Oh the Humanity!
Humour and Performance in a Contemporary Art Practice

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Abstract

This Masters project discusses humour and performance through the use and presentation of a number of video and photographic artworks. Humour can be derived from the ability to imaginatively juxtapose imagery and ideas to create unexpected relationships and outcomes. Art and creativity can function in a similar manner. This MFA seeks to examine and develop a contemporary art practice, through contrasting imagery and ideas in a performative and humourous way. The project draws parallels between the strategies and functions of humour and art, exploring the possible relationships between the two.

The thesis explores questions arising from the artworks produced resulting from an investigation of specific historical and contemporary artworks and a discourse around performance. Through consideration of art historical examples, some linages and links to ways of conceiving, thinking and discussing performance and humour are made. The research acknowledges the problems of taste and subjectivity as it applies to humour, in concert with art.

The project reflects upon the role of the artist, his motivations and takes excursions into formal and material concerns of photography and performance to clarify their relevance and significance to contemporary art practice and this project. Themes and ideas brought to the surface are used as foils, something to defend or push against and experiment with. They sometimes act as shadowy motivations that assist in the production of artwork. These themes include mans’ relationship to the landscape, personal histories, digital and analogue photography in the age of technological convergence, the image, self and representation, notions of personhood, contemporary performance and art.

Through discussion and uncovering the toil of artwork and ideas engaged with, the humanity of the project is revealed.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the Preface*,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(i) the thesis is 11,332 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Ross Coulter
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Thanks to Kate Daw, Stephen Haley, Lou Hubbard, Cheri Winter, Annabelle Kingston, Vikki McInnes, Scott Miles, Bernie Peeler, Simon Zoric, the Masters cohort and my wife, Meredith Turnbull.
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Oh the Humanity!
Humour and Performance in a Contemporary Art Practice

“... when one puts things together that are not ordinarily seen together, and the
viewer, though surprised, sees the point of it, the effect is like that of a joke,
when, often, an expectation is foiled by a new insight into possibilities.”

This MFA research project endeavors to look at the place of humour and
performance in a contemporary art practice. The research project will examine
the different roles, functions and examples of humour in both historic and
contemporary artworks. Through a process of close examination of the motives,
strategies and operations of the artworks, their meanings, themes and ideas will
be revealed.

The research paper will look at the broader and more wide-ranging questions
that arise from a practice that engages with performance, video and
photography. The operations of both humour and art can at times rely upon
similar strategies such as juxtaposition and contrast; they can both cause
surprise or befuddlement in the audience, often arriving at unexpected
outcomes and conclusions. Both art and humour can stimulate critical thinking,
discussion and discourse of a variety of contemporary ideas.

Conversely it is with a wary trepidation that I write about either art or humour,
as at times there is nothing more demystifying, dissipating of potency, or
reductive than talking about an artwork or exploring theoretical limits. And
nothing is more deadly or more un-humourous than explaining a joke. As the
author of *Charlottes Web* E. B. White (1899-1985) notes, “Humor can be
dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are
discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”

Q: Why did the conceptual artist decide to paint?
A: She thought it was a good idea.

The aim of this research is to examine the role of humour and performance in a
contemporary art practice. Humour can often have a unifying affect. It can form
a social bond, through the identification of experience, shared beliefs and
common cultural understandings. Humour can be derived from the ability to
imaginatively juxtapose imagery and ideas and to create unexpected outcomes.
Art and creativity can function in a similar manner. This research project intends
to explore the link between humour, performance and art, through both a
contemporary and art-historical lens. The Masters research project will develop
and reveal the operations of the strategies employed and with which the
audience is engaged.

A number of artworks in this research project take humiliation as a motivating
starting point, other works attempt to engage with humour, whilst still others

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test and mimic different performative functions. While these are some of the motivational frameworks, understandings, themes and ideas evolve, as the works are resolved. And that is not necessarily funny.

Hitchcock: You may be wondering where the term (MacGuffin) originated. It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men on a train. One man says, ‘What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?’

And the other one answers, ‘Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.’ The first one asks, ‘What’s a MacGuffin?’

‘Well,’ the other man says, ‘it’s an apparatus for the trapping of lions in the Scottish Highlands.’

The first man says, ‘But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,’ and the other one answers, ‘Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!’ So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.

Truffaut: That’s funny. A fascinating idea. ³

Taking the surprise of humour as a starting point, there are two things that are striking about the above conversation between the English born filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) and French film critic and director Francois Truffaut (1932-1984). The first is the function of the MacGuffin; in as much as it is an “apparatus for the trapping of lions”⁴, the MacGuffin is a device by which a story can be told. The focus on the “apparatus” is a distraction or a decoy, which alludes to a mystery, or lures the viewer into a false sense of the plot’s direction. The performance of the artworks created in this Masters project and the resulting humour, functions in a similar way. Often it is not what the artwork is obviously asserting that is at the heart of the work, rather a MacGuffin like apparatus is used as the propelling force, creative urge or starting point of the artwork’s research. The response by Truffaut, “That’s funny. An interesting idea”⁵ will be the measure of the writing and artworks produced for this MFA. Perhaps Truffaut’s aside will find an echo in the concluding statement, that the work transcends the subjective experience of the artist. That something might be both funny and a fascinating idea.

The initial title of the project “Oh the Humanity! Humiliation and a Contemporary Performative Practice,”⁶ acted as a directive, as much as a process to be undertaken. It functioned as a motivational starting point or mantra for making the work. Like most mantras, the meaning of the utterance disappears through its repetitious use. While the mantra is often used as a focusing point, it also has the potential to be a transformative creative process or tool.⁷ I hope to use this tool to engage the reader in the subjective experience of the art-making process. Through the excavation of art historical figures, contemporary practitioners, studio experiments, research into films and reflection upon my own practice, an informed body of work has emerged that is reflective of this undertaking.

⁴Ibid. 158.
⁵Ibid.
⁶This was one of a number of different titles for the Masters project that appeared during the research.
ARTWORK: Man in the Landscape

*Man in the Landscape* is a photographic and video performance piece that was first enacted in 2008. While in Japan on an artist residency in 2012, I restaged the action in a snow-covered landscape. A man stands in the foreground, naked, with his back turned towards the camera. A carrot with a green leafy head appears clenched between his buttocks. The figure, turning his head slowly left to right and then back again, appears to be surveying the landscape. This was the first performance in two years that featured my figure and was a return to using my body as a surface and a site for the production of artwork. *Man in the Landscape* draws on personal experience and memory as well as art historical contexts as a way of image making. The work could be seen to comment on colonialism and how art has been used to represent and possess the landscape.

In 1979 my family moved from the eastern suburbs of Melbourne to the Upper Yarra Valley where we built our house and home. A memory that still clearly strikes me now is my father claiming, partly in jest, that: “This is a place for a village.”8 It was a claim of possession and ownership of land. It was a familial declaration, one of solidarity, unified around the family unit, who banded together to build a house from the ground up. Father’s prior building experience before this undertaking was a dog kennel and a shed. The venture of building the family home was akin to a grand adventure. The statement, “This is a place for a village,” was for him an assertion of man, naked before nature and before God.

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8 This bastardised quote was originally proclaimed by John Batman, “This will be the place for a village – the natives on shore.” Shane Carmody, “John Batman’s Place in the Village,” *The La Trobe Journal* Spring 2007, no. 80 (2007).
The painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* by 19th century German painter, Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840), has entranced me for some time. In a way, I have seen the painting as a declarative assertion (insertion) and positioning of man in the landscape and an expression of self-possession. The figure in the foreground stands against the potential enveloping background, the vast void and existential abyss. The landscape transcends beauty, revealing the sublime terror of the natural world. Thomas McEvilley claims that the sublime “is based on dissolving the figure into the ground, on a claim of the primacy of the ground over the figure, and of the universal surround of nature over the individual self.” While Edmund Burke, according to Thomas McEvilley, described the experience of the sublime “as the stunned, even terrified, gaze of one who is unexpectedly confronted by a greater reality and cannot imagine how to address it.”

In the artwork *Man in the Landscape*, it is the terror of the action, (standing naked with the carrot), that seeks to subvert and undermine these historical notions of the sublime, through this absurd performance. It is the carrot that re-asserts the man in the scene. While the carrot is too obvious to be a “partial object” or subtle detail, it is a point of trauma that ridicules the subject of the photograph. The work is located in the landscape, positioned in contemporary art and art history and placed in post-colonial context.

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10 Ibid. 165.
Taking a stand
   Possession of land
   Carrot and stick
   Lead a horse
   Horses tail
   Bugs bunny
   The punctum
   The point
   A terrifying beauty
   The entry point
   Rooted and stuck
   Self-asserting
   Stuck up
   Up yourself
   Positioned
   Poised

There was one point during my brother’s teenage years that my father referred to him as having a “carrot arse”, because he walked with his bottom stuck out a little. For while the carrot helps assert, or re-position the figure in the landscape, it also seems to undermine or humiliate the subject. And yet the figure stands with a confident posture, in the snow covered landscape, in the green lush mountains, in the desert, on the cliff face.

Truffaut: In other words, not only is there no need for the MacGuffin to be important or serious, but it’s even preferable that it should turn out to be something as trivial and absurd as the little tune of *The Lady Vanishes*.

It was upon reflection of *Man in the Landscape* during the period of research under the supervision of Lou Hubbard that a discussion of the role of humiliation entered the discourse. Moreover my ability to undertake embarrassing and humiliating actions, activities and performances led to the development of the next body of work titled *Positions*. The criteria or framework for *Positions* came about by asking myself, “What would be the most embarrassing or humiliating thing that I could do in a performance?”

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Humiliation

There is a strong and contemporary lineage of embarrassment in performance art. One local touchstone is the artist Melbourne based artist Stuart Ringholt (b. 1971). Ringholt uses performance, video, sculpture, collage and painting in his practice. His approach to performance is somewhat like a scientist, investigating an hypothesis through the testing out of an action. Rather than engaging in performance in terms of thinking, Ringholt is concerned with the manner in which his works can be felt. It is as though he is on a quest to learn through feeling; he sees his works as having an educative possibility. The ‘education’ that one receives is imparted through a bodily experience, through his engagement with an activity. He is interested in how an artwork, or the experience of it, might feel. There are a number of his performances that demonstrate this modality.

This year, in a performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Ringholt invited an audience to participate in a guided tour and viewing of artworks that involved both the audience and Ringholt appearing naked. In an interview with Tim Spencer, Ringholt talks about the sensation of viewing an abstract painting and the feel of colours as they rush over his naked body. “You can experience colour quite physically and you can actually feel the vibration of the colour.” Through the focus on artworks in the gallery, the performance shifts the self-conscious fear and embarrassment of public nudity of the participants, into a confidence building exercise.

Ringholt’s performances are devised from enacting events that are real, personal and, (oxymoronically), imagined. Of further interest to this paper are those actions that evoke a sense of embarrassment, humiliation and humour. His work titled Conceptual Art Improved My Embarrassing Life (2003) directly points to a notion of self-improvement. By undertaking embarrassing actions in public, Ringholt attempts to evacuate any shame or humiliation felt by him through the performance. On Saturday He Stood with Toilet Paper Dangling from His Pants (2001) involved the artist walking around Florence with a piece of toilet paper attached to the backside of his pants. This action was derived from an experience Ringholt had of walking around a football oval, unaware that a 50-centimeter piece of toilet paper was attached to the back of his pants. Through this performance the artist attempts to transcend the embarrassment by reliving the traumatic experience. As Sarah Tutton notes, "the dangling toilet paper incident had a 'profound effect' on him and he 'remained shaken a week later.' He took it upon himself to intentionally embarrass himself in order to combat these feelings.”

13 Ross Coulter, 21 June 2013.
In the literature written around Ringholt, there is a strong sense of the artist’s desire for self-improvement through engaging in the art of performance. Nicola Harvey asserts, “Ringholt assumes the responsibility of living through these dark moments so that others can find a space for mirth.” In doing so, through an engagement with Ringholt’s work we are confronted by our own fear and embarrassment, experiencing a raw sensation that somehow makes us deeply feel the artwork. We are in touch with our common humanity, through the experience of humiliation and humour.

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ARTWORK: Positions

The development of the series of artworks titled Positions was an opportunity to act out and think more broadly about questions of aesthetics, identification, subjectivity, the image and the nature of representation. In addition, Positions explores the play between photographic materiality that we might understand as analogue and digital photography. The initial starting point however was to undertake a performance for the camera that I would personally find the most humiliating and confrontational: Enacting the onscreen roles of a pornographic film.

The aesthetics of the works Positions are an attempt to evoke an illicit visual experience, provoking an attraction and repulsion to the images created. The aesthetic choices of Positions have been shaped from the perspective of photography. An examination of the 1970s American artist, Lucas Samaras (b. 1936), has provided some of the key visual references for the project. His garish, high key colour ‘auto-portraits’ and projections of images onto the nude figure (Photo-Transformations 1973-1976) and series of 8 x 10 Sittings (1978-1980) have informed the palette and intent of the artworks.

When viewing Samaras’s high key colour portraits, I have a sensation analogous to the experience of acrophobia, as both attraction and repulsion to heights, in this case transferred to the experience of looking. Photo-Transformations (1973-1976) are a number of startling and strange photographic self-portraits. A penis droops forward out of an image of a boy’s head that is projected onto Samaras’s naked groin. A distorted face is projected onto the head of Samaras and photographed. Red, green and blue lights illuminate Samaras’s body as he squats with his back to us on a chair in a kitchen. In another image he shows us his face. In yet another image he presents us with his arse.19

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19 A number of Samaras’s Photo-Transformation works are a part of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra collection including January 28, 1974, February 1, 1974 and March 3, 1974, 1974.
The colours are saturated and the photographs, (Internal dye transfer prints, Polaroid film), are of an intimate scale (7.9 x 7.8 cm). Samaras plays with both himself and the medium of the film, screaming mouth open, touching his genitals, rubbing the Polaroid as it is developing to distort his features, erasing his face and abstracting his body. In other images he appears as a double, both the sitter and photographer.

In photographic series 8 x 10 Sittings (see below) “Samaras plays the civilized person”20, lurking in the back of the frame juxtaposed with the “perverse nakedness”21 of the sitters. A hairy weird 1970s Where’s Wally? Once Samaras is seen in the background of the first picture, the viewer seeks him out in subsequent photographs.

His sitters are positioned in a variety of poses. Their gaze is directed at the camera. Their naked bodies are lit with coloured lights. The scenes are constructed as if to demonstrate anti-photography or how not to make a photographic portrait. A number of the lights are included in the shots. Samaras lurks in the background shadows, hand grasping the cable release, he seems intent on revealing hidden elements of the photographic apparatus through his art making process.

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21 Ibid. 56.
The series *Positions* is a video and still photographic artwork. Freely available pornographic videos have been downloaded from the Internet and the colours of the videos have been super-saturated, creating a vivid palette. The videos were then projected onto my naked body in a photographic studio. A video camera was setup to record me enacting or performing the various roles playing out in the projected videos. During the performance for video I enact or play out the roles of both men and women, engaged in sex acts, generally taking the position and roles of the women in the films. The projected films are distorted as they wrap around my body, providing colour and visually disturbing the image. The saturated, vibrantly colourful photographs made in addition to the performative video suggest a sexual transformation, as a woman’s breasts are projected onto my (flat and hairless) chest.
The recent series of photographs *Nudes* (2004-2012) and *JPGS* (2007-2011), by the German photographer Thomas Ruff (b. 1958) have also contributed to the thinking about the theme and subject matter of *Positions*. Ruff studied at the Kunstkademie Dusseldorf, Germany, under the influence of Hilla Becher (b. 1934) and Bernd Becher (1931-2007).\(^{22}\) Working as a collaborative couple, the Bechers developed and promoted a photographic practice known as “New Objectivity”. Extending upon traditional typologies, that being the classification or categorization of people, things or objects and exemplified through the photography of Eugene Atget (1957-1927) and August Sander (1876-1964), “New Objectivity” sought to make photographic representations in their “full reach and free of distortion.”\(^{23}\)

By choosing to photograph structures frontally, positioning the subject in the centre of the frame, depicting objects “without alterations in its typical form”\(^{24}\), one of the aims of the Bechers’ photographs was to create “the strongest presence”\(^{25}\) of the object, thereby eliminating “the possibilities of being too obviously subjective.”\(^{26}\) Through their practice they sought to “evacuate their own subjectivity from the work, to remove themselves as expressive agents as much as humanly possible from the photographic act.”\(^{27}\) The Bechers strove for


\(^{23}\) Ibid. 306.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.

an austere and pure engagement with the object through the language of photography by using consistent lighting, exacting frontal compositions, pin sharp, uniformly printed images.

Thomas Ruff emerged as a photographer out of this artistic milieu and his early images were representative the values promoted by the Bechers: Pin sharp focus, consistent lighting, large scale and objective photography. However by the late 1990s his work moves away from this formalist approach to photography through an investigation of the Western Art historical tradition of the nude in photography. In 1998, armed with a computer and access to the Internet, Ruff began to search the web for images of the nude. 28 His series Nudes (1998 - ongoing) resorts to using pre-existing images, denying the practice of his own the photography and the problems of objective framing. It is this radical rethinking and approach to his practice, through his subjective selection of online photographs, which has piqued my interest in his photography.

Ruff’s curiosity and his use of scientific and medical photographs, JPGs and pornographic images sourced from the Internet are expressions of his ongoing question: what are the most objective photographs? 29

Discussing his work in a video presentation for Aperture magazine and the photography department in the School of Art, Media, and Technology at Parsons, Ruff acknowledges that, “even the most objective photography is subjective photography.” 30 The notion of objectivity breaks down by the process of Ruff’s subjective image selection.

29 Ibid.
What strikes me most about Ruff’s JPGs and Nude series’ has been the subversion of the culture of the lens and the austere traditions of “New Objective” photography. Ruff has transformed the images from a poorly compressed, lousy visual representation, to a startling aesthetic beauty that is manifested in the experience of viewing the artwork in person. Through the process of post-production editing, Ruff transforms the images and “opens up a beautifying and thus enticing associate space charged with seduction, desire, availability, voyeurism and exhibitionism.”31

From a distance of greater than 5 metres, the printed JPGs or Nudes, look as they would when viewing them on a computer screen, as intact and wholly comprehensible images. As you move closer, the images disintegrate, the representation breaks down and the viewer is immersed or engulfed in a large field of abstract colour, (Stuart Ringholt’s quote comes to mind, “you can feel the colours on the skin.”) While the images invite me in, they are overwhelming, causing uncertainty about what might be revealed to the viewer.

This radical shift from a purely analogue, lens and camera photographic practice to an engagement with a digital readymade image is an aesthetic and conceptual inspiration. This is a part of my attraction of Ruff’s artistic practice. He seems to have revolted against the practice of a pure or traditional photographic process. Ruff is still trying to remove a level of subjectivity through his decision making process. Conflating the impossible synergies between the digital and analogue photographic images, is a bold and radical gesture as he conflates the synergies between in the impossible32 quest for an objective photographic image.

32 An impossible quest as even his selection of an image online is made up of conscious, formal motivations as well as unconscious drives.
Performativity

In the process of making art, thinking is doing and acting is making. Through performance, the artist can be seen as both acting out the artwork and enacting the artwork. At the heart of Positions is an attempt to both seduce and beguile the viewing audience, while breaking up and interrupting the ‘fantasy’ space. If a fantasy space is created through dissociative visual pleasures, perhaps the Positions attempts to disassociate the ‘fantasy space’. The photograph Picture for Women (1979), made by Canadian artist Jeff Wall (b. 1946), has provided a key motivation for the Positions series. Wall has described Picture for Women “as a kind of classroom lesson on the mechanics of the erotic.” His “lesson” is derived from T.J. Clark’s interpretation of Manet’s A Bar at Folies-Bergere (1881-82) and its “pictorial complexities” that point to visual arts as “inescapably overlapping functions of class and sexual politics” and from Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

While the reference to Wall’s Picture for Women is not an explanation of the work Positions, it serves as a “creative resource” for the motivation of the work. There is a degree of pomposity that I both identify with and also reject in Wall’s work. I can’t help but attack or seek to undermine his “classroom lesson.” Is he really attempting to address issues of the male gaze though his Picture for Women? Is his Picture for Women a photographic articulation of a conceptual identification with women or an empathic expression? His hand controls the camera shutter release. The woman is the foreground is well lit by the studio lights. Wall is lurking in the background of the shot, half a stop darker than her. This luring reminds me of Samaras in the back of his Sittings.

The reading of the work is confused, or perhaps it is a strange, conceived generosity that Wall has conceived to “gift” to women. (I.e. “Here, please accept this photographic self-portrait as a gift.”) Is he trying somehow seeks to address notions of the male gaze or objectification through this picture for women? To mix some metaphors and to bring forward both a phallus and an object of castration:

Sue Charlton: “He’s got a knife”
Mike Dundee: “That’s not a knife, that’s a knife.”

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34 Ibid. 26.
35 Ibid.
37 Galasi, Jeff Wall. 26
38 Ibid. 27.
39 The term stop used here is a photographic term and refers to the measurement of light, one stop being either lighter or darker by a factor of two.
Although Picture For Women and the Positions series open questions that have more to do with the politics of sexuality, gender and the image, rather than humour, performance and photography, it is still of value to reflect on the nature and reality of photographic images.

In a recent discussion concerning the reception of pornographic images by teenagers, the discourse ran around the predilection of particular illicit actions, namely heterosexual anal intercourse, facial ejaculations and violence against women.41 According to Australian youth worker and social researcher Maree Crabbe, “Pornography is now our most prominent sex educator”42 for teenagers. Whilst “school-based pornography education might sound controversial,”43 Crabbe maintains, “that young people urgently need help to critique pornography’s representations of gender and sex, and to help them distinguish between what they see and reality.”44

Like Ruff’s Nudes, the artwork Positions uses pornographic images to create a sexual charge in the artwork. A subsequent question to the side of the aesthetic mechanism is: does the artwork “reinforce and amplify gender inequality and sexual stereotyping”?45 The pornographic material used for the projections in the work Position has led to incursions into the discourse surrounding pornography. Although the complexities and

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41 Denise Ryan, “Teachers urged to address porn factor,” The Age 2012.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
histories of the ideas and issues around pornography are outside of the scope of this research project, there is a place for an interesting aside.

“As a result of modern technologies and the loudness of the porn voice, young people today face unique challenges as they negotiate their sexual identities. In this world, we need to find ways to equip and to encourage young people to critique the images and the meanings they see in porn. Significantly, this is about teaching young people critical literacy. As anti-porn feminist academic, Gail Dines, has said, in the contemporary world, to be unable to read imagery is akin to being illiterate in a world of words.”

This statement has a curious echo and intersection with art history through an observation by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy that “It is not the person ignorant of writing but the one ignorant of photography who will be the illiterate of the future.”

The Positions is a video recording of projections of pornographic films onto my body and my mimicry of the depicted sexual actions. It was quite difficult to match the action projected onto my body and it looks like I have an ignorance of my body in space as my foregrounded figure attempts to fit into the projected forms. I fumble around with all the poise of an automaton as I clumsily try to match the projected positions. My flaccid penis flops like my performance. When there is a pause in the action, I look depleted and out of breath in repose. The humour, if it can be found in this work, is tragic.

The tragi-com performance underlines the repetitious, stereotypical and unrealistic depiction of the sexual acts undertaken within the source videos. The exhaustion of my figure, in performing, mirrors the overuse, saturation and exhaustion of the pornographic image itself.


ARTWORK: Aussie Jesus
(“It is you who say it”)\textsuperscript{48}

“A finished work “ John Cage\textsuperscript{49} says, “is exactly that (and) requires resurrection.”\textsuperscript{50}

Chris Burden, Trans-fixed, 1974. (Performance detail)

As well as the exploration of humour, it is through the mimetic act that the conceptual link between the artworks Positions and Aussie Jesus can be made. Or rather it is in the awkward, ill-fitting mimesis that the location of humour can be identified. It is the shoe that does not fit, no matter how hard one attempts to stand with it on. In the performance of Positions, the artist tries (both hard and poorly), to imitate the actions and positions of the women and men in the pornographic videos. In the video he never seems to get it right. His is not the right fit, he is the wrong size in relation to the projection, is awkward, uncoordinated, hesitant and inept. In the next artwork, Aussie Jesus, a similar attempt to imitate is undertaken. The figure in the photograph projects a fixed gaze of self-belief, but can the audience believe him?

There is a similar humour of this ill-fitting shoe, in the films of the French mime, comedian, actor and director Jacque Tati (1907-1982). In the films


\textsuperscript{49} John Cage (1912-1992)

Mon Oncle (My Uncle) (1958) and Play Time (1967), Tati plays the central character Monsieur Hulot, a middle aged man out of step with the encroaching modern times. Monsieur Hulot engages in a physical comedy, not in an “outright slapstick”\(^{51}\) sort of way, but rather his awkward actions have a carefully choreographed subtlety to them. Hulot is at times oblivious and unruffled by the advancement and conflation of modern technical and social life post WW2 in France, triumphantly performing, with balletic poetry, the dance of the ill-fitting shoe.

If the films of Tati are critiquing the impact of the modern domestic and industrial age through humour, then the compass of humour exemplified through Positions and Aussie Jesus seems to point to the nature of image making, distribution and modes of representation. Furthermore it is useful to think and see Aussie Jesus as a response to three significant art historical works: Albrecht Dürer’s\(^{52}\) Self-Portrait (with Fur-Trimmed Robe) (1500), Max Dupain’s\(^{53}\) Sunbaker (1937) and Anne Zahalka’s\(^{54}\) response to Dupain with The Sunbather #2, (1989).

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\(^{52}\) Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528).

\(^{53}\) Max Dupain (1911-1992).

\(^{54}\) Anne Zahalka (b. 1957).
The starting point for *Aussie Jesus* is Dürer’s *Self-Portrait (with Fur-Trimmed Robe)* (1500). This was Dürer’s “third and final painted self-portrait.” The initial appeal of this painting is the location of the work in an art historical context. Dürer’s self-portrait is a key work of art that signposts a shift in the (self) representation and perception of the artist. It is no surprise that Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artist* was to be published in 1550. This was a time where the artists emerged from the guild system to lay claim to their own genius and creative endeavor. What is “shocking” in Dürer’s painted self representation is not only the piercing stare of the artist out towards the spectator, but the gesture of the hand “usually reserved for Christ as *salvator mundi* (savior of the world),” supporting Dürer’s claim that God “‘grants great power unto artistic men.’” Furthermore “God is thereby honoured when it is seen that he has bestowed such genius upon one of His creatures in whom such art dwells.” And so speaketh Albrecht.

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*Imitatio Christi*

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56 Ibid. 103.
58 *The Changing Status of the Artist* 106.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid. 106-107.
Ross Coulter, Self-Portrait as Aussie Jesus (after Durer), 2013.
Creation Myths and Role of the Artist
meets Beach Culture

Post-Modern thinking about art “doubts and demystifies Modernism’s idea of the redemptive quality of the aesthetic experience. On the other hand, it heralds the usefulness of art for purposes infused with social awareness. So art still has a more or less messianic role, only secularized or disguised. Its faithful still believe that it has a power to improve human life though they back away from the spiritualism of the Modernist conception as embodied in, say, Kandinsky's On the Spiritual in Art...The general post-Modern perception is that one should follow the example of Duchamp and his implication that art can accomplish something useful for society, even if that just means shifting some bourgeois attitudes.”

“The purpose of (Conceptual Art) was to restore the mind to art. Once the mind is back in action, every medium that truly exercises it can become a form of Conceptual Art.”

If there is any humour in this work, it could be seen through an understanding of deadpan humour, “literally defined as a flat or emotionless face, the word ‘pan’ being slang for face in the nineteenth-century America.” The dryness of humour in Aussie Jesus shares an artistic-historical relationship with Anne Zahalka’s The Sunbather #2, (1989) and Max Dupain’s Sunbaker, (1937).


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63 Ibid. 103.
64 Photography After Conceptual Art. 30.
Zahalka’s *The Sunbaker #2* is a humourous ensemble of binary oppositions. A full colour photograph of a fair skinned, red haired woman supplants the now vintage black and white print depicting a heavily tanned male figure. *The Sunbaker #2* pokes at Dupain’s iconic image, “questioning its true value by introducing an ironic reading”⁶⁵ in an attempt to “subvert the mythologies and stereotypes that have evolved around our most famous beaches.”⁶⁶

While *Aussie Jesus* does not employ a strategy of oppositions in relation to Durer’s self-portrait, there is a similar, earnest presentation in the full frontal portrait; a connection to the viewer through the direct gaze of the artist. *Aussie Jesus* is a distant echo of Zahalka series *Resemblance* (1987). *Resemblance* was “based on seventeenth century Dutch genre paintings”⁶⁷, the artist drawing on the influence and “role that European art, and the values associated with it has played in Australian culture.”⁶⁸ Like Zahalka, this shared Western art history was taught to me and is inescapable in my consideration of contemporary art practice. In 1/10th of a second, the large format camera conflates Western art history and Australian beach culture through *Aussie Jesus*.

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⁶⁶ Ibid.
⁶⁷ Ibid. 4.
⁶⁸ Ibid. 5.
Not only did it seem necessary to make a representational portrait of the Christ figure, but it also seemed important to perform and represent a miracle: *He walks on Water*. The photograph is a longer shot; the figure appears to be standing on water. His right hand is outstretched as if to show the doubting Thomas his wounds. His left hand’s gesture indicates *salvator mundi* (savior of the world). He is naked, except for his blue Stubbie shorts.
Humour

“Practically everyone is a manic depressive of sorts, with his up moments and his down moments, and you certainly don’t have to be a humorist (sic) to taste the sadness of a situation and mood. But there is often a rather fine line between laughing and crying, and if a humorous piece of writing brings a person to the point where his emotional responses are untrustworthy and seem likely to break over into the opposite realm, it is because humor, like poetry, has extra content. It plays close to the big hot fire which is Truth, and sometimes the reader feels the heat.”

By outlining the territory of what the humour is not, we can perhaps identify the possibilities of what type of humour may be at work and its value in the practice. Laughter is a basic and common emotional expression. Laughter can be an emotive release valve. Alleviating tension, defusing conflict, the impact of humour often times comes from the unexpected juxtaposition of ideas, surprising relationships, usurping attitudes or inverting values. The process of identification, of subjectivity and empathy are crucial to the function of humour.

“… for there is nothing neither good nor bad, but thinking makes it so.”

For some, the endeavor of humanity and that of the artist has to do with the Romantic and poetic. Humour encourages the crumbling and accepted decay of ideal gestures, the artworks produced point to the poetic or romantic, suggesting decay in the position of the ideal. While there are a number of artists already identified in this paper, trying to put a finger on the type or nature of humour employed by this research has been slippery. A problematic aspect to this research has to do with how humour might be evaluated. How are the pay-offs, gags or humour resulting in the work to be judged? Who am I to judge the value or success of the joke or artwork?

“Several (philosophers) have defined man as ‘an animal which laughs.’ They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to.”

What does it mean to be human, what is essentially human and how has this changed though time and technology? A bastion of essential humanity, humour is the defining wall that distinguishes us from animals and machines. That’s why in an effort to be more human, sentient android Lieutenant Commander Data in Star Trek’s Next Generation is always trying to perfect the joke. One of the defining, civilizing characteristics

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69 While this thesis defaults to a British English, there are times when quotations are derived from American English texts.
70 White, Essays of E. B. White. 244.
71 Shakespeare: Hamlet: Act 2, Scene 2, 11.
73 Ibid. 62-63.
that separated humans (us) from animals (them) is our ability to think rationally. To not act in an animalistic manner, to thoughtfully consider, to think and articulate our subjective selves, detached from our primal, reptilian or reptile-like brains. Humans make fun of animals. As the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) notes, we are quick to make fun of animals, yet it would seem to be absurd to joke about a landscape.

“A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at animals, but only when you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it, - the human caprice whose mould it has assumed.”

The ability to process thoughts and thinking has been an essential domain and defining aspect of the human being. This premise was challenged in 1997 when the IBM computer Deep Blue defeated Garry Kasparov (b. 1963), the World Chess champion. A computer, in what is now a world famous chess competition, “out thought” one of the chess world’s greatest strategic thinking minds. The notion that thinking was an essential human activity, something that has distinguished us from animals and machines, was now under threat. This crisis of the advanced capacity of processing (thinking?) machines challenges us to ask the question: What is essentially human?

“At its most triumphant moments, comic art frees us from peril without destroying our ideas and without mustering the heavy artillery of the puritan. Comedy can be a means of mastering our disillusions when we are caught in a dishonest or stupid society. After we recognize the misdoing, the blunders, we can liberate ourselves by a confident, wise laughter that brings a catharsis of our discontent. We see the flaws in things, but we do not always need to concede the victory, even if we live in a human world. If we can laugh wisely enough at ourselves and others, the sense of guilt, dismay, anxiety, or fear can be lifted. Unflinching and undaunted we see where we are. This strengthens us as well as society.”

The artworks made through this research engage in a process that is emergent. That is “arising and existing only as a phenomenon of independent parts working together and not predictable on the basis of their properties.” The central or key understanding and relevance here is the possibility of the unpredictable nature of humour and art, as this Masters project attempts to plot. Solace can be found moreover in the Duchampian legacy that presides over Conceptual Art “with a kind of ultimate authority, foregrounding humor (sic) and mockery as a means to disparage the solemn and transcendental, or to put them into a more realistic context.”

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Performance

It is helpful here to define and contextualise what “performance” might refer to both historically and in the context of this Masters project and by doing so; mark out the territory and type of performance that this research employs. By seeking to find a position for the performances conducted for the purposes of video and still photography, some important distinctions about photography, as a fictitious, performative act devised for the camera, can be made. The works produced out of this research project seem to intersect in a space between traditional notions or expectations of performance and the indexical characteristics ascribed to photography.

Defying the conventions of theatre, in an attempt to assault the civilised and sophisticated European city Paris, birthplace of modernity; American based art historian, author, critic and curator RoseLee Goldberg claims that the performance of Ubu Roi, the brainchild of French symbolist writer Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), was the genesis that evolved into performance art.79 Written in the 1890s, Ubu Roi is a satirical play that takes modern man as its focus, deriding and depicting him as childish, selfish and greedy. The play opened for only one night, closing promptly after a riot occurred during the premier performance.

There are no photographic records of the initial performance of Ubu Roi.

One of the problems of historically locating the emergence of “performance art” is the slippery nature of its essential character. Performance art is hard to define. Jon Erickson, writing in the Performing Arts Journal, states that while he and his cohort, “sort of ‘knew’ what made performance art what it was and not something else...when it came to defining it in terms of its elements, it was clear that the wide purview of various traditions that constitute the theatre, especially in its twentieth-century avant-garde forms, made it impossible to definitively distinguish art from theatre as a ‘live art.’”80 Yet there is general acknowledgment that performance art is a key component at play in an amalgam of artists practices and “movements” from the Futurist, Dadaist, the Situationist, the Surrealists, Fluxus, Gitari, to Abstract Expressionists, from Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) to Yves Klein (1928-1962) and the Conceptual artists of the 1960s.

An action, a happening, a performance has generally meant to imply an act or action, in front of an audience. A performance may also include a variety of activities that may or may not take place in front of a ‘live audience’. Some performances are not seen, thankfully, thinking about the American performance artist Vito Acconci’s81 Seedbed (1971), in which the artist, concealed under a purpose built ramp, masturbated

81 Vito Acconci (b. 1940).
intermittently during the opening hours of New York's Sonnabend Gallery. A performance may be the act of nothing at all. In 1972 Australian artist Neil Evans invited an audience to a performance on the corner of George and Market Street Sydney, but nothing happened. Some performances take place in immaterial space over virtual networks. In Yoko Ono’s It’s for You (Telephone Piece, 1964), a telephone is connected and placed in a gallery that Ono might call and speak to anyone who happens to be in the gallery at the time. Such is the enveloping nature of contemporary art that it colonizes, co-opts and normalizes the activities ‘action-ed’, enacted or put into play by the artist. A more difficult question is what “is performance not?”

Art scholar and writer Peggy Phelan claims that the live performance “becomes some thing other than performance” once reproductive technologies and economies are employed. The documentation of performance, according to Phelan, disavows the live performance act. She claims that, “Performance’s being... becomes itself through disappearance.” Interestingly her argument indicates that the live act is subordinate to the photographic representation and/or video recording. In the game of scissor, paper, rock, both video and photography trump live performance.

In the absence of a material object, document or set of physical conditions, what seems central to the ontological idea of performance is the framing of the work. The performance artwork can be called into existence through designation. By designation, I mean the artwork is called into being, though the naming process akin to the moment of transubstantiation in the Catholic Church, whereby the priest, through a holy ritual, transforms wafer into the body of Jesus Christ. Unlike the Catholic priest, this form of definition is not exclusively the artist’s domain. The performance artwork can be co-opted and framed by the curator or art museum. Art critic, media theorist and philosopher Boris Groys (b. 1947) counters this claim by stating that, “The curator...doesn’t have the magical ability to transform nonart (sic) into art through the act of display. That power... belongs to the artist alone.” The elusive and ethereal nature of live performance, continues to exist through story telling, oral history, written history, art history and through visual records often attained through the process of photography. Photographs and video recordings act as memory triggers of a live performance in (a past) time. A documentary record made through a photographic process.

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83 Yoko Ono (b. 1933)
85 Ibid.
Marcel Duchamp, Rrose Sélyov, 1921. Photograph by Man Ray.
Performance for Camera

Professor in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication, Georgia Tech, Philip Auslander’ in his article “The Performativity of Performance Documentation” makes a distinction between two types of performance art photographs: “documentary and the theatrical.” This is where the crux of the nature of performance in this Masters project resides. Auslander situates Ducamp’s Rrose Séllavy (1921), Yves Klein’s Leap (1960), Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills (1977-1980) as well as the work of Matthew Barney (b. 1967) and Gregory Crewdson (b. 1962) into the category of the theatrical. A work performed primarily for a camera or as Auslander tentatively names it, a “performed photograph.” Rather than viewing the photographs as a study of performance, the works should be seen as a performance for the camera. In a “performed photograph” consideration is given to framing, multiple takes, lighting and formats of photographic medium (from large format black and white negatives, colour negatives, 35 mm black and white and digital files) to printing and picture editing.

Yves Klein, Leap into the Void, 1960.

The real or authentic experience was a central tenant of performance art, particularly in the 1970s, a position that has been problematized

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90 Ibid. 1.
91 Cindy Sherman (b. 1954).
92 Ibid. 2.
93 Ibid. 3.
94 Ibid.
throughout the twentieth century, as has the roles of the spectator and their experience of the work of live performance art. Australian artist Jill Orr confronts these notions directly in a recent series of photographs, *Between Somewhere and Nowhere* (2011) as she "explores society's obsession with authenticity and further discusses photography as a means of illusion." Photographs are based on false ideals or fictions surround us. Orr contends that to some extent we still accept them as truth.

Like Gilbert and George, presenting and performing as ‘singing sculptures’ in *Underneath the Arches* (1969) and “Yves Klein, personified in his *Leap into the Void* in 1960, [both] become the vehicles for their own expression.” They present themselves as artists in the embodiment of the total work of art. The means by which the photographic has been executed, its technical consideration, its physical record and representation have been thoughtfully constructed, operating more than a memory trigger to a performance, their photographic self-portrait stand in for both them and the artwork. It is here that that I contend that it is the *performance* of the artist as the embodiment of the total work of art that appears throughout this project, informed by the practice of both Gilbert and George and Yves Klein, that seems a relevant framework or context to situate the performative photographic self-portraiture that has developed from this Masters research.

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99 Orr, "JILL ORR SERIES / EXHIBITIONS/ BETWEEN SOMEWHERE AND NOWHERE ".
100 Gilbert Prousch (b. 1943) and George Passmore (b. 1942)
Art

At times the open ended nature of art and the abstract questions it poses, can be thought to have application both theoretical and practical situations. Artworks might tell us something about something else. Works may reflect the world in which we live, the absurdity of the existential nature of our lives. Artworks can transcend the self-reflexive discourse to speak to a microcosm of the physical world or the macrocosms of the metaphysical world, the world of ideas.

“‘If you see yourself as an artist and you function in a studio and you’re not a painter,’ Nauman has said, ‘if you don’t start out with some canvas, you do all kinds of things – you sit in a chair or pace around. And then the question goes back to what is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around in the studio.’ He took event that already verged on the absurd and pushed them even further into absurdity by recording them photographically. In consequence, the events turned into serious propositions, with an ironic flavor that recalls early Pop art.”102

Bruce Nauman Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk), 1968.
ARTWORK: Audience

“Performance documentation has gradually created fictions parallel, but not coincident with the original events: performance history is a true Situationist derive – a walk on the wild side following directions meant for another place.”103

Mike Parr, Entry by Camera Only, 1992 (photo credit: The Audience).

The artwork Audience photographically documents an audience who is gathered in a gallery space and has been instructed to imagine that they are viewing a performance art event. This series of photographs explores notions of humour through displacement as it relates to the absence of a formal performance in the presence of an audience. The artwork Positions attempts to explore the tension between the response to the work by that audience that is both empathic and repulsive.104 Audience initially takes the other side of the performance coin: the perspective of the spectators’ reaction.

This subsequent series of photographs intends on representing the relationship between the audience, in the absence of both a performer, and performance. Some key questions arising out of this series are; what is the subject of the photographs? Is there a joke? Who might it be on? Does the absence of performer negate the humour of the audience in the photograph and spectator of the photograph? What does the spectator of the photographs read into the absence of the performance/performer? Why is contemporary art like a joke that people feel excluded from?

104 This would be equivalent to the comedian’s dirty joke.
By drawing on the visual language of 1970s performance art photographic documentation images, I have sought to construct a photographic archive of an audience witnessing a number of performance art events in a variety of different galleries in Melbourne. In this series of black and white photographic prints however, the performer and performance are absent, cropped out of the picture. The focus of the images is the audience looking on with a variety of expressions as they bear witness to a non-event. The interest of this work for me has both immediate, intrinsic as well as long-term value as Australian artist and art historian Charles Green (b. 1953) notes, “through documentation (of performance art happenings or events), the exemplary ‘truthfulness’ of performance deteriorates.”105

In a way the photograph is speculative germ of an idea, whose value the future will determine.

Participants were required to stand or sit in an empty gallery while black and white photographs were taken of them. The subjects were asked to direct their gaze to different parts of the space and to evoke facial expressions eliciting emotions such as boredom, excitement, interest, disinterest and so on.

Audience images endeavor to strip back the excess of image and colour of the photographs Positions, previously inspired by Samaras and Ruff. Drawing on the archive of black and white photographic documentation of Mike Parr’s book “Performances: 1971-2008”,106 the development of the new body of work contrasts the large, subjective, super-saturated colour photographs with smaller black and white photographs of the audience.


Specifically, this photographic series endeavours to contribute to and critique, the archive of performative photographic images that the work draws from. In the place of absent action, the presence of the audience (the subjects) and discrete detail of the gallery spaces are emphasized. The ambiguities of the scenes are a counterpoint to the bodily presence of the previous work, which has heavily involved self-portraiture. The artwork is amplified through the non-performance event, by means of photography. Equally it is designed for latter appropriation into the art-historical archives.

The Audience series of photographs exemplifies the staged performance for the camera. Conceived in part as a critique of performance photography, the Audience series attempts to blend fiction, through the absence of performance action, subject and event. It plays into Green’s assertion that “frequently, the intersection of documentation and event has allowed an amplification of experience more significant than the performance itself.”\footnote{Nick Waterlow, “25 Years of Performance Art in Australia,” ed. The University of NSW College of Fine Art Ivan Dougherty Gallery (Marrickville 1994). 15.} This is an important driver for the documentary style photographs of the Audience.

“There is a sense of mere utility in black-and-white which points to the idea that documentation is really only a supplement to a performance having to do with context, space, action, ideas, of which the photograph is primarily a reminder. Moving into color photography... it’s clear that the photograph becomes less a record of a conceptually interesting event than a visual work to be appreciated for itself.”\footnote{Erickson, "Performing Distinctions." 98-99.}
By framing out and excluding the action or the subject of the audiences’ gaze, the artwork presents the photographic representation of the viewer as more mesmerising than the possible event.\textsuperscript{109}

Ultimately the sequencing of the \textit{Audience} photographs and their positioning in relationship to the other artworks is the vantage point from where the most insight and where the best understanding of the work can be arrived at as these intimately sizes (8x10") prints bare silent witness to the surrounding works.

\textsuperscript{109} Waterlow, Nick. “25 Years of Performance Art in, Australia.” edited by The University of NSW College of Fine Art Ivan Dougherty Gallery. Marrickville, 1994, 17.
ARTWORK: *Nude Descending a Staircase*

The 2013 Windsor Hotel prize has provided an unexpected catalyst for another performative photograph that has contributed to my thinking about the research project. Marking “the 130th anniversary of The Hotel Windsor and the VCA School of Art’s 150 years since the establishment of its predecessor, the National Gallery School” the Windsor Art Prize was an invitation to postgraduate students to engage with the site of this historic hotel. While on a location visit the publicist, Chantal Hooper, told a number of stories about some of the famous guests of the Windsor. The legend of the world-renowned dancer Sir Rudolf Nureyev (1938-1993) farewelling his guests goodbye from the public staircase naked piqued my interest.111

![Francette Levieux, Rudolf Nureyev, “Moments”, with the Murray Louis Dance Company, 1977.](image)

I devised a plan to interpret this gesture by leaping naked across the stage of the State Theatre at the Arts Centre, in my best possible attempt to mimic the balletic beauty of Sir Rudolf Nureyev. The site of the State Theatre was significant as this is where the Australia Ballet, the company that Sir Rudolf danced with, performs when in Melbourne. Once the shoot had concluded, Hooper revised the story of Nureyev’s naked farewell to me in an email. She clarified that it was the Artistic Director of the Australian Ballet, Sir Robert Helpmann (1909-1986) being the person sighted naked, (much to my great disappointment).

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110 The Windsor Hotel & School of Art at the Victorian College of the Arts, "The Windsor Prize," ed. The Windsor Hotel & School of Art at the Victorian College of the Arts (Melbourne: The Windsor Hotel & School of Art at the Victorian College of the Arts, 2013).

111 To be clear however fellow students on the site visit clearly recall that Hooper said that it was Nureyev that was seen naked on the staircase.
Interestingly one film in a series of photographs taken at the State Theatre was a double exposure. Like a ghostly apparition, the image depicts two figures leaping across the stage; the embodiment of both Nureyev and Helpmann? In addition to depicting the two legends of the Australian ballet, the work now had a visual and historical reference to Eadweard Muybridge’s\(^{112}\) photographic studies of the (human) animal in motion and Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase (no. 1)*, (1911). The positioning of the framed photograph on the stairs at the Windsor, tying art history, local legend and a happy accident together in the final photographic work. The significance however of this work, beyond the above allusions lies perhaps in the element of the untrained practitioner, linking with my experience years earlier in a production of the choreographer Lucy Guerin’s *Untrained* (2009 ongoing). *Untrained* was a dance piece developed in 2007 and performed locally and internationally that started as a comparative work.

![Lucy Guerin, Untrained, 2009.](image)

See what the trained dancers can do? See how the untrained fail to do as the trained do? What emerged from the production however was a unique portrait of four men and the clumsy gestures become more descriptive or expressive of the individual traits of the performers. As a participant, non-dancing was dancing. Any action presented on the stage was considered a performance work; in much the same way that Duchamp’s up-turned urinal charged the space of the art gallery with ordination of the (readymade) object as art.

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\(^{112}\) Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904)
Once again the mimetic act and what I have termed ‘the humour of the ill fitting shoe’ seems to be at play in this artwork. *Nude Descending a Staircase* is a performative poetic gesture by the *Untrained* artist, seeking to reveal humanity through a process of thinking by doing and acting as making.
Conclusion

The artworks created as a result of this Masters project rally and respond to art-historical moments while asking questions of contemporary relevance. They react in unexpected ways to (what I think are) key discourses that surround the artist in the world, the relationship of man to the landscape, personal histories, digital and analogue photography in the age of the great technological convergence, the image, self and representation, notions of personhood, contemporary performance and art...

“‘To ask is enough,’ as the (politically problematic philosopher) Martin Heidegger said. The question is not an intolerable uncertainty that must be set straight by enforcing on its openness some recognizable hermeneutical grid. Asking is the creative function. The question is free; the answer, an attempt to bind it.”

This is a list of words my brother does not want me to use in the thesis.

Any combination of:

"...playful encounter"
"...self-reflexive discourse"
"...positioning itself"
"...engage with"
"...notions of personhood"
"...tension between"
"...synergies"
"...theoretical limits"
"...reconfiguring of spatial forms"

And his personal favourite worst, any variation on: "...the artist/work defers any definitive/meaningful conclusion."

This Masters project engaged with a process that has explored different photographic techniques. It has sought to blur photographic materiality in using digital projection in conjunction with large format analogue shooting and printing. It has conflated the artist and subject and the subject of the artist through means of self-portraiture that draws on images from the Western art canon as well as iconic Australian pictures. There has been a playful encounter with humour, evident more in the artwork rather than the written text. The project has critiqued the position of both the man and the artist and his relationship to landscape. It has given historical context and attempted to find a position for the particulars of the performance for the camera. Part of the work seems to be a reaction to the anesthetization of the violence, of the image and of the pornographic image. Rather than walking away from discomfort, a times the artworks rush towards it. Other times the work appears as a

distant figure standing on water. The work does not defer any definitive or meaningful conclusion. All that can be shown is shown through the thinking (non-sequential or illogical as it may be), the thinking was doing through the performance of acting by making.

It has been about an ill-fitting shoe, an awkward moment, an assertion of a position, a position in the landscape of historical and contemporary art practice.

Certainly photography has been discussed and there has been selective analysis concerning performance, much to my chagrin there has been no reconfiguring of spatial form. How can this be concluded? To reflect upon the sequence of artworks produced, one might offer the reading of a psychologically unstable progressions of self-portraits around identity, anal penetration with a carrot, sexually ambiguous exhibitionism, self expression as a performative messianic figure, indulging in deluded dance fantasies who has photographed a series of audience shots in absence of an appreciative, thoughtful art crowd... Now that sounds like a funny, fascinating ending.

T. ...And yet, these pictures, hinged round a MacGuffin, are the very ones that some of the critics have in mind when they claim that ‘Hitchcock’s got nothing to say’. The only answer to that is that a film-maker isn’t supposed to say anything; his job is to show them.
H. Precisely.  

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Henri Bergson, George Meredith, Wylie Sypher. Laughter, Essays on  


Appendices


Ross Coulter, *Positions (#1)*, Type – C photographic print, Diasec mounted, 1x1.2m, 2013.
Ross Coulter, *Self-Portrait as Aussie Jesus (after Durer)*, Type – C photographic print, 1x1.2m, 2013.

Ross Coulter, *He Walks on Water*, Type – C photographic print, 1x1.2m, 2013.
Ross Coulter, 15/08/13 (4), Gelatin Silver print, 20x24cm, 2013.

Ross Coulter, 8/07/13 (3), Gelatin Silver print, 20x24cm, 2013.

Ross Coulter, 8/07/13 (4), Gelatin Silver print, 20x24cm, 2013.
Ross Coulter, *Nude Descending a Staircase (after Nureyev and Helpmann)*, Gelatin Silver print, 70x90cm, 2013.

The end