

How to do things with jokes: relocating the political dimension of performance comedy

Dick Veloso (Broderick) Chow

PhD in Drama by practice-as-research

Central School of Speech & Drama
University of London
Embassy Theatre, Eton Avenue, London NW3 3HY

July 2010

I understand the School's definition of plagiarism and declare that all sources drawn on have been formally acknowledged

Signed: **Dick Veloso (Broderick) Chow**

Date: 30 June 2010

Abstract*How to do things with jokes: relocating the political dimension of performance comedy*

This practice-as-research PhD examines the possibility of 'political comedy' in performance and its constitution within the ideological situation of global capitalism. The project is comprised of a written submission, documented practice, and live performance. The practice incorporates elements of stand-up comedy, installation and 'relational art,' and participatory performance. The possibility of a 'radical democratic comedy' includes two elements: (a) a break with ideology, and (b) the creation of an affective, relational space conducive to the formation of an 'attachment.' I argue that satirical, carnivalesque, and transgressive modes of political critique in comic performance operate ideologically, and in spite of appearances and intentions may be bound up in dominant ideology. A political comedy in the present day must therefore somehow break with the dominant logic of a situation. This thesis argues thus that the political dimension of the joke (the basic unit of comedy in performance) is not located in its content, but in the incommensurable gap between set-up and punch-line, which is incompatible with common sense. In practice, the audience must then form an 'attachment' with the break with ideology, which suggests a different form of audience engagement from the pedagogical form that political comedy often takes. After establishing this theoretical framework, this thesis progresses through three phases of experimental practice. First, I expand and interrogate my practice as a stand-up comic. Second, audience-performer relations becomes the primary site of engagement, leading to two projects influenced by participatory performance and Relational Aesthetics. Third, I return to the form of stand-up, coloured by my previous experiments. This project argues for and performs new positions in relation to: (a) the discourse of the politics of comedy and the limits of satire, (b) psychoanalytic readings of humour and the unconscious, (c) formal ways of making and doing comedy as a critical and resistant practice, and (d) current discourses of participation, engagement, and efficacy in performance. I intend to escape the false choice faced by the politically-minded comedian today; to paraphrase Groucho Marx, when given the choice between commenting on the world and changing it, answer 'Yes, please!'

Acknowledgements

Thanks to: Central School of Speech and Drama: Professor Andrew Lavender, Dr. Stephen Farrier, Dr. Tony Fisher, Dr. Joel Anderson, Dr. Louise Owen, Dr. Experience Bryon, Dr. Ana Sanchez-Colberg, Adam Parker and the PhD cohort. Thom Glen, Tom Goodliffe, Helen Arney, Nat Luurtsema, Jane Linden. Will Wade, Jessica Hartley, Vicki Spanovangelis, Ben Melchiors, Natasha Freedman.

Manchester Metropolitan University Cheshire, The Stand, all the many comedy clubs across the UK I have had the pleasure or displeasure of performing at. Matthew Kerr, for love, homebrew and mutual editing. Richard Jackson, Leanne Cosby, Dan Alicandro, David Gregg, Laura Douglas, Chris Farkouh, Natasha James, Colleen Campbell, Peter Henderson, Clarissa Widya, James Farrell, Matt Cavers, Christopher Murray, Grainne Maguire, Slobodan Milic, Angela Waber, Ayse Tashkiran, Jane Munro, Nick Wood. For AP, and Pazuzu.

In loving memory of EFB.

For my mother and father, Helen and Martin Chow, and my family.

Table of Contents

List of illustrations	7
List of documented content	7
Preface	
<i>written somewhere between success, and symbolic death</i>	8
Introduction	10
0.0 - <i>Introduction</i>	
0.1 - <i>The Philosophical Situation of Comedy</i>	10
0.2 - <i>Theoretical framework</i>	12
0.3 - <i>On practice-as-research</i>	16
0.4 - <i>Self-reflexivity, acts and effects</i>	17
Diagrammatic outline of thesis	20
Chapter 1: Contexts for comedy practice	21
1.0 - <i>Opening moves... on comedy in performance</i>	
1.1 - <i>On PaR, comedy, and the market</i>	24
1.2 - <i>Stand-up comedy in Britain 1852-2010</i>	26
1.3 - <i>Case studies: Akira California and Homework for Heroes</i>	31
1.4 - <i>Akira California: a post-apocalyptic stand-up comedy</i>	33
1.5 - <i>Homework for Heroes</i>	33
1.6 - <i>Conclusions: Comedy and resistance</i>	35
Chapter 2: Performance comedy and Ideologiekritik	37
2.0 - <i>The Sense and Nonsense of Comedy and Revolt</i>	
2.1 - <i>Enjoy! your comedy: on ideology, cynical reason, and the 'obscene double'</i>	39
2.2 - <i>Critique of satirical reason: Carnavalesque practices 'Tactical Frivolity'</i>	44
2.3 - <i>The Big Other is hilarious: Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary in comic discourse RSI and ideology Over-identification Postmodern irony and its discontents</i>	52
2.4 - <i>Sense to Nonsense and Back Again: On Deleuze and Comedy Curiouser and curiouser!: Difference and Nonsense Case study: Bartleby; the Scrivener; a Deleuzian sense of humour</i>	70
2.5 - <i>Conclusions: 'Fighting comedy with comedy...'</i>	84
Chapter 3: Attachments and Relational Aesthetics	86
3.0 - <i>The Social Turn: Attachments, Affects, and the Relational</i>	
3.1 - <i>Case study: Laughing in a Foreign Language</i>	89
3.2 - <i>Traces and programmes → relational aesthetics and participatory performance A practical paradigm The Aesthetic Rupture Comedy and Relational Aesthetics Traces and programmes</i>	93
3.3 - <i>Review of Relevant Practices Interactivity and objectivity: Rirkrit Tiravanija Reprogramming the status of the object: Liam Gillick Material interventions into social space: Pierre Huyghe Dialogical Aesthetics</i>	102
3.4 - <i>Conclusions: is it an ism?</i>	110
Chapter 4: Experimental Practice - Dangerology	113
4.0 - <i>Dangerology: an experimental practice in context</i>	
4.1 - <i>The Centre for Dangerology Spaces: smooth and striated Actions: indeterminacy and passivity Events: talking creatures 'Let's write a movie in 15 minutes...' '...is freedom' Consequences: situations and roles</i>	115

4.2 - Dangerology: <i>Alsager Arts Centre Gallery, February 2009</i>	125
Curating Knowledge	
<i>On Comedy and Movement</i>	
Themes: <i>other selves, perceptions, followings</i>	
Fifth Floor Drawing 2: <i>Dan Perjovschi</i>	
<i>Conviviality and spectator activity</i>	
<i>Enjoy! your libidinal bribe</i>	
<i>Antagonism (or lack thereof)</i>	
4.3 - <i>Conclusions: The space of attachment</i>	138
Chapter 5: Hegemony, ideology, and political articulation	140
5.0 - <i>The Frontier of Exclusion: articulations and antagonisms</i>	
5.1 - <i>Critique of Postmodern Reason</i>	141
5.2 - <i>Micropolitical disengagements: production or subtraction?</i>	144
5.3 - <i>A Question of Antagonism</i>	145
5.4 - <i>The Impossibility of Closure</i>	147
5.5 - <i>Kim Noble: Kim Noble Will Die</i>	149
5.6 - <i>Conclusions: Sensus communis or dissensus communis? Yes, please!</i>	153
Chapter 6: Experimental Practice - <i>Easy, Tiger!</i>	155
6.0 - <i>Easy, Tiger! (a) and (b): analysis of practice-as-research</i>	
6.1 - <i>Alliances, universalities, and particulars</i>	157
6.2 - <i>Easy, Tiger! (a): a return to performance</i>	159
<i>'I always felt like I was watching' (Visitor, 2 May 2009)</i>	
<i>Conclusions</i>	
6.3 - <i>Easy, Tiger! (b): a return to comic performance</i>	163
<i>Audience; and the group</i>	
<i>'Act?' or acting out?</i>	
<i>'I would prefer not to...'</i>	
1) <i>Antagonism or exclusion</i>	
2) <i>The break with ideology</i>	
3) <i>Attachments</i>	
4) <i>Danger and safety</i>	
<i>Conclusions: Negotiation(s)</i>	
6.4 - <i>How to do things with jokes: live submission (5 July 2010)</i>	180
6.5 - <i>Conclusions: Political articulations in the moment of performance</i>	181
Conclusion: The political dimension of performance comedy	183
7.0 - <i>Doing things with jokes</i>	
7.1 - <i>Contributions to new knowledge</i>	184
7.2 - <i>Summary of chapters</i>	185
7.3 - <i>Envoi</i>	187
Works Cited	190

List of Illustrations

- Fig. 1* - Diagrammatic Outline of Thesis 20
Fig. 2 - *I'm the most popular boy in the room*
Fig. 3 - *I'm the most...* (post-defacement)
Fig. 4 - *Fifth Floor drawing 2* (Dan Perjovschi)

List of Documented Content

Disc 1: Stand-up

1. About
View Clip
About
2. *Akira California: a post apocalyptic stand-up comedy*
View Clip
About
3. *Homework for Heroes*
View Clip
About
4. *Circuit*

Disc 2: Dangerology

1. *The Centre for Dangerology: September 2008*
View slideshow of images
2. *Dangerology: Alsager Arts Centre Gallery, February 2009*
View slideshow of images
Research Seminar Event (edit)
Research Seminar Event (full)
About Curating Knowledge (by Jane Linden, MMU Cheshire)

Disc 3: Easy, Tiger!

1. *Easy, Tiger! (a): one-to-one performance*
View edited version
2. *Easy, Tiger! (b): public scratch performance*
View film (full)
3. *Easy, Tiger! (b): The Festival Of, September 2009*
View edit
Clips
election
book
bartleby

PREFACE

Written somewhere between success and (symbolic) death...

With any piece of writing, it is understood that the reader may come across these words at any point, though of course, the burial of PhD theses in the bowels of university libraries perhaps suggest less a process of 'stumbling across' than 'treasure hunt,' but I myself, both the writer and the main object of enquiry of this thesis, set these words down at a very specific point in time. It is 10:30 in the morning, on the 24th of June 2010, and I am quietly congratulating myself for snagging a corner desk in Humanities 2 of the British Library. It is exactly one week before I submit the written portion of my PhD thesis, along with documentation of a series of experiments in practice. But the reader (and here, if I were to be less coy, I might say *examiner*), will most likely be laying their eyes upon these words after seeing a performance also entitled *How to do things with jokes*, which is part of my PhD submission. While the written thesis and documentation unfold in a sort of narrative, the first introduction to my work, for some readers, is thus an instance of practice that is, to an extent, cumulative. These readers, as in an episode of Link and Levinson's *Columbo*, are given the ending first - but of course what matters is how we get there.

The liminal status of the performance provides a good opportunity to draw attention to the importance of 'in-between-ness' in my work. In writing this at 10:30 in the morning, on the 24th of June 2010, I cannot describe any moments of this performance with any real veracity, of course; I can only imagine them. Here is one: Me, 28, dressed in t-shirt and tweed jacket (probably), sat at the head of a 'boardroom' table in a large studio at Central School of Speech & Drama in Swiss Cottage, London - You, whoever you are. 'Before the show,' I say, 'I asked a few people to write down one of their problems on an index card, and seal it up in an envelope...' I pick up an envelope, open it - 'I thought we could try solving these problems tonight.' I take out the index card and read.

I am taking a risk, presenting practice at the very point of submission rather than tidying it away to be reflected on in the writing, but this risk is the very essence of performance comedy, and thus no other form of submission could be

more appropriate. As a comedian, my practice exists in a tension between success and (symbolic) death, between getting the joke and not getting it (for the audience), between 'storming it' and 'dying' (for me). Comedy is 'exclusive' in the sense of *excluding*, it draws out an already-antagonistic relationship between performer and audience. *How to do things with jokes* highlights this antagonism in what I will come to call an intimate 'affective space.' Breaking with the traditional form of audience staging in the comedy event, the 'boardroom' suggests a certain type of urgent, argumentative discourse. *How to do things with jokes* is not a satire on business or parliament, but an alternative mode of audience engagement capable of generating three elements that determine a political comedy in performance: a visible exclusion or antagonism, a break with ideology or 'good sense,' and the possibility of an 'attachment.'

For the reader who comes across these words in years to come, this performance can be found on Disc 4 of the documentation. But the (ideal) reader, to whom I address these words, has seen a performance that crystallises ideas of being suspended between sense and nonsense, which is itself suspended in a liminal state. And should they open this volume in advance of seeing the performance, they will only find an empty envelope awaiting a disc on the back cover of the book.

A note on documentation

The reader has been provided with three DVDs of documentation (and a fourth, to be submitted after 5 July 2010), which can be accessed when necessary; there is no prescriptive mechanism for navigating through these documents. As the material on these discs corresponds to the analyses in the written thesis, the reader may wish to view the documentation before reading Chapters 1, 4 and 6. However, they may also wish to dip in and out when desired. A diagrammatic outline is provided on p. 20 to make navigation easier. The documentation of my practice takes its cue from existing documents of relational work and earlier Fluxus works; still photographs, detailed descriptions and "performance scores." Video documentation is used for the final projects falling under the umbrella of *Easy, Tiger!* which mark a return to the formal conventions of stand-up comedy.

INTRODUCTION

0.0 - Introduction

This thesis is a critical and descriptive document charting, chronologically, a three-year practice-as-research PhD enquiry that investigates the political dimension of performance comedy, a term I employ to describe forms of performance, including stand-up, sketch, and musical comedy, which have the production of laughter as their explicit aim. These pages are accompanied by a live submission¹ and DVD archive of practices, and the ratio of practice to writing is approximately 40:60. My experimental practice takes a number of forms, from ‘traditional’ stand-up to installation and ‘relational’ work, and has been made both solo and in collaboration with several artists: painter and visual artist Thom Glen, comedians Nat Luurtsema, Tom Goodliffe, and Helen Arney, and curator Jane Linden. I proceed from two primary research questions: (1) What constitutes a ‘political comedy’ or a social and politically efficacious comedy under the present ideological situation of global capitalism? and (2) How does the form of performance, specifically the relationship between audience and performer, produce an ‘attachment,’ that is, a relationship between a subject and a moment of critique? This introduction sets the ground. I first describe what I term, following Alain Badiou, the ‘philosophical situation’ of comedy. I then describe the theoretical framework of the project, including its shifts and modulations. Finally, I make a case for a practice-as-research methodology, noting the problem of self-reflexivity. The reader will then find a diagram of the thesis structure on p. 20, to which he or she may wish to refer to periodically.

0.1 - *The philosophical situation of comedy*

To locate the political dimension of comedy we must consider the philosophical situation of comedy, which is predicated on the basic defining unit of the joke, which is a gap, break or fissure in meaning. For Alain Badiou the philosophical situation requires a paradoxical relation; two heterogeneous terms between which there is an incommensurable gap. The consequences of this follow: ‘there is a choice, there is a distance, there is an exception’ (Badiou and Žižek 2005, p.

¹ 5 July 2010, Central School of Speech & Drama, London

21). This exception is the break with the status quo, social conservatism, a general logic. In essence, philosophy intervenes in order to pose new problems. I propose that a similar break can be enacted by comedy; the proposition not of a solution but a new problem entirely. For the purposes of this research, the joke is defined as the basic unit of comedy performance. I suggest the use of ‘joke’ as a technical term based in comic practice, which consists of a proposition or set-up, and a response, or punch-line. Freud, in his joke-book, takes Lipps’ (1898) definition of a joke as a starting point: ‘any conscious and successful evocation of what is comic, whether the comic of observation or of situation’ (Lipps 1898, quoted in Freud 1960[2001], p. 9). However, this definition is far too broad.

What makes a punch-line a punch-line, though? An incongruity—something that falls outside the original logic of the set-up, effecting a gap or fissure in meaning. Here is a well-known example from the opening of Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1997). Alvy, played by Allen, addressing the camera and viewer, tells an old joke: “Two elderly women are at a Catskill mountain resort, and one of them says, “Boy, the food at this place is really terrible!” and the other one says, “Yeah, I know! And such small portions!”” This is, in effect, a ‘paradoxical relation.’ Between the first and second repetition we find an incommensurable gap or chasm. When we make proper sense of the conversation of the elderly women we lose sight of the joke (recall the old truism that the moment a joke is analysed, it stops being funny). Alvy’s next line transfers the paradoxical relation wholesale to another field, perhaps, one might say, the field of philosophy: “That’s essentially how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it’s all over much too quickly.” While Alvy seems to be attempting an explanation of the joke, it is explicable only through analogy. The incongruity itself, the momentary fissure in meaning, is elusive.

My aim in this research, which makes both a theoretical and a practical contribution to the field of knowledge, is not to create a theory of humour, nor to study the function of humour, but to build from the philosophical situation of humour a model of performance comedy as transformative social and political praxis.

0.2 - *Theoretical framework*

My theoretical framework broadly falls within the category of humour theory identified by John Morreall as ‘Incongruity Theory’: ‘What makes [a] situation [...] humorous [...] is that there is something odd, abnormal or out of place, which we enjoy in some way’ (Morreall 2009, in Lockyer and Pickering eds. 2009, p. 68). From this basis my research methodology branches into psychoanalysis and philosophy. I employ two primary theoretical frames as the methodology of this research: Jacques Lacan’s concept of the ‘Real,’ in its triadic relation to the ‘Imaginary’ and ‘Symbolic,’ and Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of difference. In that the ‘meaning’ of the joke is unrepresentable, I argue that this gap is correlative to the Lacanian Real, which cannot be symbolised. Similarly, the repetition in the joke, which is to say, the set-up and the punch-line, suggests a specific form of repetition characterised by Deleuze. ‘Beyond bare repetition,’ Deleuze writes (1968[2004], p. 365), ‘and clothed repetition, beyond that from which difference is drawn and that which includes it, a repetition which “makes” the difference.’ This precise, ‘*ontological*’ form of repetition (ibid.), is repetition that makes ‘difference-in-itself,’ a productive difference that is prior-to identity. When we attempt to scrutinise the ‘meaning’ of the joke, which is to say the identity of the difference ‘between,’ we already perceive this difference through this-or-that identity; either privileging the first or the second piece of the joke. Again, this difference, one might say this ‘Real’ difference, resists symbolisation. The precise usage of incongruity deployed in this research is highly connected to the *liminal* space between meaning and non-meaning, a sort of ‘no-man’s land,’ as in Paolo Virno’s argument: ‘Jokes exhibit the logicolinguistic resources that nurture innovation in general precisely because they are found in a no-man’s land that separates any norm from its own realisation within a contingent situation’ (Virno 2008, p. 101). Hence my recourse to Lacan and Deleuze, two philosophers of structure and flux. The placing of Lacan and Deleuze in close proximity might suggest a theoretical deadlock. My research resolves this deadlock in a sort of Hegelian inversion. Butler explains, drawing on Kojève’s exegesis of Hegel: ‘the object which first appears turns out to have its opposite as its essence, and so becomes subject to an inversion on the condition of a retroactive constitution of its “truth”’ (Butler *et al.* 2000, p. 173). At the beginning of this research, I employed Deleuzian

concepts and set these in opposition to Lacan's return to Freud (not without precedent, see Hallward 2006 and Žižek 2003, not to mention Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, 2004). As reading and practice came together in a process of writing, it became clear that what was most interesting to me in Deleuze's work was what was closest to Lacanian theory. As Butler would say, the 'identificatory source' of my opposition to Lacan was Lacan himself. That being resolved, I am able to say that the political dimension of comedy is located in the gap of the Real or 'difference in itself.' My theoretical framework is therefore drawn from three places. From Lacanian theory and Lacanian-inflected political philosophy, including the work of Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, I draw the philosophical situation of comedy, as above. Deleuze's philosophy provides a means of looking at ambiguity and nonsense, particularly in relation to the linguistic side of performance comedy. And there is a final source, which provides the basis for my experimental practice, drawn from the discourse of Relational Aesthetics and dialogical aesthetics (Nicolas Bourriaud, but also to a lesser degree, Grant Kester and Claire Bishop). This finds its proper place as a practical and provocative means of working with and thinking about 'audience.'

At this point we are in a position to state the argument of the thesis concisely, before embarking on an analysis: *the political dimension of performance comedy in the era of late capitalism is not found in satire (which is focused on the object or content of the joke), but is found in the incommensurable gap between set-up and punch-line, or between 'getting-it' and 'not-getting-it.'* This is correlative to the frontier of exclusion that defines every group or social formation and is thus the very site of politics itself. Comedy in performance is potentially able to enact a break with ideology and, through a political articulation, form an attachment by the subject to the moment of the break. It is my argument that the political possibilities of comedy go beyond satirical transgressions to draw attention to the operation of the political itself. Purdie suggests, drawing on Lacan's Symbolic Law, '[...] joking paradigmatically involves a discursive exchange whose distinctive operation involves the *marked* transgression of the Symbolic Law and whose effect is thereby to constitute jokers as "masters" of discourse: as those [...] in controlling possession of full human subjectivity' (Purdie 1993, p. 5, original emphasis), meaning joking and

therefore humour is constitutive of human subjectivity. I want to argue that beyond these ‘marked transgressions’ there can be certain forms of joke-making *qua* comedy performance that do not constitute the subject but problematise the subject’s very constitution. These events of comedy would truly transgress the Symbolic Law in breaking with it entirely; in a Lacanian sense, they would be authentic ‘acts.’ The notion of the ‘act’ is developed in Chapter 2, but one simple definition is provided by Žižek: ‘the act [is] a gesture which, by definition, touches the dimension of the impossible real’ (Žižek et al 2000, p. 119). This thesis therefore examines the possibility of comedy in performance not merely as political commentary, but as the movement of the political itself. How might it do this? Through the foregrounding of the gap at the heart of joke-making, which is precisely correlative to so many similar ‘betweens’ in political theory: the ‘act’ in Žižek’s Lacanian stance on ideology (see Chapter 2), the ‘antagonism’ in Mouffe and Laclau’s radical democratic paradox, or the *dissensus* or disagreement Rancière argues is the ground of politics (Chapter 5). The difference, I think, between my position and Purdie’s, is the difference between joking as comparison and joking as paradox. The former is perhaps the bread and butter of the topical satirist, taking a figure in a position of power and comparing them to an incongruous thing; the latter is the ‘such small portions’ that opens *Annie Hall*. If the former signals its incongruity, the latter embodies it fully.

So the question here is: how can a comic event also be a psychoanalytic ‘act,’ that is, break from the Symbolic order, and crucially, what would this do? The break from the Symbolic order can be illustrated by another old joke, commonly attributed to the Marx Brothers; it is used by Žižek in his discussions with Laclau and Judith Butler in their book *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* to illustrate ‘false alternatives’: ‘In a well-known Marx Brothers joke Groucho answers the standard question “Tea or coffee?” with “Yes, please!”—a refusal of choice’ (Žižek [et al] 2000, p. 125). The false alternative is, of course, tea or coffee, which does not allow for the choice of *neither*. A modern version is the couple ‘Coke or Pepsi,’ both of which are just brown, sugary water—as comedian Mark Thomas points out in his 2008 book *Belching Out The Devil*, in a scientific blind taste test measuring brain activity, Coke and Pepsi are indistinguishable to the human senses. A more precise theoretical name for this

phenomenon is the Deleuzian concept of the ‘disjunctive synthesis.’ In grammar, a disjunctive is a modifier such as ‘or,’ or ‘but,’ which joins two unlike terms in a state of opposition. The 1995 pop song ‘Hand in my Pocket’ by Canadian artist Alanis Morissette is composed lyrically of a list of disjunctive syntheses—‘I’m short *but* I’m healthy,’ ‘I’m poor *but* I’m kind’—which demonstrate the possible pernicious effects of the disjunction. In the statement ‘I’m poor but I’m kind,’ the ‘but’ connects poverty and kindness in an oppositional relationship, which is to say, the ‘but’ *positively* links poorness and *unkindness*, as if it were exceptional anyone poor could also be kind.

To return to the Marx Brothers, what specifically happens in the punch-line (Groucho’s answer)? The gap between first and second meanings appears again, with Groucho’s answer irreconcilable to the question (and it is important we sustain this gap in our reading of the humour of this joke—it is not very funny if Groucho’s answer is changed to ‘Both, please!’, just a bit greedy). The false choice Groucho is faced with here is fairly innocuous, but his gesture *qua* act is truly radical, for he strikes at the very conditions of possibility of the choice itself. As Claire Colebrook points out, ‘the subjection of modern thought lies in the illegitimate use of the disjunctive synthesis.’ Another example from Hollywood comedy Žižek provides is Howard’s (Kevin Kline) outburst at his wedding to Emily (Joan Cusack); faced with the choice ‘Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?’², Howard blurts out ‘I’m gay’ (Žižek [et al] 2000, p. 122). Howard takes the ‘impossible’ choice, arguably losing everything, that is to say, everything that had been constitutive of his identity as a heterosexual schoolteacher in a small American town, but in doing so ‘gain[ing] the space of free action’ (ibid.). It is the aim of this thesis to begin to locate the, as it were, ‘active’ dimension of performance comedy. The basis of my research is a sort of pun, conflating the psychoanalytic act with the act of performance comedy, which is a description of what a comedian does ‘what’s your act like?’ and who he or she is ‘she’s a great act!’

² And in this case the notion of false choice is even more striking; in our collective imagination the question must be answered with ‘I do,’ for to answer otherwise would be simply embarrassing to all parties involved.

0.3 - *On practice-as-research*

The problem of practice-as-research is also a problem for the possibility of political performance, that is to say, performance as praxis. By engaging with the theoretical questions above, I also strike out at a false choice faced by the *comedian*, that is, the choice between commenting on the world and changing it. This false alternative haunts the possibility of political performance. On the one hand the comedian must withdraw, viewing the world from a distance in order to critique it through writing and performance. In this case, the best the comedian can hope to achieve is raising ‘awareness’ (while letting others get on with the ‘real work’ of politics). On the other hand we have the tradition of using humour in public protest situations, which of course has its roots in Medieval Carnival, but also characterises such diverse groups as the Orange Alternative (Poland), the Situationist Internationale, and Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army. But is this humour simply a relief from the actual work of political struggle? Both of these cases suggest the disturbing possibility that ‘comedy’ may not *do anything*, which is to say in enjoying the satirical gags of the topical comedian or the collective silliness of a group protest we are silently buying into the hegemonic or ideological regime that permits it (when the true ‘act’ would be to change the conditions of possibility for the ideological determination itself). In Chapter 2 both choices in this false alternative are examined critically. But how do I propose to escape the ‘disjunctive synthesis’ and redefine the conditions of possibility for a radical democratic political comedy? Through practice.

The first thing to note is the way in which the false alternative faced by the politically minded comedian (between critique and change) truly is a disjunctive synthesis. If phrased in the following way—‘As a comedian I critique politics/society/the world *but* I really want to change it’—we see that the ‘but’ becomes a bar that forever separates the practice of critique from change, as if critique were not a necessary part of change and vice versa. Is this not correlative to the false binary active/passive in the discourse of theatre and performance? Jacques Rancière summarises this binary in *The Emancipated Spectator*, which I quote here at length:

I shall call it the paradox of the spectator—a paradox that is possibly more fundamental than the famous paradox of the actor. The paradox is easily formulated: there is no theatre without a spectator (if only a single, concealed spectator, as in the fictional performance of *Le Fils naturel* that gives rise to Diderot's *Entretiens*). But according to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act. (Rancière 2009, pp. 2-3).

Of course, Rancière's ultimate conclusion, is that this binary is false. But pursuing this connection with audience and spectatorship, and attempting to unpack the falseness of this binary forms the basis of my experimental practice. My second research question is therefore: what forms or arrangements of audience-performer relationships contribute to a form of comedy performance as positive/transformational/subversive social *praxis*? I draw on the writing of Nicolas Bourriaud (2002, 2009), Claire Bishop (2004, 2006) and Grant Kester (2004), whose contributions to the theorising of participation and 'Relational' or 'Dialogic' aesthetics in the contemporary visual arts provide a valuable frame through which to consider both the role of the audience in the performance comedy event, and the relationship between audience and comedy performer. This body of writing also provides a number of methods for my experimental practice. Through the latter I question or attempt to 'practice' out of the false spectatorial binary active/passive, and consequently the false binary of critique/change. I (respectfully) attempt to situate the practical submission of this thesis in a context of practices that includes those of comedian Andy Kaufman, British artist and comedian Kim Noble, the Canadian performance artist and theatre maker Darren O'Donnell and the conceptual artist Marc Horowitz. In examining these artists I am attempting to locate techniques for experimental engagement with the audience that may, as I will later put it, experiment with the possibility of an 'attachment' to the radical 'break' of the act.

0.4 - *Self-reflexivity, acts, and effects*

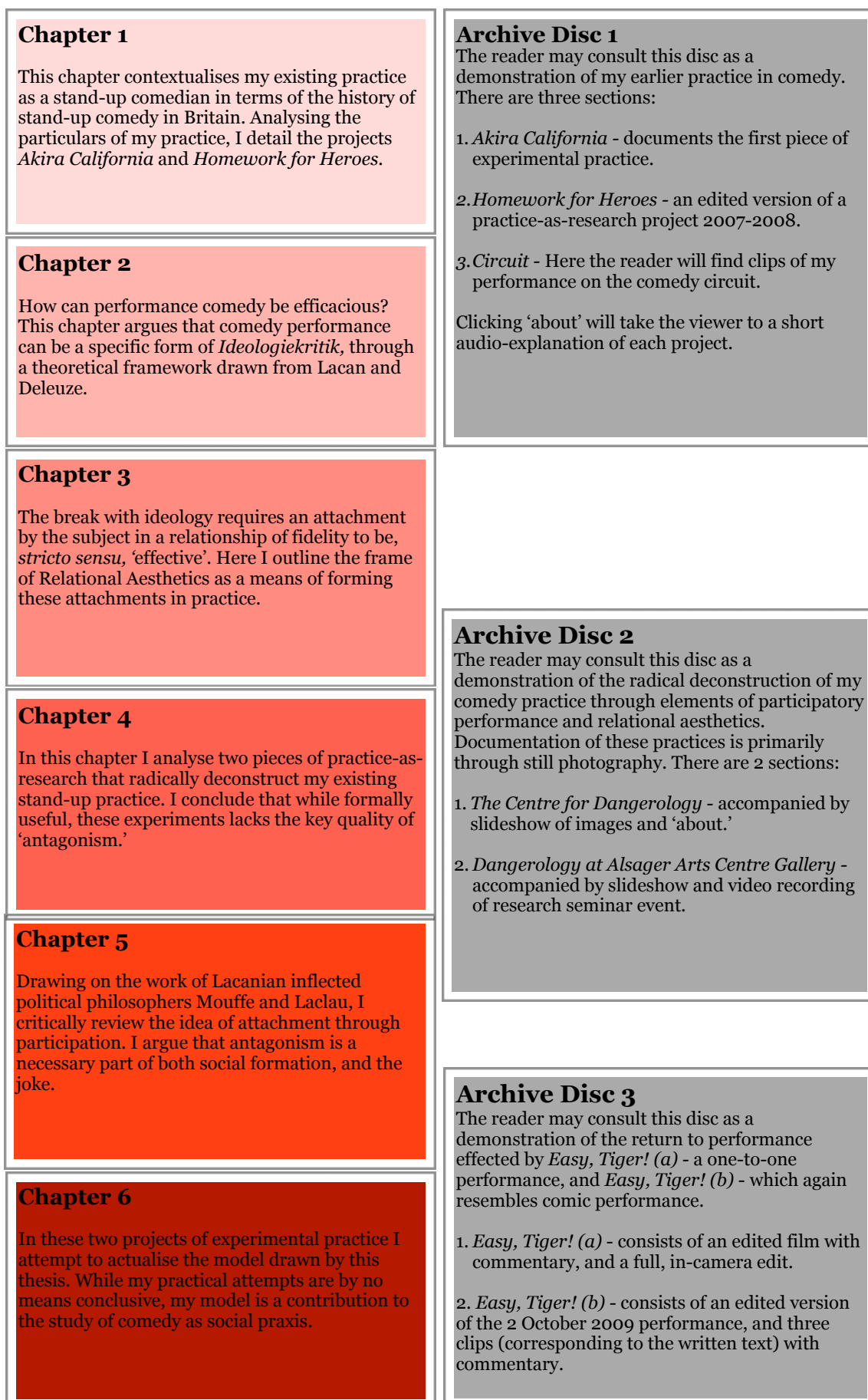
The problem of self-reflexivity in a practice-as-research project such as this one is illustrated by another joke, one with a very clear paradox appearing in-

between first and second meaning. In Matt Groening's animated science-fiction situation comedy *Futurama*, Professor Farnsworth presents the crew with his latest invention, a 'What-if? Machine.' When posed a 'What if?' question by the user, the machine generates a video sequence demonstrating the answer. Bender, the robotic crew member, desires to know what it would be like to be human, saying: 'We robots don't have any emotions. And sometimes, that makes me very sad.' A similar paradox appears in the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which features the Android character Data. Data's character-arc is dominated by what might be called the Tin-Man's dilemma: he longs to be human (he only wants a 'heart'). Of course, if Data is a robot, defined by the lack of human emotions, how can he possibly feel 'longing'? The more plausible split in robot subjectivity is between those robots that actually exist today (automatic machines completing tasks by fulfilling programmes) and the replicants of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (based on Philip K. Dick's *Do Robots Dream of Electric Sheep?*), which do not know they are robots. This is perhaps the split we find with practice-as-research; in the first example we have the programmatic researcher performing the 'task' of research (that is, outside of the practice), and in the second (the replicants) we have the artist as embedded fully within the practice without the awareness that they may also be simultaneously outside of it, or other.

But how can the robot do both? If this thesis theoretically locates the political dimension of comedy in a gap inherent to joke-making and joke structures themselves, in comedy event as 'act,' it simultaneously attempts to actualise this in practice, from inside. Like Bender, or Data, I am embodying a sort of self-reflexive paradox. I am suggesting that to truly be political, a comedy event must be an 'act,' touching 'the Real,' yet the act may only be viewed retroactively. Rex Butler writes: 'There is always an element of the unexpected and unpredictable [...] of something not foreseeable within the current conceptual horizons. [...] the act, in so far as it is successful, can only be spoken of in its own terms' (Butler 2005, p. 67). The retroactive identification of the 'act' calls into question whether it is even possible for a comedian to *be* a political comedian. I want to suggest that the practice of stand-up is perhaps best place to address this deadlock, seeing as it lies in-between pre-planned written material and spontaneous improvisatory performance. Furthermore, the

indeterminacy of the 'act' in the present ('[...] it is incalculable, not the outcome of strategic argumentation; it is a totally free act') (Žižek 1997[2005], http://www.lacan.com/symptom6_articles/zizek.html), means that elements of chance, contingency, and the aleatoric are embraced as a significant part of the practice, especially as realised in *Easy, Tiger!* which forms the final practical submission that accompanies this thesis.

With regard to the quantification and qualification of results and evidence, the new knowledge produced by this thesis is a re-articulation of the discourse of comedy and revolt; a result in theory led by an interrogation through practice. I seek to propose formal methods of comic performance (ways of making and doing) that embody a more appropriate force for social transformation, thus the underlying activity of the thesis is a sort of *modelling*. Efficacy is measured against the complementary and very partisan theoretic of democracy, antagonism, ideology, and hegemony formulated in the already mentioned sources. In the light of visible changes in the present, including globalisation, information technology, sustained war and conflict, a practical *and* theoretical intervention into the field of comedy studies, currently dominated by questions of offense (see Lockyer and Pickering 2005[2009] for a thorough study of humour and offense in Great Britain), is appropriate and necessary. The timeframe of a three-year PhD through practice cannot accommodate a sustained qualitative study of the effects of a certain comic performance, therefore use of the default techniques of questionnaires and surveys is not appropriate. Rather, I engage in a process of reflexive analysis.

Fig. 1 - Diagrammatic Structure of Thesis

CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXTS FOR COMEDY PRACTICE

1.0 - *Opening moves... on comedy in performance*

Watching stand-up, in its form and content, can be a highly discomfiting experience. Stand-up is often uncomfortable, and at times, entirely *strange*, not for nothing does the novelist and erstwhile comedian A.L. Kennedy call it ‘a very peculiar martial art, for masochists.’ Ridout (2004) employs Jonas Barish’s term ‘*ontological queasiness*’ in reference to the theatre, and what Barish calls the ‘anti-theatrical prejudice.’ What we find in stand-up is a related queasiness, less *ontological* and more concerned with looking and being looked at; it puts us in mind of Lacan’s famous paper on the ‘Mirror Stage,’ in which the subject is constituted through ‘being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other’ (Lacan 1966[2006], p. 76). The point is not, of course, that the audience-member recognises himself in the face of the comedian and thus becomes subject, but rather that there is a recognition that, for the audience, in this form there is no possibility of anonymous spectating, *you* are the object for the *other* (comedian). Thus the audience member is queasily trapped between, on the one hand, fully meeting the gaze of the comedian, and losing his or herself to laughter on the other. The condition of possibility for the form of stand-up, as Derrida would argue, is also its condition of impossibility; which is to say, the queasiness of being *looked at* is at once the thing producing audience laughter and the thing ultimately preventing a full loss of self to what D. Diane Davis calls laughter’s post-human ‘sweep’ (Davis 2000, p. 63). And a similar catch goes to the comedian, captured by stand-up’s aggressive rhetoric of fights and battles: one ‘kills’ or ‘slaughters,’ or one ‘dies.’ For the comedian-cum-gladiator, the audience is both lion and Caesar—the thing to be conquered, and the thing from which to seek approval.

In this chapter I will describe and frame the field of what I call performance comedy (encompassing both stand-up and sketch; while there are distinct differences between the forms, for me the circumstances of their performance are enough to lump them together in one category—in many respects stand-ups and sketch performers engage with the audience in the same way, particularly

when things go wrong). My argument is that performance comedy is tied to the logic of capital. The consequence of this for a practice-based project seeking to locate the politically *transformative* dimension of performance comedy is that we must revisit the unfashionable concept of ideology. I will first examine the way in which performance comedy is exclusively market-driven in contemporary Britain, making a case for an exploration through practice-as-research in the academy. I will then describe the historical development of stand-up in Britain as a series of emergences and reincorporations into a capitalist mode of production (here I draw predominantly on work by Double [2005, 1997] and Thompson [2004]). Finally, I examine my own existing practice in order to provide a base from which to build an experimental practice in the following chapters. I do so through analyses of two performances: *Akira California* (Central School of Speech and Drama, Etcetera Theatre) and *Homework for Heroes* (multiple venues, Edinburgh Festival 2008). These case studies will establish the methodological basis for ‘evidence’ in this project. I am not engaging in a project of either quantitative *or* qualitative research. Instead, the case studies are self-reflexive analyses, through which a model develops in both practice and theory.

In general, arguments regarding the social and political efficacy of stand-up comedy as a practice fall into three categories 1) transgressive/iconoclastic, 2) formative of community or identity, and 3) critical. While these are not hard and fast rules, there is a distinct sense that stand-up affects the social body (in a positive way) because it breaks social conventions, and/or strengthens social bonds, and/or ‘fosters critical thinking’ (Morreall 2009, p. 113). I take up the issue of transgression in the following chapter, following the New Historicist critique of what I call the ‘logic of the Carnavalesque’ (see Greenblatt 1989, Stallybrass and White 1986). As for the issue of formation of group identities through comic representations, I must acknowledge the work of Wagg (ed., 1998) and Lockyer and Pickering (eds., 2009). The authors in these volumes follow a sociological approach that provides useful examples, but is only laterally relevant to my project. Of more immediate interest are philosophers such as Morreall, Zupančič, and Critchley, who attempt to probe more comprehensively into humour and comedy as philosophical situations. I will draw on Zupančič’s work in the following chapters, but it is perhaps wise to say

a few words about Morreall in order to defend against the possibility of behaviourist analysis. Morreall's approach is to sketch a triad of theories of humour—Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief—and attributes to each a rejection of humour as a field of study, that is humour is 'anti-social,' 'irrational,' or a 'pressure valve' for unpleasantries. He then validates each of these cases as necessary and constitutive of the social. Thus the very thing that might have prompted the rejection of humour is identified its point of interest.

With regard to the possibility of a transformative comic practice, Morreall's model falls short; caught between a discourse which naturalises humour as human behaviour and a more interesting 'ethical' discourse. On the one hand, as natural behaviour, humour comes across as palliative: 'in humour we experience a sudden change of mental state—a cognitive shift [...]—that would be disturbing under normal conditions, that is, if we took it seriously' (Morreall 2009[1], p. xii). The comic reflex is simply this, a neurological reaction to a certain stimulus under certain conditions. On the other hand, there is a socially constructed, ethical justification for humorous practices, what Morreall calls an ethics of disengagement. Humour disengages from a practical concern ('To have a practical concern about a situation is to be emotionally involved with it'), and blocks 'negative emotions' promoting 'divergent thinking' (ibid. p. 101 - 124). I suggest that Morreall's definitions are far too sweeping, and even in his ethical discourse he is firmly imbricated in a behaviourist discourse. The key is in his recourse to theories of humour (inescapably part of his methodology), which require there to be a bar or gap to be crossed or transgressed (without this bar, that is, 'difference,' there is nothing to render humour an exceptional mode of discourse). So when he asserts that the ethical disengagement of 'our sense of humour makes us not only more tolerant of people's differences, but more gracious' (ibid. p. 117) this is flagrantly one-sided, particularly when said difference is that which draws the bar that creates the joke. Ultimately, Morreall's argument is that comedy is efficacious inasmuch as it is a part of human social life, however because it 'disengages,' 'satire is not a weapon of revolutionaries' (ibid., p. 101).

The problem lies in the necessity of the 'bar,' and what I would say is the fundamental exclusion of comedy. Ultimately Morreall's view is far too idealist,

only allowing for instances of successful comedy. But, as I will argue more fully later, comedy is at once inclusive and exclusive. It posits a division between ‘getting a joke’ and ‘not getting a joke,’ and there is in this gap something deeper, perhaps more Real than this recourse to fundamentals of human behaviour.

1.1 - On PaR, comedy, and the market

The thesis is divided between chapters of critical reflection on practice and chapters of theoretical discussion. The structure is a dialogue between practice and theory, between action and reflection, between two discursive poles that propose and refute until they reach an eventual, praxical proposition on the form a politically transformative performance comedy must take today. In reestablishing this binary I am aware that I run against the grain of practice-as-research today, which seeks to erase the binary entirely. I suggest this premiss is misplaced. As demonstration, let us take a not entirely dissimilar example from another field, political philosophy. There is a similar binary here between political action (*qua* activism) and theoretical reflection. Judith Butler takes up this issue in her book with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (2000). There is a gulf between activism on one hand and ‘Theory’ on the other, she suggests. But there is to be no comfortable synthesis, rather it is the ongoing dialectical process which matters. She writes: ‘The commitment to radical interrogation means that there is no moment in which politics requires the cessation of theory, for that would be the moment in which politics posits certain premisses as off-limits to interrogation—indeed, where it actively embraces the dogmatic as the condition of its own possibility’ (Butler et al 2000, p. 264). But why this resistance to theory?: ‘[...] those who fear the retarding effects of theory do not want to think too hard about what it is they are doing, what kind of discourse they are using; for if they think too hard about what it is they are doing, they fear that they will no longer do it’ (ibid.). So it goes for PaR in the arts. While I reject the idea that theory might be ‘applied,’ as one applies a tool to a particular job, throughout this thesis methodical, critical reflection is most appropriate to the project at hand. I am interrogating the political dimension of performance comedy, and as such it is imperative I consider how any action or impulse to action might be coloured by a set of ideological presumptions. Badiou’s famous

pronouncement on art is my watchword: ‘It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognises as existent’ (Badiou 2004, p. 119).

But practice is of course, crucial. A practice-as-research enquiry into stand-up comedy can itself be seen as a political act. Engaging in what Butler would call a ‘radical interrogation’ of my practice within the institution enables me to disengage from the conservative mechanisms of the market. Along with the critical engagement with my specific practice, this thesis contributes to broadening the profile of stand-up comedy, both in theory and practice, within the academy. Stand-up comedy is heavily market-driven, existing entirely outside government funding. At the time of writing, the Arts Council explicitly *does not fund* any practices or works that fall under the rubric of performance comedy (stand-up, sketch, and musical) as it considers these practices self-funding. In response to this policy promoter and agent Lisa Keddie has organised the petition and campaign ‘I Think Comedy *Is* Art,’ the response to which has revealed a split in the comedy community. While some comedians whole-heartedly support the idea that their practice should be supported by a UK funding body, there are others who see any exchange of monies between a government organisation and a comic artist as fundamentally compromising the comic’s freedom of speech. My own rejoinder, which I will demonstrate in the historical analysis that follows, is that far from guaranteeing freedom of speech, the throwing of comedy to the wolves of the marketplace does precisely the opposite. The field of performance comedy, and particularly stand-up, can be a bullying, conservative place; in certain clubs there are few practices that look less like freedom of speech. Fundamentally, performance comedy is ideologically determined with or without Arts Council funding.

Joanne Gilbert (2004), an academic and former professional stand-up comic also notes the relationship between stand-up and capitalism (she is specifically referring to stand-up comedy in America, but as we shall see in the following section, it equally rings true in Britain): ‘perhaps it is not surprising that a comic’s jokes are called “material,” for within the commodification of cultural performance, jokes are exactly that—the material of capitalist currency’ (Gilbert 2004, p. 17). She argues that ‘when comics—specifically members of

marginalised groups like women and minorities—get paid for “performing” their marginality and attacking the dominant culture, they provide a unique context for examining power relations in public discourse’ (ibid., p. 169). As fruitful as this is, she stops there: ‘the “master’s tools” may never dismantle the “master’s house,” but the master’s cover charge and two-drink minimum might help to build another very nice house’ (ibid., p. 165). In other words, the (marginal) comedian can play the system, but not transform it. The blame lies on laughter’s door once again: ‘[...] humour renders its audience passive. Although it may send a double message, if it is successful, humour produces laughter and laughter does not constitute a radical politics’ (ibid., p. 172). While I agree with Gilbert’s argument, I do not agree with her resignation to the idea that stand-up can only be efficacious inasmuch as it operates within the system. If we were to follow this line of reasoning, political or subversive comedy would be reduced almost exclusively to an assertion of marginal identity within heavily capitalistic circumstances of performance. My starting point must then be the possibility of a comedy in performance that breaks with the dominant ideological structures. Consideration of comedy’s relation to ideology is crucial therefore, and forms the heart of this project.

1.2 - *stand-up comedy in Britain 1852-2010*

Stand-up occupies an interesting interstitial place in the cultural economy of Great Britain, emerging as a marginal, minor practice within a larger, popular frame. Its history is one of emergences and reincorporations. In Britain, stand-up comedy’s origins are generally thought to lie in the music-hall entertainments of the mid-1800s, beginning with Charles Morton’s opening of the Canterbury Hall, London in 1852 (Double 2005, p. 29). Victorian music-hall, in a kind of *futur anterieur*, occupies in 1852 the role that could only later be filled by the technologies of radio and television; less of a show and more of a warm place where the public could spend the entire evening. An 1899 programme cited by Oliver Double features a staggering 85 acts (ibid., p. 30). The embryonic form of stand-up comedy in the United Kingdom, is ‘patter,’ or interstitial spoken-word pieces of direct-address, mostly humorous, which covered scene changes or musicians tuning-up. This break with theatrical convention, employing direct address, is a defining element of stand-up comedy

in performance. This period also produced another paradigmatic element of stand-up: *heckling*. ‘Patter’ therefore represents a kind of inadvertent invention. By the late 1800s patter sections were so popular some performers began abandoning the music and creating acts out of spoken-word alone.

By the 1960s, television occupied the place held by music-hall, leading to a steep decline in this form of live performance. Music-hall, and therefore the emergent form of stand-up was suitably ‘mainstream,’ however, the cost of running a live venue (and providing dinner, drinks, and entertainment) in comparison to the unprecedented ease of access provided by television was simply too high. Live stand-up migrated to another set of venues, the Working Men’s Clubs, leading to the emergence of another variation of the stand-up form, the Working Men’s Club comic, the most well-known exponent of which is the late Bernard Manning. Often representative of Working Men’s Club comedy as a whole, Manning’s comedy is notable for its use of deliberately offensive jokes. Although he claimed to ‘offend everyone equally,’ (Bennett 2002: http://www.chortle.co.uk/comics/b/3136/bernard_manning/review/). Manning primarily took shots at other races, women, and homosexuals. Steve Bennett, of comedy website Chortle, writes: ‘whereas most of his material is ribald teasing, there’s a vile undercurrent of festering hate in anything involving race—and its not just because it’s an automatically sensitive subject to liberal ears’ (Bennett 2002: *ibid.*). This is an assertion surely borne out by Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2009), who cite an incident in which Manning performed for a group of around 300 white police officers. Picking on the single black member of the audience, Manning launched into a ‘barrage of obscenity,’ including: ‘They actually think they’re English because they are born here. That means if a dog’s bone in a stable, it is a horse.’ At this point, the authors note, Manning’s white audience cheered; this moment must be therefore be interpreted as ‘social, emotional and psychological violence against the vulnerable since immediate retaliation from the black police officer was simply not possible’ (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah 2009, p. 53, in Lockyer and Pickering 2009). What is most interesting in this moment is its clear, and unfortunately visible ‘frontier of exclusion’ (a term I will come to use heavily in Chapter 5) drawn by comedy. For me, the joke is most offensive because it denigrates the victim’s right to name

himself as a citizen. The joke therefore draws a frontier, a line excluding, at the ontological level, the right of the black police officer to be included among the communitie(s) (English, British, Citizens, Officers). At the same time, this frontier also divides ‘getting the joke’ from ‘not getting the joke’—those who laugh form the new, exclusive community.

Along with new venues and subject matter, Working Men’s Club comedy also involved a shift in form. While the front cloth comedy often performed in a monologic style that is fairly similar to what we know as stand-up today, in this period gags or one-liners were more common: ‘club comics has a more minimal approach: unoriginal, self-contained gags, told one after another, with little else going on’ (Double 2005, p. 37). The club comic became a mainstream phenomenon with the incorporation into television. In 1971, *The Comedians*, featuring Manning, Frank Carson, Ken Goodwin, and Charlie Williams, debuted, forming the dominant model of what is still called ‘mainstream’ comedy today. Concurrent to this incorporation into the mainstream of the club comic was the arrival of comics such as Billy Connolly, Jasper Carrott, Mike Harding, and Victoria Wood. All four began their careers as folk-singers, with comedy appearing in patter, as in the days of music-hall.

In 1979, with the opening of The Comedy Store, as well as the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of Britain, came another, visibly oppositional form of stand-up comedy, ‘Alternative comedy.’ The name is problematic. As Marxist cultural critic Raymond Williams writes: ‘There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different was to live and wants to change society in its light’ (Williams 1980, p. 42). Alternative comedy, is actually ‘oppositional’, with an ideological commitment to a sort of anarchic Marxism. The term Alternative comedy is attributed to Tony Allen, who gathered a group of comedians and cabaret performers together under the name Alternative Cabaret. Acts such as Rik Mayall, Ade Edmondson, Alexei Sayle, and French and Saunders are among those associated with Alternative comedy. As well as an opposition to Thatcherism, Alternative comedy placed itself in opposition to the racist, sexist, and homophobic gags of the club comics,

performing material that was ‘blue’ (i.e. foul-mouthed), but ‘politically correct.’ Allen notes that Alternative comedy strove for a sort of new social realism: ‘[...] it was the sad state of traditional British stand-up and its total irrelevance to the post-sixties generation (never mind the post-punk generation) that was probably the most important element. There was an enormous vacuum and it had to be filled’ (Allen 2002, p. 82).

What begins as oppositional rarely stays oppositional—Williams writes: ‘In capitalist practice, if the thing is not making a profit [...] then it can for some time be overlooked, at least while it remains alternative. When it becomes oppositional in an explicit way, it does, of course, get approached or attacked’ (Williams 1980, p. 43). The popularity of the form led to its eventual incorporation into the mainstream and dulling of its ideological sensibilities. Double notes that in 1999, the Comedy Store, the recognised birthplace of Alternative comedy, turned a profit of more than £2.5 million (Double 2005, p. 82). I would argue that this demonstrates that Alternative comedy never fully broke with the ideological conditions of Thatcherite Conservatism, and in the following chapter I will engage with the precise nature of the ‘break’ from a philosophical and theoretical perspective. It is sufficient here to simply note Thompson’s (humorous) suggestion that Margaret Thatcher was the ‘mother-in-law’ of Alternative comedy, ‘not only in providing it with a necessary object of antipathy, but also (further echoing the historic tension between working-class men and their wives’ mothers) by giving it a house to live in’ (Thompson 2004, p. 38). It was Thatcher’s ‘obsession’ with deregulation, Thompson argues, that led to the founding of Channel 4 and ‘a changed TV power structure in which competing production companies would compete to satisfy egotistical comedians’ every artistic whim’ (ibid.). This submission to market logic enabled Ben Elton, Mayall, Edmundson, and French and Saunders to achieve great success on television, but dulled their oppositional edge. The greatest casualty of this incorporation by far is Ben Elton, whose career is seen by many as a series of ethical compromises.

When I began performing on the comedy circuit, it seemed the most fashionable form of comedy was what was casually referred to as ‘DIY’ or Do-It-Yourself’

comedy. The term was later given credence by Tim Jonze, who, writing in the *Guardian*, notes:

Like any artist in an emerging scene, the last thing Josie [Long] will do is admit that she's part of an emerging scene. But it seems obvious that a group of comedians—inspired by the likes of Daniel Kitson, Stewart Lee and Demetri Martin—are taking a hands-on approach to combating the rise of bland Friday night TV, stale one-liner routines and pissed hen parties doing conga dances through Jongleurs. (Jonze 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/aug/04/comedy.edinburghfestival20071>).

This emergent form of comedy shares an ethos with the later-discussed Relational Aesthetics in its celebration of conviviality and interactivity. Long, for example, employs a number of interactive mechanisms in her work. In her show, *Kindness and Exuberance*, audience members are greeted individually, given a photocopied magazine she has made, and directed to a table upon which there are homemade badges, small slips of paper and a makeshift ballot box. Long asks them to write their 'Favourite Small Thing' on the slip of paper and drop it into the box. The material gathered through such a 'relational mechanism' is incorporated into the live performance.

As the name suggests, DIY comedy did not make very much money, with clubs running either at a loss or just breaking even. All the same, when the form became *de rigueur* on comedy stages (with the increasing numbers of bookings for 'whimsical' comedians), one could argue that even this most recently emergent of forms was reincorporated into the dominant. Worse yet, the very discourse on which it based its resistance (DIY)³ has been, to an extent, co-opted. During the general election of 2010, the Conservative Party's manifesto on 'The Big Society' employed the rhetoric of Do-It-Yourself as a justification for the slashing of public services. All the same, the experimental fervour of DIY comedy, with an explosion of innovative, mixed-genre events—including *Laughter in Odd Places* (which took stand-up to laundromats, libraries, and museums), Ward and White's *Karaoke Circus* (a mixture of stand-up and karaoke with live band), and Tom Bell and the Dude Patrol (stand-up with arts

³ DIY and 'maker culture' have been cited as oppositional to capitalism (or more properly, consumerism), for example, Spencer (2005).

and crafts)—can be seen as a significant period in the history of British comedy, and has been a major influence on my own practice.

1.3 - Case Studies: Akira California and Homework for Heroes

How is my own creative comic practice situated within the context of stand-up comedy in Britain? Broadly, my stand-up might be called ‘anecdotal,’ and to a degree, ‘observational,’ though I also incorporate a large number of short jokes and near one-liners. Additionally, much my work may be said to fall into the domain of ‘postmodern irony’ (see Chapter 2). My ‘persona’ most likely falls into the spectrum of comedy personalities within a category defined by Double as a ‘naked self,’ though there is a great deal of ambiguity. My writing generally purports to be autobiographical, signalling its ‘truth’ through the first-personal past-tense: ‘This happened to me yesterday. I was...’ But behind the autobiographical signifiers the narratives in my writing are fictionalised versions of the truth—like an exaggerated version of my own life, as in Bret Easton Ellis’ *Lunar Park*. Take, for instance, the first story on the first video featured on the DVD appendix, in which I recount an incident in which I am mistaken for a Japanese person on the London Underground. Though it errs on the side of believability, the story is fiction, an amalgamation of several such mis-recognitions. While the announcement I hear and recount is a real incident, my misguided involvement is not. Instead, to write a joke, I follow these incidents through to their (il)logical conclusion.

I will often incorporate ‘topical’ satire into my stand-up, though this alone does not make my comedy ‘political’ in the strictest sense. More often than not, popular culture features heavily in my material. What this somewhat thin description of my stand-up demonstrates is the difficulty of categorising stand-up comedy. I am often at a loss for words when a non-comedian asks ‘what kind of stuff do you do?’ This reluctance to categorise myself and my practice is related to the fact that I view the object of stand-up as an event and process, rather than a self-contained artefact that may bear the violence of categorisation. One might discern an affinity with the ‘activists’ Judith Butler cites above, a reluctance to theorise in this case arises from the fear of making inert what is at times an ‘alchemical’ process. In an act of respect to theory, I

will make a single conclusion here: as a comedian, *I identify the dominant logic of a situation, and attempt to find an alternative logic that breaks from it, simultaneously revealing the absurdity of the dominant logic.* This might be demonstrated by the following joke of mine, about the leader of the British National Party, Nick Griffin. To give this joke its context, I first performed it in a Soho comedy club the day after Griffin had controversially appeared as a guest on BBC's *Question Time*.

I think Nick Griffin is a disgusting person, there's no doubt in my mind. But, just for a moment, let's do a little thought experiment. Imagine Nick Griffin in front of you, his hideous, bloated face, his head stuffed with a racist ideology. [*mild laughter*] That's Nick Griffin. [*pause*] Now, imagine if Nick Griffin was *this big* [*gesture of about four inches with fingers*]. Like, the size of a hamster. Then it's like, 'Oh my God, *adorable!*' [*laughter*] Now he's like the cutest thing ever! [*laughter*] It'd be great, cause you could ruffle his weird hair [*pause, mild laughter*], or let him run around the wheel, and the best thing about it is that he'd be dead in a year. [*laughter*].

The joke works as a satirical joke by mock-celebrating the BNP leader on a different, almost absurd level, breaking with the usual logic of disagreement. This idea of a 'logical break' is rehearsed in greater detail in the following chapter.

What strikes me as significant is the question of the context of performance; does this joke have efficacy only in audiences that for the most part agree with its sentiments (efficacy in this case meaning a diffusion of the fetishistic threat posed by Griffin's appearance in the media)? If it were performed at a BNP meeting, it would have a different sort of efficacy, fomenting antagonism towards myself, the joke teller. Therefore the break in logic can serve to further strengthen existing logics. The problem lies in the rigidity of the form. My practice-as-research project would therefore have to begin by investigating, on a deeper level, the relationship between audience and performer, in order to escape the self-imposed conservatism that, as I have argued, haunts some forms of mainstream stand-up.

1.4 - Akira California: a post-apocalyptic stand-up comedy

My first piece of practice made under the aegis of practice-as-research was an hour-long piece of stand-up and storytelling called *Akira California*, presented at the Etcetera Theatre in August 2007 and at Central School of Speech and Drama's *The Festival of Emergent Art* in September of that year. The title was derived from Katsuhiro Otomo's manga and animated film *Akira*. This work was intended to expand my existing stand-up practice, and I experimented here with the conventions of story-telling. In a sense, while exploring the 'relational' aspect of stand-up, I chose to focus on the convention of 'relating' a story. The narrative of the work is set in the near future, and is a science-fiction tale that places a real-life person (Maddox Jolie, adopted son of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt) in a futuristic setting. Taking place in an Orwellian, surveillance state version of Japan, Maddox and Hanami, a girl he meets, talk about life, fall in love, and sing karaoke.

While the piece was satisfying from a creative point of view, I did not feel that it necessarily fulfilled the aims of the research. Partially, this is related to what I then perceived as the strict conventions of stand-up. Although audiences easily warmed to both stand-up and storytelling modes, both seemed to require an end-on staging. A deeper level of audience engagement within the stand-up mode, at this point, at least, was not forthcoming. The following work, *Homework for Heroes*, began a progressive move towards the total deconstruction of my practice seen in Chapter 4.

1.5 - Homework for Heroes

Directly after finishing *Akira California*, I began working with a group of three other comedians: Nat Luurtsema, Helen Arney and Tom Goodliffe on a stand-up show entitled *Homework for Heroes*. The show explored 'everyday heroism,' and 'achievable goals'—in its whimsical tone and content it falls easily within the frame of DIY comedy, identified above. Our process led to monthly work-in-progress showings from February 2008 to July 2008, culminating in a 25-day run at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. I was able to bring my interests in

alternative modes of audience-engagement within the stand-up form to the process, and we conducted a number of experiments.

In March 2008, at our monthly work-in-progress show at The Defector's Weld, Shepherd's Bush, we incorporated an element of chance. We hung a cork-board against the back wall, and all four of us sat beneath it, for the duration of the show. On the board we had each pinned images, corresponding to various pieces of written material. Audience members were given the opportunity to 'choose' their own show by choosing which image would go next. The process of selecting an image opened the way to a dialogue between the audience member and performer, as the performer would attempt to find out why the audience member chose that particular image, and so on. This was not, to my mind, a successful experiment. While the selection process was vigorous and the open dialogue fairly comfortable to begin with, the show soon lost momentum as the audience became less and less interested in choosing images. What this demonstrates is what I have cited in the introduction as 'false choice,' the appearance of free choice, without the actuality of freedom. For the audience, crucially, their choices *did not matter*—the show would only be completed when the last image was chosen, giving it the tone of a chore to be completed. In this particular instance we were unhappily trapped between a partial implementation of an alternative mode of audience engagement and the conventions of stand-up comedy.

In the final version of the show that appeared at the Edinburgh Festival, our interest in audience participation took an absurd form. In the course of the show, each comedian nominated their personal 'everyday hero,' and explained the reasons for this choice. It was then the role of the audience to choose where on a 'scale of heroism' ('wall of heroes') they thought that particular hero should fall (see DVD appendix disc 1). At the end of the show, whoever was acting as compère that day (in the documentation it is Nat Luurtsema taking this role) would take the highest ranked 'everyday hero' and the highest ranked real-life hero and square them off in a competitive game of 'Ponkers.' Ponkers, essentially, was a game of conkers played with potatoes. Two of the comedians would reenter the stage, carrying potatoes on strings with paper faces of the 'heroes' affixed on them. As in normal conkers, they would take turns bashing

each other's potato/hero—the winner, and hero of the day, was the last one standing.

What is interesting about this game is how little, in the end, audience participation contributed to a different result each time. While the participatory mechanism was designed to bring a sense of chance to the work, in each of the 25 performances, the same 'everyday' hero was ranked highest. The only real 'chance' involved was the game of Ponkers. This suggests that there is a complex relationship of power involved in any comedian/audience engagement. As in the 'choose-your-own-show' experiment at the Defector's Weld, to a point, the audience were happy to be 'led.' In other words, the participatory mechanisms contained an inherent degree of control. The essential element of the possibility of failure was missing.

1.6 - Conclusions: Comedy and resistance

In this chapter I have outlined my existing practice in stand-up comedy, and positioned it in the context of the history of stand-up in Britain. I have outlined and attempted to describe my style and approach to jokes, and detailed two pieces of early experimental practice, *Akira California* and *Homework for Heroes*. Though the roots of the eventual deconstruction of my practice can be discerned in these pieces, ultimately they are fairly conservative as experiments. However, they must also be read in relation to my own positioning against the historical framework and the emergent form of DIY comedy. Both pieces are heavily influenced by this emergent form.

I have argued throughout that performance comedy, as professionally practiced in both Britain and America, is implicated in capital, which poses an obvious problem for the possibility of a politically and socially transformative stand-up practice. I have suggested that other academic studies of performance comedy and efficacy can limit themselves to the ideal situation of comedy (that is, when it *works*). In considering the possibility of a comedy of resistance to the ideology of global capitalism, the *form* of stand-up, a peculiar, discomfiting machine fraught with exclusion, antagonism, and possible failure, is a neglected site of study. In the next chapter I will consider these issues in greater detail, moving

away from the analytical commonplaces of Morreall's triad of humour theories to embrace two unlikely friends of comic wisdom, Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze.

CHAPTER TWO: PERFORMANCE COMEDY AND IDEOLOGIEKRITIK

2.0 - *The Sense and Nonsense of Comedy and Revolt*

What is the possibility of a political comedy performance today? In answering this question I will propose a model of comedy performance as political praxis, which forms the basis of my experimental practice. This chapter draws heavily on a reading of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory with Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of difference.

The condition of postmodernity—a specific ideological formation defined for the purposes of my work as *the* ideology of neo-liberalism and global capitalism, and characterised by withdrawal of state power, and increasing atomisation of political demands—raises an 'aporetic bind' for the possibility of a 'political comedy.' Chiefly, this problem may be defined through three axioms, which I will briefly outline and then discuss in detail. (1) Satire, the traditional operative mode of 'political comedy', exposes figures of power, institutions, and ideologies to ridicule, revealing the inconsistencies and absurdities behind the public presentation. (2) This 'logic of satire' is already characteristic of the postmodern condition. As Willett (2008, p. 63) writes, our 'age of satire' is 'riddled by the ironies of postmodern scepticism.' (3) Ironic or sceptical distance is therefore incorporated into the ideology itself, effectively rendering the satirical distance impotent. In the most brutal terms, effectively everything is rendered open for parodic performance, and this invitation to laugh at and hence dissipate a cathectic investment in the obscene dimension of a figure of power, exploitative relationship, or ideology, is part of the game. To be precise, this is a problematic unique to Western democracies, based around what Lefort calls the empty place of power; more specifically my examples in this thesis narrow the problematic further to the United Kingdom and the United States, and the predominant ideology of neo-liberalism. All the same we might look to Italy for an illustration of Willett's 'age of satire,' with one of our most well-known political clowns, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, known for his repeated gaffes and brazen behaviour. Žižek writes: "The wager behind Berlusconi's vulgarities is that the people will identify with him as embodying the mythic image of the average

Italian: I am one of you, a little bit corrupt, in trouble with the law, in trouble with my wife because I'm attracted to other women' (Žižek 2009, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n14/slavoj-zizek/berlusconi-in-tehran>).

What happens when the ironic distance the people are to take towards authority is incorporated into the public face of authority? The first thing to remember is that despite identifying with the emptiness of the place of power, Berlusconi's authority is by no means less authoritative. Quite the contrary: controlling the majority of television in Italy, Berlusconi not only lays open the obscene dimension of his place of power, he controls its very discourse. Behind this 'clownish facade,' of which a constant stream of jokes is a not-insignificant part, 'there is a state power that functions with ruthless efficiency' (ibid.). To Žižek, Berlusconi represents the new, comic face of authoritarian capitalism. The jokes, vulgarities, and swagger are part of that efficiency; Berlusconi has made himself into that most despised figure for the comedian, the 'easy target.'

The problem with satire in the era of the postmodern is therefore a problem of ideology, and in particular the specific way in which ideology functions within the postmodern. To paraphrase Žižek, ideology today often appears as its opposite. From the world of Great British comedy we can take Thompson's (2004) scolding of the Alternative comedians of the 1980s for their refusal to deviate from 'anti-Thatcher ideology.' This, of course, was true—at least initially, what defined the new Alternative comedians was an ethical commitment to Marxism. But was the television comedy that followed this period, the depoliticised silliness of Vic and Bob or the documentary verisimilitude of *The Office* less 'ideological?' Our answer must be no.

All the same, it is my conclusion that the possibility of a 'political comedy' must begin with comedy as what the Frankfurt School would call *Ideologiekritik*. This chapter develops a theoretical model of comedy as a particular form of *Ideologiekritik* that responds to the ideology of global capital and the condition of the postmodern. I first engage in a detailed analysis of ideology as a crucial category for political thought, drawing on the work of Slavoj Žižek and the hegemony in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. This leads me to a directed critique of what I define as 'Carnavalesque laughter,' referring to

Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin. I then elaborate the methodology that carries through the rest of this thesis. As stand-up, paradigmatically, is a verbal form, it follows that my first point of interrogation should be comedy performance as a series of ‘enunciations,’ which we might then consider in terms of their relation to what in the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan is known as the Symbolic Order. Comedy as critique of ideology in the face of the postmodern condition must, in Lacanian terms, approach the conditions of the psychoanalytic ‘act’, which radically breaks from or restructures the Symbolic Order. This Lacanian framework should be read as a fidelity to the importance of Freud’s analysis of jokes, and their relation to the unconscious. The basis of clinical psychoanalysis is the intervention of the analyst through the Symbolic (language, signs), hence, talking cure, therefore, it is perhaps the wager of this thesis that comedy might enact a sort of ‘joking cure’ on a large scale, intervening through the Symbolic in order to touch some dimension of the Real. The final section of this chapter uses Deleuze’s concepts of difference, repetition, and non-sense to explain the ‘real’ of ambiguity found in the joke at a linguistic level.

2.1 - Enjoy! *your comedy: on ideology, cynical reason, and the ‘obscene double’*

In order to precisely define performance comedy’s capacity as form that is critical of ideology, or even breaks with it, we must first define ‘ideology’ and its operation in the postmodern era. For Žižek, whose synthesis of psychoanalysis, philosophy, and political theory (in essence, a socio-pathological mode of reading) I draw upon throughout this thesis, ideology in the postmodern era can be summarised by Lacan’s formula of the fetishist’s disavowal. In French: *Je sais bien, mais quand même*. In English, the phrase translates roughly to ‘I know very well, and yet, all the same...’ The fetishist knows there is nothing inherently special about her desired object (shoe, hair, and so on), but *all the same*, she does not change her behaviour. ‘Disavowing’ the belief allows the subject to maintain her pathological behaviour without accepting the full inconsistency of her pathology. Žižek writes (1989[2009], p. 25, italics added): ‘[...] Does this concept of ideology as a *naive* consciousness still apply to today’s world?’ The word naive is important here: against the classical Marxian

definition of ideology as false consciousness, Žižek argues that ideology today functions in full transparency, but embodies itself in ‘disavowed’ acts. He gives the example of ‘commodity fetishism.’ In the classic analysis, money is simply an embodiment of social relations, yet, for individuals using money the social relation ‘appears as an immediate, natural property of a thing called “money,” as if money is already in itself, in its immediate material reality, the embodiment of wealth’ (Žižek 1989[2009], p. 28). On the other hand, today:

When individuals use money, they know very well that there is nothing magical about it—that money, in its materiality, is simply an expression of social relations... The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing*, they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishists in practice, not in theory. (ibid., original emphasis).

This, as it were, ‘postmodern’ version of ideology might be termed ‘cynicism,’ which already draws a connection to the aforementioned ‘logic of satire.’ What is suggested by the application of a psychoanalytic framework is clear: there is something *perverse* in the postmodern functioning of ideology, and like the clinical patient disavowing their passionate attachment to the fetish item (shoe, hair, doll), the ideal subject of neo-liberalism may disavow a passionate attachment to ‘Capitalism,’ while all the same *in practice* rejecting out of hand, any movements or actions that interrupt or critique the ‘Master Signifier’⁴ of the ‘Market.’ To go further, this fetishistic attitude to ideology means that cynical distance is already part of the ideological text. If that distance is already incorporated into the ideological framework, then to simply stand outside ideology (if that were possible) and subject the ideological text to critique, is no longer sufficient. Or, as Žižek argues: ‘We can no longer subject the ideological text to “symptomatic reading,” confronting it with its blank spots, with what it must repress to organise itself... cynical reason takes this distance into account in advance’ (Žižek 1989[2008], pp. 26-27).

What relation does this have to performance comedy? Simply, that to subject the ideological text to ridicule does not liberate either the joker nor receiver of

⁴ A Master Signifier is an ideological signifier that ‘quilts’ the hegemonic field. It is ‘that signifier which gives those others their meaning to which they must ultimately be understood to be referring’ (Butler 2005, p. 32).

that joke from ideology, for ideology is already 'laughing with.' In other words, like Berlusconi's or Bush's gaffes, laughter and a sense of humour can be an intrinsic element of the neo-liberal state. Alenka Zupančič argues: 'If the imperative of happiness, positive thinking, and cheerfulness is one of the key means of expanding and solidifying [...] ideological hegemony, one cannot avoid the question of whether promoting comedy is not part of the same process' (Zupančič 2008, p. 7). The problem inherent with the logic of satire, then, is one of subject position. The fool is traditionally positioned 'outside' society, and thus able to comment on it, with greater impunity than a citizen. In other words, the fool is *outside* ideology and his/her position of abjection affords him/her a voice to ridicule or critique that ideology. On the other hand, today all individuals are, as it were, 'outside' ideology while simultaneously being contained within it.

Parody, satire, and forms of comedy involving a cynical or ironic distance can therefore be drawn together into a category that I will call, following Žižek (1994), comedy as 'obscene double.' The 'obscene double' can be illustrated by the fabled status of Aristotle's famously lost second book of *Poetics*. This mysterious text is at the heart of Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980). Andrew Stott summarises:

The book is at the heart of a monastic conspiracy to keep humour out of religion by suppressing the Aristotelian authority that lends comedy intellectual legitimacy [...] Eco's conspirators fear that if comedy were to be rehabilitated within respectable academic contexts, the conceptual order of things would be radically altered, and with it the social fabric that draws on its hierarchies [...] (Stott 2005, p. 17).

In this narrative, comedy is the 'dirty secret' that must be repressed, for the potency of its oppositional force. The monk's investment of faith in the radically disruptive potential of comedy reminds the reader of a (naive) belief in the transformative power of Carnival misrule, yet, as we will return to in the following section we must question whether such disruptions, obscenities, upending of hierarchies, in fact serve to reinforce the social fabric. As Žižek writes:

What is really disturbing about *The Name of the Rose* [...] is the underlying belief in the liberating, anti-totalitarian force of laughter, of ironic distance. Our thesis here is almost the exact opposite of this underlying premiss of Eco's novel: in contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian, that cynical distance, laughter, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously. (Žižek 1989 [2008], p. 24).

In other words, to explore the possibilities for a political comedy, we must first accept that comedy and comedy performance can be part of an ideological process, while at the same time, appearing oppositional to it.

An unusual, real life example illustrates the extreme degree to which laughter and joking are in advance incorporated as a part of the social structure. On 10 September 2002, Rena Salmon, a 43-year-old woman from Berkshire, England, shot dead her husband's lover Lorna Stewart, at Stewart's hairdressing salon in west London. At her trial, Salmon's husband Paul, read the jury a text message received from Salmon, which read 'I have just shot Lorna. This is not a joke.' How are we to read Salmon's bizarre addendum, 'this is not a joke?' On one hand this is a commonplace, an expression that stresses the seriousness of the previous statement ('I have just shot Lorna'). On the other hand, to paraphrase Zoe Williams' 2003 article for the Guardian on irony, we are now much more alert to irony than sincerity, that is, we perceive it more readily. Why should Salmon have felt the need to qualify her statement; why should anyone have thought Salmon was joking at all? The use of the phrase 'this is not a joke' suggests the degree to which nearly all communication today is, in a way, infused with a sense of joking. If even the gravest, most serious pronouncements must be suffixed then comedy in performance has no critical purchase. John Morreall writes:

The person with a sense of humour can never be fully dominated, even by a government which imprisons him, for his ability to laugh at what is incongruous in a political situation will put him above it to some extent and will preserve a measure of freedom—if not of movement, at least of thought. (Morreall 1983, p. 101).

A pessimistic rejoinder to Morreall might be the question: 'what if that freedom is *ideologically grounded*,' which is to say, the possibilities of 'humorous freedom,' amount to Sartre calls 'bad faith,' passive acquiescence to social

conventions and roles. Imagine for instance a typical joke from the popular primetime Hanna Barbara cartoon *The Flintstones*, in which a prehistoric animal is being used for a demeaning chore or manual labour task: the animal looks directly into the ‘camera,’ and in a heavy, working-class, Northeastern American accent says, ‘It’s a living,’ eliciting gales of canned-laughter. Of course, it *isn’t* a living, it’s really backbreaking and demeaning, yet the animal’s quip is correlative to the modern ideology of work and employment. Laughing at one’s boss (who appears, more often than not, deliberately, as a figure of fun) is necessary to the smooth functioning of the working relationship and allows certain exploitations to be borne with a smile and a ‘sense of humour.’ The parallels between this model and the medieval traditions of Carnival and ‘misrule’ are unavoidable, and I will discuss these in the following section. To return to Žižek, if ideology is not meant to be taken seriously, or to put it another way, ‘ideology doesn’t take itself seriously,’ then ideology might be said to delimit the contours of possibility within humour.

How has the ideology of late capitalism delimited the contours of comedy today? Precisely by ensuring that we do not take capitalism as an abstract system too seriously yet at the same time precluding any imaginings of possible alternatives to it. See, for example, the comic fictions that fall under the rubric of ‘chick-lit,’ or their big and small screen equivalent, *Sex and the City*, in which consumption itself becomes an ‘ironic’ activity, with Carrie et al’s fetishistic lust for ‘Manolos’ eliciting laughter while also appearing deeply aspirational. Or, as a more left-field example, we might look at Carl Banks’ reinvention of Dickens’ Ebenezer Scrooge as ‘Scrooge McDuck, the loveable Glaswegian anthropomorphised waterfowl hero of Disney’s animated television series *Duck Tales*. In a frequent comic motif, with a grace of an Olympic champion, Scrooge is shown diving from a high-dive board into his ‘money-pit.’ Contrary to the laws of physics, he does not break his bones on the hoard of gold coins, rather, they part, like water. We watch as this avatar of the subject of capitalist ideology ‘splashes’ around in his material fortune. On one level, laughter occurs here through incongruity; we laugh out of surprise as the material does not behave as it should. On another level, there is a sort of corrective laughter after Bergson’s well-known analysis. Scrooge is a ‘miser,’ and thus anathema to the ‘flowing’ of capital. We laugh at the ridiculousness of his money-pit and his pathological

revisiting of it, episode after episode. But these two levels of laughter prove to be two sides of the same coin, so to speak.. While laughing at Scrooge the miser, we delight in the excessive imagery of treasure spilling over; both of these levels affirm the function of capitalism through the principle of circulation. As we laugh and take pleasure in the spectacle of coins, bank-notes and other treasures belying their solid state and literally ‘flowing,’ like water, we affirm, ideologically, the smooth flow of capital.

While the above discussion of ideology as a category for political thought may strike the reader as utterly pessimistic or totalising—if there is no position from which one is outside ideology, then how can one go about critiquing it?—we must bear in mind that ideology, in the terms I have used here, is theoretically related to Lacan’s concept of the Symbolic, in triadic relation to the Real and Imaginary. Lacan’s symbolic order is defined in terms of linguistic structuralism, the order, upon entering, by which human subjects become *parlêtres*, in other words, ‘beings-of-language.’ But this structure is always-already incomplete: ‘[Lacan] introduces a conceptualisation of the symbolic which is not that of a closed circuit but that of an always lacking and incomplete ensemble. [...] Lacan’s structure is antinomical and lacking’ (Stavrakakis 2002, p. 523). Comic efficacy can therefore be defined as the comic act that *breaks with* the symbolic order. Rather than, as above, confronting the ideological text with its excluded obscenities or parodic form, the comedian might somehow break with it entirely, restructuring the symbolic fabric in its wake. Existing strategies for this precise form of *Ideologiekritik* are examined in the third section of this chapter. Before coming to these suggestions for a political comedy I will first examine some existing arguments for comedic-political efficacy, specifically in what I term the logic of the Carnavalesque.

2.2 - Critique of Satirical Reason: Carnavalesque Practices

Having explored the relationship of comedy to ideology, noting its problematic status in the era of the postmodern and under the ideological conditions of neoliberalism, we are now in a position to explore some concrete practices of comedy performance as sociopolitical praxis. These might include satirical stand-up and sketch, ‘transgressive comedy’ (that is, comedy that pushes the

boundaries of taste and propriety, and, the focus of this present section, *Carnavalesque* practices of activism (which have today been formalised as ‘tactical frivolity’). The philosopher Simon Critchley celebrates tactical frivolity as a means of deploying humour as resistance against the oppression of the state, noting groups or practices such as Pink Bloc, Billionaires for Bush, and Rebel Clown Army. While by no means dismissing the positive aspects of Carnavalesque activist practices, I question Critchley’s uncritical celebration of resistance through *enjoyment*. By identifying precisely the relationship of the multitudinous practices of carnival to ideology, the state, and power, we might better understand the possibilities of comedy in performance as subversive praxis. Later, I will move on to satirical practices and comedies of transgression.

I must first note that in all its appearances, from Bakhtin onwards, ‘The Carnavalesque’ makes, in my analysis, two quite sensible and important claims as a resistant and eventually revolutionary practice. Firstly, the possibility of misrule claims that the the symbolic order or law is not all-encompassing, and *can* be suspended or even broken. Secondly, carnival, as the writer Barbara Ehrenreich has charted in her ‘history of collective joy,’ is communal celebration, and operates through the formation of a community of equals (Ehrenreich 2008). These two claims encompass both content and relation to audience, both of which will become important grounds for my experimental practice, meaning a more critical interrogation of both claims is needed. The first of these claims, comedy/Carnival’s suspension or breaking of the symbolic order/law will be discussed in this chapter, leaving the question of audience/community for later chapters; it is enough for now to note that an uncritical celebration of ‘community’ is as troubling as the valorisation of transgressions I will explore here.

To return to the idea of ‘misrule,’ or suspension of the symbolic order/law, the question is of course, in what way is the law suspended? and for what reason? In my view, conventionally, practices of the Carnavalesque, satire, parody, and comedies of transgression, fall into the formal category identified above as the ‘obscene double.’ These practices often place the joking subject in a position *at a distance* from the dominant ideology or institution of power. But equally, this position might be read as a ‘fold’ of power, in the Deleuzian sense—that while

appearing exterior to official culture, it is really a necessary part of it. This leads us to question whether or not comedy performances might not act as a consolation or palliative, or even worse, a justification, for exploitation or injustice. In what way, therefore, might a Carnival protest act that begins by opposing a form of dominance, ultimately reproduce that same form? Willett notes that ‘the practices of comedy provide terribly effective tools, strategies, and tactics for reinforcing social patterns of domination and exclusion. Oppressive communities, for example, may generate internal unity by using ridicule to target social outcasts’ (Willett 2008, p. 116). But this suggests that this is always a conscious process. My interest here is in the unconscious process; that when one feels they are doing something subversive they are really doing the opposite. Sam Leith writes, with regard to the G20 protests in London on 1 April 2009: ‘Misrule festivals are not revolutionary, that’s the thing. Misrule festivals are what you have instead of a revolution. They invert the established order for a day, and thereby actually reinforce it’ (Leith 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/02/g20-protest>), which quite succinctly captures the problem in a formal sense—Carnival acts as safety valve, a sanctioned event to release political frustrations. It may seem churlish or puritanical to argue against such a celebratory practice, for, if anything, at least Carnival allows subjects of even the most oppressive regimes to tolerate their conditions. But Carnival laughter as release acts as a palliative for the smooth functioning of ‘official culture.’ This should be our first lesson; suspension or inversion of the established order/law cannot be confused with a break or rupture in the established order/law.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the Carnavalesque (1941) develops from his analysis of the 16th century French early novelist François Rabelais. Rabelais, Bakhtin diagnoses, develops a dialectical picture of medieval society, organised into ‘official culture’ on one hand, and ‘the culture of the marketplace’ on the other. Bakhtin, importantly, also uses the term ‘folk humour’ interchangeably with ‘culture of the marketplace.’ Folk humour is comprised of ‘1. *Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.; 2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.; 3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons’ (Bakhtin 1941 [1965], p. 5). It is tempting to find in Bakhtin’s writing a justification for the

emancipatory potential of transgression in comedy performance. Stott (2005, p. 34) writes: ‘the inversions and suspensions permitted and legitimised by carnival represent substantive challenges to authority, therefore offering the possibility that comedy, invested with the spirit of festive and carnival traditions, may also be an expression of popular discontent.’ But in no way is an expression of discontent equivalent to change or action. Stephen Greenblatt suggests that the formalised nature of such an expression in Carnival serves to keep this discontent in check: ‘[...] the form itself, as a primary expression of Renaissance power, helps to contain the radical doubts it continually evokes’ (Greenblatt 1985, p. 45, quoted in Stott 2005, p. 35). ‘Inversion and misrule, then, exist within a matrix of “licensed transgression”’ (ibid.). In other words, the disruptive potential of Carnival is necessary to the smooth functioning of official culture. The expression of the obscene (disavowed) double of official culture is the very thing that sustains its ideological fantasy. What is the relation of this critique of Carnival to comedy in performance? We might see Greenblatt’s critique of Bakhtin as an enlarged version of Freud’s economic theory of joking. In laughter, he writes, ‘[...] a sum of psychical energy which has hitherto been used for cathexis [an investment of mental energy in an object or person] is allowed free discharge’ (Freud 1960[2001], p. 148). This is commonly known as ‘relief theory’ (Morreall 1983) and suggests that laughter is a form of waste or excess. Extrapolating from the private unconscious to the social or community unconscious, the dispersal of cathexis in Carnival laughter relieves subjects of a particular regime of their (potentially) ‘revolutionary’ investment in overturning the conditions of their exploitation. Freud continues: ‘since laughter [...] is an indication of pleasure, we shall be inclined to relate this pleasure to the lifting of the cathexis which has previously been present’ (ibid.). We might therefore conclude: sanctioning a subversive message in the affective pleasure of Carnival laughter *negates* the message altogether. Recall Adorno’s discussion of an imagined ‘extremely light comedy of pranks’: in this hypothetical television comedy, a young schoolteacher attempts to subvert her exploitation by a cruel principal through a series of comic scenes in which she hustles food. Regardless, her exploitation continues, and she is starving. Adorno suggests the form of light comedy enables the ideological indoctrination:

[...] the script implies: ‘If you are as humorous, good-natured, quick-witted, and charming as she is, do not worry about being paid a starvation wage. *You can cope* with your frustration in a humorous way; and your superior wit and cleverness put you not only above material privations, but also above the rest of mankind.’ In other words, the script is a shrewd method of promoting adjustment to humiliating conditions by presenting them as objectively comic and by giving a picture of a person who experiences even her own inadequate position as an object of fun apparently free of any resentment. (Adorno 1972[2007], p. 167, emphasis added).

It attests to Adorno’s perspicuity as a cultural critic that this example, while a fictional academic exercise, seems entirely plausible. This example seems even more apt at the present time with the popularity of television comedies of humiliation, such as *The Office*, *Arrested Development*, and *The Life and Times of Tim*, which wring humour from excruciating situations. The latter, written by Steve Dildarian, is set in New York City and centres around Tim, an everyman worker for ‘Omnincorp,’ a name that telegraphs its satirical nature clearly. Tim endures constant, brutal humiliations at the hands of his employer (‘The Boss’) and Omnincorp—for example, taking the blame for his employer’s dog soiling a lift and biting ‘Helen’—but in each instance his deadpan humour can be read as ‘promoting adjustment’ to his conditions. But all this does not mean Dildarian and other comedy writers are secret ideologues, rather, it is a problem of form and structure. An audience might empathise with the plight of Adorno’s heroine (or Tim), but our conclusion is that simultaneously there is an unconscious acceptance of the ideology that forms the backdrop of the work. In other words, ideological critique does not necessarily take place in the content of the artefact, practice, or enunciation, but should be identified on a deeper level.

The problem is further complicated by the functioning of ideology in the era of the postmodern, discussed above. Firstly, any proper discussion of Carnival, or the culture of the marketplace, must consider that any transposition of Carnavalesque ideals to the present-day is far from symmetrical. Rabelais, c. 1494-1553, writes during a period of ecclesiastical official culture in dialectic relation with the culture of the marketplace, from which Carnival springs. If today’s present official culture is the free-market ideology of global capitalism, then official culture is to a degree, already ‘Carnavalesque.’ Sloterdijk proposes the idea of *kynicism* to describe the Carnavalesque opposition to the state. In a

satirical, mocking fashion, *kynicism* presents the obscene underside of the law. But today, this obscene underside of the law is already there for all to see. Žižek writes that this *kynicism* is answered by cynicism: ‘a kind of perverted “negation of the negation” of the official ideology: confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery, the cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective, and moreover, protected by the law’ (Žižek 1989, p. 26). Perhaps the clearest example of the sanctioned subversion I am describing is the conciliatory spectacle of protests that dutifully accompany any gathering of world leaders, such as the G20 protests described above. Apart from the media furore rightly surrounding the death of Ian Tomlinson at the hands of police officers, perhaps the most sinister practice was the police strategy of ‘kettling,’ the concept of sanctioned subversion made material and visible. ‘Kettling’ describes a police action in which protesters are confined to a specific area by both police and physical barriers. Inside, the law is ‘suspended,’ but only within a defined physical space. Despite the brutality of their situation, an atmosphere of celebration and ‘frivolity’ accompanied the protests. It might be argued therefore, the affective, pleasurable, and communal dimension of this Carnival laughter convinces performers they are taking part in something very subversive, when instead they are rendering visible the law’s internal logic. As a thought experiment, one is tempted to imagine the (comic) absurdity of the opposite situation—a protest where no one at all turns up, so that the cavalcade of riot police are faced with empty streets. This would expose the clear asymmetry of power relations. In a situation similar to the premise of José Saramago’s novel *Seeing* (in which, unorganised, 83% of voters in an unnamed country turn in a blank ballot at an election, throwing the system into chaos), this non-protest would reach towards the status of the Lacanian ‘act,’ the event that radically ‘breaks with’ (rather than ‘suspends’) the symbolic order/law. In contrast, Carnavalesque practices are ‘a specific form of transgression of the law,’ that hold together a community far more than the law itself (Žižek 2006 [2], p. 64). In the case of April 2009’s G20 protests, we can see that the established order was reinforced, along with its inherent sense or value: ‘they just want to create chaos!’ Or, as Sam Leith puts it, wonderfully:

The G20 protester who hesitated to condemn violent or invasive action against property—on the grounds that she would like to hear some

"rainforest polyphonic singing" in the vaults of the Bank of England [...] will have made it all too easy to connect concern with climate change and developing-world poverty, disapproval of unregulated capitalism, human rights protests, political problems including but not limited to the situations in Gaza and Iraq, and a host of other issues, and roll them up into a great big ball marked stupid hippies. (Leith 2009, *ibid.*).

'Tactical frivolity'

We have now established the problematic kinship between Carnival practice as *Ideologiekritik* and the ideology itself, in that the 'parodies both oral and written' (Bakhtin 1941[1965], *ibid.*) that Bakhtin attributes to folk humour are themselves the necessary obverse of official culture and deeply implicated in its efficient functioning. We have also considered the psychoanalytic implications of the negation of demand in Carnival, from the perspective of both individual subject and collective. What of the practices themselves?

The term 'tactical frivolity' is used by Critchley (2008, p. 123-124) to designate 'a new language of civil disobedience that combines street-theatre, festival, performance art and what might be described as forms of non-violent warfare,' though the term most likely emerged in the discourses of the activists/artists themselves. The predominant mood of these modern practices is celebratory, grotesque, silly; in a word, Carnavalesque. Eschewing the more 'old-fashioned' solidarity of chants and worker's marches (no Emma Goldmans here!), the manifold practices of tactical frivolity seem to me unique for their refusal to voice any concrete demands, aiming instead at disrupting the functioning of the state. There is some undeniable merit to these practices. Before the first 'Battle for Seattle' in 1999, a gathering of activists under the world-wide banner of People's Global Action (organised via the internet), descended on London in a 'carnival against capitalism.' According to Wat Tyler, despite intense media scrutiny, the event 'took everybody by surprise. 10,000 revellers wearing carnival masks split into dozens of autonomous groups and invaded the heart of London's financial district, *disrupting trading* while dancing to the wild sound of samba music, and causing over a *million pounds worth of damage*' (Tyler 2001, <http://artactivism.gn.apc.org/allpdfs/188-Dancing%20at%20the%20Edge.pdf>, emphasis added). Tactical frivolity, in this case, is a way of 'softening the blow,' appearing less threatening while causing the same

disruption to a system of exploitation as older, angrier anarchist practices. As Critchley writes: ‘Politically, humour is a powerless power that uses its position of weakness to expose those in power through forms of self-aware ridicule’ (Critchley 2008, p. 124). It is not my desire to criticise this aspect of Carnavalesque protest, but rather to interrogate the role of humour and comedy in these practices and their relationship to the ideologies in which they are embedded in perhaps a deeper way than Critchley does. It seems to me that moments of true disruption (blocking roads in order to stop a meeting) in these practices are separable from their humorous trappings, and it is imperative to consider this before uncritically valorising humour’s non-existent qualities of subversion.

While giving tactical frivolity a philosophical legitimacy, Critchley’s view on humour is entirely too optimistic and for the most part, vague. He writes (ibid.): ‘contemporary anarchist practice exercises a satirical pressure on the state in order to show that other forms of life are possible.’ From a Freudian perspective, or to follow Bataille, this is unacceptable; the ‘forms of life’ represented here are defined by their inability to be sustained; moments of Carnival relieve excessive waste energy. Similarly: ‘it is the exposed, self-ridiculing and self-undermining character of these forms of protest that I find most compelling as opposed to the pious humourlessness of most forms of vanguardist active nihilism and some forms of contemporary protest (I name no names)’ (ibid.). I for one would like Critchley to ‘name some names’—as it stands his denunciation of others’ pious humourlessness would include *Medecins sans frontières*. And other than the obvious spectacle, what is precisely so compelling about humorous protest? The great problem, as I see it, is celebrating humour, joy, or ‘dancing’ in these practices as ‘goods’ in and of themselves. In doing so, the eschewing of (ideological) demands for silliness can find itself very much replicating the conditions of the ideology in which it is embedded. In the eleven years which have passed since the WTO Summit in Seattle, protest of this sort has become formalised and depleted of its original anarchic values (see my earlier example of the G20 protests above). Celebration, humour, and Carnival, then, as values in themselves, are, as I have demonstrated above, deeply inculcated in the ideology of neo-liberalism. There can be an Orwellian cast to some of the literature of tactical frivolity; one

particular activist writes: ‘Essentially, if you're not happy, you're doing the wrong thing!!!! [sic]’ (<http://www.rhythmsofresistance.co.uk/?lid=116>), which is a terrifying and succinct summary of Žižek’s elaboration of the modern superego injunction to Enjoy!⁵ There is no room, in contemporary politics of resistance, for anger or frustration. This sort of ideological inculcation, reabsorption into dominant discourses, is not confined to protest, of course. While the opening of The Comedy Store in 1979 for a time provided an antidote to the racist, sexist and homophobic ‘mainstream’ comedy, in a sort of double-negation, it soon became absorbed into the very thing it sought to critique. Stott writes (2005, p. 126), ‘Parody and satire are good for demolishing dogma but not for constructively offering alternatives to it. Alternative comedy found itself censoring guilty form to the extent that it struggled to find material and had to replace blacks and women with red-haired people and Margaret Thatcher.’ The affective pleasure of laughter was a gathering point for a communal experience, but the solidarity of community soon became a form of dominance. It is not merely a distrust of profits or success at stake, the point is that the subversive message itself was diluted. While retaining characteristics of Alternative comedy such as the monologue form (as opposed to the repeatable one-liners of club comics), the current crop of (oxymoronic) mainstream ‘Alternative’ comedians rarely retain their forebears’ social concerns. Whereas Thompson berates Alternative comedy for being too ideological, my problem with what follows is that it is perhaps not ideological enough, or rather, it does not engage in a critique of ideology in any meaningful way.

2.3 - *The Big Other is hilarious: a Lacanian approach to comedy studies*

Accepting that performance comedy’s sociopolitical efficacy in the era of late-capitalism is determined by its capacity as a form of *Ideologiekritik*, and having previously in this chapter established the functioning of ideology today as somewhat ‘comic’ in itself, I now intend to pursue this line of thinking more

⁵ ‘[...] enjoyment itself, which we experience as “transgression,” is in its innermost status something imposed, ordered—when we enjoy, we never do it “spontaneously,” we always follow a certain injunction’ (Žižek 1991[2008], p. 9).

deeply, and to examine performance comedy *qua* critique of ideology according to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan. This turn to Lacan is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, while Freud's 'economic' model of humour as a release/relieving of cathectic energy is almost dogmatically accepted as forming a theoretical pillar of comedy studies ('Relief Theory'), it takes on a cast of benign resignation when applied to my particular project, which questions whether humour might not merely have a structural/economic social function, but a more radical, disruptive function. In the same way that Lacan saw American ego-psychology as a corruption of Freud's discovery of the unconscious, and his own theories as a return to Freud, I feel it is important to step away from the present concerns of comedy studies (offense; identity politics) to return to jokes and their relation to the (political) unconscious. Therefore Lacanian theory forms the methodological/theoretical backdrop of this thesis and should be read as a return to Freud in comedy studies.

Secondly, following Žižek (1989), I will argue that Lacanian theory is well suited to explaining the subject's 'disavowal' of dominant and exploitative ideologies, one of the crucial ways in which ideology is able to today function with ruthless, utilitarian efficiency. Thus, by exploring the theoretical propositions of (comic) disavowal, we might also identify those ways in which a comic practice might do precisely the opposite, and serve to enable the audience-subject to 'Traverse the Fantasy,' that is, to identify with the little kernel of the Real (their Symptom), and in doing so, lose the fantasy which sustains their repetition of institutional rituals and also their Symbolic identity (Boucher & Sharpe 2010, p. 12). In this loss of stable Symbolic/institutional identity the subject is then able, in theory, to learn to live again, imagining new possibilities, new ways of being. While this is my hypothesis, subsequently developed through praxical investigation supported by a number of case studies, the uninitiated reader may find these terms (fantasy, symbolic order, Real) unfamiliar. My aim in this sections is threefold: (1) to define and explore the concepts of Lacanian theory most relevant to my project, particularly those concerning the structure of ideological disavowal; (2) to investigate the relation between Lacan's concept of the unconscious and ideology, particularly the postmodern, cynical, or 'disavowed' function of ideology; and (3) to explore two ways in which comic practices, I argue, *can* intervene in the political unconscious, in a similar way as

psychoanalysis, as a ‘talking cure’ can intervene into the unconscious of the analysand.

R, S and I.

Following Žižek’s application of Lacanian psychoanalysis onto political philosophy, I submit that not only is Lacanian theory useful in explaining political ideology in the era of late capitalism, particularly with regard to the psycho-social phenomenon of ‘disavowal’ I have previously detailed in the beginning of this chapter, it is also useful in mapping and identifying certain forms of comic practice that function as *Ideologiekritik*, beyond the ‘inherent transgressions’ of satire. While, previously (2.1) I have focused on Žižek’s application of Lacan’s formula of the fetishist’s disavowal (‘I know very well, and yet all the same...’) to ideology, the term, for Lacan is clinical, relating to the structure of perversion: the pervert simultaneously knows and denies his/her own fetish. The clinical origin of Lacan’s concept necessitates an elaboration of Lacanian subjectivity before we can fully extrapolate from subjectivity to ‘political subjects,’ and from fetishistic disavowal to ideological disavowal. I focus my discussion here on the R, S, and I, or the formal matrix by which Lacan develops his three ‘orders,’ the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, as these will be recurring concepts in my analysis of comic practices.

The orders R, S and I are held in what Lacan describes as a ‘Borromean Knot,’ a figure comprised of three interlocking rings. Although each order or ring is independent of the others, the structure (of the psyche) falls apart if any one ring is broken or removed entirely – for example, psychosis is the failure of the Symbolic to properly come to terms with (that is, Symbolise), the traumatic Real. To explain the RSI, we may turn to de Saussure’s linguistic structuralism (Lacan’s recourse to which often sees him labeled a ‘post-structuralist theorist’ – when in actuality, his is a theory of the clinic). Bailly (2009, p. 91) notes that Lacan describes the relationship between the two orders as correlative to that between signifier and signified; the Symbolic is the order of the signifier, while the Imaginary is the order of the signified. It is imperative to note that ‘signified’ in this context does not refer to some ‘Real’ content, but rather to an idea of the Real. ‘Cat’ in the order of language (Symbolic) is defined through its differential

relations to other words in a sentence or grammar; Cat refers to an Imaginary *idea* of a furry, four-legged, carnivorous animal; but in the order of the Real, there is some undefinable, unknowable ‘cat-ness’ that ultimately escapes both the idea and the word. The connection with language is imperative; Lacan’s famous discovery, as groundbreaking as Freud’s original discovery of the unconscious, is that ‘the unconscious is structured like a language,’ by which he means it obeys a radical set of rules and grammar, rather than the implication that it can be ‘read.’ The entering into language is what, for Lacan, constitutes becoming a subject (‘parlêtres,’ in the Lacanian neologism, literally, ‘*beings of language*.’). Language is not used purely in the sense of the language which we speak, but might be better referred to as *discourse*: ‘the unconscious is the discourse of the other. This discourse of the other is not the discourse of the abstract other, of the other in the dyad, of my correspondent, nor even of my slave, it is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated’ (Lacan 1978 [1988], p. 89). This circuit, in other words, is the Big Other (*le grand autre*), the symbolic order, which, as Bruce Fink writes: ‘serves to cancel out the *real*, to transform it into a social, if not socially acceptable, *reality*’ (Fink 1995, p. 56, emphasis added). What is the real that is canceled out by the Symbolic? *Stricto sensu*, the Real is not ‘real,’ rather, it is the breaks or kinks in the symbolic order, the (horrifying) Thing that cannot be symbolised, what we touch in ‘traumatic’ experiences. The Real gives support to reality, while simultaneously undermining it. For the purposes of this thesis, our primary concern should be the relation between reality (the Imaginary and Symbolic appropriation of the Real) and Real as ‘impossible encounter.’ It is in the ‘impossible encounter’ with the Real that a disavowal (of a fetish, of an ideology), is no longer sustainable by the subject. The clinical subject must learn to live again without the background support of their fetish, the political subject regains political agency. Let us explore this further through Žižek’s contribution to Lacanian theory, an analysis of modern political ideology.

The (political) subject identifies herself with an Ego-Ideal, which is her place in a network of Symbolic Relations. Say, she, as all political agents are, is a complex person with many ‘selves’ in many circumstances, but overall she identifies as an ‘American.’ ‘American’ then functions as a ‘Master-Signifier,’ or *point de capiton* (quilting point), which holds together an impossible-to-

reconcile field of innumerable other signifiers (that is to say, what meaning does 'American' have in-itself bar a collection of insufficient and contradictory elements such as 'apple pie' or 'Mom'?). Because the Master-Signifier is effectively meaningless, the subject must suppose an Imaginary Other, represented as I(O), or a 'big Other,' a psychic representation of a vast socio-symbolic network that functions as the guarantee of the subject's Ego-Ideal. Žižek's grand theoretical discovery is to note that while the big Other 'gives the subject a social mandate, a definite role to play in worldly affairs' (Sharpe & Boucher 2010, p. 52), it also protects the subject from fully identifying with, or getting too close to, the empty, inconsistent Master Signifier (in this case, America). The subject does not need to fervently *believe* in this or that political ideology, because there is a big Other, a socio-symbolic network of others, which she supposes all believe in her place. Which means that she can go about her business, perhaps enjoying some inherent transgressions, all the while reproducing, in her actions, the ideological fantasy she does not whole-heartedly believe in.

But there is also a psychic cost. Take, for example, a nationalistic ideology, such as Tea Party movement in the United States. Borrowing Lacan's formula, $\$ \diamond (a)$, we see that political subjects, or $\$$ (barred subject), are united by a relationship of 'mutual exclusion', or \diamond , to an *objet petit a*, or (a) , a little piece of the Real (Sharpe & Boucher 2010, p. 58). In other words, the subject fades away the closer it comes to getting what it truly wants. Applied to the Tea Party, these subjects define themselves by their relationship to ideological objects, little pieces of the impossible Real such as 'free-market,' 'no government intervention' and so on. But of course, if they ever had these things, their very identities as Teabaggers would be nullified. Thus, they must posit a fantasy of Imaginary Others who are a threat to this (a) , in this case, represented by signifiers such as 'socialism,' 'Obama-care,' and so on. In other words, political subjects are passionately attached, through their impossible desire, to 'sublime objects of ideology,' which they suppose are always under threat. In this way the social field becomes riven with antagonisms and conflicts, a point that will take on a useful importance in my later discussion of audience in Chapters 5 and 6.

Taking together two Žižekian/Lacanian concepts of disavowal and sublime objects of ideology, we see that what psychoanalysis fundamentally tells us is that ideology, for example, national identification, is not as simple as habitual adherence to a symbolic law, but a libidinal investment, an attachment to a fantasy which allows for a safe relationship with the Real. It can also be argued that this analysis of ideology is fundamentally pessimistic and leaves no room for political action. In the following section I will address this question of exteriority, through the Lacanian concept of ‘traversing the fantasy,’ and its relation to a comic practice.

Ideology and exteriority

In a number of ways, Žižek’s ‘materialist’ analysis of ideology is similar to Althusser’s, but where he differs is in the possibility of an exteriority to ideology. The Lacanian analysis of ideology, detailed above, tells us that no symbolic network is ever perfect, or total. Rather, like a round hole to a square peg it refuses to fit, and like a spider’s web, it is rent by fissures, through which the Real is made sensible. In this analysis, the subject’s disattachment from an ideological fantasy is always possible, just as it is possible for the analysand to detach herself from her symptom. From this point I would like to develop a theoretical line mapping the analysand/political subject onto the figure of the comedian, in order to identify the correlation between my explication of Lacanian theory and Comedy. The ‘political agency of comedy’ lies in its ability to transform disavowal of ideology into agency, through a ‘nonsensical’ counter to the stultifying effects of the illegitimate ‘disjunctive synthesis’ (outlined in the following section, 2.4).

Simon Critchley argues that humour acts as a kind of sublimation, drawing on Lacan’s use of the term as a redirection or outlet for some traumatic ‘Real.’ In a way, Critchley is right: in the postmodern-cynical mode of ideology, it is humour which helps sublimate the traumatic inconsistencies of ideology (papering over the cracks, as it were) — take, for instance, the now clichéd expression ‘laugh it off.’ Boucher and Sharpe argue that ‘few people can happily accept the idea that they are dupes or fools [of a set of ideological beliefs],’ but comic practices are indeed one way in which people can and do accept this

duped, foolish stance. Take, for instance, Sarah Palin, who takes every attempt by satirists to characterise her as a stupid, crazed Republican ‘dupe,’ and wears them openly, like a badge of honour, the culmination of which was an appearance on *Saturday Night Live* behind Tina Fey, the comedian responsible for some of the most vicious Palin satire. Palin’s ‘being able to take a joke’ is actually an exercise of power. In this way, a comic practice is actually a component of a political subject’s *disavowal*.

I want therefore to demonstrate that it is possible for a comic moment to *do more* than sublimate these traumatic inconsistencies. The key is to identify the difference between transgression and what Žižek calls traversing the fantasy. This is the point at which the comic act can be said to be an authentic (Lacanian) ‘act.’ For Lacan, the end of the clinical process of psychoanalysis comes when the analysand ends the transferential relationship, that is, when it is no longer supposed that the analyst has the ‘key’ to unlock the analysand’s neuroses. The analyst takes on full responsibility of his/her identification with the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of his/her desire, and in doing so, becomes, more fully, an agent. In Žižek’s political analysis, this traversing of the fantasy involves two steps. Firstly, recall that ‘individuals transpose their belief on to the big Other [the official discourse] (embodied in the collective), which therefore believes in their place’ (Žižek 1991[2008], p. lxx). This means that it is the subject’s *dis*-identification from the official discourse that gives the discourse its consistency; someone, somewhere, this unknown ‘other’, is the perfect subject who truly believes. Secondly: ‘if individuals were deprived of this belief (projected onto the “big Other”), they would have to jump in and *directly assume the belief themselves*’ (ibid.). To assume the belief is to encounter ideology directly, in all its inconsistency—and as we have seen above, it is precisely where the gaps in the symbolic order are rendered that the traumatic Real emerges. At the same time, in this process the political subject regains his/her capacity for action.

The Lacanian ‘act’ transposed onto the political field is that which violates the symbolic order of language, law, and social relations, but it differs from the inherent transgressions of Carnival. It is, ‘a move that, so to speak, *defines its own conditions*; retroactively produces grounds which justify it’ (ibid., p. 192).

In other words, it does not ‘break’ the law, but restructures the law entirely. Lacan’s celebrated reading of *Antigone* provides an example (1986[1992]). At the heart of Sophocles’ play is a dialectical confrontation between the symbolic law of Creon (one might say, Ancient Greek ideology), and Antigone’s moral law, which emerges in the cracks of the symbolic law. In Antigone’s refusal, or ‘No!’ to Creon, she is excluded from the symbolic order, expelled from the community, and condemned to a ‘living-death,’ entombed alive in a cave. But her ‘no’ reaches the status of an ‘act’ through its effect on Creon—his symbolic authority is ablated, and he loses everything. The comic ‘act’ is perhaps less epic in scope. A comic ‘act’ is an enunciation by which the comic (like the analysand, the political agent) realises his own misperception of the problem, not striking at a target outside of himself, but back at himself. In other words, it is the passage from traditional satire, to the more nuanced case studies and other performative and literary examples of comic practice detailed in this thesis.

How do we distinguish the precise breaking with the symbolic order embodied in the ‘act’ with the many inherent (and comic) transgressions that form the basis of the subject’s dis-identification with the dominant ideology. It is clear that the majority of (particularly ‘transgressive’) comic performances are contained within and indeed sustained by the symbolic order (or big Other, or dominant ideology, and so on). Michael V. Tueth writes:

[transgressive humour] depend[s] upon a basic consensus of standards and boundaries, otherwise the joke would not be pleasurable. The *societal taboos must remain*, so that one can experience the delight of the entry into forbidden realms, a childish joy in simply breaking all the adult taboos, a pleasure indulged in for the sake of exposure of the impulses we have all been forced to repress. (Tueth 2005, in Dalton and Linder eds. 2005, p. 29. emphasis added).

Is this not the logic of the Carnavalesque on a smaller scale—in the idea of a sanctioned transgression, and a release of repressed impulses? But does transgressive/Carnavalesque humour serve a social purpose beyond the reinforcing of the symbolic order? I want to argue that it is at this point that most literature on comedy and social efficacy stumbles. Take for instance, Maggie Andrews (1998, p. 51), who suggests: ‘Comedy has potentially a unique ability to *be political* in that it operates so frequently by transgressing

boundaries' (quoted in Wagg ed. 1998), emphasis added). What does it mean to 'be political?' and how exactly does the transgression of boundaries do this? Andrews' overall argument is that comic representations can challenge and therefore deconstruct hegemonic discourses. So far, so good. But Andrews is not specific enough in her definition of 'transgression,' and retreats to celebrating grotesque, comic representations as by definition 'political.' This cannot square with our precise, Lacanian definition of ideology or discourse. Firstly, the supposed transgressions—a comic representation, revelling in low forms of behaviour, obscenity, and so on—are contained already by the dominant ideology. Secondly, performance comedy as a form is 'sanctioned' by official culture, frivolity or enjoyment operating within a logic of leisure time.

This is not to say that comedy is by definition always in collusion with official discourse, the pessimistic conclusion that may be drawn at this point. On the contrary, the way in which ideology functions today, through cynicism and dis-identification; this opens up a number of avenues for comic resistance. One might take Virno's statement as a starting point: '[...] joke-making is a very specific language game, one that shows, in filigree detail, that all language games can be transformed' (2008, p. 165). Some developments in comedy performance have, as it were, 'played games' with the symbolic order. The episode 'Notapussy,' of the cultish American television comedy *Arrested Development* provides a good example, which, if not reaching the radical restructuring of the 'act,' certainly plays a specific game with the implicit and explicit rules of the ideologies of American media and television, censorship, and propriety. Written by Ron Weiner, and directed by Lev L. Spiro, the episode features an encounter between Michael Bluth (Jason Bateman) and his new English girlfriend, Rita, played by Charlize Theron. Riding his bike to meet Rita, Michael arrives out of breath. When Rita asks him why he is so, Michael replies: 'You leave me breathless.' Rita's response: 'Oh Michael, you're such a [pussy].' (The word in square brackets is censored). Ron Howard's narration tells the viewer: 'Michael couldn't believe it. What he didn't know was that she meant it in the British sense of the word: sweet or gentle, like a pussycat.' The scene then cuts back to Rita and Michael, and the line is repeated: 'you're such a pussy.' This time the word is not censored, though Michael's shocked reaction remains the same.

In the second instance Charlize Theron is openly saying the word ‘pussy,’ which, in its implied, though not, in this case, explicit, meaning, is verboten on American television. What then is the purpose of censoring the first usage? Spiro and Weiner seem to play with the status of symbolic prohibitions, calling into question the logic that would ban one use of the signifier ‘pussy’ from the airwaves but not the other. The moment is doubly complicated through the *inter-subjective* double-meaning the word pussy produces in the second instance. Rita’s British usage of ‘pussy’ is intended as a term of endearment, while Michael’s interpretation of the word comes as an unpleasant, genital term of abuse (this double meaning, or misrecognised communication, is at the heart of many jokes). But the mechanism of television censorship (i.e. ‘bleeping’) is such that the received meaning cannot be censored leaving the other intact. Thus the moment seems to call on the big Other to act, to expressly prohibit, and therefore recognise the existence of, the obscene underside of its own ideology.

The Lacanian framework established in this section allows us to identify moments that comedy can infiltrate into the fissures and cracks of the symbolic order, and the precise positioning from which to do this. In order to avoid the logic of the Carnavalesque, a socio-politically efficacious comedy practice must acknowledge the limits of opposition (forms of mocking, satire, inherent transgressions, and *kynicism*), all of which are social and cultural practices that enable political subjects to disavow their adherence to a dominant or exploitative ideology, and devise new ways of making comedy that step ‘outside’ the fold. Such practices can be better understood through Lacan’s category’s of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary. In other words, the comic, like the analysand, utters enunciations that operate at the level of the Symbolic and Imaginary, and, through a particular discursive formula, encounter the inconsistencies of the symbolic order. This ‘traversing of the fantasy’ is the process by which the subject can no longer continue to believe without believing, that is to say, to disavow their belief in an ideology. Let us now examine two forms of comic practice that embody this theoretical structure. I will firstly look at Žižek’s concept of ‘over-identification,’ and secondly, the comic trend of ‘postmodern irony.’

Over-identification

The art collective NSK (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*), and its most popular members, the music group Laibach, practice, according to Žižek, a strategy of over-identification. He writes: ‘In the process of the disintegration of socialism in Slovenia, they staged an aggressive, inconsistent mixture of Stalinism, Nazism and *Blut und Boden* ideology’ (Žižek 2006 [2], p. 65). Arts critic of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer Regina Hackett notes one particular project, in which a group of NSK artists submitted a poster entry to a contest in order to win the chance to represent the Yugoslavian Youth Day Celebration (Hackett 2004, http://www.seattlepi.com/visual_art/200214_visual19.html). The poster won, however, ‘[it] turns out the artists [...] had copied a painting by Nazi artist Richard Klein, replacing the Nazi flag with the Yugoslav flag and the German eagle with a dove’ (ibid.). What separates this from a traditional comparative critique between two regimes of power is the reaction of the authorities (the NSK artists were arrested), which demonstrates an unease rarely found with parodic art practice. It is really the reaction of their intended audience (and targets) we should be watching. Žižek writes:

The first reaction of enlightened leftist critics was to conceive of Laibach as the ironic imitation of totalitarian rituals; however, their support for Laibach was always accompanied by an uneasy feeling: ‘What if they really mean it?’ [...]—or in a more cunning version of the same thing, transferring one’s own doubt on to the other: ‘What if Laibach overestimates their public? What if the public takes seriously what Laibach mockingly imitates, so that Laibach actually strengthens what it purports to undermine?’ This uneasy feeling feeds on the assumption that ironic distance is automatically a subversive attitude. (Žižek 2006 [2], p. 65).

Instead of signifying their distance from the ideology they critique, NSK collapse the distance, identifying too much, too traumatically with the ideology. It is important to note that this form of resistance is made possible under ideological conditions where cynical distance is already part of the ideological text. For example, the question immediately raised is that surely some internal or intentional distance must be there on the part of the *artist*, or else how can the work differ from the everyday practice of those who genuinely do identify with

the ideology? The point, of course, that Lacan's RSI shows us, is that in actual fact, *no one can* genuinely and authentically identify with the ideology, for to do so would be to take on for oneself all the ideology's inconsistencies and antagonisms, precisely the points where the Real emerges. The strategy of over-identification presents this genuinely identifying subject in all of its traumatic dimensions; if we are not meant to take ideology seriously (and therefore, in practice, reproduce it), then to over-identify is to take it far too seriously. In some cases this can assume an 'asymmetric' and 'innocent' subject position, as in the story of the child who points out the emperor's lack of clothes. In Hans Christian Andersen's story, the community disavows two things: the fact of the emperor's nudity, but also the underlying fact that the Emperor (or any emperor) has no inherent or individual qualities that make him an emperor. The role is purely symbolic. The community is thus sustained by an ideological fantasy: the thing 'everyone knows' (the emperor is just a man) remains unsaid, with the belief in the official discourse ('the emperor is our leader') transposed onto the Other. So, in a Lacanian reading, the child's performative speech act ('the emperor has no clothes!') is 1) an 'act' with equally catastrophic consequences as Antigone's refusal to Creon, though in this case, comic, rather than tragic, and 2) an 'over-identification.' The child is the ideal ideological subject, the one who believes too seriously. For him, the emperor is an emperor in himself, therefore, it is too troubling to see him nude, exposed, and humiliated. In his comic act, the unsaid core of the community comes to light, and the emperor's symbolic authority is suspended. It is not as if the subjects of the kingdom are suddenly given glasses that can liberate them from a collective delusion; rather it is that once the unsaid core is said, the fantasy can no longer be sustained⁶.

From theory to praxis, one comic example of this strategy is found in Žižek's own biography. It is summarised here by Robert Pfaller:

⁶ Over-identification is also an inherently *comic* strategy, as this example of 'The Emperor's New Clothes' illustrates. Take for instance, the ludicrous story of the Heenes, and their son Falcon, the so-called Balloon Boy. Is this not a modern version of the boy who points out the emperor's nudity? In October 2009, the Heene parents devised a hoax in which they would say their son, Falcon, had been accidentally launched into the sky in a weather balloon. While television cameras captured the balloon floating away, Falcon was waiting in the attic. Later, when interviewed on live television, Falcon gave the game away, saying to his father 'You said we were doing this for a show.' Balloon Boy himself is the ideal subject of his parent's authority, guilty only of playing the game too earnestly.

It was an open secret that the communist party [of former Yugoslavia] would get 99% of the votes in every election. Once, shortly after such an election, the newspaper of Žižek's oppositional group came up with a headline stating that after a part of the votes had been counted, it looked 'as if the communists would actually remain in power.' Playing the official game of 'free election' to that extent, without sharing the obscene distance towards this semblance, brought Žižek and his comrades into serious trouble with the police. Not to declare the allegedly free elections a joke, but on the contrary, taking this semblance seriously proved to be the dangerous move. (Pfaller 2005, p. 119).

What is radical in this strategy is the way in which it throws the deadlock of forced choice back onto the location of power. In a way, the act of over-identification is the 'Yes, please!' of the old Marx Brothers' joke quoted in the introduction of this thesis. In the example from Žižek's own life, the gesture of his and his fellow students made it impossible for the communist apparatchiks to act (to shut down the newspaper, or force the students to print a retraction) without officially confirming the disavowed, implicit rule (we don't acknowledge the election is fixed) that sustains the explicit rule (we must vote because our system is a democratic one).

Of course, both Žižek & company's gesture, and NSK are based in the specific historical circumstances of former Yugoslavia and the final days of 'Really Existing Socialism.' The situation is very different in the context in which this thesis is being written, in other words, the present-day, Western logic of global capital. I want to argue that though still effective, over-identification with neoliberal or neoconservative ideologies as specifically performative gestures contained by the cultural industries demonstrate less concrete 'proof' of their efficacy than the examples given above, though even in the smallest gestures we might read a 'Yes, please!' reversal of the ideological forced choice. I want to examine two examples: the performances of Andy Kaufman, which cultural theorist Florian Keller argues is a form of over-identified critique of American ideology, and the explosion of home-made iconoclasm of amateur videos in the age of the internet.

In the 1970s, American comedian Andy Kaufman confounded audiences with his bizarre performances. Keller (2005) argues that Kaufman's comedy was so

confounding because of this strategy of over-identification; in this case with the ideology of the 'American Dream,' embodied in Kaufman's overly sincere performances of 'showbiz' characters as nightclub singer Tony Clifton. Keller defines this form of comedy in contrast to the work of Lenny Bruce, who is frequently celebrated for his 'transgressive' performances as a hero for free speech. At a time when obscenity laws were actually enforced, Bruce repeatedly used offensive or obscene language in his stand-up performances, which lead to his arrest on several occasions. Keller describes this as 'aggressively teas[ing] the law' (Keller 2005, p. 26). Though Bruce was actually violating the law with his performances, these violations were no less Carnavalesque:

[...] his transgressions may have been purely formal gestures that failed to redefine the symbolic field or make the law collapse. On the contrary, insofar as his violations induced the law to operate on its own terms, one can say he actually courted its symbolic sanction. [...] In the final instance, then, the 'sick' comedy of Lenny Bruce actually 'makes the law work.' (Keller 2005, p. 27).

It is Kaufman, Keller argues, who was the truly transgressive comedian of this period, taking the position of an 'innocent' (note the recurring theme), who truly believes in the ideology of the, as Keller describes it, 'American Dream.' Kaufman's childishly playful performances ranged from sing-alongs with the audience to '99 bottles of beer,' to inviting the audience to another venue to have milk and cookies after the show. This, as Auslander describes, is Kaufman's 'intentional infantilism' (Auslander 1994, quoted in Keller 2005, p. 13). Like the child in Andersen's story, Kaufman takes the position of one who does not know what to disavow. The American Dream, according to Keller, is the ideological imperative that the American citizen must self-invent and self-rely in pursuit of happiness. Followed to its limit, this is a dream of stardom and showbiz success (Keller 2005, p. 65). The constant re-invention of Kaufman's onstage personae show a man playing the game too much and too earnestly. It was a fundamental contradiction, it seemed, that a man who could charm so effortlessly as Latka on the sitcom *Taxi* could be filled with such terrifying antagonism for his audience as nightclub singer Tony Clifton. This duality is key:

On the one hand, Kaufman acts as the ‘nice’ American star who has perfected the trajectory prescribed by the myth of success [...] but at the same time he confronts his audiences with the ‘psychotic night’ of excessive enjoyment [...] he reveals that this enjoyment can only be gained at the expense of your own self-evacuation. In this sense, Andy Kaufman represents the uncanny ‘incarnation’ of this traumatic *jouissance* that forms the unacknowledged kernel of the American Dream. (Keller 2005, pp. 63-64).

Let us recall the Lacanian definition of ‘traversing the fantasy’ earlier in this chapter. ‘Fantasy’—and for ‘fantasy’ we might substitute ‘ideology,’ in other words, the set of values, ideals, or beliefs that ‘fill out’ the symbolic positions of the social structure—is the means by which the trauma of the Real (*jouissance*) is subjectified. By over-identifying with the fantasy of the American Dream, Kaufman embodies the perfect Žižekian ‘subject supposed to believe.’ We, the audience, see the perfect, believing subject of American ideology contemporaneously with its breakdown: the manic, psychotic trauma as the performance descends into rage, tears, or ‘symbolic death’ (Keller 2005, p. 20)⁷.

The ideology of the American Dream shares a number of characteristics, with the ideology of global capital, particularly the focus on constant re-invention, and an imperative to ‘enjoy,’ in other words, to ‘pursue happiness,’ a peculiarly Lacanian formation that seems to acknowledge the originary lack at the heart of all desire (we don’t value happiness, but rather, the pursuit). One is even tempted to confront the term ‘pursuit of happiness’ with the psychoanalytic notion of the drive, which is not about satisfying a need but its own endless reproduction. Kaufman plays the game *too much*, as if the ideology of the American Dream is only viewable from an already-cynical distance; to view a man’s full, passionate identification with it is far too terrible. In the face of the postmodern operation of ideology today, summarised as above by the formula *je sais bien, mais quand même*, Kaufman’s work suggests a radical comic gesture might be one in which the comic player *ne sait pas* (doesn’t know), and all the same, horrifyingly continues to play the game. Keller’s study is important for our purposes, breaking as it does with the logic of Carnavalesque transgression.

⁷ ‘Death’ being a common term for comedians to use when a stand-up performance fails—Keller points out that this death exists in a symbolic economy: ‘But another death will be involved, namely the symbolic death of the comedian (or performance artist, for that matter) who physically enacts this fantasmatic narrative, taking the American Dream by its word’ (Keller 2005, p. 20).

Problematically, Keller questions whether or not Kaufman's work is performance comedy at all. Following Auslander, Keller suggests that Kaufman falls in the category of performance art. He points to the frequent confusion and confrontations with audiences and his many onstage 'deaths,' to use the parlance of stand-up comedy. This suggests, I believe, a commonplace discomfort with the serious study of comedy and 'low' forms of performance. What Keller and Auslander fail to acknowledge is the way in which Kaufman's work functions *only within* the boundaries of comic form; the traumatic effect relies on a precise play between the division between 'getting it' and 'not getting it' inherent to comedy. We will return to this thread of argumentation in Chapter 5.

Finally, if Kaufman's work is *Ideologiekritik* as violent, traumatic spectacle, the internet and video sharing sites such as YouTube demonstrate a more gentle, though still effective, form of homemade iconoclasm. Many amateur reconstructions of well-known cultural artefacts can be found on the site, and while I am far from suggesting that on a formal level this amounts to any sort of subversion, certain videos present interesting propositions with regard to ideology, over-identification, and forced choice. One example is the University of Rochester Yellow Jackets'⁸ remake of the music video for Taylor Swift's song 'You Belong With Me.' Swift's music video is a saccharine, high-school set story of a good-looking boy and the more studious 'girl-next-door' (portrayed by Swift), who share messages through their facing bedroom windows. The Yellow Jackets remake the video, shot for shot, with two young men. The video is presented on YouTube without comment or contextual framing. Beyond the quite obvious disruption of the heteronormative gender roles in the original music video, 'You Belong With Me: Same Sex Version' is an interesting teasing of the symbolic law/order. In essence, the video is a violation of written, copyright law, which the official discourse (embodied by the institution Big Machine Records LLC) cannot act on without appearing homophobic. Or, to put it another way, the record company cannot exercise their authority (given by the law) without simultaneously affirming the exclusion of other gender formations

⁸ The Yellow Jackets are a university Glee Club, or show choir, and the video described here was created to be projected during a live show, though on the internet it is presented entirely without comment or contextual framing.

or sexualities that function as the fantasmatic support of the heteronormative ideology espoused by Swift's video and music. In this way, the video functions as a semi-permanent disruption of the symbolic law through provocation.

Postmodern irony and its discontents

The concept of a semi-permanent disruption presents some difficulty, particularly as the object of this thesis is comedy in *live performance*. If performance comedy *qua Ideologiekritik* entails a break with the symbolic order, this break must open a space for the refashioning of the symbolic order, and hold this space open. Which is to say, the *subject* must form an *attachment* with the moment of the break. As such the double movement of this thesis is beginning to take shape; in one movement there is the question of the content and precision of the critique *qua* break, and in a second movement there is the question of attachments to the new demand or group formed around this radical break. At this point we might begin to identify some protean forms of attachment. In the case of the video, as I have earlier noted, the attachment is a relationship of 'deadlock,' in which neither party can move. In Kaufman's case, the predominant reaction to the break with ideology in his performances was one of befuddlement, though one example demonstrates something far more interesting. In 1978, Kaufman was hired as an actor on the television series *Taxi*. In his contract, he stipulated that 'Tony Clifton' (Kaufman's alter-ego, though he insisted they were different people) would be hired for a set amount of episodes as well. 'Clifton' created so much trouble that he was eventually forcibly removed from the set. Everyone *knew* it was Kaufman as 'Clifton.' But all the same...

For the remainder of this chapter I primarily focus on the first of these movements through a case study of comedy texts, beginning with the recent phenomenon of what could be called 'postmodern irony.' This is not a hard and fast term within the discourse of stand-up comedy. My usage will refer to the commonly accepted definition: postmodern irony uses irony as a justification for controversial or potentially taboo topics. Often this is qualified by some sort of social purpose, for example, in making light of race, homosexuality, or sexual violence the comedian actually draws attention to the obverse problem of

discrimination or inequality. So far, so transgressive, however, particular comedians who work in this vein often reveal interesting ambiguities and radical suspensions of meaning. In many cases, ‘how they say it’ is far more important than ‘what they said,’ and controversial and offensive material merely serves to highlight what Paolo Virno would call the ‘filigree language game(s)’ of their jokes (Virno 2008, p. 165).

The highly popular Jimmy Carr is one of the UK’s best known exponents of this form of comedy. In the autumn of 2009, Carr came under fire from both the general public and numerous media outlets for a joke that seemed to take injured army servicemen and women as its ‘butt’: ‘Say what you like about those servicemen amputees from Iraq and Afghanistan, but we’re going to have a pretty good Paralympic team in 2012.’ While this joke is by no means linguistically complex, the first thing to note is the ambiguity of its target; the ‘butt’ might equally be the wars themselves, or a government that engages in a war that few of its citizens support⁹. Carr refuses to justify his comedy (including the joke above) in terms of social purpose; interviewed by Stephen Moss, he says: ‘There is a tendency, when someone is upset, to say “Well, I was highlighting the tragedy.” I wasn’t. I was trying to make people laugh’ (Moss 2009, p. 7). Carr’s concern is rather the construction of the joke and its absurd logic, even in the most offensive case: ‘I do a lot of jokes about rape, but it’s not a discourse on rape. I happen to think the construct of “99% of women kiss with their eyes closed, which is why it’s so difficult to identify a rapist” is funny. It’s not really about the act of a serious sexual assault’ (ibid.).

In a similar way, American comedian Sarah Silverman’s work can also divide audiences. A cursory glance through the topics that pepper her set-lists reveal race, anti-semitism, AIDS, rape, and abortion. I believe Silverman is a more interesting comedian than Carr, with an ambiguity of meaning in her joke-writing less found in Carr’s work. There is more at work than ‘saying the unsayable,’ nor is Silverman merely a crusader for free speech in the face of political correctness. Nor is she rehashing the tired, prejudiced gags of working men’s club comics such as Bernard Manning, albeit in a postmodern frame. In

⁹ I owe this idea to my friend and fellow comedian Gràinne Maguire, who expressed this opinion while defending Carr in a debate on SKY News with Conservative MP Patrick Mercer.

Silverman's writing, multiple lines of argument are constructed through an asymmetry at their heart. An example from her concert film *Jesus is Magic* (2006): 'Nazis are a-holes, and I'll be the first one to say it, 'cause I'm edgy... They're cute when they're little, I'll give them that. They're cute when they're little. Why can't they stay small!' Whom or what is the target of this joke, and where is the position from which the subject (comedian) speaks? In its ambiguous, shifting target and place of enunciation, this joke cannot be said to be traditionally 'satirical.' To use a scientific term borrowed from Žižek, the gap at the heart of this joke is 'parallactic,' referring to the parallax gap: 'a confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible' (Žižek 2006[2009], p. 4). In other words, the gap at the heart of the joke can only be viewed from shifting perspectives.

Silverman's material on race is arguably her most controversial. In a live performance at London's Hammersmith Apollo (19 October 2008), Silverman introduces a story about attending a fundraiser for then presidential candidate Barack Obama:

I was really fortunate to be able to go to a fundraiser for Barack Obama. It was in Los Angeles, a real who's-who, and I was able to go right up to him, and I wanted to have a smart question to ask. So I said: 'Senator Obama, when you were a student in Boston, did you ever encounter any racism?' And he said something really interesting. He said 'I'm Kanye West.' And I was like (*sighs*) 'I get it. We're *all* Kanye West.'

The audience laughs, and she continues:

He's half black, so I hope my stupid, retarded country still votes for him. (*Pause*) Oh my god. I just heard myself say that. I am such a pessimist! He's half *white*.

Is Silverman 'saying the unsayable,' that is, making a comment about the 'law' of political correctness by transgressing that law? In this reading, the joke is really just a racist joke in quotation marks. We might read the second part of the above joke text thus: 1) The set-up is a variation of the standard line of liberal pessimism: 'he's half black, so I hope my stupid, retarded country still votes for him' is a vulgar version of 'America isn't ready for a black president.' 2) A caesura, as if to confirm the first line: 'I just heard myself say that. I am such a

pessimist!’ This is as if Silverman has suddenly realised her remark is symptomatic of an unconscious problem. 3) Following this line of thought, the comedian surprises us: ‘He’s half *white*.’ In this first reading, then, the set-up, which is assumed to refer to liberal pessimism, is revealed to be about Silverman’s attitude to Obama’s race all along.

But this reading is too brutal and reductive. Too much is left unaccounted for, including Silverman’s fervent support for Obama during the campaign. The fact of Silverman’s ambiguity remains. The joke is uncomfortably cramped by the interpretation above, therefore, we might instead focus on the paradox or ‘parallax’ of the text; its inherent non-sense. ‘Half-black/half-white’ quite clearly refers to the half-full/half-empty platitude, so that (at least partially) the frame is shifted from race and politics to the discourse of race and politics itself. The only satisfactory answer to the question ‘is it racist or isn’t it racist’ is ‘it’s both and it’s neither.’ The ‘filigree language game’ of the joke contains multiple lines of argument. In other words, Silverman’s joke cannot be taken in any one ‘sense,’ and it is the consequences of ‘multiple senses’ to which I now turn, drawing on a Lacanian-inflected reading of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.

2.4 - *Sense to Nonsense and Back Again: On Deleuze and Comedy*

As identified above, comedy *qua* radical *Ideologiekritik* must take the form of a break with the symbolic order, and in the examples I identified, this invariably takes the form of an absurd logic, rather than what Critchley (2002) calls a reactionary humour (a comedy of recognition). It is the difference between exposing an existing logic’s inherent absurdity from a position of ‘knowing,’ (as demonstrated above, this distance is in advance taken into account), and identifying and staying within an uncomfortable point of suspension, where common sense is set aside for non-sense. My aim in the following section is to explore the contours of nonsense through the concepts of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his collaborator; psychoanalyst, and activist Félix Guattari, focusing on the capacity of nonsense to counter what Deleuze calls the ‘disjunctive synthesis,’ which is the function by which modern thought is subjected. I will also examine the political implications of nonsense, through a close reading of Melville’s story ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’).

How should one square Deleuze and Guattari, the famous opponents of psychoanalysis, with the discussion of comedy as *Ideologiekritik* in this chapter, which is based primarily in a Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytic framework? Here are three sources of precedent for a Lacanian Deleuzism. First, note Zupančič's noting of the closeness of Deleuze and Lacan's positions from her book of philosophical reflections on the nature of comedy:

How is [Lacan] situated in relation to the (Deleuzian) thesis about the primary, original character of difference? In a certain way this is, of course, also Lacan's thesis. Yet there is a crucial difference: for Lacan the primacy of difference is the primacy of the symbolic cut; whereas for Deleuze [...] the primary and fundamental difference functions as a real, even as the only *Real*. Perhaps a more precise way of putting it would be to say that the Deleuzian conceptual project aims precisely at abolishing the difference between the Symbolic and the Real, that it involves a kind of 'realisation of the Symbolic,' or a becoming-real of the symbolic. (Zupančič 2008, pp. 161).

We find that while there is sympathy between the two positions, the Deleuzian stance affirms the creative value of collapsing symbolic reality for unmitigated access to the Real (or, confusingly, in Deleuze's terms, the *Virtual*). As Zupančič also notes, while the Real may occupy the same theoretical position for Deleuze and Lacan, for Deleuze it 'ultimately refers to the cosmic whole as an inherently productive self-differentiating substance,' as opposed to the 'impossibility' or fissure in the symbolic order it is for Lacan (ibid. p. 162). But in terms of my project of practice-as-research, the important thing to note is for both, radical change requires a reorganising of the symbolic reality. This position is supported by Ronald Bogue's reading (2009) of Deleuze as, in some sense, a Freudian philosopher. Far from denying the Freudian discovery of the unconscious, Deleuze relied on the concept of unconscious thought processes throughout his work. Bogue writes: 'Throughout his work, Deleuze stresses the involuntary nature of genuine thought. To think differently [...] requires a violence to thought, a disorienting, unsettling shock to common sense and orthodoxy' (Bogue 2009, p. 235).

Finally we might turn to Smith (2004), in his criticism of Žižek's (2004) 'Lacanian book on Deleuze,' *Organs Without Bodies*. While for Žižek, Deleuze's

philosophical career entailed a turn from the deeply Lacanian early work *Logic of Sense* to a ‘corruption’ by Guattari in their jointly written books *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, Smith notes that Lacan’s reaction to *Anti-Oedipus* was positive. Was there, he asks, a fidelity to Lacan in *Anti-Oedipus* missed by most readers startled by the violently heretical attack on Freudian psychoanalysis? Smith writes: ‘Deleuze can be seen as one of Lacan’s most profound, but also most independent, disciples, *inventing a whole new set of concepts to describe the inverse side of the symbolic structure*’ (Smith 2004, p. 648, emphasis added). What Smith means is that Deleuze’s concern is for the Real, and his philosophy of becoming, production, and affect is a set of concepts intended to usefully describe it. All of which is to say that while my primary theoretical framework in this thesis will be grounded in Lacan’s concepts of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, I find several of Deleuze’s concepts — including the ‘disjunctive synthesis’ and later, the concept of ‘smooth and striated space’ — useful in describing and interrogating the making of work in the context of a practice-as-research project. While my diagnosis of the problems and pathologies of the circumstances of our historical present remains on one side of the symbolic structure, the ‘inverse side,’ can usefully be actualised in the making of art and performance. Take for instance, Deleuze on art: the artwork is a ‘bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 167). Deleuze views an artwork as comprised on ‘affects’ (sensations separated from the subject) and ‘percepts’ (perceptions separated from the subject). An artwork is a machine for feeling. The consideration of affects will become ever more important in the following chapters and discussion on practice, as the focus shifts from the break with the symbolic order to the affect needed to ‘attach’ a subject to the symbolic proposition made by a comedy performance. Performance comedy is also one of the most clearly ‘affective’ forms of art, evidenced through laughter, of course, but also in the sensations of unease that accompany an Andy Kaufman performance, or the discomfort that follows a Sarah Silverman routine. For the moment I will continue to limit my focus to the idea of a break with the symbolic order, drawing on Deleuze’s conception of ‘nonsense.’

Curiouser and curiouser!/: Difference and Nonsense

In the introduction to this thesis, I defined the ‘disjunctive synthesis’ in grammatical terms, as the use of an operator such as ‘and,’ ‘or,’ ‘but,’ to connect two independent terms in a relationship of ‘common sense.’ We might broaden our understanding of the concept at this point; for our purposes we can say it is any ‘statement’ or enunciation that presents as natural a relationship (of domination, of subordination). It is allied to the notion of ‘common sense.’ The concept appears in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* in relation to Oedipal structures — the structures of traditional family (‘daddy-mommy-me’), for example (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, p. 87). For Deleuze and Guattari, the ‘either/or’ of familial roles is an example of ‘an exclusive, restrictive, and negative use of the disjunctive synthesis’ (ibid., p. 84), that is to say, the restriction of the immanent possibilities of life to a series of exclusive ideals: ‘When Oedipus slips into the disjunctive syntheses of desiring-recording, it imposes the ideal of a certain restrictive or exclusive use on them that becomes identical with the form of triangulation: being daddy, mommy, or child’ (ibid., p. 84). What they counter to the neurotic, exclusive disjunctive synthesis of either/or is the schizophrenic, ‘immanent’ disjunctive synthesis: “‘either... or... or...” (ibid., p. 84):

This is free disjunction; the differential positions persist in their entirety, they even take on a free quality, but they are all inhabited by a faceless and transpositional subject. [Judge] Schreber [whose memoirs of schizophrenia form one of Freud’s most well-known analyses] is man and woman, parent and child, dead and alive: which is to say, he is situated wherever there is a singularity, in all the series and in all the branches marked by a singular point [...] (ibid., p. 85).

Alternatively, to this schizophrenic ideal of singularities freely associating, it is my argument that comedy, or to use Deleuze’s frequent term, ‘nonsense,’ provides another possibility for the breaking of disjunctive-synthetic bonds, not through abandoning the symbolic structure of reality altogether but by

paradoxically enunciating the inconsistencies of the symbolic order¹⁰. In Kirby Olson's *Comedy After Postmodernism*, the author notes that for Deleuze: 'To understand [comedy], we cannot resort to a transcendent definition. We have to look at individual cases, in all of their *singularity*, and recuperate their context' (Olson 2001, p. 14, emphasis added). Comic practice, as it were, thinks difference-in-itself, not subordinating this difference to the identical, but thinking the singularity of the situation. James Williams (2008, p. 17) notes that humour occupies a special place in Deleuzian philosophy: 'Humour helps us sense that meaning is not the point of certain forms of communication and that reason has limits that do not define a boundary with nonsense or absurdity, but with a different kind of sense allied to 'non-sense' and to paradox.' We might refer back to Silverman's jokes, with a 'parallactic' structure, or the classic Jewish joke referenced by Woody Allen in the opening scene of *Annie Hall*, quoted in the introduction of this thesis, for evidence of this 'paradoxical' nature of humour. Bogue (2009, p. 235) emphasises the necessity of paradox for the creation of new ways of thinking: 'New thought is necessarily "para-doxical," beyond *doxa*, and hence beyond common-sense rationality.' This paradox that does violence to thought might take the form of an enunciation or statement that affirms two contradictory senses simultaneously. In *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze takes Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as an example. As Alice changes size, Deleuze states 'But it is at the same moment that one becomes larger than one was and smaller than one becomes' (Deleuze 1969, p. 3). Which is to say, how can Alice be growing both larger and smaller at the same time? This, for Deleuze, is truly 'nonsense,' which undermines 'good sense': 'Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction; but paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time' (ibid.). Deleuze's theoretical contribution here is to define nonsense as simultaneously

¹⁰ The degree to which Deleuze's invocation of the 'schizo' is a provocation is unclear. For me, Deleuze and Guattari's critique of psychoanalysis is against its conservative uses; they do not, for example, deny the fundamental discovery of the unconscious. It is interesting to note here their argument that the function of the psychoanalytic clinic is to bolster the status quo and authority: '[...] everybody knows what psychoanalysis means by *resolving* Oedipus: internalizing it so as to better rediscover it on the outside, in social authority, where it will be made to proliferate and be passed on to the children' (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, p. 87). In this same passage, however, they celebrate Lacan (as Smith, 2004, argues above), as the clinician capable of loosening the 'nuts and bolts': '[...] injecting a schizophrenic flow capable of subverting the field of psychoanalysis' (ibid., p. 92). This 'flow' is of course, the Lacanian Real, which though differing in some crucial respects, is correlative to the singularities of the Deleuzian Virtual. Both perform the same function, providing an escape route from the stultifying nature of the symbolic order and hence the possibility of liberation from domination.

the ‘absence’ of sense, despite at the same time having a recognisable but as-yet-uncategorised sense. If this is opaque, let us again examine the old Marx Brothers joke, which seems to exemplify this senseless-sense:

1: Tea or coffee?

2: Yes, please!

The first statement (the set-up), ‘Coffee or tea,’ opens a symbolic universe with a finite number of options. I can find four: ‘Coffee,’ ‘Tea,’ ‘Neither, I’m fine, thank you,’ or the greedy ‘Actually, I’d like both.’ But in the interlocutor’s reply (the punch-line), ‘Yes, please!’ we essentially find a sensible answer that nonetheless exists outside of *this particular* symbolic order. Clearly, ‘Yes, please!’ is a senseless answer, however, at the same time there is movement towards sense, though in the symbolic order opened by the set-up, the punch-line cannot ever be fully reconciled. This movement is undeniably important. If we were to rewrite the joke in this way:

1: Tea or coffee?

2: Turtles!

it somehow loses its humour, or at least its humorous core is relocated outside of the joke capsule itself. Therefore, the nonsense of a ‘Yes, please!’ is a very particular type of nonsense that lies outside of the symbolic order opened by the first statement while at the same time presenting the possibility it might be reconciled with it, rather than the full ‘psychosis’ suggested by the answer ‘Turtles!’ We should also note that the *comedy* of the joke, by which I mean its propensity to provoke laughter, is only contained in the ‘movement.’ If we begin refashioning the symbolic order in order to accommodate the nonsense of ‘Yes, please!’, perhaps by suggesting the second interlocutor misheard the first, the joke, under scrutiny, loses its ‘funny¹¹.’

¹¹ As this chapter is essentially devoted to a precise interrogation of the terms ‘comedy’ and ‘humour,’ I hesitate to use either here to describe ‘being able to generate laughter.’ In which case, it seems appropriate to borrow a term that is in common usage on the comedy circuit, ‘funny,’ or ‘funnies,’ which is a loose fashioning of the word as both noun and adjective: ‘bring the funnies,’ ‘it needs more funny,’ and so on.

Humour, then, can break from ossified categories of sense or logic, revealing a new perspective. James Williams (2008, p. 18), writes: ‘Humour matters because we have to feel that some of the expectations of the question were mistaken, not in a way that could be connected or refined, but in a more persistent manner: it was the wrong kind of answer to expect.’ What is the relation of this new refinement of our understanding of humour to our main problem of *Ideologiekritik* and political efficacy? Deleuze insists that in addition to right and wrong answers there are also right and wrong problems. To critique sense, or to show how nonsense ‘enacts a donation of sense’ (Deleuze 1969 [2004], p. 81) is to show that our categorical common sense by which we recognise a political problem is always-already supported or founded by an exclusion (of nonsense, that is to say, other possibilities). The effect of nonsense is to show the limitations of the symbolic order opened by ‘good sense’ or ‘common sense.’

The continuum between the revolutionary, post-1968 politics of Deleuze and Guattari and the post-Kantian Deleuze of *Difference and Repetition* is this radical examination of sense and nonsense. Why should we (as political subjects) privilege ‘good sense’ or ‘common sense’ as the limit of every problem? After all, as Deleuze writes: ‘Sense [...] is only a vapour which plays at the limits of things and words’ (1968[1994], p. 195). Beyond the quibbling over the tyranny of tea or coffee, there are some major, ‘Actual’¹² consequences, that perhaps Hallward loses sight of. Williams applies these Deleuzian concepts to the discourses of power and justice:

In other words, it is a mistake to think that solutions are simply true or false solutions to a problem. Instead, a solution makes some aspects of a problem more clear and others more obscure. For example, when we answer yes or no to the question ‘Can there be a just war?’, we are not giving final correct answers to the question. Rather, our reasons for

¹² Peter Hallward, a perspicuous reader and strong critic of Deleuze, despairs that despite the inspirational, creative nature of Deleuze’s project, ultimately: ‘Deleuze’s work is essentially indifferent to the politics of this world’ (Hallward 2006, p. 126). Hallward argues that Deleuze’s privileging of the Virtual leaves no room for the Actual of emancipation from exploitation or domination. ‘A philosophy based on deterritorialisation, dissipation and flight [as in ‘escape’] can offer only the most immaterial and evanescent grip on the mechanisms of exploitation and domination that continue to condition so much of what happens in our world’ (ibid.). Against Hallward, I would argue that challenging exploitation structures of power takes place on both levels of Virtual and Actual (or, in Lacanian terms, across the spectrum of RSI—hence, why psychoanalysis is precisely a cut through the Imaginary and Symbolic into the Real).

deciding on a positive or negative answer shed a different light on the problem of war. (Williams 2003, p. 130).

The solutions (yes or no) are opened by the manner in which the problem is posed (that is to say, the manner in which the disjunctive synthesis is employed – restrictive, ‘either/or,’ or immanent: ‘either...or...or...or’). Additionally, the choice of one or other of the solutions retroactively changes, or more precisely, ‘colours’ the problem, inflecting it with a certain ‘sense.’ This is evident in the way the choice seems to inflect the question with either a neoconservative ‘sense,’ or a pacifistic ‘sense,’ which perhaps shows the hold discursive formations have a hold over even the most simply phrased questions. But a comic solution out of this ideological deadlock can be formulated as well. For instance, we might transpose the Marx Brothers’ reply wholesale to create the dark, but wholly critical:

1: Can there ever be a just war?

2: Yes, please!

Or, we might create a Carrollian neologism:

1: Can there ever be a just war?

2: Yes, absopositivelynegalutely not!

A more modern version might employ sarcasm and a more casual tone, but still reach outside of the symbolic order opened by the question. Imagine the following exchange in a Woody Allen film, between a WASP-y blond tennis player and Allen himself.

1: But can there ever be a just war?

2: Yes, of course! But seriously no, not in the slightest. Where’s that waiter again?

In these instances comedy and joke-making is a way of posing another problem entirely, of forcing the original problem to confront the ‘lack’ that sustains it. At this point we must connect our discussion to the earlier proposition of comedy

performance as Lacanian ‘act,’ a liberation from the collective structure of categorical thinking. In its comic actualisations, this can take fairly subtle and nuanced forms: consider again the earlier joke text of Sarah Silverman, in which she confuses Barack Obama and Kanye West and merges, in a potentially offensive way, black/white and half-full/half-empty. As discussed earlier, the *meaning* of this joke is ambiguous, however, is it not also structured like a ‘series’ of nonsense that ‘donates’ sense, as we find in *Logic of Sense*? What forms the series in this case are the repetitions of the empty usage of ‘Obama.’ Silverman reveals the disparate uses of his proper name as it circulates through various systems of meaning. But the humorous repetitions show that the ‘sense’ of these uses is constantly donated by another piece of ‘nonsense.’ The symbolic order opened by one enunciation is not an a priori, transcendental limit, but more like, quoting Žižek (2008, p. 49), a ‘contingent series intersecting and generating totally disparate meanings, like a science-fiction story in which scientists discover that the explosion which, in the Bible, signals the divine message, was effectively a visual trace of a terrible catastrophe that destroyed a flourishing alien civilisation.’ A truly ‘political’ comedy (which nods towards some sort of sociopolitical efficacy) provides a countervailing function to the illegitimate, exclusive or restrictive uses of the disjunctive synthesis by generating disparate meanings that reveal the inconsistencies of a dominant or exploitative ideology, in such a way that these are not *resolved* but instead held without the possibility of resolution within the existing symbolic order. We might define the former as (drawing on my analysis of comedy in relation of ideology) *satirical*, and the latter as *nonsensical*. As demonstrated throughout this section, nonsense need not carry connotations of silliness or madness, a thread I will follow in the following close-reading of Melville’s *Bartleby*.

***Case study: Bartleby, the Scrivener; a Deleuzian sense of humour*¹³**

In a conversation with Miranda Joseph, Associate Professor of women’s studies at the University of Arizona, whose work I draw on in the second and third chapters of this thesis, I defended a ‘Bartlebeian politics’ of disengagement.

¹³ The reader will note that Bartleby’s formula is incorporated into both the live performance submitted with this thesis as well as the accompanying documentation. These specific instances in performance are further discussed in Chapter 6.

‘Why is it,’ Joseph argued, ‘that the left today celebrates Bartleby so much? Just simply disengaging, or saying no isn’t an option available to everyone.’ I responded: ‘It’s not so much the idea of disengaging that should be celebrated, but the way Bartleby disengages, his particular formula for saying no. The interesting thing about “Bartleby” is that it works; the employer goes along with it.’¹⁴ In other words, Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to,’ is a comic statement that Bartleby employs in order to liberate himself from his employer’s demands. I will now examine Bartleby’s ‘formula’ at length as a case study. While, I admit, ‘I would prefer not to’ is not a punchline calculated to generate gales of laughter, it is a piece of ‘nonsense,’ in the form I have outlined above, which counters the restrictive disjunctive syntheses of social authority in late 19th century America. Many theorists have commented on the political implications of Herman Melville’s novella ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ in their work, however, I will focus on the discussions in Deleuze’s essay ‘Bartleby, or, the formula’ and Žižek’s *The Parallax View*. For Deleuze, the work is a ‘violently comical text,’ though the nature of this comedy is not elaborated further. Building upon the concepts I have developed throughout this chapter, we might begin to precisely interrogate the enigmatic comic quality of this mysterious and disturbing novella. The narrator of the text is an owner of a copywriting firm, an ‘elderly man,’ who employs a small staff. One day he hires our eponymous anti-hero as an extra scribe. While the working relationship begins well, the employer soon finds that Bartleby refuses every demand or order with an unsettling passivity; ‘I would prefer not to,’ he says. In the following scene, which I quote at length, we see that his formula takes on multiple, humorous dimensions through repetition.

At last, familiarly drawing my chair behind his screen, I sat down and said: ‘Bartleby, never mind then about revealing your history; but let me entreat you, as a friend, to comply as far as may be with the usages of this office. Say now you will help to examine papers tomorrow or next day: in short, say now that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable:—say so, Bartleby.’

‘At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,’ was his mildly cadaverous reply.

Just then the folding-doors opened, and Nippers approached [...] ‘*Prefer not, eh?*’ gritted Nippers—I’d *prefer* him, if I were you, sir,’ addressing

¹⁴ The above took place in a private exchange after a research seminar at Queen Mary, University of London, 24 March 2010.

me— 'I'd *prefer* him; I'd give him preferences, the stubborn mule! What is it, sir, pray, that he *prefers* not to do now?'

Bartleby moved not a limb.

'Mr. Nippers,' said I, 'I'd prefer that you would withdraw for the present.' Somehow, of late I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way [...] As Nippers, looking very sour and sulky, was departing, Turkey blandly and deferentially approached.

'With submission, sir,' said he, 'yesterday I was thinking about Bartleby here, and I think that if he would but prefer to take a quart of good ale every day, it would do much towards mending him, and enabling him to assist in examining his papers.'

'So you have got the word too,' said I, slightly excited.

'With submission, what word, sir?' asked Turkey [...] 'What word, sir?'

'I would prefer to be left alone here,' said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy. '*That's* the word, Turkey,' said I— '*that's* it.'

'Oh, *prefer*? oh yes—queer word. I never use it myself. But, sir, as I was saying, if he would but prefer—'

'Turkey,' interrupted I, 'you will please withdraw.'

'Oh certainly, sir, if you would prefer that I should.' (Melville 1997, p. 24, original emphasis).

Superficially, the scene (published in 1853), is similar enough to modern workplace farces such as television sitcom *The Office*, or Mike Judge's (1999) film *Office Space*, which is perhaps why the scene is retained along with much of its language, in Jonathan Parker's 2001 modern-day film adaptation of the story. The scene's comic potential is also superficially explained—there is a chaos of stock character types crashing around Bartleby; the angry, violent clerk Nippers who uses *preferences* as a synonym for bruises; the meek Turkey with his refrain of 'with submission,'; and the reasonable, 'everyman' employer who nevertheless begins to question his own sanity and acts as the reader's line into this world. Structurally the piece employs a classic, simple joke structure. Bartleby gives the premise in his line 'At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,' the ensuing conflict acts as a set-up and builds anticipation, escalating the stakes as in slapstick comedy, and finally, Turkey's great line 'Oh certainly, sir, if you prefer that I should' acts as a punch-line.

But is there not something intriguing about the repetitive nature of this scene? We might attribute Melville's comic sensibility to the ridiculous multiplicity of senses the office-mates find in the word *prefer*. For example, in Nippers' angry exclamation: 'I'd *prefer* him, if I were you, sir [...] I'd *prefer* him, I'd give him

preferences, the stubborn mule! What is it, sir, pray, that he *prefers* not to do now?' contains not one but *three* senses of 'prefer.' In the ensuing melee of preferences the word appears to lose its sense entirely. At first Nippers uses 'prefer' in a contradictory sense, sarcastically. Then, by rendering the verb *prefer* into the plural noun *preferences*, he infuses the word with a new meaning, incongruous with its preceding context: 'I'd give him...' He then returns to Bartleby's original usage. 'Prefer' has no identity for itself, opening onto the mad absurdity behind the screen of common language. Repetition is intrinsically connected with the comic, and with my project more generally. 'Over-identification,' for instance, is a repetition of the dominant expressions of ideology, and stand-up comedy itself, which often consists entirely of retelling stories, is a repetitive form. Karl Marx, of course, diagnosed this comic mode of repetition first, in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce' (Marx 1973, quoted in Žižek 2009, p. 1). Zupančič elaborates: 'Marx's main concern [...] is not the relationship between repetition and farce but the question whether, and to what extent, a repetition is also a place or bearer of something new—that is to say, to what extent it can constitute a break (with the given, or with the past)' (Zupančič 2008, p. 150). In other words, repetition reveals difference in itself, the conditions of the 'new.' Žižek explicitly makes the connection with the comic: 'Crucial for the proper comical effect is not difference where we expect sameness, but rather, sameness where we expect difference'¹⁵ (Žižek 2004, p. 220). Another Marx Brother's joke is quoted by Žižek to illustrate this point: 'This man looks like an idiot and acts like an idiot; but don't let this fool you—he is an idiot!' The comedy of this moment is in full agreement with Deleuze's concept of difference: 'When, instead of a hidden terrifying secret, we encounter behind the veil the same thing as in front of it, this very lack of difference between the two elements confronts us with the

¹⁵ To illustrate this, we might take the example of Toto the dog, in Frank L Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, pulling back the Wizard's curtain. The scene, in which we encounter difference, is full of pathos. A more comic version of this scene appears in Matt Groening's animated television series *Futurama*: in a parody of Baum's story, the crew of Planet Express imagine themselves in a version of Oz, with Professor Farnsworth taking the role of the Wizard. With the Professor's enormous head looming above the crew, Leela/Dorothy's pet alien, Nibbler (in place of Toto), pulls back the curtain. What is revealed is not another version of the Professor, manipulating the illusion as in the original story, but the *very same Professor*—his huge head is balanced on top of a normal sized body.

“pure” difference that separates an element *from itself* (ibid. original emphasis)¹⁶. This is what we find in all of Melville’s uses of the word ‘prefer.’

But what of the famous ‘I would prefer not to?’ For Deleuze, this comic formula operates in a ‘minor’ way, within the major language. He writes: ‘I PREFER NOT TO is also a trait of expression that contaminates everything, escaping linguistic form and stripping the father¹⁷ of his exemplary speech, just as it strips the son [Bartleby] of his ability to reproduce or copy’ (Deleuze 1997, p. 77). This quotation requires careful examination. Essentially, this statement is an ‘act.’ ‘I would prefer not to,’ Deleuze argues, ablates the symbolic authority of the ‘father.’ The employer stands in the symbolic position of the ‘father’ in this scenario, drawing on the big Other for his authority (conventions dictate the employer’s demands must be obeyed). But the ‘son,’ the symbolic position of whom Bartleby occupies, pays his own price. In saying he ‘would prefer not to,’ Bartleby, having ruptured the authority of the symbolic order, must maintain, as Alain Badiou might say, a ‘fidelity’ to this event, he must continue ‘not to.’ Bartleby’s fidelity to the event leads to his ever-increasing abjection; eventually, his ‘I would prefer not to’ taking on obscene and blackly comic dimensions, Bartleby dies, starving, in prison. What is key to Melville’s story is the precise linguistic form that the subject’s ‘act’ takes. For Deleuze, the key is not to return to a pre-Lapsarian state before language, or enter a psychotic state outside of linguistic meaning, but to ‘deterritorialise’ language. Melville’s earlier character Billy Budd deterritorialises language through a physical trait, his stutter; Bartleby does so through a comic formula.

‘I would prefer not to’ captures the form of *Ideologiekritik* that performance comedy best takes, that is to say, a breaking with the symbolic order that takes place through and in the symbolic, as Žižek might say, a ‘traversing of the fantasy.’ In other words, it counters an illegitimate use of the disjunctive synthesis. Take for example, the following short passage:

¹⁶ Repetition in this sense is perhaps key to Andy Kaufman’s terrifying comedy. If the ideological fantasy is a ‘mask,’ behind the mask we expect to find something different (the subject who doesn’t really believe, who maintains a distance to the mask). Instead, in Kaufman’s case we find the mask *again*.

¹⁷ Deleuze is referring here to Lacan’s concept of the Master’s discourse as opposed to a father character, which does not appear in the text.

“Bartleby,” said I, “Ginger Nut is away; just step round to the Post Office, won’t you? (it was but a three minutes walk,) and see if there is any thing for me.”

“I would prefer not to.”

“You *will* not?”

“I *prefer* not.”

The employer-narrator’s advanced age and saintly patience should not concern us — Bartleby’s formula counters the disjunctive synthesis *qua* ideological domination, rather than any personal domination. This passage highlights an either/or between ‘will and will not,’ which at first appears sensible or natural, but when countered by Bartleby is revealed to exclude a huge number of possibilities, not merely ‘prefer not,’ but even more importantly, ‘should not,’ and ‘cannot.’ The employer-narrator’s ‘will not,’ is thus revealed as yoked to a kind of capitalist individualism that frames all decisions as ‘free,’ even in situations of coercion; Bartleby’s ‘prefer not’ is a comic punchline that reveals an even deeper ranges of excluded possibilities.

Žižek writes:

In his refuse of the Master’s order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate; rather he affirms a non-predicate: he does not say that he *doesn’t want to do it*; he says that *he prefers (wants) not to do it*. This is how we pass from a politics of ‘resistance’ or ‘protestation,’ which parasitises upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position *and* its negation (Žižek 2006[2009], pp. 381-382, original emphasis).

‘Affirming a non-predicate,’ is a Kantian idea best illustrated by the difference between the phrases ‘He isn’t dead!’ (i.e., he is *alive*), and ‘He is undead!’ The *unheimlich* nature of ‘he is undead’ is not related solely to the horror film connotations of zombies and vampires, but also to the fact that ‘un-dead’ breaks from the symbolic universe opened by the dialectic proposition dead/alive. Recalling Deleuze’s assertion that in addition to right and wrong answers there are also right and wrong problems, in ‘I would prefer not to’ Bartleby poses a new question of the order sustaining his world—Wall Street, New York, financial capitalism. He also demonstrates that to *either* play the capitalist game or withdraw from it is fundamentally a forced choice. ‘I would prefer not to’ reveals

and sustains the tension of the false binary, and the employer's flummoxed reaction is the deliciously comic payoff.

While Melville's novella is a very particular example, it is exemplary of a larger function that performance comedy in general may be able to harness. It is here I most take issue with many theorists', including Miranda Joseph's, characterisation of Bartlebeian politics as a politics of 'withdrawal.' It should be clear from the context of the original novella, that Bartleby's 'act' is hardly withdrawal in the traditional sense; if anything, it is potent because of his refusal to withdraw. Witness his employer's fury as he discover that far from withdrawing from his job after refusing to do any work, Bartleby has made the office his *home*. Žižek, in his characterisation of Bartlebeian politics as a politics of passivity, of 'wait-and-see,' gets it quite wrong. In my view, Bartleby's little joke is not passive at all, but defiantly, desperately *active*.

2.5 - Conclusions: 'Fighting comedy with comedy...'

In this chapter I have attempted to refine the relationship between performance comedy and sociopolitical efficacy, and question whether performance comedy, in the era of the postmodern, might still contain the potential as a revolutionary, emancipatory, or subversive praxis. I begun by re-examining ideology as a vital category for political thought. I concluded that a contemporary theory of ideology, derived from the work of Žižek, is incompatible with arguments for comedy's subversive potential based in a model of comedy as the 'obscene double' of official culture. This 'obscene double' is discernible in arguments about comedy's potential to 'transgress boundaries,' which, for the most part, I define as inherent or Carnavalesque transgressions, which is to say, already contained by the dominant order. I argued that a majority of comic practices, including many forms of satire and humorous activist practices (which is to say, practices directly involved in transforming sociopolitical reality), are supported by a Carnavalesque logic, which is responsible for their diminished efficacy in the light of the hegemony of global capital. Continuing to draw on a Lacanian framework, I proposed that a subversive comedy must in some way undo the 'symbolic order,' in other words, the comic enunciation must attain the status of

the ‘authentic act.’ I then examined comic strategies of over-identification and postmodern irony through this Lacanian lens. Noting that certain concepts of the work of Gilles Deleuze, particularly those of difference, repetition, and sense/nonsense, had an affinity with my original Lacanian framework, I finally explored comic ‘formulae,’ and their particular effects in breaking with ideological or hegemonic discourse. I have sought, throughout this chapter to elucidate in clearest terms, the theoretical and philosophical methodology that will enable and support my experimental practice.

We should now return to what I described earlier as the two propositions of Carnival, that in this thesis I hoped to refine. The present chapter has explored the first proposition, that through a ‘performance’ of sorts the symbolic order can indeed be broken. The remainder of the thesis, and my experimental practice will explore the second, related, but far trickier proposition: through performance, a community of equals can be formed. The two propositions are deeply related; while demonstrating through theoretical argumentation that comedy can perform valuable critiques of ideology, the next step is to consider how the subject becomes ‘attached’ to the moment of critique. Or, how might both performer *and* audience maintain a fidelity to the event of breaking with the symbolic order? I have briefly noted a few instances of attachment, but before proceeding, we might organise these instances as follows: (1) passive attachment—which might also be called ‘preaching to the converted’ (2) paralysis—as in over-identificatory strategies, where the forced choice is thrown back onto the place of power (3) perverse—overt psychological investment in a moment, as in campaigns of ‘being offended’ and (4) hysterical—violent reaction in response to a moment of ideological break, as in Kim Noble’s work *Kim Noble Will Die* (see Chapter 5).

In the following chapters I will detail my experimental practice, which explores this question through alternative modes of audience engagement. This entails a radical shift from my stand-up practice, detailed earlier, incorporating modes of gallery and exhibition display, participatory art, and ‘talk-events.’ Throughout this forthcoming discussion I will build on my Lacanian/Deleuzian framework with two further sources: curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of a Relational Aesthetics, which serves as the formal basis of much of my

experimentation, and Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's concepts of hegemony, radical democracy, and social antagonism, which I will argue move Lacanian political philosophy into a place of concrete action.

CHAPTER 3: ATTACHMENTS AND RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

3.0 - *The Social Turn: Attachments, Affects, and the Relational*

Carnival is bound by an aporia of ‘licensed transgression.’ At the same time, it makes two desirable propositions. The first of these is that official discourse *can* be broken through the performance of parody, satire, mockery, grotesque, iconoclasm, in other words, *comedy*. This attractive proposition nonetheless requires scrutiny in the present postmodern logic. Following Žižek, I argued for a return to the concept of ‘ideology’ in critical political thought, consequently, comedy as part of a radical political project must itself take the form of *Ideologiekritik*. I elaborated on this concept of ideology through Lacan’s concept of the Borromean knot of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, drawing especially on Žižek’s elaboration of the concept of the big Other (‘the collective fiction, the symbolic structure, presupposed by any social field’) (Fisher 2009, p. 44). So, if Carnival proposes that official discourse can be suspended or even broken, within my Lacanian and later, Deleuzian, framework, a radical comic event must approach the condition of those powerful events of radical transformation of the social field designated by the term ‘act.’ Elaborating on the concepts of over-identification, irony, nonsense, and repetition, I examined several examples in which comedy might be read as an ‘act.’

The second proposition made by Carnival is that through an event of parody/satire/mockery/grotesquerie, a group, or community of equals may arise. The day of misrule levels social positions and installs a false king of the people—but more than this, it is a communal celebration, a gathering of bodies as a ‘public.’ It is to this second proposition and its correlative elements of comedy in performance (the relationship between performer and audience, representation of social formations, context) that I now turn. In other words, I will consider the question of ‘attachments.’ After the break, or rupture, of the comic ‘act,’ how do subjects create and maintain an attachment to the radical proposition made by the moment of *Ideologiekritik*? Furthermore, what is the best *form of performance* for this attachment to take place? Without losing sight of the theoretical arguments of Chapter 2, this thesis, along with my experimental

practice-as-research, will explore various aspects of this question. The project will necessarily expand to encompass notions of affect, collectives, and groups, and what I will begin to term ‘the relational.’ The practice increasingly explores open, relational, and dialogic modes of spectatorship and participation in comedy performance, all of which fall under the larger rubric of exploring the conditions for attachment to the break of *Ideologiekritik*. As Alain Badiou would have it, how does the subject maintain fidelity to the truth of the ‘Event’? Badiou writes: ‘[...] to be faithful to the event [a radical exteriority; a break with the limits of a certain situation] is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking* [...] the situation ‘according to’ the event’ (Badiou 2001, quoted in Hallward 2003, p. 128). But ‘faith’ in this sense should not be taken in to mean dogmatism or blindness, but rather to think *with* the violent shock to thought effected by the ‘event.’ The reader will note the closeness of Badiou’s thought here to Lacan’s. While I will periodically draw on Badiou’s terminology when it is technically most appropriate, I will primarily use the terms ‘break’ (for rupture with the situation) and ‘attachment’ (for fidelity) to avoid the confusions with the term ‘event’ when discussing performance, and to avoid any theological overtones in the word ‘fidelity.’ ‘Attachment’ also carries a valuable affective sense, so that we might think together intellectual, emotional, and affective fidelity.

Formalised performances are sites of social investment. Performance is never neutral, but embedded in a context it is productive of and produced by. I agree in principle with the view of theorist Miranda Joseph, who, like Michael Hardt (2007, in Clough & Halley 2007), expands the Marxist category of production to encompass a greater range of practices, including affective labour, sex, and performance (Joseph 2002). Performance’s ephemeral nature, she argues, has been viewed as antithetical to production—for example, Phelan’s ontology of performance, in which ‘performance becomes itself through disappearance’ (Phelan 1993, p. 146). But Joseph views production and performance as complicit, not opposed: ‘The notion that performance is unproductive because it is live, because it is produced and consumed at the same moment [...] is simply wrong: performance is just as well able to bear value (use, exchange, surplus, status) and to produce subjects and social formations as any material commodity’ (Joseph 2002, p. 66). This is the

‘productivity of performance’; performance produces relationships, affects, and social imagination(s). Joseph argues that ‘rather than attempting to escape production [e.g. through ‘liveness’ and performance], emancipatory projects need to undertake a critical engagement with capitalist production’ (ibid.), which, as I have shown, is precisely why an engagement with our ideological circumstances is important. In place of uncritical celebration of communal pleasure as a form of interstitial unity (what Critchley values as laughter’s resistant potential), communal pleasure should be interrogated for its specific relationship to an event of emancipatory truth¹⁸.

Ideology is not static, and is tied to investment and affect, and these ‘embodied’ qualities must be considered as well. In her analysis of ‘National Fantasy,’ Lauren Berlant defines the suggestively Lacanian concept of ‘fantasy’ as both ‘a set of forms and the affect that make these forms meaningful’ (Berlant 1991, p. 4). In other words, the images, ideals, and symbolic structures that make up, in this case, national ideology/fantasy, are nothing without some affective investiture: ideology is a set of collective practices. This relationship between forms and affects makes the site of the comedy event both useful and problematic. Žižek makes clear that the ‘act’ retroactively structures its own causes: it is recognised in looking back. So as comic artists, how do we bring about the conditions for the ‘act?’ In *Tarrying With The Negative*, Žižek gives the example of the dissolution of the Shah’s reign in advance of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran; the moment the edifice of power began crumbling, it is said, is traceable to single instance. The “beginning of the end” [...] took place at a certain Tehran crossroad where a common citizen refused to obey a policeman’s order to go away. The news spread like fire, and, all of a sudden, people ceased to “believe in the big Other” (Žižek 1993, p. 233). For this event to be recognisable as an ‘act,’ two elements must be present, firstly, the enunciation (or, in this case, lack thereof) that breaks with the symbolic order, and secondly, fidelity to the event, that is, a free decision to maintain an investment or attachment to the moment of the break.

¹⁸ Truth might be defined here in Badiou’s terms, as opposed to judgment, not resulting from it: ‘What transmits, what repeats, we shall call knowledge. [...] A truth appears in its newness because an eventful supplement interrupts repetition. Examples: The appearance, with Aeschylus, of theatrical tragedy. The eruption, with Galileo, of mathematical physics. An amorous encounter which changes a whole life’ (Badiou 2002, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/alain-badiou/articles/on-the-truth-process/>).

Therefore, with regard to the question of attachments, it becomes clear that the artist's practice must take into account its social and contextual circumstances, and attempt to rupture the already socially productive situation. The linguistic circumstances of the joke *qua* critique of ideology are only half of the puzzle, the other half is the social and 'relational' circumstances of its situation. An experimental practice must approach the social with a sense of experimentation, repetition, and willingness towards failure, much in the way that Kaufman's 'symbolic deaths' opened the true traumatic 'act' of his comedy. In this way, my experimental practice pushes the co-authoring dimension of stand-up comedy, in which both audience and performer produce the performance text, to its limit. Engaging with multiple dialogues, conversations, moments of chance and contingency, I encourage attachments and investments by the audience in the moment of the event.

3.1 - Case Study: Laughing in a Foreign Language

The question that arose immediately as I began my experimental practice was: what form of audience engagement best attaches subjects to the moment of the break? The improvisatory and semi-participatory form of stand-up comedy (detailed in Chapter 1), suggested curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of a Relational Aesthetics, based primarily not in performance, but in the visual arts. Before elaborating on Bourriaud's theory, I would like to examine The Hayward Gallery's February 2008 exhibition *Laughing in a Foreign Language*, and its sister work-in-progress showing, Marc Horowitz's installation/performance/video 'The Centre for Improved Living' as both pieces were a direct influence on the development of my practice.

Curated by Mami Kataoka, *Laughing in a Foreign Language* was an exhibition of humorous visual art by international artists. It questioned whether a shared background or context was a necessary condition for humour, or if indeed there was some dimension of universality to 'laughter.' As Charles Darwent's review in *The Independent* points out, *Laughing...* is often more about the failure of laughter than laughter itself: 'There's nothing like not getting a joke to make you

feel alienated, and alienation is the punch-line to much of the work' (Darwent 2008: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/laughing-in-a-foreign-language-hayward-gallery-london-777365.html>). In other words, the theme of the exhibition is mistranslation more than it is humour *qua* lubricant for cultural understanding—a sense of humour, that most inalienably *human* of qualities, is deeply problematic in the face of globalisation. What Darwent misses, of course, is the degree to which mistranslations and misreadings are a comic procedure in themselves. In fact, they are a clear example of what I will later call a 'frontier of exclusion,' a bar to common sense that produces the incongruity of the joke.

But for my part, *Laughing...* featured several works that were genuinely funny. It also demonstrated a particular relationship between laughter and the form of audience engagement found in the museum/exhibition space. As I begun my trip around *Laughing...* laughter seemed deeply problematic: the environment of the Hayward Gallery seemed non-conducive to the expression of laughter. With its grey, concrete walls, hushed foyer, and silent gallery attendants, the Hayward seemed to actively stifle laughter. As I wandered through the exhibition (on a quiet, weekday afternoon), I noticed a number of other visitors contemplating various works, alone, or in pairs. At times I heard outbursts of laughter, quickly muffled with a hand over the mouth. It seemed the rarified air of the museum space, even one as experimental as the Hayward, was difficult to overcome.

But it can be argued that the form of these artworks produced the failure of laughter, by remaining within a single-spectator, ocular mode of contemplation. Take for instance, Julian Rosefeldt's *Clown*, a series of self-portraits in which the artist appears in traditional circus clown costume and make-up in the middle of the Brazilian rainforest. Placing the figure of the clown in an unfamiliar environment away from spectators, Rosefeldt can be said to be deconstructing the laughing relationship—as if, all the signifiers of laughter are there, without the mode of transmission. BBC critic Helena Merriman agrees: 'No-one here is laughing. Instead, the exhibition audience now looks on suspiciously, unsettled by this traditional figure of fun being so out of place' (Merriman 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/>

[7215354.stm](#)). Marcus Coates's *Journey to the Lower World*, later featured as part of Bourriaud's Tate Triennial, *Altermodern*, is a video work in which the artist (self-portraiture is heavily featured here, a thread I will later pick up in my own exhibition work) is depicted in a Liverpool tower block, performing a 'Siberian Shamanistic ritual' for bemused residents. As I stood watching Coates, in full head-dress replete with fur and antlers, I genuinely chortled. Coates performs the ritual with deadpan seriousness for the residents of the tower block; as such, the work seems to engage with issues of class and cultural translation in a humorous way. But what is gained by placing the work in an exhibition space, of which, it seems to me, the free movement of visitors is by far the most interesting aspect?

It was those works that did engage in some pointed way with the communal and perhaps 'relational' nature of exhibition display that, to my mind, were most conducive to laughter, and led to a number of interesting and unexpected scenarios. Martin Walde's *Key Spirit*, consists of a locked door, behind which can be heard the mewling and scratching of a cat, pleading to be let in. In front of the door is a large pile of keys. Following the example of other viewers, one is encouraged to try key after key in order to rescue the poor cat. Of course, none of the keys work, and soon the chuckling of other viewers tells the unlucky feline rescuer that it is they who are now providing the comic spectacle for the other viewers. As I met eyes with the other viewers now attempting to muffle their laughter, I blushed with embarrassment, then laughed myself as I realised the absurdity of the situation. Walde uses a number of strategies to increase the work's comic potential: the keyhole is positioned too low, so that the viewer must bend over in an unsightly way to insert the key; and the pile of keys is too large, so the burden is truly Sisyphean, with the ever-present possibility that the next key is *the* key. As I came away from the door I shared a knowing glance with another group of visitors (I had come alone, and they were strangers). Interestingly, another woman from the group then went to the pile of keys, and tried them herself, while the rest of the group, myself included, laughed at and with her, in a strange repetition of the performance. I am reminded here of the Deleuzian distinction between surface effect (event) and depth; Walde's concern is the 'event,' the surface effect of comedy. The group knows there is nothing behind the door, no hidden depth (hidden cat), yet all the same is compelled to

participate in the event. This compulsion and attraction to the participatory event suggests a ambiguous manifestation of the idea of ‘attachment.’

Doug Fishbone’s *Joke Machine* works are more directly ‘comic’ than many of the other works in *Laughing...* while at the same time, more unsettling. The Joke Machines are shaped like clown faces, with a large red button in place of red nose. When the button is pressed, the machine barks out one of 200 ribald jokes. So far, so stand-up. But just as the stand-up event is both disrupted and sustained by moments of chance (hecklers and so on), *Joke Machine* engages with the situation of the exhibition space to produce unexpected moments of comedy. Darwent writes:

As instructed by its label, I press the button on Doug Fishbone’s Joke Master Jr. 2. After a second’s pause, an American voice—much, much too loud—growls, ‘How do you get your wife to scream for an hour after sex?’ There is no way of stopping the thing: the two other people in the room, tiny and Japanese, turn to look at me. ‘Wipe your dick on the curtains!’ hollers Fishbone’s scabrous clown. I smile weakly and make a show of scribbling notes on my pad. The couple, expressionless, leave. (Darwent 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/laughing-in-a-foreign-language-hayward-gallery-london-777365.html>).

Darwent takes this as an example of the failure of laughter in this exhibition (‘Perhaps the Japanese are laughing on the inside, though I think not’) (ibid.). But it seems to me the interest of Fishbone’s work are not the jokes (which are standard dirty joke-book fare), but the uncomfortable scenario generated by the relationship between viewer, other viewers, and artwork. This is suggested by several elements of *Joke Machine*, including the over-loud voice, the appearance of the machine, which resembles a child’s toy, and the vulgarity of the jokes. The work seems to produce an ambiguous relationship of power. Darwent’s later comment about Candace Breitz’s *Aiwa to Zen* seems more appropriate here: ‘who, precisely, is laughing at whom?’ (ibid).

Best of all is Japanese artist Shimabuku’s *Born as a Box*. As the viewer nears the exit of the gallery, heading for the ubiquitous gift shop, they pass what appears to be an innocuous, medium sized cardboard box, which appears to have been discarded by staff. As the viewer passes, however, it begins to speak. ‘I am a cardboard box,’ it says. ‘Hello, I am a box.’ The box has a strong sense of self: ‘Of

course, there are some things I don't want people to put inside of me, but basically I am happy that I am a box.' On my visit to *Laughing in a Foreign Language* a group of visitors, myself included, congregated around this introspective piece of cardboard to listen to its musings; this sense of absurdity was compounded by the intrusion of the 'real world' in the form of the bored gift shop attendant, whose bemused expression suggested his job description did not include being stuck for eight hours beside a talking box.

It was those works that played with the open form of the exhibition that most suggested a practical answer to the question of attachments (what is the best form to attach the subject to the event of critique?). The works detailed above back up Critchley's suggestion that humour is a form of *sensus communis*: 'the tiny explosions of humour we call jokes return us to a common, familiar domain of shared life-world practices, the background of meanings implicit in a culture' (Critchley 2002, p. 90). On three occasions the gathered crowd became the site of a common, shared 'sense' of humour. For Critchley, if humour is *sensus communis* it also follows that 'humour might be said to project another possible *sensus communis*, namely a *dissensus* distinct from the dominant common sense. In laughing at a joke I am also consenting to a certain ideal image of the world' (ibid.). Yet Critchley is unclear on how the passage from *sensus* to *dissensus* might come about. Therefore we must draw on Chapter 2—the passage from *sensus communis* to *dissensus communis* is effected by the critical break with ideology, which, with the possible example of Coates's work, was absent from this exhibition.

3.2 - *Traces and Programmes* → *relational aesthetics and participatory performance*

The more interactive works in *Laughing in a Foreign Language* are influenced by a set of practices grouped under the rubric of Relational Aesthetics by Nicolas Bourriaud, theorist and curator of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. The theoretical basis of relational art draws upon performance, installation art, happenings and Fluxus. In developing my practice-as-research, pushing my comedy practice into alternative modes of audience engagement, I began to experiment with modes and forms derived from my readings of Bourriaud,

therefore it is critical we examine his work and the movement of Relational Aesthetics in some depth.

A practical paradigm

In the conclusion of the previous chapter I elaborated three possible paradigms for subjective attachment to the break with ideology proposed by certain formulations of comedy performance. In the first instance, for example, in the discourses of offense that surround ‘postmodern irony,’ there is a gathering around an incommensurable point of antagonism; while highlighting a point of social antagonism, this attachment usually progresses no further. In psychoanalytic discourse might be said to be ‘perverse.’ In the second instance there is the reversal of forced choice back onto a structure or institution of power, as in the instances of over-identification. This attachment results in a deadlock. There is the third form of a violent, over-determined attachment, as in instances when Carnival tips into riot, or the reaction to *Kim Noble Will Die* at the Edinburgh Festival 2009, where spectators were compelled to rip down his posters in an act of hysterical erasure. From the discussion of *Laughing in a Foreign Language* we might now add a fourth instance of attachment: the formation of a group, which might hold both a *sensus* and a *dissensus communis*. In other words, the production of a place of safety that can hold the antagonistic moment of rupture with ideology; based in the mutual agency of its members. My experimental practice thus concerns this fourth mode of attachment through the invention of new forms of comedy performance that engage with mutual agency and audience participation.

The turn to participation in theatre, performance, and the visual arts has been well documented and debated in recent times, by art theorists such as Bourriaud, Bishop, and Kester, and theatre scholars, including Kershaw (1999), Bayly (2009), Read (2008), and Dixon (2007). Jacques Rancière’s text *The Emancipated Spectator* has problematised these debates as well as contributed a philosophical vocabulary with which to discuss them. I am also aware that openly ‘participatory work’, at the time of writing, is enjoying a renaissance of sorts, from large scale environmental works by Shunt or Punchdrunk to intimate, often one-to-one performances under the umbrella of the Forest

Fringe. In other words, participatory art/performance is an umbrella rather too big (for example, Melanie Wilson's monologue *Iris Brunette* has little in common with Blast Theory's SMS game *Day of the Figurines* bar a concern with the increasingly empty signifier of 'audience engagement'). It lies outside the word-length of this thesis to include a comprehensive survey of the field. As well, as I will demonstrate below, (traditional) stand-up comedy as a mode of performance already disrupts the binary between passive spectator and active participant that much of this work is predicated on. Instead, my concern will be with the theoretical framework provided specifically by Relational Aesthetics, as a means of further interrogating my experimental practice. This is supported by a 'Review of Relevant Practices.'

My focus is the relationship between participatory modes of audience engagement and attachments. Turning away from a pedagogical or didactic model of critical art, Relational Aesthetics shifts its focus to affects and mutual agency; while I believe Bourriaud's readings of the politics of Relational Aesthetics are based in a 'micro-topian' world-view I consider far too simplistic, this shift in practice is better placed to deal with what Rancière identifies as the aesthetic rupture, which renders didactic art (and thus critical art-makers) obsolete.

The Aesthetic Rupture

We can distinguish two independent, albeit (sometimes) interrelated vehicles of efficacy in 'art': content and form. Either content (a particular image, story of trauma or suffering, or satirical juxtaposition) is privileged as the thing that acts, or the form of its arrangement of particular relations around the art object is. In her essay 'The Subject of True Feeling,' Lauren Berlant critiques what she calls a politics of 'feeling' in the United States, in which action follows from an encounter with a narrative or image of suffering or exploitation; this 'true feeling,' 'organises analysis, discussion, fantasy, and policy' (Berlant 1999, p. 58). What follows from the 'feeling politics' of confrontation with a 'wounded image' of say, the exploited child, are steps to limit direct, subjective violence, while leaving the systemic violence that produces the wounded image intact: 'Yet only "voluntary" steps are ever taken to control this visible sign of what is

ordinary and systemic amid the chaos of capitalism [...] privatise the atrocity, delete the visible sign, make it seem *foreign*' (ibid. p. 52, original emphasis). The politics of feeling can therefore be deeply counterproductive: 'Sentimental politics makes [...] these violences bearable, as its cultural power confirms the centrality of interpersonal identification and empathy to the vitality and viability of collective life. This gives citizens something to do in response to overwhelming structural violence' (ibid. p. 54). I might add to Berlant's thesis that the connection between the 'wounded image' of pain, exploitation, or subaltern identity is in no way *direct*. The politics of feeling are a sentimentalised version of Levinas' ethics; from the encounter with the image of the Other's face the individual is constituted as an ethical subject, through what Critchley would call an 'infinite demand.' But what of the deluge of wounded images we see today? Should these not overwhelm the subject to the point of collapse? What such a reading of Levinas misses is the dimension of *fetishism*, which I identified in the first chapter: the 'voluntary acts' Berlant identifies are partial objects of the totality of systemic violence, allowing the subject to bear the inconsistencies and horrors of the structure (and these are everywhere today, from buying Fair-Trade coffee to the ultimate painless act of goodness, the two pound direct debit extracted by charity street fundraisers—'you won't even notice it!', they assure us). So much for the efficacy of content.

Rancière describes this paradigm of critical art thus: 'Underlying these forms is the assumption that art compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things' (Rancière 2010, p. 135). On the other hand we have critical art as 'ethical immediacy,' which takes in practices from the festivals of Ancient Greece to Fluxus and Relational Aesthetics. I will pursue this point further in Chapter 5. Apart from the polemic, however, relational art, much like theatre, exists on the intersection between ethical immediacy, representational mediation, and aesthetics, in other words, between form, content, and reception. Against the pedagogy of the efficacy of content and the efficacy of form, Rancière posits the efficacy of the aesthetic rupture, which is the efficacy of *dissensus*. The specific formulation of dissensus here is important: 'Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory perception and a way of making sense of it' (ibid., p. 139). As politics 'invents new forms of collective enunciation, it re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible' (ibid.). In other words, the lack of

direct causality between content/feeling → action, or form/doing → action, is not a problem for critical art, but the source of its efficacy: ‘What comes to pass is a rupture in the specific configuration that allows us to stay in “our” assigned places in a given state of things. These sorts of ruptures can happen anywhere and at any time, but they can never be calculated’ (ibid., p. 143). Rancière is of course not far from the idea of the ‘act’ *qua* break or rupture with ideology, however, in his formulations I detect a resignation that is far from ideal for a practitioner of ‘critical art.’ While his concept of the efficacy of dissensus is useful, and fairly close to my own position, his argument that dissensual ruptures cannot be calculated might be taken by some as relieving the critical artist of responsibility for the signifying possibilities of his/her content and forms. While the vocabulary Rancière introduces is useful and compatible with the framework I have identified previously, it is both too specific (bracketing off other possible and useful interpretations of ‘police’ order or even ‘politics,’ for example), and not specific enough. While I agree that performance comedy can be political in as much as it enacts a ‘redistribution of the sensible,’ this gives no possible indication of how this redistribution might be effected or what its effects might be. I have effectively introduced Rancière’s theoretical framework on the efficacy of art here in order to show that my Lacanian position on the artwork *qua* ‘act’ or rupture does not exist in isolation.

Comedy and Relational Aesthetics

Three elements of stand-up comedy performance appear already sympathetic with the discourse of relational aesthetics: the directly ‘relational’ mode of performer-audience engagement; its anti-representational character; and its focus on the event. Firstly, stand-up comedy bypasses the active/passive binary that often defines the distinction between ‘participatory’ and ‘traditional’ theatre. As noted by Lockyer and Pickering (2005[2009], p. 11) ‘in many instances what is accepted as a joke, and so funny on that account, has first to be negotiated as a joke. Its meaning has to be accepted as comic, either in intention or consequence, and then evaluated as comic [...],’ which suggests a type of ‘joking relationship’ between all parties, which is crucial for humorous or comic exchange. If this breaks down, or one party refuses to play their role, the

joke fails. Stand-up, therefore, is an *immanently relational* form, directly complicating the idea of an aesthetic break as elaborated by Rancière. Historically, stand-up is defined by its break from theatre *qua* ‘theatron,’ that is, a ‘place of seeing.’ Even in 1888, critical discourse around front-cloth comedians noted their ability to directly ‘relate’ to the audience. Double analyses a recording of performer Nellie Wallace: ‘she acknowledges the audience and talks directly to them. She goes on to ask them to join in with the song’s chorus (which closes the act) [...] T.S. Eliot remembered seeing her being jeered and heckled: “I have seen her [...] make some quick retort that silenced her tormentors for the evening”’ (Double 2005, p. 33).

Secondly, stand-up comedy is, for the most part, *anti-representational*. The use of this term requires some elaboration; in the relating of stories or anecdotes in the first-person past-tense, stand-up comedy might be said to have the same representational character as certain novels. Additionally, the issue of the comedian’s ‘persona’ complicates matters; what is the persona but a representation of a particular facet or facets of the comic’s subjectivity? By ‘anti-representational’ I mean that stand-up is a *task-oriented* and *game-oriented* performance form: the task is to make the audience laugh (a task that the audience is similarly complicit in), the game is based in the risk and chance involved in completing the task. The form is anti-representational inasmuch as the mechanisms of the task/game are transparent.

Finally, stand-up comedy is ‘event’ focused. This is perhaps related to stand-up’s unique relationship with temporality. Eschewing narrative time, stand-up might be said to exist in the time of the event. In the stand-up event, the collective awareness of audience and performer is directed to the present. Both audience and comedian are unbearably assertive of their ‘being-there,’ from interruptions such as heckles or self-reflexive comments by the comedian, to the smiles and ‘corpsing’ that may overcome the comic as a routine is going well. These three interrelated elements of stand-up comedy practice demonstrate a paradigmatic break with the conventions of theatre practice that have, through repetition over time, evolved into a coherent practice of their own. Similarly, the experimental practices in the visual arts from the 1990s onwards, gathered by Bourriaud into

a (debatably) coherent ‘movement’ known as Relational Aesthetics, also show such a paradigmatic break.

Traces and Programmes

Maintaining a critical distance from the ‘utopian’ claims for a relational art made by champions of the theory and form, I will now provide a concise exegesis of Bourriaud’s text and related theoretical work. This is intended to provide a critical background for my project of experimental practice. While my hypothesis is that the formal practices of relational art (that is to say, deconstructing the stand-up event in space and time) may suggest a further, efficacious form of subject attachment to the break with ideology effected by jokes and joking, conversely, I can also suggest that comedy can provide the knife-edge of antagonism that rescues relational art’s radical-emancipatory politics from becoming what Bourriaud himself describes as ‘Nokia Art’—‘producing interpersonal relationships for their own sake and never addressing their political aspects’ (Bourriaud 2004, quoted in Bishop 2004, p. 68). The synthesis of comedy and relational art might be doubly productive.

The term ‘Relational Aesthetics’ designates both a theory and a practice, which has led to a certain degree of misinterpretation. The key features of Relational Aesthetics are its open form, interactivity, and the fore-fronting of viewer/audience reception. In simplest terms, Relational Aesthetics might be characterised as an alternative framework for aesthetic reception: the viewer completes the artwork, but as opposed to the individual response, his/her response is to be read as part of the viewer’s social circumstances in the presence of the work (I am 28, male, standing in the Tate Modern, there are three people around me, one has asked me about the painting, we might go for coffee and discuss it further, and so on...). The work is a locus of ‘transitivity,’ a ‘forever unfinished discursiveness, and a never recaptured desire for dissemination’ (Bourriaud 2002[1], p. 26). So far, so post-structuralist. But Relational Aesthetics is made interesting by the ‘possibility of a *relational art*’ (ibid., p. 14, original emphasis), an ‘art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space’ (ibid., original emphasis). The

innovation of Relational Aesthetics, separating it from post-structuralist theoretical arguments as previous visual arts movements including Fluxus and performance art (to which it is heavily indebted), is its execution. For the most part, relational art is a shift from the social circumstances of the viewer as a fundamental condition of viewer's response to the art object to those same social circumstances taking the place of the object itself. The ontology of the relational artwork is, in a way, productive: it produces a scenario, an event, a series of social relations. The artwork is processual or even provisional—and transparently task-oriented, in the manner ascribed above to stand-up comedy. In contrast to participatory or environmental theatre, the mechanisms of the relational art event are not shrouded by fiction or illusion. The work aims not at making the spectator feel part of an unusual environment or narrative, but instead draws attention to the viewer's social circumstances in the present. That, at least, is the idea.

In truth, Bourriaud's writings are often little more than a series of observations on an emergent social turn in contemporary art. As such, Relational Aesthetics documents a transition from a critical art of the industrial economy to a critical art of the service economy; or, to use the technical terminology, from Fordism to post-Fordism. In an interview with George Barker, artist Pierre Huyghe, one of Bourriaud's recurring references, notes: 'In the 1960s, it was important for artists to deal with the product and the object [...] but today this former economy of industrial products has shifted to an economy of service. Human relations are directly involved in such an economy' (Huyghe/Barker 2004, p. 100). Bourriaud writes: 'Because art is made of the same material as the social exchanges, it has a special place in the collective production process [...] This quality is its (relative) social transparency' (Bourriaud 2002[1], p. 41). Thus, while emerging from the conceptual art of the late 1960s, relational art is a significant update of this oppositional practice, and the theoretical model of Relational Aesthetics can be read as a materialist criticism in the era of 'immaterial production.' In the 1960s, what Lucy Lippard denoted as the 'dematerialisation of the art object' was an immanent critique of modes of production and the devaluation of what Benjamin calls the unique 'auratic' quality of the work. The shift to a service economy means many individuals might be engaged with what philosopher Michael Hardt calls 'affective labour,'

which might include ‘health care workers, flight attendants, fast food workers, and sex workers—all strongly gendered activities that, to a large degree, produce affects’ (Hardt 2007, in Clough and Halley 2007, p. xi). This, he argues, forms a large proportion of waged and unwaged economies—see both the well-documented turn to ‘service economy’ in the UK and the way in which a household is structured along lines of gender and ‘roles.’ With a turn to affective labour comes a change in our theoretical conception of production; Hardt writes: ‘The challenge of the perspective of affects resides primarily in the syntheses it requires. This is, in the first place, because affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and, in the second, because they involve both reason and the passions’ (ibid. p. ix). In a certain sense, the ‘affective turn’ (Clough and Halley 2007) in the social sciences takes into account the break between sense and sense identified by Rancière; in thinking the affect of the piece we might (arguably) conceive of the feelings it evokes along with how these feelings are synthesised and ‘made sense of.’ If we are to take historical context into account, relational art might also be described as ‘affective art,’ and it would not be unreasonable to ascribe to it a certain potential for resistance. Relational Aesthetics and relational art might be described as an artistic intervention using the framework of immaterial production or affective labour to produce a new scenario or set of relations.

While the affective turn in Relational Aesthetics is where one might locate the political dimension of this work, Bourriaud’s own conception of relational art’s transformative or resistant potential is simultaneously too optimistic and too resigning. It leaves no space for an emancipatory politics of systemic transformation, but overstates the potential of interstitial pockets of resistance. Relational Aesthetics, he argues, moves away from ‘utopian,’ modernist politics of wholesale transformation to simply ‘learning to inhabit the world in a better way’ (Bourriaud 2002[1], p. 13). ‘It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows’ (ibid., p. 45). The resignation of this statement recalls what Žižek describes as the first reaction of the contemporary Left to the ‘full hegemony of global capitalism and its political supplement, liberal democracy’: ‘full acceptance of this framework: continuing to fight for emancipation *within* its rules (Third Way social democracy)’ (Žižek 2008[2009], p. 337). Significantly,

Bourriaud uses the term ‘interstice’ to designate art (2002[1], p. 16), echoing Simon Critchley’s argument that an emancipatory politics must operate from within the interstices of state power, bombarding it with impossible demands. But without the moment of the ‘break,’ the possibly of an ‘act’ of ‘traversing the fantasy,’ does the artwork *qua* interstice not reproduce the structures of power it seeks to overturn? The transition from industrial economy to service economy is not merely a problem in theory but a more total and global expansion of capitalism itself. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, we have, as Mark Fisher (2009, p. 16) argues, entered a period of ‘capitalist realism’—without a really-existing alternative as an imaginary reference point, we begin to see the invented, reified relations of global capital as ‘natural.’ ‘Capitalist realism,’ he writes, ‘can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism’s ostensible “realism” turns out to be nothing of the sort’ (ibid.). In the most brutal terms, the argument we must raise against Bourriaud’s ‘micro-utopianism’ is simply the place of ideology—does the invention of new relations *in a particular work* break with ideological conditions, or does it simply enable us to live more efficiently and comfortably under them?

These questions of critique will be investigated in Chapter 5. For now, in keeping with the narrative structure of this thesis I will now detail several works by artists Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, and Pierre Huyghe, in a review of relevant practices. I will also examine the related theoretical model of dialogical aesthetics documented by Grant Kester.

3.3 - Review of relevant practices

A relational artwork typically features an artist-led social scenario, activated by the presence and/or participation of viewers/visitors. These may take the form of parties, discussion groups, *ateliers*, or inhabitable installation pieces. In the following review of relational art practices my aim is not to engage in an art-historical reading of Relational Aesthetics, but rather to identify some key formal features that will prove useful for my practice-as-research.

**Interactivity and objectivity: Rirkrit Tiravanija
untitled (Aperto, 1993), *untitled (tomorrow is another day)*
(Cologne, 1996).**

Tiravanija is an Argentinian artist of Thai origin practicing in New York who creates interactive, participatory works often held as representative of relational art as a whole. *Untitled* (Aperto, 1993) at the Venice Biennale is an installation consisting of a gas stove, a cooking pot filled with boiling water, camping gear, and cardboard boxes, most open, containing ‘dehydrated Chinese soups’¹⁹ (Bourriaud 2002 [1], p. 25). Visitors were free to add boiling water to the noodles and eat them, while enjoying the social atmosphere. For Bourriaud, this piece ‘remains around the edge of any definition: is it a sculpture? an installation? a performance? an example of social activism?’ (ibid.), which suggests he is wrestling with an emergent, ‘social’ form. Three years later Tiravanija presented the viewer with not only a makeshift kitchen, but an entire living quarters, a recreation of his apartment in New York City (*untitled [tomorrow is another day]*, Cologne, 1996). The viewer was permitted to inhabit the installation, using the working kitchen, bathroom, bedroom and lounge. In both these pieces, the artist is present. In *untitled [tomorrow is another day]*, Tiravanija inhabits his simulated apartment 24 hours a day, and the hours of the museum are also extended to allow the artist to receive ‘guests’ at any point. In his cooking pieces it is the artist himself who cooks for his viewers. How are we to read these pieces?

One account of Tiravanija’s exhibition at 303 Gallery reads: ‘The gallery became a place for sharing, jocularly and frank talk. I bumped into [David Zwirner] on the street and he said, “nothing’s going right today, let’s go to Rirkrit’s.” We did, and he talked about the lack of excitement in the New York art world’ (Saltz 1996, quoted in Bishop 2004, p. 67). This account suggests that *conviviality* is Tiravanija’s primary concern. Bourriaud (2002 [1], p. 49) describes a relational artwork as displaying ‘[not] its construction (or dismantlement) process, but *the presence of its form amid an audience.*’ The intersection therefore, of installation and dematerialised ‘event’ renders both the focus on the object of traditional criticism and the discourse of performance (as ephemeral, as ‘disappearing’) problematic. Bourriaud writes (2002 [1], p. 54): ‘A Tiravanija

¹⁹ ‘Pot noodles,’ in layman’s parlance.

show, for example, does not dodge materialisation, but deconstructs the methods of making the art object into a series of events,' which is to say, it shifts the logic by which an object comes to be a representative of a process so that it is an always-unfinished process that is on display. To follow this thread to its end, the relational artwork *qua* 'event of art' functions as an inherent critique of commodification/capitalism. This inherent critique is highly contestable, and later I take up this thread through Martin Stewart's 2007 article for *Third Text*.

The most useful way to approach Tiravanija's work is, perhaps, by considering the status of affect. Bourriaud conceives of the work in terms of its potential to disrupt relations of reification and commodification in the art world. However, it is perhaps more interesting to consider the rupture effected by the serving of free food in a gallery. What new relation is created when the artist takes the role of donor or patron? What *dissensual* reorganisation is created by the sense (tasting, eating) of free food in the light of ideological discourses of poverty or starvation? What is the role of the affective space that this action produces—the smells, the tastes, the conviviality, do these effect a form of 'attachment?' Crucially, Tiravanija's work lacks contextual reference beyond the 'art world,' and so may be said to reinforce existing structures or groups. Formally, however, Tiravanija's work is groundbreaking in its casual and convivial approach to the event, and I will incorporate a number of elements of his works into my own experimental practice, particularly the exhibition/studio space *The Centre for Dangerology* with painter Thom Glen.

Reprogramming the status of the object: Liam Gillick *Prototype Erasmus Table #2* (Ghent 1995), *Instructions/Il Mistero dei 100 Dollari* (Milan 1992)

Unlike the convivial installation-events of Tiravanija, Goldsmiths-trained British artist Liam Gillick creates architectural forms and sculptures that draw on household design, though their relational nature challenges the finished status of any art object. For *Prototype Erasmus Table #2*, Gillick created a large table filling nearly one entire room in the ON-LINE gallery, Ghent. It was given a use; the table is conceived of as a working space for Gillick's book *Erasmus is Late*. According to the catalogue (2000): '[...] the table was also made available to other people for the storage and exhibition of work on, under and around

it' (Gaensheimer/Schafhausen 2000, p. 36). The table becomes a palimpsestic display of artistic activity. Each engagement by the viewer invites interaction with the artist through a plastic materiality. Gillick's table invites reconsideration of the viewer's relationship to the art object; which, in this case is not fixed, but expresses a programme for more activity. The work of other artists displayed on the table does not feel parasitic, but collaborative, as if the existence of the table as an artwork is itself contingent on the encounters with other artworks, and so on. Gillick's work in this way represents a move from conviviality to collaboration. This 'collaborative' mode of working is also apparent in *Instructions/Il Mistero dei 100 Dollari* (Milan 1992), in which Gillick invited other artists to fax in sets of instructions for the creation/construction of artworks, directly to the receiving gallery. The instructions were completed by Gillick and the works were exhibited as a group show. The possibilities for collaboration on a *material* level in Gillick's work is useful, and is incorporated in several pieces of my experimental practice. Furthermore, while less directly interactive, perhaps, than Tiravanija's pieces, Gillick seems more broadly aware of the importance of context—the pieces I have referred to above respond and document the network of relations that form their context.

Material interventions into social space: Pierre Huyghe *Chantiers Barbes-Rochechouart* (Paris 1994) and *Streamside Day Follies* (Dia Centre, NYC, 2004)

French artist Pierre Huyghe's work demonstrates a further complication of the relational paradigm in his use of film and documentation. But the film produced is rarely the simple end-point of a process of artistic labour. In an interview with George Barker (2004, p. 89), Huyghe notes: '[...] art objects should be seen as transitory, they are in-between, they are not ends in themselves. They have an outside.' Huyghe's artworks also responds more directly to larger social conditions as well as issues of labour and capital, to a greater degree than either Tiravanija or Gillick. I wish to focus my discussion on Huyghe's use of 'proposition'—the ideas of 'score,' 'screenplay,' and the Situationist '*ritournelle*' (time-score) appear frequently. There is a particular relationship between activity and object, between screenplay and film, in Huyghe's oeuvre, which disrupts patterns of progress and labour. For *Chantiers Barbes-Rochechouart* (Paris 1994), Huyghe photographed a group of construction site

workers (*chantiers*, French for ‘building works’) on the Rue Barbes-Rochechouart, and erected the enlarged photo as a billboard a few yards from the building site. This remained in place for the duration of the workers’ project, was documented by still images and video, and taken down. Bourriaud writes: ‘[Huyghe] organizes his work as a critique of the narrative models offered us by society’ (Bourriaud 2002 [2], p. 47); what *Chantiers Barbes Rochechouart* critiques is the accepted narrative of progress, or even *process*, which Huyghe shuns: ‘It is less a question of ‘process’ which is too linear, but of a vibrating temporality’ (Huyghe/Barker 2002, p. 88). We generally accept that labour happens somewhere in the background, and a large structure is built. Huyghe’s intervention disrupts this narrative; it is a real-time representation, obliterating the ‘social falsification’ of ‘delayed representation’ (a building as representative of a period of human labour) (Bourriaud 2002 [2], p. 51). The co-presence of representation and process is a dissensual aesthetic object.

Streamside Day Follies (Dia, NYC, 2004) takes the idea of production of a new scenario further. Streamside Knolls is a new, fabricated village in upstate New York. In this project, Huyghe created Streamside Day, a new celebration. Acting as ‘project manager’ for the celebration, Huyghe allowed it to happen, documented it, and exhibited his video and still images in a multimedia installation. Huyghe says of *Streamside*: ‘What interested me was to investigate how a fiction, how a story could in fact produce a certain kind of reality. An *additif* of reality’ (Huyghe/Barker 2004, p. 82). Huyghe’s ‘score’ or ‘screenplay’ explores the production of social reality. In the almost absurdist setting of the planned community Huyghe catalyses a fictional ‘tradition,’ the documentation and potential repetition of which creates a new social reality. In his interview with Barker Huyghe likens this to the celebration of Halloween (an American import) in France: ‘We used to import products, and now we import traditions, invented traditions... Mainly planting a custom is about setting up a stable repetition’ (Huyghe/Barker 2004 p. 85). However, if anything, *Streamside* seems to undermine the idea of a ‘stable repetition.’ The juxtaposition, in the visual documentation, of participants wearing rabbit heads, with anonymous, vinyl sided manufactured homes, is profoundly destabilising of the empty signifier of community, evoking a strong sense of melancholy. The ‘score,’ or proposition in this case thus holds a potential for a new mode of living as well as

an embodied critique of actual circumstances of living.

Dialogical Aesthetics

Grant Kester's concept of a 'dialogical aesthetics' draws from and then departs from Relational Aesthetics. The practices that serve as Kester's points of reference take place almost exclusively outside of the museum or gallery and are much more akin to the discourse of Applied Theatre or Community Arts. Kester aligns the process of 'dialogue' with transformative potential—where Bourriaud discussed creating micro-utopias, the 'dialogical projects of WochenKlausur, [Suzanne] Lacy and others' work through a form of Brechtian alienation, 'challenging fixed identities and perceptions of difference' (Kester 2004, p. 84-85). Whereas, for the most part, the artists collected under the aegis of Relational Aesthetics generate or produce social relationships, often among strangers, using the 'free' discursive medium of the art gallery or museum, a dialogic artist intervenes in an existing community. Whereas Tiravanija and his peers tended to view the gallery as a 'neutral space' for the event, an artist working dialogically might contend that no space is 'neutral,' and that the existing context (cultural, social, political, and economic) must be forefront in the collaborative process. Kester cites artist Stephen Willats' diagram 'A Socially Interactive Model of Art Practice,' which triangulates 'Artist-Audience-Context' around the produced thing, 'Artwork' (Kester 2004, p. 92). Writes Kester: 'Willats argues for a form of aesthetic exchange in which the artist's own presuppositions are potentially challenged by the viewer's response through a process of direct collaboration and feedback' (ibid).

Take for instance Austrian artist's collective WochenKlausur, who created a piece of design-art with the students of a school²⁰, in a collective and collaborative process leading to a visual redesign of existing social space within that school. In Willats's terms we have a relationship of potential 'challenge' in the dialogue effected by the collaborative model of the collective's practices with participants. The role of the artist is of considerable importance here. In the Lacanian 'act', as I have detailed in Chapter 2, the actor in some way 'objects'

²⁰ WochenKlausur, *Intervention in a School*, University of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria (Nov 1995-Jan 1996).

herself, changing her position within the community and in some cases excluding herself entirely (Antigone). Within the frame of (comic) performance this positioning holds, as we can see in the work of Andy Kaufman, and as I will demonstrate in my later discussion of artist Kim Noble. The position of the artist in a dialogical aesthetic process is almost precisely the opposite, as in the majority of cases the process begins with the artist in a position *outside* the community and through collaborative work the artist becomes increasingly included, in a sort of ethnographic artistic practice. A good example is artist Jay Koh, whose laudable practice is documented by Kester:

For Koh an art practice that privileges dialogue and communication cannot be based on the serial imposition of a fixed formal or spatial motif (as in Tiravanija's 'cafes' and 'lounges'). Rather, it must begin with an attempt to understand as thoroughly as possible the specific conditions and nuances of a given site. Only then can one devise the most effective and responsive formal manifestation, gesture, or event. (Kester 2004, p. 107).

In September 2009, I also worked with Koh, inviting him to organise and facilitate a workshop as part of the colloquium *Zombomodernism: The Ends of Practice-as-Research*. Koh presented his work in a round-table format, discussing and debating the problems associated with socially engaged art. From our discussions it became clear that Koh's mode of working privileged permanence; that is, revisiting the site of the artist's intervention should, ideally, show a continued independent development by the community. For Koh, the problem was not how to intervene, having created through his projects methods of working based on principles of absolute transparency (for example, when working in Burma, Koh was as open as possible to government officials about his projects, paradoxically, remaining continuously visible afforded him and his collaborators a greater degree of resistant freedom) and cultural sensitivity. The problem, was how the process could be aestheticised. This is not a problem for so-called relational artists, for whom the very framing-as-art of 'process' formed an emergent aesthetic. In this way, Koh's practice, as well as other dialogic artists, has a great affinity with the practices of applied theatre. These practices are commendable, but as the numerous discussions in the field of applied theatre have shown, far from 'challenging' fixed identities, they might often strengthen the identity of community. 'Strengthening community' is in no

way a priori *bad*, however, as Joseph writes, it is in no way an unequivocal or self-evident *good*, either. For all of Kester's departure from Bourriaud, these practices tend towards the same problem as Tiravanija's cooking pieces or Gillick's showrooms: they privilege the interstitial distance without offering the possibility of larger, systemic critique. Both Kester and Bourriaud are perhaps equally trapped by ideology.

I will end my discussion of Kester's dialogical aesthetics at this point as the scope of this study and its word count cannot begin to encompass such a related but divergent practice. I am by no means critiquing the good work done by Koh, Lacy, WochenKlausur, or other applied artists. It is rather my argument that these practices must be supplemented by practices that aim at progressive ideological critique—as David Harvey argues, anti-capitalist struggle requires both structural change as well as the transformation of mental conceptions of the world (Harvey 2010). From another angle, Bishop (2006) summarises my objections:

What serious criticism has arisen in relation to socially collaborative art has been framed in a particular way. The social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism. This is manifest in a heightened attention to *how* given collaboration is undertaken. In other words, artists are increasingly judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration—and criticised for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to “fully” represent their subjects, as if such a thing were possible... (Bishop 2006: <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=200602&id=10274>)

This privileging the process over the product (and keep in mind by way of contrast the complication and enmeshing of process and product in the Relational practices I have detailed above), Bishop argues, is based on a resistance to the commodification of the art object, a critical stance previously occupied by conceptual art. But lacking the provocation(s) of conceptual art (which seemed to all ask ‘*is this art?*’), the discourse of socially-collaborative art ceases at the termination of the process: ‘the urgency of [the] political task has led to a situation in which such collaborative practices are automatically perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance’ (ibid.). In other words, the process becomes unknowable, specific to the community in which it

has taken place²¹. Furthermore, while Kester rejects the way in which Relational Aesthetics ‘preserves the idea that the artist is a superior being, able to penetrate the veils of mystification that otherwise confuse and disorient the hapless modern subject’ (Kester 2004: 88) (leading to ‘orthopaedic art’), he seems not to recognise the way in which his model is based on a similar artist → community binary. While Bourriaud’s ‘micro-topian’ assumptions that the artist is in a privileged position to create awareness, transform society, and build communities are indeed objectionable (as Kester writes: ‘bring[ing] the orthopaedic aesthetic into surprising proximity to the rhetoric of advertising, which promises viewers access to a more prestigious or enlightened social identity if they engage in the requisite act of consumption’)(ibid.), how, precisely, does the dialogical artist evade this trap? In other words, how is the dialogical artist placed in a (privileged) position to recognise a community needs fixing? In such a binary relationship, the artist is always-already outside. This reveals the presence of a social antagonism, the exclusionary position which I will further explore in Chapter 5. For the moment, I would like to propose a reorganisation of Willat’s triangular model, to read ‘Artist-Audience-Artwork’ around ‘Context,’ with Context being the thing produced. This returns to the event-based theoretic of both Relational Aesthetics and performance, in which the artwork is a transitional object.

3.4 - Conclusions: Is it an ism?

The essays that would eventually make up *Relational Aesthetics* were first published in French in 1994. Since then, Bourriaud’s curatorial practice and theoretical model has moved on. The follow-up text *Postproduction* built on the idea of an ‘unfinished discursiveness’ from the practices of Relational Aesthetics and focused on the art of collage, edit, and remix. In 2008 Bourriaud coined the term ‘Altermodernism,’ a neologism that foregrounds diversity, alterity, and translation as central concepts of the present ‘modern.’ *Altermodern* was also the name of the popular 2008 Tate Triennial, curated by Bourriaud. Within the

²¹ The thing that is ignored, of course, is audience. Illustrations of WochenKlausur’s *Intervention in a School* or *Intervention to Improve the Conduct of Public Debate* tend to leave me, as a viewer, cold, suggesting state-funded graphic or architectural design, with none of the frisson of liveness or potential suggested by even still photos of Tiravanija’s *Untitled (Aperto 93)* (Venice Biennale), an artist induced relational machine.

intentionally piece-meal curatorial impulse of the exhibition, traces of what we might refer to as a relational aestheticism remained. Immersive installation was much in evidence (Nathaniel Mellors' large-scale walk-through installation *Giantbun* was the flagship work). The main hall featured an installation of cushions, arranged around a cluster of television screens—visitors could lounge on these cushions to watch video work, including Spartacus Chetwynd's *Hermito's Children*. And a great deal of work engaged with actually existing social structures, including, most notably, Walead Beshty's work, which featured a series of glass boxes, revealing their damage after having been shipped via Federal Express to various locations in the world. These curatorial decisions highlighted the processes of both 'seeing' and 'seeing-with.' Among strangers, an invitation was extended to form a sort of community in shared viewing. Ultimately, while interesting in its own right, the downsizing of Relational Aesthetics to a Relational Aestheticism in a way diminishes any arguments for social transformation or political efficacy. If the prime concern is simply an aesthetics of participation or conviviality, is Bourriaud simply 'theatricalising' the spectator experience in the fine arts?

The most effective way, therefore, to treat this important movement in the visual arts is as a 'bricolage' of concepts capturing a particular historical moment, irreducible to a common form or aesthetic. In this chapter I have raised the issue of 'attachment' to the break, shifting the discussion from the philosophical situation of comedy and the means by which it performs *Ideologiekritik*, to the artistic situation in which the subject can form an attachment to the break (in Harvey's terms; transform mental conceptions). Building on three instances of attachment identified in Chapter 2, I proposed a fourth, the formation of an affective space, and a group. I then examined the theoretical framework of Relational Aesthetics and reviewed a number of relevant practices. A number of formal elements may be drawn from Relational Aesthetics and applied to my experimental practice. Hence, I have conceived of the following three keys to relational art practice:

1. Participation, encounter and engagement
2. Art as intervention into an existing social network
3. Art as open space and proposal for production/encounter/interaction

Taken together, these three concepts sketch a possible model of art as producer of social and cultural conditions, or context. My experimental practice is, at this point, supported by a theoretical framework of the break with ideology from Chapter 2, and a theoretical/formal framework of encounter and mutual agency from this chapter. In the following chapter I will detail the first proper phase of my experimental practice, which led to two outcomes, two exhibitions of visual and conceptual art (*The Centre for Dangerology* and *Dangerology*) that attempted to expand my stand-up comedy practice under the rubric of the relational. It is important at this point to note that my practice-as-research progresses as a narrative. Within this first phase, I now acknowledge, my embrace of Bourriaud's theory of Relational Aesthetics was far too uncritical. These problems in theory also lead to problems in practice (for example, not only were my assertions of the transformative power of relational aesthetics misguided, but in practice the very idea of 'comedy' was compromised). In the course of my work, my practice less and less resembled performance comedy; which led me to conclude that the practice lacked 'antagonism.' This is addressed in later chapters with a synthesis of the Lacanian framework with Mouffe and Laclau's concepts of hegemony and antagonism, and an ultimate return to *performance*.

CHAPTER FOUR: EXPERIMENTAL PRACTICE - *DANGEROLOGY*

4.0 - *Dangerology: an experimental practice in context*

In this chapter I analyse the first instances of my experimental practice proper in the context of the methodological and theoretical framework I have now developed. The two ‘finished’ projects examined in this chapter, *The Centre for Dangerology* (Central School of Speech and Drama) and *Dangerology* (Alsager Arts Centre Gallery) are experiments into the formal practices of relational and participatory aesthetics. In this ‘phase’ of experimental practice I broadly interrogate ‘open’ forms (here I draw on Eco’s terminology from *The Open Work*, 1989) of audience-performer engagement as sites of *attachment* to the political ‘acts’ of *Ideologiekritik*. Seen in the macro, this phase is the first of a double-movement. In the previous chapter, I proposed that relational or participatory engagement might create a particular mode of attachment. This attachment might be defined as a relationship of empathy and conviviality, while all the same maintaining fidelity. In a simultaneous movement, I also proposed that comedy may contribute antagonism itself, the very break required for any social efficacy or transformation. My experimental practice is therefore a synthesis between two divergent practices. In doing so I am expanding the idea of performance comedy to encompass other practices (interactive performance, participation, environmental theatre) that are already well-established.

The first consideration when attempting to synthesise (this word is intended in a Hegelian fashion) two antithetical practices is their superficial opposition. In the discourse of stand-up the performer is often said to ‘control’ the audience: it is common to hear a comedian speak of ‘doing some “crowd control,”’ a term generally reserved for scenes of riot police and protestors). The goal in this form is sustained and collective outbursts of laughter. On the other hand, relational art is characterised by an injunction to relax, converse, and enjoy a convivial atmosphere. On one level, these two practices could not be more different. As such, this phase of experimental practice tests which aspects of my existing comic practice would endure a radical shift in form. If one were to attribute the adjective ‘comic’ to any of these practices it would be qualitatively different than

its traditional usage. Characterising the look, feel, sound, and general aesthetic experience of these works is a softness, safety and ease in participation. Laughter, and therefore the pleasure of comedy, was felt in moments of intimacy, rather than communal solidarity.

It is important, however, to read the practice under this phase of research as a waypoint. Although these works were crucial to my mastery of formal techniques of participatory practice, the misstep of both presentations is their presumption that a particular form of engagement is by its very nature, politically engaged. While ‘comedy’ was meant to provide the ‘break,’ in this phase it fell to the wayside as I grappled with the particular challenges of this new form. The pieces themselves could then be said to be trapped within the same viciously circular argumentation for which I will come to criticise Bourriaud, that is to say, the sociopolitical efficacy of the form is only guaranteed if one accepts, axiomatically, that interstitial distance from the state/dominant power is by definition, socially and politically efficacious. This axiom is coloured by a particular set of ideological presumptions, already characteristic of the logic of late capitalism. So while the experiments with affects and relationships in the performance event were useful, they also necessitated a more critical return to the theoretical framework of Relational Aesthetics and an eventual return to stand-up comedy as my primary practice. This ‘return to stand-up’ resembles in its look/feel/sound, my original, more conventional stand-up practice, yet it contains a far more nuanced reading of the audience/performer relationship, as well as a number of ‘relational mechanisms,’ informed by this phase of practice-as-research.

Therefore the synthesis or sublation of stand-up and Relational Aesthetics eventually returns to stand-up, but not without having produced greater knowledge of both practices. In a properly Hegelian movement, ‘comedy’ must be read as the ‘determining factor’ of this dialectic; as the greater, generic element, it has determined the purpose of this research. What is concluded, through experimental practice as well as reading, is that its potential for critique and revolt may be best helped and managed by alternative modes of audience-performer engagement and, as such, performance comedy must be willing to relinquish certain of its formal characteristics. The two projects detailed here

should be seen as engaging with two different activities—the first, collaborative authorship (or ‘building’), and the second, collaborative deconstruction (or ‘reading’).

4. 1 - The Centre for Dangerology

In relation to my larger research questions, *The Centre for Dangerology* was a modest experiment, though a radical departure in terms of form. I aimed to employ an alternative mode of spectator/audience engagement in order to build moments of *sensus communis* such as those found in the more successful works featured in *Laughing in a Foreign Language*. At this point in my theoretical reading and thinking, I perhaps agreed uncritically with Critchley’s (and by extension Bourriaud’s) suggestion that a *dissensus communis* (that is to say, a better way of living, or ideal expression of the community will) follows directly from a *sensus communis*. As my theoretical thinking grew more sophisticated I saw the argumentative flaw in Critchley’s model; a true dissensus must follow from some fissure, a rupture, which is to say, an authentic ‘act.’ It must be noted at this point that this shift in theoretical positions followed from the discomfort that my work was growing too whimsical or easy, lacking, in other words, *antagonism*. It is this antagonism that I later suggest is the grounds for the dis-ease, or unnerving of the relational moment, which is where the political dimension of performance comedy is located. It is important to note that this shifting of positions was *prompted by practice*.

Created in tandem with painter and illustrator Thom Glen, the exhibition/installation-style work was included in *In/Scissions*, a festival of performance work. My persona as a performer faded significantly into the background of the work, which, inspired by the tactics of invitation and the non-coercive ways in which crowds or communities would form around certain works in *Laughing...*, explored audience participation (to put it bluntly), *without* coercion or compulsion. The three primary questions addressed were:

- 1) How can the artist create a collective, participatory experience *spatially*?
- 2) How does the artist create a collective, participatory experience

- through *action*, and how can this action remain non-coercive?
- 3) What is the effect on the viewer when encouraged to participate in, produce, or discuss the work while simultaneously receiving that work?

The installation was open for nine days, and took place in a large, high-ceilinged studio space. Three walls were devoted to large-scale paintings created by Thom Glen, while the floor space was filled with trestle tables and chairs, while masking tape demarcated spaces of various functions. There was a ‘kitchen,’ in which viewers could make themselves coffee or tea or, in a nod to Rirkrit Tiravanija, instant noodles, paid with an ‘honesty box’ that accepted secrets, rather than money. There was also an ‘office,’ ‘reading room,’ and a stage space used for events, discussions and lectures (more of which to follow). *The Centre...* functioned as a container or scrapbook of encounters; a work continuously creating its own documentation. Glen’s paintings interacted with the palimpsest of the white walls and trestle tables: viewers were given pens and freedom to write on the walls, similarly, the trestle tables were covered with large sheets of white paper, and soon filled with a glut of audience expression, writing and drawing forming an uncontrolled “biomass.”²² As can be seen in the photographic documentation (DVD appendix, disc 2), the overall visual style of the resembles the ‘provisional’ aesthetic spaces of Tiravanija. Glen’s paintings were nailed directly into the wall and consisted of acrylic and ink on corrugated cardboard, while the furniture was either found in the space or recycled/salvaged from dumpsters and skips. In a gentle subversion of the conventions of the gallery, the artists’ notes which greeted viewers were not typed and printed onto the wall but rather hand-written onto the wall in marker-pen. There was beside another wall with the function of a guestbook, on which viewers were asked to ‘tag’ their name, height, favourite artist and ‘the highest thing you’ve ever jumped over.’

²² I have borrowed “biomass” as a term from the fourth film of the *Alien Quadrilogy*, however I think it is a fitting description of the uncontrolled and often unlovely but endlessly *interesting* material generated through unlimited encounters, as Hardt and Negri might use the term “biopolitical production”: “When the flesh of the multitude is imprisoned and transformed into the body of global capital, it finds itself both within and against the processes of capitalist globalisation. The biopolitical production of the multitude, however, tends to mobilize what it shares in common and what it produces in common against the imperial power of global capital” (Hardt and Negri 2004[2005], p. 101).

Spaces: smooth and striated

How did *The Centre...* actualise the experimental principles of this phase of my research? Let us begin with the question of space. The gallery or exhibition space poses a difficulty for the relational artist interested in comedy: the artworks most conducive to laughter are those that break apart the space of individualised viewing. The space of *The Centre...* was one-room, large and cavernous. While not subject to the maze-like compartmentalisation of the Hayward, it was large enough to afford the viewer a free path through the space. With multiple viewers in the room, how might the assemblage of individuals, a series of singularities, form a *group*? Through some form of determining catalyst, a point around which the group might coalesce. The question of spatial organisation of the group is therefore a political question. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of smooth and striated space (1987) is helpful in understanding this aspect of the work. 'Space' here refers to both a conceptual state and actual geomorphological process. Deleuze states: 'We are deserts, but populated by tribes, flora and fauna. We pass our time in ordering these tribes, arranging them in other ways, getting rid of some and encouraging others to prosper' (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, p. 9). The 'desert' is an example of 'smooth' space, a shifting space of nomadic movement, as opposed to the 'striated' space of the fortress or settlement. Deleuze uses the geomorphological analogy to describe a process of subjectivity, simply put, individual subjects have the capacity for nomadic thought, yet are given to arrangement and organisation. Encounters with a singularity are inevitably referred to an existing structure of thought. Yet it is also the case that striations of thought can be 'smoothed.' Deleuze writes, with Guattari (1987, p. 474): 'the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space.' Something escapes from the striated space, smoothing it. To put this in the terms of the first chapter, the striated space is analogous to Lacan's concept of the symbolic (and as Deleuze's essay 'How do we recognise structuralism?' suggests, may draw heavily from it); as with the Symbolic Order, there must always be something that escapes symbolisation, a stain of the Real that can never be fully symbolised/striated.

To analyse the tactics or uses of space that Thom Glen and I employed in *The Centre...*, in order to create a 'collective, participatory experience' we must first draw a connection between the internal 'spatial' organisation of the subject (Lacan's famous dictum, for instance, that 'the unconscious is structured like a language') (1966) and the external activities of space. If smooth and striated always exist in mixture, then the fold of the inside and the outside of the subject is a similar mixture. Thus the internal striations of the unconscious, which manifest themselves in habitual lines of movement, prejudices, or ways of living, can be disrupted by the practices of the artist's material gestures. As Simon O'Sullivan suggests, an encounter with art '[...] operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities' (O'Sullivan 2006, p. 1). For myself and Glen, the spatial organisation of *The Centre* was a similar mixture, an uneasy equilibrium between providing as much creative freedom ('smooth' blank space) to viewers as possible while simultaneously providing enough stimulus to satisfy and spark what in previous chapters, *pace* Huyghe, I have called 'the production of a new scenario.' In other words, the formation of a new group, collective, a *sensus communis*. Hence, the conventional white walls disrupted by the unconventional, participatory process of 'tagging.' For Glen and I, a space for participatory, collective action could only be determined through as few instructions as possible; while the centre of the room was filled with arrangements of tables and chairs, these were utilised by the viewer, in his/her own way, who determined his/her own route around the space. Some viewers dropped by and left straight away, others reacted with disdain at the idea of being asked to write on a wall, others stayed for hours, searching, exploring and chatting.

A similar mixture of the smooth and striated can also be seen in the process of building the installation itself (in museum terms, the 'hang'). Beginning with an empty studio populated with a few trestle tables and chairs, Glen and I had no formal plan, not even for the content of the paintings he would shortly be executing. Aesthetic elements were determined by dialogues and encounters outside the space (how much cardboard we could collect being a major factor). In short, the space was built (in two intensive weeks) through a series of dialogues, which mirrored the encounters with viewers when the space was made public. As it was always the intention of the space that it would serve as a

container for ‘encounters’ with the viewer/audience/spectator, the spatial practices were only one determining factor of *The Centre...*’s principles of experimentation. The other factor was simply, ‘what do you *do*,’ and thus the difficult question of my role in the piece was raised. In the radical shift from comic artist to interactive artist, what survives?

Actions: indeterminacy and passivity

As stated earlier, *The Centre...* was part of *In/Scissions* 2008, predominantly a festival of performance; thus my role was challenged frequently, not least in conversations with puzzled viewers who wondered why I was not putting on a ‘show.’ In the end I solved this indeterminacy of ‘role’ by designating myself as a sort of docent. This gave me a repeatable action to return to (greeting, explaining), but left the content of the encounter to chance. By the second week of *The Centre*’s opening, I felt I had exhausted the possibilities of this repeated action (in other words, it had become *habitual*), and therefore I scheduled and facilitated a number of ‘talk-events,’ more of which to follow. To begin with, as visitors entered the space I greeted them, directed them over to the gallery notes, and showed them where pens and art supplies were kept and what they could do in the space. In keeping with our aim of a non-coercive participatory experience, there were few instructions. The ‘guestbook’ wall followed a formula as previously mentioned, though the constraints actually seemed to spark more imaginative answers – favourite responses to the fourth question on the list “what is the highest thing you’ve ever jumped over” included ‘My own ego,’ ‘My mate Tim’ and ‘From finance to arts’. However, the paper covered tables were left freer – one contained the instruction ‘help draw a map of the city as you’d like to see it,’ and another the injunction put your ideas here, and the third no instruction at all. I would also offer visitors coffee or tea, to be paid for with anonymous confessions of secrets.

Events: talking creatures²³

²³ The idea of ‘The Talking Creature’ is derived from Darren O’Donnell and Mammalian Diving Reflex’s performance piece of the same name, in which strangers were invited from the street to a central, public meeting in order to engage in ‘unstructured, unagendaed conversation’ (O’Donnell 2006, p. 53).

In the second week of the run I would begin the day by preparing a ‘provocation,’ handwritten on a sheet of card. These provocations took the form of an instruction, or a simple statement, and were meant to catalyse further conversation or engagement. These formed the basis of a number of ‘talk-events,’ which I will next discuss. In the initial conception stages of *The Centre...* these talk-events formed a much greater focus of the work. However, the overwhelming majority of viewers chose to utilise the space individually, coming into the space alone, or at most, in groups of three, thus these events were confined to instances when audiences were invited at specific times (as one might schedule an artist’s talk in an gallery). Circumstantially, this led to a curtailing of the research in some sense, as the very act of scheduling ‘compelled’ an audience to assemble. Nevertheless, these script-less (though not exactly structureless) events worked as a whole towards a better understanding of the principles of chance, encounter, safety and power, all integral to both the progressive development of my practice.

Let’s write a movie in 15 minutes

This event took the form of a light-hearted workshop, in which a group of people would gather together to write a film, or rather, a treatment of a film, in the above-mentioned, very short space of time. The intention was to create an experience of collaborative creativity without slipping into the realms of ‘work.’ The event began with me, as facilitator, relaying some ideas about creating one’s own cultural experience, introducing myself to the group, and then asking everyone in the workshop to introduce themselves. Each member of the group of around 12 was also asked to name their favourite type of film. The collaborative ‘work/play’ involved a discussion that would lead to filling in a simple template that I had described as required by every movie. Making connections between ideas in the ensuing discussion and jotting them down, the group created a treatment for a movie called *La piano dans le fenêtre*, a quiet thriller starring Audrey Hepburn as a composer whose music her conductor sister plots to steal away. This having being written, I switched off the lights and turned on the overhead projector and together we ‘watched’ the opening credits of the film (an audience member scrawling the title onto an acetate sheet laid on

the projector). Due to the comparatively higher complexity of the instructions of this talk-event compared with the others, my role was considerably more central. Additionally, I was the only person in the group with control over the paper upon which the ideas were being written. One audience member commented that my presence during this talk-event was not dissimilar to my onstage persona when performing stand-up comedy. Can this work, or type of work, then, be seen as a modification of the content of my work as a comedian, rather than a radical reconfiguration of its form? In a sense, the fact that this was the only talk-event that could be described as ‘funny,’ would support this conclusion; on the other hand, it began to determine the limits of the comic form in my work. If this is a modification of an existing practice, then, what precisely was different? For one, the focus of the event shifted from the limited feedback system of the stand-up event to a collaborative system, necessitated by the goal-oriented nature of the event. As opposed to the activity of relating jokes and anecdotes to an audience whose desired response comes in the form of communal, ‘crowd’ laughter, this talk-event required a greater response of verbal participation from the audience (as well as the corresponding mental ‘work’), in order to direct the group towards a common, albeit frivolous, goal.

...is freedom

In our dialogues while devising *The Centre...*, Thom Glen and I drew, for inspiration, on familiar spaces of sociality: the living room, the local pub, even historical spaces such as the Viennese coffee-shop of the 1890s. It was this last social space that provided the template for the final two ‘talk-events’ of *The Centre...* Drawing on the famous ‘salons,’ I proposed two ‘discussions,’ with the intention that my role as ‘performer’ would fade into the more neutral role of ‘facilitator.’ Each discussion was framed by a short question or provocation; in the first—‘What is your idea of a free space?’ and in the second—‘Comedy is freedom / all freedom is coercive.’ There were no further instructions or limitations bar duration and the audience create its own experience.

However, these discussions were approached with a certain trepidation – participants were unsure whether they were meant to be watching a performance or whether they themselves were somehow performing. And with

no performance “score,” these talk-events relied purely on the expressive potential of the audience. It is important to note that the atmosphere of these latter talk-events tended towards the serious, almost ‘downbeat,’ as one viewer commented, which suggests that production of shared context without a strong central expressive locus is not conducive to humour. This is an important idea to be developed in further experimental practice.

Consequences: situations and roles

Before moving onto the second piece of work, let us recapitulate the guiding principles of *The Centre...* and attempt to draw some conclusions. I began by exploring audience as the grounding principle from which a political comedy or politics of comedy might develop. But at this point my reading of audience was split into a very naive binary between ‘active’ and ‘passive,’ a binary Rancière identifies as historical and traditionally grounded and then begins to demolish in his essay ‘The Emancipated Spectator.’ In this binary, the ‘active spectator,’ I believed, would be driven to form, with his/her fellow ‘active spectators’ a new group, basically what Critchley calls a *sensus communis*, reveling in their new-found, liberated, ‘activity.’ To formulate this hypothesis, I drew on a tradition in the history of art with its origins in Fluxus, Happenings, the Situationist Internationale and the writings of Debord, of which Bourriaud and his Relational Aesthetics is but the most recently influential manifestation. According to Bishop (2006, p. 13), Debord saw ‘situations’ as a ‘logical development of Brechtian theatre, but with one important difference: they would involve the audience function disappearing altogether in the new category of *viveur* (one who lives).’ But this category of ‘living’ (as if the choice to participate in a situation itself were not a proof of ‘life’) threatens to do away with the notion of ‘art’ itself. In the dialectic art/life, it is precisely the ‘audience function’ that donates ‘art’ its being and consistency. Based on my experience of *Laughing in a Foreign Language* I modified Debord’s argument—the goal then, would be to create a work that would pass from the audience function to a community of *viveurs*. In the analysis of this work, it must be concluded that I attacked this process in the wrong way. In the event, *The Centre...* was overall coloured with an *injunction* to freedom, that functioned, much in the way that direct *repression* does, as its opposite. What I, as a facilitator, failed to do was to

recognise the already-active role of the spectator or audience member, in other words, that fact that the choice to engage with a work is an expression of ‘freedom,’ and that in entering *The Centre...* they were not in any desperate need of liberation. From the slogans and provocations (‘Comedy is freedom’) and invitations to ‘have a discussion’ or to write or draw whatever they saw fit, the spectator was immediately bombarded with an injunction of ‘participate, or else.’ What was missing was what Kester (2004) calls the ‘expressive locus’ of the work as the catalyst for the *sensus communis*. In the case of *The Centre...* there was even a strange disconnect between the visual spectacle of the space (Glen’s paintings) and the various participatory mechanisms (though there was a thematic, that is to say, representational, link). Instead of building participatory mechanisms that took the spectacle itself as their expressive locus, my role as facilitator began to resemble Žižek’s description of the modern figure of authority:

The traditional figure of authority (boss, father) insists on being treated with proper respect, following the formal rules of authority; the exchange of obscenities and mocking remarks has to take place behind his back. Today’s boss or father, on the contrary, insists that we should treat him as a friend; he addresses us with intrusive familiarity [...] For the subordinated, such a constellation is much more claustrophobic than traditional authority: today, we are deprived even of the private space of irony and mockery, since the master is on both levels: an authority as well as a friend. (Žižek 2004, pp. 203-204).²⁴

In treating the spectators according to the (false) binary of active/passive, I invited this ‘claustrophobia,’ as it were, as the spectators were unsure of how they should regard my role in the work. This can be evidenced in the trepidation the audience approached the talk-events, which demonstrate the quite obvious fact that the injunction ‘let’s have a conversation,’ can be the thing least conducive to a good conversation.

Let us also briefly return to the idea that theoretically frames this project, the Lacanian notion of the ‘act’ as a break with the symbolic order. We should keep

²⁴ Though I am viewing this ‘modern figure of authority’ in a negative light in this passage, it is also a useful concept. The figure of the ‘cool dad’ is now a standard comedic archetype (e.g. the symbolic authority of the Master in the guise of the fantasy), seen in characters such as David Brent (Ricky Gervais) on British sitcom *The Office*, and Phil Dunphy of American sitcom *Modern Family*. The change in register from repressive to comedic lies in the degree to which we perceive the character ‘over-identifies’ with the level of ‘friend.’

in mind the temporal quality of the act. Žižek writes: ‘An act is never fully “present,” the subjects are never fully aware that what they are doing “now” is the foundation of a new symbolic order—it is only afterwards that they take note of the true dimension of what they have already done’ (1991, p. 222). Therefore it may be said that the only authentic act, within symbolic ‘laws’ of *The Centre...* would be to sidestep these entirely. Perhaps the most authentic response, then, was the one visitor who, ignoring the instructions, the spaces for participation, and my role as docent/facilitator, simply said: ‘I have this space booked in two weeks. I’d like to know what you are planning to do with the walls when you’re done.’

While it can be concluded that *The Centre for Dangerology* approached the questions of my research through practice in an incorrect way, it was useful as a rethinking of my existing practice. Also invaluable was the idea of building an affective space through food, drink, music, and other convivial mechanisms. But to move on from this experiment, I developed the following principles that were put into effect in my next projects.

- 1) Acknowledgement of the spectator as an already active participant in the work by his/her choice to receive the work. In this way the spectator need not be coerced into participating, but may or may not accept the offer to do so.
- 2) A single ‘expressive locus’ for the purpose of comedy through transitional status and power, confidence and embarrassment.

The first principle shows a developing subtlety in approaching the category of ‘spectator’ or ‘audience,’ which emerged through experimental practice. This experiment led me to conclude that a range of ‘affects,’ and more importantly, an ‘attachment,’ arises from this work of intersubjective *building*. The element missing is, of course, the element of performance, the element that ultimately separates this exhibition from previous comedy/art hybrids such as Horowitz’s *The Centre for Improved Living*, Kataoka’s *Laughing in a Foreign Language* or *When Humour Becomes Painful* at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich. In the next project, at the Alsager Arts Centre Gallery, you will see that despite my role as performer becoming almost non-existent, I have nonetheless

redoubled my presence within the space as an ‘expressive locus.’

4.2 - Dangerology: *Alsager Arts Centre Gallery*, *February 2009*

Curating Knowledge

In February 2009, the Curating Knowledge project at Manchester Metropolitan University (Cheshire) provided a ideal space and forum to engage with my practice as research outside of the frame or mechanisms of the university theatre or drama department, liberating me, in a way, from the burden of performing. Programmed by Jane Linden, course convenor of the BA in Art, Media and Performance and the MA in Contemporary Arts at MMU Cheshire, Curating Knowledge is based at the Alsager Arts Centre Gallery, a large white space purpose built for the display of visual art. The project is a season of work comprising seven week-long artist residencies, from various disciplines, all of whom are currently engaging in practice as research. Each residency is accompanied by a research seminar, and elicits a short written response from one or more senior academics including Professor Allen Fisher, Professor Robin Nelson and Dr Ric Allsopp. Documentation of the material is published in an online archive. While the remit of the project seeks to work with artists who use alternative media (including new media, durational work, performance and interactivity), my personal response to the intimidating starting point of the bare, white cube was to highlight the visual side of my work. The exhibition consisted of a series of digital prints, each involving a ‘relational mechanism.’ The content of these prints was primarily self-portraiture with text. Some of the prints referenced ‘lifestyle magazine’ layouts or home furnishings catalogues. Throughout the gallery I had also hung a number of small drawings. In the largest room I projected another series of self-portraits. The floor of three rooms was littered with colourful balloons; in the fourth I had scattered a number of paper ‘fortune-tellers’ on the floor. This fourth room featured a short film, as well as two other digital prints. In the second room I set up a ‘desk,’ upon which I would work as ‘artist-in-residence,’ drawing, writing, and digitally editing photographs and video. A number of trestle tables were set-up throughout the

space, upon which art supplies such as marker pens and paper as well as photocopies of the self-portraits, were laid.

Overall, the space of *Dangerology* AAC was far less ‘provisional’ and more polished; therefore the emphasis of the relational engagement with the space shifted to the group process of interpretation rather than collaborative authorship or building. In a more focused way than *The Centre...*, *Dangerology* AAC engaged with the prospect of producing artwork that intertwined relationality and humour. The relational mechanism in this work facilitates the production of comedy through a process of defacement/effacement/tagging, similar to graffiti. The viewer is invited to engage in this mechanism; this invitation is made attractive but undemanding and non-coercive through the strong visual language of the space. For viewers who choose to engage with the relational mechanism of the work, the production of comedy is predicated on the complex and uncomfortable presence of the artist both as the repeated ‘face’ of the works and as a non-matrixed presence within the space. Additionally, this exhibition explored the theme of perception of self—this can be seen as the addition of an expressive locus, which ideally, would provided a necessary antagonism and tension to the work that gives any comedy its productive backbone. Whether or not *Dangerology* AAC fulfilled the aims of my research fully, especially with regard to ‘antagonism,’ will be examined later in this chapter.

On comedy and movement

During my AAC residency, at least, I never ‘performed’ within the traditional frame of *performance*, however, the work, as was commented on by Rory Francis, a lecturer at MMU Cheshire in the contemporary arts department, was explicitly, and over-consciously ‘aware of its audience.’ This awareness of audience and heightened performativity of the static works, combined with the overall theme of effacement/defacement of self was not dissimilar to my practice as a comedian. There was an overabundance of text: each photograph was accompanied by writing, two works were simply enlargements of written letters, and the lone film was a stuttering edit of an interview sequence. The participatory mechanisms, while simple and undemanding, proposed a

feedback loop from the viewer to the artist/artwork; this stands in contrast to participatory work that leans towards the environmental, in which the artist creates an experience for the viewer (such as Carsten Höller's slides at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, or Gregor Schneider's *The Schneider Family at Home*, in which the viewer enters and wanders around one or both of two identical houses in East London). As the manner of installation was comparatively conventional, the viewer was left to navigate the gallery independently. Participation and audience response was elicited by the way in which the material works themselves seemed to self-consciously *performed* a sort of neurotic narcissism.

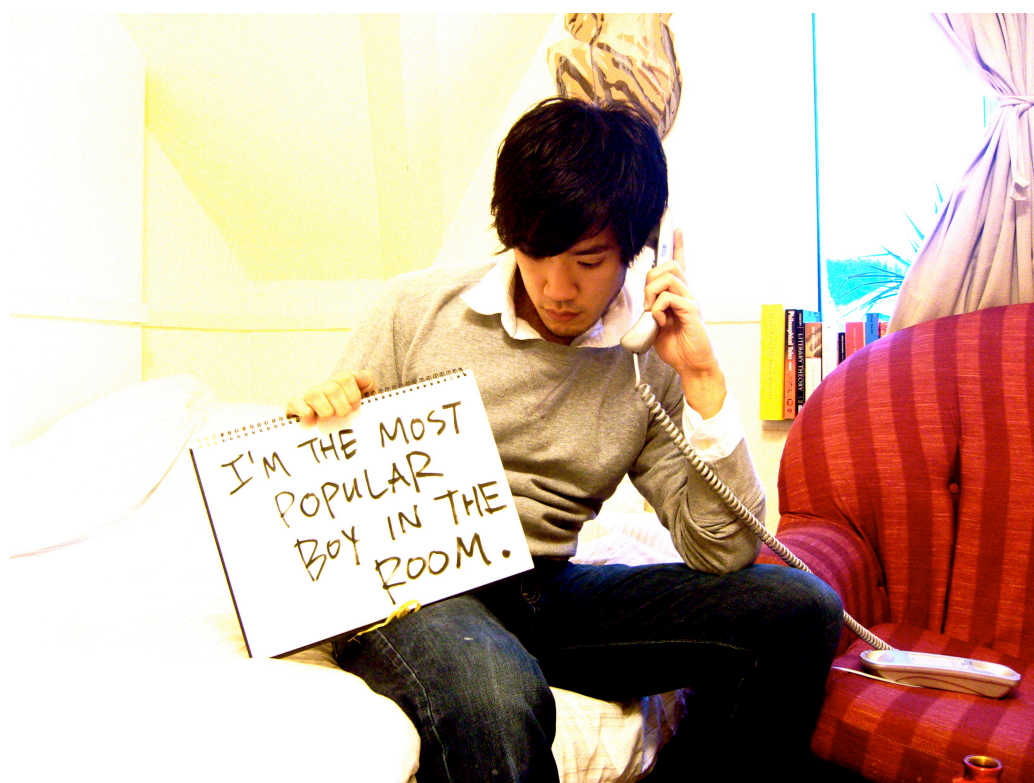


Fig. 2 - 'I'm the most popular boy in the room.' (2009) Digital Print. Chow, Broderick. Alsager. At: Alsager Arts Centre Gallery.

Take for example, 'I'm the most popular boy in the room,' one of many self-portraits hanging in the space (Fig 2). The self-portrait works were displayed over large, institutional tables, on which were scattered photocopied reproductions of the works, and a large number of permanent markers. The invitation, intentionally subdued (primarily subtextual but also buried in the artist's statement, if a viewer were to read this first), was for the viewer to deface, comment on or otherwise mark the reproduction. On the second day of

my residency, I entered the space to discover that the words ‘the most popular’ had been struck out of one of the copies, leaving ‘I’m ~~the most popular~~ boy in the room.’ The edited phrase strikes one as comic not for the new *meaning* (‘I’m the boy in the room,’) nor the original phrase, but for the trace left of the movement between the two, a movement achieved in a shared place that is nonetheless heterochronic. Let us recall Zupančič’s assertion that ‘...irresistible motion is one of the key features of comedy, which is why it seems so difficult to

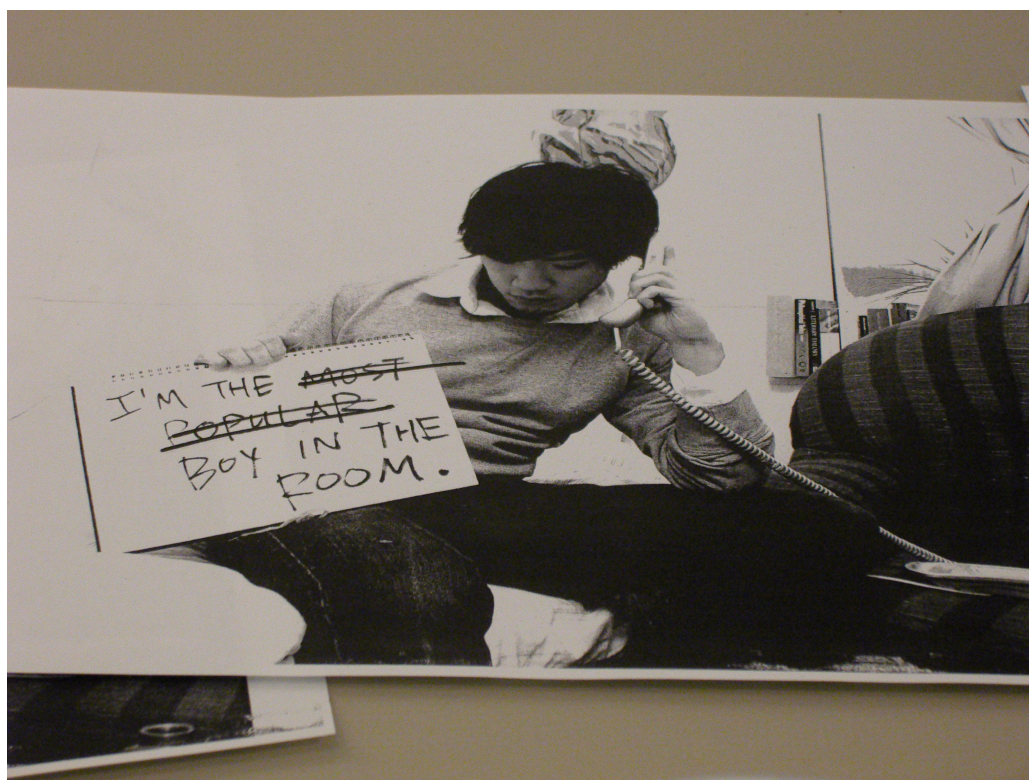


Fig. 3 - ‘I’m the most popular boy in the room.’ (2009) Photocopy, marker. Chow, Broderick. Alsager. At: Alsager Arts Centre Gallery.

pin it down with concepts and definitions... comic subjectivity does not reside in the subject making the comedy, nor in the subjects or egos that appear in it, but in this very incessant and irresistible, all-consuming movement’ (Zupančič 2008, p. 3). What ‘movement’ does she mean? In her discussion of comedy in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, this movement is the short-circuit from the particular to the universal. But there are other comic ‘movements,’ such as the movement in comedy from one meaning to the next. In this case, movement is demonstrated through a movement of agency; from artist to spectator (and again to spectator, repeat *ad nauseum*). Later in the week I found myself chatting to a group of visitors in an adjacent gallery space, while part of their

group busied themselves in the room containing ‘*I’m the most popular boy in the room.*’ The viewer (Dan) to whom I was speaking me told me his friends ‘wanted to interact with the work,’ but were intimidated of doing so in front of me. ‘They want to be witty,’ he said. While my intention was never to place that kind of onus on the viewer, I found this interesting: is this not functionally similar to the heckle in the comedy club (welcome if it’s funny, but quickly shot down if it’s not), demonstrating a similar fluctuation of power relations? Later, after the viewers had gone and I was left alone in the space, I found the same reproduction further defaced. It now read, simply, and absurdly, ‘I’m in the room,’ a bizarre non-sequitur that is amusing only for its last vestiges of movement. This final image (no one defaced the same reproduction further), captures a stages of movement between the activities of writing and reading, so that the great joke of the piece (though admittedly we are not dealing in belly laughs) is revealed as only actualised through a multiple engagement by multiple subjects (see Fig 3).

Themes: other selves, perceptions, followings

Although Lacanian psychoanalysis has contributed a great deal to the methodology of this PhD project, the response, from a viewer, that *Dangerology AAC* was ‘very Lacanian’ was somewhat unexpected. In retrospect, however, the work compellingly played with ideas of the symbolic order and subject. The digital prints, for example, drew inspiration from two main sources. The first is Renaissance portraiture, in which a subject is represented not only through her image (face), but through a series of object symbols: book, bell, ferret. In a sort of modern updating, I created a series of photographs in which the object-signs of my everyday life were arranged and rearranged into multiple configurations; some hidden, others highlighted, each photograph presenting a new ‘version of myself.’ Though the clothes, signs, location and body presented in the portraits are mine, ultimately (and intentionally) I feel absent from the images. This absence can be attributed to a process of self-fictionalising, a word I repeatedly used to describe the process of making these works, and which, the reader will recall, is also the process I employ to write comedy material. It is as if, in making the images I am consciously determining the arrangement of sign-equipment, as in Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis (1990), to create a

Front, but without the knowledge of the situation in which this Front is to appear. Thus, in its apprehending by the camera lens, this dramatisation is always-already inappropriate, unable to respond to the interactions in the moment. Comments from viewers supported this suggestion of ‘absence;’ one noted that taken together, a profile of a character began to emerge, which is unexceptional but for the fact that this comment was said directly to me, as if this ‘character’ were an entirely separate entity.

I also suggest that what I was creating was a ‘signifying chain,’ a symbolic order that is ‘constitutive of the subject’ (Lacan 1966[2006], p. 6-7). Systematically employing signs and symbols into the work made visible the intersubjective nature of the encounter with the art object. Kay (2003, p. 20) writes, in relation to Lacan’s theory of subjectivity as ‘mutual recognition’: ‘I position myself as a result of the way I am already recognised *by the other*, while the other who recognises me is himself in a position to do so because he is already recognised *by me*’ (original emphasis). Inviting the viewer to leave his/her mark on the material form of signification is to invite him/her to reposition himself within this scheme of recognition, allowing, perhaps, for moments of humorous incongruity.

This absence of self under a flurry of signs and symbols, compliments the relational mechanism of the work, which was partially inspired by the experimental social reportage and documentation of French artist Sophie Calle. Calle’s work is often described as operating between the public and private, fact and fiction (Calle 2004: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5CLplquFCg>). Returning to France after her studies, directionless, a bored young woman, Calle began devising simple social games, involving other people, which she would document. She notes these games, in their early stages, contained no overt artistic gestures. It was only after she had followed a man to Venice, photographing him and taking notes, that she decided to make a book; only after a series of strangers had slept in rotating shifts in Calle’s bed that a friend suggested she exhibit the photographs. Calle’s primary interest is the game or ritual. In her lecture for the European Graduate School in 2004, Calle notes that her work uses ‘arbitrary situations... and just by the strength of the obedience to the ritual, they become important and necessary’ (ibid.). In one of her later

works, Calle became interested in how she was perceived by others, and hired a private detective to follow her and document her movements during a single day. The resulting images and exhibition suggest a strange obsessive relationship, a ‘caricature of a passionate relationship’ (*ibid*). My own work for the AAC was similarly interested in exploring perception by the other. In my work, however, the game or ritual (‘relational mechanism’) is inverted, and begins with the object on display and examines the ‘real’ relationships that emerge from the artificial situation. In this way this work has developed from *The Centre...* in its use of relationality to explore a particular theme (in this case, the self and its multiple perceptions).

‘Fifth Floor drawing 2’: *Dan Perjovschi*

Dangerology AAC drew comparisons to another relational/participatory artwork that also involved its viewers in drawing and marking, ‘Fifth Floor drawing 2’ by Dan Perjovschi. This work was shown as part of the exhibition *The Fifth Floor* at Tate Liverpool, which had run for two months and ended only a week before my hang at the AAC. *The Fifth Floor*, subtitled ‘Ideas Taking Space,’ drew together a wide variety of relational, participatory and socially engaged artworks to engage directly with the people of the city at the end of Liverpool’s year as European Capital of Culture. Contributors to the programme of essays included Bourriaud, Bishop, Kester and Lars Bang Larsen. Romanian artist Perjovschi’s piece comprised a large wall covered in chalk-board paint, on

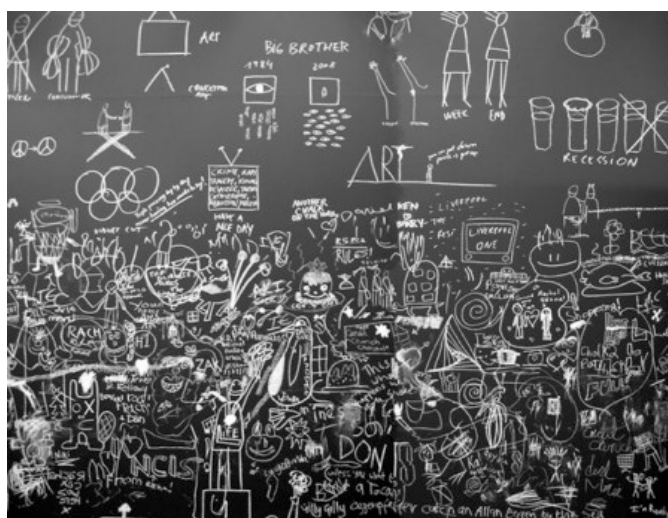


Fig. 4 - ‘Fifth Floor drawing 2.’ (2008) Perjovschi, Dan. Liverpool. At: Tate Liverpool

which the artist had drawn some of his cartoon-like drawings (see Fig 4). Viewers were encouraged to do the same, and in the installation views published in Peter Gorschluter's catalog, there is a sense of conviviality and friendly socialising as viewers set to a shared activity. However, Perjovschi's work carries a sort of internal control mechanism. Perjovschi's drawings remind the viewer of political or editorial cartoons, which, like my own defacings of my self portraits, suggests the artist desires a specific quality to the material participation. As I learned with both the self-portraits, as well as the talk-events of *The Centre*, this imperative to participate in a 'certain way,' however implicit, is intimidating, and leads to either a reluctance to participate (in my case), or a rebellion against the artist's imperative (Perjovschi's)²⁵. While discussing the piece with several different visitors ('Fifth Floor drawing 2,' owing to its thematic and functional similarities, not to mention its similar time-frame, came up a number of times as a reference point while discussing *Dangerology* with visitors), it arose that Perjovschi intended the viewer drawings to develop from the visual and textual languages of social comment he had begun. But faced with the injunction 'be witty!', many viewers had begun ignoring Perjovschi's drawings completely, and scrawling unrelated things, such as 'Elly (hearts) Shane.' Two visitors to *Dangerology* AAC reported that they were 'told off' by the gallery attendant while getting on one another's shoulders to draw in the free space higher on the wall, because 'that space was reserved for the artist.' Later, a docent told them that the artist 'had been very disappointed by what people had drawn.' What is most interesting about 'Fifth Floor drawing 2,' however, is not the supposed organic generation of ideas and social comment in free collaboration but the way in which the artist's own intentions disappear among the chaos of visitor's drawings: use of the same colour medium (white) on a uniform backdrop creates a homogenous sea of voices in which Perjovschi's marginally distinctive style of drawing struggles to be heard. While Perjovschi notes that 'humour is (his) main tactic,' he seems unaware of the comic multiplicity his participatory mechanism encourages. While his cartoons of veiled women asking each other 'how do I look,' for example, are near-the-knuckle humorous, the expectation that all visitors would create similar jokes is unrealistic. Far better is the comedy that arises from movement and ambiguity:

²⁵ In many ways, this second scenario is far more comic.

the phrase ‘Croxteth Rules’ in a child’s unhand scrawled over the work of an international artist is both funny and uneasily ambiguous. Contained within it are multiple lines of argument and interpretation; it is funny *and* disturbing, considering the implications of Croxteth’s gang problems with nearby Norris Green and the murder of Rhys Jones, yet the incongruity of this irruption of ‘feral youth’ within the frame of the Tate makes this a dark, if unintentional, joke. Bourriaud elaborates on the ‘fragmentation’ of the work of art: ‘No longer can a work be reduced to the presence of an object in the here and now; rather, it consists of a significant network whose interrelationships the artist elaborates, and whose progression in time and space he or she controls’ (Bourriaud 2009, p. 13). While the network of significant interrelations of ‘Fifth Floor drawing 2’ are elaborated through the material developed on the blackboard, the artist has not set the means of controlling its progression in the way it would seem he wanted to (save the presence of grumpy docents or guards). Surely, though, this is the point of the blackboard (*tabula rasa*), and the fragile, ephemeral quality of the marking medium (chalk)²⁶. What ‘Fifth Floor drawing 2’ achieves, though, is an overlaying play of frames of languages that evokes a comedy of wildness through visitor’s resistance to, rather than collaboration with, the artist’s expressive locus.

In *The Centre for Dangerology*, the reader will note, I provided a similar *tabula rasa* to Perjovschi’s chalkboard: viewers were encouraged to mark on walls and large sheets of white paper in POSCA markers and acrylic paint. For *Dangerology* at the AAC I ‘decontextualised’ this material archive of visitor traces by cutting around the drawings, texts and scribbles on paper and mounting these, in a random fashion, on the walls of the gallery. These were interspliced with (my own) new drawings, cut directly out of my sketchbook. The effect of this was of an assemblage of nonsense: a quotation, in French, from Sartre’s *Being and Time* took its place beside the words ‘Holy shit remember Street Fighter?’ over a drawing of Street Fighter avatar Guile saying ‘I

²⁶ It is interesting to speculate on the difference in affect of the marking media in both projects. While Perjovschi’s chalk is impermanent and, in a way, frivolous, my visitors were provided, as in *The Centre for Dangerology*, with POSCA pens, which distribute an opaque, intense liquid closer to acrylic paint than ink. The permanence of this medium could possibly account for the slow thaw to the idea of participation in the AAC exhibition. On the other hand, this medium might also be seen as part of a specific affective space, which produces a slower, more considered participation from viewers.

don't.' As a result of the AAC being a gallery space, there were restrictions on the marking of walls. But far from falling into the old trap of active/passive spectatorship simply for being on a wall, this chaotic display forms, images and languages reveals the 'activity' of spectatorship itself: the viewer is constantly struggling to read meaning. If the overarching atmosphere of the exhibition is one of over-conscious communication, this awareness of audience can be read as an invitation to make meaning, the invitation to produce new contexts and solutions to the problem of nonsense.

Conviviality and Spectator Activity

As noted above, the exhibition was comprised of three adjoining gallery spaces. Despite some shared scenographic elements, each was designed as a unique relational space. Room 1, the largest room, was dominated by a looping projection of six self-portraits (*Mot d'ordre*). Having taken these photographs in the same space as the gallery while installing the rest of the works, the effect was of the balloons which decorated the entire space spilling off the virtual projection and into the actual space. Additionally, Room 1 contained pieces of the interactive series of self-portraits as well as a CD player rotating a mix of popular music. Atmospherically, this room somewhat suggested a dance floor (through the music, dimmed lights). Importantly however, the room was dominated by my neurotic presence, as my image, life-size, shifted and fluctuated, ghost-like, on the wall. Although there was no determined path for the visitor, this was, it seemed, the room most entered first, and thus their first contact with the work. During my residency I was mostly present in Room 2, which was laid out like a studio or workshop. I tended to work at a makeshift desk, writing or drawing, with my back to the rest of the exhibition. The room also contained a television with VCR, on which viewers could choose to watch a selection of films. On the walls were more interactive self portraits as well as 'magazine layouts' of portrait and text. Balloons also littered the floor of the space, and, in a nod to artist Felix Gonzales-Torres, a large plinth was set up in the centre of the room, upon which was a colourful pile of un-inflated long balloons. Finally, Room 3 had a decidedly different atmosphere. This room contained a single large table, upon which was a ream of blank white paper and a black pen. A looping film was projected against the facing wall, an interview

with comedian Helen Arney interspersed with half-second frames of popular films; the sound of this film was played through a pair of headphones resting on another plinth. To either side of the projection were two enlarged ‘open letters,’ written by Helen Arney and another comedian, Chris Boyd, addressed to friends the authors had not seen since elementary or secondary school. Upon the floor of this room were scattered a large number of ‘fortune tellers,’ folded from sheets of newspaper.

Use of the AAC gallery as a social space was more hesitant, and it could be said, more tense than in *The Centre*.... With the room divided into three spaces, it often came as a surprise to visitors to find the artist, myself, working in Room 2, and reactions ranged from avoiding Rooms 2 and 3 entirely, to making reluctant conversation, to fully taking up the invitation of the space and indulging in a playful engagement with myself, others, and materials in the space. As the week progressed, I speculated that my presence was an imposition into the free movement of the viewer, pulling him/her from private, solitary contemplation of the visual language of the exhibition into an alternative, potentially uncomfortable, form of engagement. However, when large groups visited the exhibition together interaction and conviviality emerged in unexpected forms. Single visitors tended to carefully avoid the balloons on the floor, as if these themselves were ‘an artwork,’ despite the conscious choice of balloons as dispensable, fragile objects, with an uncontrollable movement (the physical properties of non-helium balloons meant that the air currents produced by visitors merely walking by them would cause them to tremble and scatter, in this simple way the space itself became responsive to the presence of visitors). However, one day I was pleasantly surprised to see a makeshift game of ‘balloon football’ develop between two young male visitors, and later returned to the space to see that, in a manner that would have pleased Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a number of long balloons had been removed from the plinth (it is important to note here the traditional role of the plinth in museum culture: it often supports a sculpture and is surrounded by two foot barrier of velvet rope or even social agreement— ‘do not touch’), inflated, and fashioned into balloon models. On another occasion another visitor sat down in front of the television and watched the remaining hour of the film *Jurassic Park*, which I had put on earlier that day, fascinated by Spielberg’s world of animatronics and computer graphics.

Enjoy! *your libidinal bribe*

At times it seemed that *Dangerology* AAC functioned as intended—responding to the visual stimulus or precise relational mechanism of the work (the expressive loci), enabled the formation of a temporary conviviality or momentary group. But what emerged as troubling from this phase of my practice-as-research is another, related ‘injunction,’ this time not an injunction to participate, but to enjoy. As we have previously seen with regard to Carnival, the excessive enjoyment of ‘misrule’ is the ‘obscene double’ of the law or prohibition. It is experienced as an internal transgression. Žižek writes: ‘[...] *enjoyment itself, which we experience as “transgression,” is in its innermost status something imposed, ordered*—when we enjoy, we never do it “spontaneously,” we always follow a certain injunction’ (Žižek 1991, p. 9). In the case of *Dangerology* AAC this injunction was suggested strongly by the celebratory nature of the decorations, the popular music, the competing noise of the VHS films, and (in the case of the gallery’s open evening) presence of food and alcohol, in other words, the affective space of the exhibition. One comment left in the visitor’s book confirmed this perception—to this viewer, the project transformed the gallery into ‘a space for enjoyment.’ What are the consequences of an aesthetic space that carries such a suggestion? Firstly, ‘enjoyment’ is strongly linked to both comedy and the idea of art generally, so it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape. At the same time, if the aim of this project, from a theoretical perspective, is to create, in practice, a form of comedy that escapes the logic of the transgressive or the Carnavalesque, the idea of a free enjoyment concealing a deeper coercion is incompatible with such a critical frame. The question here is one of differences and equivalences: enjoyment is relative, therefore the implication that the viewer *must* enjoy a certain way contains a sinister, authoritarian undercurrent. Secondly, as Žižek argues, it is often the injunction to Enjoy! that carries the ideological message; it: “bribes” us libidinally into accepting the ideology of the story’ (Žižek 1992[2008] p. xvii). Let us consider this further with specific reference to the gallery space created in *Dangerology* AAC. The overwhelming scenographic ‘feeling’ of the gallery was of the aftermath of a party, or, even, as one viewer noted, a ‘child’s party.’ The riot of colour provided by the balloons, the confetti and decorations all

contributed to a feeling of over-the-top cheerfulness. As an artistic gesture, I felt that this visual statement was done ‘knowingly,’ which is to say, with a certain sense of irony. As an artist, I was stating ‘we can all see through this.’ But to what, exactly? This sense of ‘knowing, yet all the same, still doing,’ is of course, how ideology functions today, and, as Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) reminds us, cheerfulness, positive thinking, and an injunction to happiness form a very pervasive and damaging ideology in themselves.

Antagonism (or lack thereof)

The difficulty, of course, with this reading (viz., the ‘libidinal bribe’) is that, as the artist, I am quite unaware of concealing ideological coercion in the work. But it is notable that the problems of both *The Centre for Dangerology* and *Dangerology AAC* stem from a lack of antagonistic relations. There is a direct connection here to trends in comedy particularly the trend in recent British stand-up comedy (as noted in Chapter 1) for ‘whimsy.’ The tendency is to frame comedy whimsy as an oppositional practice, creating alternative communities and hence modes of living. However, in its cheer, its friendliness, its injunction to ‘enjoy this alternative item/object/practice’ (‘child’s toy/*Revolutionary Road*/knitting’), it is inculcated into the ideological terms of late capitalism. In place of the imperative to consumption the alternative proposed is not ‘don’t consume,’ but rather ‘consume differently.’ Whimsy isn’t *bad*, of course, but it can be coercive and misleading when the form, atmosphere or spectacular surface of the performance contains such an injunction. *Mutatis mutandis*, the equivalent in a piece of relational art is the space itself. The danger being that when the space of inter-human relations in such an artwork is delimited by the *very terms* of the society it is meant to refuse, it can no longer be considered oppositional. The ‘social interstices’ proposed in the early writings of Bourriaud must be renegotiated, into spaces of critical work. For me, one of the most notable moments of this exhibition did not seem to involve conviviality at all, but rather an interaction based on contemplation and solitary engagement. On the Thursday night gallery opening, which was billed as a ‘party,’ I observed one young female visitor sitting alone at the table in Room 3, concentrating over a sheet of white paper with the pen provided. The implicit invitation of this room was to use the desk as a space to compose your own open letter, like the

enlarged versions hanging on the walls. The next day, I discovered one sheet of paper missing, but no completed letter. This suggests that either that viewer was not happy with the letter they had composed, or that, possibly, the public/private nature of the work was such that they did not want their letter shown. Either way, it suggests an 'authentic' spectator activity, that is not coerced by a participatory 'script' or an imposing injunction to enjoyment.

4.3 - Conclusions: *The space of attachment*

With all this in mind, I tentatively returned to my role as performer, in the hopes of bringing some of the 'antagonism' of my comedy performance to a re-energated practice, charged with a greater understanding of audience and performer/audience relationship. In this section I have detailed two pieces of experimental practice, which extend my performer-centered stand-up comedy practice into the medium of interactive and participatory art practice. This practice aimed at deriving a *form* that would best result in the 'attachment' of a subject to a moment of ideological break. As a result of this experimental practice I have found that participatory practice enables attachment through means of creative of shared context, affective space, and a libidinal injunction to enjoyment. However, none of these things can be taken as in-themselves politically efficacious, and far less progressive or critical.

Or, in other words, where were the jokes? While the intersubjective nature of relational work acts as a 'set-up,' the crucial moment of the break, or the 'punch-line,' was rarely to be found. In the following two chapters I explore this problem both theoretically and through practice. Firstly, I will perform a critical reading of Bourriaud's claims for efficacy, bringing in the crucial category of 'antagonism,' through the work of Mouffe and Laclau. I argue that in order to be a critical force, the formation of a group must be negotiated around a 'demand,' which arises *through the moment of a break with ideology*. In the final chapter, as well as the live submission that accompanies this thesis, I will attempt to actualise this in practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: HEGEMONY, IDEOLOGY, AND POLITICAL ARTICULATIONS

5.0 - *The Frontier of Exclusion: articulations and antagonisms*

As we have seen in the preceding analysis, I have engaged explicitly with the concerns of audience engagement through a radical shift in form partially inspired by the theoretical frame of Relational Aesthetics. These practices were intended to uncover a form best suited to forming a ‘suspended’ or ‘safe’ attachment to the break with dominant ideology. While contributing to a greater practical understanding of how to negotiate alternative modes of audience/performer relations, ‘Comedy,’ the object of my thesis, seemed to fall into the background. As identified in Chapter 1, my comedy, if it can be said to have a singular defining characteristic, attempts to identify the dominant logic of a particular situation, and then break from it. While the open forms of Dangerology were good for identifying, or rather, *producing*, a situational logic (i.e. a ‘shared context’), the break itself (that is, the punch-line), rarely arrived. My concern with negotiating a convivial space in fact sometimes seemed to quell the very possibility of the break. That is to say, it aimed at limiting *antagonism*. This did not manifest itself in an overt way, but in what I have referred to as the libidinal bribe of the space, which, above all, shouted ‘Enjoy!’

In this chapter, which marks a synthesis of the dual theoretical positions in this text, I will formulate a model for a practice that holds an antagonistic break in ‘suspension,’ allowing the subject to assume the break from an ambiguous position. This requires us to examine the practical basis of my experimental practice (Relational Aesthetics) in a more critical light. I first examine criticisms of Relational Aesthetics, specifically criticisms of Bourriaud’s (2002) claims for its political and social efficacy. Here, I focus primarily on well-known texts by Martin Stewart (2007) and Claire Bishop (2004). I argue that though the formal mode of relational art is useful in its production of relations and affects, the suggestion that a relational work is immanently efficacious draws too heavily from an outmoded ‘postmodern reason.’ Following Bishop’s critique that relational work lacks ‘antagonism,’ I employ the concepts of hegemony, articulation, and antagonism from the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto

Laclau (1985) to draw together my practical methodology with the Lacanian framework detailed in Chapter 2. The chapter concludes with a detailed case study of comedian and artist Kim Noble's highly controversial work *Kim Noble Will Die*. This work points to a mode of 'interactive' practice that holds the antagonistic break in a moment of suspension, and therefore forms the basis of the experimental practice in the final chapter.

5.1 - Critique of postmodern reason

Relational Aesthetics captures a historical and art-historical moment in which communication, conviviality and inter-human relations were of prime concern. But does the overdetermination of the form and theory by what I call 'postmodern reason' negate Bourriaud's claims for socio-political efficacy in his works, namely, the production of interstitial spaces of conviviality and dialogue? In his most recent book, *The Radicant*, Bourriaud responds directly to conditions of globalisation, mass networked communication, and multiculturalism. These conditions present a problem to which contemporary art and art criticism must respond:

The numerous aesthetic theories born of the nebulous alliance of cultural postcolonialism have failed to elaborate a critique of modernist ideology that does not lead to an absolute relativism of to a piling up of 'essentialisms.' In their most dogmatic form, these theories go so far as to obliterate any possibility of dialogue among individuals who do not share the same history or cultural identity. [...] If I am a Western white man, for instance, how can I exercise critical judgment on the work of a black Cameroonian woman without running the risk of inadvertently imposing on it an outlook corrupted by Eurocentrism? (Bourriaud 2009, p. 25).

As we can see, Bourriaud is situated in what might be called a post-postmodern framework, despairing of postmodernism's inability to formulate theoretical means for dealing with the increasing globalisation of the planet, that do not reduce it to mere dogmatic plurality of multiple identities. Proponents of this outlook include a number of authors already mentioned in this text, including Žižek (2000, 2008), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (1985), and Simon Critchley (2008)—each of whom have strikingly different responses to the same problem. Bourriaud follows Hardt and Negri's thesis of *Empire and the Multitude* here: "Postmodernism [...] is indeed

the logic by which global capital operates,” for it constitutes “an excellent description of the ideal capitalist schemes of commodity consumption” through notions such as difference, cultural multiplicity, mixture and diversity’ (Hardt and Negri 1994, quoted in Bourriaud 2009, p. 26). The uncritical diversity of postmodern theory, it follows, is analogous to the globalisation of the planet under corporate capital, with its accompanying exploitation of labour and natural resources, increasing divisions of wealth, and threats of war and violence in the authoritarian schema that organise globalisation. Art and art criticism have their own role to play in opposing this theoretical frame, Bourriaud argues, by addressing the crucial problem: ‘[...] how can we simultaneously defend the existence of cultural singularities yet oppose the idea of judging works by those singularities, that is to say, refuse to judge them only in keeping with their traditions?’ (Bourriaud 2009, p. 40). Bourriaud argues for a move away from ‘postmodern aesthetic *courtesy*, an attitude that consists of refusing to pass critical judgment for fear of ruffling the sensitivity of the other’ (Bourriaud 2009, p. 27) to ‘translation.’ The idea is to embrace *radicantity*, as a kind of postmodern radicality. A radican is a form of plant, like ivy or couch-grass, that develops roots laterally as it progresses along above ground. As opposed to the radical tactics of ‘pruning, purifying, eliminating, subtracting, returning to first principles [...] the adjective “radicant” captures [the] contemporary subject, caught between the need for a connection with its environment and the forces of uprooting, between globalization and singularity, between identity and opening to the other. It defines the subject as an object of negotiation’ (Bourriaud 2009, pp. 44, 51). Eschewing the similar Deleuzian botanical term ‘rhizome,’ which famously refers to an amorphous, shifting form, Bourriaud chooses ‘radicant,’ which has a progressive, forward movement. The radican subject is akin to his earlier term ‘semionaut,’ which imagines the artist as a navigator and re-arranger of signs. Bourriaud is characteristically speculative here of what a radican practice of translation precisely is: ‘The transfer: a practice of displacement, which highlights as such the passage of signs from one format to another’ (Bourriaud 2009, p. 138). He cites the collaborative project *Ann Lee*, in which over a dozen artists (including Huyghe and Parreno) purchased the copyright to a Japanese *anime* character. The artwork, in true relational style, was/is provisional and processual, an assemblage of multiple actualisations or *translations* of a virtually ‘empty’ sign,

the ‘character’ of Ann. At the same time, it is difficult to discern this semionautic process of translation from the traditions of pastiche, montage and especially, collage. Rancière notes that collage, or the ‘clash on the same surface of heterogeneous, if not conflicting, elements’ is an old technique:

In the days of surrealism, the procedure served to express the reality of desire and dreams repressed under the prosaic character of bourgeois quotidian reality. Marxism then seized on it to render palpable, through the incongruous encounter of heterogeneous elements, the violence of the class domination concealed beneath the appearances of quotidian ordinariness and democratic peace. (Rancière 2009, p. 27).

Yet far from this being a ringing endorsement of the technique we must tread with caution; Rancière knows, to quote Fredric Jameson, that ‘one of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism today is pastiche’ (Jameson 1988[2009], p. 4). In fact, such a project of combining diverse elements could also be seen to reproduce the logic of global capitalism *tout court*. There is, in the radican, a sense of ‘having it both ways.’ That is to say, a postmodern diversity yoked to a modernist notion of forward progress. *Ann Lee* is in no sense anti-productive, rather it is the form of late capitalist cultural production.

Bourriaud’s post-postmodern position is problematic. Firstly, Hardt and Negri’s general thesis that a radical-emancipatory politics (for they do indeed use the term radical) must operate as a redoubling of the production of relations in postmodern society, creating an alternative to the dominant, commodified relations under global capitalism seems to negate the idea of ‘emancipation.’ If the goal is the production of new relations, *within the logic of global capital*, from where do we derive a radical discontent? Hardt argues (speaking in Taylor’s 2009 documentary *Examined Life*) that ‘biopolitical production’ may serve as ‘the basic for instituting the training in democracy [...] providing a springboard or a standpoint for imagining an anticapitalist or postcapitalist alternative’ (Hardt 2009 in Taylor 2009, pp. 150-151). Therefore, the old revolutionary site of the factory is relocated to those modes of work that produce ‘social relations’: flight attendants, call-centre workers, and artists. Hardt and Negri’s argument celebrates this ‘immaterial production’ for its ‘possibility of “absolute democracy” [...] because *it is immediately, in itself, the form (and practice) of social freedom*’ (Žižek 2008, p. 356, original emphasis).

But biopolitical production is already well incorporated into the machine of capitalism. Is it not a part of what Žižek designates as ‘biocapitalism,’ ‘the immense field of new capitalist investments into the direct production of new forms of biological life?’ (ibid., p. 357). The assertion that the interstitial sphere of relations is a place for the production of resistance or opposition is therefore somewhat thin. We must also consider the efficacy of interstitiality itself, to which we might turn to Martin Stewart’s critique of Relational Aesthetics.

5.2 - Micropolitical disengagements: production or subtraction?

Stewart focuses primarily on Bourriaud’s claim that the relational artwork operates as a social interstice in the Marxian sense, a community of exchange that disengages from capitalist economies by ‘being removed from the law of profit’ (Bourriaud 2002 [1] in Stewart 2007, p. 371). Is this, Stewart asks, referring to Hardt and Negri’s concept of a new global proletariat, ‘a manifesto for a new political art confronting the service economies of informational capitalism—an art of the *multitude*?’ (Stewart 2007, p. 371, emphasis mine). Or, is it not ‘a naive mimesis or aestheticisation of novel forms of capitalist exploitation?’ (ibid.). Which is to say, is the art world the proper place for the production of new social relations? Stewart appeals to Adorno’s modernist notion of an ‘autonomous art,’ that is, the possibility of an art outside exchange value; valuable in itself, which, as Stewart explains, does not mean ‘art is actually autonomous from its social constitution’ (Stewart 2007, p. 375). Rather, autonomous art becomes critical art by immanently criticising an ideological illusion; ‘that nothing is valuable independently of its exchange value’ (ibid.). Bourriaud, on the other hand, succumbs to the opposite extreme, heteronomous art, where the market becomes all-encompassing—the acts of translation and remix in his book *Postproduction* and *Altermodern* ‘are defined by the manipulation of already marketed elements’ (Stewart 2007, 377). As Stewart says, ‘the issue is not just the internal social relations of art, but how it relates to capitalist exchange as, supposedly, something outside it’ (Stewart 2007, 378). In producing immaterial relations, relational art is meant to oppose the logic of the art market that privileges the collector—the ‘event’ cannot be collected in the same way. However, as Hardt and Negri themselves have shown in their book

Empire, global capitalism has now, in its omnipresence, moved into the very business of producing social relationships in the service economy. Stewart's reading of Bourriaud's claims echo with Peggy Phelan's (1993) idea of an 'ontology of performance' based in disappearance; their ephemerality has not stopped theatre nor performance from being incorporated into a heteronomous system of exchange.

5.3 - The Question of Antagonism

Academic and art critic Claire Bishop's (2004) main objection to Bourriaud's theories is what she sees as its utopian impulse. The shift from the radical (that is, utopian) to the radican is supported by a discourse of micro-utopias: 'Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies' (Bourriaud 2002 [1], p. 31). Bishop argues that these micro-utopic politics are equally problematic as the modernist utopian project. Furthermore, she rejects the accompanying suggestion that participation and conviviality are in themselves *democratic*—a criticism that is echoed in discourse surrounding audience participation in theatre. This is her summary of the relational aesthetics rubric:

The interactivity of relational art is [...] superior to optical contemplation of an object, which is assumed to be passive and disengaged, because the work of art is a 'social form' capable of producing positive human relationships. As a consequence, the work is automatically political in implication and emancipatory in effect. (Bishop 2004: 62)

In which case, *Relational Aesthetics* is allied to a long tradition of suspicion of the spectator; see Simon Bayly's note that 'Throughout political, philosophical and artistic history, the production of spectators [...] has been regularly condemned, from Rousseau to Situationism to the current and "relational" turn in contemporary art practice' (Bayly 2009, p. 20). That is to say, the 'emancipatory effects' of interactivity are predicated axiomatically, on the supposition that spectatorship is necessarily passive and suppliant, which as we have earlier established, is a quite false premise. Bishop also argues that at worst, works such as *Pad Thai* by Rirkrit Tiravanija, the intended social event or machine reinforces negative in-groupings or social systems; recall Jerry Saltz's

engagement with Tiravanija's work, in which conviviality seemed to revolve purely around discussions of the New York contemporary art scene. What Bishop does not take issue with is the form of relational art. Bishop alternatively proposes as 'good' interactive practice the art of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn, whom she believes have been ignored by Bourriaud, yet have since been featured prominently in his curatorial and critical practice. Bishop argues that when Sierra and Hirschhorn make use of a relational form, the work is 'marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibility of a micro-topia and instead *sustains* a tension among viewers, participants and context' (Bishop 2004, p. 70). She connects this tension to Chantal Mouffe and Ernest Laclau's reading of 'radical democracy' (1985), in which a functioning democratic society is 'not one in which all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate' (Bishop 2004, p. 66). I would argue that Bishop is suggesting that the convivial artwork must itself be a space of some undefined transformation, something akin to Victor Turner's concept of the *liminoid* (1969). Bourriaud has since suggested similarly: 'Thomas Hirschhorn's work,' he writes, 'relies not on spaces of exchange but places where the individual loses contact with the social...' (Bourriaud 2002 [2], p. 31).

How does antagonism manifest in the relational practice? Sierra's work, including *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People* (2000) and *Ten People Paid to Masturbate* (2000), for example, consists of 'actions' involving paid participants, and is, according to Bishop, 'organized around relations that are more complicated – and more controversial – than those produced by the artists associated with relational aesthetics' (Bishop 2004, 70). Most interesting for our analysis is Sierra's *Eight people paid to remain inside cardboard boxes* is more intriguing for its ambiguous suspension of the social (and legal) order. As the title suggests, in 2000 Sierra recreated a piece that had initially taken place in Guatemala City at the ACE gallery in New York, remunerating a series of 'workers' for the labour of remaining inside a cardboard box, for the government minimum wage of ten dollars. The workers were migrants of Mexican origin, with questionable right to remain in the United States. Utilising

a legal loophole (naming these workers ‘extras’²⁷) the presence of these unseen persons approaches a radical break with the symbolic order because they literally ‘break the law;’ their presence calls the law to either intervene or transform itself. Incidentally, as Sierra describes in his ‘list of materials,’ ‘the public did not see the workers when they were placed in the boxes’—which cannot but call to mind Lacan’s analysis of Antigone sealed alive in her tomb. Her living/dead status corresponds with the legal/illegal status of the workers; in this work Sierra is bringing making sensible what Giorgio Agamben calls *Homo sacer*, the figure of the human who has biological life, but no life in the symbolic order, which is to say, no ‘legal’ life (Agamben 1998). Bringing this excluded figure into the form of relational aesthetics creates an antagonism that, much like the over-identification described in Chapter 2, produces an attachment of ‘paralysis.’ Because of the legal loophole, it calls on the law to act, while simultaneously acknowledging the powerlessness of the law to act without putting itself into a compromising position. Because of the directly political content of this piece, it can be said that this attachment raises a possible, ethical choice for the viewer, meaning the work creates an ethical experience. The acknowledgement of deep, structural antagonism gives Sierra’s work a particular efficacy.

5.4 - *The impossibility of closure*

Before examining Kim Noble’s work as paradigmatic of a form of comedy performance that brings antagonism back into the relational field, I will first examine the concept as it appears in the work of Mouffe and Laclau (1985). Drawing on Lacan, Foucault, and linguistic structuralism, Mouffe and Laclau argue that the ‘totality’ of the social is both its condition of possibility as well as its condition of impossibility. Which is to say, every attempt to describe the fullness of ‘the social,’ or ‘society’ is an impossible attempt to suture a field of differences. Every social formation is thus ‘discursive,’ a ‘hegemonic’ articulation that draws together plural and divergent interests into a single ideological operation. This represents a dialectic between a ‘logic of difference’

²⁷ The word ‘extras’ performs an interesting doubling. Literally, the word refers to the category of supernumerary non-speaking actor on film sets, serving to disguise the Mexican workers’ status. At the same time, it actually *draws attention* to the fact that these illegal immigrants are ‘extra-legal.’ This is an over-identificatory strategy.

and a 'logic of equivalence.' Individual persons are particularities that are held in a 'logic of difference,' that is, they are defined *in relation to each other*. But politics (and by extension the social) operates through drawing differences into a logic of equivalence, the formations of groups around demands. As Laclau writes '[...] equivalence is precisely what subverts difference, so that all identity is constructed within this tension between the differential and equivalential logics. [...] What we have, ultimately, is a failed totality' (Laclau 2005[2007], p. 70). Such a tension produces a fundamental *antagonism*, for example, an element that cannot be represented within the identifying operation: '[...] it is through the demonisation of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion' (ibid.). This antagonism is visible in the pacts and concessions of American bipartisan politics: at the time of the 2008 American election it seemed the Democrats would have to concede on gay rights in order to get Barack Obama elected. Later, to keep Obama in office the Democrats would have to concede on health care. The very operation of the political therefore, is bringing the excluded element, the antagonism of a particular hegemonic subjectivity, to bear on the demands of the collective. For Jacques Rancière (1999, p. x) it is 'disagreement,' in his definition '[...] a determined kind of speech situation; one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying,' that is the very condition of politics proper, and by extension this is how art functions politically, in being a certain 'distribution of the sensible' of what is seen and not seen, understood and not understood.

How does this relate to comedy? In advancing Mouffe and Laclau's concepts of hegemony and antagonism I do not mean to simply add to an already overcrowded theoretical framework but to in effect bring the Lacanian concepts of Real and Symbolic to the social field. 'Society' is 'symbolic': 'The incomplete character of every totality necessarily leads us to abandon, as a terrain of analysis, the premise of "society" as a sutured and self-defined totality [...] There is no single underlying principle fixing—and hence constituting—the whole field of differences' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985[2001], p. 111). Thus we can (theoretically) bring the latent potential of the joke for an ideological break directly to the articulated field of ideological attachments and investments. Let us return to the fissure in meaning at the heart of the joke as speech act, the gap

between the first and second meaning, the void between sense and nonsense. Is this disagreement or antagonism not the proper name for the incommensurable gap in meaning in the joke itself? Joking itself draws a frontier of exclusion between ‘getting it’ and ‘not getting it.’ Davis (2000, p. 64) writes, drawing on Lyotard:

A giving laughter, then, serves to kick loose what Lyotard calls the “disjunctive bar” that separates the terms in a binary opposition. The bar stands as gatekeeper, as guardian of the binary order, signaling an “either this or not-this” mode of thought [...] The disjunctive bar is the very foundation of rationality and identity, of (phal)logocentrism) [...]

Comedy thus *proceeds* from a place of exclusion or barring. This bar is ‘antagonistic,’ and this antagonism is immanent to comedy as a form; for the possibility of laughter, to *get it*, there must also be the possibility of *not getting it*. I locate ‘the political’ in comedy precisely in the void or antagonism between difference and equivalence. The passage from serial individuals to ‘laughing group’ is an equivalential operation that always has the potential to exclude. It never fully captures the series in its infinite potential for differentiation. Comedy trades in antagonisms and tensions, and so a truly agitating *political comedy in performance* must hold this antagonism without resolution. It is not the ‘punchline,’ but the ability of the event to hold the audience between meanings. This comedy has a *traumatic dimension*, embodied in the performance of Kim Noble, which I will now discuss.

5.5 - *Kim Noble: Kim Noble Will Die*

Kim Noble won the Perrier Award, with partner Stuart Silver in 2000. Both studied fine art at Sheffield Hallam University, and their work together treads the line between comedy and live art: ‘situational’ shows at London’s Beaconsfield gallery (2001), multimedia collages at the Edinburgh Festival (which are now *de rigueur* for comedians) and the experimental E4 sitcom *Noble and Silver: Get Off Me!* In 2004 Noble suffered a breakdown and was diagnosed with manic depression. *Kim Noble Will Die*, staged at the Soho Theatre in April and December 2009, as well as the 2009 Edinburgh Fringe, is a deeply autobiographical look at the artist’s mental illness in the form of a stand-up comedy performance.

The show unnerved critics and audiences alike. Both the *Times* and the *Guardian* (in positive reviews) described the work as ‘a multimedia suicide note.’ *Time Out* gave the show an outlandish 6 stars despite being deeply distressed by its content. *The Scotman’s* Kate Copstick enthuses: ‘This is visceral, graphic stuff; a kind of wonderful the like of which I have never seen before. It totally obscures the line between comedy and tragedy. I remember laughing, crying, gasping, but I don’t remember breathing. [...] This is an hour I will remember for all of my life.’ (Copstick 2009, <http://www.edinburgh-festivals.com/viewreview.aspx?id=962>). Audiences responded in kind; Copstick, again describes her collective experience:

Around me I hear sometimes roars of laughter, sometimes bottomless silence, occasionally a cry of “oh no!” or a sharp intake of breath. As we – all except three of the audience – are ejected shortly before the end of the show, a lone voice in the silence shouts out: “You’re a c**t !” but no-one else seems to agree. (ibid.).

Around Edinburgh, Noble’s posters were being ripped down by a (presumably) lone, furious viewer, while another viewer at the Soho Theatre wrote a letter threatening legal action; Noble responded by inviting him to *Ben-Hur* at the o2 Arena. This reaction can be described as an hysterical or neurotic attachment; a furious acting out in full knowledge that nothing will be changed.

The show’s content is partially responsible for this reaction, as it includes a multimedia parade of graphic images. In one particularly gruesome filmed scene images of Noble and an unidentified woman in his mental institution self-harming are intercut with scenes Noble staging a musical about meat in a supermarket. There are also films of Noble ejaculating into various containers, and in one scene Noble’s ‘dead’ body, struck by a car, is urinated on by a woman. The atmosphere of the show was nervous and disquieted, but it must be emphasised that the work still *functions as comedy*. And while it explores a personal narrative of mental illness, *Kim Noble Will Die* also functions as embodied political critique. This is a) signalled in its content and b) actualised through Noble’s staging of ‘exclusion’ with the audience. Firstly, a large part of the work consists of filmed pranks with consumer products. Take, for example,

the video ‘Improving on Ivar,’ played during his show, an instructional video in which Noble ‘improves’ an IKEA chair by adding a series of useless safety features (high-visibility jacket, assault whistle), then returns it to IKEA’s shelves. Or Noble’s vendetta against Paul McKenna (he purchases a book by the hypnotist, makes his own version of the enclosed CD, and returns it to the shelf). These pranks are parodies of self-help or health and safety regulations, but they also telegraph a particular way of reading the work. Their presence in the everyday also begins to complicate matters. A video of Noble throwing £5 notes into a Job Centre as an ‘act of charity’ begins to make things more uneasy. The target of the joke becomes unclear. Are we meant to be laughing at the unfortunate unemployed? Or Noble himself, that is to say the disturbed individual who thinks that such a demeaning action is charity? But if it is the latter, the non-representational quality (this is clearly *happening*) pulls it out of the realm of satire. There is a ‘disagreement’ here, to use Rancière’s term, highlighted by Noble’s intervention in the everyday. The use of the everyday forecloses the ‘just kidding’ mechanism of the punchline we come to expect. If he is really doing this, he isn’t just kidding. Here we encounter a frontier of comedy as ambiguity; there is a sense that this is funny, but the movement into *why* it is funny is suspended. The ‘why’ is an antagonism that cannot be fully symbolised; to look at it directly (that is, to explain it) is *traumatic*, as demonstrated by the charity scene, which is troubling to watch. Nor is this antagonism simply affective; it is actually correlative to the antagonism that escapes symbolisation in the content of the video. The drawing together of an ideology of individual self-determination, along with the concept of social welfare into a hegemonic totalisation raises the uneasy question ‘what is charity?’

It is Noble’s use of moments of exclusion that most interest me, as these take place in the live event of performance. As the audience enters the room, Noble gently asks one individual of to come onstage. He then asks the person to stand on a particular mark, and places a bucket on his head. As the show begins, a projection of the head of Noble’s mother, foul mouthed and disappointed in her son, appears on the bucket—Noble will interact with this projection/human hybrid for the remainder of the show. While his interactions with the mother are very funny, the figure’s (always male) torso and legs serve to remind us, the

audience, that one of our ranks is suffering at our expense. He has been excluded. Later in the piece, another audience member is brought onstage and excluded in the same way, so that there are three figures: Kim, a second Kim and Kim's mother. These figures become a constant visual reminder of the exclusion in the audience's ranks.

For me the most radical use of audience exclusion is also the funniest. Noble stages an eviction, telling us that this is a popular form of entertainment. He chooses three random people, and interviews them each in turn, as a compère would: they are asked their names and occupations. The rest of the audience is then forced to vote, though it is never made clear what exactly they are voting for—whether the person they have their hand up for will be going, or staying. After the hands are counted the losing person is asked to leave. They do not get to see the remainder (more than 30 minutes) of the show, nor are their tickets refunded. As a parting gift, however, they are given a microwave (which, it transpires, they are allowed to keep). This moment is 'political' in two ways. Firstly, it is a 'vote,' a transaction that evokes the basic principle of parliamentary democracy. However, knowing nothing of what our votes will do, nor how the candidate names and occupations should influence our vote draws us into making a 'false choice.' Secondly, in a larger sense, the tragicomic nature of this act embodies what I call the 'terrible laughter of community.' For while the sight of the poor victim, staggering out of the venue with his or her new microwave is undeniably funny, there is no positive resolution available. Through the act of exclusion, the audience passes from series to group with the important awareness that in doing so there is a 'founding crime' that gives the group its consistency, a comic version of the stoning that concludes Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery.' We pass from being spectators of the same event (series) to a group defined by our active exclusion of one of our ranks. Thus, *Kim Noble Will Die* is a critique of the ideology of global capital not through the satirical tactic of confronting the ideology with its perverse underside, nor through an 'over-identification' with the ideology, but, by using the paradigmatic qualities of stand-up as a performance form (liveness and direct address) to stage the *very act that produces the ideological text*. In this way Noble's work is political, though it is not directly satirical, nor does it politicise the act of participation in performance. The logic of global capital encourages

the serialisation; the free play of differences and the passage to groups based on divergent ‘interests,’ rather than, as perhaps before, based on a ‘wrong’ or injustice. Hardt and Negri write: ‘The structures and logics of power in the contemporary world are entirely immune to the “liberatory” weapons of the postmodernist politics of difference.’ As Mouffe and Laclau suggest, it is not that antagonism is the consequence of an exclusion between difference and equivalence, but rather that this is the very essence of politics. *Kim Noble Will Die* is comedy that confronts the audience with this politics at play in the real, and reveals that, while it is entertaining, the antagonism of the group is also deeply traumatic.

5.6 - Conclusions: Sensus communis or dissensus communis? Yes, please!

In this chapter I have argued that Bourriaud’s claims for the political efficacy of Relational Aesthetics are founded on a set of unsupportable positions. Therefore, I have isolated what features of relational work are accurate and valuable today, specifically the (politically neutral) ability to produce affects and attachments. Following Bishop, I have argued that the work takes on a political efficacy when it incorporates a critical position through the use of ‘antagonism,’ a concept I then pursued through Mouffe and Laclau’s theory of radical democracy (1985). At this point we can conclude that Relational Aesthetics, as a neutral *form*, produces shared context and affective space. Freud’s concept of ‘joke work,’ a specific proposition which must be accepted by the receiver for the joke to *be*, demonstrates that shared context is an important part of comedy performance. We might posit the following axiom: Shared context is a necessary condition for comedy performance. Three principles follow: (1) A ‘relational machine’ can produce shared context through the creation of affective space in which new relations may be formed. (2) Context is *hegemonic*, constituted through an exclusion of a certain party, which enables dialogue or community to exist. (3) Making that exclusion *visible* (or *sensible*) within a suspended ambiguity is a comic procedure as well as a practice of politics. I propose our first, tentative conclusion: that comic-antagonistic practice reveals a systemic exclusion, and through the production of an affective space, attaches itself to the subject as a disquieting ethical-political demand.

In the next chapter I will examine the final phase of my experimental practice in which the disjunction between the experimental practice, based on the participatory practice of Bourriaud, and 'comedy' is resolved as far as possible. The principles identified above are pursued through my practical work. The aim of this final phase is to create a model of comedy in performance that privileges aleatoric moments of suspension, in which an antagonism (that is, the break), can be made sensible. Which is to say, my intention is to model performance comedy around the articulation of the political.

CHAPTER SIX: EXPERIMENTAL PRACTICE - *EASY, TIGER!*

6.0 - Easy, Tiger! (a) and (b): *analysis of practice-as-research*

In the previous phase of my practice-as-research (Chapter 4), I explored open forms of participation, interactivity, and audience engagement in order to determine a *form* for generating an attachment, a relationship of fidelity between the audience subject and the moment of ideological rupture, having hypothesised on the nature of this form in my critical reading of the Carnavalesque (Chapter 2). From these experiments, I concluded that the ‘open’ form (derived from, among other things, Nicolas Bourriaud’s theoretical framework of Relational Aesthetics), is able to create an attachment through the production of a shared context and a space of affect. What the majority of relational work misses, however, is the critical dimension. Without a clear ‘expressive locus’ (Kester 2004) to generate a fissure or critical antagonism, in this middle phase of experimental practice this work seemed far more focused on the formation of an interstitial community. But is such interstitial distance or indeed community always positive? Or should it be read as far more politically ambivalent? Joseph’s (2002, p. xxxiii) critique of the ‘romance’ of community ([...] community is complicit with capitalism and [...] communities are, through capitalism, complicit with each other’) seems particularly apt.

In the preceding chapter, therefore, I began with a critical re-reading of Bourriaud’s (2002) position on the social and political efficacy of relational work, finding that while relational *work* is undeniably valid as an art-historical development, much of Bourriaud’s ‘micro-topian’ thinking is predicated on somewhat spurious reasoning. Drawing on Claire Bishop’s (2004) criticisms, I took up the political philosophy of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) as a further clarification of the Lacanian framework I had earlier employed. It became apparent that the ‘act’—rupturing the symbolic order to reach the dimension of the Real—was somewhat correlative to their concept of ‘antagonism,’ the Real which escapes every social formation. This antagonism acts as a sort of stain or crack in the structure and organisation of the social field; every social formation is a ‘failed totality’. Therefore the question of

attachment to the break *qua* antagonism is never purely one of individual subjectivity. It arises, rather, in the formation of the group. As in a film with a twist ending, in which a series of flashbacks reveal the presence of the great secret all along, this theoretical insight retroactively reframes my previous practice. The interstitial community, therefore, is not a means of smoothing over an antagonism, but rather, produces it.

In this chapter I examine the ideas of formation of the group, antagonism, and attachment in practice. As in Kim Noble's work (Chapter 5), a politically efficacious comedy practice must give space to 'antagonisms,' which are an immanent, generic element of comedy itself. What I rehearse in these final pages is a model of comedy as political praxis, that opens a space to make the Real of antagonism sensible. In other words, to make sensible the uncomfortable, ambiguous space in which particularities of meaning are suspended²⁸. This chapter comprises three case studies. I first examine a recent performance in Eton, Berkshire, which demonstrates the way in which a suspension of meaning can make the Real of antagonism sensible in a 'safe' way (and which also demonstrates that the model derived from this thesis is not limited to an experimental practice). Working backwards, I then examine the transition work *Easy, Tiger* (a), a one-to-one performance. I then devote the remainder of the chapter to a discussion of *Easy, Tiger* (b), an hour-long stand-up piece incorporating various modes of audience-performer relationship.

6.1 - Alliances, universalities, and particulars

The *Funny Farm Eton* is the type of show comedians rarely enjoy performing at —not particularly well-paid, nor an easy audience to get along with. The gig is

²⁸ In *The Odd One In*, Alenka Zupančič suggests that 'comedy is the universal at work,' (2008, p. 27) she draws on Hegel, who in her words, argues that 'the comic character is not the physical remainder of the symbolic representation of essence; it is *this very essence as physical*.[...] the comic work of art does away with representation' (ibid., p. 26, original emphasis). She discusses the old trope of the baron slipping on a banana peel. In contrast to the suggestion that the baron, in his slipping, reveals the particular humanness behind his universal baron-ness, Zupančič proposes that the baron is made human precisely in his getting up again and behaving as if he were a baron; therefore, the scene enacts a short circuit between the universal and particular.

I would suggest further than comedy is the universal at work precisely because it suspends particularities within a universal relation, that is to say, with recourse to the ahistorical bar of the Real, the void behind meaning (symbolic, imaginary).

located in the large but poorly lit function room of The Waterman's Arms, alongside the Thames. The audience is predominantly composed of couples in their 30s and 40s, with one large birthday party in attendance on the evening I performed. Tickets for the show are fairly expensive; at £10, they are nearly twice that of the average pub-based London comedy club.

Eton, as the reader will no doubt already know, is a small town on the River Thames that is home to Eton College, a public school for boys well known for educating a number of British politicians, including current Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron. Eton is part of the parliamentary constituency of Windsor, which, since 1874, has been a Conservative stronghold. I performed 20 minutes of stand-up to the people of Eton on 30 April 2010, less than one week before the UK general election, which would see Cameron become PM through a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. The show opened with difficulty. The first comedian struggled against a chatty and restless crowd. After an interval things calmed down substantially, and I found myself building an enjoyable, dynamic rapport with the audience. The set was going well and both I and the audience were having a great time. At the 15 minute mark, however, I decided to test the waters—there was little to lose with five minutes to go. I said: 'You guys vote Tory, don't you?' The response from the crowd was affirmative (some cheers and more nods) but tentative. I then proceeded to deliver a final five minutes of unrehearsed anti-Conservative rhetoric, deliberately teasing the audience for their (stereotypical) political leanings. The audience response was interesting, as is the fact that I could 'get away with it.' The audience continued to laugh at my punch-lines, as they had during the previous 15 minutes, however, the *quality* of the laughter had changed—it was now tinged with (good-natured) grumbling from certain sections of the audience, some chatting, some scandalised gasping. I ended on the following line: 'Listen, you go vote for whoever you want... It's not like it'll affect this part of the country anyways!' There was some laughter, and some strange nods of assent. I left the stage, was paid, and hurriedly left the venue. Despite some audience members congratulating me, I decided it would be best to find the train station as quickly as possible.

This moment represents ‘suspension’ on a large, group scale. Whereas in Chapter 2 I had suggested that the linguistic capsule of the joke potentially suspended the receiver between meanings, one might read this moment as opening up a relational or dialogic space that suspends ideological attachments, suspending the antagonism between Left and Right, Labour and Conservative, so that it may be viewed from an objective distance. In theoretical terms we might say that in the moment of *performance*, the social field became disrupted, so that the inabilities of the articulatory processes of naming and hegemony to reach full closure were exposed, for example, various audience members at different times laughed, agreed with me, disagreed with me, and so on. This variance of responses is substituted for the clash of identities supposed by the names ‘Conservative,’ ‘Labour’ or even ‘middle-class.’ It is also important to note that I did not have to concede in order to produce this result. Rather, it arose in part from my ‘abjecting’ myself, placing myself in the excluded position outside of the group. This moment is political in a way that satire which ‘preaches to the choir’ is not, and it is political in the way that even voting is not. In satire, and in voting, performer, audience, and citizen must retreat to his/her ‘universal’ position, designated by a hegemonic name. Whereas in a moment of suspension there is an aleatory potential in which, perhaps, losing their ideological bearings, subjects might form around a new demand.

This moment also illustrates the quantitative difficulty of ascribing efficacy to a performance practice. In the early morning of 7 May 2010, as I performed at an all-night election party in Bethnal Green with a distinctly ‘Left’ leaning audience, Conservative incumbent Adam Afriyie was re-elected to parliament with a staggering 60.8 per cent of the vote, an 11.4 per cent gain. It is ridiculous to assume that 50 people could ever change the face of an election, and furthermore, I have no idea of what those 50 might have voted, which perhaps serves as a cautionary tale against ascribing too much efficacy to a performance form or practice. What new knowledge my thesis and experimental practice is contributing to is in the work of *theory*.

6.2 - *Easy, Tiger! (a)*: return to performance

Easy, Tiger! (a) was the first project since *Homework for Heroes* in which I was fully present (and live) as a performer and expressive locus of the work.

Dangerology AAC presented a highly self-conscious art practice integrating self-portraiture, journalling, and viewer participation, however, my presence in the space was limited to photographic representation. *Easy, Tiger! (a)* could be said to develop this self-portraiture in a live situation. The piece is a 15 minute relational performance intended for *single audience members* or *small groups*. As the visitor enters the space, he or she faces a long trestle table, side-on. I am sitting at the table, in profile to the visitor entering, with several items, including a laptop computer, projector, speaker, books, papers and photographs. Behind me is a white flip-chart, upon which is projected a live image of my face. This is a projection from the webcam embedded in the screen of my laptop. By zooming out of this image I can also show the audience the full desktop of my computer and whatever programs are on it: essentially the projector functions as my 'electronic eyes,' allowing the visitor to see what I am seeing (on the computer screen).

I invite the visitor to sit down across from me at the table, and ask his/her name (if I do not already know it). With a black felt-tipped pen, I write 'Hi, (name of visitor)' on the whiteboard in the space upon which is projected a reduced image of the whiteboard. The piece then begins. I say some vague introductory remarks, which the visitor responds to (or doesn't). Then, using the computer, I play back those introductory remarks and response (which I had been recording) now underscored by gentle, acoustic guitar music. Simultaneously, using the webcam as mirror, put on a pair of thick, black-rimmed glasses, and tidy my appearance. The event proper then begins. *Easy, Tiger! (a)* is a structured conversation with a very loose performance score (see DVD Appendix Disc 3). The score consists of questions and stories about myself written to engage the visitor in open discourse. At certain points in the piece I pass photographs, books and papers across the table, including a negative review of a previous performance (of another show) found on the internet. Finally, with the permission of the visitor, I type their name into an internet search engine and we discuss the revelations (or non-revelations).

I thank the visitor for coming, and he or she leaves the table. On the way out of the space the visitor passes a wall hung with the visual work from *Dangerology* at the AAC, which develops many of the same themes found in the conversation piece.

Easy, Tiger! (a) is a departure from the majority of my previous work in its use of the single audience member. While the work had been advertised as also appropriate for small groups, no such groups appeared, and when three or more audience members simultaneously found themselves in the space, they preferred not to participate together, but rather to watch, as others participated in the piece, a development I did not anticipate. *Easy, Tiger! (a)* also addresses the four principles I had identified as lines of exploration at the beginning of this phase of my research. These were:

- a. Incorporation of the performance ‘score’: a simple, undemanding form of structure allowing both the audience and performer to focus on an ‘object of encounter’ in the moment of performance.
- b. Acknowledging that the spectator is an already active participant in the work through his/her choice to receive the work.
- c. Use of the single, expressive locus for the production of comedy.
- d. Use of relationality to explore a theme.

These four principles are all explored in *Easy, Tiger! (a)* far more than in my previous work at the Alsager Arts Centre Gallery, however, it is important to note that the AAC work was a formal and methodological exploration and thus a vital stepping stone.

The use of a performance score, a loosely structured list of moments, pieces of text, and verbal cues, was intended to enable myself, as a performer, to maintain overall control over the event while still creating an open discursive space. In its realisation, the performance score created a productive tension between open dialogue and performer as expressive locus. While the majority of post-event visitor responses stated that the piece *did* create open dialogue (and several stated that the most enjoyable thing about the work was responding, rather than simply listening), there was a surprising but not entirely unwanted annoyance

on my part when it seemed the event was moving out of my control. Despite accounting for the possibility of deviations from the score, I found deviations when they did arrive difficult and frustrating to contend with. This tension between the score (or programme) and the event is a welcome finding for two reasons. First, is this space between the way the world is and how you want it to be not at the root of political efficacy at its simplest? That is to say, these escapes from the control of the score *through* the relation between performer and visitor are the bearers of a transformative potential. Any emotional annoyance or even antagonism should be read as an escape from existing categories; thus the goal of such conversational work should not be merely to open smooth flows of dialogue within existing channels of communication, for these may reproduce situations of dominance or exploitation²⁹. It was in the actualisation of the piece that I found that antagonism is always antagonism *between*, which is to say, it is based on a relation between self and other, rather than some abstract qualification in terms of content. It is primarily a recognition of ‘antagonism’ as a comic value that links *Easy, Tiger!* (a) and (b).

Second, when manifested in the body of the performer, this distance between *want* and *is* finds itself in a long line of artworks using failure as humour. While it has never been the intention of this project to connect my work on the comic function to traditions of clowning, or failure as comedy, this finding points to a sort of fluid comic aesthetic in which generic categories are fairly permeable.

‘I always felt like I was watching’ (Visitor, 2 May 2009).

The use of visual and electronic media in *Easy, Tiger!* (a) was a significant departure from my previous work, which often took a ‘lo-fi’ approach in its aesthetic; this would provide an interesting point of enquiry into the nature of my relationship with the audience and the nature of such relational work as a whole, especially with regards to the role of ‘spectating’ in the piece. One visitor towards the end of the day responded that she ‘always felt like (she) was

²⁹ This is surely related to the many misinterpretations of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of deterritorialisation, primarily within the field of digital media and internet communication. By ignoring the ‘earlier Deleuze’ of *Difference and Repetition* and *Logic of Sense*, we thus lose the idea that deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are in constant flux, and it is moments of transformative subjectivity, that are desirable, not merely an open, rhizomatic network for the flow of information (the internet).

watching,' an interesting response considering her earlier statement that the most enjoyable part of the piece were moments of direct participation and dialogue. The screen and projector and use of laptop were, in this visitor's opinion, the primary contribution to her partial-scopophilia. To an extent, the use of visual media was intended to provide a certain 'theatricality'; in particular, the opening of the piece (in which I played back my own recorded words underscored with music) was intended as a simple yet uncanny framing device that would mark the departure into the 'event' proper. So it is not wholly unexpected that the visitor might enjoy looking or watching. Yet *Easy, Tiger!* (a) collapses the physical distance between performer and audience to the everyday proximity of two diners across a lunch-time table, which leads me to conclude that a change in proximal distance *is not* the sole factor in a heightened engagement between performer and spectator.

Conclusions

From this small but necessary experiment, two major areas of exploration presented themselves, one in terms of form, the other content. The use of the one-on-one performance form, while both relevant to the history of relational aesthetics and participation in art practice, allowed me to explore antagonism in terms of power, control, and 'escaping.' But while highlighting the intersubjective nature of antagonism, the one-on-one performance form lacks the group dynamic that makes 'audience participation' a valid site of exploration with regard to the political in performance. The question then, is one of passing from the serial individual(s) (the self and the other) to the group, which is the site of politics itself. It also became clear that I must, from this point onwards, incorporate a more central theme, perhaps even a narrative. While the performance score in this iteration was heavily fragmented and often felt 'flat,' a more cohesive structure in conjunction with an open form, it seems, opens up a distance for the performer between *want* and *is*, and provides a fruitful ground for comedy.

6.3 - Easy, Tiger! (b) - return to comic performance

The final piece of practice presented in this practice-as-research project returns to the traditional conventions of stand-up comedy, being an hour of stand-up augmented with multimedia and participatory elements. *Easy, Tiger! (b)* would slot easily alongside the tradition of comedians bringing hour-long shows to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (and indeed, it will be performed there in August 2010). So how can *Easy, Tiger! (b)* be distinguished as experimental practice?

The first thing to keep in mind is that the work is in no way definitive. If in the political theory that provides the background of this work the universal can never fully draw together a series of particularities without some sort of exclusion or failure, a praxis cannot fully embody the principles of its theoretical source. In situating this work in a context of practices that all, to some extent, embody certain aspects of the theoretical model of comedy performance as political praxis detailed above, *Easy, Tiger! (b)* should perhaps be viewed as one 'praxical' attempt. What it represents, then, is not a summation of the thesis but an instance, a manifest work of comedy performance that has been coloured and inflected by the experimental practice and concurrent theoretical research. As a moment in a hopefully life-long personal research project into the politics of comedy performance it is a small milestone, rather than an end-point.

Easy, Tiger! (b) is an hour-long stand-up performance with a Marxist theme. As in my earlier analysis of *Kim Noble Will Die*, the content of the material 'signals' the way in which the form of the show should be read, as precise political critique. The show explores what constitutes a political subject in the 21st century, which is not a subject that immediately brings comedy performance to mind. In essence, the show's theme is derived directly from the theoretical questions of my research. In translating these into performance, I personalise or 'subjectivise' them, and the material of the show draws on my own failure to present a certain ideal political subjectivity. I interweave a loose philosophical analysis with perhaps more conventional stories about being a defiant child and my father (who grew up in China and left with his family during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution). A long essay is given to every audience member, with accompanying bibliography. Therefore, all audience members, even those booking tickets strictly for 'stand-up comedy' had their attention drawn to the

theme of the work. By avoiding any Leninist pronouncements of ‘what is to be done,’ but by making the general theme of the work explicit, I hoped a shared problem would open for the audience that would encourage certain readings and more importantly, discussion and intellectual engagement. In the September 2009 version of the work, which took place as part of The Festival Of at The Central School of Speech and Drama (which this analysis mostly looks at), the performance took place in between three locations. Beginning in the foyer of the building, I engage individual audience members in small conversation. To three individuals I hand a pen, slip of paper, and envelope, asking them to write on the paper something they would like to change in the world, anywhere from ‘I want a swimming pool,’ to ‘I want fair and accountable politicians.’ I then ask them to seal the slip in the envelope without showing me, and to hand it back to me. As the show proper begins, I gather the audience together, telling them of a personal fantasy or wish to assemble a cabal or sleeper cell that would ‘overturn capitalism.’ I hold an ‘election,’ and the audience decides on a deputy head of our new state. I then lead the audience out into the street and around the building, while we collectively sing our ‘new national anthem,’ accompanied by my ukulele playing. We enter the large studio in which the remainder of the show takes place through a back door, and I lead the audience over to a table covered in plastic. At this point I begin to talk about refusing the products of ‘Empire.’ This section very much resembles a ‘funny version’ of Alain Badiou’s statement (2004, p. 103): ‘All art, and all thought, is ruined when we accept this permission to consume, to communicate and to enjoy. We should become pitiless censors of ourselves.’ Removing a book by the popular ‘chick-lit’ author Sophie Kinsella, I invite the audience to commit an ‘ethical act’ by destroying the book with the use of spray paint (or simple tearing). Once done, I take a picture of the destroyed object with a digital camera. I tell the audience I will email this picture to Sophie Kinsella, with a note reading ‘I really enjoyed your book, Sophie.’

After this iconoclastic *passage à l’acte* I lead the audience over to the performance area, which is structured as per the conventional form of comedy audience. Onstage there is a large table, with a laptop, projector, and sound system. There is a stool for my notes and several books of political philosophy on the floor. The projector shines onto the (white) back wall of the space, and

shows a number of images, primarily self-portraits in the style of *Dangerology*. I perform roughly 20-25 minutes of themed stand-up in this setting. At the end of the piece I recount the story of Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, designating his 'I would prefer not to' as a political 'act,' a way of asking new questions about 'what is to be done.' I reveal the envelopes from the pre-performance chat. One by one I open these, and in dialogue with the audience we proceed to have a 'surgery' on their personal or political problems. This engagement is left entirely open to chance. After this the show is over, and the audience exits the space.

The most useful way to examine *Easy, Tiger! (b)*, a mixture of a number of elements, is to break it into separate instances, each of which corresponds roughly to a principle of my research: audience-performer relations, 'act' (or *passage à l'acte*) and exclusion, and contingency and aleatoric materialism/performance. In a systematic way, I will now examine each of these principles, making specific reference to the material of *Easy, Tiger! (b)*, speculating on the possible implications of this as political praxis. Each accompanying instance of practice can be found on the DVD Appendix (Disc 3).

Audience; and the group

The first site of experimentation in *Easy, Tiger! (b)*, was, of course, engagement with 'audience.' The previous phases of practice-as-research required positing a false alternative between the seated mass of spectators (usually designated 'audience') and the freely navigating viewer of participatory art. This false binary suggests a denigration of the audience as the mass, the crowd, a series of unthinking bodies imprisoned by the regime of representation. Hence, a 'political theatre' would either be pedagogical or immediately efficacious, as in my earlier discussion of Rancière (Chapter 3, section 2). In trying to escape the confines of traditional spectatorship, I moved towards this second model, which, as Rancière writes, was proposed by Rousseau as an alternative to the pedagogical model of theatre as early as 1760: 'Rousseau sought to contrast this separation with the collective body of a city that enacts its own unity through hymns and dances, such as in the celebration of the Greek City Festival (Rancière 2010, p. 137). But there is a distinct ideological problem with Rousseau's model—if art immediately 'acts' on the social body, building or

strengthening community or the social bond, from where does the critical moment arise? In the levelling of the social field to a community of equals, who is the privileged member who holds the critical faculty to designate whether this of that celebration or festival is, as Kant might say, ‘a good’? The tradition of Carnival wrestled with this problem precisely by being a tradition; the critical role is bestowed upon the Lord of Misrule, however this figure is only able to exist through the positing of an *a priori* set of strictures, which is, perhaps, another way of invoking my thesis that the Carnavalesque is merely the obscene double of official culture. Relational artists have also struggled with this problem—in this work, the critical role is held by the artist, which is why Ben Lewis’ criticism is warranted:

On an intellectual level they’re still living off the arguments of the Frankfurt School – Adorno and Horkheimer [...] They argue that we are all slaves to something called dominant ideology; this bourgeois thing that was constructing our way of thinking for us [...] The weakness of the art to me is that [...] they’re trying to tell me something I disagree with and they’re saying ‘because we’re artists we know better.’ (Lewis 2004 quoted in Mulholland 2004: <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/04autumn/mulholland>).

Furthermore, we might say the conflating of ‘relations’ of a relational artwork with everyday relations is only possible under a theoretical framework which posits space outside of the artwork as ‘non-relational,’ as Bourriaud does, extending Debord’s Society of Spectacle into a Society of Extras, in which all human interrelations are tainted by commodification. So, in the model designated ‘ethical immediacy,’ we are faced with the problem of the *outside* of the interstitial community.

Easy, Tiger! (b) intends a more nuanced reading of audience and efficacy. Undoing the false binary above in Chapter 5, we see that the problem of the *outside*, from which a critical moment can arise, is produced *by* community, which is to say, critical moments arise from antagonisms. In performance, this means that audience should be read as already active, with the agency to unite around particular demands. The stand-up audience gives a good demonstration of this model—while they are generally happy to sit back and watch, they are not ‘passive’ viewers, at the very least because of the customary transgressions of

direct address and heckling. While there is some similarity between the form of stand-up and the form of relational aesthetics, in most cases the audience is happy to be led into comic bliss by someone who at least seems to know what he or she is doing. However, the stand-up audience, unmoored from the superego conventions of proscenium arch and ushers, can very quickly form factions and groups when comedy 'goes wrong.' This idea of forming a group is useful, not least because it demonstrates an attachment, the production of which is a key question for my research. We will use 'group' in its technical sense, referring to Sartre's basic question of the political in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, the passage from the 'series' of individuals, to the 'group.' Whereas the series is defined by contingent circumstances, as individuals happen to be at the same place at the same time (for example, the bus queue), the group, on the other hand, is a self-conscious unity around a demand. Earlier, I have argued that the passage to group (a) can never form a fully realised totality, and (b) produces an *antagonism*, the recognition of which is the beginning movement of politics. As in my discussion of *Kim Noble Will Die*, answering this question of the formation of the group can create performance comedy that is a very particular type of political critique, and I have attempted a similar experiment in this piece.

The audience begins in a state of series. This is particularly clear in the context of *Easy, Tiger!*, which officially begins in the foyer of the building. The audience mills around the foyer, loitering, waiting for something to capture their attention. By engaging personally with individual audience members or small groups, I intensify this 'seriality.' Three random audience members are given a task (the envelope), further serialising the group, three of whom now have a unique investment in the piece. When I begin to address the audience as a group, I take on the capacity of leader, in the sense that I occupy a particular place in the chain: I am the point of interest that unites the crowd in an act of viewing. In *Group Psychology*, Freud argues that (in certain types of crowds, at least):

[The leader] need often only possess the typical qualities of the individuals concerned in a particularly clearly marked and pure form, and need only give an impression of greater force and more freedom of libido; and in that case the need for a strong chief will often meet him

half-way and invest him with a predominance to which he would otherwise perhaps have had no claim. (Freud 1921[2001] p. 134, quoted in Laclau 2005[2007], pp. 57-58).

In other words, not only does the crowd desire a leader, the qualities they desire in a leader are to an extent identificatory qualities in themselves; Laclau clarifies –‘he is the father, but also one of the brothers’ (Laclau 2005[2007], p. 58).

Ultimately, what Laclau concludes is that this form of identification with and of a leader is a ‘democratic’ form. To return to *Easy, Tiger!*, as a performer I occupy this position through a similar combination of identification and trust. After milling around with the rest of the audience as part of a group I separate myself from it, while remaining accountable to it. Once I begin ‘performing,’ telling jokes and stories, I become accountable to my audience, who cannot but make their demand on the performer (myself) known through laughter (or lack of laughter), smiles, heckles, silence and so on.

The first thing to note is that this is not far from the conventional position of the comedian, particularly the element of accountability to the group, therefore it is not sufficient to argue that because the comedian occupies a ‘democratic’ position, it follows that comedy is an inherently democratic form, or that it is any way transformative (we are back at Rancière’s [2009] notion of ethical immediacy). I would argue, in fact, that the group formed through the comic occupying the position at the head of the chain is not a group at all, for they have not yet been split by some sort of naming, identification, or demand. So how do we pass from the series or crowd to the true group (in the event of performance)? While the September 2009 version of *Easy, Tiger! (b)* attempted to actualise this idea right away, it was not until the discomfort of the destruction of the novel when any real antagonism of group identification was able to emerge. However, one participatory strategy I employed in the opening moments of the piece was the staging of an ‘election.’

Addressing the audience, I designated myself ‘Leader,’ (‘Like Stalin, just like in my childhood fantasies,’ I say, a somewhat contentious but throwaway joke that is characteristic of my comic brain). I then held an election to find a Second-in-Command (‘I need a Nikita Khrushchev’). Picking two members of the audience at random, I asked them to tell me what qualities they would bring to the role of

second-in-command, which they do ('I will obey you ruthlessly...'). I then asked the audience to vote on their choice, by show of hands. My phrasing is particularly important here ('Who votes for...?'); as in Kim Noble's show, it is somewhat ambiguous what exactly the audience is voting for, although, it seems, most interpret the raising of hands as a positive vote, as in normal elections. After a quick count to tally the votes, the person with the most votes was eliminated. The discontent of this moment perhaps contributed to a comic atmosphere. The chosen second-in-command was then charged with leading the audience through the public square and through the street to the main venue for the performance.

While this instance demonstrates the formation of a 'group,' it is superficial. It lacks a requisite antagonism or discomfort, and more importantly, the audience's interaction was here of no consequence. I remained in the position of power. In the further development of the work (seen in the live submission accompanying this thesis), the interaction with the audience takes on greater consequence—the second in command is asked to suggest something we as a group might *do*, and it is followed through. This engenders a discomfort, and reveals an antagonism, which in a way, was more present in the September 2009 version, in the procession through the street (the range of participation here was hugely varied, some refusing to participate out of embarrassment of public singing or not knowing the words, some throwing themselves into the task full-throttle). I am reminded of a singular and unrepeatable performance by Hugh Hughes (the alter-ego of Welsh theatre maker Shôn Dale-Jones) at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival. Hughes' show *360* is a traditional stand-up and storytelling piece, though what sets Hughes apart is his seeming limitless capacity for good-natured audience interaction. On the evening I attended, there was an extraordinary rupture in the structure of the show. At the ten-minute mark, as Hughes began to launch into the main part of the story (of going up a mountain with a childhood friend), two women in the audience got up and tried to surreptitiously leave the auditorium. Hughes noticed them, asking 'Where are you going?' They replied, embarrassed but laughing, 'Sorry, we're in the wrong show!' They had, it transpired, booked tickets for stand-up Sarah Millican's show *Typical Woman*, playing in the venue next door. After the women had gone, Hughes proposed that the audience should go *en masse* to

Millican's show, in progress, interrupt it, and demand that the women come back to our group. After some open discussion with the audience (mostly about logistics), he held it to a vote; the motion (to disrupt Millican's show) passed with around 60 per cent support. We left the auditorium and gathered in the Pleasance Courtyard, as ushers attempted to dissuade Hughes from following through with the plan. Eventually, the plan was stopped by the front-of-house staff; as the audience booed them, yelling 'fight the power,' they seemed visibly confused at having suddenly become 'power.' As we filed back into the auditorium, and Hughes returned to his story, there was a sense of disappointment that nothing, from this point, could be as exciting. For me, this instance of group demand illustrates the possibilities of discomfort. It is political because it makes sensible the antagonism that arises in consensus. Suturing the field of differences into a single action generated a huge range of responses. While I was somewhat uncomfortable with participating, others were visibly distressed. Still others left, while a representative of the British Council stood at a distance and scrawled notes in his pad. These responses, of course, were accompanied by a great majority of the crowd, baying in the Courtyard and ready to go.

'Act?' or acting out?

The second instance of alternative audience engagement is the shared, collaborative action of destroying a Sophie Kinsella novel. In the text of *Easy, Tiger! (b)*, I framed this instance as 'an ethical act.' 'Ethical act' is uneasy terminology, at once suggesting action as well as the Lacanian psychoanalytic 'act.' In the end, this instance demonstrates a participatory moment that incorporates antagonism and discomfort. As described above, the audience is led over to a table covered in plastic, whereupon I tell the audience of my objections to her work. The material is persuasive as opposed to angry or manipulative—my primary objection to Kinsella's writing (as representative of a larger culture of 'chick-lit') is its contribution to misogynistic attitudes and its un-ironic celebration of consumerist values—and feedback from audiences

shows that, to an extent, others agreed.³⁰ The shared destruction of the book represents a move from the commentary of the material into an intervention in the real. The material destruction of a book creates an uneasiness among the audience (as a cultural object books hold a certain sanctity, and the destruction of books raises the spectre of censorship and book burning, associated with totalitarian or illiberal regimes). Therefore, I proposed, to invite audiences to destroy the book would be to ‘break with’ social constraints, that perhaps to a larger extent prevent us from acting upon damaging or exploitative situations. Paraphrasing Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* I tell the audience, ‘what is destroying a Sophie Kinsella novel compared to *writing* a Sophie Kinsella novel?’

But is this an ‘act’? To what extent is a break with social convention (the transgression of the unspoken rule that books are not to be destroyed) an authentic ‘act’? My view on the matter has changed significantly since originally devising this moment. While I still believe that the shared destruction of the book carries an important sense of iconoclasm, and also reinforces in an informative (that is, didactic) way the thesis of the show, a true ‘act’ requires more than a transgression of social norms, which is a point I have articulated throughout this thesis. The way in which this supposedly experimental moment retrospectively falls into the naive logic of transgression demonstrates the degree to which transgression is bound up with performance comedy. Let us examine the moment more carefully. I address the audience in the spirit of sharing, inviting them into a safe space in which to ‘break the rules,’ which of course, is the very definition of Carnival as suspension of hierarchy and norms. In attempting to break with the logic of the Carnavalesque through experimentation with different forms of audience engagement, this moment seemed to fall back into this logic in a different form. Crucially, the framing of this moment as ‘art’ relieves the moment of any true transgressive potential, unlike Kim Noble’s interventions with everyday products explored in the previous chapter, which take place in a private sphere and are only framed as art after the fact. So when, particularly in the second performance of the

³⁰ In emailed feedback from a showing of *Easy, Tiger! (b)* at the Open Arts Cafe (West London Synagogue), I received this anonymous comment: ‘Right on! Thanks for talking about misogyny too and making us laugh at it, a nice counterpoint to all the “blokey” humour this country currently subscribes to. Brilliant use of material – I learnt a lot and laughed – don’t apologise/explain for the material – we need to hear it!’

September 2009 run of *Easy, Tiger!* the action of destruction escalates into a progressively more delirious fury of paper tearing, laughter, and misfired spray paint, this moment has the status of a *passage a l'acte*, an excessive 'acting-out' that does not particularly change the coordinates of the symbolic order. In planning the possible act I determine in advance its outcome, therefore in effect, this form of comedic 'act' is as ineffectual as satire.

Žižek notes (1992[2008], p. 40) that the 'foundation' for the 'act' is words, or rather, ideology itself, just as psychoanalysis as 'talking cure' is predicated on the notion that it is possible to touch some part of the Real through intervention in the Symbolic, with words. Which is to say, the 'act' emerges from ideology and in doing so reveals '[...] a certain surplus which eludes the domain of ideology as such.' As in Mouffe and Laclau's (1985) concept of hegemony, ideology can never fully 'totalise,' and always leaves some excess. Perhaps it is this dimension that this particular section of *Easy, Tiger!* lacks. To be precise, in this section I pit one ideology against another in a very deliberate 'false choice.' There is, on the one hand, the ideology of global capital and consumerism, represented by a sort of fetishistic object (Kinsella's book), and on the other there hand, there is a rejection of this in the course of the performance. What I failed to take into account was the degree to which the rejection of the products of global capital is already part of the ideology of global capital, which is predicated on the notion of 'choice.' This particular part of the piece, then, provides a safe space in which to take the choice of 'rejection,' an important action in itself. But it is not satisfying from the theoretical position I have reached in this thesis.

'I would prefer not to...'

The closing section of *Easy, Tiger! (b)*, is/was a framed dialogue with audience members. In my notes, as well as the DVD documentation, this section is referred to as 'Bartleby,' and takes Bartleby's 'formula,' his 'I would prefer not to,' and proposes it as a sort of panacea for all social, political, public, or private ills. The reader will recall the discussion in Chapter 2 of this verbal formulation, which, I argued (following Deleuze 1997 and Žižek 2006), is a comic form that breaks from the disjunctive synthesis (false alternative). My intention in this

piece was not to actualise Melville's text but to frame a piece of direct audience engagement, and to explore moments of chance and contingency in comic performance. With the audience gathered in the foyer of the building, I ask three separate visitors (on most occasions these were people standing or sitting alone at the time), to write, on a slip of paper, something 'they would like to be different about the world.' I noted that in past performances, responses had ranged from 'I want a swimming pool' to 'I want honest, accountable politicians.' When this has been written, it is, unseen by me, sealed in an envelope and given back. These sealed envelopes sit on stage for the duration of the performance. This action draws on certain 'showman' elements of stage magic, perhaps demonstrating the historical continuity between stand-up and vaudeville. Towards the end of the show, I briefly recount the story of 'Bartleby, the Scrivener.' Opening the envelopes, I reveal (to myself, as well as to the rest of the audience), what is written on the slips of paper. Taking each 'problem' in turn, I improvise, in dialogue with the audience, the ways in which Bartleby's formula might be used to solve that problem.

The first thing to note is that, superficially at least, this act (in the vaudevillian sense) resembles the conventional trick of 'putting someone on the spot' used by compères at comedy nights, so often loathed by audiences. In this case, however, the general tone and feeling is different from those often forced moments of interaction; there was little sense, that the audience member *in dialogue* was, as it were, 'on the spot,' having chosen to put forward a contribution earlier they were already aware of their commitment to the pact.

Let us examine this instance in greater detail. In the narrative of my practice-as-research project, this instance of formalised participation is, to an extent, cumulative and exemplary. I am somewhat reluctant, however, to declare this simple and formal act *the* model of the political in performance comedy. Is *this* the political dimension of performance comedy evoked by the title of this project? The answer, of course, is yes, and no—no, because to relocate the political dimension of performance comedy is to engage in an ongoing process of re-invention based on a series of theoretical propositions, this being a landmark. The Lacanian 'act' always breaks free of its circumstances while arising from them; a prescriptive model of a comic act *qua* 'act' is therefore

anathema to my method. But *yes*—in that ‘Bartleby’ serves to illustrate the four theoretical propositions I have to this point detailed as required to call a comedy performance ‘political’ in the strictest sense. Breaking it down we see that it embodies: 1) an *antagonism* or *exclusion*, 2) the ‘break’ with ideology, or the *potential for the break*, 3) a ‘relational’ process of *attachment*, and 4) an ambiguous, suspended atmosphere, that serves to hold the antagonism in a place of *safety*. I will address each of these elements in turn, making reference to various documented instances of ‘Bartleby’ (all of which can be found on the supporting DVD appendix).

1) *Antagonism or exclusion*

‘Singling out’ a member of the audience, not only through direct address, but through the demand for verbal response, is exclusionary, elevating a single unit of the audience from the rest of the crowd and denying them the freedom of silence. Ridout (2006, p. 71) considers that ‘it is when direct address arises as a disruption to dominant conditions of spectatorship that it produces [...] discomfort and embarrassments [...].’ This embarrassment is both pleasurable and political, political in that the economic relationships that produce the machine of the theatre are exposed: ‘[...] the phenomenon of embarrassment arising from eye contact seems to expose the consumer as consumer in her own eye, whether she looks away or not’ (ibid., p. 89). This line of analysis is useful: what economic conditions are exposed in the stand-up comedy event through the particular mode of direct address employed (which we might call antagonistic)? In my experience, there is, paradoxically, a general distrust for direct address in stand-up, a form which requires a phenomenologically sensible response of the audience through common laughter in order to *be* stand-up. Take, for example, the lengths to which an audience member will go in order to avoid sitting in the front row (in two years of running the regular comedy night *Every Other Monday* in Angel, London, I have seen audience members go so far as to bring furniture from the bar downstairs and place it in the back row). The usual justification here is ‘I don’t want to be picked on,’ which must be distinguished from the imperative ‘Don’t pick on me!’; the latter is an attempt at bargaining with the form, while the former perhaps reveals the understood contract (if not me, the compère has to pick on *someone*). In

circumstances where either compère or audience member disrupt the fragile niceties of picking-on and being picked-on, ‘taking the piss’ and (to be perfectly symmetrical) ‘donating it,’—one party being overly aggressive, and so on—a common response (from the audience) is ‘I’m paying here, you make the jokes, not me.’ What economic conditions are thus revealed in the act of direct address (in stand-up)? The answer is that nothing is revealed, because nothing was ever being concealed. There is effectively an already-antagonistic relationship between performer and audience which, in the transparency of the stand-up mechanism is already on show. When the direct address collapses through aggression, violence, or conversely, shyness or reluctance, the imbalance of the (economic) relationship (‘We’re paying you so we can do the work?’) is acknowledged directly and therefore the form is stripped of its symbolic efficiency. We must of course note the *ideological* dimension to this collapse; the unbalanced economic relationship is the disavowed element that allows the symbolic ritual/performance to exist.

In all instances (thus far) of ‘Bartleby,’ the direct address was not met with silence or refusal but rather felt fairly ‘easy’—I will deal with this ease or ‘safety’ further on. Suffice it to say here that if fundamental antagonism is not being acknowledged through the collapse of the direct address ‘work,’ something else must be doing the work. I want to argue it is the use of envelopes and the temporal displacement effected by these that makes the exclusion sensible. There is a delay between writing the statement and the reading of the statement, as well as a difference in the ‘to whom’ the statement is addressed. That is, if I were to ask a member of the audience ‘what do you want to make different about your life?’ they are aware that in their answer they are addressing the group. In ‘Bartleby,’ though I am honest that the statement in the envelope will be read out, the process is much more a matter of writing a statement in the past and being made responsible for it in the present. For example, at the ‘scratch’ performance at The Green Man (a full recording of which is captured on the DVD), I read a statement from a woman in the audience which reads ‘I want a swimming pool.’ In this moment a sense of identity and circumstances of a nameless audience member are conjured. The rest of the audience (group) is made aware of their own relation to this person’s circumstances or identity and

(psychically) organises itself accordingly. The woman must take responsibility for her statement in the agora of the comedy event.

2) *The break with ideology*

Bartleby's comic formula allows for a potential ideological 'break,' although in a way totally unintended by Melville. 'Bartleby' is a kind of improvised joke with a fixed punch-line, similar to the legendary vaudevillian joke 'The Aristocrats' popularised by the 2005 film by Paul Provenza and Penn Gillette. In 'The Aristocrats,' the comedian tells a story of a performer, usually the patriarch of a performing family, visiting an agent's office, who tells the agent 'Have I got an act for you!' The comedian then proceeds to describe the act, improvising an escalating series of gleefully disgusting and taboo acts. The now shocked agent, asks the performer, 'what do you call this act?,' whereupon the performer always replies 'The Aristocrats!' The incongruity between the punch-line and the set-up, of course, produces the comedy. What is interesting about Provenza and Gillette's film is that very few of the comedians featured manage to wring laughter from the punch-line itself. What no one seems to realise is perhaps we should call the 'performative problem'—after so many repetitions (with variation) of the same joke, the words 'The Aristocrats' are perhaps elevated (or more properly, denigrated) to a kind of Master Signifier of filth. In their symbolic efficiency they simply become shorthand for 'dirty joke'—the incongruous punch-line no longer functions because there is no incongruity³¹.

There is a similar reiterative danger in 'Bartleby'—however, the fact that the premise and set-up are effectively co-authored guards against this. In 'Bartleby' the formula of 'I would prefer not to' is always too narrow a formula. As in Melville's story, it does not actually solve a problem but creates further ones. The incongruity, or incommensurable gap is between the unwavering ethical consistency of Bartleby's formula and the personally invested problems of the audience, and this produces the 'funny.' Again, as above, let us use the example of 'I want a swimming pool.' Here my improvisation leads to 'solving' this

³¹ The two comedians in this film who manage to make 'The Aristocrats' work in the traditional joke formula (set-up/punch-line) are Wendy Liebman and Sarah Silverman, both of whom solve the performative problem of reiteration by playing with the meta-structure of the joke itself.

problem by ‘getting rid of your kids,’ which might be read as a straightforward satire of middle-class, consumerist aspirations. *Bartleby’s* solution in this scenario utilises a naive, over-identificatory strategy (in other words, stick to your guns, and when your kids knock on the door wanting to be let in, simply reply ‘I would prefer not to’) which gives the joke a measure of ambiguity. Unlike more traditional satire, it is not read by the audience as an attack on the (as established above) ‘excluded’ audience members.

3) Attachments

As I have argued in these pages, the form of performance is crucial to establishing the ‘efficacy’ of comedy performance, as it may lead to the formation of an attachment—a relationship of fidelity to the moment of the ‘break’ with dominant ideology and the emergence of the new. In Chapter Two I argued that different forms of performance comedy may produce different attachments (and therefore may be efficacious in different ways). What form of attachment does ‘Bartleby’ produce, and how does it produce said attachment? I will now argue that ‘Bartleby’ produces attachments in two ways. First, there is a psychic investment on the part of the participant, who contemplates a proposition and produces (writes) a response. In an earlier phase of practice-as-research (see Chapter Four, *Dangerology*), I might have valorised this process on its own, arguing for the transformative quality of participation for the participating subject; here emphasis must instead be placed on the transformative quality within the group. Therefore, the second way ‘Bartleby’ comes to produce an attachment is through the psychic investment on the part of the *remainder* of the audience. In other words, the remaining (still anonymous) members of the audience must suddenly re-establish their relation to the excluded (that is, made visible) party, as when, perhaps a stranger is revealed to be a friend of a family member, or when a close friend says something off colour or offensive at a dinner party.

As ‘Bartleby’ is the culmination of *Easy, Tiger! (b)*, one can argue that the previous relational moments (the ‘election,’ destroying the book) ‘set-up’ an affective space (producing a *sensus communis*) which is (potentially) broken/reorganised (into a *dissensus communis*) by ‘Bartleby,’ in which the audience

member must re-organise his or her relation to the excluded party of the group. But this *dissensus* does not result here in a deadlocked antagonism. Rather, in my experience of performing ‘Bartleby,’ what was exceptional was the ease of discussion. This is one example of what I speak of when I say ‘making the Real of antagonism sensible in a “safe” way.’

4) *Danger and safety*

Several audience members commented that this particular section of the show felt ‘dangerous,’ with a real sense that it could ‘all go wrong.’ At the same time, it was also commented that my manner in performance produced a degree of ‘safety.’ How are we to read this paradoxical opposition?

Addressing *danger* first, despite the title of my work produced in Phase Two of my practice-as-research, *Dangerology*, it could be argued that danger was far from the object of study. Rather, in retrospect, the work denied danger through formal structures of conviviality. What is, formally speaking, *dangerous*³² about stand-up is the uncomfortable (see introduction to Chapter 1) possibility of failure created by its already-relational form, such as failure to respond to heckles, silence, or any number of contingent circumstances. The experiments in Phase Two, denied this danger by removing the possibility of ‘failure’—the participation lacked a clear objective, or rather, was the objective itself. Furthermore, the formal deconstruction of the mechanisms of address (one-to-one, not necessarily regarding the rest of the group) denied the clear ‘exclusionary’ principle that has become so important to later phases of the work. However, what has remained a clear benefit from this earlier work was the negotiation of conviviality, which finds its proper place here. The convivial atmosphere produces a relationship of *safety*, which tempers the antagonism of the exclusion. Effectively, the singled-out/excluded element of the group, under this aegis, can have the experience of both being-laughed-at and laughing-with. The remainder of the group can have a similar experience of at/with, which

³² While I am speaking of danger in somewhat abstract terms of ‘failure’ or ‘success,’ it is perhaps useful to note, especially with regard to ‘efficacy,’ that this danger can lead to physical danger and violence. In April 2007 at the Manchester Comedy Store, Australian comedian Jim Jeffries was punched in the face by an audience member who rushed onto stage after some banter had not been to his taste. This scenario is exceptional, but it is interesting to keep in mind that terms such as ‘antagonism,’ ‘exclusion,’ and ‘danger’ can have bodily consequences.

means the antagonistic relationship is opened and viewed from an objective distance, ‘ironic’ in the sense used by Empson, which ‘can believe at once that people are and are not guilty’ (Empson 1930[2004], p. 44). The reader will note that throughout this project I have employed varieties of ‘incongruity’ in both my theoretical and creative practice, the final incongruity is here, between a ‘convivial,’ united group ready to lose their ‘selves’ in the sweep of laughter, and the excluded, antagonised singularity. This incongruity is required to reach the condition of comedy in performance that opens the space for a rupture in categorical reason, for the *exception* of the situation to be made visible³³. The conviviality of the audience is formally produced by the possibility of abjection for the stand-up comedian, which Limon claims is the very basis of stand-up in general: ‘what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection. Stand-up makes vertical (or ventral) what should be horizontal (or dorsal)’ (Limon 2000, p. 4). In the situation of comedy, the comedian is *already* the excluded element, directing the audience’s investments to a central expressive locus.

Negotiation(s)

Let us review the precise stages in this act of political comedy (for we must be confident enough to now give it its proper name). In ‘Bartleby’ a proposition is answered, in secret, by one audience member. This is then read out to the group, singling-out that audience member. Improvising around this moment of structured chance I make a joke from the audience member’s written response and the ensuing discussion. On the surface, this does not appear political at all, unless the content of the written response is directly ‘political’ in as much as it refers to the political process (it often did: ‘I want fair, accountable politicians’; ‘How do I collectivise my struggle?’ were two such responses). But what actually happens in this moment correlates to three elements that, I have argued, determine a political comedy in performance. Firstly, there is an exclusion, secondly, a break, and finally (the possibility of) an attachment.

³³ This feeling is captured by Nicolson in his 1946 book *The English Sense of Humour*, a feeling ‘existing at a level of consciousness between sensation and perception,’ that can be enjoyed, anytime, by the ‘curious sensation produced when we cross the middle finger over the index and then push the v-shaped aperture up and down the nose,’ a haptic illusion of ‘having two noses and one nose at the same time’ (Nicolson 1946, quoted in Thompson 2004, p. xxiii).

What is striking about this model in practice is the way in which it clearly sidesteps a direct engagement for a kind of ‘looking awry’ (Žižek 1991). As I have argued above, the political dimension of a joke is not necessarily located in its content, but rather in the way this peculiar sort of word-game (to use Virno’s analysis [2008]) breaks with an existing logic. While this argument, as formulated in Chapter 2, might seem to preclude the possibility of any effective direct comic engagement with the political, in practice, we see that the comic artist can use a number of strategies to negotiate between exclusion, break, and attachment. What is employed here is a sort of misdirection via laughter and conviviality, so that while the Bartlebeian formula³⁴ will always fail to solve the problem directly, a new set of problems is opened.

Again, I must emphasise that though ‘Bartleby’ is a landmark in an ongoing process, it should in no way be viewed as a prescription for a mode of making and doing political comedy. It is anathema to my methodological framework to presuppose that one single form of political comedy might be applicable to all situations. What is required is a constant re-negotiation between the elements of the political itself, which I have identified, within the comic frame, according to the particular circumstances in place and time (context).

6.4 - How to do things with jokes - *live submission* (5 July 2010)

My final piece of experimental practice expands on propositions of ‘Bartleby,’ documented above. Seating the audience in a ‘boardroom’ formation, I engage the audience in a mixture of written jokes, anecdotes, and verbal participation. This live submission is intended to crystallise the principles of my PhD enquiry, and highlight moments of exclusion/antagonism, break, attachment, and suspension in safety in a particularly ‘intimate’ affective space that suggests a certain discursive mode (not the conviviality of the party, but the urgency or discomfort of the war room or political negotiation).

³⁴ Melville’s genius, firmly established by Deleuze, is demonstrated by the way in which the formula ‘I would prefer not to’ is at once familiar in its ordinary, prosaic language, and strikingly strange. Against the usual ‘I don’t want to,’ and ‘I’d rather not,’ it sounds almost too formal, even for mid-1800s Manhattan; as Deleuze writes: ‘Despite its quite normal construction, it has an anomalous ring to it’ (Deleuze 1997, p. 63).

6.5 - Conclusions: Political articulations in the moment of performance

In this chapter, I have examined two performances that represent a return to a more traditional form of comic performance, through the analytical lens developed in previous chapters. The first piece, *Easy, Tiger! (a)* employed a one-to-one form of audience engagement. Incorporating a performance score as well as moments of chance, ambiguity, and suspension, this was an important albeit tentative synthesis of the formal discoveries of the second phase of my research with an increasingly sophisticated theoretical frame. In *Easy, Tiger! (b)* I continued to undo the (false) binary between active and passive audience, this time in practice. Employing the concepts of articulation, hegemony, and antagonism from Chapter 5 (under the Sartrean question of how a group is constructed) to several moments in practice that best represent the synthesis of relational and stand-up practice (that is to say, an open, interactive mode of stand-up), I have concluded that the political dimension of performance comedy resides in its making sensible the Real of antagonism. These moments of suspension hold a multiplicity of potential choice open; they are characterised by an ambiguity that cannot be articulated. To reference Chapter 2 again, they are like moments of ‘non-sense’ for Deleuze: they donate ‘sense.’ The political dimension of performance comedy is not to provide answers to questions in a satirical fashion, but to pose different problems entirely. By suspending meaning (a break with ideology) in situations where the articulation of groupings in the audience is forefront, an attachment to a new ‘problem’ can be produced.

There are, of course, limitations. Though this practice in its intertwining with theory both explicates and is explicated by the theoretical model, measurement and evaluation can and should be done through self-reflexive analysis. But while this thesis does not propose a model of evaluating efficacy, it does model ways of making and doing for political comedy practice, and aims to reinstate comedy as an important and worthy of theoretical consideration. The old oppositions—comedy/tragedy, humorous/serious, carnival/official—are hardly sufficient in the era of late capitalism. If the paradigmatic elements of comedy are incorporated into an official ideology of neoliberalism, it is imperative for any

Leftist practice of resistance to take comedy very seriously, and alter its techniques and practices accordingly. The ‘apocalyptic’ sites of critical resistance Žižek identifies—ecological crisis, economic imbalance, bio-genetics, and social divisions and apartheid—are not going away. All the same comic practice helps facilitate official discourse to carry on as normal, from Sarah Palin’s postmodern appearances alongside her imitator Tina Fey, to Silvio Berlusconi’s clownish media persona. It can even allow corruption to escape unpunished: I will allow myself one final example from Žižek:

A supreme case of [...] comedy occurred in December 2001 in Buenos Aires, when Argentinians took the streets to protest against the current government, and especially Domingo Cavallo, the Minister of Economy. When the crowd gathered around Cavallo’s building, threatening to storm it, he escaped wearing a mask of himself (sold in disguise shops so that people could mock him by wearing his mask). (Žižek 2005[2007], p. 219).

Is this not the ideal example of power employing the tools of satire to further its own ends? This moment must therefore be read as a call to action. In the spirit of fighting fire with fire—if they can do things with jokes, we *must* do things with jokes.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF PERFORMANCE COMEDY

7.0 - *Doing things with jokes*

‘I’m finishing a PhD, but unfortunately, it’s about the philosophy of comedy. When my parents said they wanted me to be a doctor, they really should have been more specific.’ (Broderick Chow)

In this thesis I have described and analysed a three-year practice-as-research project. The driving question was the following: ‘What constitutes “political” comedy today?’ My research aimed to ‘rethink political comedy’ outside the superficial categories of political satire and topical comedy that have become synonymous with ‘political comedy’ in the present. This was achieved through an intertwined process of critical reflection on practices and practice-driven theoretical work, made clear by the use of varied and numerous examples from the much larger generic field of ‘Comedy.’ In this concluding chapter I recapitulate my arguments, making a case for a contribution to new knowledge. I address potential limitations of my research and research framework, and suggest possibilities for further research. I suggest to the reader how the practice and documentation might be read, and finally, summarise the argument of each chapter.

To recapitulate the primary argument, firstly, we must posit the following axiom: *the ideological situation of global capitalism represents a limit or problem for a critical and resistant comedy practice.* This may be demonstrated both materially (the increasing discourse of offense that is correlative to social atomisation and identity politics; the problem of translation and cultural specificity for humour) and theoretically (capitalism, as Deleuze and Guattari have argued [1984, 1987], is an endlessly deterritorialising force that consumes and incorporates codes of both culture and state, hence, from where does a site of resistance emerge?). Following from this axiom, ‘political comedy’ must break with ideology (must be a form of *Ideologiekritik*), and thus must circumvent the logics of satire and Carnival, in which making sensible to ‘obscene double’ of official ideology is presented as in-itself radical or

emancipatory. The political dimension of the joke is not its content, but in the incommensurable gap between set-up and punch-line, which is correlative to Lacan's definition of the impossible Real as a 'crack' in the symbolic order. A second problem appears at this point: how, in practice, does the subject become attached to the break with ideology in a relationship of fidelity? This question suggests that the conventional, 'pedagogical' mode of audience engagement is insufficient. The practice of performance comedy must produce an attachment by making sensible an 'antagonism,' which defines every group demand, and which is the site of political practice (here I follow the theoretical framework of radical democracy that relates the mode of politics to an *agon* or 'struggle,' elaborated by a variety of theorists, especially Laclau and Mouffe [1985]). My practice-as-research suggests that performance of comedy may create a space of 'suspension,' in which an antagonism (effected by the ideological break) is held and can be viewed from another perspective. This redefined 'political comedy' is characterised by 'discomfort'—instead of conciliatory *plaisir* (pleasure), it approaches the much more radical condition of *jouissance* (enjoyment, but also, an intolerable excess of enjoyment; pain in pleasure). This conclusion was reached through a series of practice-as-research experiments, and produces a set of four practical-theoretical propositions. (1) As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Žižek (2000) argue, antagonism is constitutive of the social, rather than operating as a division within it. Operating on this principle, in comic practice this antagonism can be made visible within the audience through a process of 'singling-out.' (2) The work of a political comedy, as argued in Chapter 2, is an act of *Ideologiekritik*. The second proposition therefore synthesises the critique of ideology with its relation to audience. In other words, the 'break' with ideology must in some way be related to its audience. (3) The third step of the process is one of an 'attachment.' How, after the break with ideology, is the audience able to form and 'attachment' or psychic investment with the moment of the break? In my practice-as-research this attachment could be said to be formed as the audience *reorganised its relation to the excluded member of their party*. (4) Finally, to prevent this reorganisation from slipping into hostility or unproductive aggression, I argued that some guarantee of safety be made present in the performance, in order to hold this newly visible antagonism in a moment of suspension. These propositions, as you can see, are not prescriptive with regard to their actualisation in practice. Though they are grounded in the

theoretical and philosophical model laid out in the early chapters of this thesis, they were discovered in the process and analysis of my experimental practice.

7.1 - Contributions to new knowledge

This thesis makes a contribution to knowledge in four ways, and in three different fields. My approach has been primarily philosophical, though it contributes as well to both performance/theatre studies and comedy studies. Firstly, I contribute a redefinition of the political dimension of performance comedy and the limits of satire under the ideological situation of neoliberalism and global capitalism. This may be considered a significant contribution to the study of comedy as a sociopolitical phenomenon, which is, at present, dominated by discourses of offense, but rarely considers determination by ideology. Additionally, however, the reconsideration of satire and carnival as forms of resistance contributes to the philosophical field of the critique of ideology, particularly as a detailed critical analysis of humour and comedy in Žižek's oeuvre. Secondly, and additionally in the field of comedy studied, my reading of comedy with Lacan, contributes significant additional knowledge to psychoanalytic readings of comedy and humour. This is not to say that my thesis posits a new theory of humour against Morreall's triad. But rather like Lacan's own return to Freud my thesis contributes to a more complex and developed understanding of the relation of jokes, joking, and humour to the Unconscious mind. Whereas the 'relief theory' of humour (Freud) is well-rehearsed, and Critchley has written on the relationship of super-ego to humour, this thesis contributes the Lacanian triad of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary to the reading of comedy in its relation to ideology and discourse. More generally, the decision to take a primarily theoretical approach redefines the terms of how comedy practices have been read as forms of resistance. Thirdly, this thesis contributes a formal model for comedy as critical and resistant political praxis, and actualised this through several instances of practice-as-research that may serve as reference points for future artists. Finally, with regard to the field of performance and theatre studies, in line with current discourses of participation, engagement, and efficacy, this thesis contributes a more nuanced understanding of audience/performer engagement that is to a degree opposed to a current discourse of the emancipatory

immediacy of participation and ‘liberation of the spectator.’ While the project is focused specifically on comedy in performance, with all its attendant problematics, the four practical-theoretical propositions contribute to discourses in theatre studies perhaps exemplified by Ridout (2004) and Read (2008), particularly in relation to the conditions, material or otherwise, for a theatre of radical critique and transformation in the age of global capitalism. It can also be seen as a deepening of the discourses surrounding the possibility of a ‘radical democratic theatre,’ for example, Janelle Reinalt’s paper ‘Notes for a Radical Democratic Theatre: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy’ (1998), or Jill Dolan’s essay ‘Performance, Utopia, and the “Utopian Performative”’ (2001). While such discourse has remained, predominantly, in the theoretical, my practice-as-research methodology contributes a very specific analysis of the material and affective conditions for a radical democratic performance — which is a specific finding that could not be achieved through a conventional PhD.

With regard to the status of *practice* in this thesis, which has produced several outcomes in ‘theory,’ we must note that the discoveries in theory and practice were co-dependent, which means, that rather than seeing the work as practice-based or practice-led, it is in the strictest sense practice-as. That is to say, theory, theorising, and critical reflection are an integral part of the practice and not an adjunct to it. Throughout, choices were made in practice as a result of the work of theory, and theoretical discoveries (for example, the idea of *suspension*) were made as a result of embodied knowledge produced through actualisation in practice. This is hardly accidental—if anything, stand-up comics are among the most self-critical (read: neurotic) artists. The research has led to the discovery, in my continuing practice, of a facilitative model of creativity, particularly in terms of comedy writing — a model less based on scripting than ‘scoring,’ incorporating formalised moments of participation and interactivity. The thesis suggests a number of points to be explored in future practice. One such point is as an investigation of comic writing with regard to the notion of (Lacanian) *Ideologiekritik*, which, due to the necessary focus on the field of audience has not yet been fully developed in my stand-up practice — yet developing my comedic writing in line with my theoretical convictions is an interesting prospect. Another point of investigation is the use of the facilitative

model of creative comic practice in traditional stand-up venues (clubs, pubs, and the ‘hour-show’ format). As argued in Chapter 1, stand-up in the United Kingdom is yoked to capital and free-market economics, with the government maintaining an ideological stance towards funding (that is to say, comedy is viewed as self-funding, regulated by the ‘Invisible Hand’ of the market and thus receives none). While I have at times in this thesis derided the conservative/conventional work this state of affairs produces, the grassroots nature of the art (especially in the UK) suggests communal tendencies that, given the proper context, might support experimentation. Though I maintain that experimenting as a practice-as-researcher in comedy practice, within an academic context, has a radical edge, my research must be outward facing, and must remain in touch with the wider field of comedy practice.

7.2 - Summary of Chapters

I will now revisit each chapter, summarising the main argument in each and its salient points, attempting to make a case for final closure.

Chapter 1 introduced the field of stand-up comedy in the United Kingdom and situated my existing practice upon embarking on my research in a historical framework. It was concluded that the tradition of stand-up, as it exists, is deeply implicated in the system of capital. I then reflexively described my practice through two projects, *Akira California* and *Homework for Heroes*, each of which attempted an experimentation with a different mode of performer-audience engagement. The audience-performer relationship, I argued, is the potential site of the political efficacy of performance comedy.

Chapter 2 developed a theoretical model for a transformative political comedy through a theoretical framework based in the Lacanian triad of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary and the Deleuzian dyad of Virtual/Actual. I argued that the logics of satire and the Carnavalesque did not take into account the larger question of ideology and how it functions in the era of the postmodern/global capitalism. I suggested a number of possibilities for comedy *qua Ideologiekritik*. This chapter raised the further question of attachments—while I identified a

number of possible modes of attachment, an attachment of objective critique presented itself as lacking.

In Chapter 3 I drew upon Nicolas Bourriaud's writings on Relational Aesthetics as a provocative possibility for practical experimentation, concluding that relational work is useful because it produces a shared context and affective space. In Chapter 4, I analysed a set of practices under the banner 'Dangerology,' which put these ideas into practice. I identified several useful ways of making relational art. However, what this practice lacked was the dimension of 'antagonism,' which I found was correlative to a lack of *jokes*.

Chapter 5 revisits the terrain of Relational Aesthetics critically, informed by the concept of antagonism. Extending the Lacanian framework developed in Chapter 2 into the discourse of political philosophy, I drew on the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau to suggest that antagonism is constitutive of both the joke (the incommensurable gap at its heart) and the social (the frontier of exclusion that defines every discursive articulation and hence, social formation). I examined a case study, Kim Noble's show *Kim Noble Will Die*, which provided a foundation for the work examined in Chapter 6. This chapter discussed two pieces that marked a return to a more traditional stand-up form in my experimental practice. Experimenting with alternative forms of audience engagement, moments of chance and contingency, and most of all, the constitution of the 'group,' it was suggested that an attachment might be formed through a practice that makes sensible an antagonism, 'suspending' it in a relation of ambiguity so it may be viewed from another perspective. My four key propositions are developed in this chapter. These can effectively be read as a synthesis of my theoretical analysis (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5) with issues arising from practical experimentation (Chapters 4, 6). These propositions — 'antagonism,' 'ideological break,' 'attachment,' and 'safety,' — arose from an analysis of a participatory method developed in the experimental piece *Easy, Tiger! (b)*. In Chapter 2 I contributed a Lacanian reading of performance comedy and its uses either as a constitutive element of ideological disavowal or a means of escaping it. While this reading has been maintained through the remainder of the thesis, through my four key propositions I am able to deal with certain problems of how this comedy *qua Ideologiekritik* might appear in practice. Rather than

remaining on the abstract-theoretical level, my experimental practice, along with close readings of other artists (for example, Kim Noble's work *Kim Noble Will Die*) has allowed me to deal with the problem of attachment to the ideological break. Using Mouffe and Laclau's concept of antagonism as constitutive of the social, I map onto the audience-community a process by which social change can occur — a splitting of the group, a moment of critique from which other possibilities may be revealed, a process of attachment by which political subjects choose to act in fidelity to this moment — adding a final element, the safe, non-violent space of the performance. It is important to add here that these propositions set up a *provisional* formal space for the regaining of political agency through performance; the comedian's role is perhaps similar to what Augusto Boal nicely termed the 'Joker,' an artist of facilitative creativity who sets up the ground of the event and augers the participation, but can never predict its outcome. The comedian, facilitating performance comedy, sets up the material conditions for the claiming of new political consciousness and the regaining of political agency — the four key propositions thus form a practical and theoretical guide.

In summary, these pages, accompanied by a live submission and archive of documented practices, redefines within certain parameters the notion of political comedy, providing a practical model to suggest further ways of making and doing in the field of comic performance.

7.3 - *Envoi*

This is not to say that the contributions I make in this thesis form a conclusive totality. One area of for further research is the evaluation of 'efficacy.' The problem of evaluating efficacy has been a central one for radical emancipatory theory since Marx elaborated his well-known eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, on what philosophers had hitherto done and what they in fact should do. I have argued that it is not appropriate for this project (or any such practice-as-research project) to evaluate efficacy quantitatively; rather, the intention of this research was always to contribute to ways of *making*, *doing*, and *thinking*. This is not to say that evaluation is not an important question, only that it is beyond the scope of this practical/philosophical enquiry. My contribution to the field of

comic practices in performance raises another question: what is the applicability to the existing field? One might argue that, as I have established, the practice of stand-up comedy in the United Kingdom being driven exclusively by free-market economics, the model I have contributed is difficult and, some may say, impossible to apply to the existing terrain of comedy clubs, arts centres, and television programming. My response to this objection is more complicated than the previous. What my research suggests is that, to a degree, stand-up is immanently 'political' in its form, particularly in its engagement between performer and audience member, and as such can always be a site for the *agon* of politics, through the failure of a joke, generation of antagonism through offense, exclusion of a group or person, and so on. However, I would also argue that the precise form of attachment I have elaborated in these pages is generated by the production of a space of ambiguity or suspension; which requires a degree of risk of possible failure and symbolic 'death'³⁵ that the economy of the comedy circuit, with its laughs-per-minute ratio and overwhelming injunction to pleasure, simply cannot tolerate. I would argue then, that at certain junctures performance comedy *must* free itself from the market, taking support from institutions including the Arts Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council, National Lottery, and university drama and performance departments in order to facilitate greater experimentation. At the time of writing, only one of these bodies (university drama and performance departments) in any way supports such experimental practice, which limits public dissemination of the work, which of course, is the entire point. I therefore whole-heartedly support the ongoing struggle by comic artists for recognition within the remit of state and governmental funding bodies.

What of the objection to this source of support I raised earlier, that state funding would as a matter of course dull comedy's oppositional edge? I might respond by noting my earlier discussion of comedy in relation to Lacan's concept of the Big Other. While the (reasonable) fear is that state funding would lead to greater surveillance and eventual curtailing of objectionable material, which is to say, material critical of the state, I argue that this applies only to material *directly* critical of the state. Through my reading of ideology and its

³⁵ As in, 'that comedian is dying on his arse.'

relation to performance comedy, I have since argued that *Ideologiekritik* must take a form of what Žižek calls 'looking awry,' not a direct objection but a sideways glance. As demonstrated by my discussion of the concept of 'over-identification,' critique of ideology in this form can actually, far from forcing official culture or the state to exercise its power, paralyse that power entirely. This raises the possibility for further research into historical instances of over-identificatory practices.

A further response to those who object to state funding for the purposes of experimentation in performance comedy: far from being separate to the state, a free-market driven culture of comedy is already inculcated in state power. Moreover, we must consider the way in which formal techniques of comedy are already incorporated into the ideological text of neoliberalism and global capitalism. One need only point to Barack Obama's recent stand-up performance at the 2010 White House Correspondent's Dinner. Contrasted with Stephen Colbert's performance at the same event under the Bush administration does this not represent an unprecedented conflagration of the places of critic and power? In the first instance we have the figure of power (Bush), *whom everyone knows* is a laughing-stock, and a send-up/celebration in the tradition of the 'Roast' by a well-known satirist. In the second instance we pass to a situation in which power and critic are one and the same; the effect of this is to place power above critique (as critique is already laughed-with). Obama was very funny, but our response should not be to further his hagiography, but to become ever more vigilant and critical. Similar examples from the political right include Silvio Berlusconi's buffoonish political persona, David Cameron and Nick Clegg's 'double-act' to introduce the new coalition government, and of course, Sarah Palin, who, throughout her political career has used humour to repel every objection to her lack of experience or skill. Again, a detailed study of the postmodern uses of humour in politics is beyond the scope of this research, but suggests itself as timely.

If figures of state power are employing comedy to their advantage, this is even more so for Capital itself, which, at every turn, bombards the subject with injunctions to Enjoy!. There has never been a better time for those with a vested interest in radical-emancipatory politics to begin taking comedy seriously.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor (1972)[2007]. *The Culture Industry*. J.M Berstein (Ed). London: Routledge.
- Agamben, Giorgio (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Allen, Tony (2002). *Attitude! Wanna Make Something of It?* London: Gothic Image Publications.
- Andrews, Maggie (1998). 'Butterflies and Caustic Asides: Housewives, comedy and the feminist movement.' in Wagg, Stephen (ed.) (1998). *Because I Tell a Joke or two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Auslander, Philip (1994). *Performance and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Badiou, Alain (2004). 'Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art.' *Lacanian Ink*. No. 23. 2004. pp. 103-119.
- Badiou, Alain and Žižek, Slavoj (2005). *Philosophy in the Present*. Oxford: Polity.
- Bailly, Lionel (2009). *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1941)[1965]. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bayly, Simon (2009). 'Theatre and the Public: Badiou, Rancière, Virno.' *Radical Philosophy*. 157. September/October 2009. 20-30.
- Bergson, Henri (1900)[2008]. *Laughter; an essay on the meaning of the comic*. Trans. Cloudesley Brereton. London: Arc Manor.
- Berlant, Lauren (1991). *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berlant, Lauren (1999). 'The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics.' *Cultural studies and political theory*. Ed. Dean, Jodi. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bishop, Claire (2004). 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.' *October*. 110. Fall 2004. pp. 51-79.
- Bishop, Claire (ed) (2006). *Participation (Documents of Contemporary Art Series)*. London: Whitechapel.
- Boal, Augusto (1979)[2008]. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press.
- Bogue, Roland (2009). 'Sigmund Freud.' in Jones, Graham and Roffe, Jon (eds.). *Deleuze's Philosophical Lineage*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 219-236.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, and Mathieu Copeland. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. (2002). *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. Trans. Jeanie Sherman. New York and Berlin: Lukas and Sternberg.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas (2009). *The Radicant*. New York and Berlin: Lukas and Sternberg.
- Butler, Judith; Laclau, Ernesto; and Žižek, Slavoj (2000). *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso.
- Butler, Rex (2005). *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory*. London: Continuum.
- Clough, Patricia Ticineto and Halley, Jean (2007). *The Affective Turn: Theorising the Social*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Colebrook, Claire (2002). *Gilles Deleuze*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Critchley, Simon (2002). *On Humour*. London: Routledge.
- Critchley, Simon (2008). *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London: Verso.
- Davis, D. Diane (2000). *Breaking up [at] Totality: a rhetoric of laughter*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1968)[2004]. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. London and New York: Continuum.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1969)[2004]. *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale. London: Continuum.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1997). *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles (2002)[2004]. 'How do we recognise structuralism?' in Deleuze, Gilles (2003). *Desert Islands and Other Texts (1953-1974)*. Trans. Mike Taormina. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1984)[2004]. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1994). *What is Philosophy?* London: Verso.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Parnet, Claire (1987)[2006]. *Dialogues II*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Barbara Habberjam, and Eliot Ross Albert. London: Continuum.
- Dixon, Steve (2007). *Digital Performance: A history of new media in theatre, dance, performance art and installation*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.
- Dolan, Jill (2001). 'Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative"'. *Theatre Journal* 53 (2001). pp. 455-479.
- Double, Oliver (1997). *Stand-up! On Being a Comedian*. London: Methuen.
- Double, Oliver (2005). *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy*. London: Methuen.
- Eco, Umberto (1989). *The Open Work*. Trans. Anna Cagnoni. London: Hutchinson Radius.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara (2008). *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*. London: Granta.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara (2009)[2010]. *Smile or Die: How positive thinking fooled America and the world*. London: Granta.
- Empson, William (1930)[2004]. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London: Pimlico.
- Fink, Bruce (1995). *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fisher, Mark (2009). *Capitalist Realism: is there no alternative?* Winchester and Washington: O Books.
- Freud, Sigmund (1960)[2001]. *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious (1905)*. Trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. London: Vintage.

- Gilbert, Joanne (2004). *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Goffman, Erving (1990). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books.
- Hallward, Peter (2006). *Out of this World: Deleuze and the philosophy of creation*. London and New York: Verso.
- Hardt, Michael (2007). 'Foreword: What Affects are Good For.' In: Clough, Patricia Ticineto and Halley, Jean (eds). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio (2000)[2001]. *Empire*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio (2004)[2005]. *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire*. London: Penguin Press.
- Harvey, David (2010). *The Enigma of Capital*. London: Profile Books.
- Homer, Sean (2005). *Jacques Lacan*. London: Routledge.
- Howitt, Dennis and Owusu-Bempah, Kwame (2009). 'Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour.' in Lockyer, Sharon and Pickering, Michael (eds) (2005)[2009]. *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*. pp. 65-80. Houndsmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huyghe, P. & Baker, G. (2004). 'An Interview With Pierre Huyghe.' *October*. 110. Fall 2004. pp. 80-106.
- Jameson, Fredric (1998). *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*. London: Verso.
- Joseph, Miranda (2002). *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis and London: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Kataoka, Mami and Critchley, Simon (2008). *Laughing in a Foreign Language*. London: Hayward Publishing.
- Kay, Sarah (2003). *Žižek: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Polity.
- Keller, Florian (2005). *Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American dream*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kershaw, Baz (1999). *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*. London: Routledge.
- Kershaw, Baz (2007). *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kester, Grant H. (2004). *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lacan, Jacques (1978)[1988]. *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*. New York and London: Norton and Company.
- Lacan, Jacques (1986)[1992]. *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*. London: Routledge.
- Lacan, Jacques (1966)[2006]. *Écrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York and London: Norton and Company.
- Laclau, Ernesto (2005)[2007]. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal (1985)[2001]. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

- Lambert, Gregg (2006)[2008]. *Who's Afraid of Deleuze and Guattari?* London and New York: Continuum.
- Limon, John (2000). *Stand-up comedy in theory, or, abjection in America*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lippard, Lucy. (1997). *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lockyer, Sharon and Pickering, Michael (2009). *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*. Houndsmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Melville, Herman (1987)[2009]. 'Bartleby, the Scrivener.' in Melville, Herman (1987)[2009] *Billy Budd, Sailor: and selected tales*. Milder, Robert (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 4-41.
- Morreall, John (1983). *Taking Laughter Seriously*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Morreall, John (2009). *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Oxford and Malden: Wiley-Blackwell
- Morreall, John (2009). 'Humour and the conduct of politics.' in Lockyer, Sharon and Pickering, Michael (eds) (2005)[2009]. *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*. pp. 65-80. Houndsmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- O'Donnell, Darren (2006). *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia*. Toronto: Coach House Books.
- Olson, Kirby (2001). *Comedy After Postmodernism: re-reading comedy from Edward Lear to Charles Willeford*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press.
- Parr, Adrian ed. (2005). *The Deleuze Dictionary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Pfaller, Robert (2005). 'Where is Your Hamster?: The concept of ideology in Slavoj Žižek's cultural theory.' in Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos and Matthew Sharpe (eds.) (2005). *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical responses to Slavoj Žižek*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Phelan, Peggy (1993). *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Purdie, Susan (1993). *Comedy: the mastery of discourse*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Rancière, Jacques (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans: Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rancière, Jacques (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliot. London: Verso.
- Rancière, Jacques (2010). *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Trans. Steven Corcoran. London and New York: Continuum.
- Reinelt, Janelle (1998). 'Notes for a Radical Democratic Theatre: Productive Crises and the Challenge of Indeterminacy.' in Collaran, Jeanne & Jenny S. Spencer (eds.) (1998). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Ridout, Nicholas (2004). *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ritchie, Christopher (1998). *Stand-up comedy and everyday life*. PhD Thesis. University of London.
- Sharpe, Matthew and Geoff Boucher (2010). *Žižek and Politics: a critical introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Spencer, Amy (2005). *DIY: the rise of lo-fi culture*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers.

- Sloterdijk, Peter (1987). *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Trans. Michael Eldred. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Smith, Daniel W. (2004). 'The Inverse Side of Structure: Žižek on Deleuze on Lacan.' *Criticism*. Vol. 46, No. 4. (2004). pp. 635-650.
- Stallybrass, Peter and White, Allon (1986). *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Stavrakakis, Yannis (2002). 'Creativity and its limits: Encounters with Social Constructionism and the Political in Castoriadis and Lacan.' *Constellations*. Vol 9, No. 4. 2002. pp. 522-534.
- Stewart, Martin (2007). 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics.' *Third Text*. Vol 21, Issue 4. July 2007. pp 368-386.
- Stott, Andrew (2005). *Comedy: New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge.
- Taylor, Astra (ed.). (2009). *Examined Life: Excursions with contemporary thinkers*. London and New York: The New Press.
- Thompson, Ben. *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy from Vic Reeves to The Office*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Trahair, Lisa (2007). *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and nonsense in early cinematic slapstick*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Tueth, Michael V. (2005). 'Breaking and Entering: Transgressive Comedy on Television.' in Dalton, Mary M. and Linder, Laura R. (eds) (2005). New York: SUNY Press.
- Turner, Victor (1969). *The Ritual Process*. Piscataway: Aldine.
- Virno, Paolo (2008). *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*. Trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Wagg, Stephen (ed.) (1998). *Because I Tell a Joke or two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Willett, Cynthia (2008). *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic perspectives on democracy and freedom*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Williams, James (2008). *Gilles Deleuze's Logic of Sense: a critical introduction and guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Williams, Raymond (1980). *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays*. London and New York: Verso.
- Žižek, Slavoj (1989)[2008]. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, Slavoj (1991)[2008]. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a political factor*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, Slavoj (1991). *Looking Awry*. Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj (1992)[2008]. *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. London: Routledge.
- Žižek, Slavoj (1993). *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj (1994). *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2003). *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and consequences*. London: Routledge.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2004). *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin, the 1917 writings*. London: Verso.

Žižek, Slavoj (2005)[2007]. 'The Christian-Hegelian Comedy.' in Higgie, Jennifer (2007). *The Artist's Joke*. London: Whitechapel. pp. 216-220.

Žižek, Slavoj (2006)[1]. *How to Read Lacan*. London: Granta.

Žižek, Slavoj (2006)[2]. 'Why are Laibach and the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* not Fascists?' in Žižek, Slavoj. *The Universal Exception*. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (eds). London: Continuum.

Žižek, Slavoj (2006)[2009]. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press.

Žižek, Slavoj (2008). *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador.

Žižek, Slavoj (2008)[2009]. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London: Verso.

Žižek, Slavoj (2009). *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London: Verso.

Zupančič, Alenka (2008). *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press.

Web

Anderson, Sam (2005). 'Irony Maiden: how Sarah Silverman is raping American comedy.' *Slate Online*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.slate.com/id/2130006>. [accessed 25 June 2009].

Badiou, Alain (2002). *On the Truth-Process: An open lecture by Alain Badiou*. European Graduate School [Online]. Available at: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/alain-badiou/articles/on-the-truth-process/> [accessed on 3 June 2010].

Bennett, Steve (2002). 'Bernard Manning: Review.' *Chortle*. [Online] Available from: http://www.chortle.co.uk/comics/b/3136/bernard_manning/review/ [accessed 3 May 2007]

Bishop, Claire (2006). 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its discontents.' *Artforum*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=200602&id=10274> [accessed 12 Dec 2008]

Calle, Sophie (2004). 'Lecture at European Graduate School.' *EGS*. [Online Video] Available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5CLplquFCg> [accessed 3 March 2009]

Darwent, Charles (2008). 'Laughing in a Foreign Language, Hayward Gallery, London.' *The Independent*. Sunday, 3 February 2008. [Online] Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/laughing-in-a-foreign-language-hayward-gallery-london-777365.html> [accessed 1 March 2008]

Hackett, Regina (2004). 'Slovenian art collective is adept at working politics and art.' *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. [Online] Available from: http://www.seattlepi.com/visualart/200214_visual19.html [accessed 30 August 2009]

Jonze, Tim (2007). 'Laugh? I nearly DIY'd.' *Guardian*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/aug/04/comedy.edinburghfestival20071> [accessed 8 October 2007]

Kennedy, A.L. (2006). 'Comedy is my self-defence.' *Guardian*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2006/aug/07/comedy.edinburgh20061> [accessed 10 September 2006]

Leith, Sam (2009). 'Political protest should be about more than having a nice day out and fighting some bankers.' *Guardian*. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/02/g20-protest> [accessed 25 August 2009].

Merriman, Helen (2008). 'The weird world of laughter.' BBC. [Online] Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7215354.stm> [accessed 1 March 2008]

Rhythms of Resistance (2005). 'Tactical Frivolity.' *Rhythms of Resistance*. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.rhythmsofresistance.co.uk/?lid=116> [accessed 15 October 2009].

Moss, Stephen (2009). 'Jimmy Carr: I thought my Paralympics joke was totally acceptable.' *Guardian*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/nov/05/jimmy-carr-paralympics-joke> [accessed 10 December 2009].

Mulholland, Neil (2004). 'Awkward Relations.' *Tate Papers*. Autumn 2004. [Online] Available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/04autumn/mulholland.html>. [accessed 15 December 2007]

Tyler, Wat (2001). 'Dancing at the Edge: A spanner in the works of global capitalism.' *We Are Everywhere*. [Online] Available from: <http://artactivism.gn.apc.org/allpdfs/188-Dancing%20at%20the%20Edge.pdf> [Accessed 30 August 2009]

Williams, Zoe (2003). 'The Final Irony.' *Guardian*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2003/jun/28/weekend7.weekend2> [accessed 25 August 2009]

Yellow Jackets (2010). *You Belong With Me: Same-Sex Crush Version*. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxWskedKAVU> [accessed 4 April 2010]

Žižek, Slavoj (1997)[2005]. 'The Act and its vicissitudes.' *The Symptom* (Online Journal). Volume 6, Spring 2005. [Online]. Available from: http://www.lacan.com/symptom6_articles/zizek.html [accessed 10 September 2009]

Žižek, Slavoj (2009). 'Berlusconi in Tehran.' *London Review of Books*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n14/slavoj-zizek/berlusconi-in-tehran> [Accessed 30 January 2010].

Films and other recorded media

Annie Hall (1977). Directed by Woody Allen. [DVD] New York: Rollins-Joffe Productions

The Aristocrats (2005). Directed by Penn Jillette and Paul Provenza. [DVD]. THINKfilm.

'Arrested Development.' (Episode 44: 'Notapusy') (2005). Directed by Lev L. Spiro. Los Angeles: Imagine Entertainment.

Bartleby (2001) Directed by Jonathan Parker. [DVD] Novato, CA: Parker Film Company

'Futurama.' (1999-2003). Created by Matt Groening and David X. Cohen. The Curiosity Company and Twentieth Century Fox Television.

'The Life and Times of Tim.' (2008-2010). Directed by Steve Dildarian. Good Humor Television.

Office Space (1999) Directed by Mike Judge. [DVD] Austin, TX: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic. (2006). Directed by Liam Lynch. [DVD] Los Angeles: Black Gold Films.

Live performances and artworks.

Beshty, Walead (2008). *Fedex Kraft Box*. London. At: Tate Britain.

Chetwynd, Spartacus (2008). *Hermito's Children*. London. At: Tate Britain.

Gillick, Liam (1992). *Instructions/Il Mistero dei 100 Dollari*. Milan.

Gillick, Liam (1995). *Prototype Erasmus Table #2*. Ghent.

Huyghe, Pierre (1994). *Chantiers Barbes-Rochechouart*. Paris.

Huyghe, Pierre (2004). *Streamside Day Follies*. New York City. At: Dia Gallery.

Mellors, Nathaniel (2008). *Giantbum*. London. At: Tate Britain.

Noble, Kim (2009). *Kim Noble Will Die*. Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh. [20 August 2009]

Sierra, Santiago (2000). *Eight people paid to remain inside cardboard boxes*. New York City. At: ACE Gallery.

Silverman, Sarah (2008). *Live at the Hammersmith Apollo*. Hammersmith Apollo, London. [19 October 2008].

Tiravanija, Rirkrit (1993). *Untitled*. Aperto. At: Venice Biennale.

Tiravanija, Rirkrit (1996). *untitled[tomorrow is another day]* Cologne. At: Kölnischen Kunstverein.

WochenKlausur (1995-1996) *Intervention in a School*. Vienna. At: University of the Applied Arts.