

with -
Life Enhancement Solutions
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Stephen Humphries laughed. Standing at the top of Looe Street hill, he watched the rain hit the wet cobbles of the steep port city. Things were looking up. Things had been looking particularly good since he got back in the swing of the local casual violence and was caught on camera bottling a man in a pub. He felt more interesting, more experienced, more human. His shaved head glistened in the rain like a well-oiled egg and he felt pumped. The public humiliation of the community service gave him a subtle vein-throbbing ego-swell of righteous pride. He felt like a well-scripted sit-com character, delivering some mundanely heroic monologue in the right place, at the right time, rather than fumbling for a sarcastic comment a couple of hours later like a dunce. Humphries went looking for enlightenment, of a sort, and he got it. He had earned the provincial social kudos that he needed on return to his hometown – in fact, he bought it. Leaning his back against the nearest wall he lit a cigarette. Above him was a line drawing of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* and above that the words *Plymouth Arts Centre*.

Since the time of Michelangelo's divine paintings and the founding of Plymouth Arts Centre, *beauty* as criteria for aesthetic judgment has been quietly outwitted by the charm of *humour*. This essay looks at humour as a strong aesthetic in contemporary art. The focus is on a specific sense of humour in a particular type of comedic exhibition made by artists – specifically *With's* project at Plymouth Arts Centre. It does not cover theories of humour because that is not essential here. Art is funny, much of the time, but to think of it as entertaining is to miss the beauty of the joke. Like the one about the pissoir by Marcel Duchamp, who exhibited a urinal in a gallery and nominated it as art – currently the most popular joke in 20th-century art history. That joke split aesthetic experience into two main parts: the initiative and intention of the artist and then the thinking and understanding by the individual viewer. *Fountain* (1917) was positioned with the flush-spout facing front so that urinating in this particular urinal would cause one to piss on one-self – you get out what you put in. His mischievous gesture marked a key moment in avant-garde art because it decisively shifted the premise of art from being about telling people what to think to making an appeal to people to think for themselves.

Contemporary art is perhaps the only area of visual cultural life that is premised on creative and critical thinking as ends in themselves (unlike fashion, design and advertising). The current prominence of auction prices in art confuses things because it compounds an old idea that aesthetic value (e.g. beauty) is necessarily inherent in the art object itself (because that logic translates most convincingly into financial value and *tangible assets*). Contemporary art disrupts expectations and plays with meanings and ideas, which is also what happens in humour. However, art is not entertainment like *comedy*, because it is presented to the audience in spaces made for reflection and critical thinking. Humour can prompt us to see things as they really are, and then recognise that is something we can never fully do. It illuminates our values and what we find meaningful at a given moment. So back to what made Stephen Humphries laugh.

Every footstep of the pub attack was choreographed. The evidence of the activities and the characters behind Humphries' violence was made public in the exhibition *Violentome™ Stephen Humphries CLIENT#STHVTM3682Q A Public Outreach Initiative from withyou.co.uk*.¹ Inside Plymouth Arts Centre (PAC), the backroom alcove displayed the planning of the scenario in neatly-drawn dance diagrams hung above corresponding architectural models of a pub containing tiny white figures. On plinths were life-size polystyrene heads with booze bottles lodged, with careful precision, into each face. This exhibition by *With* was a detailed narrative presentation of a case study of one *With* Client, Humphries, who has paid for a *Life Enhancement Solution* – aka a *meaningful* experience – to be fabricated

1. *With* is a project that was created by artist Alasdair Hopwood in 2002 and has been developed through a series of collaborations with other arts and business professionals. *With* have exhibited widely at both home and abroad, recently completing a series of projects at Rokeby, London, The ICA, London, Tate Britain, the Hayward Gallery, London, and the British Council, New Delhi. This exhibition, *Violentome™ Stephen Humphries CLIENT#STHVTM3682Q A Public Outreach Initiative from withyou.co.uk* was made in collaboration with artist Sean Parfitt.

by *With*'s creative Agents. *With* employs a surfeit of pseudo-creative-help-speak that is quietly entertaining and at times (deliberately) annoying.

*Violentome*TM Stephen Humphries CLIENT#STHVTM3682QA Public Outreach Initiative from *withyou.co.uk* presented real (yet faked) life. *With*'s super-slick corporate style appeared vulgar in the 18th-century worn-wood domestic interior of PAC. The exhibition, which they dubbed an *expo*, was one unified work that was ingenious and complex. It drew on multiple references and an excessive number (and type) of jokes, with moments of witty brilliance. The core narrative of Humphries' *Violentome*² solution was of truly dark humour but the multitude of works that made up the exhibition were light, clever and playful.

The narrative method of the exhibition involved taking viewers through the chronological process of the case study project as they moved through each room of PAC – or to use *With*-speak – the *Zones*. *Zone 1: Opinion Frame* – PAC's converted drawing room, white-walled and well-lit – introduced Humphries by presenting his bachelor belongings (on the floor in a minimalist-like grid formation) and then displayed the *With* analysis and diagnosis of his needs. *Zone 2: Absorption*, the windowless backroom, showed some of the research and development work produced by the blue-faced *With* Agent as he immersed himself in Humphries' *Violentome* solution. *Zone 3: Results*, upstairs, displayed the public images of the event (many pictures but decidedly no 'fine art'): phone video, dramatic photograph, court drawing, newspaper clipping and enlarged snapshots of the community service. This final room was painted as a bright green chroma-key environment, suggesting the exhibited artefacts will have another backdrop added in at some future point for a different *expo*. The flippant end point of the *expo* was a large vitrine displaying an oversized gift box that contained a single USB memory stick (Humphries' digital backup of the experience) and a public comments board of mainly unfavourable responses.

What was particularly enjoyable in this show was that it constantly prompted imagination of unseen activities and characters: the lonely character of the Client implied in *Zone 1*³ the frenzied focus of Agents' activity that created the *With* wall; a hyperactive marketing team; and post-production editing that is yet to happen. The success of the exhibition lay in its wittiness and the linear unfolding of the main narrative through the signage and artefacts. This allowed the audience to understand the main players (Clients, Agents, Corporation) and then analyse their activities, working out the joke and humour for themselves (Client as alienated everyman, Agent as creative subject, Corporation as exploiter of both, pimping the creativity and agency of the Agent to satisfy the ego needs of the Client).⁴ The explicit joke of *With* is the concept of creative industry, with strangely comic jibes at social-capital relations around art and the consumer's desire to appear to others as a more intriguing, substantial (but fantasy) version of themselves.

With clashes together a parody of creative business, the world of contemporary art and contemporary cults (*With Water* nods to Kabbalah, the fantasist self-improvement to Scientology). *Violentome* is perhaps the darkest of *With*'s solutions and the bespoke violent fantasy idea brings to mind J. G. Ballard's novel *Super-Cannes* (2000), which drags readers through every state of terror while depicting the intriguingly vile death-drive frolics played out by the elite medical staff behind the scenes of the suburban hospital Eden-Olympia. But the horror of *Violentome* is the mundane plausibility of it. *With*'s business (unlike the recreational 'real' experiences in Ballard's thriller) is that of faked experience, post-production trauma and branded creative agency, and it is twistedly earnest rather than immoral. The exhibition narrative does not slowly reveal the violent crime and motive, but instead introduces it immediately as a pragmatic solution to establish the street-credibility

2. "In VIOLENTOMETM Platinum an agent will assume your identity and become hostile in a variety of scenarios on your behalf. Whether at an exhibition or in traditional venues like sporting arenas and bars, we insure that someone is causing havoc in your name. All evidence of your offset experience will be presented in a contemporary archive box with selected documents framed and mounted for your pleasure. WITH WATERTM will be used to assist Product AssimilationTM".

3. The opening paragraph of this essay is my imaginary version of the Client, Stephen Humphries, based on the exhibition.

4. This essay includes capitalisation of Agent, Client and Corporation to make each *With* character distinct.



#STHVTM3682Q FSR fig 3.1,
With, 2007

of *With* Client Stephen Humphries in the small-minded pub culture of the port city. It is a hard punchline and a mischievous joke.

However, the pervasive jokes in *With* call into view the un-credited *creatives* behind the creative industry. While the Plymouth Client appears pathetic and passive, the truly tragic figure is the *With* Agent who willingly subjugates his whole creative output to service the superficial self-improvement of the Client. At no point in the exhibition does the viewer see an image of Humphries, only the anonymous shaved-headed Agent acting on his behalf. In fact, the face of the individual Agent is edited out – *With* Agents have their face painted blue so that later on, during post-production, the Client's face can be superimposed using chroma-key technology. The viewer is also implicated in this dynamic by the dramatic asides made by *With* throughout the *expo*, directly attempting to conscript individual audience members to be Agents (in the backroom there is a stack of witty, personal questionnaires for aspiring Agents to fill out) or Clients (the conclusion of the *expo* show presents Mac computers logged on to *withyou.co.uk*).

The odd pleasure of *With*'s exhibition work comes from it being like a Samuel Beckett play that has been rebranded by *Nathan Barley*.⁵ The visual aesthetic of *With* is snazzy, insidious and frigidly professional but the dark, self-ridiculing humour is the real beauty of the work. *With*'s sense of humour is best understood in the context of the *Theatre of the Absurd*⁶ and contemporary British comedy shows, particularly the humour of Charlie Brooker, Armando Iannucci and Chris Morris. It is the use of satire (to use a literary term) in the language of lived experience (to use a drama term) that conveys the absurd humour in this case. Absurd humour is not nonsense humour (misfired logic), but is characterised by focusing ridicule on the whole situation rather than a real individual or single joke. This sense of humour creates enough distance from the situation to enable viewers to enjoy how deeply irrational (but not unimportant) it really is. The ingenious TV, radio and internet comedy

5. *Nathan Barley*, written by Charlie Brooker and Chris Morris (Talkback Productions in association with Zeppotron for Channel 4; first broadcast 2005)

6. Martin Esslin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Methuen Publishing, 2001 (1961).

shows created by Brooker, Iannucci and Morris mock the self-congratulating idiocy and disingenuous nature of the media (*On the Hour*, 1991–92; *The Day Today*, 1994; *Brass Eye*, 2001; *TVGoHome*, 1999–2003; and *Nathan Barley*, 2005) and politics (*The Thick of It*, 2006–07). These shows mimic the form they are satirising so precisely they seem alarmingly plausible, but the pile up of exaggeration and aggressive jokes makes them explicitly comedic.

With exists as a cool promotional website that offers *Life Enhancement Solutions* and catalogues previous Client case studies. The Plymouth exhibition-work was an exception as most public *expos* of their work have been as *With Events* – elaborate live acts involving unusual performances by comedians, artists and musicians, with actors (and friends) playing *With Agents* and *Clients*, which gives a cult-like feel to the proceedings. As with the multi-media double act *Noble and Silver*, whose work crosses art and comedy (without sitting comfortably in either world), exploded introspection and self-ridicule are at the core of the project. *Noble and Silver* are peers of *With* and their bizarre theatre, TV, radio and art shows seem to hijack whatever frame they occupy. With no linear narrative in their shows, *Noble and Silver* generate uncomfortably intimate portraits of themselves and disorientate the audience using a relentless series of alarming jokes, actions and multi-media wizardry.

While these contemporary comedies seem far from the starkness of a one-roomed Beckett play, they share a raw, dark-humoured portrayal of life that is amused by the bleaker aspects of the human condition. Beckett's one act play *Endgame* (1956) feels like a relentless barrage of multiple types of jokes and humour, which produces some sort of logic exhaustion in the audience who quietly laugh at the obvious jokes then smile, frown, smile, wince and smirk all at different times depending on their sense of humour and how many of the jokes they catch. A long-time admirer of comedy guru Buster Keaton, Beckett wrote *Film* (1965) in which Keaton spends the duration of the movie attempting never to be seen or perceived. This short episode of an angst-riddled life plays with the cinematic frame and draws attention to heavy philosophical aspects of silent physical comedy.

Theorist Martin Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd* is a text that analysed with meaningful insights the implicit philosophy behind the dark humour. To be brutally brief: in identifying the philosophical moorings of playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, Esslin argues that their work conveys the stark reality of existence – that the human condition is to seek purpose in a purposeless life. However, Esslin goes beyond the existentialist angst to assert that full recognition of that futility can enlighten us to the delights of being alive. Absurd drama attacks religious, political and social convention in order to show the difficult truth, that each individual is alone but free: free to be responsible for their own life and capable of finding joy in the everyday existence by choosing to be alive. 'For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions – and to laugh at it.'⁷

This is also the case with comedic exhibition-works such as *Violentome™ Stephen Humphries CLIENT#STHVTM3682Q A Public Outreach Initiative from withyou.co.uk*. *With's* project is not simply flippancy, cynicism or irreverence – it is deliberate cheerful antagonism, created to force viewers to relax and respond honestly. When humour is used in the very making of an exhibition, the idea is that you find it funny, you get the joke, your values and prejudices are the joke (your own private joke). This is different from humour as the *subject* of the exhibition. When a curator chooses *humour* as the theme of a group show, for example, the risk is that the work is reduced to its *aesthetic*, which denies viewers the delight of *finding* it funny for themselves and eclipses the central ideas within the work. Declaring that an

7. Esslin, p 429



#STHVMT3682Q FSR fig 3.4,
With, 2007

artwork is primarily funny, rather than exploring what it is being funny about, short-circuits the processes of critical thinking and aesthetic judgement as the concerns are reduced to whether or not an artist's work is entertaining.

There have been other comedic exhibition-works by artists and these installations are also articulated in the visual language of the artists involved. As with *Violentome™ Stephen Humphries CLIENT#STHVMT3682Q A Public Outreach Initiative from withyou.co.uk* these are not conventionally curated shows; the artists are using the exhibition as a medium. Photographs of the *First International Dada Fair* (Berlin, 1920) show a rebellious and deliberately chaotic installation, clearly identifiable as Dada by the use of montage, the juxtaposition of slogans and works that were hung in an anarchic salon style. It was a joke-exhibition in that it deliberately ruptured the conventions of the exhibition format, undermining it as an authoritative cultural medium. Dada discourse of self-publishing, montage, self-curating and playful experimentation became, and to a large extent remains, the visual art acme for the politicised avant-garde because the artists strongly asserted themselves as situated outside, and largely against, the official institutional culture.

The influence of Dada on contemporary art, originally thanks to Robert Motherwell's book *The Dada Painters and Poets* (1951),⁸ cannot be overestimated. But perhaps the European Avant-Garde was, and still remains, so appealing to young artists that it has constricted other innovations that may have happened in visual art. *With* is unusual in striding purposefully away from the now trendy post-dada-post-1968 style that has become art-world shorthand for 'implicitly political'; instead, they present something more direct, more uncomfortably corporate, more *Nathan Barley*. In *With*'s case, the criticality is fairly explicit – as in absurd drama and comedy shows – and the experience of the exhibition invites viewers to be self-aware and question contemporary ideas of creativity.

Esslin's text asserted the influence of vaudeville comedy on the dramatic arts

8. Robert Motherwell (Ed.). *The Dada Painters and Poets* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1951)



Above: #STHVTM3682Q FSR fig 3.4, With, 2007
 Opposite: #STHVTM3682Q SD fig 2.2, With, 2007. Photo: Angie Hicks

and is credited as being crucial in generating a new interest in the performance work of Futurism, Dada and Surrealism in the early 1960s.⁹ Its impact on the work of Fluxus artists at that time is evident, and their corresponding influence is palpable in the practice of many young(ish) contemporary artists, including *With*. Fluxus works are absurd interventions into everyday life, instruction pieces and performances of real-life actions. Like Beckett's plays, they are usually without metaphysical metaphor, presenting life as life. In the exceptional exhibition *The Festival of Misfits* (London, 1962), a group of artists made an installation that was a theatrical exhibition with an itinerary of interactive works, created to directly confront the viewer in order to awaken their self-awareness through humour.¹⁰

First the viewer's curiosity was solicited by Ben Vautier, caged and for sale in the front window; on entering the gallery and paying viewers 2s 6d (capital exchange and individual consent) they had to physically force themselves through wet hanging skins in Daniel Spoerri's *Dark Room* (phonological awakening); before coming to concrete music and poetry, including Robin Page's *Kicking Machine* and Robert Filliou's composite poetry device (physical and creative engagement) and skittles with all the artists' names on for the viewer to knock down (critique and judgement). The concluding punchline of the exhibition was a brutal articulation of absurd ideas, with a sign instructing 'Kill Yourself Or Else Stop Beefing And Get On And Enjoy Life' above Robin Pages' *Suicide Chamber* (philosophical question of how to live). By way of assistance, the booth offered a range of domestic, everyday tools for the job, including knives, razors and household poisons, to pronounce the responsibility and active agency of the viewer. This harsh humour is not likable, jolly or laugh-out-loud funny but it causes a deep smile, as one understands the point, the importance of life realised though antagonistically dark jokes. Both the *Misfits* exhibition and *With*

9. Michael Kirby. *Futurist Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986) p6.

10. This account of *The Festival of Misfits* exhibition was generated from the original archive material of letters, photographs and reviews in the Tate Archive, London. Also, my thanks go to Gustav Metzger, who in our conversation about the exhibition (in 2006) confirmed that his work was excluded because it was deemed not to be funny, which all work was required to be for inclusion in the project. It seems that because this exhibition aspired to invigorate the agency of the viewer, Metzger's political work (he planned to exhibit the *Daily Express* newspaper each day) would have pointed to the political question, what is to be done?; rather than the ethical question, what is it to be?



11. Fundamentally, public art exhibitions serve an educative role, with individuals (viewers) contemplating things (artworks) in order to learn from the visionary output of others (artists), which is mediated by experts (curators) into exhibitions (making artists' private work public), usually in spaces elevated from everyday life (museums and galleries). This schema is very basic, but highlights the conventions of art exhibitions that artists disrupt when they create exhibition-works. They employ the medium of the exhibition as a curator does – to make an argument (however abstract) visually, linguistically and physically through the gallery space. In the case of art and performances in the public realm (e.g. art interventions or agit-prop theatre), the conspicuousness of such activities in everyday life mean that the educative motivation is maintained and the critical response of the viewer is still anticipated but the audience is not self-selecting, which is the case with the public who choose to attend a theatre or gallery.

at PAC directly addressed individual viewers, were stylistically distinctive and articulated a robust confidence in humour as an aesthetic in itself.

Quin Quag (2002) was an exhibition project by Michael Smith and Joshua White that had a similar corporate professionalism to *With*. It was based around a convincingly deadpan mockumentary about the discovery of an old artists' colony during the planning of a wellness centre in New York State's Catskill Mountains. Like the PAC exhibition, there was a similar feeling of the project being incongruent in a gallery space, before one realised that the *inappropriateness* of the visual language was intentional; then the jokes began to take effect. Although each of the exhibition-works mentioned were unique in the artists' practice, it is likely that the theatrical curation and confidence in how humour functions developed from their performance work.

Performance is different from exhibition – fundamentally, the social agreement is different. Performance audiences are expected to demonstrate their appreciation with applause (and laughter where appropriate) and gallery-goers show their appreciation by adopting a disinterested contemplation of the work (however inappropriate). To make comedic exhibitions is to disrupt the polite disinterest expected from gallery-goers and rupture the familiar conventions of the 'unconventional' world of art.¹¹

Performance on the other hand (humorous or otherwise) is set up to be entertaining and socially cohesive; the audience are one social group responding together, simultaneously, which declares understanding as a group. Each audience member, standing or sitting, is physically separate from the situation portrayed on stage or screen, and engages only their eyes and brain until given the cue to use their body to make noise (e.g. clapping, laughing or booing). Exhibition visitors physically move through the material presented and view work simultaneously, but they engage individually to think about the work and the play of meanings

and ideas that the artist has created. Exhibitions prescribe an unsociable, individualised form of public mingling – the space is dedicated to reflective thought. The hope is that viewers are confident at making their own judgements and self-aware enough to question their own assumptions, which are inherent in the judgements they make.

Humour in art not only amplifies the playfulness of ideas, but appeals to (or repels) viewers' individual engagement in a way that is immediately subjective. Involuntary smiles physically show momentary flashes of our own personal judgement. Humour can reveal to us our social and cultural values and assumptions, and reveal to others our delight in understanding, whether displayed through a smile or embodied through laughter. As the late great anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests, 'Aesthetic pleasure [has] something in common with the joy of a joke; something which might have been repressed has been allowed to appear, a new improbable form of life has been glimpsed.'¹² Exhibitions magnify that the pleasure of humour is the brilliant little moment of understanding something for oneself; without declarative cues of when and why to laugh, people have to *find* things funny – viewers discover the jokes alone.

Analysing humour is as perilous as judging beauty; both are necessarily complex, subjective and context specific. Appreciating humour in contemporary art requires only relaxed, honest responsiveness with the courage to make independent judgements and acknowledge what we, as individuals, find meaningful at a given moment. The implicit intention of *With* and other artists' strategies of cheerful antagonism is to jolt each individual from being a self-conscious visitor to being a self-aware, critical, thinking viewer. Humour in art, particularly in comedic exhibitions, asserts that understanding what we find funny and why is a form of critical thinking – humour is a form of aesthetics. Stephen Humphries laughed, but did not yet understand why.

12. Mary Douglas. *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1993, 6th ed) p 94.