Deadpan Comedy and Personal Narratives in Contemporary Art

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Abstract

Audience response to deadpan comedy is most often polarized between reactions of awkward silence and hysterical laughter. Such division is further widened when deadpan is used to perform autobiography. The purpose of this research is to better understand this phenomenon by identifying the ways in which deadpan performances affect the readings of personal narratives in contemporary art practices. It investigates instances of deadpan’s slippage between autobiography and fiction through practice-based methodologies focused on the use of personal narratives deployed in my own artwork, as well those used by other contemporary artists. This is supported in the written thesis by a wider examination of the use of deadpan strategies in contemporary television sitcom and cinema, and further contextualized by critical reflection on theories of comedy and deadpan developed within the fields of philosophy and comedy studies. Much of the research centers on the importance of performativity within deadpan comedy, and this is reflected through the use of personal narrative performed in my practiced-based research and manifest in the video, drawing and sculptural components as well as the practice of the context-specific performances I have recently developed within this doctoral research. This research places emphasis on the role of the performer and is juxtaposed with writing that reflects on how these deadpan characteristics inform my own videos, sculptures and drawings. This PhD first establishes a clear definition of deadpan, one expressed through the lowering of affect through a series of masks that teasingly reveal and conceal personal narrative. I argue that this strategy has a flattening effect, not only on the performer and their environment, but also the audience, whereby expectations and structures of the context become evident. The audience is thus forced to engage more actively by questioning what is ‘authentically’ autobiographical, and what is fiction. In this situation, the audience confronts their own impulses whether to laugh or not. In this respect, the thesis differentiates deadpan from other forms of comedy by arguing against Henri Bergson’s concept of comedy as a social phenomenon: Since deadpan does not necessarily result in laughter but awkwardness and discomfort, this research seeks to define the outer boundaries of deadpan that embody melancholia and cruelty. Explicitly articulating this narrative, the research serves to create a richer context for works that exemplify deadpan and to redress the insufficient lexicon of language surrounding deadpan comedy in contemporary artistic discourse.
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Final thanks to my Mom and my partner, Garnet, for their encouragement.
Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the University Ethics Committee on February 10, 2016.

I declare that the Word Count on this Thesis is 38, 597.

Name: Erica Eyres

Signature:

Date: 26 September 2018
**Introduction**

Autobiography and humour have long been central to my practice: Comedy is deployed as a means of drawing the viewer in and disrupting their understanding of my role within seemingly personal narratives presented in my videos, drawings and performative interventions. Such uncertainty becomes most evident during screenings of my videos, during which audiences may laugh uproariously, or remain uncomfortably silent, while one or two persons suppress their laughter. This research seeks to understand the relationship between comedy and autobiography and is informed by an examination of the practice of deadpan humour as it is performed across a range of cultural forms, including contemporary art, popular television shows and cinema. The research draws upon theories relating to the affective nature of humour and the joke and contributes to the development of a more expansive account of the use of deadpan strategies by contemporary artists.

Working from the perspective of a practicing artist, this PhD examines deadpan humour in relation to autobiography, focusing on the key research question: *How does the performance of deadpan humour effect our reading of personal narratives?*

Related questions include:

*How does deadpan humour contribute to the production of the artist persona?*

*If no one laughs, who is deadpan comedy for?*

Although commonly used within day-to-day language and discussions on comedy, the term ‘deadpan’ lacks clarity and definition, especially when applied to its’ relation to contemporary art practices. Recent surveys, such as *The Artist’s Joke* (Higgie) or *Black Sphinx: On the Comedic in Modern Art* (Welchman), bring together significant texts on art and comedy, but none offer in-depth examinations into the nuanced nature of deadpan. David Robbins’ chapter, ‘Power Deadpan, Sincerity and “Kidding”’, in his book, *Concrete Comedy*, has been useful to this research, though it remains to be a brief introduction.

In response to this lack of definition, this thesis seeks to rectify this shortfall and begins with a description of deadpan’s characteristics; one based on strategies present within my own art practice, as well as that of other artists whose work reveals similar interests in, and use of, deadpan comedy. In the first section of the thesis, chapters one through to three, the focus will be on an exploration of the proposition that deadpan comedy results from a physical
disconnect between the performer and their subject. Working from a lineage that begins with
the films of Buster Keaton (*One Week*, 1920; *College*, 1927) and encompassing examples of
contemporary art, film and television, the research will seek to outline a definition of
deadpan centered on the critical exploration of its codes and conventions through art
practice, and realized in a series of videos, drawing projects, sculpture and context-specific
performance interventions. This practice-based research will be shaped and contextualized
by a critical engagement with a wider tradition of deadpan that includes readings of literature
drawn from art history and theory, comedy studies and philosophy.

The later part of the thesis, in chapters four, five and six, will contextualize my definition of
deadpan by focusing on the ways in which the experience of its performance affects the
spectator’s impulse whether to laugh or become estranged through processes of
identification (with the character) and alienation. From this stage, the thesis actively works
against Henri Bergson’s notion of comedy as one that performs a social function, to show
that deadpan often seeks to evoke a negative response from the audience rather than simply
the production of laughter. Although Bergson’s essay *Laughter* is initially valuable in
helping me to identify more generalized characteristics of comedy (the mechanical and the
tension between rigidity and elasticity), it nonetheless becomes a focus of critical
engagement which enables me to explore and dispute his notion of the comic as being
oblivious and question the social dimension of comedy.

The representation of personal narrative within practices of contemporary art is key to this
research, and I have focused on work that exemplifies methods of storytelling through
deadpan performance (Haley Newman, Andy Kaufman). My attention focuses specifically
on performances to camera, rather than live performances, due to my interest in strategies of
camera framing and post-production editing. However, these processes extend beyond the
medium of video to include works of photography (Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince), and
painting (in the case of John Baldessari’s ‘dot’ paintings).

Due to the underdevelopment of literature on deadpan in contemporary art writing, television
shows such as *Arrested Development* serve as texts with which to help identify and define
its characteristics through a close reading of the formal and conceptual strategies employed.
*Arrested Development*, in particular, displays a unique ‘knowingness’ (a key deadpan
characteristic) through its references to comic traditions, and its own self-reflexivity,
consequently it easily lends itself as a valuable and instructive text on deadpan. For example,

1 John Baldessari’s series of photographs painted with coloured dots over the subject’s faces. See Figure 7.
the show uses numerous deadpan tropes such as references to slippery banana peels, as well as a family house that continually falls down, in what can be read as a nod towards Keaton’s *One Week* (see page 64). One also cannot help but wonder if the character Buster is named after Keaton. Equally significant and useful to this thesis, is the television show *Brass Eye*, which enables a consideration of the subtleties of deadpan through its precise use of timing and descriptive comedy that becomes elongated and increasingly surreal, whilst maintaining a level of ‘believability’ in its keen mimesis of the visual language of sensational news programs. The importance of elongated timing proves equally significant in the study of Jim Jarmusch’s *Stranger Than Paradise*, with its depiction of boredom and stagnant characters. In analyzing Jarmusch’s film, as well as my own series, *Life Drawings*, I demonstrate how obliviousness and knowingness may be portrayed through the performer and artist’s gaze, in a process of what I refer to as ‘looking while not looking’.

The research emphasizes the importance of performance, not only in terms of the featured artworks I examine, but also through the methodologies I employ, including my own performances to camera. The re-emergence of my interest in performance has developed during the course of my doctoral research and may be registered through the increasing importance allotted to my own appearances within the videos. While the earliest work, *Clay Head* only features my hands and voice, I become increasingly visible as the performer, especially in the later works *Anne 2.0* and *Anxious Artists*. In these last two works, the performance is visibly rooted in the construction of characters and their grotesque prosthetic features. The personal narratives that feature within the text also function as performance scripts (for example, the anecdote about the exhibition of the *Nudist* drawings, on page 42), in stories that offer subjective (and perhaps unreliable) accounts of the making and presentation of the works developed throughout the PhD. Furthermore, the drawings executed in live situations (*Conference Drawings* and *Life Drawings*) convey my own performance as the artist who awkwardly and covertly records from their position as an audience member attending a class or academic presentation (in other words, these drawings emphasize the performance of studying performance).

The preoccupation with performance is further explored as a means by which anxiety is provoked within deadpan, and is described in terms of how it is experienced both by the spectator who encounters live performance (as depicted in *Anne 2.0*), but also in terms of the anxiety I experienced as the artist at the prospect of performing in an academic setting (the scenario depicted in *Anxious Artists*, but also through my own self-parody of my inability to perform at an academic conference, as shown in *CPR Conference*).
Although the videos feature my own performances to camera, there is nonetheless a live element of performance that is explored through the subsequent screenings of the videos in an exhibition context, and the discomfort experienced by audience members. Observing audience reaction to such situations became a useful tool within the research, gauging laughter, or the absence of laughter in a number of cases, raised the issue of what kind of audience reaction constituted a successful deadpan performance. The silence of viewers who either do not laugh at my videos or consciously suppress their laughter, although anxiety producing, became integral to the project and inspired a line of enquiry into the significance of negative reactions. This research into audience reaction was tested through screenings and exhibitions that took place in specific contexts, for example, the presentation of Anne 2.0 at Glasgow International 2018 (described on page 72); the screening of Video Tutorial at the Northumbria Student Conference, 2017; and the video Anxious Artists which was developed specifically to be presented at my viva in December 2018. Other context-specific exhibitions that allowed for the testing and development of this research include Inflatable Head, for Plug In ICA’s Stages, Winnipeg; and The Vegetable Store, part of Glasgow International 2016 (see page 44).

In examining deadpan performance across a range of media and contexts, the research highlights the role of the performer and enables an exploration of deadpan effect as not limited to live acts. Rather the research explores how the deadpan performer deploys various forms of “masking” to disguise their appearance, examples of which are analysed through a discussion on my own methods of self-transformation in my videos, and are employed by Cindy Sherman in her work, discussed in chapter two. Such masks enable the performer to disappear behind disguises (makeup, masks, character) while simultaneously revealing personal narratives. This dichotomy of hiding and revealing sets the scene for an investigation of the complicated relationship between deadpan performer and viewer, one that subverts the traditions of monologue to camera and current trends of ‘confessional’ video in popular media culture.

In chapter three, the significance of the deadpan ‘mask’ extends to include processes of copying through studies of examples by artists who employ methods of appropriation (Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman). In a manner that is similar to the use of physical costumes described in chapter two, I argue that the found image enables the artist to dissipate behind a veneer of fiction while revealing traces of their own biography through evidence of their re-photography (for example, the visible sheen on Levine’s After Walker...
Evans series that signals her process of photographing the Evans monograph). This proposition of image as mask is encapsulated by a quote from Richard Prince, where he describes his own desire to “play the picture”. In the work, Spiritual America, Prince’s performance extends beyond his own action of re-photographing the image of a young Brooke Shields, to his placement of the piece in a small gallery called Spiritual America, as well as his subsequent disappearance from the city amidst the controversy his work produced. In this case, the artist’s ability to erase themselves, to dissolve behind the image is identified as key to the deadpan act.

Disappearance is explored further through the study of Arrested Development in chapter four, to show how the performer’s lack of self-awareness results in a state of invisibility and, subsequently, a flat existence. This is formally and conceptually developed and tested in the production of my artwork as shown in Video Tutorial. The theme of invisibility is also central to chapter six, in a discussion of the deadpan persona. The limits of the relentless performance, whereby the body of the artist is seen to disappear through death, is illustrated by a discussion on the lives and works of Andy Kaufman and Bas Jan Ader. Despite the focus on such extreme circumstances, I also show how the power of deadpan derives from its subtle nuanced performance. How such moments of deadpan relentlessness are encompassed by single gestures is examined in a study of David Bowie’s portrayal of Andy Warhol through a sigh or his positioning of hand on hip; or how Chris Morris’ roll of his eyes, as a child is informed of their parents supposed drug overdose.

These subtleties further demonstrate the significance of knowingness in deadpan humor, which I argue, undermine Bergson’s concept of the oblivious comic who serves as a social corrective. In fact, deadpan might be best described as an antisocial comedy. The darker aspects of deadpan are first expressed by the performance anxiety described earlier, but also in the text’s focus on the melancholic characteristics of deadpan that become the subject of chapter five, as I query whether laughter can accurately measure the deadpan comic’s success. The presence of emotions that are antithetical to comedy, specifically melancholy and cruelty are investigated through close readings of my videos, Clay Head and CPR Conference in relation to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the ‘abject’; as well as through analysis of works by Hayley Newman and Bas Jan Ader and undertake a close reading of my video, CPR Conference, in relation to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the ‘abject’.

These findings distinguish the subtle nature of deadpan, differentiating this type of comedy from any other. Deadpan is revealed to be the antithesis of Bergson’s model of social
comedy, in that it questions the very nature of laughter; of when and how we respond to humour that is out of context. Like the elongated silences in *Stranger Than Paradise*, the deadpan joke slows to a stop, during which the audience either laughs instinctively, only to question their reaction when surrounded by other non-laughing audience members; or they experience alienation when they fail to find any comedy in this awkward situation. The polarizing effect of deadpan is explored in an anecdote in chapter five, during which a woman watching *Anne 2.0* turns to her fellow audience members to ask if it is “okay” to laugh. In such instances as the screening of the videos, laughter is not *necessarily* the most appropriate response; for the silence generated by deadpan creates a space in which both laughing and non-laughing audience members must consider their position within the situation and question their own impulsive reactions toward this type of comedy and its relationship to seemingly personal narratives.
1. Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the methodologies used for this research. I begin by describing the pattern of research before detailing the use of key methods, including personal narratives, parody and interventions.

1.1. Pattern of Research

This research is strongly motivated by my own art practice, especially the production of videos which are central to my methodology. Throughout the PhD, the practice-based work and written research have become tightly woven, both directly influencing one another: the video scripts increasingly draw from my academic writing, and likewise, segments of the scripts become assimilated into the texts. Allowing these differing modes of writing to seep into one another enables me to perform a series of interchangeable voices throughout the visual and written work.²

The process of research is conducted in a cyclical pattern: I first perform close reading and written reflection on the practice-based work in order to highlight recurring themes relevant to my research questions before contextualizing these themes alongside related practitioners and texts. These reflections lead onto further research, eventually informing the thesis chapters. I then consciously build on these themes when creating new work (while maintaining an experimental approach during early stages), allowing the videos to become increasingly elaborate over the course of three years.

This pattern of research occurs as follows:

² The notion of inter-changing voices takes influence from my own video practice that makes use of multiple characters, but also Mike Kelley’s essays in his book, *Foul Perfection*, 2003. See, for example, the essay, “Urban Gothic” (1985), which includes multiple ‘voices’ within the same text.
An example of this pattern of research occurred during the development of the video, *CPR Conference* which evolved from a segment of writing in which I explore Simon Critchley’s notion of self-parody. In his book, *On Humour*, Critchley casts himself in the role of a professor writing a book about the philosophy of comedy, thus exaggerating the role he already inhabits (59). I responded to this theory through an analysis of the television show, *Arrested Development*, in particular, the character Tobias who fails to find a role as an actor, not even being allowed to play himself in a film about the Bluth family. His failure to inhabit any life role led me to the idea of a person playing themselves ‘badly’. The video begins with the reading of my own conference paper which is made deadpan by my straight-faced delivery, grey costume and makeup.

My own anxieties to fulfil the role of an academic are parodied in the video as I read my paper with an assumed professional smugness that is undermined by my outfit, as well as the appearance of my dog, George, who disrupts the scene to lick his own bum. During a period of reflection, I realized I had rendered myself as an ‘invisible’ grey blob; much like Tobias who is covered in Chroma Key blue body makeup while ‘working’ as a stand-in actor for the Blue Man Group (referenced in *CPR Conference*). I also reflected on the dissemination of the work at the ‘Comedy and Critical Thought’ Conference at the University of Kent Canterbury, where this theme of invisibility was furthered through my own live experience of being alienated at the conference, as outlined in chapter five.

This research led me to reflect critically upon Henri Bergson’s essay, “Laughter”, in which he describes comedy as a social phenomenon whereby the audience responds positively through laughter (7). Contrary to Bergson’s theory, the audience response to *CPR Conference* was less laughter than silent ambivalence—which, in retrospect, was more appropriate to the subject of deadpan. From this realization, I hypothesized that laughter is not necessarily a measure of success when working within this field of comedy. My findings were then contextualized through the writing that appears in chapter five, as I position the work alongside other artists whose work evokes comedy while also portraying antithetical emotions such as sadness (Haley Newman and Bas Jan Ader). The negative response of the Kent conference audience is also comparatively analyzed alongside the work of the artist group, V-Girls, who developed a series of parodic conference presentations.

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3 Tobias is a stand-in actor for the Blue Man Group but never receives a call to perform (apart from once, when he is crying in the shower and does not hear the phone).
The research gathered during and after the making of *CPR Conference* was then later applied to *Video Tutorial*, which expands my interest in rendering the artist’s body as partially invisible. The awkwardness of *CPR Conference* is also more pronounced in *Video Tutorial*, as the presenter makes use of extended pauses in between their “tips” for making successful videos. This work was later presented in a specific academic context at the Northumbria PGR Conference, April 2017.

Periods of reflection are crucial to this model of research as they provide space to consider the visual language within the practice-based work and its’ relationship to my own personal narratives. For example, in reflecting on *Video Tutorial*, the character’s invisibility reveals itself to be an allusion towards the autobiographical experience of being overlooked within my local art scene in Glasgow. This reading only became apparent *after* the work was completed, as it was not conscious to me while I was filming or writing the script. Although each scene is subject to repeat filming (I shoot multiple versions by means of rehearsing and refining the videos), the initial design of costumes, props and sets occurs on an unconscious level. Upon later reflection, once the work is complete, I am able to understand the significance of each visual element within the mise-en-scène and its’ relationship to personal narrative and the broader research questions. One narrative points to the next.

1.2. Personal Narratives

Personal narratives feature heavily in the work as I borrow stories and dialogue from my own life. This is exemplified in the video *A Pool of Blood*, written during an artist residency in Winnipeg. While there, I attended a series of workshops with author Chris Kraus, during which I developed an objective writing style based on factual and visually detailed reconstructions of autobiographical events. Although these details are mundane (say, describing my mother’s memory foam mattress), the objects and events acquire weighted significance through their description. The details become exaggerated in a manner similar to the process of rendering used in the execution of my drawings and ceramics. Also based on found images or autobiographical situations, the drawings and sculptures accurately depict the image or object/figure they represent. However, the density of the lines or the materiality of the fired clay, instills the subject with a heavy weight that differentiates it from the ‘original’ and reveals subtle exaggerations of proportion, so the figures appear distorted. The process of editing writing is also similar to the smoothing out or filling in that happens in the drawings and ceramics, as the text is pushed back and forth, expanded and contracted to run smoothly with carefully placed bumps intended to jolt the viewer.
1.3. Self-Parody

Parody has long been integral to my video practice, having featured in such early works as *Commercials*, and mockumentaries *Destiny Green* and *Without Arms*. The work created during the PhD engages with Simon Critchley’s notion of self-parody, as discussed above. These characters may reside in the same living space as myself, or may share my past experiences, even perform under my name\(^4\), however, their unique physical attributes distinguish them from ‘the real’ Erica Eyres, as seen in the videos *A Pool of Blood* and *CPR Conference*.

1.4. Interventions

*CPR Conference* marks the start of a body of work where the academic conference becomes a site for production and intervention. The video was first screened at the ‘Critical Thinking and Comedy’ Conference, at University of Kent Canterbury in 2016. I here anticipated an audience who would be grateful for the video’s comic relief. However, during the screening, my audience remained silent (apart from a few outbursts from a friend who participated in the conference). Months later, I received an email from the conference organizers, informing me I would not be included in the accompanying conference publication. The video is accompanied by a series of drawings produced during the conference that depict cartoon images of presenters next to a single line of text borrowed from their paper. My activity remained ‘undercover’ as I discreetly executed my drawings in a small notebook. To those around me, I appeared to be diligent taking notes, attentive to every word.

Following the conference, I was left with the distinct impression that the comedy academics suspected I was making fun of them and/or the conference format. In retrospect, the idea of an academic conference on comedy where no one laughs is the perfect set for deadpan comedy. The absence of laughter emphasizes the video ‘paper’ format as an appropriate vehicle for deadpan intervention: my abstract was accepted by the committee as a respectable practice-based contribution to the conference as an investigation into the relationship between deadpan and personal narrative. *CPR Conference* was then curated into a panel that featured other practice-based contributions by artists working with humor in the medium of video. My ‘live’ performance as a participant in the conference was equally understated, as I made no attempts to draw attention to myself, diligently taking notes and sporting a ‘business casual’ grey shift dress.

\(^4\) For example, the character in *A Pool of Blood* introduces herself as ‘Erica’.
In his essay, “Laughter”, Henri Bergson emphasizes the social dimension of comedy that manifests through the audience’s affirmative, laughing response. I will argue, however, that deadpan has an opposite effect, one that results in confusion and alienation. Although this is a difficult position to maintain as an artist (like anyone else, artists appreciate a positive reception), it is crucial to the work. CPR Conference, along with the accompanying body of Conference Drawings, led to a series of interventions that allowed me to explore this alienating effect of deadpan, where some audience members ‘get’ the joke, and some do not. This polarizing effect provokes the questions who is deadpan for, and whether laughter is a true sign of the work’s success.

The methodological device of context specific intervention was also deployed in The Vegetable Store, featuring an installation of hand-rendered ceramic fruit and vegetables inside a pottery shop, made in collaboration with Garnet McCulloch for Glasgow International 2016. Following the festival, a sale was held, and the artifacts were made available to purchase. As all the work was produced in the studio space, the front gallery maintained its function as a pottery shop, selling items made by studio holders. This mode of production also formed a joke around the idea of ‘locally grown produce’. Some visitors mistook the installation for a genuine vegetable shop, confused by its status as an art exhibition; while others became annoyed when they were not permitted to purchase anything during the festival, announcing, “It’s called a ‘store’, but you can’t buy anything!”

The interventionist nature of The Vegetable Store is significant to this exploration of deadpan because it highlights the disruptive potential of destabilizing conventional contexts in which meaning is constructed. Although the ‘produce’ was displayed in a manner that emulates a traditional vegetable store, they were made of ceramic, which in any case the visitors/customers were not permitted to acquire until after the festival. The installation also functions within these same parameters as a pottery store, where all the items are made of ceramic, and displayed to emphasize their attractiveness as desirable objects; however, the items are sculptures of vegetables that cannot be eaten rather than any functional pottery. At the same time, the context of a contemporary visual arts festival is undermined because it assumes the understated position of being no more than a ‘vegetable store’. It does not employ the same signposts as other exhibitions in GI, where viewers were asked to contemplate the conceptual meaning behind the work. No accompanying information was provided, in the form of an artist statement or a printed press release. Rather, the installation was deceptively, easy to ‘consume’. It was what it was: a vegetable store. No explanation was required, and none was given.
The same may be said for CPR Conference, as it disrupts the protocol of the academic conference, firstly by presenting a recorded presentation rather than a live one, but also by using the language of contemporary visual art rather than literary language. For example, the lecture is interrupted by another monologue to camera in which the character addresses the camera through her reflection in the bathroom mirror, and here uses another persona to tell a confessional story about their personal relationship with photography. Also, in a scene during which my character performs CPR on a clay mannequin, the footage references the black-and-white photography of Diane Arbus\(^5\), as well as documentation of artists working in their studios\(^6\). During my presentation at the comedy conference, I withheld from offering any explanation by only introducing the video with my name and my area of research. The video screening was an unexpected demonstration of deadpan comedy, rather than an academic description of deadpan, which caused the audience to respond with awkward silence.

Further interventions also took place through the series Conference Drawings and Life Drawings. The act of drawing becomes performative in the first series which was developed during the ‘Comedy and Critical Thinking’ conference. Here, I performed deadpan by appearing to take diligent notes, rather than drawing cartoon-like images of the presenters that were accompanied by a single line from their speech, such as, “What Might a Non-Ideological Laugh Look Like?” These drawings were done covertly, as if drawing someone’s image was a transgression against unwritten protocol.

Notably, these interventions did adhere to a degree of social protocol, in that I was accepted through the process of submitting proposals. Thus, I was a legitimate participant in the conferences and the art festival. By adhering to this first stage of protocol, I was able to situate my interventions firmly within these structures. The work is thus inserted into the landscape so that when watching the video or attending the exhibition, the viewer experiences an unexpected disruption. The work is at once quiet and jarring. If the viewer is familiar with the language of deadpan, they realize that in The Vegetable Store, the gesture of making hundreds of fake ceramic vegetables by hand is ridiculous. In becoming part of the context landscape, the work asserts itself as deadpan parody by emulating elements of

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\(^5\) The confessional text also borrows from Arbus’ journals.

the protocol, but also distinguishing itself through difference. Methods of copying or mimicking while revealing difference is the subject of chapter three.

1.5. Summary

In summary, my key methods of research have been periods of reflection, during which I contextualize my artworks alongside other artists and theories; the use of parody, in particular my own self-parodies that occur through my performances to camera; and context-specific interventions in conferences and exhibitions. The sense of awkwardness that is integral to my practice and to deadpan in general becomes heightened during these situations by the strategic absence of laughter. The silence in the room has a flattening effect as it becomes impossible for anyone to laugh (even if they have the impulse to do so). The expectation of comedy, which is to fill the room with laughter, is disrupted and reveals the underlying structures of humour, but also the social contexts in which the work is being presented. For example, the presentation of CPR Conference highlighted the protocol surrounding the conference; one that dictated that participants in a conference on comedy should perform academic seriousness in the same manner as demonstrated by the male keynote speakers.

These methodologies have been integral to the research because they have provided live demonstrations of deadpan. In attaching the word ‘comedy’ to the research and conference papers, I set up an expectation that signals to the audience, ‘this will be funny’. They momentarily suspend their performances as serious academics to become passive audience members of comedy, relaxed and ready to laugh. In some cases, the work opens with a joke, say, as the audience laughs at my character’s appearance; or they laugh at George when he licks his bum. Eventually, though, the audience finds they have taken a wrong turn as they are unable to detect any comedic signposts. Laughter drains away. Deadpan comedy thus becomes a method for drawing the audience in, to challenge their passive position by casting them in a situation that is neither humorous nor seriously academic. The awkwardness of the video is mirrored by the audience’s experience. It is through this awkwardness, this state in which comedy stops its easy flow, that the audience becomes more self-aware and their expectations are revealed.

In this chapter, I have outlined the methodologies used in this research which includes a cyclical pattern of research that emphasizes the production of art works and periods of reflection. Also significant to this research are methods of self-parody and interventions in academic conferences and exhibitions.
In this chapter, I will first outline the fundamental elements of deadpan comedy as evident in the performer’s face and body. Secondly, I will show how deadpan uses these strategies to appeal to the viewer’s sense of emotional intelligence, as well as their imagination.

2.1. The Disappointing Artist

I arranged to meet the curatorial students at the café in a local art center. Approaching, I realized I had no idea what they looked like, and likewise wondered if they knew what I looked like. Having arrived early, I studied the stream of faces for any detail betraying one as an aspiring curator. A small blonde woman with glasses and a bearded man in a blue shirt sat across the room. As time went by, I wondered if the students intended to meet upstairs. I ran to the first-floor bar and stood in the doorway waiting for someone to look towards me with recognition. I ordered another coffee before composing an email to say where I was. Four minutes later the bearded man bustled past, looked around, and quickly exited. Soon after, I received a reply to my email, “Hi Erica, we’re in the café downstairs. I’m wearing a blue shirt”. I slid cautiously towards the blonde woman and bearded man (who, by this time, were joined by a woman with long brown hair and vintage-style glasses). They looked up at me as if I were a waitress about to take their order. As I announced my name, a resounding “Oh…” went around the table. The brown-haired woman explained they had been expecting someone with short dark hair. For the duration of the meeting, the students gazed at me with the curiosity of tourists regarding an exotic animal in the zoo—they were expecting someone who looked different and more aggressive; someone more like the person in my videos.

Such disappointment is often expressed by audiences who are meeting me in person. For reasons I will explore further in this chapter, I find it necessary to make myself physically unrecognizable in my videos and to differentiate my on-screen persona from my ‘real life’ persona. I will now describe the physical processes of constructing the deadpan face and body to show how these methods enable the performer to problematize autobiographic reference by which personal narrative is teasingly revealed and hidden. By removing cues that conventionally signpost comic intent, the deadpan face strategically moves between blankness and subtle emotion in a manner that is both candid and evasive. I use the term deadpan ‘masks’ to describe the performer’s methods for altering their own face, body or
voice. These masks function to partially cover the performer, making it difficult for the audience to ‘read’ their face and body language.

2.2. The Comic Cue

Humans learn to understand emotion by reading and mimicking the expressions seen in other’s faces (Moody). Comedians have always known this, and use exaggerated expressions, or their own naturally ‘silly’ appearance, to signal jokes. David Robbins describes this phenomenon in relation to the comedian’s promotional photograph, where “(g)rown men and women…mug childishly, extravagantly, sculpting fleshly arabesques of ‘delight’, ‘ecstasy’, ‘fear’, ‘surprise’, ‘confusion’” (Robbins 116).

Performers during the era of silent comedy developed an exaggerated style of ‘slapstick’, whereby their faces and bodies communicated narrative towards the camera.7 In this period, Buster Keaton perfected his own performance to camera (Figure 1). According to Keaton, he first developed his comic skills as a child while playing in a family vaudeville act where many of the gags featured Keaton’s father throwing his son across the stage as a ‘human mop’. Here, Keaton noted he received more laughs when he did not react to comic blunders (Keaton 13). The application of this restrained expressive response, and its development as a performative technique by Keaton, is recognized as pivotal in the development of ‘deadpan’ performance.8 Keaton has long been associated with the term ‘deadpan’, and some theories translate the word ‘pan’ as face—a dead face (Holt). By refraining from comic exaggeration, Keaton eliminates the traditional cues that tell the audience when to laugh.

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Deadpan comedy may be described as the removal of the comic cue. Instead of pulling faces to signal, ‘this is funny’, the deadpan comedian offers no specific signposts. In his book, *Concrete Comedy*, David Robbins defines deadpan comedy as a *lowering of affect*, in which emotion may be either dialed up or down to flood the audience with feelings or to withhold them completely: “Turn it down far enough and the signal becomes difficult or impossible to detect. Now, unable to read the sender’s emotional relationship to the signal, denied indicators crucial to identifying our own emotional response, we read the information presented just as that: information” (256). Such removal of emotion presents the subject matter with fact-like neutrality. This lowering of affect is evident in the work of Andy Kaufman and is exemplified by his routine in which he gives a live reading of the entire *Great Gatsby*. On one occasion, Kaufman would have continued through the whole novel if he had not been forcefully interrupted by a venue manager pleading with Kaufman to do something ‘funny’ (Zehme 147).

In addition to lowered affect, Robbins also identifies a second qualifier in deadpan comedy which is an “outrageousness of conception, presented with a veneer of fact-like neutrality”—meaning the subject matter is excessive or shocking whilst the presentation is restrainedly objective. In order for these two factors to create force, excessiveness must remain within the parameters of believability; outrageousness must not upset the balance of neutrality. Outrageousness was certainly manifest in Kaufman’s ventures into the burlesque world of professional wrestling, which he began by exclusively wrestling women in order to earn the first and only champion title of “Inter-Gender Wrestling” (Little). When asked why he chose to only wrestle women, he answered, without laughing, that he was not strong enough to wrestle men (Demain). Although Kaufman’s soft physique made him an unlikely candidate for the sport, his performances were executed with such commitment that he embodied of the grotesque aggression appropriate to the role.

I will now describe the physical construction of the deadpan face, and the ways in which such tension between outrageousness and neutrality manifests in the deadpan ‘masks’ worn by the performer. I am here referring to methods of disguise including physically covering the face (via costume, makeup and/or prosthetics), as well as stand-in narrators who replace the artist or author. Disguise conceals the performer’s ‘real’ face (how they appear in day-to-day life, or when not framed by a video or photograph).

2.3. Masks

I never appear as ‘myself’ in my videos and am only satisfied once I have sufficiently
disappeared. Through an invented persona, I exude an aggressive confidence and speak in a series of interchanging voices. The characters I play are made grotesque by their exaggerated features, and unflattering costumes and makeup (such as the presenter, Cassey, of Anxious Artists- Figure 2). By altering my physical appearance, I change my speech and the manner in which I present my body to the camera.

A similar process of transformation is made visible in the BBC Arena documentary, Cindy Sherman: Nobody’s Here but Me, which offers candid interviews with the photographer. In footage of the artist at work, Sherman may be seen standing in front of a mirror while trying on clothing and prosthetics. Sherman discusses the ‘click’ that occurs when she changes her appearance to a point where she no longer recognizes herself in the mirror. “Maybe it’s possession”, she ponders.9

For me, this transformation starts with such defining characteristics as teeth or hair. To alter either of these features is to experience an automatic change in persona. Fake teeth effect my speech by interfering with the tongue and palette—if the teeth are slightly too large, or do not fit correctly, they cause a lisp in my speech. Unable to close my mouth, I assume an exaggerated smile by widening the sides of my mouth to accommodate the prosthetic. A wig also has immediate effect since my characters favor blunt styles in contrast to my own long hair. I associate such haircuts with a more aggressive personality, so automatically adjust my stance to embody such traits. More subtle changes such as eye color are not as

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9 For further examples of Sherman’s exploration into grotesque caricature, see her series History Portraits, for example, Untitled #225, 1990.
easily visible to the camera, however, these ‘tedious’ details contribute to the creation of a unified character and help me to experience the ‘click’ discussed by Sherman.

Despite such immediate changes to my appearance, the act of assimilating all the features takes longer. In this process, I stand in front of a mirror, rehearsing lines and developing a set of mannerisms. If the initial transformation is a ‘mask’, then the second phase of transformation takes place as I mold the mask to my face and develop a believable performance. I acquire an understanding of the character’s voice, their hand gestures, articulation of words and any other visible behaviors in order to portray a convincing portrait of the invented character. During rehearsal I practice my delivery so as to appear effortless, as if the character is, like the prosthetics, molded to my own character.10

The ‘mask’ and the portrayal of character may be understood within David Robbins’ concept of outrageous conception and fact-like neutrality. On the one hand, the mask is constructed by a series of exaggerated, synthetic parts (oversized plastic teeth, blunt wigs, colored eye contacts and heavy makeup). However, these parts must become animated by adhering to the movements of my own face. The mask maintains ‘fake’ elements (the hair does not sit quite right; the teeth are slightly too white), while also conveying a degree of authenticity by their realistic rendering. Likewise, my performance is comprised of exaggerated mannerisms and speech, however, these are modelled on my own observations of characters taken from film, television and real life. Often, the members of an audience identify with the performance, frequently remarking that the characters remind them of people they know or have seen.

Referencing my video, *Clay Head*, I will elaborate on the process of constructing a deadpan face. In this work, a pair of disembodied hands sculpt a clay head over a white, foam mannequin head held upright on a stick. As more clay is applied, the increasing weight causes the head to sway from side to side. A large knife is used to cut holes for dentures and a pair of oversized glass eyes. The narrative follows the autobiography of an actor who once starred in a popular science fiction television show, with the inanimate head serving as a stand-in for the omniscient narrator. Intensity accumulates as the actor describes the process of having their head cast in plaster for prosthetic makeup: “I sat for hours, engulfed in darkness and in silence”. Despite this mounting tension, the face remains static and does not react to the story. Eventually, a single tear is administered from a bottle of eye drops.

10 The relationship between the performer and their character will be discussed further in chapter six.
In *Clay Head*, deadpan is constructed through the balance of exaggeration and neutrality. Excess is conveyed by slightly enlarged features that maintain human likeness in their realistic details. Voice is also made strange by raising the pitch to become child-like, but likewise, this alteration is subtle to avoid sounding computer-generated. The script combines fiction and biography by adapting a found narrative while excluding identifying names and places. Subjectively, my own autobiography is revealed when my voice cracks along the line, “I was crushed… but that kind of thing happens all the time”\(^{11}\). The fictional monologue is complicated by my identification with the character’s experience of rejection which provokes my own ‘authentic’ emotions. Yet, these are not my words, but those found in an online interview. Thus, the use of first-person is ambiguous since it remains unclear whether I am speaking as myself or another person.

![Figure 3](image)

In each process of construction, the image and narrative are subject to exaggeration. All the while, excess is contained by the authenticity or realism grounding the video in neutrality. The pushing and pulling between outrageous subjectivity and neutral objectivity creates tension, a sense of ambiguity that is never resolved as fiction and autobiography strategically overlap throughout the video.

\(^{11}\) The speaker is referring to their experience of being rejected by the show’s producers who did not offer them the part in a following episode because they were considered too short for the role.
2.4. Rigid and Elastic

David Robbins’ concept of neutrality and outrageousness may also be understood in terms of Henri Bergson’s theory of comedy’s rigid and elastic properties. In his essay, “Laughter”, Bergson identifies a rigid or mechanical gesture repeated so many times the audience may predict when it will next occur. He describes this action as “something mechanical encrusted on something living” (25). For example, in One Week, Buster Keaton sits with a piece of wood between his legs, jutting out from the house frame. He mechanically cuts at the wood beneath him with a hack saw; all the while, the audience can easily predict the outcome of his repetitive action. Anticipation is furthered when he shouts “I’ll be right down” to his wife who calls him for dinner. As anticipated, Buster cuts through the wood and falls to the ground. According to Bergson, rigidity and repetition must also be accompanied by a form of absentmindedness. “The comic person,” says Bergson, “is unconscious… he becomes invisible to himself while remaining visible to all the world”. The comic must remain absentminded, for if they become self-consciousness, their behavior changes to “either show it less or differently” (Bergson 10). In this example we laugh at Keaton’s absent-mindedness, well aware of what will happen next. He continues the same motion until our suspicion is confirmed and he falls to the ground.

Clay Head exemplifies such rigidity as the sculpted head is physically encrusted onto the foam head. Like a hastily assembled robot, the stiff dentures protrude from the mouth, with eyes too large for the face and a shiny, synthetic wig. Repetition is performed as clay is continually spread onto the mannequin, then also as the knife cuts several times into the face. However, neither the narrator nor the faceless sculptor acknowledges these defects during the process of making, both remaining oblivious throughout the video.

Rigidity is also present in my own transformations: false teeth are sculpted to fit tightly over my own teeth; my own hair is forcefully shoved under a wig. Despite my best efforts, the mask appears ‘unnatural’ with protruding teeth and awkwardly set hair. During periods of rehearsal, I develop strategies for mastering these synthetic features, moving my lips around the teeth so they appear ‘natural’, or combing the wig in a variety of styles or wearing a hat. With practice, I gain control of the clumsy teeth to improve my speech while appearing oblivious to my overly pronounced smile. If I was to behave self-consciously, say, covering my mouth when I talk, this would not be as funny as someone who grins widely and permits their grotesque teeth to protrude.
2.5. Body Masks

I will now describe the ways in which the deadpan body is subject to methods of disguise. In the same manner a mask conceals the face while revealing a pair of eyes and a mouth, the deadpan body is rendered partially invisible. The performer is segmented into a series of disembodied limbs, appearing as a pair of hands, a free-floating head, or even an anonymous voice. The body continues to display the same balance between rigid and elastic.

Rather than a straight-forward monologue to camera, the performer’s body in Clay Head is fractured by the first-person address spoken by an omniscient narrator over a pair of disembodied hands and an inanimate mannequin’s head. Throughout the video, these segments continually align as a unified body before separating again. During the opening shot, the mannequin gazes into the mirror, with human hands reaching up from below to touch the face. The voice says, “it is fun to look back”. Read together, the image and voice portray a person contemplating their reflection in the mirror while meditating on past events. From here, the voice departs from the body as the narrator discusses their experiences as a young actor (seemingly) without any connection to the grey clay being smoothed over the white face. Voice and face then realign at the description of being ‘engulfed’ in the plaster cast while the head becomes sealed in clay. A hand gently caresses the face as the narrator states, “I was handled with great delicacy”.

The unified body is fleeting, however, for the narration only briefly connects to the image. Neither the hands nor the face, offer a complete image of the author, for it remains unclear whether the performer is speaking as the artist or giving voice to another author. The expectation for a straight-forward monologue to camera is disrupted by the fractured body who continually alludes to both fiction and autobiography. This fluid motion between candid expression and cool detachment destabilizes the viewer’s position because they can never be certain which aspects of the narrative are genuine or fake; funny or serious. Tension is furthered by the balance between rigid and elastic/neutral and outrageous. Unlike the more widely understood terms of comedy, whereby tension accumulates in order to be released and exude laughter, deadpan remains tensely ambiguous.

2.6. Voice

The performer’s voice cannot be as easily disguised as their other identifying physical attributes. In his book, Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism, Steven Connor shows this is due to the fact we do not possess our voices in the same manner as such other
attributes as eye colour, hair or complexion. These attributes belong to us and attach to our bodies. Instead, we produce our voices. We can disguise our physical appearance, but the voice remains the same (Connor 3–4). In Clay Head, I alter my voice by raising the pitch, however the voice remains recognizable as my own.

Because the voice cannot be transformed in the same manner as the body, the deadpan performer is more likely to detach from their voice and lend their speech to another body or mask. As seen in the video, my voice is recorded separately from my body in order to lend itself to the clay mannequin and found text. The voice moves between the head and the invisible narrator in a kind of ventriloquist act: although the mouth does not move, the viewer periodically understands the voice to be attributed to the head; or they assume the head to be serving as a stand-in for the narrator. At other moments, the viewer may attribute the voice to the artist who speaks autobiographically. The voice and the identity of the performer/author leaps fluidly between positions just as the voice does between the ventriloquist and their doll.

The act of ventriloquism is also present in the celebrity endorsements featured in Chris Morris’ television program, Brass Eye. For the show, Morris (dressed in disguise) convinced celebrities and politicians such as Noel Edmonds, Vanessa Feltz and David Amess to repeat on camera absurdist public service announcements. For example, in the episode, ‘Crime’, Venessa Feltz is featured in ‘Message to Murderer’, where she speaks as the voice of murder victims (Figure 4). The skit becomes increasingly comic as the gap between the body of Feltz and the identity of her voice widens, “I’m the little boy whose face you stabbed off in panic when I found you robbing my house… I’m Marvin Gaye, shot by my own father. Oh yes, you know me all right... I hate you.” The celebrity endorsements function both as a critique of the authority granted to public figures on television, but also as a comic device in its own rite. Despite the absurdity of the lines, the celebrities maintain their serious delivery without questioning the veracity of their words or the campaign they so willingly take part in. 12

Our ability to produce our voice is what Connor believes makes the act of speaking an event rather than a physical characteristic—a performance requiring an audience. The voice is an entity to itself as it is emitted from one body to the ears of another, but also transmitted back to the ears of the speaker who hears themselves as they speak (Connor 2000, 4-5). Connor describes the imaginary spaces created through transmission and reception as the voice is produced inside a body before being sent into the surrounding exterior, then finally absorbed by the listener’s interior body. At the same time, internal space is also created by our unspoken thoughts (2000, 6-7).

These divisions of interior and exterior spaces point to the voice’s ability to physically attach to a person and to define their character, but also to express their thoughts as it departs from them. Connor illustrates the split between interior and exterior through the uncanny experience of hearing one’s own voice played back to them, and the ways this makes the “familiar of the unfamiliarity of one’s own voice as heard by others” (2000, 7). The author outlines a study by Philip S. Holzman and Clyde Rousey in 1966, which showed that participants hearing their own voices on tape either did not recognize themselves or appeared uncomfortable at their recognition (Holzman 79-86).

According to Connor, the detached voice always implies a body—meaning that, in the disembodied voice, we are forced to imagine the source, to make assumptions and to fill in these gaps: “This voice conjures an imaginary body that may contradict, compete with or replace/ reshape (Connor 2000, 20). Although we understand that the voice of the narrator in Clay Head is not being emitted from the clay head, it is not hard to imagine this inanimate stand-in as the source for the disembodied voice.
2.7. Wearing a Mask that Looks Like Me

Another form of deadpan disguise is a mask based on the performer’s own image. Although the face looks like mine, I remain behind a rigid mask constructed of synthetic parts. The sculpted head in *Clay Head* is based on my own image using the mirror shown in the first shot. What differentiates the head from mine is the wig and the oversized brown eyes. A similar technique is also used in *A Pool of Blood* (Figure 5), where I play a character named ‘Erica’ who wears a wig, fake teeth and coloured eye contacts. The audience understands the character to be myself since I use my own name and am known to perform in my own videos. However, the costume affects my appearance, and I adopt an aggressive stance to differentiate from my ‘real’ persona. Conventional self-portraiture is subverted through self-parody. As David Robbins states: “To parody the self is, ironically, to lend it greater definition” (116-117). The performer presents a heightened version of self-portraiture, one made different through exaggeration.

![Figure 5](image-url) Gillian Wearing’s *Family Portraits* (2003) features photographs of the artist wearing highly detailed silicon masks based on photos of herself and her family. Although the image is uncanny, close inspection of *Self-Portrait at 17 Years Old* (Figure 6) reveals the hair to be too shiny, and the pores of the skin too plastic. What makes the photograph most strange is the division between the skin around the eyes and the mask, indicated by a faint line. Wearing’s ‘real’ eyes peek through the mask to highlight the simulated quality of the photograph. The image is at once an accurate depiction of the artist as their younger self, while also being evidently rigid and synthetic. The viewer is seduced by the illusion while they remain aware of the mask and the artist’s presence behind it.
Other examples of self-parody may be found in examples of recent comedy, such as Larry David’s autobiographical character (also named Larry David) in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. The character dresses and speaks like David, even lives the same showbiz life as a comedy writer in Los Angeles. Each episode presents David in a series of day-to-day dilemmas based on his own or other people’s misunderstandings. David’s response to these situations is extreme when he, for example, becomes enraged by a woman who reluctantly permits him to squeeze by her in a movie theatre seating aisle. Unfortunately, the woman turns out to be his best friend, Richard Lewis’, new girlfriend (“The Pants Tent”). When interviewed, David is quick to differentiate himself from his on-screen persona. In a New York Times interview, David is asked, “are you really the Larry David that we see in the show?” Larry responds, “that’s the guy I wish I was.” He specifies that the show’s comedy is based on the negative emotions we feel in situations that go unsaid. Although the scenes often derive from real events, he imagines himself doing the opposite of his actual, more civilized behaviour.

The notion of self-parody and its relationship to mechanical comedy is evident in an essay by the artist Wyndham Lewis, “The Meaning of the Wild Body”. In this short text, Lewis furthers Bergson’s theory of a person behaving like a machine to also say we laugh at a machine (or ‘thing’) behaving as a person: “The root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a thing behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic: for they are all things, or physical bodies, behaving as persons” (Lewis 158-9). According to Lewis, it is only when we deny there is any kind of mind in the person, if we pretend this mechanical performance is natural, do we

encounter a world both serious and absurd. As an example, Lewis offers the image of a cabbage reading Flaubert, arguing if you came across this cabbage in the act of reading, “you would be very much surprised. But if you found a man or a woman reading it, you would not be surprised” (159).

Lewis continues to say we should be equally surprised by the image of a man or woman reading in this way, because it presents the same physical anomaly (159). In his book, On Humour, Simon Critchley interprets Lewis’ statement as a remark on the absurd nature of a person behaving as a person: “there is something laughable about me behaving like a little professor of philosophy and you behaving like earnest readers of a book on humour… We might as well just be cabbages” (Critchley 59). So equally, there is something comical in the image of me acting like a video artist, performing as Erica Eyres in a video.

Critchley shows, if we detach from our actions, we are able to find humor in the “unbridgeable gap between the physical and metaphysical, between body and soul, between being and having” (60). He traces this theory of detachment back to the philosophy of Descartes’s Second Meditation. In an experiment where Descartes practices looking out the window at persons passing by, he claims to not simply understand these persons as people, similar to himself, through any of his own physical senses, but through something he has deduced rationally (Descartes 31-2). Philosophy is an act of rationality that requires the body to perform detachment, to separate the metaphysical from the physical; a “momentary transformation of a person into a thing” (Critchley 61). Critchley finishes by telling us there is something innately funny in possessing a human body, but in order to see this experience as comical, we must adopt a detached, philosophical point of view of ourselves and the world.

In my videos, I perform detachment by differentiating myself as the artist from my own physical body in the video. As stated previously, this is achieved through the process of self-transformation. These changes to my physical appearance allow me to perform in a manner contrary to my ‘real’ persona, while highlighting my position as the artist.14 The technique of playing a mechanical version of the self draws attention to the viewer’s habit of ascribing biography to the work for it both offers a direct connection between author and subject while undermining this relationship.

14 This is most evident in A Pool of Blood, as the script highlights the difficulties in creating the work while being on a residency in Winnipeg and living with my mother.
2.8. Don’t Take the Mask Off

What matters most about the deadpan performance is the mask never be removed during the performance. This is because deadpan does not follow the traditional format of a gag, whereby tension accumulates to be released at the punchline. Since there is no cue to tell the audience when and how to laugh, the deadpan performance does not announce a beginning or an end, and therefore does not relieve tension. David Robbins explains, because the deadpan comedian “doesn’t show joking while telling the joke, the audience has now to figure out whether there indeed is a joke (and if there is one, what is it possibly about?)” (257).

In *Clay Head*, I maintain the same mode of address throughout the video. The effect would be incredibly different, if, say, I was to interrupt the monologue and speak directly to the camera in a voice other than the omniscient narrator; or if I was to include a blooper of myself laughing at my own performance. I am also careful not to offer any clues as to the source of the text in any formal information (press releases or artist statements) because the comedy relies on an ambiguous first-person narrative. The deadpan mask is not only formed by the physical stand-in narrator (the clay head), but also the borrowed text. In revealing the source, I would be removing the ‘mask’ by drawing attention to it as a mask.

Robbins refers to this disorienting effect of deadpan as its’ political dimension, a power game where the comedian is in control. In order to maintain control, the comedian must maintain their deadpan expression, never releasing it to communicate to the audience, “that was just a joke”. In this respect, deadpan can be incredibly alienating, resulting in anger or confusion. The aim of deadpan is not necessarily to generate laughter, but to upset the accepted expectations and parameters of comedy. The deadpan comedian is relentless. The performer must attach their mask before a performance but must also keep the mask on after the performance has (seemingly) ended. Blurring the boundaries of comedy’s parameters heightens this sense of control and makes the comedy more threatening. In permitting the joke to seep into real life, a question is raised as to whether the audience is watching a performance at all.

Despite such relentlessness, the deadpan body does not remain completely hidden because it must reveal some form of ‘truth’ or authenticity. David Robbins draws a comparison

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15 I will speak more in depth on the extensive lengths of the relentlessly deadpan joke in chapter six, but for now, will stress the significance of keeping the deadpan mask on.
between self-parody and the bodybuilder, as both “engage in exaggeration” (118). However, he also reminds us in “the realm of comedy, truth always trumps beauty; something is only beautiful because it is first true and about us” (Robbins 118). For Robbins, the comic body exerts carefully executed self-control in order to reveal something of human vulnerability.

In *Clay Head*, my voice cracks as I speak about rejection to reveal my own vulnerability as an artist. The found narrative is a mask used to disguise autobiography, yet, the holes in the mask expose the precarious status experienced by myself and other artists. Thus, the deadpan mask not only presents personal truth but also addresses human vulnerability in general.

**2.9. Emotional Comedy**

As we have seen, deadpan combines outrageousness with a sense of neutrality or believability. I would therefore argue deadpan does not exclusively make use of Bergson’s mechanical comedy by imitating the mindless machine, but also reveals the performer’s *natural* expressions of emotion. Although emotional affect is turned down in deadpan, the dial is not set at ‘zero’, but say, ‘1’ or ‘2’. For example, Keaton’s face is not void of expression, but rather, displays a subtle play between blankness and expression. In his book, *Comedy Incarnate*, Noel Carroll emphasizes the degree to which Keaton’s gags rely upon his facial expressions: “He is not a great stone face, except with respect to not smiling. Otherwise, his face is quite communicative” (Carroll 42). Carroll offers the example of Keaton’s recurring look of ‘surprise’, which is performed by the character Johnnie in *The General*, at moments when he realizes that “the environment, which he has conceived as being one way, has changed.” (43) The deadpan face is neutral, but more importantly, it is ambiguous and requires closer reading than the more overt, ‘clown’ expressions akin to comedy.

I will now use Noel Carroll’s theories on Keaton’s use of rigid and fluid gags to show the deadpan face does not just appeal to our sense of intelligence, but also to our emotions and imagination. By creating subtle play between blankness and expression, the deadpan comedian encourages the audience to engage in a more active reading of the face.

Carroll categorizes Keaton’s gags as being either *automaton* or *fluidly adept* (29-58). The automaton gags rely on his portrayal of the body’s inability to adapt to the environment; while the later show the body in effortless motion as it performs a mastery of skill over the environment and its’ objects. An example of Keaton’s mechanical rigidity may be found in *One Week*: in this film, Keaton and his bride are gifted a plot of land and a flat-packed house.
A jealous ex-boyfriend sabotages Keaton’s endeavors by changing the numbers on the boxes. Throughout the film, Keaton fails to recognize the change and does not alter his behavior to adapt to this situation, meaning he consistently fails in building the house. Carroll describes Keaton as displaying a lack of peripheral vision in these gags, for he can only move forward with rigid repetition (29-44). Alternately, in the film *College*, Keaton runs at great speed across the campus and effortlessly pole vaults through a window. Keaton is known to have performed all his own stunts, many of which had to be done with one take (often, scenes involving locomotives) (Knopf 42). These actions are achieved through great feats of effort, but also appear effortless. We can therefore say Keaton’s films relied on his own ‘natural’ abilities.

The deadpan face is constructed to encompass both Bergsonian rigidity, as well as fluidity. Carroll shows although many of Keaton’s jokes rely on the body behaving in a mechanical, absent-minded manner, an equal number of gags show his own impressive mastery of objects and the environment. This fluidity reveals the ‘natural’ movements of the human body and is confirmed by the subtle facial expressions communicated to camera. These expressions allow the viewer to identify with the character, rather than regarding the performer as a cold machine. Although the deadpan comedian is, to use Robbins’ term, ‘undershooting’ emotion, they carefully hit a mark between emotion and its apparent lack (Robbins 118). This balance may also be found in the work of John Baldessari, whose paintings scramble and isolate human features such as eyes, noses, and ears. The faces in his appropriated film stills are hidden beneath large coloured dots (Figure 7), and are subject to methods of cropping, cutting and altering. John C. Welchman connects these visual deconstructions to the blank expression of Buster Keaton and describes the work’s “rhythmic play of muteness and expression” as characteristically deadpan (261).
Carroll aligns Keaton’s automaton gags with Bergson’s theory of mechanical comedy, but also highlights the ideological nature of Bergon’s writing (45-50). For Bergson, comedy functions as a social corrective that discourages repetitive and habitual behavior (mechanical in a negative sense). Intelligence is expressed here as the ability to adapt to one’s surroundings, and laughter is intended to humiliate those who are absent-minded or inflexible (Bergson 12). Written in 1900, Bergson’s “Laughter” was directly influenced by Charles Darwin’s *Theory of Evolution* (published in 1870). Bergson shows comedy to be a tool for survival “by conditioning people away from complacent, absent-minded, inattentive, rigid, inflexible, inelastic, mechanical, and automatic thinking” (Carroll 45). Carroll notes, although there are no statements to support Keaton expressed a similar notion of intelligence as a flexibility, or the idea comedy should humiliate the absent-minded, he was working at a time shortly after Bergson’s essay was published, a period when America’s cultural climate was heavily influenced by Darwin’s theories: “Evolutionary theory became quite well publicized in the United States. Debates about it appeared in popular newspapers while discussions of Darwin and (Herbert) Spencer were often sources for theological discussions and even sermons” (Carroll 47).
The problem with ascribing Keaton’s comedy solely to Bergson’s theory, is Keaton’s films also make use of ‘adaptation’ gags (where Keaton’s character displays successful adaptation skills). Carroll proves Keaton “can rethink a situation and arrive at insights and interventions” (52). These gags occur as a sudden and abrupt shift from the automaton gags to interrupt our expectation of Keaton’s character as being irrational or inept. In this light, we cannot apply Bergson’s theory that comedy serves to humiliate the character since “the character’s thinking is way ahead of the audience” (Carroll 54). Carroll equates the audience’s resulting laughter at these jokes to the sensation experienced when things ‘fall into place’, like when seeing a mathematical problem being solved (appealing to the audience’s intelligence). He likens this type of comedy to the Gestalt psychology practiced in the 1930s, where the character displays an ability to reorganize his own mental map of a situation (Maier 69-70).

This opposition between automaton gags and the fluidly adept gags leads Carroll to theorize comedy does not just appeal to our sense of intelligence (even with regard to the performance of physical tasks), but also to our emotional senses—especially to our affective processes: “In silent comedy, much of the sadism is addressed to the darker recesses of the mind rather than to our intelligence, let alone our understanding of how things work” (Carroll 56). He points towards the work of Charlie Chaplin as an example of silent comedy’s appeal to our visual imagination. Similarly to Keaton, Chaplin’s comedy relies on his treatment of objects, but through a metaphoric approach. Carroll uses the example of Chaplin’s boot and shoestrings in The Gold Rush, where “the nails become bones, and the leather laces become spaghetti through Chaplin’s treatment of them” (56) (Figure 8). Our visual imaginative is provoked as we see these objects as stand ins for other objects. “Chaplin… treats the imagination, rather than concrete intelligence, as the most significant mental faculty” (Carroll 57).

Likewise, in strategically suppressing and expressing emotion, the deadpan face provokes the audience’s emotional senses by drawing attention to the disjunction between an
outrageous subject and a neutral expression. The viewer is forced to consider the manner in which the face expresses something contrary to the situation. Aware of the disjuncture, the audience observes the subtleties of the face more closely, waiting for emotion to betray the neutral expression. Rather than passively consuming comedy, being told when to laugh, the viewer reads emotion more actively by listening to what is being said or presented in contradiction to an image that communicates otherwise. The audience’s mind and emotions consciously consider the significance of repressed emotion. If the viewer laughs, they must ask themselves why they laugh, since there was no sign to tell them to laugh.

This disjunction evokes conflicting feelings within the audience as they experience guilt or confusion when laughing at an inappropriate moment. Instead of a unified, social experience, with everyone laughing at the same moments, laughter becomes solitary and involuntary. Because the parameters of the comedy are not made clear by the comedian’s face, a person may laugh compulsively. When screening my work, I may only hear the laughter of one person. Since that person finds themselves to be the only one laughing, they may try to stop themselves, to suppress emotion.

If we return to the scene in the café, and imagine the art center as a comedy set, we may envision both myself and the aspiring curators engaged in an intense game of deadpan performance. At varying intervals, both parties will interchange roles to act as both performers and audience members throughout the production: I first inhabit the role of audience member while waiting for the meeting to begin, watching carefully for the actors to announce themselves. At this point, I assume the students have learned to play the ‘archetypal curator’ by their choice of costumes. My mind conjures images of clean black clothes, colorful thick-framed glasses, expensively eccentric shoes, or (at the very least) a tote bag from some foreign biennale.

This situation is made deadpan by the fact the two parties are simultaneously playing the roles of audience members. Tension mounts when both the aggressive, dark-haired artist and the young curators with big glasses and exotic tote bags appear fail to perform. Despite the outrageousness of the scenario, everyone understands the importance of remaining neutral and not revealing their anxious emotions. I risk betraying my neutrality when my face becomes flushed from caffeine and running up and down stairs. The students also reveal subjective emotion as their eyes widen at my introduction.
I had wrongly anticipated that the students would deduce my ‘real’ appearance from having viewed my video, *A Pool of Blood*—towards the end, I remove the yellow baseball hat and brown wig. My own hair falls down and I look (more or less) like myself (Figure 9). However, judging by the students’ quizzical reaction, the false teeth and aggressive persona were enough to make me look like a different person.

![Figure 9](image)

Like all good sitcoms, there is a lesson to be learned here. Firstly, you should never assume a performance artist appears the same way in a café as she does in a video. Secondly, I can honestly say, I will never assume all curators wear the same outfits and carry the same bag. At least not young aspiring curators. Perhaps what they say isn’t true: success is not measured by how far you fly to get a tote bag.

*In this chapter, I outlined the fundamental characteristics of deadpan which include the suppression of the comic cue, as well as David Robbin’s notion of lowered affect and ‘outrageousness’. I connected these principles to Bergson’s theory of rigid and elastic humour in order to show how these fundamentals are present within the deadpan performer’s face, body and voice. Such performances must be carried out with ‘relentlessness’ (i.e. the performer does not remove their ‘mask’ throughout the act). The concept of a ‘mask that looks like me’ leads to the notion of self-parody which complicates the viewer’s perception of authenticity. Using Noel Carroll’s writing on Buster Keaton, I showed deadpan not only appeals to the audience’s sense of intelligence (as according to Bergson), but also to their emotions and imagination. Rather than passively consuming

16 I am still wearing a set of false teeth, green eye contacts, and a flesh-toned jumpsuit (Figure 9). However, the most distinguishing aspect of my appearance is my hair.
comedy, being told when to laugh, the viewer reads emotion more actively by listening to what is being said or presented in contradiction to the image.
3. “A woman walks into a gallery and….”: Appropriation and Repetition in Deadpan

Elaborating on Henri Bergson’s notion of the comic as a machine, as previously discussed in chapter one, this chapter will examine the deadpan performance of mechanically ‘copying’—specifically art works that employ methods of appropriation. By looking at work by members of the ‘Pictures Generation’\(^{17}\), I will examine the deadpan potential of appropriation and will argue that this (seemingly) direct approach enables the artist to both perform and disappear through the found image.

### 3.1. Naked Copies

I arrived at the exhibition preview of ‘Nudists’ only to find that the curator had placed a stack of ‘H & E Naturist\(^{18}\) magazines in the room where my drawings hung. In silent horror I watched as viewers sat reading the same issues I had based the nudist drawings on; helpless as they delighted in pointing from a magazine photo to a drawing each time they discovered the corresponding images. I despaired because such close proximity to their references highlighted the drawings as mere ‘copies’. Despite the obvious failings of the installation, this anecdote allows me to consider the effects of physical distance between the found image and its ‘copy’, as well as the critical distance achieved through reproduction. The confrontation between the ‘original’ image and the reproduction also highlights the work’s relationship to the ‘Pictures’ generation; for although my drawings employ manual reproduction rather than the mechanical reproduction of a camera, they exhibit the same method of re-framing the image within a new context. Rather than appearing in a nudist magazine, the images acquire new meaning through their graphite translation and placement within an exhibition (or at least, that was my intention).

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\(^{17}\) The ‘Pictures Generation’ includes artists working during the 1970s and ‘80s, whose work was based in photography, video and performance and employed methods of appropriating found images and a critical analysis of media culture. Artists associated with the movement include Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo, Barbara Kruger, and Sherrie Levine among others. The term was established by the title of the exhibition, ‘Pictures’, curated by Douglas Crimp at Artist’s Space, New York, 1977, as well as his accompanying essay.

\(^{18}\) *H & E naturist* is a British nudist journal which was first published in 1900 and is still currently in production.
3.2. The Deadpan Gaze

I will begin by describing this method of reframing an image through what I refer to as the deadpan gaze. In order to simulate the deadpan gaze, the camera or frame surrounding the image must portray its’ subject through a forward-facing, stationary shot, without elaboration or enhancement. As outlined in chapter one, the deadpan comedian assumes a straight face that remains in contradiction to the ridiculous situation or subject matter. This framing assumes a similarly straight stance unaffected by what it sees.

The deadpan gaze is exemplified in Sherrie Levine’s series, After Walker Evans 1-22 (Figure 10). Upon first glance, the work may be summarized by the title: copies made after Walker Evan’s photographs, attributed to Levine. So similar are the two bodies of works, one cannot help wondering if they are looking at Levine’s photograph when seeing Evans’, and vice versa. Although Levine’s photographs directly mirror Evans’, closer inspection reveals numerous images at play. Firstly, there are Evans’ black-and-white photographs documenting three families living in Southern Alabama in 1935. Each photograph portrays a mundane situation imbued with the drama of Evans’ documentary eye. Commissioned by ‘Fortune Magazine’, the photographs were eventually brought together with a text by James Agee in the book, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (a title that acquires ironic relevance when viewed through the scope of Levine’s work). (Burton 19-20)
3.3. The Myth of the ‘Original’

The relationship between the ‘original’ artwork (in this case, the Walker Evans photograph) and the reproduction (here represented by Levine’s re-photographed copy of Evan’s photograph) is discussed by Walter Benjamin in his essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (211-214). Benjamin traces the development of historical reproductions, starting from the manual reproduction of bronze sculptures and coins in Ancient Greece; as well as methods of printing and the invention of photography, in order to show that modern methods of reproduction allow for increasingly greater accuracy in the mass production of images and objects (including works of art, as well as magazines and newsprint) (215). Benjamin argues technological advancements in printing and photography have led to the devaluation of the art work’s ‘aura’.19 He defines this aura as the authentic and unique essence of the object or image, one diminished as “reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (Benjamin 215).

By this line of enquiry, Levine’s photograph deteriorates the ‘aura’ of the original Evans’ photograph. However, the nature of Levine’s reproduction as a photograph of a photograph, makes the subject of ‘original’ versus ‘copy’ all the more complex. In his essay for the exhibition ‘Pictures’ at Artists Space in 1977, Douglas Crimp described Levine’s photographs by saying, “underneath each picture there is always another picture” (Crimp 3). Most significantly, Levine photographed Evan’s pictures from bookplates. This simple act draws our attention to the individual life of the image that exists as an ever-expanding number of copies: first born as a negative inside the camera of Walker Evans, the image is eventually printed as a photograph (of which there are likely numerous prints), the image would later be packaged as a book, only to return again as Levine’s photograph that retains subtle evidence of the bookplate (which is then re-presented as a plate in a book on Levine’s work). (Burton 19)

Benjamin argues that no matter how accurate or ‘perfect’ a reproduction may be, it reveals a ‘lacking’ which he defines as “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (214). Likewise, Jacques Derrida shows in Writing and Difference that, although repetition seeks to circle or enclose the original without affecting its nature, difference (no matter how slight) is inevitable (295). For example, evidence of

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19 Although the essay refers to mechanical reproduction rather than manual reproduction, the essay will prove nonetheless relevant to methods of ‘copying’.
Levine’s re-photography may be noted by the subtle sheen across the photo resulting from light bouncing off the bookplate. The presence of Levine’s gesture leads me to argue that rather than a deterioration of the aura, Levine’s work shows a displacement of the aura. To quote Hito Steyerl, “By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. The aura is not based on the permanence of the ‘original’ but the transience of the copy” (42).

In his book on repetition in the work of Samuel Beckett, Steven Connor writes that the modernist desire to create art works defined by their originality has been superseded by the post-modernist practices of recycling “the old or already known, if only in the attempt to subvert the grounds of familiar knowledge” (2007, 2). Derrida also discusses the myth of the ‘original’ by arguing for the mutual dependency between original and copy. He argues that if repetition can only be performed on a pre-existing original, then it is also possible that originality is equally dependent on repetition; the term ‘original’ implies an image or object containing some essence that may be apprehended, but this can only be understood if there is a possibility that the essence is subject to copying. As we understand repetition cannot exist without an original, we must likewise acknowledge repetition is only possible with an original that may be duplicated (Derrida 295-297).

In *Difference and Repetition*, Giles Deleuze distinguishes between two forms of repetition: firstly, ‘mechanical’ or ‘naked’ repetition, which seeks to reproduce the original without any addition or distortion; secondly, ‘clothed’ or ‘disguised’ repetition which adds to the original by revealing difference (Deleuze 342-83). Deleuze eventually abandons this distinction in favour of ‘nomadic’ difference in order to resist the notion of mechanical reproduction. Like Derrida, Deleuze argues there can be no such thing as a pure repetition, for in order for a repetition to be recognizable as such, it must display (no matter how slight) a degree of difference between itself and the original. In this light, we must acknowledge there is no ‘original’ image, that every artwork is itself a repetition of a repetition, as any original is already a representation of another image.

Rosalind Krauss noted that artists, such as Levine, were engaging in a discourse of the copy, citing Roland Barthes who described the realist “not as copyist from nature, but a pasticheur who makes copies of copies” (Krauss 151-70). The copied copy is central to my own drawings (*Nudists*, 2016, mentioned above) that are based on archival magazines and books; as well to the ceramics featured in *The Vegetable*


*Store* (2016) that imitate produce from such chain groceries as Tesco.\(^{20}\) (Figure 11) Despite existing as unique, individually sculpted items, the ceramic models were produced as a series of multiples, such as groups of aubergines, bananas, plums, etc. Although each sculpture is based on an individual fruit or vegetable, the ‘original’ items may be understood as ‘clones’ themselves: for example, all commercial bananas are thought to originate from a single plant in Southeast Asia.\(^{21}\) The detailed rendering of the ‘produce’ also leads viewers to assume the sculptures were taken from moulds rather than sculpted by hand.

![Figure 11](image)

### 3.4. Copying by Hand

This process of individually sculpting each art work by hand can hardly be defined by the speedy reproduction described by Benjamin. Rather, the process of manual copying implies timely elongation. Drawing by hand from a found photograph marks this time through an especially slow process as the artist disassembles then reassembles an image over days or weeks. While sketching a figurative portrait, the artist first roughly maps out the body’s proportions before gradually developing the forms of each limb. Eventually, unique features become visible as harder lines are committed and detail accumulates. This procedure is directed by scrutinizing communication between the eyes and hand, calling attention to the artist’s presence and revealing the copy to be more human than machine. The drawing’s

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\(^{20}\) *The Vegetable Store*, by Erica Eyres and Garnet McCulloch, is a ceramics installation at Fireworks Pottery, Glasgow, commissioned for Glasgow International, 2016. The venue is situated next to a Laundrette. During installation the neighboring tenants complained to our mutual landlord that we were planning on selling fruit and vegetables – a violation of our lease which states the business may not sell food. When the neighbors realized the items were not ‘real’ fruit and vegetables, but sculptures part of an art exhibition for Glasgow International, they changed their business name to “The Art Laundrette” and installed an exhibition of watercolors and photographs by local artists. They also repeatedly asked how they might acquire their own ‘Glasgow International’ sign in order to attract visitors.

imperfections exemplify Deleuze’s concept of ‘clothed’ repetition to show the image is, in fact, not a copy, but a new and more awkward version of the original. For example, the image is ‘added’ on to or enhanced by slight changes to proportion and the contrast between light and shadow. These subtle alterations to the image reveal the artist’s inability to mechanically replicate. Just as the amateur models in my drawings oafishly mimic poses of seduction\textsuperscript{22}, the artist awkwardly renders an image. This sense of awkwardness created by difference and the resulting humour is characteristic of deadpan and significant to my practice.\textsuperscript{23}

Ripped from books and magazines, my images are not printed from a computer or downloaded onto a phone. Despite being collected through online sites, these found images pre-date digital technology. This way of working is a resistance to the instantaneous nature of current screen technologies; collecting physical material further slows the speed of reproduction and emphasizes the three-dimensional properties of the object. No longer in circulation, the source magazines and books exist as out-of-print collector’s item picked from charity shops and corners of online book stores. As my nudist subjects resist standard lifestyles, I cling to outdated modes of photography in order to reproduce images of a sub-culture from another era. This furthers the sense of incongruuity and awkwardness in the work.

3.5. Far and Near

Studying the manner in which an image is reproduced, we begin to understand the physicality of an appropriated picture. Rather than a flat copy, the images expand to form a three-dimensional, autonomous object. As layers accumulate between viewer and image, the original photograph gradually recedes into the distance. This space provides the artist with critical removal from their found material. The artist conveys a serious and detached demeanor, an expression characteristic of deadpan.

In his book, On Humour, Simon Critchley illustrates the role of distance in comedy through Gulliver’s Travels: “Satire is often a question of scale, of the familiar becoming infinitely small or grotesquely huge, which can be seen in Gulliver’s voyages from the littleness of Lilliput to the bigness of Brobdingnag” (15). This change of scale has a de-familiarizing effect that removes us from our lives, so we may assume a

\textsuperscript{22} See, for example, a series of drawings based on found photos taken from the ‘Readers’ Wives’ section of archival issues of Fiesta Magazine, i.e. Eyres, Erica. Helen. Pencil on paper, 2015. These drawings exemplify Judith Butler’s notion of gender as performance (Gender Trouble, 1990), whereby the figures awkwardly mimic poses they have seen in the same magazines.

\textsuperscript{23} I will discuss the subject of awkwardness further in chapter four.
critical perspective and realize the humour in our mundane surroundings. Critchley describes this perspective as being uniquely human and attributes the ability to the fact that we not only “are our bodies, we also have our bodies” (42). In other words, we are able to see ourselves as both subjects and objects.

Such comic distance is at work in my drawing *Bowling* (Figure 12). Here, the image is removed from the context of a nudist lifestyle magazine to be presented in a sterile gallery to a clothed audience who acknowledges the comic absurdity of naked bowling. Removed from their original narrative, the characters become anonymous and allow us to focus on the social context of their bodies as they engage in such a mundane activity as bowling with the abnormality of public nudity. Our detachment from the image is also furthered through our historical point of view when we note the document is dated by 1970’s hairstyles. The found image continues to recede as color and unnecessary detail are drained away. Figures in the background fade and disassemble; a set of genitals may be seen floating unattached to any particular person. Realist rendering and greyscale connotate a serious tone that is also affected by the straight-faced nudist bowlers. The artist’s ‘seriousness’ is reflected by the investment of time in the drawing process and the deployment of skill in a realist style of the drawing and contradicts the absurdity of this scene. The nudist subjects appear oblivious to their situation and their exclusion from the joke only adds to our own enjoyment. Seemingly, the further away from its original context the image moves, the more deadpan the image becomes.

![Figure 12](image)

Despite this distancing, the drawing establishes a level of intimacy. Each face is given unique and detailed features that make the persons strangely familiar.
Although the figures display their eccentric personalities through public nudity, they engage in mundane activities, such as bowling, shopping for shoes, or having dinner with their families, that are easily identified with. The audience’s recognition is furthered by the depiction of generic naked bodies (rather than the idealized and flawlessly photoshopped bodies of celebrities ubiquitous to contemporary magazines). Although the bodies are abstracted and anonymous, their detailed faces resist de-humanization.

The intimate nature between the artist and their found image is substantiated by a quote from Richard Prince, who, in an interview with Peter Halley, claims he has never intended to establish distance between himself and his subjects, but to get as close as possible “to produce the closest thing to the real thing” (Halley 1984, 5-6). Despite the significance of comic distance, the artist must become deeply familiar with the image they seek to copy. This sensation of being ever so close yet just out of reach has led such critics as Susan Kandel to describe Sherrie Levine as a kind of stalker, coming ‘after’ Walker Evans (67-68). In this view, the appropriator is an unwanted visitor who trails too close behind the image, then fades into the background.24 Dan Fischer, whose hyperrealist graphite drawings (Figure 13) are based on photocopied portraits of famous artists, has also been described as a ‘passionate fan’ who displays his devotion through the painstaking hours of labor involved in each work. In reviewing his exhibitions, critics emphasize the fact his images are taken from books and magazines read by Fischer as a teenager, aligning famous artists with the celebrities who decorate bedroom walls.25

24 Copying through impersonation will be discussed further in chapter six.
25 See reviews by Meghan Dailey in Artforum February 2004, p 152; and Katie Stone Sonnenborn in Frieze, issue 100 (Summer 2006), p 274.
Through my ongoing series *Conference Drawings*, I inhabit the roles of artist, audience member, stalker and plagiarist. These cartoonish depictions of academic presenters were first developed while attending a conference on comedy, from my position in the audience. The images are accompanied by a single phrase taken from the presenter’s paper, for example, “What Might a Non-Ideological Laugh Look Like?” While drawing, I assumed a deadpan posture, so I appeared to be writing notes and merged with my fellow audience members. Although everyone in the room was watching the person at the front, my eyes looked too closely at their face and body rather than listening to their words.

![Figure 14](image)

This notion of close proximity between the artist and their found image leads back to the analogy about the curator placing the source magazines next to my drawings. In this case, the lack of distance between original and copy undermined the drawings by permitting the audience to look directly between the drawings and the magazines. The exhibition became a space for comparing photographs and drawings, and thus, erased the ambiguity I sought to achieve through the laboured process of re-framing and re-contextualizing the images.

26 The series, *Conference Drawings* (2016), was first developed at the ‘Comedy and Critical Thinking’ Conference at University of Kent Canterbury in 2016.
Alternatively, the close proximity between the ‘original’ and ‘copy’ may be used as a means of revealing the original’s fallacy and may be understood through the work of Elaine Sturtevant. Her piece, *Heizer Double Negative* was first conceived as a repetition of Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative*, a land work consisting of two trenches cut into the ground along the eastern edge of the Mormon Mesa in Nevada. A reported 240,000 tons of rock was displaced in the construction. In his book, *Under the Sign of [Sic]*, Bruce Hainley describes Sturtevant’s intention to duplicate Heizer’s *Double Negative*, “not merely within spitting distance of, but on the same topographic stomping grounds as Heizer’s own” (Hainley 209).

However, the enormous costs involved in displacing 240,000 tons of rock meant the work was never completed. Instead, as documented through Hainley’s monograph, the piece exists as a series of correspondence and documentation of the artist’s efforts (208-233). This includes letters written between Sturtevant and gallerists, travel companies and potential financiers. By repeating Heizer’s work only to cancel it, the artist highlights the original artwork’s fallacies, in particular the gross amount of money and human effort needed to create the piece.

Also brought to light is the conflict between the purist mythology surrounding land works outside the gallery, and their reliance on the commercial art world. Sturtevant’s piece questions the commercial value of land works: how does one sell a work such as *Double Negative*? How is it represented in a commercial gallery context? In the case of Heizer, the artist presented a series of photographs documenting the process of making. As a response, Sturtevant’s exhibited a series of pencil drawings in cursive writing, each inscribed ‘New York is Shit’; ‘Los Angeles is Shit’; ‘Tel Aviv is Shit’, and so on. Stacked along the floor and leaning against the wall, her drawings, titled *Studies for De Maria’s ‘New York is Shit’*, were pronounced to be duplications of drawings done by Walter De Maria. Hainley, however, states there is no such record of De Maria exhibiting these drawings. Rather, De Maria made a series titled, ‘Rome Eats Shit’; ‘New York Eats Shit’, etc.

Not only is there a cancellation of Sturtevant’s work, but more significantly, a cancellation of Heizer’s via the deflation of the masculine myth surrounding a giant chasm—a big pit of nothingness. Nothingness is doubled (Hainley 224). The drawings further Sturtevant’s examination of the structures surrounding earth works by devaluing what Hainley calls, “the virginally ‘breathless accounts’ of city folk trekking out west then in critical vogue, accounts which frequently ended up operating as uninterrogated press releases for
documents of ‘nonsites’ (photographic, topographic, material) situated within metropolitan white cubes” (228). The work also disrupts the significance of exhibiting preparatory drawings for sculptures or performances, any form of fetishized ‘documentation’ within the gallery space.

3.6. Play the Picture

Although much has been said about the manner in which the ‘Pictures Generation’ questioned the authenticity of images, I would highlight the importance of these artists as convincing ‘performers’. In his interview with Peter Halley, Richard Prince describes his work as a form of role-playing, “in order to produce the effect of what the original picture imagines, you have to play the picture, you can’t play yourself” (Halley 1984, 5-6). Prince’s lengthy commitment to a role is encapsulated by the work Spiritual America (Figure 15): A photograph of a child Brooke Shields standing nude in a steamy bathroom, which he exhibited the same year that Shield’s mother secured legal ownership of the photograph. Spiritual America was the name of the storefront gallery in New York where the photograph was hung in a gilt frame and a young woman was hired to play receptionist and gallery owner. Prince himself remained unseen throughout the remainder of the show and was connected to the work only by rumors (Brooks 85-86).

In order to ‘play the picture’, Prince not only erases the evidence of his work, he removes his artist’s presence from the image and gallery. Here, the appropriation artist may be likened to the actor who becomes so immersed in their role that they
are visually transformed. The audience no longer sees the actor but views the character/image as a separate entity. My own ‘performance’ of producing drawings at an academic conference occurs in the real context of my position as audience member and presenter, but at the slight distance where I upset academic protocol by sketching and looking instead of writing and listening.

The vocabulary surrounding appropriation has long been associated with such criminal acts as ‘stealing pictures’ and ‘identity theft’. Although the deadpan act may appear to be a straight-faced lie, this façade is punctured by a series of facts. In *Spiritual America*, for example, we acknowledge that Brooke Shields is a real person and the photograph documents an undeniable event in her past. Likewise, the nudists in *Bowling* are not fictional characters but living people first depicted in a magazine. Such facts situate the image in an unstable reality and allow for a discomforting laughter that reminds us “there is always a grain of truth in every joke”.

The artist does not evaporate but dissimulates beneath the image. Some have interpreted Richard Prince’s work as an expression of his own masculinity, even deeming the Cowboys to be self-portraits as ‘regular’ men; by appearing as an ‘untruth’ they reveal something true. Though my video, *Clay Head*, is based on a found text, the first-person story of a deflated acting career may be compared to my own experience as an artist. When showing the video, I often cringe at the line, “but that kind of thing happens all the time,” as though something too personal is being revealed.

Yet, we cannot be certain that Prince’s Cowboys are indeed ‘self-portraits’ as the artist has never confirmed this interpretation. Nor can I affirm that *Clay Head* accurately depicts my life for I am not the author, just someone who selected and adapted the text. Fiction is represented as ‘real’ and complicated by an affectless tone. Such a mixture of lies, truth and apparent seriousness produces more questions than answers and enables the production of deadpan. As Glenn O’Brien tells us, art

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29 Alternatively, if the images are self-portraits, then the concept of ‘self’ and ‘portrait’ become complicated when projected onto a mass-produced representation created by someone other than Prince.
is “funnier than almost anything because it’s so serious. When it comes to
funniness, the more serious the setup the bigger the payoff and nothing is more
deadpan than art.” (109)

The key word is ‘setup’. By placing the source material next to the found image, the
artist (or curator) changes the setup. For the act of ‘stealing’ a picture is made overt
when performed in front of an audience; the reference is not concealed but boldly
contained within the artwork (in the case of Sherrie Levine, the reference is
included in the title). And so, an artist walks into a gallery and finds their magazines
on the floor next to their drawings. Lies are separated from truth and the
performance is no longer convincing. The joke is not taken seriously, and nobody
laughs.

To ‘copy’ brings to mind the office photocopier; a giant machine situated in a corner,
on stand-by mode ready to spit out cheap, fast paper copies of documents. Let us imagine, instead, a human being in the same office (that is actually an artist’s
studio) performing this role by pretending to be a photocopier. The person would
assume a most serious expression, standing very straight in order to pose as an
affectless machine. Looking through their collection of found materials, the artist
photocopier selects a single image to replicate. The eyes study every inch of the picture
before sending information to the hand that moves a pencil across a piece of paper.
After many hours, the new image becomes recognizable as a repetition of the first, but
any differences boldly announce themselves. Eventually, the copier moves the drawing
to another room, creating sufficient distance between copy and source material in order
to discourage comparisons between first and second image. In this new context, the
drawing evolves into an autonomous object while retaining some traces of the original.
Viewers come to see the drawing in its’ private room, judging its authenticity as an
original artwork whilst recognizing it as an imitation. Throughout the act, it remains
obvious that the artist does not successfully pose as a machine for their movements are
too fluid and their attachment to the found image is overly sentimental. Such awkward
human qualities are imbued within the drawing, meaning that it cannot be viewed as a
simple copy. The visitors may laugh at the incongruities between human and machine,
amateur and professional, or copy and imitation, but the human photocopier must retain
their neutral expression. Seriousness in the face of absurdity, repetition and difference,
convincing lies and awkward truths, proximity and distance are all part of the human
photocopier’s deadpan act.
In this chapter, I described the process of reframing a found image through the ‘deadpan gaze’ as demonstrated by the work of Sherrie Levine. Despite the straight-forward appearance of this gaze, it also reveals a layering of images that complicates the status of the ‘original’ which is shown to be dependent on the copy. The mechanical process of reproduction also divulges a ‘human’ quality, which is seen in my drawings and ceramics. Such a balance between mechanical and human is further understood through close and distant proximities, for although comic distance is established, the artist also becomes intimate with their found material. By inhabiting the role of the found image, the appropriation artist obscures the boundaries between autobiography and mimesis.
4. Obliviousness, Knowingness and Flatness

“A comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious...he becomes invisible to himself while remaining visible to all the world.” Henri Bergson, ‘Laughter’.

In this chapter, I will argue against Henri Bergson’s notion of the comic being unconscious to show the deadpan technique of performing oblivion whilst also revealing knowingness. Using examples from the Jim Jarmusch film Stranger than Paradise, as well as the television show Arrested Development, I demonstrate how the characters’ performed lack of self-awareness renders them flat in respective states of stagnation and invisibility, as comedy erupts from their persistent inability to function within the family or society. I will begin this chapter by describing the difference between oblivion and performed oblivion through an anecdote.

4.1. Performing Oblivion

I hired the empty swimming pool for exactly one day, in which to film the video, A Pool of Blood (Figure 5). While filming a close-up, I faced the camera from about three feet. I was slightly out of breath, carried away by my own words. Mid-sentence, my solitude was interrupted by the sound of footsteps on concrete, approaching from behind. I turned left to see a blonde man with glasses walk slowly along the side of the pool. His backpack and smartly casual clothes led me to understand he was a tourist taking a leisurely stroll through the historic building. I nearly shouted, “excuse me, you shouldn’t be in here—I’m filming!” However, the manner in which he stepped so gently made me hold my words; for he appeared self-conscious of the fact he was interrupting my progress. Having already walked halfway between the back and front entrances, he decided it was better to continue forward, rather than turn away. Although he carefully mimed the act of sneaking past, his soft footsteps echoed across the enormous room. My head slowly rotated as my eyes followed him along the side of the pool, then to the furthest edge, and finally, out the door. I remained silent as his footsteps gradually faded down the hallway towards the lobby.

In this situation, I perform the forward-facing gaze described by Henri Bergson in his essay, “Laughter”. According to Bergson, the comic performs the gesture of oblivion through their inability to show awareness towards their surrounding environment, which he refers to as a state of “automatism that makes us laugh—an automatism...closely akin to mere
absentmindedness” (10). Speaking with great excitement, my eyes remain fixed forward on the camera while I unconsciously perform a comic gesture through my lack of awareness towards the tourist. The man also performs obliviousness as he ‘sneaks’ past me, maintaining his own forward gaze and never allowing his eyes to move to his right where I am standing just below.

In this example, knowingness may be understood as a heightened sense of self-consciousness disguised as obliviousness: despite the man’s awareness of my presence, he continues to perform a state of unknowing that enables him to continue his forward motion. For, if he did acknowledge me, he would be forced to change his forward motion and slow his steady momentum towards the exit. I myself cease to be oblivious the moment I become suspicious of his footsteps and look behind me. By remaining silent, I pretend not to be angered by this interruption.

In addition to the silence of both performers in this analogy, the direction of the performer’s eyes also proves essential to the game of ‘looking while not looking’. This action is made visible in my recent series, Life Drawings (Figure 16). Although the nude models feature centrally in the images, the convention of life drawing is disrupted by the inclusion of my fellow participants who are situated in the background. The drawings’ humour derives from the awkward tension between the clothed artists’ penetrating gazes, and the nude models who ignore on-lookers by staring in the opposite direction or back towards the viewer.

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30 The significance of silence will be addressed further in relation to allusions towards deafness and invisibility in Arrested Development, later in this chapter.
31 I am here referring to the other artists who take part in the life drawing sessions. These events are held in the function rooms of local pubs and bars, where members of the public are invited to pay £5 to attend. Participants sit in a circle and the model is posed in the middle.
Here the forward-facing gaze is first demonstrated by myself as I draw the models in front of me. While I do this, the other participants demonstrate the same action since they are also drawing the same figures. The difference is I perform a knowing, faraway look by widening the frame to include the artists, whom I cast as oblivious actors who unknowingly star in my drawings. My ‘not looking’ is further performed through my fleeting glances: I select a person who sits across from me, directly within the eye line between myself and the model, so I appear to be staring at the nude figure while also looking slightly left or right. I am facing forward, but my eyes shift to the side. While drawing, I remain on edge, ready to avert my eyes the moment I sense another person returning my gaze.
Interestingly, the model also performs the act of looking while not looking as their eyes land just beyond the crowd, occasionally jumping inwards to scan the captive audience. Despite their discomfort of being cold and unable to move, the model’s pose suggests solitary contemplation; the eyes avert themselves from the onlooking artists, so the body may perform the illusion of relaxed solitude. Although the model may be looking forward in my drawings, towards the viewer, their eyes are likewise focused to the right or left.

Through this analysis of ‘looking while not looking’, I will now discuss how the characters in Jim Jarmusch’s *Stranger Than Paradise* perform obliviousness in order to depict their own existential states of inertia. The black-and-white film also demonstrates the forward-facing, ‘deadpan gaze’ through straight, static shots in which bodies pass through. An opening scene follows Eva, a young woman arriving in New York from Hungary, as she walks with bags in each hand, towards her cousin Willie’s apartment. Eva’s body remains at the center of the shot while the camera moves alongside her. In the distance, solitary figures float in and out of view (Figure 17). The film is marked by desolate streets, sparse rooms and lingering shots of banal conversations. Its’ soundtrack features only Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’ ‘I Put a Spell on You’, which is repeatedly played from a portable cassette player that Eva carries. Music is never dubbed over the film, only emitted from the physical source of this machine—a stylistic choice part of the film’s deliberate lack of special effects and minimalist editing.

Figure 17

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32 The term ‘deadpan gaze’ is discussed further in chapter two.
4.2. Inertia

The forward gaze is further demonstrated by characters who likewise engage in minimal activity: one imagines a young person such as Eva, upon finding herself in New York for the first time, to have an unlimited number of fun things to do. Yet, she and Willie spend their days sitting around the apartment smoking, watching television or looking incredibly bored. Even when Willie and Eddie embark on a holiday to Cleveland, they sit around Willie’s aunt’s house, eating Goulash and watching TV. None of the characters occupy full-time jobs (though it eventually becomes clear that Willie and Eddie make money by cheating at Poker and betting on horses). Willie even refrains from basic house chores and tries to dissuade Eva from vacuuming. Very little happens in terms of character and plot development—no one falls in love or resolves any problem. Willie and Eddie do form a bond with Eva, but the expressions of these relationships are incredibly elusive. The characters in Stranger Than Paradise choose to remain stagnant and fixate on the tedious activities and conversations within their immediate vision, rather than ever noticing ‘the larger picture’ in which life is passing by. In this sense, the forward gaze is expressed by the characters’ obliviousness towards life experiences and results in their state of inertia.

However, the forward-facing gaze is complicated by two other forms of looking portrayed in the film. The first is also forward-facing, but rather than a fixation on the immediate environment, it is a faraway gaze reaching into a distant, invisible space: Willie eats his TV dinner at the table, not even looking at a TV; in Cleveland, the three make a trip to see the big lake, only to stare into a snowy, white abyss. This faraway look implies a very different gaze than the oblivious, Bergsonian one because it counters the film’s humour with a more existential point of view; as if the characters do acknowledge their own boredom and temporary existence, but, see this with indifference. Through their mile-long stares, they silently affirm the ever-present sensation of darkness just below the surface. They may be looking straight into the abyss, but whatever is there remains hidden. If the first, direct gaze may be understood to embody Bergsonian obliviousness, then the faraway look implies a subtle form of knowingness through the silent acknowledgement of boredom.

Knowingness is also furthered by the film’s slow-paced editing. Although the characters employ a deliberate lack of emotion, their underacting is complimented by elongated shots. In permitting the camera to linger, Jarmusch allows for the subtle play of expression along the character’s face—for example, there is a scene where Willie, Eddie, Eva and her new

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33 A faraway gaze similar to the one attributed to the nude model.
boyfriend Billy go to the cinema in Cleveland (Figure 18). Here, the camera points towards the four figures who sit watching a screen positioned to the left of our view. The action of this imaginary film is deliberately withheld so we instead watch the careful body language between the characters. These shots reveal a distinct sense of deadpan timing as the moment slows down to acknowledge what is not said. This sensation that action is occurring just out of sight adds to our discomfort and awareness that something, both physical and emotional is being suppressed. Although the audience or the characters may be looking into a vast nothingness, the space surrounding them implies they are staring directly into the void, facing it head on. They acknowledge the emptiness of their lives while choosing to remain stagnant.

![Figure 18](image)

This brings me to the third gaze performed in the film, which is a form of ‘not looking’—a turning away from life. Willie, Eddie and Eva show an awareness towards their own existential dilemmas, yet, they choose boredom rather than excitement. As they move between these three gazes, their actions may be described as the same form of looking while looking away depicted in the Life Drawing series mentioned above. Their forward-looking reveals obliviousness when they become fixated on their close-up environment, but also knowingness when they look forward at the faraway void. The more ephemeral form of ‘not looking’, in this case, also reveals knowingness as they deliberately ignore a more fulfilling life. The final gaze is tragically comic, as it is difficult to understand why the characters prefer to spend every day doing as little as possible.
4.3. Invisibility

If obliviousness in *Stranger Than Paradise* results in a state of inertia, then it also results in a state of invisibility in the television show *Arrested Development*. As noted in chapter one, comedy is initiated by a philosophical distance between the self and the body, enabling the performer to view a smaller version of themselves in order to caricature their own behavior. But what if a person fails at this effort; what if a person plays themselves badly? This experience is most evident in the character Tobias, who spends the majority of season two covered in blue body paint, ever-ready to fulfill his role as a stand-in for the Blue Man Group (Figure 19). The call never comes. His desperation to find an acting role, along with his inability to act, render Tobias as invisible. The character’s failure is most poignantly represented by his Chroma Key blue costume—a colour used in film and television productions as a flat\(^{34}\) painted backdrop that, during post-production, may be removed by selecting the exact shade with an eye drop tool. The colour disappears, leaving the foreground bodies floating in empty space, ready to be pasted into another world. In this case, the body is painted blue, suggesting its own comic disappearance.

![Figure 19](image)

Failure to inhabit *any* kind of life role is a constant theme throughout *Arrested Development*. The main plot highlights the collapse of the Bluth Company (which markets and builds mini-mansions)—a downward spiral initiated by the arrest of founder and former CEO, George Bluth Senior, for defrauding investors and gross over spending of company money towards his ‘personal expenses’. The eldest son and manager, Michael Bluth, is passed over in favor of his mother, Lucille Bluth, whom George appoints as the new CEO. Lucille promotes her son Buster to president—a job which he is ill-equipped for since his only experience is a class he took in 18th century agrarian business. Michael leaves the company to take a position

\(^{34}\) The significance of flattened space within deadpan comedy will be discussed further later in this chapter.
at a rival company but returns after the family recognizes they need him. Though seemingly more responsible and business-minded than other characters, Michael is also unprepared for the position since he is unaware of the extent of his family’s spending and his father’s treasons. As Bluth Company President, the abilities to lie and commit fraud are necessary skills—for which Michael’s good intentions make him unqualified.

Apart from Michael and his son, the majority of characters are unemployed. Michael’s sister, Lindsay, refuses to get a job, preferring her former role as a socialite who holds benefits for fictitious charities. Her husband, Tobias, is a psycho-therapist who lost his medical license for malpractice before pursuing an acting career. Sadly, Tobias never manages to receive a part—not even to play himself in a movie about the Bluth family. Gob Bluth is a magician who has been kicked out of the Magician’s Alliance for having revealed the secrets of his illusions, and whose acts continuously fall short due to technical difficulties. The only person who does maintain a job is Maeby (daughter of Lindsay and Tobias), who is mistaken for an executive film producer—a job which she continually bluffs her way through. Consequently, Maeby’s occupation leads to her failure in her given role as a teenager attending high school.

The Bluths are equally bad at occupying any position within the family—especially Lucille Bluth, whose style of mothering includes calling her children fat and coddling her man-child son Buster in a satirically Oedipus style relationship. Lindsay and Tobias frequently separate and get back together, while Michael repeatedly threatens to move to Phoenix, only to return when he realizes the family has not noticed his absence. His son George Michael is decidedly in love with his cousin Maeby, whom he hopes might be adopted.

In addition to Tobias, multiple characters lead ‘invisible’ existences: Notably, George Michael’s girlfriend Ann, who is characterized by her plain appearance which makes her unrecognizable to Michael (despite having met her numerous times). Michael refers to Ann as ‘Her?’, or even ‘Egg’, and accidently abandons her in Mexico (“Amigos”). Another example is George Bluth, who, after escaping prison, hides in the attic while spying on the family through a hole in the floor (“Good Grief”). The episode, “Public Relations”, references Buster’s attendance at the Milford Academy, a school where children are encouraged to be neither seen nor heard.

35 George Michael manages the family side business, The Banana Stand, selling frozen bananas.
36 This relationship is also a source of comedy, as Buster frequently references being in a relationship with his mother. He later dates his mother’s best friend/ arch nemesis Lucille ‘Two’ (Liza Minnelli).
This inability to view the self from an outside perspective forms the basis for the show’s comedy, whose gags center around the characters’ unawareness towards the implications of their own speech. For example, Tobias repeatedly says or does things to implicate himself as gay—such as, “even if it means me taking a chubby, I will suck it up!” (“Ready, Aim, Marry Me”). At one point, he writes an autobiography titled, ‘The Man Inside Me’, which is a big hit with gay readers (“Let ‘Em Eat Cake”). The audience as well as the other characters understand the joke’s double meaning, while the speaker appears innocently deaf towards the implications. Other characters reveal their own knowing either through a silent pause or a sarcastic remark that goes unnoticed by the first speaker. This pause slows the joke to a brief stand still—a silence traditionally filled by laugh tracks. In permitting the silence to remain, the show draws attention to the distinct and awkward gap between how the body actually exists within the world and how it is represented inside the person’s mind. The joke is knowingly acknowledged by the listener, but never by the speaker.

Inside the mind, the self-image is fully formed and functioning, while incomplete and incapable in the real world. During this moment of silence, we watch a metaphysical projection of the character’s imaginary self in collision with the exterior image they present to the world. The collision of real and imagined causes a double negation of opposing images, cancelling each other out and making the character invisible and sometimes mute. This form of ‘invisibility’ differs from, say, H.G. Wells’ The Invisible Man, whose character is able to go completely unseen. The deadpan phenomenon resembles more an empty hole cut into space, resulting from the character’s lack of self-perception. This semi-invisible body exists as an outlined form, incomplete and waiting to be filled. Further references to incomplete bodies in Arrested Development are represented by characters with missing limbs, such as the one-armed J. Walter Weatherman (“Pier Pressure”), or Buster whose hand is bitten off by a seal (“Out on a Limb”).

Keith Arnatt’s Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self similarly illustrates such a human-shaped hole cut into reality. Here, the artist becomes a flat shadow with no distinguishing features.38 For this work, Arnatt stood on the sidewalk while a colleague drew

37Blindness is a recurring theme, as if the character is literally unable to see themselves—including the character, Maggie (Julia Lewis-Dreyfus), a lawyer who pretends to be blind.
38The empty silhouette of the artist is also discussed in my video, A Pool of Blood: Before starting a series of nightshifts, my mother suggested I would be more comfortable sleeping in her bed which has a memory foam mattress. However, her generous offer was accompanied by a warning: in lying down, the body stamps out a blank image of itself as a silhouette. Although the mattress produces a perfectly form-fitting place to sleep, it also creates a body-shaped chasm. If the sleeper awakens and climbs out of their chasm to travel to the bathroom, they find themselves awkwardly falling back into the hole upon their return.
a chalk outline of his shadow, which he then filled in with black and brown paint before photographing it. The resulting image displays an anamorphically distorted hole where the artist once stood. As the image is based on Arnatt’s shadow, it echoes his body shape while being distorted by enlarged feet. Evidence of the chalk outline remains, the white line referencing the brick’s mortar. The title makes use of deadpan word play, translating the term ‘shadow of his former self’ as a literal shadow of the artist.

The semi-invisible body is also evident in my work, Video Tutorial, for which, like Tobias, I wore a Chroma Key costume to remove myself from the video. My presence is indicated by a pair of eyes and a mouth cut into the mask, as well as gloves and a t-shirt worn over the green suit. A faint outline of the body reveals my form. My lack of self-perception is performed as I boast about being such a famous video maker that “world-class, professional video makers” constantly want to be photographed alongside me. This statement is not true of myself as an artist (no one has ever wanted to be photographed next to me—not as a famous video maker anyways39). Likewise, the character bares no distinguishing features and is therefore is not easily recognized.

39 I once had my photograph taken next to a famous collector while standing under a Jason Rhoades sculpture, but have yet to see evidence of that photograph.
Video Tutorial shows that I am incapable of becoming truly invisible and can only render myself as partially invisible. The residue left by the vague outline shows, as David Robbins points out in his chapter on the comic body in Concrete Comedy, the “comedian’s shape-shifting doesn’t extend very far. Only in illusionistic media—movies, television, video and computer games, comic books can we physically morph, and only death releases us from chronic selfhood. Comedians… not only know this, they admit to the knowledge, and the admission lends an aspect of humility to their search even while they persist in it” (117).

Figure 21

4.4. Flattening

Rather than transporting my body to another place, the Chroma Key generates a flattened version of myself and the surrounding space. This painstaking effort points towards an impulse to erase myself from my own studio; as if I try to escape the confines of my immediate environment but am unable to complete the disappearing act. The empty coat hanger on the door further emphasises this flatness, suggesting the t-shirt and my body hang there while not in use. As a piece of clothing is moved from the hanger to the body, it is transformed from a flat, inanimate, two-dimensional object, to a dynamic, three-dimensional extension of the body and an expression of its’ character. In this instance, however, the vaguely outlined body and t-shirt suggest a permanent state of two-dimensional flatness, one embodied by the suppression of affect and emotion: “Imagine that believability is a box, and we want to stay inside, inside of the box” (Eyres, VT). Imagination is not portrayed as a

40 True invisibility, in video format, could be achieved by filming an empty room and using a voice over. However, this technique would not imply the body as an empty hole cut into space.
limitless blue sky, but as a confining, square, white room.

As previously mentioned, flatness is apparent in the characters’ delivery in Stranger Than Paradise, but also in Arrested Development, whose characters show little emotion and use sarcastic delivery. Incapable of producing tears, Lindsay can only grimace; Michael asks if she is trying to cry (“Pilot”). In another episode, Lucille Bluth states that she wants to cry but can’t “spare the moisture” (“Prison Break In”). Affection is also impossible, as seen when George Michael hugs Lindsay and she responds with a confused smile and a pat on the back (“Pilot”). The character’s lack of appropriate response is characteristically deadpan, for, as noted in chapter one, the deadpan comedian never laughs at their own jokes, and by this logic, would not cry at their own sad story.

The characters reside in a Bluth Company model home, a flat-packed house coming apart at the seams: Michael leans back in a chair and falls to the floor as it breaks; a news reporter taps on a window that shatters. Much like the characters, the model home is unable to perform its given role of standing upright and providing stability and comfort. I am here reminded of Buster Keaton’s character in One Week, who struggles to assemble a house that constantly falls apart. Keaton’s film favours a number of wide-angle shots where the characters’ bodies are dwarfed by the interiors, emphasising the house’s dominance over the inhabitants. Once all four sides have come together, a full shot reveals that the building’s top does not fit the sides. The house pulls itself horizontally, back towards its flat-packed state. Keaton himself is in danger of being flattened as he repeatedly falls from the structure, and famously experiences his near-miss flattening by a falling wall — miraculously finding himself in the cut-out doorway.41

This flattened existence implies a world based purely on surface. As Steven Connor describes in his essay “Flat Life”, such a world “would have no interiority, no depth, no secret, nothing hidden from view” (Connor 2001). However, much remains hidden in Video Tutorial, as flatness permits the character to slip easily between autobiography and fiction, to constantly shuffle one behind the other. Rendering myself ‘flat’, I disable the audience from reading my facial and bodily expressions that tell them when to laugh or be serious. This removal of emotion blurs the division between personal facts and found fictions: as the body becomes invisible, it effortlessly moves between mundane truths and outrageous lies, eventually slipping out a closed door.

41 This scene is referenced in Steve McQueen’s 1997 film, Deadpan, where the artist restages the wall falling down on himself, repeating the action from multiple angles.
Steven Connor uses Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, to illustrate the flat imaginary’s habit for inversion and mirroring: “Looking-Glass land is therefore much more than a reversed image of our world. For in it, things move backwards and forwards with equal facility...It is not so much an upside down, as a palindromic world, a world in which direction is indifferent” (Connor 2001). The flattened space provides room for the doubling and repetition described in chapter two. Mirroring is a frequent trope in *Arrested Development*, as characters are often paired with a double image of themselves: George Bluth’s twin brother Oscar replaces him as Lucille’s partner when he is in jail; Lucille’s best friend and arch nemesis, Lucille Austero, lives across the hallway and competes for Buster’s affections (thereby repeating the Oedipus relationship); the name ‘Lucille’ becomes the subject of word play when Buster’s hand is bitten off by a ‘loose seal’. As previously stated, words and phrases reveal their double meaning, even if the speaker is ignorant to the alternative meaning. Most significantly, a character will attempt to fill the void of their incomplete body with a double, or doppelganger.

On more than one occasion, George Bluth asks his twin brother Oscar to stand in for him. In another example, George hires Larry, a ‘surrogate’, to act on his behalf while he is on house arrest (“Forget-Me-Now”). Played by Bob Einstein, the surrogate dresses as a body guard in a black suit with sunglasses and an ear piece through which he hears George before mechanically repeating his words. The situation’s comedy derives from Larry’s ineffectiveness as an impersonator; a hired automaton who looks nothing like George Bluth and displays even less affection towards the family. Comedy further erupts from the collision between impersonator and originator when George is revealed to be sitting in the bedroom while speaking through Larry during a family meeting in the other room. As Michael storms through the door, we hear Larry’s delayed echo of George’s words (“Notapussy”). Later, George orders Larry to go to a mirror, so they can speak ‘face to face’. In this scene, only Larry is visible as he says, “Larry go to a mirror. You’re fired. What? It’s over. And this is how you tell me, in the middle of a wedding?” (“The Ocean Walker”). At such close proximity, the double and the original cancel each other out when their differences, rather than similarities, become illuminated. Larry the Surrogate exemplifies the copy that looks nothing like the original. This attempt to fill the absent body with a stand-in serves to emphasize the emptiness of the original.42

42 The function of the double as a negation of the original is discussed further in chapter two, through an analysis of the work of Elaine Sturtevant.
Doubling becomes frantic when Gob seeks to destroy his professional arch nemesis, magician Tony Wonder, by proving he is not gay but straight (“A New Attitude”). Gob proposes Ann wear a ‘Gob’ mask while having sex with Tony, which he would film with surveillance cameras. He tells her, “in the act of having fake gay sex, you’re going to take off the mask to show that you’re having real straight sex”. When Ann refuses, Gob forms a new plan to wear a Tony Wonder mask while having sex with Ann while she wears the Gob mask. Ann leaves Gob starring into the empty Tony Wonder mask, saying he needs “a little while to get same… be the same” (Figure 22). On her way out, Ann runs into Tony, whom she convinces to have sex with her while wearing the Gob mask, and while she wears the Tony mask. She justifies her proposal by suggesting that if Tony is going to have sex with a man, it would be “more of a turn on” to have sex with someone who looks like him. Anne leaves Tony starring at the empty Gob mask, whispering, “same…same”. In this effort to fill the empty masks, both characters cancel their plans for mutual destruction to instead have sex with each other. In the morning, Gob goes downstairs to take one of his ‘forget me now’ pills (a memory loss pill equivalent to the ‘morning after’ pill). This scene depicts a manic state where characters attempt to fill the void only to erase the event, keeping the human shaped hole empty. The cycle of production and destruction is further illustrated by a quote from Michael to his mother: “I have a job, Mom, so I can earn money for you to buy more things and destroy the evidence”.

This cycle of doubling and erasing, trying to create two only to come back to zero leads back to the state of inertia performed by the characters in Stranger Than Paradise. The creation of a stagnant, flattened existence forms a space where the expectations of comedy may be deflated. Rather than imagining comedy as a three-dimensional, full world where the jokes rhythmically arise before erupting in punch lines, the world of deadpan is defined by a
permanent state of two-dimensional boredom. However, this flattened state becomes one where comedy may be visibly deconstructed. Through the processes of flattening, draining the laughter out of comedy, the deadpan comedian draws attention to silence. This silence gives the audience a heightened self of self-consciousness where they become more aware of, not only the structures that give comedy its ‘fullness’, but also the structures implicated by the situation in which they view comedy.

*Video Tutorial* functions to examine the institutional structures and conventions inherent within the context of the academic conference. The work was first presented at the Northumbria Post-Graduate conference 2017, to an audience who did not find humour in the fifteen-minute video ‘paper’. In this silent room, the gaps between the presenter’s tips become even more elongated, each pause underlining my awkward position as an artist researching comedy within an academic setting; not to mention, my problematic task of screening the video to a group who has no interest in the subject. The awkward nature of the situation is brought to light by the absence of laughter: rather than performing to a live sitcom audience, or even a live gallery audience, the comic artist performs to a fluorescent-lit room of PhD students and a panel chair who repeatedly points to his watch and whispers, “your time is almost up”.

Since filming *Video Tutorial*, I have tried to imagine a life for myself that involves going to openings and seeing renowned video artists who want to take selfies with me. In truth, the more successful artists I meet at openings have never seen my work. Most often, if introduced, they would say, “oh, I think I’ve seen you around”. In this sense, the un-represented artist experiences invisibility in the process of being ignored by those who perceive themselves to be part of an inner circle of success. Clearly, this anecdote about invisibility is more autobiographical than my claim towards being the most successful video ‘maker’ ever. However, the video’s ‘truths’ are only revealed through their neighbouring lies. By mimicking the overly confident motivational speaker, or the smugly self-assured academic, I point in the opposite direction towards my own experience of invisibility within the local art world of Glasgow. The video’s fiction (supposedly) reveals autobiography.

At the same time, a double negative is formed between the partially invisible body on screen and my ‘true’ image as an artist: neither one is more complete or authentic than the other. My ‘real’ invisibility may even be said to be fictional since it is a subjective experience.
According to my mother, I am a highly successful, international artist. My invisibility is not factual in the same manner as my location of residence, date of birth, or history of exhibitions, all of which are proven by photographic or written documentation. Alternatively, the video does make use of mundane, verifiable facts: For example, I do use a Sony video camera, a MacBook Pro and Premier Pro Software. I have not made over 1000 videos but have made quite a few.

My partially invisible body in *Video Tutorial* more accurately represents my interior self-image. I do imagine myself to be invisible, regardless of whether this statement may be verified. This image of my imagined-self collides with my ‘real’ image. Positioning a fictional version of myself within spitting distance of my ‘real’ self, occupying the same studio, causes the space between the two images to collapse. Neither version can be confirmed as truthful, yet both maintain an essence of truth. In one sense, the video mimics a found video that offers tips to people making videos on YouTube, as well as health advice about staying away from drugs and alcohol. In another sense, the character adopts my own insecurities as an artist, my own experience of invisibility within an art community.

If the character in *Video Tutorial* does not exist beyond the video frame, and the image of my ‘real’ invisible self is a mere figment of imagination, then neither versions of myself exists. There is no ‘real’ artist represented here. The artwork itself is not original since it uses found text. No tangible image of the artist exists beyond the video. Although biography is presented in fragments, these are as fleeting as my body is in the video, partly visible and partly missing. Autobiography does not substantiate the work but exists as another found material used to generate fiction.

In summary, I will here offer a final analogy about obliviousness and knowing that is demonstrated in my video, *CPR Conference* (Figure 1). While performing my monologue to the camera, I am interrupted by my dog who silently enters the frame. He skulks in at the corner, his skinny body momentarily unnoticed by the viewer. Here, I may be seen to perform obliviousness as I continue to face forward, only moving my eyes between the camera and my page of notes. Of course, I also possess knowingness as I am aware of his presence, but, continue to perform obliviousness rather than acknowledge him. George also performs obliviousness, since he does not care that he is intruding on my video. He makes his presence known by scratching at the ground and pulling the curtain. I pause my

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43 I refer to my mother as ‘a walking CV’, because she frequently lists the locations of my previous exhibitions to her friends and family.
speech and turn my eyes, waiting for him to stop. I silently tell myself to later edit this pause out—at least that is how I remember it. However, my eyes betray that notion as I glance towards the camera. Perhaps I knew all along that the interruption would be included in the video. This subtle nod to camera reveals a knowingness that is returned by the audience (or not returned, in the case of the viewers at the “Critical Thought and Comedy” Conference in Kent, where the video was first presented). At that exact moment, I may not be certain in my knowing that this is funny, but I am suspicious. I later become more knowing when I make the formal decision to include the blooper while editing.

The video portrays the ‘straight’, deadpan gaze as the performer directly addresses the camera. However, the familiarity of the situation is made strange by my grey sweat suit, makeup and wig. This costume, although comfortable, counteracts my effort to speak with academic professionalism and makes the notion of performing an academic lecture alone in my front room absurd. The image becomes even more strange when interrupted by a slithering, skinny black dog. A tear in the screen allows this moment of reality to seep through, as my dog, George, enters this fictional world. The video is humorous, yet there is also something repulsive in my smug performance and grey attire, as well as the moment when George licks his own bum. However, George’s gag was the only moment that received any laughs during the conference screening. Which proves that even serious academics can enjoy a funny dog video.

In this chapter, I distinguished the deadpan performance of obliviousness from Henri Bergson’s notion of the comic as a mindless automaton by demonstrating the kind of knowingness that accompanies the forward-facing gaze. Such performed obliviousness results in a state of inertia as deadpan timing emphasizes the slow pace of boredom. In the case of Arrested Development, the comic’s lack of self-awareness causes their body to become invisible—as characters continually fail to inhabit any life role (another state of inertia). This state of invisibility is induced by the awkward collision between the imagined and ‘real’ body; a form of cancelling out. These states of inertia may also be understood as a ‘flat’ existence, one that serves to make visible to institutional structures and conventions that uphold comedy and the context in which it is viewed.
5. When Laughter Drains Away (Melancholia and Cruelty in Deadpan)

In this chapter, I will focus on the question, how does deadpan make use of emotions and sensations that are contrary to the experience of laughter? Henri Bergson, in his essay “Laughter”, claims that humour exhibits a social dimension due to its reliance on the presence of an audience (11-12). This is echoed by Sigmund Freud’s assertion that if there is no audience there is no joke, and that an un-transmitted joke is not structurally a joke (145-6). In response to Bergson and Freud’s theories, I will discuss deadpan as an anti-social form of comedy, one that severs the feedback loop between performer and spectator through alienation.

5.1. “It’s funny… Right?”

While invigilating my own exhibition44, I overheard a conversation between two visitors viewing my video, Anne 2.0. One woman turned to the other and asked, “it’s funny… Right?” The other said, “yes,” which gave the first permission to continue laughing. The lack of comic sign posts within the videos, along with my performance of affected seriousness leaves audiences uncertain whether they are regarding comedy or not. Another point of confusion is the presence of emotions that contradict humour, such as melancholia or cruelty. While watching one of the videos, a viewer might feel guilty for laughing at a sad image, or at the cruel relationship between two characters.45 Furthermore, the allusion to personal narratives frequently leaves audiences feeling guilty for laughing at my loathing self-portraiture. In laughing at the melancholy artist, the viewer renders themselves as cruel. I will begin this chapter with a descriptive analysis of melancholy and cruelty as these appear in my video, Clay Head; the photograph Crying Glasses, by Haley Newman; and I’m Too Sad to Tell You, by Bas Jan Ader. I will also show how comedy, in these three works, is dependent on their depiction of sadness.

5.2. Laughing and Crying

Clay Head makes use of a first-person narrator who recalls their experiences as a child actor in a science fiction television show. The light-hearted opening statement “it is fun to look back” is undermined when the speaker recalls the isolation felt while having their head

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44 Anne 2.0 was exhibited at Girls Club, at Glasgow Project Room, part of Glasgow International 2018.
engulfed in a plaster cast; or watching the application of fake blood onto their ‘Mother’. The video’s comedy relies on a detached voice that is juxtaposed with the image of a pair of hands sculpting a clay head (Figure 3). As the narrative progresses, the uncanny head, at once human and lifeless, is gradually formed. A dull utility knife digs holes in the clay, into which prosthetic glass eyes and teeth are forcefully inserted. The head becomes a stand-in for the narrator, its’ unmoving gaze a demonstration of the emotional disconnect between the body and its’ memories. Throughout the video, the narrator maintains a neutral demeanor, never acknowledging the presence of sinister foreboding. Despite the use of first-person address, the story is based on a found text and features an anonymous speaker, and is therefore, neither a self-reflexive representation of the artist’s emotional state, or the character being portrayed.

My own detachment to the narrative is compromised at the moment my voice cracks across the words, “but that kind of thing happens all the time”. The found text here acquires autobiographical significance through the allusion to rejection (one experienced by artists), and a prolonged sense of disappointment. However, the sadness expressed by the character is only audible through the subtle shift in pitch. Although tears stream down the face of the clay head, these are administered by a bottle of eyedrops (Figure 23). Sadness is revealed to be contrived—another material used to construct this inanimate head. Despite the autobiographical implications, the story maintains its status as found narrative, and therefore cannot be substantiated as authentically biographical. The subjective experience fails to be attributed to a singular person, meaning the origin of the tears remains elusive.
The origin of tears is also significant to the work, *Crying Glasses (An Aid to Melancholia)*, by Haley Newman (Figure 24). The photograph documents a performance in which the artist wore a pair of sun glasses that (using a water pump system hidden in Newman’s jacket) produced tears from the lenses. The accompanying text claims the artist wore the glasses on public transportation for one year, as “an external mechanism which enabled the manifestation of internal and unidentifiable emotions.” In other statements, however, Newman admits the performance to be fictional, and is only represented by the photographic documentation. In writing about *Crying Glasses* in her book, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, Jennifer Doyle reminds us of the inherently suspicious nature of tears, as they “seem to embody both the height of unquestioned emotionality and the depths of emotional manipulation” (84). Therefore, the photograph is “a false image of artificial tears” (Doyle 84-5). Doyle reads the work as an allegory depicting the difficulty of ‘real’ feeling, but also as a means of questioning the viewer’s desire to see true, tearful emotion enacted by the artist. According to Doyle, Newman is suggesting that art is merely a “tool to enable the representation of feelings in public spaces” and not one to enable feelings themselves (85). She argues that the photograph’s claim to ‘authenticity’ is thrown into question by the very nature as an image of feelings (84-5).

*Figure 24*

The bracketed title, ‘An Aid to Melancholia’ also furthers the ambiguity of feelings. Here, Newman presents sadness as an emotion that is restrained within the body and requires assistance. Theoretically, the tears are enacted not only for the viewer, but also for the one
wearing the glasses; in pretending to cry, the artist becomes convinced by their own performance and is rewarded with authentic melancholia. The glasses fulfill a double function as they simultaneously veil the eyes while permitting tears to flow freely. However, the work itself does not aid melancholia by inspiring tears in the viewer. We do not know the source of Newman’s sadness (if there is one) but focus on the performance of tears that are separate from the body and its emotions. In this case, tears do not emerge from the same interior where we understand sadness to reside, but from an external water source hidden in Newman’s jacket. Melancholia is reduced to a removable fashion accessory.

By contrast, Bas Jan Ader’s, *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* (Figure 25), unmistakably shows the artist himself with tears streaming down his face. In this three-minute silent black-and-white film, Ader holds his face close to the camera as he sobs uncontrollably. In this case, the cause for tears is unknown, for as the title reminds us, he is too sad to tell us. However, the source for sadness is less important than the presence of the artist and his authentic representation of his own tears. Writing in *Death is Elsewhere*, Alexander Dumbadze assures us that it is “not an apparition that is projected onto a screen, but Ader’s tortured features captured in a chemical emulsion on celluloid” (155). Dumbadze argues that the mythology surrounding Ader’s life and death has charged every work that features the artist’s image with a particular ‘aura’ that alludes to his absence (155). Jennifer Doyle also supports this notion of Ader’s ‘authentic’ display of emotion in stating that there is “nothing in Ader’s filmic performance to signal that we should read it as produced for the camera” (89).

Although Ader’s mysterious death and such works as *I’m Too Sad to Tell You*, have imbued his work with tragedy, his films that feature the artist falling (*Fall 2, Amsterdam*, 1970; *Nightfall*, 1971) also bare reference to the slapstick comedy of the Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton in which comic actions end with the performer falling to the ground. In his book on the artist, Jan Verwoert compares Ader to the hero of Greek tragedy who “takes the conscious decision to carry out a decision that will inevitably lead to his fall” (28) In his essay, “Curb Your Romanticism: Bas Jan Ader’s Slapstick”, Jorg Heisser argues that Ader avoids the enactment of “overt comic effect” through the “seriousness in his actions, isolating and exposing the romanticist strain in the comical mishap as a means to isolate and expose the relation between failure and empathy” (28). Heisser shows that with such

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46 Bas Jan Ader’s disappearance occurred during his performance, *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975), in which he attempted to sail across the Atlantic Ocean. This relationship between this work and the subsequent myth surrounding the artist will be discussed further in chapter five.
seriousness, Ader’s work creates a link between slapstick and melodrama by using the outdated medium of silent film to destabilize the image of the Conceptual artist as a hero.

Similar to *Clay Head* and *Crying Glasses*, *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* isolates the performer’s tears in an effort to avoid the overt depiction of melancholy, for the silent film permits the viewer to concentrate on the physicality of tears detached from any known cause for sadness. Although we may not go so far as to announce *I’m Too Sad to Tell You* as comical, the work uses the language of silent film in an effort to short-circuit the direct image of the artist’s authentic tears-to-camera.

Conversely, Newman’s *Crying Glasses* becomes comical when we imagine the ‘pump system’, a prop that likens the artist to a clown who sprays water from a flower. Newman’s expression also betrays her attempt at sadness, as the corners of her mouth hint towards a smile. Comedy emerges as an unwelcome intruder in this image of ‘melancholia’, sneaking in to disrupt expectations. By contrast, the speaker in *Clay Head* announces themselves with the line, “it is fun to look back.” In this case, melancholia intrudes upon the light-hearted actor’s biography.

### 5.3. The Silent Intruder

In his book, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, Peter L. Berger discusses how the comic realm is divided from other day-to-day experiences. Berger identifies comedy as a specific form of ‘reality’, one that is “separated from other sectors… to which laughter is the most appropriate response” (6). Berger identifies such comic experiences as watching comedy in a club or on film or television; as well as such mundane scenarios as office staff members who parody their boss while (s)he is at lunch (6). Although
the comic dimension may be easily defined from the more serious sectors of life, Berger argues that in everyday life, “the comic typically appears as an intrusion. It intrudes, very often unexpectedly, into other sectors of reality” (6). Berger cites the work of philosopher Alfred Schutz in his assignment of differing sectors of what we perceive to be ‘reality’. In particular, Schutz divides human experience into those of everyday life as being part of ‘paramount reality’, as opposed to ‘finite provinces of meaning’ (Schutz 207-31). Such finite experiences are those in which a person temporarily escapes from their own paramount reality, for example in worlds of dreams, theatre or film. As a person shifts between paramount and finite realities, they experience a shock—such as waking from a dream and being confused as to what is real or not real (Berger 7-8).

Berger connects these forms of reality to comedy, humour being a finite reality that weaves its way into everyday life as a series of fleeting moments. He offers the example of a joke told during a business conversation. The joke’s ending might be marked with the statement, “But seriously”, before returning the conversation to the previous topic (Berger 6). Although this example demonstrates comedy as an interlude that seamlessly moves in and out of paramount experience, Berger also describes scenarios in which laughter occurs as a shock by awkwardly halting the progress of other realities; for example, an actor who laughs when forgetting his own lines, or a person laughing in the middle of an orgy (11). Both scenarios imagine laughter as an unwanted intruder, a disruption to protocol. Equally disruptive is the absence of laughter. Returning to Bergson’s notion of a social comedy, we see that silence or seriousness is also unwelcome within the environment of a comedy club.

An example of silence intruding on the realm of comedy is found in my video work, CPR Conference, which was first presented at the ‘Comedy and Critical Thinking’ Conference, at the University of Kent Canterbury in 2016. Serving in lieu of a live presentation, the video was intended as a comic interlude that would be effortlessly woven into a conference which I imagined as two days of humorless speeches. I was certain the academics would be grateful. The video did not receive the reaction I anticipated. Rather, the audience responded with awkward silence, and afterwards, directed their questions to the other people in the panel. After the screening, participants continued to avert their eyes and avoid conversation with me. My situation worsened when I was later edited out of the accompanying publication with a vague email about there “not being enough space for my contribution”. My attempt to insert comedy into the serious realm of academia induced the kind of ‘shock’ described by Berger.
Using this scenario of the comedy conference, I will here identify the presence of three forms of melancholy: Failure, awkwardness and abjection. The first instance of failure occurs in the anticlimax of the joke falling flat. The video announces itself as ‘comedy’ by appearing at an event titled ‘Comedy and Critical Thinking’, but also as an output of research in deadpan comedy. This categorization alludes to Bergson’s insistence that comedy equates laughter. Following that logic, the absence of laughter deems my experimental research presentation to be a failure.

5.4. Failure

Before elaborating on the alleged failings of the video presentation, I shall offer a few notes on the conference format: Over the two days, the male keynote speakers (there were no female keynote speakers) took to the stage with great confidence in their abilities to discuss the finer details of Henri Bergson and Giles Deleuze. Each used their hands in decisive gestures and proudly paced along the stage. They diligently considered audience questions and engaged in passionate debates. Although the conference did include an adequate number of women, their presentations were allocated to gender-specific panels discussing ‘feminist’ comedy and were held in a smaller room. None of the male speakers made jokes. Although ‘comedy’ was embedded within the title, conference protocol implied serious academia performed by male speakers. ‘Comedy’ was only evoked through discussions around philosophers and literature on the subject of humour, and laughter appeared as a word within quotation marks. Evidence of this format is documented in my series of Conference Drawings that are based on the presenters and their lectures.

Previously unacquainted with the format, my attempt to effortlessly weave comedy into the finite reality of the academic conference did not go according to plan. Furthermore, my own experience within the paramount reality of the day-to-day conference was disrupted as I found myself frequently standing and sitting alone. Thus, the video failed as an example of ‘serious’ academic writing, while also failing to receive laughter; thereby inducing a state of melancholy as I was subsequently alienated by the other conference presenters.

Significantly, the video presentation also withholds the offering of my live performance. Since I had edited the video to be fifteen minutes long, it was neatly framed by the 15-minute window allocated to presenters. This allowed for only a very brief introduction on my part, during which I did not offer any explanation other than my statement that I was a PhD student whose research was based in deadpan comedy, and that the outcome of my research was
evidenced by the video. Not only did my pre-recorded presentation fill the time slot with an unexpected, surreal video that was neither understood as serious or humorous but, it also denied the audience the physical presence of my live reading. This denial added to the audience’s frustration because it enabled me to avoid speaking publicly (especially since the audience was largely filled by others who had or would complete this task during the conference). By the standards of conference protocol, I ‘cheated’ by offering the less strenuous effort of a video performance.

Such ‘failures’ of my video presentation may be compared to an example of a more conventionally ‘successful’ conference intervention by V-Girls, an artist group that includes Martha Baer, Erin Cramer, Jessica Chalmers, Andrea Fraser and Marianne Weems. The performance, Academia in the Alps: In Search of the Swiss Mis(s) features a mock-panel discussion of Johanna Spyri’s Heidi. While the artists maintained their serious personae, the table before them was set with a pile of books, small Christmas trees, and artificial snow. In her essay on the work, Chalmers writes, “We were almost always pointedly pompous… Like most comic performers, we did not laugh. We offered stern impersonations of women on panels we had seen…We sported what C. Carr once called a ‘fresh from the Sorbonne’ look, by which she referred to our youth and to our competence in theory” (207).

Chalmers comments on how much their performances relied on their own fluency within the academic language they used and misused: “[W]e were able to mock its stiffness and exclusivity while at the same time accruing a certain power through knowing it” (207-8). According to Chalmers, this fluency allowed the artists to develop ‘insider complicity’ with their audiences by flattering viewers who “had worked long and hard to acquire their conceptual capital” (208). She also cites the significance of their performed insecurities, for example, beginning a talk with the statement, “My paper is really bad”, and apologizing after reading the title (Chalmers 208).

According to Chalmers’s descriptions, the V-Girl’s performative strategies were successful demonstrations of comic parody: “Sometimes it was impossible to tell what the audience was laughing at… [a]lthough sometimes it did work exactly as we had planned, laughter, as we experienced it, could not ultimately be controlled” (209). Regardless of whether laughter

47 Florian Keller discusses a similar phenomenon in his description of Andy Kaufman’s Great Gatsby performance on Saturday Night Live: after protests from members of the audience, Kaufman “punishes” them by playing a record of a recording of the same performance (see Keller 35-36).

48 Also see further institutional critique works by Andrea Fraser, most notably, Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk (1989), which makes use of deadpan humor to parody the exhibition descriptions provided by museum educational guides.
occurred at expected or unexpected moments, their interventions into academic conferences did demonstrate the Bergsonian and Freudian model of laughter as a social activity because their audiences ‘got’ the jokes.

Conversely, CPR Conference reveals my own lack of fluency. Despite my performance of academic smugness, I did not accurately mimic the academic language. Rather than flattering my audience in the manner described by Chalmers, I frustrated and offended the male academics by disrespecting the conference format and failing to take academia seriously. Thus, melancholia is not only represented by my flat grey character in the video, but also demonstrated by the video’s failure to perform social comedy within an academic setting. In developing CPR Conference, I imagined myself to be funny, and anticipated laughter from the academics. However, the image of myself and my presentation bore no resemblance to the imaginary self-image I formed prior to the conference.

5.5. Awkwardness

This leads me to the next level of melancholy that is awkwardness. A distinct gap is formed between my own perception of the work and the way in which it was received. This sensation may be likened to Jacque Lacan’s concept of ‘dialectic of recognition’: the idea that we understand the image of ourselves through the ways in which others respond to us (Sarup 12). As the audience gave no response (or responded in silence), I was left without any concept of how my presentation was perceived, and therefore my self-image as an academic presenter remained awkwardly undefined. I could neither confirm the premonition of myself as a comical yet serious academic, nor did I acquire any concept of how I was actually perceived. Both versions of my real and imagined selves remained incomplete.

In his essay, ‘Abject’, Hal Foster identifies a similar melancholy awkwardness in the work of Cindy Sherman (Foster 2015, 10-14). For example, in Untitled Film Still #2, Sherman performs what Foster refers to as ‘psychological estrangement’ (Figure 26). Sherman’s character stands in the bathroom wearing only a towel while looking over one shoulder towards her own image in the mirror. This private moment is captured from the position of the bathroom doorway as the camera mimics the gaze of another character within this

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49 I may have miscalculated my audience’s fluency in the language of video art—although other presenters referenced artists in their papers, these were fairly mainstream, i.e. one keynote presenter discussed Christian Marclay’s, The Clock.

50 The flattening effect of deadpan comedy, specifically the videos presented at academic conferences, is discussed further in chapter three.

51 Such awkwardness between the imagined and real self is also discussed in relation to the television sitcom, Arrested Development, in chapter three.
scenario; one whom, according to Foster, is implicated as the viewer (10). From this position, we are able to view two images of the same fictional woman. Foster claims that Sherman uses this space between the figures, to point to the “gap between imagined and actual bodies that yawns within the subject…This is the gap of misrecognition that we attempt to fill with fantasy images of our ideal selves, drawn primarily from entertainment and fashion industries.” (10)

In my own case, the image of my ideal self is drawn from remembered depictions of business conferences in films and television.52 Having never previously attended an academic conference, I created a fantasy image of myself as a figure who is equal parts artist, comedian and academic, and therefore one who is perceived as creative, funny and respected within an imaginary conference setting. My awkwardness is represented in the video through my grey costume and evasion of any signifying persona; for although the video credits my name in the title, the characters are fictional, without names and not based on any particular persons. Like Sherman’s character, they call to mind a series of references from films or media, but do not point to anyone specific.53 The video features a discussion of the Arrested

52 These fantasy images of business conferences are described further in the book, Conference Drawings, that accompanies this thesis.
53 Sherman’s process of simulating the images of female film stars without representing a singular person or image is discussed further in chapter two.
Development character Tobias, who, as discussed in chapter three, painted himself in Chroma Key blue while working as a stand-in for the Blue Man Group (thereby rendering himself invisible). Ignored by the academics, I manifest as my own, live demonstration in the phenomenon of invisibility. This ‘psychological estrangement’ may be compared to Bertolt Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’.

Brecht’s alienation effect is a method of making the familiar ‘strange’ by presenting it in new and different ways. Through a series of techniques such as explanatory captions, illustrations projected onto a screen, or actors stepping out of character, the audience becomes distanced from the narrative and unable to easily identify with the characters. Brecht demanded his actors present their stories with a high degree of objectivity, like a journalist reporting on a car crash or a sports match (Unwin 52). This is not to say their performances were devoid of empathy, but that emotion was not the driving force behind their technique. Empathy and the portrayal of the character’s inner life should not be at the centre of production but must be complicated and function intermittently with other feelings (Unwin 47-54).

In the case of CPR Conference, alienation is used to create distance and divisions between the audience and performer. Rather than participating in the social model of humour, whereby the audience responds positively to the comic with laughter, the viewers are made distant from the artist as they remain engulfed in awkward silence. Rather than passively consuming comedy, the audience is forced to reflect on their own impulses to laugh or not laugh; to actively consider the position of laughter in relation to such conflicting emotions such as sadness or frustration. In light of this effect, I argue that the video’s success relies on its ‘failure’ and the melancholy awkwardness induced by that failure; that the academic’s negative response completes the work. Let us imagine another scenario in which the audience laughs and compliments the video, and I am later included in the ‘Comedy and Critical Thinking’ publication. This imaginary version of events adds nothing to the theme of deadpan, for it does not encompass the irony of attending a conference on comedy where no one laughs. This evocation of a negative reaction represents the final level of melancholy that is abjection.

5.6. Abjection

Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject is enacted through the performance of horror, particularly in the form of the maternal body made strange and repulsive. The abject is a state in which the body remains undefined as a neither subject nor object; a state of non-
being (much like the state of awkwardness described above). According to Kristeva, abjection embodies that which we must get rid of in order to exist and to become a defined subject. She stresses the significance of the abject mother figure who created us in order to form our own identity (Kristeva 38). The abject threatens the sense of self and subject-hood because it is a form of waste that was once part of the body which has been cast off—this often takes the form of the corpse, for example, the clay mannequin featured in the video (Figure 27). As the clay itself exists in a state of in-between (too dry to be molded but not yet fired) my efforts to revive the corpse cause the jaw to crumble.

![Figure 27](image)

Because abjection is considered that which disturbs social order, confrontation with the abject only occurs outside the social order, and therefore causes a sense of repulsion (Kristeva 136-7). While watching the video, the academic audience experiences abjection through their repulsion towards my presentation that disrespects the social order of the conference format. Rather than taking part in the live presentations, I opt instead to appear in a leisure suit within the comforts of my home with my dog who also performs abjection by licking his own bum.

Abjection also occurs through my retelling of the conference story, more than once, to secondary audiences who shares a more knowing attitude towards the video’s art references. I have frequently recited this anecdote to fellow artists and curators whom respond positively through laughter and display the kind of ‘insider complicity’ mentioned by Chalmers. In this respect, the work not only depicts my own alienation, but also demonstrates cruelty through my alienation of the primary audience: the academics become comic subjects who are laughed at by the secondary audience. By retelling the narrative and casting the academics
as characters, I intentionally ridicule the conference format and its speakers. The audience’s negative reaction becomes the object of my narrative.54

Hal Foster discusses artists who, during the 1990s, enacted abjection in order to provoke and affirm the social order (2015, 7-28). For example, Andre Serrano’s photographic work, *Piss Christ* that depicts a small crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist’s urine: while being exhibited in 1989 at Virginia’s Museum of Fine Art, the work was protested by the conservative politician, Jesse Helms, who was outraged by not only the ‘blasphemous’ image, but the artist’s use of taxpayer-funded grants in making and exhibiting the work. The photograph confirms the social order of American right-wing, Christian conservativism through Helm’s demonstration to censor the artwork (Foster 19).

This act of intentionally provoking a negative reaction is also explored through John Limon’s essay on Lenny Bruce, in his book, *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. According to Limon, Bruce used provocative material in his act not to offend audience members, but to invoke the ‘punishing’ hand of the Law. Limon compares the differing audience reactions to Bruce’s routine whose punchline ends with his declaration that he is going to “piss” on them. Since the bit resulted in reported rage and walkouts in Australia and London, Limon proves that American audiences ‘got’ the joke by laughing for an unheard of 15 seconds (as may be heard in a recording of the live act). Thus, it would seem that Bruce did not aim to offend those who attended his stand-up acts, but to provoke the American legal system who claimed to be representing the public: “Why should the law in that case be moved to action? It would seem to have prosecuted Bruce on nobody’s behalf. The only answer is that the law acted on its own behalf, precisely because it represented no one” (Limon 23). Referencing a letter written by a forty-year-old Bruce to his father, whereby Bruce blames his being sent to jail on his father’s “spoiling” him, Limon uses Freudian psychoanalysis to form an image of the comedian as one who attempted “not to overthrow the law but, by threatening it, to bring it into play” (25). The law becomes a stand-in for the absent father, under whom, “the spoiled child turns to crime not for its promise of unearned satisfactions, but only because the law…is capable of antagonism…He wants something at any cost, or, rather, he wants cost itself” (Limon 30).

‘Cost’, as a negative reaction is brought into play to expose the underlying structures upholding social order. During the presentation of *CPR Conference*, the academic’s silence

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54 As opposed to the academics who sought to exclude me from the narrative of their publication.
and subsequent censorship of my work from the publication, highlights the conference as a site for philosophical discussions on comedy, but also one that does not include laughter. The video exposes both the expectation of academic seriousness performed by men, as well as the expectation that humour should be easily consumed. As the academics fail to ‘get’ the jokes behind the video, their status as ‘experts’ on comedy is undermined by their lack of humour. A clear division is formed between the artist and the academics—specifically, the female artist and the male academics.55

5.7. Dividing the Audience

The division of audience is made explicit in the Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle episode, ‘England’. Here, Lee describes a conversation with a cab driver who remarked, “These days, you get arrested and thrown in jail if you say you’re English, don’t you?” The act entails Lee relentlessly repeating the lines as a question by himself and affirmed by the driver: “I said, ‘What? Just if you say you’re English, you get arrested and thrown in jail?’ ‘Yeah’, he goes, ‘these days’ he said, ‘if you say you’re English, you’ll be arrested and just thrown in jail.’” In each reiteration, either the structure of the sentence or the emphasis changes, but the lines are repeated over and over. After two minutes of repetition, the driver’s answer abruptly changes: “No… But… on an official form, where it says ‘nationality’, if you cross out British and you write ‘White English’, they will send that form back” (“England”).

In this act, Lee repeats the joke ‘set up’ (the cab driver’s statement), so many times that it becomes predictable—ending the gag abruptly with the word ‘No’. The anecdote serves in Lee’s strategic political division of his live audience with the at-home audience who is watching the program on BBC television. Lee’s comedy draws attention to the fact his live audiences are, like himself, middle-class and Left-leaning; that his political material is being used to ‘preach to the converted’. He first aligns himself with his Left-leaning audience by performing his confusion towards the driver, implying he does not agree. Towards the end of the episode, the joke is re-structured when Lee describes sending his child to a St. George’s day school celebration dressed as a 1970s football hooligan, who shouts, “I’m English, I’m English! Wanna make something of it?” Lee says, “Apparently, these days if you say you’re English you get arrested and thrown in jail.” Here, Lee subverts his audience’s expectation that he is ‘just like them’, by telling a story that portrays himself and

his family as bigoted nationalists. Clearly, the crassness of Lee’s joke makes us aware that he is being ridiculous.

Lee’s division of the primary studio audience with the at-home viewers is further demonstrated by his technique of addressing the camera. In this episode, for example, Lee uses the camera to speak specifically to audiences in Liverpool, accusing them of being responsible for the behaviour of Paul Nuttall of UKIP. In response to Nuttall’s statement that Bulgarians should remain in Bulgaria (rather than immigrating to the UK) to make their country more economically prosperous, Lee implores Paul Nuttall to stay in Liverpool, “because you are clearly the best and the brightest that Liverpool has to offer”. Lee then stands back from the camera to align himself with the studio audience in opposition to the television viewers. He furthers his insult to Liverpool by saying, “if only there was some way for Liverpudlians to profit from going on and on about the past in a winey voice” (“England”).

The gag not only draws attention to Lee’s political allegiance with his live audience, but also acknowledges that the program will be aired to BBC viewers who include non-liberal audiences. In a mock Interview segment conducted by Chris Morris, Lee admits that he seeks to ‘decant’ the primary audience’s laughter for the purpose of filling the half-hour time slot. He likens his procedure to that of “someone that milks semen out a pig for artificial insemination” (“England”). Lee’s technique may be compared to my own treatment of the academic audience; though rather than ‘decanting’ laughter, I collect their absence of laughter for the purpose of re-presenting it to the secondary audience.

The division of the primary academic audience and secondary art audience inverts the superiority theory of comedy, whereby humour functions as a means for the audience to maintain superiority over the performer who serves as the butt of the jokes. In this case, the academic audience becomes the subject of the joke for the secondary audience. However, more crucially, the conference serves as a site where the video performance creates a heightened sense of self-consciousness for both audience and performer, in which to question the very nature of laughter, or in this case, the absence of laughter. This is not so much a conscious questioning as one of felt affect. For the discomfort experienced during the screening mimics the felt discomfort of everyday life, of situations where laughter is not

appropriate. Such situations are explored further in the works described above, such as in *Clay Head* and Haley Newman’s *Crying Glasses*.

In their essay, ‘The Minute Interventions of Stewart Lee’, authors Scott Sharpe, J.D. Dewsbury and Maria Hynes discuss the significance of affect in Lee’s comedy, and how he extends repetition to a point of absurdity by means of creating tension. Although each reiteration, such as the cab driver routine described above, contains the exact same words, difference is established through each instance, and tension accumulates until the final moment of true difference is revealed. Sharpe, Dewsbury and Hynes show that Lee is not so much interested in making his typically Left-leaning audience uncomfortable, but rather, to challenge those who “consider themselves low prejudice risks—to ‘reflect’ on the ambivalences and complexities of the nature of prejudice” (Dewsbury).

The authors draw on Alan Read’s writing on the singular nature of performance, where he shows performance to be a space for the heightened intensification of life, as it grips the audience’s affections, imaginations and attentions (Read 192). In the case of Lee, this becomes a place for re-presenting everyday interactions between people, as well as our “contemporary cultural maps” (Dewsbury). The live nature of the performance provides an experience where audiences may self-reflect on our laughter to the commentary, especially since we experience it as a shared experience within a live audience (Read 34).

In the case of *CPR Conference*, the performance does not occur live, but the screening maintains a similar heightened intensification of atmosphere since it is presented in a space conventionally allocated to live speaking. Also, I am present in the room with the audience, and perform, albeit brief, during my introduction, which makes the video part of a live demonstration. The expectancy of laughter contributes to the accumulation of tension, as the audience awaits the release of a joke that fails to appear. The video questions audience expectations on two levels: the work as a demonstration of comedy, and the work as a contribution to academia. As previously stated, the term ‘comedy’ triggers the expectation of laughter, which may be understood as the passive position Brecht sought to undermine. As one identifies with the character and is carried away with the narrative, they respond with rhythmic laughter. In traditional comedy, jokes punctuate the story at prescribed intervals to
become predictable. These patterns of repetition enable the audience to anticipate the joke whilst being pleasantly surprised by the difference that interrupts repetition. Even within examples of deadpan television previously mentioned (such as Arrested Development), laughter occurs at such rapid-fire pace, it becomes difficult for the audience to recall previous jokes and narrative (hence the constant recaps and flashbacks).

In the CPR Conference presentation, laughter drains away. By disabling comedy, I call to question the expectations and structures of the conference. Because the video does not conform to familiar standards of stand-up comedy or an academic presentation, the audience can neither occupy the comfortable position of passive laughter, nor the position of being critically engaged and ‘knowing’. Their alienation leads to their stagnant act of ignoring me. Through their lack of response, the audience becomes the object of my comedy rather than the viewing subject. As I retell the scenario, the characters within the conference are no longer the respected scholars that they perceive themselves to be, but a set of men who would rather debate the details of Bergson and Deleuze than find humour in something that the secondary audience laughs easily at.

In this chapter, I described the co-dependence of humour and sadness in my own practice, as well as artworks by Haley Newman and Bas Jan Ader. Each of these works presents melancholia in the form of tears while also detaching subjective emotion from the signifier of sadness. Using the writing of Peter L. Berger, I showed that comedy is expected to be effortlessly woven into day-to-day life, but also occurs as an unwelcome intruder in ‘serious’ events. Likewise, the absence of laughter, or silence, intrudes upon the comic realm, as demonstrated in the presentation of CPR Conference. Analyzing this conference intervention, I identified three significant forms of melancholy: failure, awkwardness and abjection. Lastly, I proved that the video presentation’s deadpan comedy is reliant on the presence of these forms as the absence of laughter becomes necessary to expose the expectations of comedy and the performance of academic ‘seriousness’.

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6: Deadpan Death and Delusions: Deadpan Persona and ‘Going Too Far’

In this chapter, I will explore the ‘relentless’ performance of deadpan persona to inquire what constitutes ‘going too far’. By investigating themes of presence and absence (or persona and death) in the art of Andy Kaufman, Andy Warhol and Bas Jan Ader, I will also locate the boundaries of deadpan within my own practice.

6.1. Absence of Presence

Speaking in the Netflix documentary, Jim & Andy: The Great Beyond, Jim Carrey describes acting in Man on the Moon whilst remaining in character as either Andy Kaufman or Tony Clifton throughout production. ‘Possessed’ by the spirit of Kaufman, Carrey says, “Andy came back to make his movie. And Andy did what Andy does”. Combining recent interviews with behind-the-scenes footages, the documentary shows Carrey antagonizing his fellow cast members with repeated insults, physical violence, unbearably loud music, hiring a gang of Hell’s Angels to inhabit the set, all while refusing to speak as ‘Jim’. He also serves as psychic medium to Kaufman’s family, speaking as their long-lost son, brother or father; at one point, embracing Kaufman’s sister while assuring her “this is a healing process”. Reflecting on the experience of alienating the entire film crew, he says, “I thought, this is how Andy must have felt.” Such statements reveal Carrey not only envisions himself to be the actor portraying Kaufman, but also one who pushes similar boundaries in comedy through his embodiment of a character whose life is not limited to the film. This comparative analysis between Andy Kaufman and the actor who portrays Kaufman will serve to demonstrate the necessary tension between absence and presence of persona in deadpan comedy. I will begin my argument by describing Andy Kaufman’s fluid use of personae through his portrayal of characters.

Throughout his career, Kaufman portrayed a wide range of characters, his first being Foreign Man58, an immigrant from the fictional country of “Caspiar”, who spoke in a high-pitched voice with an unidentifiable European accent. In his stand-up acts, Foreign Man parodied the inept comic by failing to tell jokes with any significant punchline before resorting to a series of unconvincing celebrity impersonations. As a last resort, Foreign Man would do an

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58 Foreign Man was the basis for ‘Latka’, Kaufman’s character on the sitcom Taxi (1978).
Elvis impersonation, which (by all accounts) was an uncanny embodiment of the ‘real’ Presley (Zehme 188).59

If Foreign Man was Kaufman’s naively polite and gentle persona, then Tony Clifton was one of grotesque excess who provoked outrage from his co-stars and audiences. A fictional Las Vegas lounge singer, Clifton frequently appeared as part of Kaufman’s stand-up acts, as well as a number of talk show appearances and as a guest star on Taxi. Although it has since become known that Clifton was Kaufman’s alter-ego, he consistently disassociated himself from Clifton by claiming he had met the singer in Las Vegas and subsequently developed an impersonation of him; and that he later hired the ‘real’ Clifton when he could afford to pay him (Auslander 143-4). In each appearance, Kaufman refused to let his mask slip, even as he was forcibly removed from the set of Taxi. Judd Hirsch remarked on the disturbing realization that he was throwing out the body of Kaufman disguised as Clifton: “it was a phantom, a fiction—a fiction with a real body” (Zehme 203).

The separation between Andy Kaufman and his alter-ego became further blurred during his performance at Carnegie Hall when Kaufman was joined on stage by Tony Clifton (who was later revealed to be his brother, Michael Kaufman) (Figure 28). Florian Keller describes a kind of space that opens through this separation of Clifton as a fictional persona and the ‘real’ Clifton. As a result, says Keller in Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream, “Kaufman vanished in the gap in between—and maybe this gap is even a non-space of zero dimensions, because person and persona are in fact one and the same” (84). The effect demonstrates Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra, where the character appears to be neither a real person nor one of pure fiction.60

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60 See Jean Baudrillard’s Simulacra and Simulation (1981).
Keller goes on to describe Kaufman as a “postmodern escape artist”, who, through his shuffling of personae, eludes the restraints of the ‘self’ while physically remaining inside his own body (72-3). Keller argues that Kaufman displaced himself from the beginning of his career, that he was already ‘beside himself’ since he first appeared as the Foreign Man character without having previously revealed the ‘real’ Andy Kaufman (79). It is this refusal to pinpoint any unified person that becomes the most frustrating and disturbing aspect of Kaufman’s comedy as it continually defers the audience’s moment of candid ‘authenticity’ with the performer. In his book, Presence and Resistance, Phillip Auslander describes this phenomenon by saying, “there is no real Kaufman, only a series of displacements without a final referent” (151).

Uniquely, this evasion of persona was only achieved through Kaufman’s relentless commitment to his characters, and the refusal to ever appear as ‘himself’. He is quoted as saying, “I’m not breaking character, I’m not giving away to the audience that I’m playing a role. I believe in playing it straight to the hilt” (Keller 89). For even in instances where Kaufman did claim to be acting as ‘Andy Kaufman’, he would plant seeds of doubt in the audience’s perception of his own authenticity. For example, in a candid moment on The Midnight Special, Kaufman offers false biographical facts about himself by saying that he was born on January 17, 1937 (12 years before his actual birth) (Keller 89-90).

Another example of Kaufman’s ability to pursue his character beyond the boundaries of the medium may be seen in an episode of The Andy Kaufman Show: During the closing credits, Kaufman stands waving goodbye to the at-home viewers. After the credits, the camera follows Kaufman backstage where he proceeds to harass members of the crew. With the aid of a split screen, Foreign Man confronts Kaufman. Once Kaufman has left, Foreign Man asks if he is “off the air” before proceeding to harass the crew members himself, threatening them and challenging them to a wrestling match. In this scene, Kaufman not only enacts relentlessness by continuing his performance beyond the confines of the television program, but he also parodies the notion of a consistent character by showing that not even these fictional representations are reliably coherent. Thereby, Kaufman’s own displacement of a singular subjective position ‘infects’ his own fictional characters (Keller 85-9).

What Jim Carrey mistakes for Kaufman-like deadpan is his own performance of relentlessness via his refusal to break character, but also through his antagonistic behaviour towards fellow cast members that mirrors this scene in The Andy Kaufman Show. This
behaviour is most prominent in Carrey’s relationship to Jim Lawler—the professional wrestler who was Kaufman’s apparent nemesis. At one point, Carrey is seen forcibly rocking Lawler’s trailer and threatening him, provoking Lawler to throw a chair at him. Eventually, Lawler has to be restrained. Appearing confused, Lawler says, “I don’t understand, Mr. Kaufman was always very polite to me”. Such antagonism is modelled directly on Kaufman’s on-going feud with Lawler, which was later revealed by Lawler to have been a collaboration from the beginning.

Carrey is equally relentless in his interactions with Kaufman’s family, affectionately presenting himself as ‘Andy’ and telling them “it’s good to be back”. These scenes are more reminiscent of role-playing therapy than an actor meeting the family of the man he is portraying. Carrey expresses his own identification with the young Andy Kaufman as he too was misunderstood by his father and performed alone in his bedroom. His constant attempts to align himself with Kaufman make it obvious that Carrey is not merely performing for Andy’s family, but as a means to resolve his own childhood trauma. These therapy games extend to members of the cast, namely Gerry Becker (Figure 29), who plays Kaufman’s father. Following an in-character, father-son argument between Carrey and Becker, a makeup artist is brought to tears because, she explains, she is reminded of her own father.

61 The feud between Lawler and Kaufman was simultaneously exposed as a collaboration through the film Man on the Moon (1999), as well as Bill Zehme’s biography of Kaufman, Lost in the Funhouse: The Life and Mind of Andy Kaufman (1999), and Bob Zmuda’s book, Andy Kaufman Revealed! (1998).

62 This argument is made complicated by Florian Keller’s account of the feud and Lawler’s subsequent reveal of its fiction: Keller shows that professional wrestling operates through a social code whereby the audience and performers understand the spectacle to be fake, but knowingly pretend that it is real. Thereby, Kaufman was only abiding by that conduct in refusing to let the mask slip, while Lawler may be said to have acted against the code in admitting to the fictional collaboration. In light of this, one might argue that Carrey was only acting to further continue Kaufman’s commitment to role by invoking Lawler’s authentic rage and to continue the feud. However, I would also say that this provocation would mean that Lawler is no longer part of the fictional act, but one who acts with genuine aggression whose boundaries are not scripted in the manner of professional wrestling.
During the interviews, Carrey does maintain his ‘mask’ by upholding his claim that he was possessed by the spirit of Andy Kaufman. However, he nonetheless uses the documentary to celebrate the singular image of ‘Jim Carrey’ through his descriptions of his commitment to the role and the biographical similarities between himself and Kaufman. I argue this point because what signifies Kaufman’s evasion of persona as deadpan is his ability to disappear through a kind of mirroring effect. As Phillip Auslander explains, the very nature of Andy Kaufman’s comedy (which Auslander aligns more with traditions of avant-garde performance art, 141) was to evade the notion of any singular subjective persona in order to negate audience expectations (139-55). By contrast, Carrey does not present anything that would subvert or question his presence as Jim Carrey.

Despite his numerous efforts to align himself with the comedy of Kaufman, Carrey’s intention is to promote himself as the perfect vessel for the resurrection of Andy Kaufman. Although Carrey describes a process of ‘emptying’ his body to make ‘room’ for Kaufman, (which implies the absence of persona) his disappearance is negated by the interviews in which he reflects on his achievements. Carrey’s own persona is subsequently inflated through the documentary, and his grandiosity is reflected in such statements as: when asked what he plans to do next, having achieved his highest acting goal, he answers, “I wonder what would happen if I decided to just be Jesus”.63 Seemingly, the only deadpan element of Carrey’s performance as Kaufman (or his reflections in Jim & Andy) is the ridiculously overstated importance he allows himself. These statements are reminiscent of the outrageous speeches Kaufman made during the wrestling project, saying that women were “only good for raising the babies and washing the carrots and peeling the potatoes” (Zehme 213). However, Carrey’s extreme sincerity makes it clear that this is not part of the act, and the interviews are not intended to be humorous.64

Rather than deadpan performance, Carrey offers an impersonation by pretending to be Kaufman, not just within the film, but throughout the entire production. To be clear, I am not stating that impersonation is irrelevant to deadpan, for I would likewise deem Kaufman’s Tony Clifton or Elvis acts to be impersonations. What I contest is Carrey’s extreme sincerity within the documentary, as well as his claimed method of submitting his body to the imagined spirit of Kaufman. In watching Man on the Moon, the viewer does not ‘forget’ that

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63 This statement is said with a degree of humour, but also with an amount of enthusiasm that betrays it from being exclusively deadpan. What comes to mind is Freud’s assertion that every joke conceals a truth.

64 I am concerned my description of the film makes it sound more deadpan than it is. It is not. A clip containing Carrey’s statement about becoming Jesus may be viewed on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YM0suqbfjgg. Accessed 6 August 2018.
Jim Carrey is playing Andy Kaufman. Although Carrey remains recognizable in his portrayal, he demands that his audience (including fellow cast members, Kaufman’s friends and family, and movie audiences) join him in a game of pretending to see and speak to the body of Kaufman. Carrey attempts to impersonate Kaufman by becoming Kaufman, providing a living, breathing body for his dead spirit. Impersonation is defined as the portrayal of another person’s appearance, mannerisms, behaviours or speech, for the purposes of entertainment or fraud—\textsuperscript{65}—it would seem that Carrey has been duped by his own fraud.

For the sake of comparison, I will now conduct an analysis of another impersonation of a historical figure portrayed in film, that is David Bowie’s role as Andy Warhol in the film \textit{Basquiat}. The film centres on Warhol during the 1980s, shortly following the shooting by Valerie Solanas and just before his death (as opposed to the 1996, \textit{I Shot Andy Warhol}, or the 2006, \textit{Factory Girl}, that both caricature Warhol’s 1960s automaton persona\textsuperscript{66}). In \textit{Basquiat}, Bowie appears as David Bowie doing Andy Warhol, barely swapping his English accent. Yet the details of his stance, both hands on one hip with his weight to one side, or his delicate walk, render an accurate portrait of the artist (Figure 30). Despite being a main character, his lines are kept to a minimum, and his likeness and comedy are established by such subtle mannerisms as hand gestures or a shifting of the eyes. One deadpan scene involves extended repetition in an ongoing argument between Warhol and Albert Milo’s\textsuperscript{67} father about the location of Saddle River. “Saddle River’s in New York”, says Mr. Milo. “Saddle River’s in New Jersey”, says Warhol. These two lines echo back and forth six times, before fading into the background as the camera shifts to another conversation. Eventually, Andy says, “Oh I didn’t know that…”

\textsuperscript{66} In his interview with G.R. Swenson, Warhol is quoted as saying that he aspires to become a ‘machine’: “The reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine, and I feel that whatever I do and do machine-like is what I want to do.” See ‘What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters’, Part 1, G. R. Swenson, in Art News 62, November 1963.
\textsuperscript{67} Albert Milo, played by Gary Oldman, is a fictional character based on Julian Schnabel’s relationship to Jean-Michel Basquiat.
When interviewed about the film on the *Charlie Rose Show* in 1996, Bowie himself refers to his style of acting as an ‘impersonation’ based on his own sightings of Warhol during the 1970’s and 80’s. “I tried to capture his ‘spirit’ and his movement”, Bowie says. Like Carrey, Bowie attempts to represent the ‘spirit’ of his character but manages to achieve this without the loss of his own consciousness as David Bowie. Although he refers to his fleeting encounters with Warhol in a casual manner, his first-hand knowledge provides a more substantial reference than Carrey’s imagined possession by Kaufman. He also describes a process of transformation induced by wearing the wigs (genuine Warhol hair pieces loaned by the Warhol Foundation): “I suddenly found myself becoming very interested in people”, says Bowie. The authenticity of a costume that was physically worn by Warhol himself, combined with Bowie’s observations provide a tangible connection between performer and subject. Assumedly, Carrey studied videos of Kaufman (also watching from afar), however, this gaze is positioned further away in time and space—meaning that his observation of a two-dimensional moving image provides the basis for a two-dimensional character. Conversely, Bowie was able to watch, even at a distance, a living, breathing Warhol, in order to create a more three-dimensional representation. All the while, Bowie remains inside his own body and objectively distant from his reference model. The audience is at once convinced by the image of Warhol while still recognizing Bowie.

What makes the body of Andy Warhol so readily filled is its inherent emptiness. Warhol’s desire to evacuate himself of any signifying personality is confirmed by his own statement that he wished to “become a machine”. In his essay, “Death in America”, Hal Foster discusses the void inhabited by Warhol and the resulting uncertainty that there was anyone behind the deadpan mask, with the question, “is anybody home, inside the automaton?” As a blank screen, Warhol openly invited his audience and contributors to project their own identities onto him. This is supported by his use of the ‘Factory’ as a site for employing

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68 In the Charlie Rose interview, Julian Schnabel discusses the film’s depiction of numerous characters who were alive at the time, such as Mary Boone, who also loaned her own clothes as costumes to Parker Posey.
69 As mentioned in the interview with G.R. Swenson, see above footnote.
staff to make his paintings, objects and films. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that David Bowie should fill the ‘blank’ screen of Andy Warhol with his own star personae.

Like Bowie, Kaufman maintained the distance and objectivity necessary to invoke deadpan. His *Mighty Mouse* routine exemplifies Kaufman’s ability to easily slip between personalities with perfect control over what appears to be possession: Kaufman walks onto the stage and plays a vinyl record of the *Mighty Mouse* theme tune. He stands nervously twitching before lip-syncing the segment: “Here I come to save the day!” When the line stops, he immediately ceases to move. For fleeting moments, the viewer witnesses the figurative transformation of the anxious Kaufman into the buoyant Mighty Mouse. It is this ‘illusion’, in combination with our certainty we are not watching Mighty Mouse, that forms the gag. All the while, Kaufman remains in control and situated within his own body. Unlike Carrey, he does not demand that we forget his presence as the performer, in fact, the joke relies on the rapid transitions between Kaufman as Kaufman70 and Kaufman as Mighty Mouse.

By maintaining a position of distance between actor and subject, the deadpan comedian always remains in control. Carrey’s intentions and recollections are portrayed as being deeply sincere, meaning he exhibits no distance or self-awareness to allow for a humorous reading of his performance. He also admits that his desire to perform results in what he refers to as ‘Hyde’ – a shift in personality whereby he becomes loud and elastic while in the presence of an audience. Carrey discusses his childhood use of comedy to gain his family’s attention, which led to a career doing celebrity imitations, before eventually abandoning formal routines and jokes for improvisation.71 Seeking to fulfill audience expectations by doing ‘anything’ to make them laugh, he constantly wondered, “What do they want? What do they want?” Carrey eventually determined his audiences wanted to be “free from concern”. This utopian notion of comedy as a release from worries is even further divorced from Kaufman’s humour which emphasizes the act of placing the audience in an uncomfortable position where their expectations are continually subverted. Deadpan is not a desire to ‘please’ people, for how can one perform alienation, or negate the expectations of an audience if they are constantly seeking positive reinforcement? Rather than gratification, deadpan is a power game achieved through disappearance. In the case of Kaufman, invisibility is achieved through his deferral of any ‘real’ Andy Kaufman, thus enacting a mirroring effect through a stream of characters that evade any singular persona.

70 Here, the ‘real’ Kaufman refers to his nervous, inexperienced ‘comedian’ persona.
71 Another possible source of confusion is where he aligns himself with Kaufman in terms of Kaufman’s purposeful lack of jokes.
Rather than becoming larger and louder, the artist erases their own image in order to disappear.

In the next section of this essay, I will discuss the manner in which the absence of presence is enacted by the artist Bas Jan Ader through his efforts to dissolve the representational medium between the artist and the viewer.

6.2. Absence of Representation

If Andy Kaufman and Andy Warhol may be said to have developed their personae through the absence of presence, their works nonetheless emphasize this phenomenon through the representational media of film and television. In the case of Kaufman, what is most frustrating to the audience is that there is no ‘real’ Kaufman hidden behind the representation, thus withholding the ‘authentic’ connection between performer and viewer. This is partly because Kaufman was working specifically within the context of television and entertainment, and therefore many of his efforts specifically address the simulacrum of the medium as pure representation (Auslander 151).

Conversely, the work of Bas Jan Ader reveals the artist’s consistent efforts to convey the authentically sublime experience by evaporating the representational medium between performer and viewer. Ader’s earlier performances primarily took place on screen as he performed to camera in such works as I’m Too Sad to Tell You (as described in chapter four), or the Falling films. In his book, Death is Elsewhere, Alexander Dumbadze refers to these works by noting that Ader “did not confront viewers without a screen… his performative presence never faced another person in the here and now” (44).

Dumbadze illustrates Ader’s relationship to representation by comparing his work with that of Chris Burden. Like Ader or Kaufman, Burden used his own body as the primary medium, most often in situations where he was subjected to potentially life-threatening circumstances, such as being shot at with a gun (Shoot) or rolling across a pair of burning trousers (Fire Roll). While Ader performed for the camera, Burden’s work reveals several layers of audiences: Those attending or participating in the live performance, those doing the documentation and those viewing the work through photograph or video. In Shoot, the fate of Burden is placed in the hands of the marksman, but in Fire Roll, the audience is implicated as the spectators are forced to choose whether to intervene. Although Burden’s work

72 These include Fall 1 (Los Angeles), 1971; Broken Fall (organic), 1971; Broken Fall (geometric), 1971; and Nightfall (1971).
emphasizes the immediate relationship between the performer and the primary audience, this occurs within the institutional context of an art gallery.

Throughout his career, Ader maintained a utopian notion that art was something ‘pure’ that required protection from the ‘impurities’ of the institution (Dumbadze 87). Although the notion of ‘blurring art and life’ dates back to historical avant-garde, the 1960s and 70s climate in which Ader was working, saw artists become increasingly engaged with social and political concerns that could no longer be separated from the art world. This concern is the subject of Allan Kaprow’s *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*.

In, *The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls*, Ader performed live without the screen as a mediator between himself and the viewer. The work was presented in two separate exhibitions, the first at Art & Project Gallery, Amsterdam; then two months later at the Kabinett fur Aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, West Germany. In both instances, Ader entered the gallery space and sat down on a chair next to a table and a lamp (Figure 31). He began to read from a Reader’s Digest article titled, ‘The Boy Who Plunged Over Niagara’ (1962). The story tells of twenty-seven-year-old Jim Honeycutt who travelled by boat along the Niagara River with his friend’s two children, seventeen-year-old Deanne and Roger Woodward. As an unexperienced boatman, Honeycutt pointed the small motor boat downstream. The water gradually became choppy before the group was able to see Niagara Falls in the distance, at which point they were unable to turn back. As the boat was capsized, the passengers were thrown into the water. Honeycutt and Roger Woodward were swept over the falls while Deanne was able to swim to rescue. Roger miraculously survived, while the body of Honeycutt was washed ashore some days later.

The pages of the article from which Ader read were marked with X’s, at which points he would pause and drink from a glass of water that was placed next to him on the table. In the performance at Art & Projects, Ader finished reading the final word, “death”, and took his last sip of water before placing the magazine down and silently exiting the room. The second iteration in Bremerhaven was performed exactly the same, except that when Ader finished the performance, he ran from the gallery with tears streaming down his face. Upon returning, he refused to speak to the viewers (Dumbadze 66-9). By refusing to break character, Ader was able to continue the act until the next performance, as the piece was presented at set time slots throughout the exhibition. This expression of the artist’s subjectivity via tears that are induced by his live reading of the story made a direct correlation between the artist’s body and the found narrative. Although the use of live performance is in line with Ader’s
efforts to dissolve the mediation between artist and viewer, the work nonetheless occurred within the confines of an art gallery and therefore limited the reception of the performance as ‘art’ (Dumbadze 78).

Ader’s ambition to escape representation is tragically realized in his final work, *In Search of the Miraculous*. The work was intended to be part of a triptych which began as a series of photographs of a solitary figure wandering through the streets in Los Angeles at night, searching with a torchlight. The second part of the piece was to be a performed by Ader sailing across the Atlantic, arriving in his home of the Netherlands to complete a second body of photographs. In 1975, he set out in a thirteen-foot sailboat, the Ocean Wave, which was scheduled to arrive at Falmouth, England two months later. After three weeks, Ader’s radio contact broke off and his deserted vessel was found off the coast of Ireland on April 18, 1976. His body was never located. Although speculation around the nature of Ader’s death remains, the tragedy of his disappearance meant that his body was irrevocably connected to the performance. In the words of Alexander Dumbadze: “In theory, Ader took art to the edge of life, where whatever gap remained between art and life ensured that the piece remained unmediated to an extent he had not achieved in his previous work” (87). Because no documentation of the performance exists aside from the postcard announcing the work, produced and distributed by Art & Projects, Ader’s body becomes the primary, un-representable medium. The singular body of the artist is inseparable from the work, and yet his absence makes the work unpresentable. As Jan Verwoert states in his essay on Ader: “The work is about the idea of the tragic and is itself a tragedy” (8).

Following his disappearance, there remained little interest in Bas Jan Ader’s work until the 1990s. Alexander Dumbadze correlates the growing fascination with Ader and his death with a shift in society’s perceived relationship between artists and their work. Firstly, Dumbadze cites the coincidence of Ader’s death with the inaugural issue of *October* journal, which he
describes as “the symbolic heralding in the history of contemporary art of the death of the author” (145). The journal’s emphasis on structuralist and post-structuralist theories gave greater authority to the critic as opposed to the subjectivity of the artist or historical contexts. Authors such as Rosalind Krauss granted agency to the object itself through the “possibility of looking at historical process from the point of view of logical structure” (Krauss 44). This new form of criticism functioned in a manner that suggested artists were working to fulfil a predetermined plan. In emphasising the artwork, itself, the critic becomes the one to find meaning in the work while the artist remains secondary. Dumbadze also remarks on the separation between the artist and their work that evolved through this climate of the 1970s and ‘80s, and how this is especially prevalent in the photographs of Cindy Sherman, whose body is so central to the work. Despite her physical position within the work, little attention was paid to Sherman herself, but rather, the gendered stereotypes that she enacted through her poses (Dumbadze 149)73.

While the artist’s body signified identity politics in American art during the 1990s, the rise of Young British Art in the UK developed a new interest in the artist’s subjectivity, as artists such as Tracey Emin made work that was visually ‘shocking’, but also strove to construct their own identities through the media (Stallabrass 17-48, 127-69). This movement gave rise to the ‘celebrity’ artist, which aligns the art world to Hollywood where “the aura of the film competes with the aura of the actor” (Dumbadze 150)74. According to Dumbadze, the renewed connection between the artist and their artwork led to the romanticization of Bas Jan Ader and a mystification around his death. It seems inevitable that the work has inspired a number of rumours which speculate his disappearance to be part of the performance, that Ader is living elsewhere under an assumed identity. Dumbadze remarks on the artist’s interest in leading “secret double lives” and creating work where he gradually disappeared (99, 115).

In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss the notion of death in terms of ‘going too far’ in deadpan, and whether it is necessary to visually represent the ‘extreme’ in order to push the boundaries of audience expectations.

6.3. Invisibility and Death

As previously stated in chapter one and reiterated through this chapter’s analysis of the work of Andy Kaufman, the deadpan artist commits to their role with a degree of relentlessness that entails playing the part until the end, never permitting the mask to slip; a commitment that implies the question, ‘how far is the end?’ Throughout this chapter I have focused on persona as a performance not limited to the confines of art, but one that is increasingly blurred with life. Logically speaking then, death represents the end of such a role. In chapter four, I explored the significance of deadpan invisibility induced by the performance of obliviousness. In the art of Kaufman and Bas Jan Ader, invisibility is enacted both literally and metaphysically through the erasure of persona and body, as the performance of invisibility escapes the frame of representation and occurs in ‘reality’; the final erasure of their bodies evoked through their respective deaths.75

As Alexander Dumbadze states, there is nothing as “unmediated as the end of life” (141). Although the truth of Ader’s circumstances cannot be confirmed, one cannot help but to read his autobiography as part of the work—especially since his body operates as the medium for the performance. It is difficult not to view such historical facts as Ader’s reported interest in leading a double life, or his desire to make work in which he disappeared as a foreshadowing to his tragic death. Likewise, much speculation remains around the life of Andy Kaufman and that, like the Clifton performance, his death is yet another hoax. Regardless of whether these theories may be proven, they establish a notion that the performers’ deaths are ‘set-up’, and therefore, a ‘joke’. Death becomes the subject of the ultimate deadpan joke, revealing an imaginable commitment to relentlessness.

Without wishing to add to the speculation surrounding Andy Kaufman and Bas Jan Ader’s deaths, I will instead focus on the significance of their deaths in terms of unpresentable absences (or extreme manifestations of deadpan invisibility). Since there is no evidence surrounding the death of Ader, we cannot help but to create an imagined narrative. With regards to Kaufman’s death, it seems inevitable to imagine his corpse as another disguise—is the body real? Did someone else play the role of Kaufman’s corpse?

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75 Even if the rumours that Ader and Kaufman’s deaths are ‘fake’ may be taken seriously, their bodies have nonetheless disappeared from the lives they previously inhabited.
6.4. Representing Death

What is significant in Ader’s performance is that death is enacted but not represented. Just as we do not know the cause for Ader’s tears in I’m Too Sad to Tell You, we do not know the circumstances that surround In Search of the Miraculous. Death is evoked but not made explicit. The only representational evidence of Ader’s voyage is the black-and-white photograph that shows Ader on board the Ocean Wave (Figure 32). Even in this image, Ader is made distant with his face turned towards the horizon. Jan Verwoert comments on the manner in which Ader eliminated excess information from the work, for even though Ader performs the crossing and the walk himself, he “downplays this personal involvement in the work by presenting himself as merely a figure with few discernible character traces: a man whose features are barely visible (in the photographs)” (3). This erasure of distinguishable features also bears reference to the character in Video Tutorial, whose face remains invisible apart from a pair of eyes and a mouth.

Although Bas Jan Ader’s death is portrayed as something that occurs in ‘reality’, both inside and outside of the performance context, the physical act of dying remains unrepresented. This un-representable performance of death brings me to my own practice and personal relationship to representation. For example, in the work, Playing Dead, my character performs to camera as she describes and demonstrates her methods for faking suicide, practicing the performance as one might rehearse a musical instrument (Figure 33). The video borrows aesthetically from reality television but portrays suicide as a simulation. The slashes across the wrists and blood are emphasized as synthetic and therefore ‘harmless’. Using makeup and performative techniques, the character enacts a cycle of false endings, after which the actor examines their own handy-work. Death is therefore represented but only as something that may be repeatedly staged and never fulfilled (at least within the parameters of the video).
In *A Pool of Blood*, the abject nature of blood-letting is represented through description rather than visual images as my character verbally recalls their desire to represent their/my mother’s obsession with giving blood. The relentlessness of someone donating their blood more than a hundred times, in combination with my relationship to my mother and her actions can only be imagined by the viewer. As described above in the example of Bas Jan Ader, the lack of representation is what generates an imaginary narrative more tangible than one that is visually explicit. While watching *A Pool of Blood*, the viewer is also forced to question whether the information is autobiographical; whether my mother really has given blood that many times or if the narrative is merely fictional. Conversely, if the video was filmed in a documentary style to *show* my mother donating blood, the work would portray the narrative as straight-forward biography and would therefore lack the ambiguity associated with deadpan. Likewise, if Ader was to ever find the ‘miraculous’ that he searched for, who is to say that he could depict it.

Relentlessness through description is also central to Chris Morris’ mockumentary news program *Brass Eye*. The deadpan approach is here achieved through Morris’ uncannily accurate simulation of sensationalist news specials that focus on such issues as ‘drugs’, ‘sex’ or the ‘decline’ of society. Like Andy Kaufman, Morris inhabits multiple roles as reporters and witnesses, making it similarly impossible to identify any ‘real’ Chris Morris beneath the guises—even as the reporter, ‘Christopher Morris’. His absence was furthered during the release of the show in 1997, by his refusal to appear in interviews (Leggot 6). Withholding any explanation, Morris made no apologies for his controversial humor and denied access to
his ‘real’ persona. Therefore, Chris Morris only existed as his hyperbolic cast of characters. A lack of visual representation is also apparent in the show’s use of ‘evidence-based’ media that accompanies the news stories since much of the supporting images or footage are either reconstructions played by the cast or are comprised of arbitrarily sourced surveillance footage. In the cases where the footage does depict the crime, the image is undermined by its own absurdity—such as the video of an undercover agent dressed as a school in order to attract pedophiles (“Pedophilia”).

Following the broadcast of the Brass Eye special, “Pedophilia”, in 2001, Channel 4 received a record-breaking number of 213 complaints (Mills 98). Aside from the show’s obvious use of scandalous subject matter, part of its controversy derived from the fact that television audiences were not, at that time, overly familiar with the language of mockumentary which has since become naturalized through shows like Da Ali G Show (2000-2004) and The Office (2001-2003). Chris Hight notes that, unlike American shows like The Daily Show, Brass Eye (and its predecessor, The Day Today) were more “sustained exercises” in that they maintained their “appropriation of television news aesthetics and rely on the audience to pick up on cues to its fictionality” (58). In deadpan fashion the show’s absence of laugh tracks also withheld any comic signposting. The humour of the show relies on the audience being able to read the performances and visual material as satire.

What is most ‘shocking’ and characteristically deadpan about Morris’ comedy is the flippant nature with which the characters treat their ‘serious’ subject matter. This is evident in a skit featured during the “Drugs” episode: set in a primary school, Morris’ character Lamuel Webb uses aversion therapy to warn children (who appear too young to be at risk) about the dangers of using drugs. The children are led into a tiny cell where Mark, “the school drug addict”, juggles his shoes for the children like a deranged birthday party clown. A few days later, Mark is writhing with painful withdrawal symptoms while each child is held up to the small window to look in. In this skit, Morris creates a theatre of looking and not looking, allowing the television audience to watch deadpan being enacted between the performing drug addict and the audience of children. Webb forces the children to look directly at the dark ‘reality’ of drugs, in a forward-facing manner, to which they remain unphased.

The deadpan comic effect is furthered through the children’s restraint. One child, Desiree is singled out as ‘high risk’, and is told (falsely) that her parents have died of a drug overdose. She remains silent throughout the skit, only shedding a few tears during the funeral. When the act is later revealed to be a hoax, Desiree expresses her anger with continued silence,
averting her eyes and body from her parents (Figure 34). The children’s lack of response further highlights the ridiculous nature of the comedy and causes the audience to laugh with discomfort—for by not reacting, the children confirm this situation to be beyond their comprehension and inappropriate for their age.

Morris’ deadpan flippancy is encapsulated in the scene where Desiree is informed of the death: his character, Lamuel Webb is standing in a corner while the tragic news is delivered. At that moment, Webb rolls his eyes to undermine the seriousness of the act—a fleeting gesture that represents the show’s most darkly comic aspect, which is that it depicts such ‘cruelty’ with lightness. Austin Taseltine (Morris’ other character in the scene) comments: “I want you to know, that when you’re there, there is something about this that is really quite shocking”. This understatement, at once naïve and knowing, illustrates the dynamics upon which the show’s comedy is reliant; for it is only when we recognize the scene as mockumentary fiction, by which we maintain the distance of not being physically there, that we are able to laugh.

While maintaining this close proximity to the television programs it emulates, the show roots its imagery in reality before stretching forward into surreal territory; for example, when the priest conducting the funeral states that Desiree’s parents would rather pump themselves “full of magic monkey juice and take a trip to space land”, than spend another moment with “that poor sod” (Desiree). James Leggott compares such lines as this to the ‘non-sense’ writing of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll (11). Morris begins with the depiction of a
A plausible scenario (such as a school campaign against drugs), then allows the joke’s pace to slow down and become increasingly surreal. At the same time, the jokes’ success is aided by the exact placement of each word and the manner in which they are delivered. Careful phrasing heightens this forward and backwards movement between the accurate mimicry of new programs and comic absurdity.

Significantly, Brass Eye demonstrates the precarious subtleties involved in the deadpan performance as it works carefully within these near and far parameters. Just as Morris invokes deadpan with a single roll of the eyes, David Bowie reconstructs the persona of Warhol with a sigh or one hand on a hip. The notion of ‘going too far’ does not necessarily entail such extreme positions as faking one’s own death, or risking one’s life on camera, or alienating everyone on set. In the cases of Andy Kaufman, Bas Jan Ader, and Chris Morris, the unsettling nature of deadpan is evoked by the absence of a reliable subjective persona—meaning authenticity is constantly called in to question. Relentlessness is performed, but more through a resounding silence; without explanation, the deadpan performer forms a blank, abysmal space around themselves. In this silence, there is no return from the dead, just one long joke about disappearance whose punchline is that there is no punchline.

This chapter began with a comparative analysis of Jim Carrey and Andy Kaufman by means of discussing the significance of evading a singular, subjective persona. Jim Carrey’s failure to extend Kaufman’s techniques demonstrates the effect of ‘not going far enough’, whilst Kaufman’s exemplifies both deadpan relentlessness and the importance of invisibility. The erasure of the performer’s body is echoed by Bas Jan Ader’s efforts to dissolve his own representation and his tragic disappearance. This examination of Ader’s work also shows that death and ‘going too far’ need not be visually explicit; that narrative is developed within the viewer’s imagination, as demonstrated by Chris Morris’ use of surrealist language in Brass Eye. The darkest elements of deadpan are shown to exude more from a single gesture or a rolling of the eyes, which further testifies to the complex and nuanced nature of this subtle yet brutal form of comedy.
Conclusion

The aim of this research has been to understand how the performance of deadpan humour effects our reading of personal narratives. It begins by establishing a definition of deadpan, one informed by my own art practice, as well as practitioners whose work shares common deadpan characteristics. Since this thesis stresses performance, the role of the performer’s body is examined first. The behavior of the face is pivotal, for in deadpan, it is the primary signifier by which to communicate a lack of affect, or ‘comic cue’, and in doing so, contradicts an outrageous subject matter or situation, problematizing its interpretation and reading. I have argued that the deadpan face is often constructed through the use of various forms of masking techniques and this is explored through discussion of my own videos as well as the work of Cindy Sherman, Andy Kaufman and Jim Carrey. This includes both the more physically conventional forms of masks established by Sherman’s and my own self-transformations with make-up and costume, as well as Kaufman’s extensive explorations into persona by which he evades the reveal of his own ‘true’ identity through a constant shuffling of characters. During the process of construction, this state of transformation occurs whereby the performer acquires access to another persona, and their own ‘real’ person disappears (Kaufman, arguably, being the most extreme example of this phenomenon as he continually evades any unified persona; while Carrey serves as the antithesis by his efforts to become more visible through his portrayal of Kaufman). The body itself is also disguised, often through a process of segmentation: Voice is made transient as it leaves the body to inhabit another entity during the act of ventriloquism. The process is demonstrated by the example of celebrity endorsements in Brass Eye and exemplified by Venessa Feltz’s ‘Message to Murderer’ that sees her speak as a series of murder victims, including Marvin Gaye. However, the enveloping surface of the mask is periodically punctured by ‘truth’, or allusions to autobiography, such as the unscripted appearance of my dog, George, in CPR Conference; or my ambiguously personal relationship to the found text featured in Clay Head.

This blurring of biography and fiction is made more complicated by a mask that bares resemblance to the performer themselves by means of ‘self-parody’ that is portrayed by the characters, both named ‘Erica’, in, A Pool of Blood and Anxious Artists. Despite their biographical and physical connections to myself as the artist, they also distinguish themselves through such differences as hair styles and aggressive or overly nervous behavior. This is also explored in the study of Gillian Wearing’s Self-Portrait at 17 Years Old—for although Wearing’s mask displays a human quality, it also reveals itself to be a
synthetic construction. Autobiography is rendered unreliable and made subject to
manipulation as the deadpan performer reveals their uncanny ability to detach from their
own identity and re-present a mechanical version of themselves.

As shown by the analysis of Andy Kaufman’s television work (most notably, his appearance
on stage alongside his alter-ego Tony Clifton), what is most crucial is that the mask must
remain in place throughout the performance, as the art of deadpan stresses a relentless
commitment to any given role. The question of whether and where the joke lies must be
maintained throughout the work. Boundaries surrounding the site of the performance are
made unclear when the comic continues to inhabit their role long after the performance has
ended. Such borders dissolve on an episode of The Andy Kaufman Show, when, following
the closing credits Kaufman ‘breaks’ character to antagonize the backstage crew, and is then
confronted by Foreign Man. In the case of Bas Jan Ader, questions remain unanswered as to
whether his tragic disappearance while making In Search of the Miraculous is, indeed, a
tragedy or a hoax, thereby making the work a never-ending performance.

I have argued that the ‘serious’ face of deadpan is, in fact, not a blank one but one of great
emotional subtlety. This is explored in the production of, and reflection on, the
characterization in my own videos and drawings, and through an examination of Noel
Carroll’s analysis of Buster Keaton’s films in light of the distinction he makes between
Keaton’s ‘automaton’ gags and those that show him to be ‘fluidly adept’. Henri Bergson’s
theory of mechanical comedy is mobilized to reflect on this process, as I argue that the
concept of the deadpan mask exemplifies his notion of rigidity and elasticity during which
the human body momentarily morphs with the machine.

The role of the mechanical in deadpan is further examined in relation to methods of copying
when applied to artists utilizing appropriation, such as those associated with the ‘Pictures
Generation’, as well as its use in my own artwork (for example, the Nudists drawings).
Through readings of individual art works I argue that in such art, images accumulate through
repetition to defy their flat form to create distance between the performer/artist and the
audience that is akin to that experienced in deadpan. Through this process I argue that the
artist also develops a closeness to their subject, indicative of their intimate knowledge of
their material. Therefore, the proximity between the original and its double is shown to be
critical to the audience’s perception of appropriation, for aligning the two may degrade the
ambiguity established by re-contextualizing the image (as demonstrated in my anecdote
about the Nudists exhibition series at a domestic space in Glasgow, 2015); while close
comparison may also function to reveal a lack in the original. Such a lack is further explored through analysis of Elaine Sturtevant’s *Heizer’s Double Negative*, a formally unrealized piece that, through its own failure to replicate, sheds light on the grotesque amount of financial and human effort required to create a pit of “nothingness”. The found image operates as a ‘mask’, a ready-made fiction that blurs with the artist’s biography, especially when rendered by hand as in the case of my drawings that copy found, archival images (such as the nudist images that borrow from 1970s copies of Health & Efficiency), as well as the ceramic sculptures that are rendered from ‘real’ produce from chain groceries in *The Vegetable Store*. My discussion of Richard Prince’s *Spiritual America* and the erasure of himself and any explanation for the work also introduces what I argue to be a typical preoccupation of deadpan: invisibility.

I have argued that invisibility is an essential trope of deadpan and central to this research. It is examined further in chapter four via Henri Bergson’s notion of the comic as an absent-minded automaton. Rather than being ‘unconscious’, the deadpan comic *performs* obliviousness whilst revealing their own self-awareness. I explore how knowingness is articulated by the act of ‘looking while not looking’, through close reading of my own *Life Drawings* and by an analysis of the characters in Jim Jarmusch’s *Stranger Than Paradise*. In *Arrested Development* and *Video Tutorial*, I argue that the characters’ apparent lack of self-awareness leads to their inability to fulfill familial and societal roles and is expressed by a state of invisibility.

Through the study of the lethargic behavior of the characters in *Stranger Than Paradise*, I demonstrate the performance of obliviousness, as the environment surrounding the performer also becomes subject to transformation: time slows down, stretching out into a state of flat inertia. It is within this deadpan realm that I argue the comic is able to perform a state of (semi) invisibility whereby they teasingly hide and reveal themselves. Their flattened state is reflected by the viewing audience who experiences a subsequent flattening: they must adjust their response to a sense of comic timing that runs slower than the conventional cycle of joke set-up and release. The absence of laughter becomes an acute source of anxiety within the room. This flattening functions to deconstruct the conventional expectations accompanying the performance of comedy. With deadpan, the audience is forced to question their impulse whether to laugh or not and to reflect on the appropriateness of their response in relation to the context in which it is experienced.
I have examined how, at this point, deadpan shows itself to be decidedly antithetical to traditional modes of ‘comedy’, embodying emotions that are understood to be far from humorous. The relationship between sadness and humour is explored through my study of individual artworks by Bas Jan Ader (*I’m Too Sad to Tell You*) and Haley Newman (*Crying Glasses*). In such works, tears are alienated and objectified as they are separated from any known cause of sadness. In the case of *Crying Glasses*, the photograph becomes comic as the viewer considers the “hidden pump system” that produces the tears (rather than being ‘naturally’ produced by the melancholic artist). Tears also become an unreliable signifier of ‘true’ emotion which contributes to the complicated reading of the artist’s use of self-portraiture.

The fractured nature of personal narratives under the influence of deadpan attests to the fact that deadpan is not a social phenomenon (as argued by Bergson). The deadpan comic evades the production of jokes that are readily consumed by an audience who responds with laughter, choosing instead to invoke a state of silent awkwardness. This theory of deadpan as an anti-social comedy employs Peter L. Berger’s proposition that rather than being effortlessly woven into day-to-day life, comedy may erupt, unwelcome, into realms of the ‘serious’. Likewise, deadpan comedy shows that silence intrudes upon the comic realm, causing awkwardness where there should be comfortable laughter. Reflection on the disruptive potential of silence and context intervention is undertaken through the discussion of the presentation of my video, *CPR Conference*—an intervention that failed to garner either laughter or academic respect. Awkward silence precedes alienation, as the primary conference audience later becomes a comic object when the video and anecdote about ‘a conference on comedy where no one laughs’ is re-presented to the more ‘knowing’ art audience. Thus I argue, *CPR Conference* divides the primary, ‘oblivious’ conference audience from the secondary, ‘knowing’ art audience.

This intervention points towards the question, ‘If no one laughs, who is deadpan for?’ In answer to this, I argue deadpan is ‘for’ any audience who possesses a familiarity with the established conventions of comic performance to the extent that they are able to detect and appreciate as comic, a performance of deliberate disruption, or subversion of such conventions in order to understand its unique characteristics and to ‘get’ the joke. However, deadpan does not exclude the primary, unlaughing audience, for their awkwardness within the live situation frames and contextualizes the performance. Their silence becomes part of the narrative. The research asks that both laughing and non-laughing audiences consider their positions and question their impulsive reactions towards this form of comedy.
Invisibility is explored further by an analysis of the work of Andy Kaufman, where I show that the surface of the mask is not necessarily punctured by authenticity but lifted to reveal another elusive character. In what is (arguably) the most frustrating aspect of deadpan, the comic suggests that behind the mask, there lies an infinite number of other masks with no singular, subjective first-person. In chapter six I investigate the nature of invisibility as evoked through disappearance and the eclipsing of art and life and is explored through the deaths of Kaufman and Bas Jan Ader. However, this form of ‘going too far’ does not necessarily define deadpan, for I argue that the brutality of deadpan is found more in a single gesture, as in the scene in Brass Eye where Chris Morris’ rolling of his eyes which undermines the apparent seriousness of his absurd drugs aversion therapy tactics.

In answer to the initial question posed by this thesis, deadpan effects our reading of personal narratives through its effort to drain emotional affect. In some instances, the comic cue is replaced by the melancholic cue of tears. However, these signifiers are also rendered ambiguous for in deadpan they likewise detach from the body and reveal themselves to be void of emotion. This process is exemplified in the video, Clay Head, during which the face of the narrator is replaced by that of the inanimate clay sculpture; with sadness indicated by the presence of tears. However, these tears are shown to be administered by the detached hand of the anonymous sculptor, whose relationship to the narrative remains ambiguous. The viewer can no longer read the first-person subjective as ‘authentic’ and must instead focus on their efforts to decipher fact from fiction. Their passive position as a consumer of the narrative, where they are permitted to laugh easily at the jokes, is threatened when they are asked to assume an active role in trying to locate the elusive narrator. Although they may periodically identify with the narrator, they must also remain suspicious. Personal narratives can no longer be produced in a free-flowing manner, in a direct line between the first-person, their camera and their audience. Instead, the narratives become fractured and are permitted to attach themselves to other person’s narratives. In the case of Clay Head, the location and identity of the narrator remains elusive.

This research has facilitated the identification of the characteristics of deadpan comedy, which in summary include: a lowering of affect in relation to outrageous subject matter; the construction of masks that complicate the reading of the performer’s autobiography; and a relentless commitment to an assumed persona. The definition of deadpan outlined within this thesis has been developed through an investigation into contemporary art, which includes my own practice as well as writers and practitioners whose work communicates a
common use of deadpan strategies. These characteristics manifest themselves within the deadpan performance, notably the mechanical act of copying; as well as the act of looking while not looking (a performed obliviousness that reveals knowingness) which also invokes a form of invisibility. The audience’s reading of the artist’s personal relationship to their material is further complicated by the presence of emotion that is antithetical to comedy, such as tears and alienation.

In terms of an original contribution to knowledge, this thesis offers a clear articulation of the characteristics of deadpan, expanding research in the way it is utilized in practice by a diverse range of contemporary artists. Although much has been written on philosophies of comedy (Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Simon Critchley), none offer an in-depth study into the singular phenomenon of deadpan, and its polarizing effect of dividing an audience into those who laugh and those who remain silent. Furthermore, this PhD offers this research from the point of view of a practicing artist. This study is also unique in its performative approach to methodologies, by aligning the personal narratives present within the artworks to those within the thesis text. The presentation of the videos at conferences is also unique as it uses the academic conference as a site for dissemination as well as production (especially in terms of the production of the Conference Drawings). The project also makes a significant contribution to knowledge in terms of the circulation of artworks through their respective exhibitions and conference presentation. Notable solo presentations include The Vegetable Store (with Garnet McCulloch), part of Glasgow International 2016; Alone and I, at Queen’s Park Railway Club, Glasgow (2017); and Inflatable Head, for Plug In ICA’s Stages 2017, Winnipeg; as well as the group exhibitions The Laughable Enigma of Ordinary Life, at Arquipelago Centro de Artes Contemporaneas, Azores (2018); and Double Act: Art + Comedy at Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool (2016).

As a result of my research, I have been able to refine my practice through extensive bodies of drawings, sculptures and videos. Key to this research has been my development of interventionist performance strategies that explore issues of social awkwardness and appropriateness, specifically in the presentation of the videos, CPR Conference and Video Tutorial. This also includes the exhibition of the work The Vegetable Store at Glasgow International 2016, and the drawing series Conference Drawings and Life Drawings. Such interventions have enabled me to explore the significance of deadpan comedy within specific contexts whereby the audience reads the comic strategies through the framing of the situation.
My research has also given me greater confidence in exploring deadpan humour within this set of media. This confidence is most evident in the enhanced role of performance in my videos and drawings: previously to the PhD, I had moved away from the self-transformative performance videos that I had developed since completing my MFA in 2002. However, my research into comic timing and the performative nature of deadpan encouraged me to revisit these strategies. Performance also became central to my drawings, as is apparent in the work done in context-specific, live settings such as the *Conference Drawings* and *Life Drawings*.

In advancing my writing practice, I was also able to develop more diverse and ambitious scripts for the videos which have become increasingly interwoven with the academic and autobiographical writing. This practice has also enabled me to acquire a confident voice to articulate the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin the operation of deadpan strategies in my own art practice.

Through my art and writing that manifests in this research, I have demonstrated the ways in which artists have refined their expressive resources through deadpan to unsettle and problematize conventional reading of their work as autobiographic. Most prominently, this research has revealed the precision and subtlety used by deadpan practitioners to create ambiguity. It is this ambiguity, one that constantly evades the certainty of authenticity that defines the relationship between deadpan and personal narrative.
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Deadpan Comedy and Personal Narratives in Contemporary Art

Erica Eyres

A portfolio submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences

September 2018
Clay Head, 2015, HD video, 6 min. 49.  
Vimeo: [https://vimeo.com/134954559](https://vimeo.com/134954559)  
Password: ClayHead15

Vimeo: [https://vimeo.com/164981881](https://vimeo.com/164981881)  
Password: CPR_conference
Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/207376183
Password: tutorial2017

Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/230888755
Password: BloodPool17
Anne 2.0, 2018, HD video, 15 min. 12.
Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/264890728
Password: Anne@GI

Model Artists (in progress)
Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/291518003
Password: Anxious_Artists2018
Truth Does Not Change (Conference Drawings), 2016, pencil on paper, 15 x 21 cm.
Suzie (Conference Drawings), 2016, pencil on paper, 15 x 21 cm.
All Documents Must Be in PDF Form (Conference Drawings), pencil on paper 15 cm x 21 cm.
Nude Model (Life Drawings), 2016, pencil on paper, 47 cm x 29 cm.
Young Man Drawing a Woman (Life Drawings), 2017, pencil on paper, 47 x 29 cm.
Man Drawing a Woman (Life Drawings), coloured pencil on paper, 47 x 29 cm.
Three Men Drawing a Man (Life Drawings), coloured pencil on paper, 47 x 29 cm.
The Vegetable Store (with Garnet McCulloch), 2016, site-specific ceramic installation at Fireworks Pottery, for Glasgow International 2016.
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The Vegetable Store (with Garnet McCulloch), 2016.

Inflatable Head, 2017, site-specific installation for Stages, with Plug-In ICA, Winnipeg.

Inflatable Head, 2017.
Bloody Nose, 2017, glazed stoneware, installation image from *Alone and I*, solo presentation at Queen’s Park Railway Club, Glasgow.
Bloody Heart, 2017, glazed stoneware, installation image from Alone and I.

Crying Teardrops, 2017, glazed stoneware, installation image from Alone and I.
Hand, 2017, glazed stoneware, installation image from Alone and I.

Blood Drops, 2017, glazed stoneware, installation image from Alone and I.
Clay Feet, 2017, glazed stoneware, installation image from Alone and I.

Test Tiles, 2017, glazed stoneware, installation image from Alone and I.
Pink Spaghetti Poodles, 2018, glazed stoneware, site-specific installation at Bill’s Tools, for Good £uck, curated by Beagles and Ramsay for Glasgow International 2018.
Hand Model Sculpture Garden, 2018, glazed stoneware, installation at Glasgow Botanic Garden, for Glass House, for Glasgow International 2018.
Hand Model Sculpture Garden, 2018.
Pierre, 2016, glazed stoneware.
Pink Mask, 2018, glazed stoneware, site-specific installation at Fabric Bazaar, for Good fuck, part of Glasgow International 2018.
Moustache Mask, glazed stoneware, site-specific installation at Garnethill Store, for Good Luck, part of Glasgow International 2018.
Lipstick Cigarettes, glazed stoneware, 2017.

Clay Glass Eyes, glazed porcelain, 2017.