in David Lynch's films - uncanny suburbia and dream like logic.

Simmons' use of childhood objects has a clear relationship to nostalgia. These are made eerie through her slightly unsettling adult tableaux, recalling the detached gaze of surveillance or cinema. The photograph references the visual codes of 1950s domestic femininity with the well-dressed woman and the private, lonely interior. "It is through these dollhouse photographs that she betrays the constructedness of society, and the hierarchies it sustains."¹⁷

The familiarity is shifted through her use of skewed scale and exaggerated staging. There is tension between recognisability and a general feeling of strangeness, where meaning is produced through a constructed *mise-en-scène*. Through this manipulation of scale and staging, Simmons exposes the performativity of gender roles, and the voyeuristic structures embedded in photography. Similarly, Shannon's constructed images and Seymour's collage works adopt these strategies to mess with documentary conventions, suggesting that photography does not merely reflect social reality but is a narrative tool.

Alternatively, Seymour's imagery drawn from medical textbooks and popular magazines, utilizes appropriation. The work speaks more to image circulation and authorship - a strategy aligned with Barthes's concept of the *death of the author*¹⁸, where meaning no longer originates from a singular creator but instead emerges through circulation and in the case of this example, reinterpretation. Like readymade and found object ideas, archival photographs, medical diagrams, or magazine imagery shifts the authorship from invention to selection, framing, and recombination. The important moment here is the selection.

In this way, Seymour's work might be compared to the postmodern strategies of artist Sherrie Levine. Levine is best known for works such as *After Walker Evans* (1981), in which she re-photographed Walker Evans's Depression-era images of rural American life. By reproducing canonical photographs and presenting them within a contemporary art context, removed from their historical moment and original authorship, Levine destabilises ideas of originality, authenticity, and assumed authorship or artistic genius.

I reference these practices because my own work similarly focuses in on a chosen moment: overheard conversations and lived experiences operate as a form of found material. Here, fragments of the everyday are collected, reassembled, and reframed into critiques of social systems and institutional authority. The ideas within my practice are less concerned with artistic originality or authorship, and instead the *borrowing* of experiences.

¹⁷ Laura Sutton Leffler, *Life in the dollhouse: Laurie Simmons's early work as a display of constructed hierarchies*, (2005). 4.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*.

Big Brother is Watching

The camera is linked to industry, surveillance and therefore power and control. It joins other machines and technologies as more efficient limbs or *prosthetic gods*¹⁹. Tools like this act as a means of perfecting our organs. "Our natural ability to remember has been 'improved' or at least extended in some way by the seeing/documenting tools of the lens"²⁰. Or as Vilém Flusser puts it in his work, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, "Man forgets that he produces images in order to find his way in the world; now he tries to find his way in images"²¹. With the animation Pack N' Save (me), a section from the video work *Common Sense*, the audience assumes the perspective of a casual supermarket goer, on the journey to get a nice bag of blue bird ready salted chips (yum!). Confronted by tech-fused-chaos at the check-out - another perfected organ? I think not.

There are several relationships to/with the camera in this animated short. It is both a tool for watching, with the depiction of security technologies, and a POV style reflection of the self-consciousness which these spaces evoke. Who's watching who, who am I looking out for, all become preoccupations.

Take an environment such as the supermarket, purposeful, somewhat mundane but highly systematic and controlled. Along with the literal surveillance in these spaces, there comes a self-surveillance as well. Who knows what's behind the sleek screen of the checkout? There is a relationship to Jeremy Bentham's 1791 Panopticon prison design. A single, anonymously guarded watch tower, keeping tabs on the masses. Here surveillance is internalised - prisoners never know if they are truly being watched. Our behaviours in public, shared spaces are dictated by this imaginary watch tower. While the panopticon design has never been built or used in its original form, it illustrates surveillance and its clever, insidious ability to wield power through a created sense of paranoia. Much like Flusser's musing on images and their symbolic power, Micheal Foucault's ideas of panopticism, inspired by Bentham's designs, describe an automated surveillance, "...permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action"²². We imagine we are being watched, and therefore the cycle continues. This *idea* of automated surveillance allows us to uphold the worst of our cultural values.

Action and consequence as a disciplinary tool – swapping out limes for lemons or red onions for bread rolls at the shops becomes a risk that trumps Ms Trunchbull's²³ terrifying nail closest or an adolescent grounding. Even an innocent mis-scanned item or misplaced bag could signal both humiliation and an empty pantry.

The camera instead of being a neutral observer, is part of a scopic regime of self-consciousness, in which visibility, or this idea of possibly being watched becomes a tool for control. Cameras in this way begin to become synonyms with discipline. The quiet internalisation of power spurred on through the glass of the lens.

¹⁹ This term comes from Freud's writings in *Civilization and its Discontents*. It describes modern humans as prosthetic gods because of tech's new abilities to enhance our bodily powers.

²⁰ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 499.

²¹ Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 7.

²² Foucault, "Panopticism.", 303.

²³ Remember the horrifying head teacher from Roald Dahl's novel *Matilda*? If not, some of her punishments included the examples above - a cautionary tale and imaginary disciplinary figure, at least in my experience.

"When did this place get so dammed high tech?"

A quote overheard from someone's supermarket woes - neck sweat, presumably high blood pressure, and alarms all present.



Fig 8. Still from video work, *Common Sense*.



Fig 9. Still from video work, *Common Sense*.

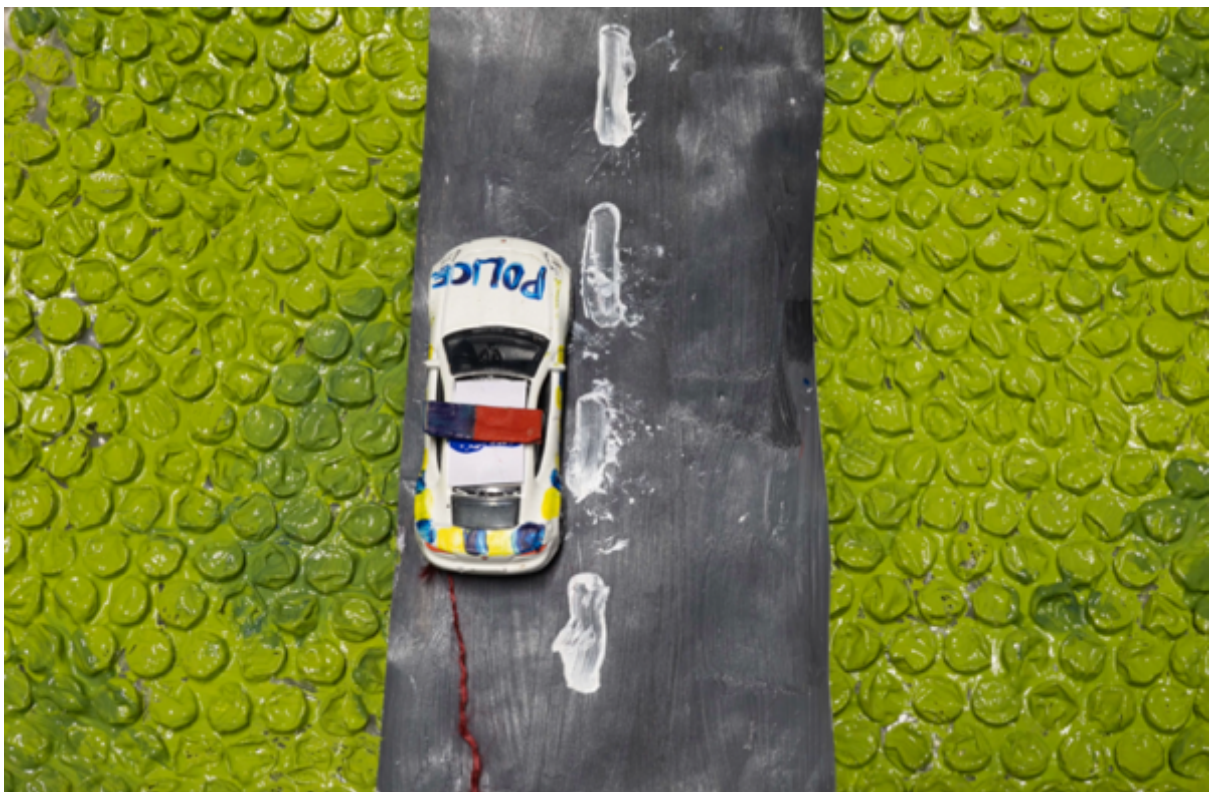


Fig 10. Still from video work, *Common Sense*.

DIY it's in our DNA - The Remade

Using materials in deliberately crude ways to laboriously remake existing objects, brands and interiors has been at the core of my process. This deliberate *re-madness* aligns with a fondness for cartoon aesthetics and DIY. Using easily available and low-cost materials taped together in an aesthetically unpretentious or child-like manner, I create photographed scenes (animated and static) to reflect an off-centre version of our world.

This process is in a sense a form of material culture: amateur production delivers imitation as a creative strategy in unpacking the recognizability of everyday space and certain cultural frameworks that dictate our behaviours within it.

I think about DIY as a method to respond to ideas of artistic 'uniqueness'. Because most of the objects within these scenes represent a mass produced or branded item, the hand-painted logos use humour and irony to re-materialise the easily reproducible. Replicating spaces this way becomes less about mimicking reality but acknowledging an absurdness in routines and environments – *re-presenting* our mundane habits and *re-constructing* these narratives through artifice.

The materials and processes used to construct these narrative scenes are ultimately concerned with production. Each space is a re-produced version of mass-produced objects or environments. With this, I reflect on Walter Benjamin's ideas around cult, and "*exhibition value*". Specifically, the implication that reproducible and new forms of artmaking democratise the experience of art works.

In his 1935 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin writes to the changes in the mode of production and the effect this had on the definition of art objects. Things such as photography and film, which can be reproduced and viewed anywhere at any time, bring people together. This democratization of art gains a new (and potentially revolutionary) purpose. He refers to this as "*exhibition value*" - an art object which gains status from being viewed publicly or on mass. As opposed to an art object of "*cult value*", which is more concerned with an object's existence for ritual or traditional purpose.

"Our taverns and or metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-clung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion movement is extended."²⁴

If Benjamin is talking about these technology changes such as movies presenting an exciting sort of window – freeing us from the prison of our mundane lives, my work, such as the (public) pool rules stop motion video in, *Common Sense*, flips this and reflects the mundane back at us. The "debris" in this example takes the shape of greying pool towels and damp tile floors. The familiar echo of the public pool and the stray band-aid, ground the work in an uncomfortable common place. The almost unbearable changing room experiences laid bare (pun intended).

²⁴ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.15.



Fig 11. Still from video work, *Common Sense*.

A different sort of democratisation happens in these vignettes. Instead of just reframing our experiences on the screen, which by now we are probably used to, the materiality or DIY cheapness re-positions our routines. Reflecting on our more modern era's grappling with technological changes. These narrative traverses the frequented realm of the everyday, unravelling the codes of the public pool or, our times "taverns, offices and furnished rooms". This way, public spaces reveal their stifflingly elusive rules.

Today, our newish changes in production are driven increasingly by digital technology. I use re-producible technology (a digital camera), in conjunction with slow, handmade scenes, aiming to make fun of these new systems of power. With an increase in AI and surveillance technologies, cameras used for monitoring public spaces have a strong relationship to control. This monitoring contributes to a general societal behavioural regulation. Affecting how we *perform* under the expectation that we are being watched.

Crafted reproductions, while unique and handmade, represent the shells of highly circulated media. Pastiche, or a recycling of popular references in animation, is an important method within my project. The audience then participates by imbuing their own experiences within the already recognisable narratives. Which include but are not limited to:

- Sound bites taken from the long running television series, *Law and Order*²⁵
- A popular (although extremely boring) Ted Talk²⁶, appropriated in sock puppet form
- Tropes borrowed from cheesy rom coms
- Advertising material is ironically appropriated from the 2004 anti-piracy warnings

Within my wonky landscapes, Supermarkets turn into car chases and my staff parties turn into cautionary tales.

DIY, and this do-it-yourself attitude, while having an anti-automation, punk ethos, also has its links to an outdated idea of New Zealand nationalism. *DIY it's in our DNA*, is a well-known brand slogan for Mitre 10 hardware store. A symbol of masculinity and hard yakka²⁷. It represents that New Zealand specific, *number 8 wire mentality* - or the idea that all New Zealanders are resourceful, can do anything, probably on their own, with some common fencing wire and a good solid pair of gumboots. Not to mention a pie and a V.

This creation of identity, based on hard physical labour, represents a gendered and long-standing symptom from Aotearoa New Zealand's pioneering and colonial histories. A kiwi myth, which champions white men, "whose presence is naturalized by association with the landscape and a "frontier" model of pragmatic, physical industry"²⁸. With criteria like this, a skewed national identity is formed which is not at all representative of the population, indigenous culture, and general lived experience.

Instead it conjures stereotypes; the Mitre 10 man in his orange get-up is an ideal figure of doing it and getting it done. No metrosexuals/city slickers here. This masculine culture is reflected pretty heavily in branding. DIY in the context of this creative project uses these tired tropes of kiwi nationalism as a tool for satire. For example, the petrol station section of the video work *Common Scenes*. Here the POV protagonist struggles against the macho world of cars and petrol pumps, fumbling around lost as fuel leaks and fires start. All under the time pressure as a car off screen beeps angrily. A test of your practical skills and car knowledge - as pillars of this false national ideal. The sound of a backfiring car signifying our (potentially) shared disdain for these cultural pressures.

²⁵ The popular show follows police officers investigating brutal crime scenes. The theme sound from the show ends my constructed police chase in the video work *common sense*. Referencing the end of the detective's work and the imagined criminal saga. The sound, emulating a cell door closing has also been appropriated by meme or internet culture to signify a surprising or particularly suspenseful moment in pop culture.

²⁶ TED Talks refer to a series of presentations on Technology, entertainment and design

²⁷ Hard yakka AKA hard work

²⁸ Person, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Settler Societies: States of Unease*, (2001).



Fig 12. Still from video work, *Common Sense*.

Kitsch is the New Black

Do it yourself aesthetic is aligned to kitsch, originating from the German word for trash, or gaudy. We mostly understand kitsch through objects which are mass produced or made in a haphazard way – void of depth. Within a postmodern context, especially following cultural movements such as MTV in the 1980s, mass-circulated images and visual culture begin to blur the distinctions of high and low culture. Kitsch through this lens is less about poor craftsmanship or a capitalist/ mass-produced boringness – but a democratic turn.

Instead of functioning as formalist art critic Clement Greenberg described as ersatz culture²⁹ or a substitute or genuine experience, it becomes a strategy or unpacking or relating to our media-saturated environment. It makes me think back to Blockbuster™ and Video EZ, a celebration of pulp media and pop culture, just now in a different form. Something which becomes recognisable and accessible.

Here, a loss of aura³⁰ is revealed not to be a loss of the *sacred*, but a tool for understanding changes in a mainstream understanding of visual culture. It begins to act as a new (ish) aesthetic strategy within an image and media-saturated era. Kitsch here can then give the audience agency. The work can begin to reflect real life and elevate the vernacular and the humble.

Hal Foster, in his book *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, writes of an art pluralism, from a 1980s post-modern perspective. He describes artwork, which is more socially reactive, and less concerned with what should be, or historically prescriptive.

“We are free —of what we think we know. But where are we left? The present in art has a strange form, at once full and empty, and a strange tense, a sort of neo-now moment of “arriere-avant-gardism.”³¹

In this “neo-now” condition Foster describes a shift shaped by our tendency to look backwards and continually re-work and re-cycle old forms. This arriere-avant-gardism (the followers) revisits old or outdated frames of reference, reveals a self-conscious chewing of history, style and representation. Instead, now we see an “...increasingly pluralistic environment.

In summary, understandings of visual culture are less grounded in tradition but now in ideas. Here, the everyday, can reveal itself within an art context.

While we are forty or so years on from Foster’s essays, and characterised by relentless image making, circulation and reproduction, I think of a visual culture of kitsch by way of responses to social observations. Ironically reworking what are now familiar forms - functioning both as nostalgic and satirical devices.

²⁹ Clement Greenberg in his work *Avant-garde and Kitsch* describes ersatz culture as low culture masquerading as high culture. With all the exterior trappings without the filling so to speak.

³⁰ Aura here refers to Benjamin’s ideas around artistic uniqueness or artistic authenticity as tied to time and place or an idea of an exalted history.

³¹ Foster, *The Return of the Real*.

Monday vs Friday (cup stack)

AKA Process pic AKA Spot the difference



Fig 13. Personal photograph of the classic Wellington l'affare takeaway cup.



Fig 14. Personal photograph of re-created versions of previously mentioned cups.

Time and Cardboard

With model making, I am also reminded of German sculptor and photographer, Thomas Demand. Demand's work is referential and ultimately concerned with technologies. Re-making images from popular media through constructed paper models, which are re-photographed. I also reflect on this act of re-photographing, referencing the medium's innate qualities- to reproduce- by highlighting the gap between the actual events and the reproductions we interact with.

Michael Fried, in his book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, explains Demand's preoccupation with the photographic form of reproduction (as opposed to sculptural versions of his work) as "...not interested in the act itself, but rather the photos in an act in itself - something has entered circulation in the form of a photo"³². This warping or difference between sculpture and image, asks interesting questions around Walter Benjamin's ideas of aura, which has been previously mentioned. The reproductions are unique but also represent the shells of highly circulated images.

I feel Demand's approach to reproduction/making, with his obvious evidence of labour, shifts these readings. Giving life back to these events and reminding us not to get lost in the seductive potential of technology.

There is a temporary nature to Demand's sculptural work. Paper models are disposed of and exist only through the photograph. Each scene, while being carefully planned and meticulously constructed, only exists for a 'quick snap' in comparison to the laborious approach to making. These scenes pretend to exist as a passing moment. Here, there is an intriguing relationship to time.

Photography and its ability to record an assumed reality or moment has a relationship to artificial or 'mnemonic' memory. This means photography holds or acts as a placeholder for 'natural' memory - our ability to recollect events. As stated by Freud in *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, tools, such as the camera, act as a means of perfecting our organs. Our natural ability to remember has been 'improved' or at least extended in some way by the seeing/documenting tools of the lens³³.

Like memory, the temporary nature of the constructed scenes change – they are inherently unstable or shifting. Once dismantled or destroyed, the moment or experience can only be re-entered through the photograph. Therefore, susceptible to interpretation. The re-telling which occurs in my projects mirror, or are suggestive of, that which we lose through time and the fallible nature of memory.

This impermanence is shown literally in Demands practice though their destruction. Dramatically burned after the image is taken. In my practice, pieces and sets are reused and reconfigured, taking on new forms across multiple images. Tracing the grey area between document, memory and fiction.

³² Foster, *The Return of the Real*. 226.

³³ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 499.



Fig 15. Thomas Demand, *Tavern*, (2006), 2751 x 1701 mm. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/thomas-demand-2641>

The Movie Machine

I remember the strong disciplinary figures in movies from my childhood - conjuring up images of dark finishing schools and children locked in nail-filled closets (thanks, Ms Trunchbull). Through the power of pop culture, infused childhood worries of being thrown into the sky by your pigtails (horrifying) shift to more “adult” concerns, such as being exposed as socially incompetent (even more horrifying).

A cunning disciplinary form lies in the genius of popular entertainment - its mystical powers, able to hold attention for hours and teach us how to behave at the same time. Batman beats up the robbers, and Big Bird teaches you to share. More effective than a teacher yelling at you, and most importantly, more *entertaining*.

When creating short animations and vignettes, this idea of entertainment as a moral or disciplinary form, reminiscent of children’s cartoons, is central to my practice. Pop culture is referenced heavily for this effect. Recognisable fonts, familiar audio clips from advertisements and television series, and visual tropes borrowed from mass media are re-assembled into twisted, adult versions of the content that shaped my generation. The works expose the behavioural lessons hidden within them.

Peter Jackson’s early work adds to this adult twisting of childhood entertainment - into something wittier and more absurd. Wellington New Zealand, otherwise known as Wellywood (desperately clinging to its American namesake) owes much of its success to Peter Jackson. Mostly known for his directorial work on the fantasy series *Lord of the Rings*, however, his early low budget work speaks to a more satirical preoccupation. His and Frances Walsh’s twisted muppets parody *Meet the Feebles* (1989) combines the dark underbelly of show biz with anthropomorphic puppets. The plot follows a variety of characters who are a part of a variety show troupe rehearsing with the hopes of getting a broadcast television series. Here, promiscuity, sex, drugs, New Zealand’s gang culture stereotypes, and sleazy managers pave the way for a tragic ending in which the downtrodden protagonist who has become tangled in a toxic backstage culture, massacres the theatre, all to a musical number on sodomy. [<https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/meet-the-feebles-1990>].

Performances here are exposed as dysfunctional, revealing the corrupt power struggles and tensions behind the curtain. Through absurd humour, the narrative dysfunction is forced into a spectacle. A mismanaged production turns musical numbers into grotesque tableaux that cannot conceal their own institutional issues. Vomit, violence and all; a crooked Jim Henson³⁴ cult classic.

The element of performance in these examples becomes self-aware. They are stripped back and presented in an unforgiving, awkward way. A way which I feel represents the spirit or lived experience of performing more than the glitz and glamor that Hollywood has been a promoter of. In this way, the vignettes in *Common Sense* share this dysfunctional reflection. Focusing instead on behavioural scripts that are embedded in popular culture. Like these examples, they don't offer comfort but treat performance as a site of power and absurdity.

As part of these cutting societal observations, there is a punk ethos underpinned by a haphazard approach, paired with an evasive sense of humour. A deliberate piss-take that values non-conformity and authenticity over technical perfection.

In this way, my time-based works are also influenced by the animated music videos of New Zealand artist Chris Knox, whose DIY sensibility, and embrace of imperfection continue to inform the methodology of my work. Knox’s animations for the Tall Dwarfs’, *Fork Songs* (1991 album) made in collaboration with Alec Bathgate exemplify this influence. naïve backdrops are defiled through Knox’s irreverent animation style, which mirrors the anti-commercial experimental music itself. Anarchic animations and the rough immediacy of the work resist a polished perhaps commercial conformity. This tension between accessibility and subversion is something which I actively seek in my own practice.

[<https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/fork-songs-1992>].

A personal favourite quote from Knox has stuck with me throughout this making process:

“...the sorta love that is included in the literal definition of amateur: Someone who does what they do, not for monetary gain, but for the sheer kick of making it happen; of finishing something that all their mates say will never fly; of being able

³⁴ Jim Henson: the famous Muppets creator, who famously acknowledged the *Feebles* in episode 7 of *Muppets Mayhem*. The implication that they exist in the same universe is hilarious.

no sit back at the small-town premiere and see the fruits of their labours being shared by tens – maybe dozens – of others. Just like themselves.”³⁵

Something about his musings on perfection erasing some of the humanity present in things people make – linking amateur back to its original definition perfectly highlights the ethos of this project.

Additionally, as a child of the early 2000s, music videos held weight in my psyche. Michel Gondry has been a recurring point of influence, especially the low-fi constructed nature of his work. His direction on the Stereogram ‘*Walkie Talkie Man*’ music video has been a major influence and general inspiration in the materiality of my work.

[<https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/steriogram-walkie-talkie-man-2004>].

This video consists of miniature hand-knit stop-motion and large-scale knitted sets, with some live action in the mix. It combines kitschy craft and raucous guitar playing (arguably also a bit kitsch, right?). 90% knitted stop-motion, 10% spunk, the perfect juxtaposition between grit and craft.

Twisted pop culture references knitted together (literally) for chaos and colour. Grandma’s knitting on steroids. His visual style is characterised by its self-awareness, childlike, handmade touch and the “fourth wall” breaks. Packed with references and wit. Gondry notes his interest in early surrealist filmmakers, such as George Méliès. A pioneer of early silent film, practical effects and fantastical narratives. Méliès’s most notable work, *Le Voyage dans La Lune (a trip to the moon)*, 1902, uses in-camera tricks, like stop motions, double exposures, alongside hand-painted sets and props to bring his dreamscape to the screen. Gondry cites Méliès as the first person to use the camera as an extension of his tricks³⁶.

Gondry also mentions his admiration for Terry Gilliam. Citing his cut-outs, collages and practical gags on his *Monty Python* projects and his feature film *Brazil*. Exaggerated authoritarian imagery in the form of dystopian plastic surgeries, oppressive machinery and absurd scale - a *magical realism* which closely aligns with Gondry’s own interest in power structures made playful and a bit grotesque.

This commitment to practical effects and the subsequent blurring between imagination, dreams, and reality is a running theme in my creative practice. There is an impatient nature to the work. Frames shuffle together and tape slowly peels off the walls, new paint drips on the floor as scenes progress.

All these precedents find their humour in critique, much like the Dada sentiment discussed previously. *Monty Python*’s gags on a British culture for the elite, and *Brazil*’s wry digs at bureaucracy and mindless consumerism. These deadpan and illogical narrative threads laugh at the system while also revealing our inability to escape authorities’ firm grasp.

³⁵ Craig Robertson, *Chris Knox: Not Given Lightly* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2025).

³⁶ Weintraub, “Exclusive Interview – Michel Gondry.”

Strings Attached

While there are more obvious societal structures which may be easier for us to collectively navigate, there are many more elusive origins to these unwritten rules. These slippery guidelines are acknowledged in my video work titled *TED? - what happens when you try to explain the unexplainable?*

This work uses edited audio from a TED Talk from 2018 by Jeff Leitner titled *The undiscovered power of unwritten rules*³⁷ (I think the perfect subject for my creative research).

The presentation ambles on for around fifteen minutes, filled with half-heated fake laughs at just the right moments, like a 1960s American sitcom³⁸. The narrator's words sort of wander around the point, never quite getting anywhere, ironically, performing the elusive roles that these aptly named *unwritten* rules do. The focus or obsession with unwritten rules speaks to the shared self-consciousness I am trying to portray. By admitting to their existence, he has outed himself as a member of a smoothly running polite society. Both behind the cells and in Bentham's watch tower.

I appropriate this presentation and illustrate it with a sock puppet interpretation of the performance. Allowing this puppet persona to waft into a slightly more exciting daydream. To take the piss at the rambling self-assurance. Here the narrator is exposed as a charlatan and TED Talks as shallow, conceited and therefore sort of hilarious? TED talks already have a bit of tense history or unsavory association. Recently, they are often criticised for platforming neo-liberal ideology, capitalistic narratives and a general aura of corporate greed. Or more simply – keen on offering up individual solutions to gross systematic issues. The classic over intellectualized blame game.

When creating short animations or vignettes, I have investigated the idea of a moral form of entertainment, reminiscent of children's cartoons. I heavily reference pop culture for this effect. Using YouTube, recognisable fonts and audio clips from advertisements and television series, creating twisted adult versions of the media that shapes us all.

The TED Talk scene is deliberately reminiscent of an early sitcoms and office romcoms of the 2000s - a tired man worn down by the mundane nature of his everyday life has a moment of unexpected passion. The busty blonde of his corporate dreams takes us out of the stringent rules of the office guided by unnecessary and stifling social niceties. A tool for satirizing the self-important structures these talks advertise to the world.

³⁷ Leitner, *The Undiscovered Power of Unwritten Rules*.

³⁸ The laugh track was invented by CBS sound engineer, Charley Douglass in 1950 as a way to help audiences navigate a new medium - the television! Apparently, he didn't trust audiences to laugh at the *right* moments, so he gave them a helping hand. The laugh track was first used on the Hank McCune show.



Fig 16. Still from video work, *Common Sense*.

Lobby vs Living Room - The Middle of the Ven Diagram...

Along with these stop motion vignettes and photographic tableaux, "*Common Sense*" is presented on the humble television, extras and all. Unusable models of remotes are provided - representing a technology which is both modern and infuriatingly outdated. I often think about the time when my family decided to tape up all the buttons except the on-and-off button on my grandmother's remote so she could operate the TV, with it stuck on one (presumed favourite) channel. A hilariously un-accessible accessible item.

Re-created stray cords and taped up remotes and miscellaneous batteries litter the gallery floor, highlighting the confusing territory of our tech-driven world. Like these unwritten elusive social etiquettes, the lost threads of usefulness are exposed as unwanted or perhaps unnecessary? Maybe it's time to throw out some of those old cords. Let's be real, you only need one or two anyway, right?

Here the installation set-up trips over the familiar feeling of a waiting room, or maybe a foyer? The seemingly default-ness of its contents adding to the general confusion-come stress of the transitional every day. Playing with the *normal* expectations of viewing. Not quite the comfort of your living room, but something much more awkward.

This viewing experience is paired with a suit of 1:1 scale photographs. Each tableau, presenting a sight of unwanted performance and social tension.

A Conclusion

This exegesis, *Common Sense: Micro dramas and other Cardboard Conundrums*, addresses many things, beginning with social etiquette, our collective awkwardness, and the sort of *social choreography* found within the everyday. It examines constructed photography, viewing images and related animation practices as performative mediums rather than neutral recording devices.

Across the works produced, handmade scenes/tableaux, use roughly made props and shuffling stop motion animations to stage observed and experienced everyday encounters. This visual reference to DIY and kitsch, situates the work as something closer to performance or theatre. Through the materiality and low-fi aesthetic, images and vignettes reject seamless realism and instead use material construction to unpack the carefully mediated rules which govern our behaviours in public. My focus on materiality functions both as an aesthetic reference and a conceptual strategy, aligning with the project's interest in amateur production, and mass-access media. Critiquing sites where power, and control are socially rehearsed. Staged gestures reiterate social scripts shaped by surveillance, automated technologies and institutional forms of power and control. Drawing from theorists, the work considers how norms become internalised through systems of observation.

This project also situates itself within lineages of artists and filmmakers working with constructed imagery, particularly those operating in Aotearoa New Zealand. Practices such as Ava Seymour's staged photographic scenes, Marie Shannon's narrative installations, and the broader use of low-tech fabrication and domestic materials across local experimental film and animation traditions provide important contextual grounding. These artists demonstrate how constructed image-making can address social systems and bureaucracy through humour and artifice. Their strategies resonate strongly with this project's interest in the handmade, and the politics of everyday environments.

My engagement with DVDs, VHS aesthetics, and video store culture, draws attention to how technological infrastructures shape not only image circulation but also social relations. These nostalgic formats evoke collective memory, and shared modes of viewing that contrast with today's algorithmic-led platforms and data-driven surveillance. In this way, a sense of nostalgia embedded in the work operates not as sentimentality but as a critical device, drawing attention to how systems of access, control, and spectatorship have shifted across time.

Common Sense: Micro dramas and other Cardboard Conundrums, does not attempt to resolve our collective tensions, but to dwell in them. Treating this idea of *common sense* not as gospel but as something more fragile, performative, and quietly strange.

The video work *Common Sense* can be found online:

<https://vimeo.com/1159946642?fl=ip&fe=ec>

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