

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Distaste and Nonsense:
Some critical reflections on the interface between Comedy
and Contemporary Art

Master of Fine Arts

Massey University, Wellington

Scott Morrison

2016

Abstract

This thesis investigates, through a largely video and performance based art practice, some of the relationships between Comedy, Contemporary art and psychological defence mechanisms. This body of work aims to challenge some preconceived notions of what comedy in an artistic context can be, including comedy that involves elements of disgust, irony, failure and anti-humour. The research here also attempts to find unique perspectives that have come about through the intersection of specific psychological defence mechanisms, experimental comedy, and contemporary art.

Contents

Abstract	2
Contents	3
Short story	4
Project One: Bigger	6
Comedic Influences	12
Failure and Anti-Humour	19
Project Two: Surprise	22
Project Three: Sniff Like You Mean it	25
Performance Style	27
Improvisation	31
Conclusion	33
Bibliography	35

Short story

In 2012 I was twenty years old and was in my third year of my undergraduate degree. It was during this year that I first became interested in performance art. The kind of work I became interested in making was based around two subject areas, these were 1) The relationships between myself, and artwork and an audience / audiences, and 2) What fun and enjoyable experiences are and why they should be important in a contemporary art context. During this year with the help of some great teachers, and an introduction into artists that I am still heavily influenced by now, I began a process that I would continue developing over the next four years. Artists like Paul McCarthy and John Bock were among the major influences I learnt of in 2012 and I will be unpacking their influence and more during this thesis.

The ideas I was interested in started to change the following year: the final year of my undergraduate degree. My interest in “playfulness” and “fun” declined and my interest in “pranks”, which already had a strong influence on me during the previous year, increased. I became very interested in tricking audiences and setting up particular expectations, only to destroy those expectations during the course of an artwork. This combined with my then heightened interest in making an audience very uncomfortable, disgusted and often-times afraid, was for me not only a new chapter, but would form the basis for my current deep interest in comedy.

In my mind at the time I was making work that attempted to force an audience to confront their fears, because that is what I wanted to do the most in my own life. I learnt about psychological projection and regression and defence mechanisms in more depth towards the end of my undergraduate degree, and this has informed much of my Master’s practice.

I used my Art practice for a long period of time as a personal self-help mechanism. What was very interesting to me here is that I was at once critiquing and making fun of the folly people display in regards to using self-help resources and creating personal delusions and self-defence mechanisms for themselves, while at the same time I was doing this myself.

Project One: Bugger

One of my major projects is a performance piece and video work called *Bugger*. It is an unedited long take (single shot), and was only performed once. The work is filmed on an iPad, and the iPad sits stationary on a couch. The piece is twelve minutes long and includes me by myself in the garage at my parent's house. I am playing a character who seems to be having some kind of psychological breakdown. The character is experiencing deep psychological pain and employs defence mechanisms during the duration of the work.

The character believes that by repeating to himself out loud certain words and phrases that in his imagination, hold some kind of healing or at least comforting "power", that he might be able to overcome the anxiety and other symptoms that are part of his life and for which he uses such defence mechanisms. The words that he repeats to himself continuously are influenced in part by the self-help industry, especially from the perspective that self-help tools are often superficial and mask whatever psychological problems one might have as opposed to helping you overcome them (Bergsma, A). The character wears children's costumes, plays with children's toys and eats apricot pie at a very fast rate during this performance piece. The reasons for doing this will be unpacked in the text below.

My psychological intentions: This work takes influence from my own life including some of the problems (especially psychological problems) that I have dealt with over a number of years. This is a common thread in my artwork, and an interest that I've pursued and explored in great depth over a number of art works during my Master's.

The main defence mechanisms that I employ in my own life that I also use in the work *Bugger*, is the use of “denial” and “regression”. These are two reoccurring defence mechanisms I use/have used in order to avoid painful or uncomfortable experiences that I don’t want to engage with. The “binge eating” element is a sub-set component of “regression”.

Defence mechanisms are defined as “any of a group of mental processes that enables the mind to reach compromise solutions to conflicts that it is unable to resolve. The process is usually unconscious and the compromise generally involves concealing from oneself internal drives or feelings that threaten to lower self-esteem or provoke anxiety” (Hentschel, U & Smith, G & Draguns, J & Ehlers, W). The two main defence mechanisms that I explore and am influenced by throughout my art practice are “regression”, defined as “[...] a movement back in psychological time when one is faced with stress. When we are troubled or frightened, our behaviors often become more childish or primitive. A child may begin to suck their thumb again or wet the bed when they need to spend some time in the hospital”, and “denial”, which is defined as, “a defence mechanism in which the existence of unpleasant internal or external realities is denied and kept out of conscious awareness. By keeping the stressors out of consciousness, they are prevented from causing anxiety” (Hentschel, U & Smith, G & Draguns, J & Ehlers, W).

“Its okay” and “Its okay, eat the pie”, are words that this character constantly speaks out loud and repeats to himself, in order to try and gain some sort of control in the midst of his mental breakdown. When I see Paul McCarthy’s 1995 performance art work *Painter* I see a similar kind of anxiety and fear and doubt in the work’s central character. The artist’s character in the film wants desperately to create great and successful art, and the deeper he gets into his own creative process, and the more tense he becomes –

trying to get into the right frame of mind to make a good painting (Campbell, M). He repeats words out loud to himself much like my character does. He says, “I’m fu-cking painting, I’m fu-cking painting, I’m fu-cking painting, I’m fu-cking pai.. I’m fu-cking painting”, etc. He continues to paint but then breaks down and goes into some kind of delusional state where he is cutting all his fingers off. The character relates to what the painter goes through here. The way my character consumes food and messes it up on his face, getting the Prince Phillip mask that he’s wearing all covered in disgusting pieces of crumbly, slippery, chunky apricot pie; the masochism involved and the character’s mind and reality, recedes into a hedonistic place that is both pleasurable and painful, and this is similar to what McCarthy does with his character in *Painter*.

When the words that are used by my character to try and calm himself down do not work, he goes and picks up the giant family sized apricot pie, opens it up as fast as he can, and begins to eat it. This automatically calms himself down and seems to get him out of the traumatic psychosis-like experience that is going on inside of him. The problem that lies here is that this is the only way that this character can feel good. He succumbs to his own defence mechanisms and indulges them, in this case, by eating apricot pie.

The objects in *Bugger*, including the pie, the Prince Phillip mask, the child’s tent and other giant children’s play toys made out of cardboard, are used to create a connection between the character’s child-like use of regression and the audience. The fantasy elements involved in this character dressing up in children’s toys and costumes while eating pie is supposed to be seen as both uncomfortable and ridiculous.

There was an effort with this work to create feelings of disgust, the recognition of something ridiculous and laughter in an audience, and see if the work could be effective

in producing all of these elements at the same time. The way I start the video from introducing myself and explaining how there will be four parts to the work, becomes undermined very quickly when I do not include four different parts in the work, and the different moments where I introduce the new parts of the work become insignificant because of the seemingly ridiculous content that is being performed. The first moment where the combination of ridiculousness, disgust and humour happens is when I bend down to eat the apricot pie in front of the camera. It is intended to be unattractive but also funny at the same time. The character goes through a series of ridiculous realisations, I start to eat the pie out of the side of the mask, and then suddenly realise that I should be eating it through the Prince Phillip mask. It is absurd for the character to think that it is somehow important to be eating this apricot pie through the mask, just because he initially ripped a whole in it where the mouth is so that he could start ingesting.

Empathy on the audiences' behalf is also an important part of the work. The work was designed to evoke audience embarrassment as one likely response, but at the same time I felt confident enough in the way I was able to employ comedy throughout the work.

In preliminary critique, the work received a range of responses, and an interesting response in particular was from a middle-aged woman who said that she connected with the work and could relate to it. She told me that the way that I would indulge in the food, seemingly unable to help myself and continue to gorge on pie, resonated with her, and said it was similar to how she understood women to often feel when it comes to having a positive and or negative body image. She related it to the high social standard that women are held to in regards to having a particular kind of body, and are criticised when they do not have that body. And that this kind of superficial standard women are

held to can be especially unfair when people like her enjoy “comfort eating” now and then, and will sometimes indulge in particular “vices” now and then to either decrease anxiety or attain some pleasure in that moment. This response was interesting to me – to see that the way that I create my art, and create from a very specific point of view, that it can be meaningful to somebody else who is very different to me, and be meaningful to me in a way that is very different to the original intentions I had when making this work. The use of food here, and the use of food in *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!*, share similarities. In *Tim and Eric Awesome Show* one can see social vices being used, and can see how disgusting food can be and look (Fisher, C. 2011. Mem Mems and Pep Peps).

There is an element of social critique in this work in the way that it looks at defence mechanisms and superficial Self Help material. The way *Bugger* aims to speak to “how people in day to day life use defence mechanisms like “denial” to overcome or numb certain anxieties”, can be related to the kind of rhetoric Self Help material can often uses (Bergsma, A). This rhetoric has influenced the dialogue I’ve used in *Bugger*, for example a big part of what Self Help is based around today, is not only around positive or optimistic thinking, but arguably using thinking that employs methods that deny “the existence of unpleasant internal or external realities and kept out of conscious awareness”. In other words, “denial”. “The Law of Attraction”, is a term popularized by the 2006 film “The Secret”, directed by Drew Heriot, and writers like Deepak Chopra have created their own sets of ideas that are often variations of the same or very similar ideas (Harris, S. 2010). Through these particular Self Help methods, one is supposedly able to become whoever they want to be or were “made” to be, they can become their “true selves”. Some of the methods include blocking out any negative thinking from one’s life and only concentrating on the positives and positive thoughts. There is a point of view that I hold, that while having an optimistic point of view to a certain degree can

be beneficial; only concentrating on positive elements and even made up elements in your perception of reality can lead you to be increasingly superficial and even more prone to having negative effects take hold of your life, like “denial” developing as a defence mechanism in oneself. The way that this character continuously tells himself that everything is fine, when you can see that it isn’t by his need to consume copious amounts of pie to decrease anxiety, has been influenced by my point of view regarding certain aspects of Self Help.

Comedic influences

Million Dollar Extreme Presents World Peace is an Adult Swim (Cartoon Network) show that has premiered its first season in August 2016, the season consists of six episodes. The show follows on from the trajectory of strange absurdist comedy shows that have a dark nightmarish quality to them and produce in the audience feelings of grotesque and disgust. To understand the context of this sub-genre of comedy, one has to talk briefly about British satirist Chris Morris. Morris's work will be discussed later on.

Along with the influence of Morris on *Million Dollar Extreme*, the 2007 - 2010 Adult Swim show *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!* had an influence just as meaningful. *Tim and Eric*, which was also influenced by Morris's work, has less of a straight satirical point of view than Morris's *Brass Eye*, but it has a similar keen interest in highlighting human stupidity and mediocrity, through drawing inspiration from amateurish late-night 1980s and 1990s public access television and other things they were interested in such as fatherhood, businessmen and the superficial Hollywood lifestyle / pop culture in general. One can see the influence that these comedians have on *Million Dollar Extreme* and *Million Dollar Extreme Presents World Peace*. One sees this in the nightmarish, often satirical highlighting of various forms of folly and "trash" that we can observe within our culture. But there are a number of things that this show does specifically that are different to many of the comedians that have preceded them. First of all the show takes further the way in which the "fourth wall" is continuously broken on the *Tim and Eric Awesome Show*. *Million Dollar Extreme* exists as a space that uses "meta-humour" and irony, like in *Tim and Eric Awesome Show* (Fisher, C. 2011. Mem mens and pep peps), but will also present their points of view on subjects in an honest way, just as frequently as they are sarcastic and ridiculous about something.

When looking at how irony and "anti-humour", and "meta-humour", is used in a lot of contemporary comedy, like in *The Eric Andre Show* or Andy Kaufman's / Bob Zmuda's Tony Clifton character, or in *Tim and Eric's Awesome Show*, one can see that these humour types have been taken to an extreme yet inasmuch, have become just another predictable comedy trope (Weller, M. 2015). The way Million Dollar Extreme has responded to this is by creating content in which both extreme irony and total honesty has become fused into one. Million Dollar Extreme end up creating content that has ironic and ridiculous humour about social absurdities they consider to be genuinely funny, while at the same time giving you, the audience, their honest response to how they genuinely feel about the subject, which will often take the form in a more serious tone on the show, and will not necessarily have irony layered on top of it. This has taken further the Andy Kaufman and the like, "inside or outside" of the joke dichotomy where, if you were an audience member watching Kaufman's performances throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, he did not want to let on that he was either joking or serious.

By inside or outside of the joke I mean the position an audience member finds themselves in around whether or not they understand the comic situation that they are experiencing, and whether they are aware or unaware of what is going on (Fisher, C). Kaufman was a big proponent of this technique and there are positive attributes within this comedy method. For one it creates more layers for jokes, humour and other experiences to exist – the work can exist on multiple levels as opposed to a regular comedy set up where there is a single comic and a singular audience. The David Letterman Show Late Night with *David Letterman* that was on NBC from 1982 to 1993 employed this technique in his talk show, and it can be argued that his surreal and dry humour and kind of show contributed to its originality, popularity and the large influence it had on culture, especially in the way that the show changed the way comedians created comedy. Comedian Norm Macdonald has said many times that

“David Letterman changed the way people speak”, and that he realised what the Letterman Show was about, saying that “the show was set up in such a way where Dave was in on the joke, the studio audience was in on the joke, the audience at home was in on the joke, and the guest was the joke”, (Marc Maron WTF podcast (episode 219, 2011)).

With Million Dollar Extreme on the other hand, especially the main creator of their youtube show, Sam Hyde is especially open about what his real beliefs are and at the same time will play both a sincere version and almost parody version of himself, for most of the time while he's on camera. Trying to create something that can be understood and is honest, while also being completely ridiculous. I think some of the decision to do this has come out of a reaction to "prank comedy", or comedy where the comedian does not let on that they're acting, and all of this kind of content becoming much more easily understood and easier to understand than it once was. This is probably in large part because of the number of people now using online forums to dissect comedy.

This style of comedy where the comedian does not let the audience completely in on the joke has changed in part because forums like reddit have made discussion of this information and brand of comedy much more accessible and understood. Although the trajectory of any style of comedy will change over time and evolve into something that is slightly different from what has come before, or will lead to the creation of an entirely new and original kind of comedy (Maurice, C). It's in how this style of comedy has evolved and what it has evolved into that I am more interested in, as opposed to how Letterman and Kaufman employed their version of these techniques thirty – forty years ago.

To follow on from the style of comedy Million Dollar Extreme employ; whenever they use comedy techniques that are already established as "normal comedy techniques and tropes", they are doing it at once ironically, because those techniques are predictable and easily seen through, and on another level because they need to use them, because some of those techniques and tropes are essential in creating a piece of comedy. You need reference points for comedy to work, even if they are used sparingly. Some of the humour produced is funny in the sense that it portrays a contradictory situation, where the comedians are making fun of comedy tropes and techniques while simultaneously using them because they need to. In turn they make fun of themselves for not being able to get away from these predictable things, and this is where part of their mixture of both ridiculousness and irony, and also sincerity become very effective.

Shows such as satirical news program like *Brass Eye*, (1997 - 2001) and the surreal, deadpan, nightmarish radio show turned television program *Jam*, (2000), had in part the intention of creating feelings of unease, and if the content was understood, excitement. These shows pushed unnerving surrealist ideas and images in front of an often surprised and shocked audience. In the show *Brass Eye*, Morris focused his attention on satirising the way that mass-media is able to manipulate people at large into believing things against their best interest. In saying this, the main focus of these shows to my mind, and the main interest to be discovered in all of Chris Morris's work, is the analysis of human folly (BBC, 2014. The Frequency of Laughter).

In Chris Morris's 1994 news radio show *On the Hour*, 1991 – 1992, as well as his absurdist sketch comedy show *Jam*, disparate and seemingly random ideas and themes are woven together to produce stories and humour. Ever present disparate and seemingly random ideas and themes, and are held together to produce stories and humour throughout the respective shows. The always present desperate feeling,

nihilistic views points and the kind of anxiety Morris can provoke in his work has influenced a whole generation of comedy, with notable comedians including Sacha Baron Cohen in the late 1990s to the work of “Tim and Eric” and Charlie Brooker from around 2007 onwards, (BBC. 2014. The Frequency of Laughter) and now Million Dollar Extreme. *On the hour* was a parody news show that had Morris playing multiple characters, and influenced a lot of the comedy that would be employed on future comedy shows, where pranks are played on unsuspecting people, like members of the public or guests on a talk show. The influence Morris has on my work has more to with his show *Jam*; the way this show ties together nonsensical story lines with stupid and seemingly insane characters, psychologically falling apart. Characters continuously look like they are on the verge of being put in a mental asylum, or putting somebody else in one, or being involved in a situation where some kind of accidental death occurs. There is one scene in *Jam* where a man is being interviewed in his house (it is just as likely that there is nobody there at all and he is just talking to himself), and he talks about how he just saw somebody across the street jumping off the first floor of his apartment building continuously. During this dialogue of his we see a flashback to the man jumping off the first floor of the building, slowly getting up, and then going back to the front door of the building to go trundling up the stairs so that he could jump off again. Eventually there is a crowd of people all standing around him, not helping or anything, just standing around in curiosity. This keeps going on until he jumps off again, but on this jump he does not get up. It’s at this stage that the people who were watching him, drag him inside. It’s revealed that somebody had overheard the man jumping off the building talk about how he wanted to jump off the first floor of the building forty times, instead of the fortieth floor one time, just in case he changed his mind. The nonsensical elements exist in this scene in many different ways, the most obvious way being in the thought processes behind the character trying to kill himself, and the actions he takes to go about achieving that objective. The premise that one should jump forty times off the

first story of a building instead of the fortieth (one time), so that he can decide to back out of it if he changes his mind, is absurd. This mixed in with the crowd of people surrounding him, just watching and not asking any questions or trying to stop him, with the monotonous voice of the man being interviewed with strange ominous elevator music being played over top of the scene makes everything deeply surreal and creates feelings of unease.

Jam, along with much of Morris's other work, creates a dark and disturbing atmosphere through characterisation, narrative and subject matter. There are very frequent occurrences of tragedy, insanity and death in his work as with the example described above. Jam reveals how comic forms of nonsense and the absurd represent "temporary liberation from prevailing truth and from established order" (Morson, G & Emmerson, C.) of conventional systems of linguistic logic. The forms of anti-realist representation allowed by the conventions of comedy challenge the authority of hierarchical structures by displaying fantastic alternate versions of reality in which the rules of logic and reason are suspended. In this way Morris uses comic absurdity and nonsense language to undermine fundamental ideas around logic, language, and stable identity, while at the same time creating laughter in the audience.

The Eric Andre Show is set up to look and feel like a dark and existential portrait of one man trapped in a "hellish" talk show environment. Eric Andre could be lifting from *Waiting for Godot*, with the premise of two men returning to the same location every day, unable to escape or do or find anything even slightly meaningful. Eric tries to destroy the set and this dark talk show world he's trapped in at the beginning of every episode, but the set inevitably just slides back in to place by itself. He isn't even able to kill himself and release himself from this endless place he does not want to exist in. He just sits at his desk and wilfully obliterates all of the conventions of cable talk show

television to no avail. I am influenced in part by the way this show takes a formulaic and crowd friendly approach to television and turns it inside out, antagonising his guests and creating a destructive and vulgar spectacle that seems to employ dream logic through its editing. The feelings of disgust and the grotesque and anxiety present in this work is something I try to work with myself. Employed in my work as a way to try and create tension, and to try and represent some of my perspectives around perverse and absurd human (including my own) folly in thinking and behaviour. The public pranks he does on the show are done in a similar vein to and building on the long history of public interaction comedy and prank, like the characters seen in the work of absurdist British comedians like Sacha Baron Cohen's "Ali G" and "Borat", and Chris Morris's variety of obnoxious characters. Hannibal Buress, another comedian (who, has no clear reason for appearing on the show, who's being there works well within the show's context and makes it funnier and more absurd), does not even have his own chair and every so often adds in a "one-liner" with a delivery and sense of humour that is polar opposite to Eric's crazy and gross and energetic persona. His jokes usually serve as a kind of moral commentary towards some of the perverse and disgusting acts Eric performs on the show. It also acts to try and undermine Eric's comedy and actions in the show, creating a feeling of repulsion towards the artist, not dissimilar to the effect of Paul McCarthy's *Painter*, 1995.

Failure and Anti-Humour

In my work *art film: a day at Te Papa*, I was trying to understand my defence mechanisms and my own fear of failure, or more specifically, my fear of failure in regards to being afraid to express myself / show myself in my work. At the time I did not want to, and felt I could not, create a character like in *Bugger* where I explore these things more directly, so I explored instead through anti-humour. Anti-humour's comedy structure has "failure" built into it, the structure of an anti-joke is usually set up with a premise like any other joke but what follows is different. When an incongruity presents itself in a joke, the punchline will usually resolve that incongruity by showing the audience why the relationship between the premise and the incongruity was a ridiculous situation, and then the audience laughs at the way the incongruous element does not belong in the context it's presented in. Anti-humour on the other hand will present something incongruous, but instead of resolving the joke in a punchline, where it is revealed what about that incongruity was funny, there is no resolution, and the joke just keeps on presenting content that does not seem to belong in context (Fisher, C).

Art film: a day at Te Papa, is not entirely based on anti-joke structure. Points of resolution do exist within the narrative presented, and there are moments where one can see how something is supposed to be funny, although anti-humour is still the predominant influence in this work, especially in regards to the "intentional aesthetic failures". This more than the actual structure of the jokes in the work, is closely related to anti-humour, and it is where I explored my fear of failure the most.

The black and white over-saturated aesthetic of the video footage and the bad camera work were both intentional decisions. The anti-humour here is seen in the humour created from the irony that exists in one of the jokes: Being that this is a video work

where seemingly poorly executed elements exist, but the character appears sincere in the kind of work that they have made. The saturated black & white aesthetic is supposed to look like an attempt on behalf of the character to make something that looks stylish (like an art film). Because the camera work and editing appears poorly executed, and the character has failed in some sense to create the polished-looking product he was intending to, failure exists within this component of the work. The humour here is created partially out of the irony that exists within this failed attempt on the part of the character being very unsuccessful at what he was trying to do.

My fear of failure and the effort to try and gain confidence in expressing myself was explored through using this kind of comedy structure and kind of joke telling. The intentional use of failure within the aesthetic of the work, encourages the effort to try and make things look bad on purpose. It is important to note that there is a skill involved here and one must be confident in using this particular kind of irony when using it, because not all intentionally “bad looking” jokes are funny in regards to anti humour. In making work using anti-humour there is a lot of freedom in how you create, because things that might otherwise be unsuccessful in another context, can end up being very successful because of the editing process. These moments can be edited in such a way that the incongruity and ridiculousness within those moments becomes apparent and successful. This freedom to fail here gave me space to gain confidence in my work, and allowed me to further explore my fear of revealing myself more in my art practice.

Through exploring failure in jokes and aesthetics I was able to move on further in my practice and create projects like *Bugger*. In *Bugger*, I have mixed in both psychological failure and aesthetic failure, while also developing my other comedy tools like how I use character and language and the way I use my body etc. The aesthetic failure that is

present in *art film: a day at Te Papa* is also present in a similar way in *Bugger*. Where psychological failure comes in is during moments like where the *Bugger* character is failing to deal with the problems that he has, and is forced to eat the pie to deal temporarily with those problems. The poorly taken and edited video footage in the Te Papa work has also been taken further in works like *Bugger* in regards to how I use props, such as the Prince Phillip mask and the cardboard toys and the tent. The props used here and the way that they become cut up and messed up by apricot pie is intended to be unappealing aesthetically and look as if the character hasn't taken much care in considering how they present the objects that they are performing with. This mixed in with the grainy quality of the video creates an overall sense of failure in the work, which functions on a comedic level because of the constant ridiculousness that repeats itself in the work.

Project Two: Surprise

Norm Macdonald and his show *Norm Macdonald Live* has had a big influence on my work during my Master's Degree. Norm Macdonald is a Canadian comedian who was very popular on the Weekend Update section of *Saturday Night Live* (SNL). He was the main actor of this skit between 1994 and 1997. Since being fired from the show he has had a number of his own television shows and has been the lead actor in a number of comedy films. But in my opinion the Norm Macdonald Podcast available on the Video Podcast Network and youtube, has been his best work since he left SNL nineteen years ago. The podcast set is set up to look as many American morning shows look, there is a small desk with the guest and the host (Macdonald) sitting on chairs quite close to one another. But there are major differences with the regular morning television format shows and Norm Macdonald's podcast, one of those differences being that he is an exceptionally funny comedian who has been fired from half of the shows he's worked on, generally because of controversial remarks he has made. Macdonald uses a large number of different comedy styles and techniques in his work on *Norm Macdonald Live*.

Macdonald's comedy is a kind of extension or evolution of the late Andy Kaufman's work. Andy Kaufman is somebody who also disrupted every comic and interview situation he was in. One seldom had much of an idea about what was going to happen next. But a major difference between most of Norm Macdonald's work and Kaufman's work is a difference that also exists in Sam Hyde's work. Both Macdonald and Hyde use prank techniques, but they are much more likely to let on that they are using prank tactics to create comedy, unlike Andy Kaufman. In *Norm Macdonald Live*, Macdonald, both with different guests and at any given moment during a podcast episode, will sometimes be completely open and honest with a guest while other times he is just making fun of

them without them ever fully catching on to it during the episode. This is similar to Kaufman's work and has an influence on the kind of comedy and art I create.

While I have not pranked anybody in my work during the course of this Master's program, the kind of humour and prank tactics that take place on *Norm Macdonald Live* has helped me to form the jokes I create in my work. Norm Macdonald brings a kind of unpredictability to everything he does, and when he doesn't have a script and he is just letting the comedy he makes take its own unique form in the moment, he is at his best. When Macdonald pranks a guest he will often do it through picking up on anything superficial or pretentious or stupid that they might say, then he'll do something like pretend that he agrees, or do something else that reveals their folly to the audience watching at home.

I have been influenced by the way that comedians like Norm MacDonald use jokes in their work. When creating the work *Surprise* I went through a creative process that was very similar in nature to the process I would take on when coming up with one long drawn out joke. In *Surprise*, the work was developed as a weird set up and punchline between two characters (or a character with multiple personalities). The first character we see seems to have OCD and lives in his own fantasy world. He writes notes to himself and sends them to himself through an orange tea-pot. Eventually he finds a present in the corner of his bedroom and when he mails that to himself, he opens it up to find a hat. When he puts the hat on his head, we see another character taking a shower with no water and with his clothes on, and he slaps himself in the face. The first character continues to put the hat on and take it off, and he feels good when he does it, while on the other side, the other character does not enjoy involuntarily slapping himself in the face.

Surprise works in a few different ways. First of all the first character that we see walks in a slightly robotic way, and the sound effects present in the video when he is walking are exaggerated and are in synch with his steps. When he starts to write a letter we see that the words he is writing are not words at all, but scribbles. His hand moves off the page and the sound effects from the writing still remain, right here is something incongruous with reality. He is not writing words on a letter, he is writing off the page, but the writing sound effects are still here in the video, and once he is finished he is very happy with himself regarding what he has done. The incongruity here lies in the fact that there are a number of things that have happened so far that do not make sense and they especially do not makes sense when the character smiles and is happy with what he's done. This relates to the incongruity theory of comedy. Incongruity theory says that, "Humor is perceived at the moment of realization of incongruity between a concept involved in a certain situation and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept". We see this in *Surprise* when the character's smiling presents a contrast and is the opposite of what the expected or normal outcome would be if somebody was to write a letter that made absolutely no sense. By the character continuing to write with a pen in the air, with the writing sound effects not matching up with what was going on, we experience an incongruous situation.

Project Three: Sniff Like You Mean it

Chris Morris has used a large amount of pranks that acted as creative joke structures. We can see some of the earliest forms of his experimentation with jokes in his radio shows in between 1990 and 1993 such as *The Chris Morris Radio Show*. One particular joke included phone call / interview prank that involved practical jokes such as asking people what they “thought of the Queen’s death last night”, and “Whether they are afraid of the alarming rise of children being born with dog’s feet”. This influenced my work *Sniff Like You Mean it* in terms of the way the humour was structured during these segments. The short interview pranks were then followed by Chris coming back onto the radio, playing a character that sounded just like most upbeat mainstream radio DJs do. He would comment on the absurd pranks that just occurred while using a wide range of made-up words, and all the while a pop music song would be playing in the background. Part of what made this very interesting was that a large portion of his audience would often really think that they were listening to a regular radio station, because the humour was so subtle in its absurd and satirical nature that if you were not accustomed to this kind of comedy, you probably wouldn’t notice it for the prank it really was (Leggot & Sexton).

In *Sniff Like You Mean it* there is an “Incredible Hulk” mask at the top of a small cardboard tunnel. I am singing and sniffing all throughout the video work and moving the Hulk mask around to make it appear like The Hulk is sniffing into the tunnel. The main influence Morris’s radio work has on this project is seen in my use of contrast. By this I mean that I took what I was influenced by in Morris’s absurd work, and rearranged that kind of joke format so some parts of the joke structure remained similar, and other parts became the opposite of what Morris did. The pop music in the radio prank would draw in an audience and have them accept something absurd as if it was normal and

nothing about it abnormal, *Sniff Like You Mean it* on the other hand is ridiculous straight away and does not attempt to be subtle and draw in an audience slowly and precisely like Morris did. The contrasting use of “pleasant muzac” in *Sniff Like You Mean it* creates a more claustrophobic surreal atmosphere.

Performance Style

Further reasons as to why I think that *Norm MacDonald Live* is successful, and this is a place where I draw a lot of inspiration for my work, is that Norm's persona on the podcast appears to not really care about the overall standard of the show, and this creates a "casual" or free-flowing kind of atmosphere that is very well suited to his style of comedy.

The show in some ways reminds me of Spike Milligan's 1969 show *Q5* which was the main inspiration for *Monty Python's Flying Circus* which began its first season later that year (Duguid, M). *Q5* spun together a wide array of nonsensical comedy skits not dissimilar and often in fact more absurd than many Monty Python sketches (Duguid, M). The unpredictable nature of *Q5* and Spike Milligan and other's constant breaking of character / not seeming to care that much if a joke isn't fully understood by everybody on set, is very relatable to Macdonald's podcast and it makes it more surreal and fun in that way.

While it is a version of Macdonald's "self" that he plays on this podcast, I think a large part of the way he appears on the podcast is actually an honest representation of who he really is. The way in which he comes to work every day, wearing his sweatshirt and sweatpants, being unshaven and appearing tired, regularly eating sandwiches on the set; you can see that the effort to look polished and in his best shape does not appear here on the show, and he will mention and joke about this with his guests, which often makes for very funny self-deprecating humour. One could argue or question whether Macdonald is just doing this all intentionally for comedic effect, and there is almost certainly an element of that, but because he never mentions the podcast on interviews and even appears to be embarrassed to speak about it when he is asked about it by an

interviewer, and considering also that he had been on many big television shows for twenty years before this podcast, it is no wonder that he does not appear to always be happy and thrilled that this podcast is the major project that he has in his life right now. Either way, the end result of the show is something really creatively and comedically beautiful, in part because in every example of Macdonald's work, he is at his best when he only has a very general idea about what he is going to say or do, and his comedy becomes even funnier still when he attempts to disrupt any kind of predictable narrative that might seem to exist within the comedy "bit" he is in. This creates a feeling of anxiety and adrenaline in an audience, and it feels like he is trying to destroy any sense of logic or normality in any given comic context.

I think a comparison can be drawn between Macdonald's casual comedic persona in *Norm MacDonald Live*, and my comic persona in most of my artworks. Throughout this Master's Degree I've produced works in which I am just wearing the clothes I happen to have on at the time of the art making. I find wearing, or more specifically, not changing my clothes into a costume specific for a video can create an interesting layer of comedy within the work. For example in *Surprise* the two characters in the video are the same person. 1) Because I play both of the characters and 2) I'm wearing the exact same clothes in both character's scenes. Macdonald's wearing of his everyday sweatshirt to me reveals or gives an insight into his understanding of how entertainment works, all of its constructed pieces and the formulaic and predictable ways that entertainment content is so often made. There is part of me that feels if I was to wear a costume, I would have to make fun of it, or at least make it aware to the camera that I was wearing a costume, and that a costume, and that has specific connotations. It is something that is put on, constructed and helps one to act or pretend. In other words you have to make-believe that this person (me) that you are watching on this screen is something other than who he is. In art works where my body is present, I often feel like I'm playing

a version of myself in every work I make, and I feel as if Macdonald does the same thing here. Hyde also does this, his cell phone videos involves, as I've said before, him playing at once both a parody, and sincere version of himself throughout all of his video works.

Million Dollar Extreme does the same thing, they find it too hard to stay in any kind of character because they know that no matter how hard they try to act and stay "in" a particular character, it is something that is not real. Things that are constructed and set up and not real is what they, and Macdonald and myself are all making fun of and "playing with" in our own respective art forms.

By "not real", I am more so talking about people acting and thinking in ways that are in themselves constructed, set-up, unnecessary and ridiculous. If I am making fun of some of what I think are very interesting absurd parts of human nature and human experience, like the reality of what defence mechanisms are and how they force somebody to think in a less honest way regarding who they think they are. (Hentschel, U & Smith, G & Draguns, J & Ehlers, W), then when it comes to acting, I personally can find it hard to take truly seriously any character that I play in a performance work, because that character and the act I put on is in and of itself its own constructed thing.

This style of performance has gradually become more dominant in my art practice throughout the Master's program. A major reason for this becoming a predominant factor in the kind of work I make has been at once the growing deeper interest in the constructed and set up nature of so much human behaviour, as mentioned above. The other reason is a desire to want to become more connected to myself, and be able to express more of who I am through my art.

There has been a process undertaken in the transformation of my performance style that has been a process for four years. At the start of this process I separated myself entirely from the performances I made, and the characters I came up with. I was trying to figure out how to cope with my different anxieties and troubles, and as I mentioned in the introduction, I created artworks that tried to deal with any suffering I was experiencing at the time. The characters were removed in many ways from my personality and if anybody asked me if there was something specific about a performance I made that was true about me, I would tell them that nothing I say or make should be taken seriously. This was a defence mechanism on my part as I was very uncomfortable expressing myself.

Improvisation

The improvisational element in Macdonald's podcast can also be related to Milligan's Q5. Q5 as I've mentioned has an unpredictable nature to it, and while there was a general script that was followed, Milligan and others were known to go off on their own comedic improvisational tangents at unexpected moments (Bond, P). Comedy involving improvisation can at times create funnier experiences that might not be able to be found when trying to write a script. Not dissimilar to the creative process in general, when an improvisational comic is inside of a comedy moment and needs to keep the level of funniness going, or make it funnier, a tension builds within the performer if they are unsure what they will do next to produce the humour. If the comic using improvisation can trust their instincts and comic abilities to move through that tense moment, the humour that is then created is often stronger than what they might have come up with if the tension was not there in the first place (Reay. M). If successful these jokes created through these tense moments come to the comic spontaneously, almost like a flash of insight. Improvisational humour is influenced a lot by the absolute necessity and desperation of that moment to arrive at something funny. There is a deep fear of failure rooted within comedy when one is trusting one's improvisational comedic talents. Although the payoff is worth it if you have a particular comic skill-set that thrives on spontaneity, "in the moment" creativity and the enjoyment of risk and reward that goes along with it if successful (Reay. M).

Many improvised moments in my work have occurred, and even if a particular work of mine is heavily scripted, there will always be moments where I don't know what is going to happen next. My experience of the creative process of my work aligns with the perspective above regarding improvisational moments in comedy. I have been able to create funnier moments by coming up with things during a performance or film piece

than if I was just writing a script, or if I had every line of dialogue and body movement absolutely planned out before I created it.

So a lot of the comedy surrounding the projects I create, becomes what it is because of these necessary spontaneous moments. It is also influenced by the kinds of characters I create. A major influence in my character making process comes from my interest in “anti-humour”, especially from the perspective of Tim and Eric’s work. Tim and Eric use anti-humour and their interest in mediocrity, to guide them in creating characters that are intentionally badly acted and unfunny. A lot of the humour that exists here derives from the absurdity found in these characters being so unfunny to the point of ridiculousness. I have taken this kind of method and weaved it into the general way that I create jokes and characters. Although I no longer set out to intentionally create characters that are intentionally bad and unfunny, I just use the different kinds of absurdity you’re able to produce and add it into my overall comedy repertoire.

Conclusion

A number of personal artistic projects have been analysed in this exegesis and the relationships between the core ideas examined and the experimentation undergone within the creation of these and other projects have resulted in unique perspectives and outcomes. These perspectives have been influenced by and created through exploring different facets of comedy: Including how its structural mechanism operates, how Anti-Humour works and can be applied to different aesthetic and psychological contexts, and how different perspectives on comedy and humour used in practical application towards the creation of new artwork can contribute to finding new ways of eliciting laughter and other responses from an audience, such as disgust and discomfort. The perspectives unique to my art practice are created in part through these comedy methods and its intersection with psychological defence mechanisms, including but not limited to “regression” and “denial”. The final component involved in this multi-faceted relationship is how both comedy and psychology intersect with a contemporary art practice, and one that employs predominantly performance art and video as its core mediums.

Some future predictions regarding research after this thesis study includes continuing to explore how psychological defence mechanisms function within human behaviour, as well as exploring potential patterns and searching for more insightful in-depth reasons regarding the way our culture uses various defence mechanisms and Self Help tools. This art practice will likely also continue its comedy trajectory into exploring both grotesque and satirical based contemporary art and comedy, and how the contexts of film and the internet, including video sharing sites like youtube.com and discussion forums like reddit.com, function as platforms for creating creative content.

Experimenting with the form and function of comedy and trying to create unique comedic content, will be the final area of further research that will be undertaken.

Bibliography:

Books:

Bonner, K. 2001. John Bock: Gribbohm. pp36 - 58. Hate Cantz Publishers.

Hentschel, U & Smith, G & Draguns, J & Ehlers, W. 2004. Defence Mechanisms: Theoretical, Research and Clinical Perspectives. Sage Publishing. pp358 - 371.

Katoka, M & Critchley, S. 2008. Laughing in a Foreign Language. Hayward Publishing. pp40 - 43.

Kayser, W. 1968. The Grotesque: In Art and Literature. Indiana University Press.

Leggott, J & Sexton, J. 2013. No known cure: The Comedy of Chris Morris. British Film Institute, London.

Maurice, C. 2005. Comedy: A Geographical and Historical guide, Volume 1: Greenwood Publishing Group. Pp463 – 464.

Morson, G & Emmerson, C. Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges. Northwestern University Press. pp99.

Nelson, T.G.A. 1990. Comedy: The Theory of Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema. Oxford University Press. Pp159 – 166.

Bent, M. 2009. The Everything Guide to Writing Comedy. Everything Books.

Online Journals:

Barthe, J.T. 2011. Uncommon Nonsense: Comic Nonsense and Absurdity as the destabilisation of linguistic logic

<https://blogs.commonsgorgetown.edu/jtb63/2011/01/05/uncommon-nonsense-comic-nonsense-and-absurdity-as-the-destabilization-of-linguistic-logic/>

Brown, D. 2013. The Poetry of Victorian Scientists: Style, Science and Nonsense (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press<http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9781107023376&ss=exc>

Reay, M. 2015. Using “Wild” language to explore the social sources of humour. Social Forces. Mar2015, Vol. 93 Issue 3, pp1241-1265.

<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=9de16fc5-88f9-4496-8c33-f08d0c2dbec6%40sessionmgr103&vid=7&hid=119>

Marsh, M. 2015. Practically Joking. Logan: Utah State University Press. pp4-14.

Bergsma, A. Do self-help books help? Journal of Happiness Studies. pp8-19.

Websites:

BBC, 2014. The Frequency of Laughter: A History of Radio Comedy - A podcast series.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04nvy5c/episodes/downloads>

Fisher, C. 2011. Mem mems and pep peps
<https://medium.com/@misoks/i-don-t-get-it-a-guide-to-tim-eric-for-mem-mems-and-pep-peps-a160476fd35#.6nzzjw20b>

Leich, W. The oppressively nihilistic anti-comedy of Tim and Eric who think you're stupid for laughing
<http://deadspin.com/5889909/the-oppressively-nihilistic-anti-comedy-of-tim-and-eric-who-think-youre-stupid-for-laughing>

Weller, M. 2015. No-one's laughing at all: On Anti-Comedy
<http://moviemezzanine.com/anti-comedy-essay/>

Duguid, M. 2014. The roots of Monty Python
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1377417/>

Bond, P. 2002. Spike Milligan: I told you I was ill.
<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2002/03/mill-m07.html>

Maron, M. 2011. Marc Maron WTF podcast, interview with Norm Macdonald.
http://www.wtfpod.com/podcast/episodes/episode_219_-_norm_macdonald

Campbell, M. 2011. Paul McCarthy's "The Painter!".

http://dangerousminds.net/comments/paul_mccarthys_thePainter_art_attack

Debates:

Harris, S. 2010. The Future of God Debate Sam Harris and Michael Shermer vs Deepak Chopra and Jean Houston.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0E99BdOfxAE&ab_channel=AllSamHarrisContent