

Making art in a playful way:
How do people find humour
when they experience the artist's play?

By

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the University of Leeds

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies

University of Leeds

April 2025

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To be honest, doing a Fine Art PhD is a painful and lonely process: it continually challenges my sanity and love for myself. Although I have lost a lot of hair in the past six years, I am very grateful to the people who accompanied me on the most unforgettable journey of my life.

First, I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Joanne Crawford for all the time, support and encouragement she provided. I am grateful to her for making the many difficult things in philosophy more straightforward and comprehensible, and importantly, I have found the joy of doing research under her guidance. Also, I am particularly grateful to my practice-led supervisor Simon Lewandowski for his untiring support of me. His humour, modesty, and passion for art education have given me great help and inspiration in terms of art practice, schoolteaching, future development, and self-improvement in the profession as an artist. Also, I'd like to thank Cathy Johns for the support of proof-reading.

I will give my biggest hug to my wife who has always been by my side during my most difficult times and given me the support and confidence, and I can't thank her enough for all her help and care over the years. I want to thank my parents deeply for their selfless love, unconditional financial support and mental guidance to me.

Many thanks to my former tutors Anat Ben-David, Jordan Baseman and Liu Jiajing. They established my attention and love for this research field and provided me with basic research ideas in the early stages. Also, thanks to Dr. Helen Pheby for giving me precious exhibition opportunities. And thanks to Leren Li and Tom Weiyue Liang: they are my friends I want to cherish.

ABSTRACT

This research is about the causal relationship between “play” and “humour”. This study explores play through Eastern and Western artworks from different periods, and the author also uses his own art practice as cases to analyse how to express humour in the creation of art. This is a cross-cultural research project and a study of artistic methods. The first section describes the author’s interest in “playfulness” in real life, then introduces several characteristics of play and discusses their definition through examples; the second section examines play in Western art through both ancient and modern aspects; Section three introduces how Chinese artists play and express humour in art. The author intersperses the theory of humour and the theory of play into the content of the first three sections to explain a range of concepts in humorous works, aiming to provide readers with a better understanding of playfulness in art. Section four is about the study of creative methods. This part introduces in detail eight creative methods of creating humour, and discusses the creation and theoretical methods of experimental art through examples of modern artworks. In the last part, the limitations, contribution and impact of the research are discussed, as well as the author’s views about the six years of PhD study, along with some thoughts about the future.

INTRODUCTION

Think about play: what comes into your mind? Play for happiness, celebration or relieving pressure? And what does play mean to you? Is it like an artist's joke, a childhood memory, an attitude to life, or a positive solution? This research topic can be explored from many angles: it is an interesting doctoral research subject, but full of difficulties. "Play" is very complicated, and the artist's play is itself a controversial topic as it challenges the traditional role of the artist. First, the notion of art I propose here is a process rather than an object – artists can make art by playing; playing by the public can also be art – then what makes artists unique? Second, as a research artist, what can play give me? Bring me inspiration on art practice, or make my art more humorous? Third, does play belong to art? I once heard a saying by an artist, "art will be born naturally as long as you play". I question this statement: if one artist can create art just by playing, why isn't everyone an artist, as everybody plays? One perspective on it is that, although play is a behaviour we are very familiar with, it is far from being as simple as imagined.

Play is involved in many academic fields, such as philosophical and psychological research. However, no matter how complex play is, it always has a channel that can open up to start research. As an artist, I make art by playing, and I gradually discovered a subtle relationship between play and humour during the process of my practice. There are always people who find humour in my work, and some people even laugh when they visit my show: such feedback aroused my desire to explore the relationship between play and humour. In this thesis, I do not intend to discuss what humour is, nor will I focus too much on the philosophical theories of play, because these have been explored by many other scholars, such as Nietzsche¹ and Schiller². My aim is to make art through a playful attitude and method, and discuss how I understand play through my work. In addition, as most of my doctoral studies were during the Covid-19 period, this epidemic and governmental policies have had a significant impact on my research,

¹ L.M. Hinman, '*Nietzsche's Philosophy of Play*' (unpublished PhD thesis, Loyola University Chicago, 1975).

² S.M. Bentley, '*Friedrich Schiller's Play: a Theory of Human Nature in the Context of the Eighteenth-century Study of Life*' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Louisville, 2009).

whether this is my practice, the content of my research, or even the way I have looked after myself. Play is an idea and an attitude to life. After several years of the Covid pandemic, although I have not investigated statistics on people's mental health before and after the epidemic, I guess that laughter and play globally have decreased, or we could say they are different from how they were pre-Covid. In the face of the deterioration of the environment and the emergence of various social problems, I feel that we need to rethink play, understand play, and learn to coexist with play. I choose to put the word "play" in the title of my research because play is critical and it can be applied in many fields in our life: the relationship between play and art is an ineluctable question for almost every artist, dancer, comedian and educator to think about. Furthermore, in different contexts and occasions, whether play is appropriate will enable people to think critically, and the humour brought by play is also worth discussing. Accordingly, my research offers a clue about contemporary life from another perspective.

Play is not only a process, but also a method and an approach to art practice. I will explain the "process" first. It is not difficult to understand that play is a process, and as Johan Huizinga stated in *Homo Ludens*, the process of play is the purpose of play.³ In the context of my artistic research, the "process" here is defined as a series of actions or steps taken in order to make an artwork, and I define all my dynamic installation works as "process art". In an exhibition space, when they are switched on, these dynamic installations will move as if they are playing with each other, and the viewer interprets and appreciates the work through this series of actions. Sometimes viewers will laugh at my work, thinking it is funny, absurd and mischievous. But if these mechanisms are turned off, they seem to lose a large part of their charm, and the viewers' passion and curiosity will be reduced, too. This explains why sometimes we find humour in the process of play rather than from the result or the object. Joke-telling is a process, just as a song, a film or a comedy is. They are different from a completed painting or sculpture, because amusement is expressed through the process in a comedy or a joke. People do not laugh at the comedy itself, they just laugh at the comedic

³ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Beacon Press 1955), p.211.

movements and words of the figures in the comedy. Then I realised I cannot discuss “humour” without “play” in terms of play defined as a process.

Second, play is also a method of art practice and an artistic approach⁴ for me. This idea was prompted by a lecture given by Professor Zhu Yingchun at the Royal College of Art in 2017. Zhu credits nature as his sole source of inspiration and is at his happiest while studying the patterns and rituals of insects and flowers around his studio. His work expresses an inquisitive approach to the world and his belief that every part of nature has a distinctive beauty. Because I am fascinated by humour in art, I thus feel that my intention should be to pay more attention to thinking about the environment in a playful way, and that this approach could make me more creative. “[...] if I choose a hammer as a potential material, I will first have a dialogue with the hammer: I will hold it in my hand and imagine that it is in any scene and try to connect it with any other items. Then I will fiddle with the object, imagine and simulate its moving trajectory. Meanwhile, I could make this moving process disordered, exaggerated, contradictory or absurd in my mind, and then practically use mechanical devices to make the hammer move according to my design to achieve the purpose of interestingness [...]”⁵ A playful thing means it is interesting, artistic and attractive, and might be humorous too. According to this logic, if I make my work playful, then the work will acquire these characteristics. Therefore, I don’t think an artist needs to explain too much about their work, as long as it is playful enough, the audience will naturally engage with the work and access more ideas from the playfulness of the work.

However, I have a remaining doubt about the audience laughing at my work: I question what people are laughing about, and why. One response might be: “the answer is simple, because those artworks are just funny”. Nevertheless, the word “funny” is too vague and general to describe the principle. How specifically are they funny, and what could be funny about them? It is never easy to answer these questions. From my personal experience, when I see an interesting work in the gallery, I initially think the presentation and the visual content are humorous, but apart from that, another crucial

⁴ The “art attitude” here means how I look at art and appreciate art from the point of view of “play” and always try to find an element of comedy from art.

⁵ This statement came from a lesson called “*The Art Practice Research*” that I gave to the graduate students at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in December 2022.

reason for my laughter is evidence of the artist's playfulness when they were making this work, which means I enjoy the artist's sense of humour and how they designed play into the work. This is the exciting part and is also the thing that attracts me the most. I can imagine that an artist who makes a witty arrangement in his painting prompts a humorous response. I can also imagine a clever and experienced comedian who makes people laugh out loud with an astonishing plot device on the stage. The discussion of play is not just the exploration of the relationship between the artwork and the viewer, nor between comedy and the audience. This is a complex process, and it is a process that involves play.

I am interested in the questions above, and I am also curious about the "jokes" and "tricks" that artists design into their art and the things they play with. Therefore, I will establish some key words and discuss what play means, and what play is about, through artists' works, my own art practice and some related theories. I will then develop this with my own ideas.

SECTION ONE Let's go "play"

What is play? How can play be studied academically? Play is a very familiar word for us, and even for some dog owners, just giving the verbal instruction "play!" and their dog will respond (at least, my dog does). As a participatory activity, play exists not only in human life, but also in abundance in mammals. In the animal world, play is a way for various animals to familiarise themselves with their environment, practise skills and communicate. In human society, play not only retains the instinctive attributes of animal activities, but also has more innovative and cultural values.

First, from the perspective of motivation, play is spontaneous. Spontaneous behaviour is produced, or performed through natural processes without any constraint, effort, or premeditation.⁶ Similarly, spontaneous play is exactly what it says – play that happens naturally, without any prior planning or being directed by anyone outside the play.⁷ Play is a human and animal instinct. Sometimes people play with their fingers when they are anxious, or play physical or psychological games with themselves when they are bored, or jump up and down unconsciously when they are in a good mood. An example of my work is when I collected all the skin that I peeled off my fingers during my PhD study to make an artwork: these pieces of skin were picked off whenever I was anxious or nervous over the past six years. I have formed this habit of looking uncomfortable to others since I was a child. I tried to get rid of this "bad" habit, but I unconsciously started to do it to help myself calm down and relax, I feel satisfied and comforted during this process, even though it is an addiction that I find difficult to stop. That is the spontaneous aspect of play.

⁶ L.F. Seltzer, 'The Wisdom of Spontaneity', *Psychology Today*, March 2009. Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/evolution-the-self/200903/the-wisdom-spontaneity-part-1>

⁷ Aussie Childcare Network Team, *Spontaneous Play in Early Childhood*. (2022). Available at: <https://aussiechildcarenetwork.com.au/articles/childcare-articles/spontaneous-play-in-early-childhood>



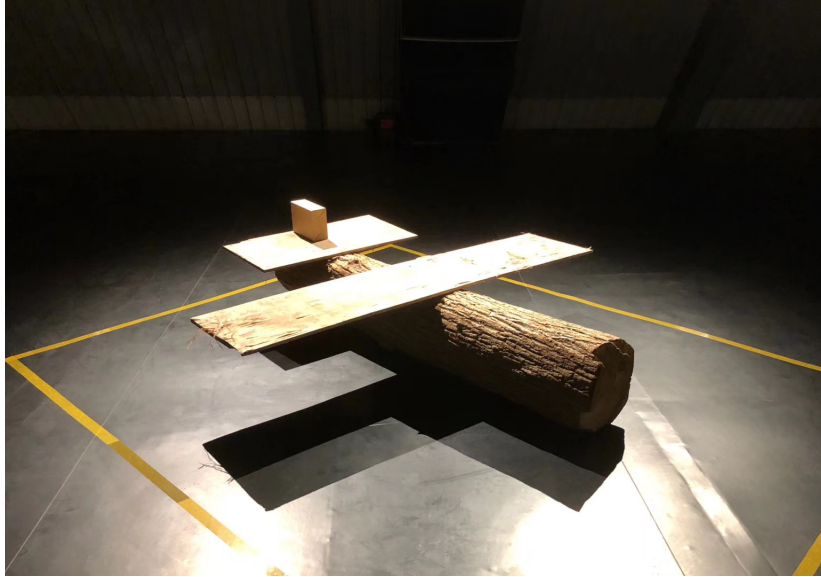
My finger skin collection.

A spontaneous creation is about the artist focusing primarily on capturing their current mental state, impressions, feelings and moods, thoughts or attitudes.⁸ This situation is common, especially when there is a strong desire to create, but no specific theme or idea presents itself. American artist Sarah Sze describes spontaneity as the interesting part of the process. She states that “You can spend a lot of time conceptualizing and thinking it over, and then it’s usually in the actual making and the process where there is something spontaneous. After all that planning, you had no idea what was going to happen—and when that happens is when it’s interesting.”⁹ *Improvisation No.7* (2019) was created in these circumstances. During the installation of the exhibition, I discovered that there was a large vent in the corner of the ceiling, from which the wind blew downwards. I felt that it could be an excellent opportunity to create a work driven by the wind, and this method of environmental adaptation is not only a manifestation of site-specific art, but also a spontaneous creation stimulated by its surroundings. In this case, my most immediate idea was to let the wind make an object move, and I wanted this temporary work, which would not have been on display in the exhibition as it was originally imagined, to be simple, and not require too much processing, because that can more clearly show the uniqueness of spontaneous works of art. So I

⁸ M. Bajnarová, ‘Spontaneous Artistic Expression as a Unique Way of Self-expression’, in *Proceedings of the Comparative European Research Conference*, 2014 (London: Sciencce Publishing, 2014). pp. 127-130. Available at: http://www.sciencce.org/library/proceedings/cer/cer2014_proceedings02.pdf

⁹ E. Richard, “‘Yes, and...’: How Artists Are Using Improvisation and Spontaneity in Their Work’. Reading material. *Art21*, 2020. Available at: <https://art21.org/read/yes-and-how-artists-are-using-improvisation-and-spontaneity-in-their-work/>

combined discarded wood from the gallery into an “aeroplane”, and the design of the wings was simply a long wooden board placed on a tree trunk. With the power of the wind, the wings swayed slowly, as if flying in the sky. It was such a temporary work that it not only became a part of the exhibition, it also showed how I spontaneously used existing materials to create and play in a specific environment.



Improvisation No.7. (2019), wood, 170cm×110cm.

Among all the forms of art practice, I think performance art can express spontaneity more directly than any other, because body movements, facial changes and language are the most direct expressions of inner states. Sculpture, conversely, requires people to project spontaneous thoughts, behaviours, and emotions onto the object. To prove this, I show here an example of spontaneous performance art. The *Drinking* series is a series of performances of drinking water with the eyes. It was inspired by a moment when I was walking in Edinburgh in winter. Confronting the slow pace of life, the slightly gloomy atmosphere and the traditional architectural style of the buildings, I couldn't help but also slow down my physical rhythm. As I drank water I was thinking about how to make this process slower, so slow that I could become one with the environment. Thus, I improvised and raised the water bottle in my hand and slowly absorbed the water with my eye. At that moment, I did not perform this with the idea of performing for passers-by. I was immersed in my own play and just wanted to experience the feeling of “slowness”. Spontaneity is an important part of play, and it is something that performance artists often address during their performances, because

interaction with an audience, changes in the environment, etc. may bring new inspiration or influence to the performing artist, and the artist needs to make corresponding adjustments. Impromptu performances can provide a sense of freedom and creativity that is difficult to replicate in a well-planned performance art work.



Drinking series. (2021), ten-minute live performance, Edinburgh.

Second, in terms of its content, play is imaginative. This is not difficult to understand—children imitate their parents by playing with dolls; a young kitten likes chasing a ball to train for hunting mice; kids play the role of policeman to catch other kids who play thieves; and the characters in online games are directed by us to carry out tasks to bring us laughter and excitement... these cases are evidence that play is something that can help us understand reality through virtual experience. In Chinese folklore, the dragon is a magical animal with the horns of a deer, the head of a camel, the body of a snake, the scales of a fish, the claws of an eagle, the paws of a tiger and the ears of an ox. It is a product of imagination and culture, and the creation of a dragon is a result of imaginative play. In Nanchong, China, there is a folk ceremony called the Toad Festival. As the Spring Festival approaches, people in the whole village will make different kinds of toad sculptures with paper, and take their own “toad” to participate in a lively parade. This activity is symbolic as it is to lure the harmful toad demon out of the village and create blessings of peace and health for the local villagers. The process of making toad

sculptures and the parade was a symbol of local people's trust and hope, allowing them to believe in the pursuit of a better life through play with their paper toads. Similarly, in Japan, families with boys will make *koinobori*¹⁰ and hang them up every May 5th, with wishes that their sons will thrive and become talented as soon as possible. Moreover, the virtuality of play can also be expressed through online games. If a player goes bankrupt and fails to break through a level in a video game, they will not feel pain, but just want to start a new round of challenges, because this is just a game, not reality. However, if the player goes bankrupt in real life, that would certainly be difficult for them. The idea and content of the game come from real life, thus we can learn, gain experience, and embed our wishes and imagination into the game.



Toad Festival in Nanchong.

Source : <http://urbandesign.tsinghuajournals.com/CN/column/item1750.shtml>

Third, from the perspective of process, play is autonomous. In any environment of play, people play according to their own interests and needs, aiming for happiness and satisfaction. We can choose what to play and how to play, or control the duration of the play, and even control the play in the way we want. For instance, there are many ways for children to play with tyres, such as rolling them, jumping on them, crawling into them, etc. Each game has a different kind of fun and challenges and children can choose what to play according to their interests. Play is also autonomous for artists. Such as different artists make metal works with different ways of expression. Moreover, in a film, the same story can be shot by different directors, creating different atmospheres

¹⁰ A kind of flag with an image of a carp.

and effects. This explains that even though many artists have historically addressed similar themes, if we look at the content from the perspective of the autonomy of play, we may find something special, or even completely new.

Fourth, by its nature, play is structured. At school or in a park, it is common to see children playing in circle formations - the actions they perform are usually repeated. Morris dancing, a traditional English form of dancing, is a good example of this, and is obviously structured: the dancers wear specific clothes, and make specific actions. However, one thing that needs further explanation is that the “structure” mentioned here does not just refer to behaviour in play, it may also be ideological. For example, players’ desire to win a football match and the awareness of unity among teammates, or players from different countries, involve different methods of confrontation on the pitch. In other words, some structures are implicit and invisible. This can be seen in a group of children playing a game in a straight line: we can understand the “structure” in terms of this straight line. However, when children play hide-and-seek, how can we find the “structure”,¹¹ as the children hide in completely different places? The seeker needs to find those who are hiding, and they have to avoid being found. This “structure” can be found in the relationship between different roles.

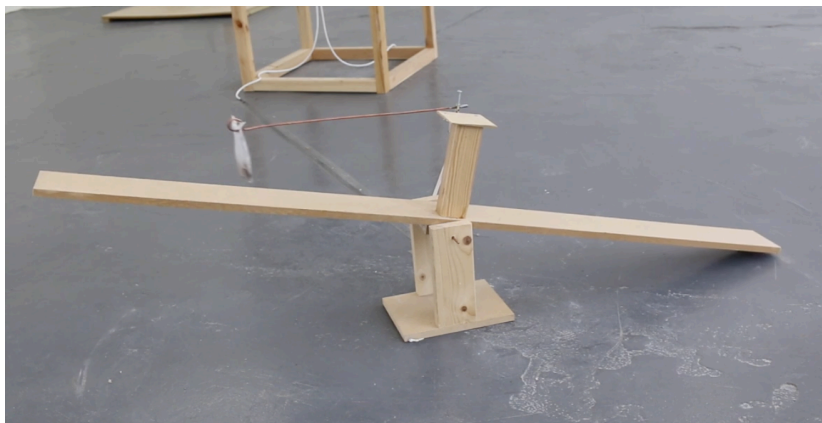


Game “Ninja takes over IT University”. Photo by Flickr user Joao Ramos.

¹¹ The structure of play can be explained by the philosophical concept “language-game” (German: *Sprachspiel*) which was developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his work *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). The concept refers to simple examples of language use and the actions into which the language is woven. Wittgenstein argued that a word or even a sentence has meaning only as a result of the “rule” of the “game” being played. Depending on the context, for example, the utterance “Water!” could be an order, the answer to a question, or some other form of communication.

Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/joaoramos/5621465814/sizes/o/>

I cite here one of my dynamic installations titled *Money*. As one of the most important and ubiquitous things in our life, money is critical, as it is the root cause of many social issues. However, I wanted to interpret this critical subject playfully and humorously, testing the audience's attitude to money by seeing how they reacted to the "play" between money and the artist. Thus I made eight dynamic installations with real banknotes and coins, all of which have their own structure: I designed a mobile track for each work, and they moved repeatedly according to a trajectory. In one of the works, a pouch of coins horizontally rotated on a seesaw. The participation of the coins broke their connection with their original function – the coins became the force of gravity that made the seesaw swing back and forth. In the exhibition, the viewers' eyes followed the coin bag, waiting for the moment it fell. The direction in which the money bag pointed was the position in which one side of the seesaw fell, and this work implied that where is the money there is power. In the picture below, the trajectory of the seesaw is obvious and simple, and it is in such a fixed trajectory that something interesting appears. The inspiration for the work came from a seesaw for children play on in a park. The trajectory of the seesaw is a simple up and down motion, thus this structure and order are already fixed. The children already know that they will follow this simple motion, but the reason why children so enjoy to playing on it is still an interesting question. I don't think that the popularity of seesaw play is all about how interesting it is: it is based on a certain structure, or competitiveness, no matter whether this structure is explicit or implicit.



Money series, mixed media, 2018. Video link: <https://vimeo.com/278226350>

Fifth, play is educative and imitative. German psychologist Karl Groos believed that play is useful and purposeful, and that it offers preparation and practice for future life, so play is about learning.¹² He also compared play with imitation, and he pointed out that all perception must be premised on imitation. For example, seeing an arc-shaped object, the eyes will imitate it by making an arc-shaped movement; and when seeing others laugh, we will laugh along with them as well. Children's play is actually a reflection of their own lives, showing their individual experience and inner needs. Some children enjoy "playing house" - they often spontaneously simulate everyday life situations in the game to build their cognition of the world, as well as learning about trust and boundaries, and how parents feel about their children. In addition, the traditional Chinese exercise "five-animal play"¹³ is also a product of imitation. Inspired by the actions of five different animals, the ancient Chinese invented this "remedial dancing" to help maintain good health. The physician Hua Tuo (AD141-208) devised movements that mimicked the behaviour of the tiger, deer, bear, monkey and bird. This may sound unbelievable, but this kind of exercise has indeed lasted for nearly two thousand years in China, and it must clearly have retained its meaning for it to be still popular today. This fitness culture is built by playing, feeling, imitating and learning in nature. Therefore, whether it is children playing house or adults' Five-animal Play, playing explores the relationship between human and human, humans and nature, humans and society, through creative behaviour, and can be seen as a way of problem-solving. From Schiller's theory of play, I understand that play is educational. Schiller believed that playing means acting in a way that was free from the pressure of need or duty, and thus playing is to enjoy liberation from necessity. It is this experience of freedom that links play with the aesthetic phenomenon of beauty and demonstrates how it can educate the player to enjoy the freedom of creativity.¹⁴ People sometimes play randomly, and from this they start to create behaviours and structures. It could be a game, dancing or even something else. Then they will repeat it, and it thus becomes a part of culture. In 1950, the theorist of play Johan Huizinga articulated the position of play as a cultural phenomenon, one that humans share with animals.¹⁵ Therefore,

¹² K. Lorenz, *Studies in Animal and Human Behaviour*, Vol.1, (London: Methuen, 1970), p.91.

¹³ Also known as "Wu Qin Xi".

¹⁴ G. Dörnberg, "Man is Only Human When at Play". Friedrich Schiller's Ideas Concerning the "Aesthetical Education of Man" and Maria Montessori's Thoughts on Pedagogics', *Synthesis Philosophica*, 21.1. (2006)

¹⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*.

cultural differences in different regions will lead to different styles of play. For instance, a child raised in a rural area may enact a role that relates to farming- taking care of animals or driving tractors. Children growing up in a city are more likely to enact the roles they see there, such as driving taxis and buses. Children learn and imitate during the play process, while also building their own cultural cognition. This is why play is educational, because it allows people to play and create, and it is beneficial to society.

Sixth, play allows failure as well. I came up with this point of view when I was translating an English article into Chinese. I noticed that when expressing concepts in playing music and sport, Chinese people will say “hitting the drum”, “pulling the violin”, “blowing the flute” and “kicking the football” while English use “playing” for all these activities: playing the drum, the violin, the flute and football. Also, in English almost all expressions for playing musical instruments and sports use “playing”, and all Chinese instruments and sports use words like “drilling”, “striking” and so forth. I am not suggesting a hierarchy between the two, but the biggest difference between the two is that in the face of the same inevitable failure,¹⁶ to use the word “play” is to regard failure as a normal element in the process, and the ability to enjoy the power and fun brought by failure. However, saying “drill”, for instance, communicates the wish to avoid and escape from failure. The process in both national and linguistic contexts is the same, but the attitude towards music, sport and life is completely different. In addition, in terms of linguistics, “play allows failure” can also be seen in the workplace: if an employee does not successfully complete a task and brings financial loss to the company, this will dampen his enthusiasm and even make them afraid of failure. But when they lose £100 million in a game of Monopoly,¹⁷ they will not be depressed by this, but will bravely launch a new round of the game. At this point, “play allows failure” has something in common with “play is imaginative” that I mentioned earlier.

Finally, from the perspective of effect and influence, play is relaxing, entertaining and spiritually liberating. This seems to be the most obvious discovery in life, and it is also the collective experience of many people during the process of game-playing. The

¹⁶ Failure is a process that must be experienced when practising music and sports training.

¹⁷ A multi-player economics-themed board game.

philosopher Immanuel Kant believed that art is liberal play,¹⁸ with no external purpose, and that art and play are connected and sometimes have much in common.¹⁹ British psychologist Herbert Spencer believed that the higher animals still have energy left after completing the main tasks of maintaining and extending life, so in their leisure time, when they do not need to make a living, the idle organs will freely carry out imitation activities, and this seemingly useless activity is play.²⁰ As I mentioned before, play itself has no utilitarian purpose: the process of play is the purpose of play. Thus, I suggest that play is related to laughter and liberty, and where there is play, there will be a space full of possibilities. Artists can obtain rich ideas from play, and these open and free ideas can inspire them to dig deeper and go further on the journey of exploring their art practice.

Artists' play

I have offered here a definition of play, so what is artists' play? The term "play" here is often used as a metaphor, and is then applied to the making of art, to the execution of artworks as well as to the enjoyment and the creation of art. Here, play is a state, or a way of making art. There is a clear difference between play and art, although it features in many expressions in English, such as "the art of speaking", "the art of cooking", etc. This produces the tendency to classify art and play in the same category. This is actually not comprehensively true. There are many serious works in art history, such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). This work is a monument to women's history and accomplishments. It is a massive triangular table – with thirty-nine place settings dedicated to prominent women in history. Chicago used female genitalia to metaphorise female heroines throughout history and address their gender-based exclusion from history.²¹ Therefore, art is not play, but play can be artistic, and sometimes art can be made by playing. As the scholar Eva Balke states, "the true artist

¹⁸ K. Sweet, 'Kant and the Liberal Arts: a Defense', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 49.3 (2015) pp. 1-14

¹⁹ J. Williams, *Attention and the Free Play of the Faculties* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

²⁰ T. Henricks, *The Cambridge Handbook of Play*, (Classic Theories of Play, part IV), ed. by P. Smith (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²¹ N. McGonigle, 'Judy Chicago's Dinner Party: Contextualizing the Critical Reaction', *Art Journal*, 1, Article 5 (2019). Available at: https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/art_journal/vol2019/iss1/5

has something of the same attitude toward life as the playful child: their awareness of time disappears when playing or creating [...]”²² Whether a child or an adult artist, they will be passionate and curious about things such as shapes, colours, and the working principles of objects, and they may imitate, learn, and even experiment and innovate. But what is slightly different is that children’s play is about learning, imitating and trying, and is more of a process of absorption. Adult artists’ play is, however, about experimenting, expressing, raising awareness and asking questions based on continuing their childhood hobbies, habits and attitudes to life. This is the process of output.

I think there are two kinds of play for an artist when they are working. The first is the play that happens within the artist’s own instinctive consciousness. I suggested earlier that play is an instinctive state – this could result, for example, in unconscious smears on the painter’s canvas, or in the variable placing of installation art based on the artist’s feeling. However, the second kind of play is the artist’s intentional behaviour in creating works. This kind of play can be understood as the artist’s careful planning, clever arrangement or experimental exploration in the work. For example, traps and mysteries might be set up in the work, or concepts that are worth thinking about, or that make people laugh. In this thesis, I discuss this latter kind of play. However, artists’ engagement with play is still a very broad field. But at least we can identify that the word “play” summarises the artist’s understanding of things, and the way they conceive and create their work. The artist’s process of playing is also a process of creating humour. When appreciating the work, the audience may be able to feel surprises, absurdities, ironies, tragicomedies, and even subversive, disturbing or liberating elements. The American sculptor Tony Matelli, for instance, creates objects that are both disturbing and mysterious through his representational, botanical and abstract sculptures. His pieces, created with absurd details like an antique sculpture topped by a banana, or a sculptural bust with a sandwich, cause repulsion, laughter, shock, mesmerisation and perplexity in the spectator, and also immediately lodge in their memory.²³ So we can see that, behind their superficial positions, these works convey significant connotations.

²² E. Balke, ‘Play and the Arts: The Importance of the “Unimportant”’, *Childhood Education* (18 July 2012), pp.355-360. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.1997.10521139>

²³ ‘Tony Matelli Exhibition Overview’ *Pilevneli*. Available at: <https://www.pilevneli.com/artists/44-tony-matelli/overview/>



Arrangement, (Left) 2022, Tony Matelli. Painted bronze, stainless steel, epoxy, fiberglass, 73.7 x 55.9 x 55.9 cm. Picture from Nino Mier Gallery. *Caesar*, (Right) 2018, Tony Matelli. Marble, painted bronze, painted urethane, 48.2 x 149.8 x 76.2 cm. Picture from Nino Mier Gallery. Source: <https://www.miergallery.com/artists/tony-matelli>

Like play, humour is also a complex word. It is impossible to determine when human beings first began to explore the nature and function of humour. It is likely, though, that this has been happening for as long as humans have sought to understand their own nature.²⁴ In my understanding of humour, and its impact in society, the essence of humour has never changed, but play has become more and more complex and diverse. The advancement of technology has given artists more choices and ways to create, from early frames and brushes to artificial intelligence today; from plaster, marble to mixed media such as the use of sound, light and electricity in art. However, what is interesting is that no matter how diverse the creative methods become, the sense of humour in human consciousness has never changed: regardless of cultural differences globally, Thomas Hobbes' and Kant's philosophical theories relating to laughter, written hundreds of years ago, are still relevant in explaining the reasons why people laugh today. For this reason, in this thesis I will not focus on what humour is, but rather on how artists play, and how audiences find humour in the artist's play.

²⁴ P.E. McGhee, *Humor, its origin and development* (W. H. Freeman, 1979).

SECTION TWO Play in Western art

Humour can be found in traditional and modern art, Western and Eastern art. As a Chinese artist studying in the UK, cultural comparison is something I have had to engage with. This is an important part of my research, because there are differences in the expression and understanding of humour between the East and the West that lead to differences in the way we play, and people from different cultures may not understand the same joke. Like language, humour has a certain limitations and boundaries: the differences are not only between countries, but also between cities, and even towns. Humour is a product of a social culture, and identifying the sense of humour that prevails in a country is a method of approaching its culture. It has been suggested, erroneously, that Germans lack a sense of humour. But every cultural and demographic context has its own means of expression and language structure. Many Chinese people don't understand English "black" humour, and English people often have difficulty in understanding Chinese humour. English people prefer to express jokes seriously, but Chinese people are good at expressing a serious problem humorously. A joke made in a different cultural context from one's own is often not comprehensible, thus there is no culture that lacks humour, only humour that another culture does not understand.²⁵ Therefore, as a product of the fusion of Eastern and Western culture, and also as a "go-between" of the two, I will discuss the Eastern and the Western art respectively in the next two sections. I will not focus too much on works or aspects of them that are already well documented, but intend to share my understanding of them. I will use related works of my own to discuss how Eastern and Western artists understand humour through playing.

Play in Western art history

I trained as an artist under the influence of the Soviet art training system. Thus, producing traditional figurative painting and sculpture, including monumental figure

²⁵ Yan, G.L. and Xu, D., *Study on Key Words in Humour Theory*, (Chinese edition) (Academia Press, 2009), pp. 25-30.

sculptures and traditional Chinese Buddha sculptures, were my main practice in my early years before I came to the UK. The traditional art practice I undertook in my early studies was more about paying attention to the sculpture itself than exploring its context – the relationship between the sculpture, society and the public.²⁶ It took me some time to adapt this learning model when I first encountered contemporary art in London, and also made me doubt the importance of learning traditional art techniques. However, this idea was quickly dismissed. My extensive training in making figurative sculpture has equipped me with keen powers of observation of the aesthetics of the human body and a clear understanding of the spatial relationship between various parts of the body and the expression of texture. It has also allowed me to identify that humour also exists in early figurative sculpture, but that this humour is implicit, euphemistic, and very thought provoking. I feel that, to a certain extent, the humour expressed in traditional art is ingenious and subtle, and less exaggerated. As for humour, traditional art is never out of date – didn't the ancients laugh, as we do today? Artists in the ancient world had a sense of humour, just like artists today.

Ancient Greek theatre gives a fairly good idea of what the ancient Athenians found amusing. But what about the visual arts? Based on vase paintings, we have some idea of what made ancient Athenians laugh. Pottery was used every day, was accessible to everyone, and quick and usually inexpensive to make. The images the painters created were popular with the public. It wasn't all about myths and heroes – instead, the images included many visual puns and situational comedy.²⁷ The Athenian idea of beauty not only applied to appearance, but was also expressed in ideas of harmony, order, and heroic deeds of great men.²⁸ To be beautiful was to be noble, pure, and virtuous. Anyone who deviated from these ideals was considered ridiculous, absurd, and laughable, and anyone who looked different, or came from outside Athens, failed to meet these high standards. People with physical signs of ageing or deformity, or who were foreigners, were all the subject of jokes. Athenians considered themselves racially

²⁶ In the first few years of a sculpture programme in Chinese art schools, modelling ability and the artistic expression of sculpture are the main content of students' studies and the objective of the course. Later on, critical thinking about sculpture in a social context gradually forms the content of the students' curriculum

²⁷ A. Gustafsson, '6 Vase Paintings that Made Ancient Athenians Laugh', *The Collector*, 16 Jul 2023.:

<https://www.thecollector.com/vase-painting-ancient-athens-funny-humor/>

²⁸ Ivanova, E., 'Beauty as an Idea in Ancient Greece' *By Arcadia*, 18 June 2023. Link:

<https://www.byarcadia.org/post/beauty-as-an-idea-in-ancient-greece-101-beauty-and-philosophy>

and morally superior. Their humour often came at the expense of foreigners, and humour in the form of insults was popular.²⁹



Eurymedon Vase (460 BC) by Triptolemos, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, Germany.

Image source: <https://www.thecollector.com/vase-painting-ancient-athens-funny-humor/>

The Persians were perennial enemies of the Athenians.³⁰ In 466 BCE an Athenian fleet defeated the Persians in a battle on the Eurymedon river.³¹ A great victory was commemorated in numerous paintings and verses. In one vase, the Eurymedon vase (460BC), a horrified Persian is bending over and has lifted his hands as a sign of surrender. He is also pictured facing forwards, something seldom seen in vase paintings, and a position that usually depicted extreme ridiculousness or madness.³² On the other side of the vase is a naked Athenian, holding his penis with his right hand, running towards the bending Persian. Moreover, there is an inscription on the vase stating, “I am Eurymedon, I stand bent forward”,³³ which has a strong sexual implication. The classical scholar K. J. Dover believes the painting expresses the exultation of the “manly” Athenians at their victory over the “womanly” Persians at the river, and it

²⁹ Gustafsson, A. ‘6 Vase Paintings that Made Ancient Athenians Laugh’.

³⁰ Christopher Brooks, ‘Persia and the Greek Wars’, in *Western Civilization: A Concise History*. (Portland Community College, 2020, pp.89-103).

³¹ Joshua J. Mark, ‘Battle of the Eurymedon’, World History, 2020. Link: <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1516/battle-of-the-eurymedon-c-466-bce/>

³² Gustafsson, ‘6 Vase Paintings that Made Ancient Athenians Laugh’.

³³ The original text is in ancient Greek. The term connotes the bent-over, rear-entry position. James N. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (London: Harper Collins Publishers. 1997), p.170.

proclaims, “we’ve buggered the Persians!”³⁴ Interestingly, it is believed that the artist who painted the vase was playing a trick, because the characterisation of the two men is remarkably ambiguous.³⁵ If the point of the scene is the triumph of one country over another, the different national traits of both men should have been emphasised, or at least clearly expressed, so this depiction is interesting and curious. The art historian G. F. Pinney suggests that the comic element is the essence of the picture, and that what is being ridiculed is not the Persians, but “heroic” characters, caught behaving like ordinary, incontinent men.³⁶ Thus the comedy lies in the unheroic behaviour of the heroes, who have descended into despicable behaviour.

Therefore, denigrating a noble, positive image is one way to express comedy. I will talk about this method of expression, which I use frequently in my art practice, in detail in discussing “transformation” in Section Four. When writing the script for the video work *Love and Peace* (2022), I thought of the satirical expression of the so-called “victor” in the Eurymedon vase. Thus, I designed the king and his army in the video as an absurd, barbaric and hypocritical image: In narrative way, I told a story about a king accidentally tripping over a stone and angrily and arbitrarily starting a war: he finally wins the war and makes a Peace Monument for his victory. In the video, I portray a stupid, brutal and narrow-minded king. But at the same time, I show the heroic attitude of his army, which fought bravely as if they were the side of righteousness. At the fourth minute of the video, one of the fighter planes belonging to the king, who represents “justice”, is hit by an anti-aircraft gun. It falls and turns into ashes in a ball of fire. I deliberately emphasise and amplify the colour of this tragedy to confuse the audience’s perception and make them feel as if the invaders are the victims. At the end of the video, the monuments representing peace are destroyed, and the audience gradually discovers the hypocrisy and absurdity of the invaders. In addition, not only will the audience fail to be moved by the king’s inspiring oath, his “Declaration of War”, but they will also realise that sadism and patriotism are sometimes allies. What the Eurymedon vase teaches me is more than just how to use comic effect by denigrating a person’s image. The ambiguous identity of the figures painted on the vase and the strongly sexually

³⁴ Dover, K. J., *Greek Homosexuality*, London, 1978, p.105.

³⁵ There are plenty of references that analyse the two images in the painting. One of the references: Ferrari Pinney, Gloria (1984). *For the Heroes are at Hand*. Journal of Hellenic Studies. p.181.

³⁶ Ibid.

suggestive posture made prompted me to interpret the concept of “fake” in this work, and inspired me to think about the moral issues of humour. I discuss this work further in relation to these aspects in the last chapter of Section Three.

Artists use humour not only when depicting humans, but also when they portray animals. *The White Cat* (1894), by Pierre Bonnard, is a good case. Here, Bonnard uses distortion to create a humorous image of a cat arching its back. The cat looks caricature-like, with its disproportionate body, no neck, and long legs which make it look like Dalí’s elephant.³⁷ Its eyes are like slits, ears laid down: with its cunning expression, it seems both tame and wild.



Pierre Bonnard, *Le chat blanc* (*The White Cat*), 1894, Oil on cardboard, 51.9 × 33.5 cm. Image source: <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/le-chat-blanc-8019>

I will discuss another painting of a cat that interests me, by a Chinese artist, in Section Three. Neither the Western cat nor the Eastern one, prompted me to do animal-related

³⁷ Salvador Dalí, *The Elephants* (1948).

work during my doctoral studies. However, what I took from Bonnard's *The White Cat* is not only the odd look of the cat, but also the way the artist played with the idea of the grotesque. John Ruskin and the German Romantic theorist Friedrich Schlegel both emphasised the element of play in the grotesque.³⁸ And the German literary scholar Wolfgang Kayser, referring to the earlier Schlegel fragments in the first volume of the journal *The Athenaeum*,³⁹ summarises in a later book: "[...]grotesqueness is constituted by a clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying".⁴⁰ He also gave the following conclusions: "The grotesque is the expression of the estranged or alienated world, i.e. the familiar world is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange (and, presumably, this strangeness may be either comic or terrifying, or both)".⁴¹ Guided by these ideas, we can better understand the grotesqueness of Bonnard's *The White Cat*. From the perspective of Eastern aesthetics, and influenced by the Chinese culture of ghosts and gods, I am comfortable with the image of this cat – but its human-like appearance makes some people feel strange and even scared. Therefore, as a practical method in my own work to demonstrate my interpretation of grotesqueness, I decided to create a mix of different real-life elements, breaking the rules and challenging order, freely fantasising about the image, as a way to integrate the bizarre, ironic and contradictory into my work. The work *Pizzas* emerged from this thinking.

Twenty-five pizzas with boxes lie neatly and quietly on the ground. When you get closer to see what these pizzas are made of, you will be surprised to find that they are not pepperoni or barbecue chicken, and you can't even find cheese. What you see in front of you are real fossils from the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods: ammonites, belemnites, sponges, corals, gryphaeas, and gastropods. This strange combination gives a surreal feeling: things that we are familiar with are suddenly unfamiliar – the delicious, soft pizza immediately becomes ugly, grotesque, crude, and unappetising. In the

³⁸ The arguments can be found in J. Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (vol. XI of *Works*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, London, 1904), and *Gespräch über die Poesie* (*Conversation on Poetry*, 1800). The latter had spoken of the fecund imagination which the grotesque manifests, and from his theoretical writings in general it is clear that playfulness is an important element, praised by the Romantics.

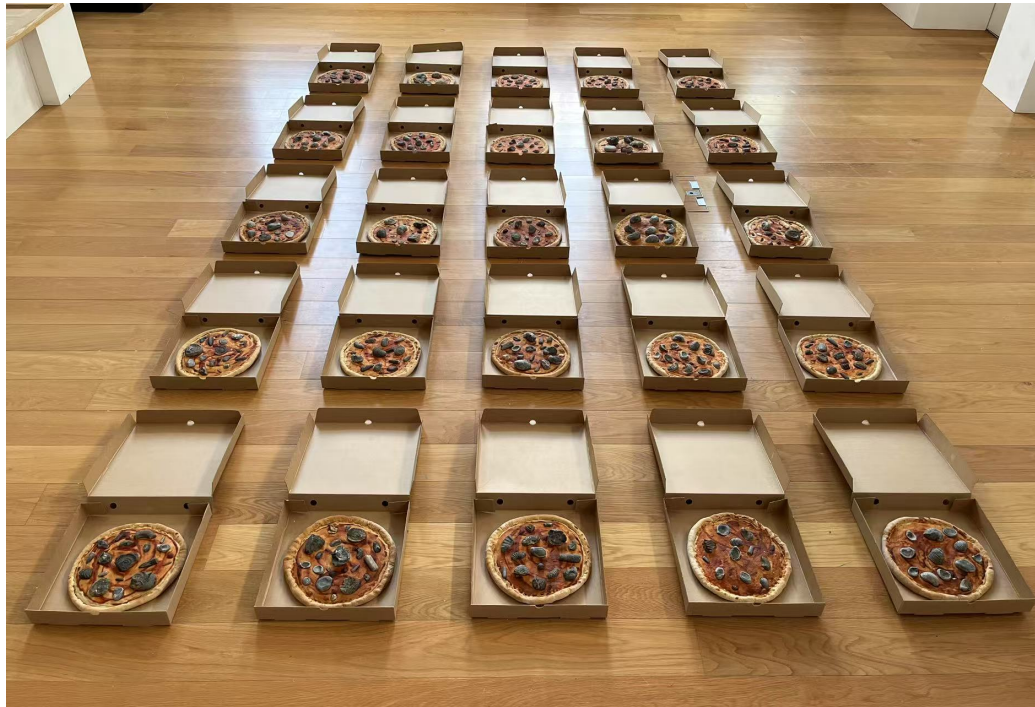
³⁹ *The Athenaeum* was a British literary magazine, established in 1798.

⁴⁰ P. Thomson, *The Grotesque* (Taylor & Francis, 2017), p.16.

⁴¹ Thomson, *The Grotesque*, p.19. The original reference is: W. Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. by Ulrich Weisstein (Indiana University Press, 1963).

exhibition, the audience walked back and forth among them, bending over to observe each pizza, as if they wanted to find some comfort in these deceptive tricks, or hoped to identify the intention of the artist in these ancient “seafood pizzas”.

Fossils are originally traces left by nature. They are like frozen time, telling people stories that happened hundreds of millions of years ago. As the remains of ancient life, fossils offer us a way of thinking about life. Pizza, a product of human culture, is a symbol of popular fast-food culture. However, “fossil pizza”, as a surreal combination of them, is a contradictory expression in terms of time – the contradiction between two different symbols in time appearing at once. I understand that pizza represents fast-food culture, as well as modern, fast consumption. But fossils, these traces of the evolution of life, are placed on pizzas. The ideas of “fast” and “slow” compete fiercely here, constantly playing with the audience’s attention and judgement. The visual effect and concept of the work both trigger critical thinking in the viewer. Although the intention of combining fossils and pizza demonstrates my critique of the contemporary culture of fast consumption, it also critiques the fragmentation of information in the modern world. Visitors to the exhibition reported that they were thinking about the role of human beings in nature, how human culture exists in nature, and the question of the contradictions and coexistence of history and modernity when viewing this work. Should those pizzas be in the museum, or in a restaurant? What is the price of each “fossil pizza”? How fast can a chef make a fossil pizza? Is it edible? If so, how can it be eaten, then? Such questions came to me when I was making the work, and I was immersed in the joy, amusement, mischief, disharmony and irony brought by these “pizzas of contradiction”.



Pizzas (2024), Material: flour, fossils, colours and pizza boxes.



Details of the work.

In many artworks, both Eastern and Western, I find that the expression of humour is subtle and exquisite. A humorous painting, sculpture or even a drama may not immediately make the viewer want to laugh at first, but requires the viewer to constantly seek enjoyment while slowly appreciating the work – this is not an intense

or obtrusive process, although sometimes it seems there is no humour in the work at first glance. An example is the painting *Goalkeeper* (1949) by the Soviet artist Sergei Grigoryev. This was created at the peak of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, which crushed democratic freedom,⁴² and therefore most artistic expression, including humorous expression, of that time appears conservative. At first glance, this painting does not appear very humorous. The work's subject is a football match – a scene that we cannot see at all in the picture. Every single figure, including the spectators, in the painting looks to the right – beyond the picture. However, for these invisible scenes, the artist made the most effort with the facial expressions and movements of the watching spectators, rather than directly portraying the competition between the players. This particular approach is clever: It is interesting to find information and clues from the group of spectators' faces, and this requires the viewer to spontaneously discover the hidden humour in the process of interpreting the work, which becomes the highlight of the entire work. From *Goalkeeper*, we can see that there are many ways for artists to express humour; some of them are implicit and require the viewer to deeply understand and discover the humour through their own experience. Thus, in appreciating *Goalkeeper*, the audience should interpret the humour of this work more from the perspective of the social environment at that time than just judging whether it is funny based on the content of the picture. Humorous expression in the Soviet Union was politically restricted, which is why many people think that this work has nothing to do with humour. However, the artist still pursued humour in the work: he cleverly used the method of “concealing” to subversively create fun in a politically oppressed environment.

On the other hand, there is some evidence to show that sometimes apparently humorous works that give a strong visual impact at first sight are not truly funny, or that humour is not what the artist wants to express most. For example, the laughing figures in Yue Minjun's painting *Pyramid* (2001) do not make the viewer laugh. Instead, they will probably feel a kind of political speculation about this group of people whose crazy, exaggerated laughter disguises their hollow, unstable inner state.

⁴² O. Slobodkina, 'Soviet Art of the mid-1940s – end of the 1950s', *Passport*, December 2010 Available at: <http://www.passportmagazine.ru/article/2093>



Goalkeeper, 1949, by Sergei Grigoryev (1910-1988). Oil on canvas.

Source: [https://arthive.com/zh/artists/18117~Sergey Alekseevich Grigoriev/works/538988~](https://arthive.com/zh/artists/18117~Sergey_Alekseevich_Grigoriev/works/538988~)



Yue Minjun. *Pyramid*, 2001. Colour screenprint on woven paper. Courtesy of Artsy.

Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/yue-minjun-pyramid>

Regarding the expression of humour, I think the East and the West are consistent in some respects. Earlier in the twentieth century, the renowned writer-translator Lin Yutang suggested “you mo” as a phonetic rendering of the English word “humour”. He

explained: “For those who are skilled at ‘humour’, their wit is invariably calmer and concealed. And for those who are skilled at judging ‘humour’, their appreciation lies particularly in a silent realization of the heart, which is often difficult to describe to others. Unlike crude jokes, the more ‘calm’ and ‘silent’ the humour is, the more marvellous it is.”⁴³ Returning to the *Pizzas*, each piece not only gives the viewer an original sense of beauty, but its contradictory elements also offer another way to appreciate beauty, and I think this is the power of “wit”. As for the relationship between humour and wit, the English playwright William Congreve stated that clever people might not be humorous, but humorous people might be clever,⁴⁴ in a letter headed “Concerning Humour in Comedy”, that Congreve wrote to John Dennis in 1695. Therefore, both Eastern and Western understandings of humour assert that real humour is always witty, tactful, unobtrusive, hidden, and it also needs to be tasted and absorbed slowly. When I appreciate traditional art, I am very much open to its charm, and I can naturally see the simple, original and real humour coming out from it, which explains why for thousands of years people have never tired of admiring it.

Another work that I find humorous is the Northern Renaissance painting *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559) by the Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel. In the lower right corner of the picture, as detail 1 shows, there is a person lying on a long table, holding a piece of bread in his left hand, while his right hand is still some feet away from another piece of bread, and he falls down on the table, exhausted. This hilarious moment expresses a Dutch saying: if you can reach this meal, you cannot reach the next one. It shows that life is difficult, but there is a strong sense of comedy in the tragedy, and the narrative is brilliant.

⁴³ The English statement here was translated from Chinese by Tianyou Huang. Original in Y.T. Lin, *Lin Yutang's Autobiography: Volume 2, On Humour* (Qunyan Press, 2010), p. 155.

⁴⁴ Monsieur de (Vincent) Voiture, Monsieur de (Vincent), (1701-1702). *Familiar and Courtly Letters Written by Monsieur Voiture to Persons of the Greatest Honour, Wit, and Quality of Both Sexes in the Court of France; made English by Mr. Dryden, Tho. Cheek, Esq., Mr. Dennis, Henry Cromwel, Esq., Jos. Raphson, Esq. Concerning Humour in Comedy*. (London: printed for Sam. Briscoe, and sold by John Nutt, 1702), p.72.



Pieter Bruegel, *Netherlandish Proverbs*. Source: <https://bruegel.analog.is/>

Also, at the bottom left of this man, a servant-like man in green is holding a bucket (detail 2), and the contents of the bucket are spilt. The scene actually depicts the proverb “there’s no use in crying over spilt milk”. That is, don’t regret what’s lost – but what the servant spilt was not milk, but porridge. Thus it also represents the saying that “he who has spilt his porridge cannot scrape it all up again.” In the picture detail 3 below, the woman puts a blue cloak on her husband, which traditionally meant that she had deceived him.⁴⁵



From left to right, details 1, 2 & 3. Source: <https://bruegel.analog.is/>

⁴⁵ A Danish proverb meaning to deceive someone. This act is a metaphor for adultery, explicitly the adultery by a woman, and the cloak a deceitful “cover up” that helps her husband to “not see it”.

It is very interesting that this work, painted almost half a millennium ago, contains so many hidden proverbs that we still use today. From this painting, the “scattered perspective” method of composition was used by the artist, so that the viewer can engage with all the characters in the painting. face to face. When the viewer looks at the work, it seems that they have entered the world of the painting, talking to everyone in the picture and looking for hidden proverbs in them by observing the characters’ actions. The scattered perspective method is widely used in Chinese paintings, and I will explain it in more detail, and how this method offers enjoyment to the viewer, in Section Three. In addition, I appreciate that the artist set these different characters and stories in a such a large scene when he conceived the painting before working on it. Even though each character represents a different proverb, they form a living society when they are put together.

Humour, geometry and rhythm

From the scattered perspective in Bruegel’s painting, the geometric design can be one of the factors to create humour, and I will introduce this concept here. In a sense, geometry can be thought of as god-given rules of creation, and it is also one of the ways people use to understand the beauty of traditional art⁴⁶. People can study the geometric composition of characters in a traditional painting, the distribution of colours and the grasp of the rhythm in the entire picture, and even the expression of the figures’ movement and their characteristics. In the traditional art of hundreds of years ago, we find that the expression of a lively, tense atmosphere and breathtaking artistic effects in the work is based on a certain geometric framework⁴⁷. Moreover, rhythm in a work of art refers to the visual or auditory patterns created by the repetition of shapes, elements, colours, sounds and movement. It creates a sense of flow and connection in the work and draws attention to certain areas of the piece.⁴⁸ An example of rhythm in art can be

⁴⁶ Michell, J. and A. Brown, *How the World Is Made: The Story of Creation According to Sacred Geometry* (Inner Traditions International, 2009)

⁴⁷ Referencing works *Rape of the Sabine women* by Nicolas Poussin, and *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt.

⁴⁸ Deguzman, K., *What is Rhythm in Art - Principles, Types & Techniques*. Studio Binder, 2023. Available at: <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-rhythm-in-art-definition/>

seen in the work *Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow* (1930) by Piet Mondrian. The painting consists of a balanced arrangement of horizontal and vertical lines and blocks of primary colours. The black lines and the colours are repeated in a regular geometric pattern throughout the entire canvas, creating a sense of order and calm. I associate geometry with rhythm here because they are in a complementary relationship: the geometric cuts and the arrangement of colours in the painting directly affect the rhythm in the artwork, while rhythm in art is based on the language of geometry. One thing to emphasise here is that not all geometric art is humorous, but humour can be found in the geometric expression and rhythm in art works, as I discuss next.

It may seem that humour has no direct connection with geometry in art. But please do not ignore that the artist's composition and arrangement of objects in the painting will directly affect the audience's inner rhythm. In the process of watching art, the inner rhythm of the viewer will change with the ups and downs of the surface of a sculpture⁴⁹, or with the trajectory of a dynamic artwork⁵⁰. If we feel humour in a work, could it be partly due to the geometry and rhythm of the work? This is just a conjecture, but it is very important for me to explore humour from this angle. To prove this, I created a tense rhythm and atmosphere in a kinetic work to see if the viewer could find humour in it. My kinetic installation *Origin* references Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (1512). In this work, there are two boards that respectively illustrate God's and Adam's finger. The finger from God keeps uniformly rotating, and whenever it turns to the closest position to the Adam's finger, the infrared detector beside it will send a command to a pot plant five metres away. Then the plant will shake violently, showing a theatrical view of the moment of creating a life. The process of God's finger rotating is the process of waiting for the viewer. Constant rotation shows a steady rhythm, gentle and calm. However, what the viewer most expects is the moment when the two fingers are about to touch. At that moment, we will look at both the fingers and the trembling tree in the distance with excitement. The arrangement of the rhythm can bring people direct psychological feelings and emotions. Accordingly, as the scholar E. Lilja states: "the experience of rhythm should be coloured by bodily recognition, such as the balance of walking, the joy or anger of a jump, the safety of regular heartbeats. And the focused

⁴⁹ Referring to the sculpture *Points of View* (2013) by Tony Cragg.

⁵⁰ Referring to the kinetic art *Homage to New York* (1960) by Jean Tinguely.

attention, typical for art production as well as perception, means that a piece of art can never be a pure object, and there is never a distinct limit between man and artwork.⁵¹” Through interpreting the work *Origin*, I tried to understand more about the relationship between the movement of dynamic art and psychological states, and this also made me start thinking about how to create humour by addressing rhythm in art.



Origin (2019), Mixed media. Video link: <https://vimeo.com/353980272>

In addition, my performance art also discusses the relationship between rhythm and humour. In February 2020, I collaborated with an architect on a performance piece *The City Game*. This performance is based on the context of the decline in play facilities in Birmingham. Our investigation showed that most of the local playgrounds are located at the edge of the city and are basically too small. The built development and transformation of this industrial city took up land that could have been used for playgrounds. Therefore, we designed a performance work about the interaction between children and urban planners by way of playing a game. In the performance, I played the role of the “demolisher”, in orange, and the other two performers, in yellow, played the “children”: the boxes were positioned to symbolise the “play facilities”, or the

⁵¹ Hopsch, L. and E. Lilja, *Embodied Rhythm in Space and Time: A Poem and a Sculpture* (Penn State University Press, 2017), pp. 436-437.

children's spiritual homeland. I was blindfolded, and explored the area, throwing away any boxes that I could touch and disrupting the existing order. The task for the children was to move those boxes secretly to avoid me touching and ruining them: after I pushed over the boxes, the children would quickly rebuild them.



The City Game, 2020, Performance art, collaboration with the architect Tom Liang, Birmingham.

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/449432222>

Although the loss of playgrounds is not good for the well-being of children, and urban demolition and construction is a serious subject, this performance was expressed by means of a game. The background music for the performance is *The Thieving Magpie* (1817) by Rossini. This overture is notable for its use of snare drums, its cheerful rhythm and its infectious melody, and it expressed the main character very well: a devilishly clever thieving magpie. Like the magpie, the children who are hiding from

the demolisher are nimble and mischievous, spontaneously building their own inner playground in silent confrontation. The whole performance is a process of pulling down, rebuilding, pulling down again, and rebuilding again. Both the demolisher and the children knew that their tasks and their actions restrained each other, so the performance was structured. However, the rhythm of our actions was irregular and unpredictable. No one, including me, knew when I would be able to find those boxes with a blindfold. The performers were both following their own rhythm, but they were still affected by the background music in speeding up or slowing down. The addition of music enriched the rhythm of the entire work: in the first half of the performance, looking carefully made me walk slowly, while the music was also brisk, with a woodwind solo. Then as the climax of the music was approaching, the combination of wind, string and percussion instruments maximised the entire atmosphere. It can be clearly seen that my movement was becoming fast, bold and reckless. At the same time, the fast rhythm also caused the children to speed up the movement of the boxes, which made me more confused, and my movements looked even more ridiculous. The rhythm of the entire piece changed the movements of the three performers, and our own physical rhythm also affected the feelings of the viewers.

Geometry and rhythm can be seen in any form of art, in any period. This is not only part of the soul of an artwork, but also evidence that the artist should spend most of their time thinking and experiencing in their art practice. Through the discussion of the works above, the artist's clever arrangement of geometry and rhythm in the work can increase the viewer's enjoyment of the work. However, geometry and rhythm in art are not necessarily the key to creating humour, but the full expression of geometry and rhythm must exist in humorous works.

My discussion of humour in Western art history has come to an end. I have always believed that learning about traditional art is significant to contemporary artists. Almost all modern art is in the shadow of traditional art, or the creation of modern art more or less refers to the art in history, because innovation is always based on the past. However, no matter how materials and styles change, humour is a constant theme in human development. People have maintained close contact with it for thousands of years, from the sculpture and handcrafts of Mesopotamia to the interesting works we are discussing

today, and humour does not seem to have changed much in nature. However, play, the action that can express humour, seems to have become richer, due to changing times.

Play in modern Western art

Many modern artists have played with humour. This may be because humour has become more and more important in the rapid development of modern society and has always affected people's lives. Most artworks today are the result of artists' free choice in their practice. We don't need to make art for rulers today, as they did in the ancient Egyptian era, nor do we need to make statues of gods, as in the ancient Greece. We can make art with any theme, and express any of the details of our lives. Therefore, contemporary art has become more and more complex, while the way artists play has become more and more diverse. To me, one of the most confusing things is that the artist today makes art by playing with ready-made objects. Some of objects are natural, some are functional and some are not very beautiful. However, on the other hand, traditional artworks are made by artists: they are exquisitely made and often very expensive.⁵² Before the twentieth century, the distinction between traditional artworks and objects seemed clear until Duchamp included ready-made objects in the category of art.⁵³ Objects became more and more like artworks, and gradually the boundary between them has become increasingly blurred.

The fact that artists today treat objects as artworks is only one aspect of the major changes that have taken place recently in art. The definition of art is no longer just paintings and sculptures hung on the walls in art galleries or displayed in halls. Art has been redefined and become an action, or a state, even coloured by absurdity. For example, in Martin Creed's *Work No.88* (1995), the artist took sheets of A4 paper, crumpled them into a ball, and sold them for £180 each. In 2019, the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan taped a banana to the wall and sold it for US\$120,000 at Art Basel.

⁵² BBC, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* (2016), Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Do6sTAmigE>

⁵³ Pettersson, R., *Marcel Duchamp, Concept and Context*. (Institute for Infology, 2019), pp. 7-9.

Modern art has begun to make us feel confused and unfamiliar, and even ridiculous. But if the public is conflicted about it at the moment, maybe we are missing something. Why do modern artists make art in such a “strange” way? How is their way of expressing humour different from that of traditional artists? This is something that I, and many others, am curious about.

Olivier Richon has focused on staged portraits of animals and still life subjects since the 1980s. *Portrait of a Monkey with Fruit* (2008) shows an oddly pensive macaque monkey perched against the pristine grey of a photographer’s studio examining fruit, while the earlier work *Melancholia #1* (2006) shows an extremely moon-like globe with its shadow, that seems to question what reality is. Richon cleverly plays with our allegorical expectations, loading his images with art-historical symbolism, but simultaneously confusing conventional readings.⁵⁴ In *Portrait of a Tortoise* and *Portrait of a Tortoise in Motion* (both 2008), for instance, a tortoise is paired with another blurred one, the sharp contrast between their outlines giving us a clue that although they are the same creatures, the one of them is apparently in high-speed motion, which is comical, but unbelievable.



Olivier Richon, *Melancholia I*, 2006. Source: <https://www.pinterest.nz/pin/420453315186282289/>

⁵⁴ Referenced in: Sarah E. James, ‘Olivier Richon, IBID Projects, London’, (Review) *Frieze*, 5 May 2009. Available at: <https://www.frieze.com/article/olivier-richon>



Olivier Richon, *Portrait of a Monkey with Fruit*, 2008, c-type print, 91x115 cm.

Source: <https://www.frieze.com/article/olivier-richon>



Portrait of a Tortoise and *Portrait of a Tortoise in Motion*, both 2008.

Source: <https://www.studiointernational.com/photography-olivier-richon-anima-l>

In fact, the influence of Surrealism is evident throughout Richon's photographic work. His choice of specific symbols and implausible compositions and arrangements of objects encourage the viewer to find daily objects familiar as well as unfamiliar. The reference in *Generic Still Life, with Lobster* (2008) is to a series of seventeenth-century

Dutch still life paintings that include lobsters. The lobster can symbolise wealth,⁵⁵ while some think it represents instability.⁵⁶ Whatever interpretation, it is safe to say that this crustacean has remained a powerful symbol for artists, from seventeenth century still-life paintings to Dali's *Lobster Telephone* to Richon's photography, as popular now as it was then. I like the arrangement that Richon has made: a cooked lobster with some untidy, untitled books. It is like an artist's deliberate plan to let the viewer look for a relationship between different symbols carefully, within a specific context: to interpret the work in their own way.



Olivier Richon. *Generic still life, with lobster*, 2008. (left).

Source: <https://www.studiointernational.com/photography-olivier-richon-anima-l>

Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Still life with Lobster*, 1643, The Wallace Collection. (right)

Source: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/still-life-with-lobster-209172>

Another interesting question that Richon asks is how to define his work – is it sculpture, a photograph, or even an event? It is hard to define his work as it resembles photography as well as sculpture. However, the relationship between photography and sculpture in his art is worth discussing. It seems interesting to say that a photograph is a flat form of sculpture, that it has a strong sense of space; or that a sculpture is a three-dimensional form of photography, and has a strong sense of imagery. I think Richon's work is the most appropriate example. I would say that he is not only a photographer, but also a sculptor. His way of thinking in the practice may start from the thinking of object – the

⁵⁵ Lobsters could rarely be caught around the coast of Netherlands during the seventeenth century.

⁵⁶ Due to its ability to crawl both forward and backward.

plasticity and storytelling of each object. Then he combines different objects and finds a relationship between each of them. At this moment, a picture is naturally formed in the mind, and recording this picture will become a process of taking a photograph. When viewers look at the photograph in the gallery, they always look for the most original characteristics of each object, and appreciate their beauty as small sculptures. The logic of his practice is the process of proceeding from sculpture to photography, and then back to sculpture.

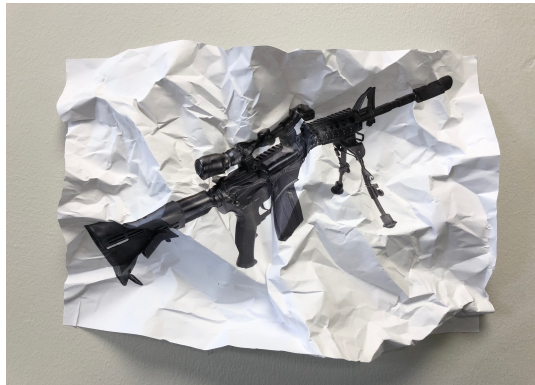
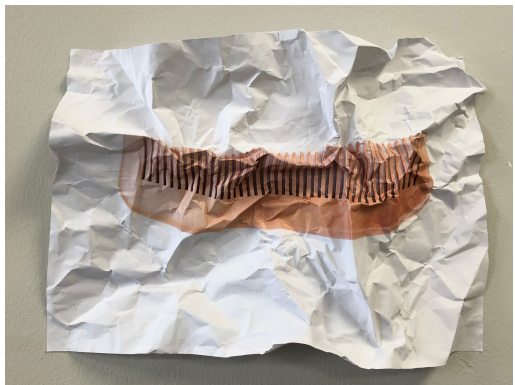
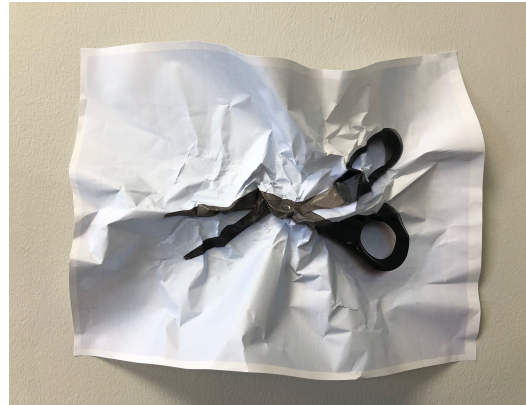
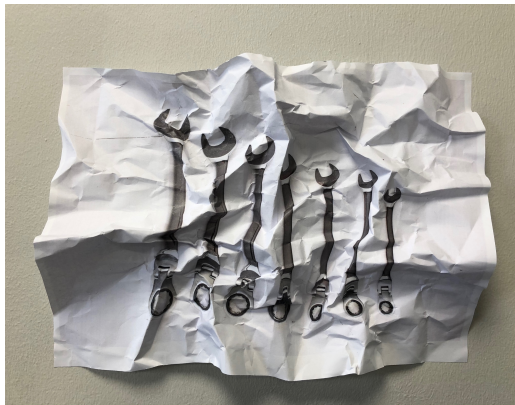


Olivier Richon, *Homo Bulla*, 1991, C-type analogue, edition of 5, 58 x 44 cm, Courtesy Galerie Albrecht. Source:

<https://ocula.com/art-galleries/galerie-susanne-albrecht/artworks/olivier-richon/homo-bulla/>

Out of curiosity about the relationship between photography and sculpture, in May 2022 I undertook a project that aimed to interpret Richon's practice. I took photos of some objects and printed them on A4 paper. Then I squeezed the flat papers to change their shapes, and make spatial fluctuation and texture, turning them into three-dimensional sculptures. Compared to the two-dimensional photos, the undulating surfaces and textures bring a sense of engagement and give the objects character. I intentionally included some functional objects with well-defined shapes and functional

meaning in this work. I twist the shape of some of the strictly industrial products, so that the objects lose their original functions. If these deformed objects were physically real, it would be fun – and absurd – if we used them. We might imagine what kind of hair needs a twisted comb. Or how a ruler without standard measurements has become useless and no longer makes any sense, and the scissors and the knife are no longer sharp and aggressive. The internal usefulness of the originally functional manufactured products have collapsed. Furthermore, I was thinking about what this usefulness in terms of standards is when I was twisting the paper of the ruler. A standard is the rule made by consensus within a certain scope in a certain environment at a particular time. The standard will change, and the reference object will also change. There is no permanent standard, only changing ways of viewing.





Twisted Papers, 2022. Printed pictures.

Both Olivier Richon's and my work referenced here are typical conceptual art works. And their humour requires the audience to interpret daily objects of familiarity by challenging everyday experience and understanding. This is a trick commonly used by conceptual artists, and it is like a trap set by the artist to force the viewer to walk into it. Once the viewer starts imagining according to the artist's guidance, they will be able to find the humour in the work. Another aspect that makes an impression on me is Richon's action in the work. Although there are only between two and five objects in each of his photos, the position of these objects and the meaning of their relationship have clearly been considered and repositioned repeatedly. Regardless of whether the work is defined as photography or sculpture, I would say it is an artistic action, which is what I did with my twisted paperwork. The term "artistic action" nicely sums up the

content in Richon's work: in a still photo, a monkey is inspecting fruit, or a bubble is lingering on a tablecloth, or a turtle is spinning at high speed, even... We are curious about what the filming process was like, how the artist's idea was involved in the objects, what interesting events occurred, and so forth. However, if whole process of making had been recorded with video, it would probably lose its charm. Richon deliberately froze the moment of happening, allowing the viewer to discover the action in the stillness. Thus the process of art-making in this case does not end, it continues for the viewer's imagination and interpretation, and their action is also a part of the creation of the artwork.

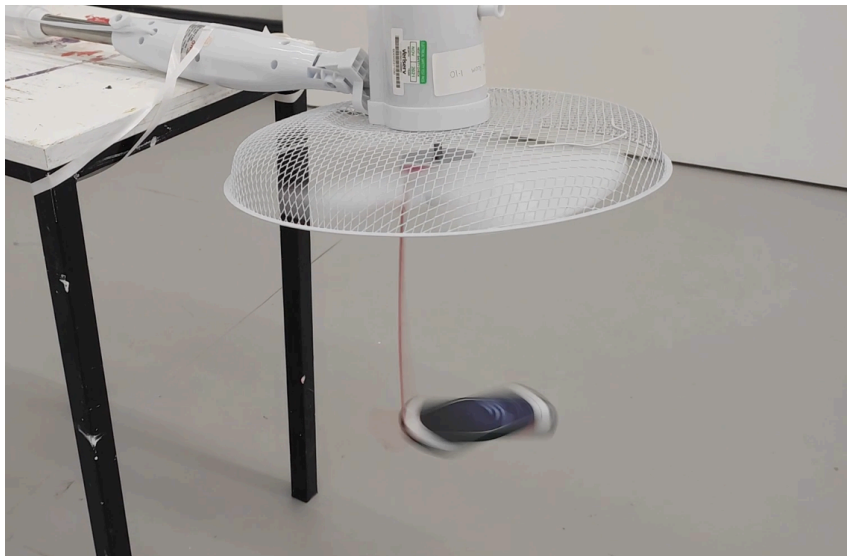
Another work related to action and created by breaking the conventional symbols of objects is the video *Action at Home*⁵⁷ (2006) by David Bestué and Marc Vives. The references in the video are very diverse, ranging from films and architecture to pop culture. This work is both a video diary and a "guidebook" for the various facilities in the house. The two artists invented a series of movements in the house, initiating a series of conceptual deceptions through interaction with different household objects. They used every corner of the house to constantly present surprises, and the process of playing with the objects is also an absurd one. The artists complicated the relationship between the objects in the house by their actions, and they chose not to use objects for their normal function, but exposed them deliberately to complex and absurd procedures, such as sliding soap under the feet to clean the house; turning butter into electric sockets and cutting them out for cooking; turning a ham into an oven glove; reading a book in the light of a microwave... to intentionally create chaos and absurdity. The original functionality of each object was challenged, their symbolic representation was transformed, and they were no longer the objects we recognise in everyday life.

Inspired by *Action at Home*, in August 2021 I made a video work *Events at Studio* to experiment with playing with objects. What I originally intended was to use the elements in the studio as materials to make several physical sculptures, showing the state that the humorous work had already been reached in the studio. But I decided to tell a narrative event instead, and making a video would present this idea better. I spent

⁵⁷ In Spanish: *Acciones en Casa*.

the day wandering around the studio at college looking for potential subjects in preparation for this fictional video. In the evening, my friends and I interacted with various objects in the studio, intervening in public spaces with our actions, but the objects also interfered with us: our use of an electrical fan to propel a balloon around made the entire experimental process full of comedy and surprise; inserting a plug into a socket made of dough to turn the power on allowed us to accomplish something “impossible” that can only be possible in a fictional video... These interactive behaviours were recorded in the form of “events”. Many art works are well known for privileging the evidence of process rather than their final appearance, and the artist believes that the process of making or showing is the essence of the entire work. For example, the American artist Allan Kaprow invited the audience to participate in creating the work, and the behaviour of the audience constantly affected the rhythm and the meaning of the entire work, and also brought unexpected results. I will discuss Kaprow’s ideas in more detail in Section Four. The notion of the “event” has gradually become part of my understanding of what art is, thus, I wanted to inject this idea into my art practice to test whether my concept would work. Although I think *Events at Studio* is strongly influenced by *Action at Home*, as an experimental work the entire practical process is important to my research. Some artists begin a work by playing with objects,⁵⁸ and to create humour in their work requires training in how to understand the characteristics and everyday meaning of each object during the process of playing, and then to guide the chosen objects into a drama.

⁵⁸ Referring to the quote from Rachel Lowe, *Visual Intelligences Research Project*, 2004, available at: <http://www.visualintelligences.com/rachel-lowel.html>



Video screenshot of *Events at Studio*, 2021. Photo by Yue Wang and Bingbing Deng.

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/595562074>

Here, I pose four questions, which may offer more insight into the concepts of “artistic action”, “event as art” and “object in different use” mentioned above. I am not going to answer these questions here, so I ask the reader to consider them. No matter what perspective you start from, your answers or attempts will be helpful to understand several problems in art.

1. If seeing comes before words, what comes before seeing?

2. *Why did you decide to call the entire work “actions”, and not, for example, “performances” or “interventions”?*
3. *Must objects be used according to routine? If not, then what is its significance, or is it somehow a kind of creation?*
4. *Is an unreasonable action absurd? Can a reasonable action be absurd too?*

Play in relation to darkness and pain

In literature, fine art, drama and other art forms, irony has always been a common creative strategy. The most common expression of irony in modern Western art works is “making humour out of darkness”. This means that artists choose to create humour in a period of unusually dark events, such as the Great Depression or global wars. They have played with humour through their practice in this depressing environment, producing what is undoubtedly a very ironic act. Charles Chaplin was a master in this field, and the film *The Great Dictator* (1940) demonstrated irony in its fullest expression. The American comedian Buster Keaton’s films have a quality of sadness. He doesn’t laugh in the film, the audience laughs. Laughter is liberating, it is sometimes terrible too.⁵⁹ Therefore, I think the work of those artists who still insist on creating humour in negative situations is worth exploring. Because laughter is complex, humour is also complex. Humour can come from positive states as well as negative states, and self-healing and enlightenment are definitely not the primary motivation for artists to play within the pain. So, what exactly does the artist want to tell us through “play within pain”?

When I first saw Anna and Bernhard Blume’s *Mahlzeit* (1987) and *Küchenkoller* (1986), I experienced the sense of spinning, absurd, exaggerated, and dizzy expression. These works are like performance art, but the contrast between the stillness of the flat photographic work and the dizzy movement of the content is, to some extent, more expressive and imaginative than performance art. In the picture, the movement of

⁵⁹ G. Mack and Roman Signer, *Roman Signer* (Phaidon, 2006), pp.22-25.

objects and people fills the picture with absurdity and comedy, and the exaggeration of human action aroused my curiosity about the artists' intention or whether it is a prank. When observing a photographic work, we always have a desire to discover the things that are hidden behind the pictures, even though sometimes they are not easy to interpret. The Blumes' work not only has a strong visual effect but also provides much inspiration and imagination that can be accessed by the audience. In *Küchenkoller*, we are attracted by spinning potatoes, so what do potatoes represent? What does it mean when people see these potatoes with such peculiar expressions? As their own directors and protagonists, the Blumes positioned themselves in a small, dark interior environment, where they created a "nightmare disaster".⁶⁰



Anna and Bernhard Blume, *Mahlzeit*, 1987. 7-part photo series. Source:

<https://www.artnet.com/artists/anna-and-bernhard-blume/mahlzeit-vrkNDWaF0DmvOirSQP5YBg2>

⁶⁰ Blume, Bernhard Johannes, *Projects 16: Bernhard and Anna Blume* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1989)



Anna and Bernhard Blume, *Küchenkoller* (Kitchen Frenzy), 1986. C-Print, Triptych.

Source: <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artist/27491/Anna-and-Bernhard-Blume>

In the *Küchenkoller* series, a housewife in a lower-middle-class domestic environment of the 1960s literally finds her kitchen work above her head. Representing the wishes of the woman caught up in the constraints of her time, the potatoes take on a life of their own in her sieve and whirl through the air on their own initiative. The sequence of images was staged by the artist couple in their studio, photographed in analogue form and meticulously edited. The effect of blurring is specifically used to visualise the dizziness of the protagonist. The Blumes were addressing the depressing social atmosphere of postwar Germany with exuberant imagination and an anarchically liberating humour. The artfully posed images were an ironic photo riposte to orderly and obedient Germany, behind whose apparent normality lurked everyday madness. These photos were taken during the Cold War. Germany had not yet achieved reunification and reconciliation at this point. The Blumes' project subverted conventional narrative expectations and notions about the documentary nature of photography. They used absurdism to express their political attitudes, the prevailing turbulent atmosphere and the uneasiness of the German people. As Lisa Kurzner's article "Project: Bernhard and Anna Blume" points out: "[...] they confront the conformism of postwar Germany through their nonsensical kitchen activities".⁶¹

⁶¹ Ibid.

Through the use of ordinary objects in the films, the simple and obdurate is made transcendental. Stirring up a strong sense of comedy and absurdity within the social context of grey exemplifies the beauty of satire.

In my practice, there is “play” that I have briefly mentioned in Section One, which demonstrates my anxiety and uneasiness. *Peelings* (2019-) is an unfinished work that started in the first year of my PhD and has continued to the present. It is more like a everyday habit or routine behaviour than a work that waiting to be finished. Peeling off skin from my fingers is a way for me to relieve stress and find temporary calm: it is obviously not my intention to do it, but I do it out of instinct. When I am nervous and anxious, I will scratch my fingers with a nail to find a place where the thickest skin is located, while considering which is the best direction in which to start tearing. Then I start tearing it, with temporary satisfaction, comfort, excitement and ongoing greed, then find another finger to repeat this peeling behaviour. I dried all the peeled skin from the first year of the research to the present⁶² and carefully kept them in a container. I chose to play with my fingers to decompress: even though this method is disgusting, extreme and incomprehensible to many people, for me this kind of play offered satisfaction and joy. Therefore, I realised that I could somehow record this behaviour in my thesis, or finally display it as an artwork in my exhibition to show that it is an important exploration and an attempt for me to learn and understand play. Thus, play can be positive but is sometimes painful, and *Peelings* wanders and switches between pain and ease. This contradiction is a problem that artists will encounter in their practice, and it also became an inevitable issue for me when I was exploring the relationship between play and humour.

Through the discussion of the above projects, I have identified that ideas and creative desires can be born out of negative states. There are many such cases in the history of

⁶² The reasons for tearing my finger skin during the PhD include: The departure of the doctoral supervisor in the first year; The dormitory was deliberately set on fire by a criminal; The PhD transfer exam; An operation in hospital and hospitalisation; Writing the dissertation; Looking for literature and references; Looking for inspiration of art practice; The meetings with the supervisor; Presentation; The temple that required investigation and interview was demolished; The modification of the doctoral research title; The pain and loneliness during Covid-19; The death of my grandmother; The ending of a three-year long distance relationship and getting married; The guilt caused by the stagnation of doctoral research; The visa was about to expire but I hadn't completed my study yet, etc. I have collected all the finger skins in the past six years, and the current net weight of the dry skins is 80g.

art. For example, an entry in Edvard Munch's diary, dated 22nd January 1892, records the inspiration for *The Scream*:

I was walking along the road with two friends – the sun went down
– I felt a gust of melancholy – suddenly the sky turned a bloody red.
I stopped, leaned against the railing, tired to death – as the flaming
skies hung like blood and sword over the blue-black fjord and the
city – my friends went on – I stood there trembling with anxiety –
and I felt a vast infinite scream through nature.⁶³

One of the greatest anti-war paintings in history is *Guernica* (1937) by Pablo Picasso. He painted this work at his home in Paris in response to the 26th April 1937 bombing of the town of Guernica, in Spain, by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The artist painted it in grey, black and white, portraying the suffering wrought by violence and chaos through Cubist techniques of expression.

Through the interpretation of *Guernica* and the study of other contemporary art works, I have always believed that one of the reasons for making art is to raise awareness of social issues. Therefore, I think successful artists are often ones who are keenly aware of the problems in society and understand their own negative emotions, then exposing and interpreting these issues through creative approaches, without telling people what to think, but to make them think. Social issues such as class conflict, racial discrimination and gender equality will also inspire artists to create in the face of difficulty. Covid-19 is a recent issue that cannot be ignored. Its negative impact on artists has been huge: the closure of art galleries meant that artists lost the opportunity to make exhibitions; the number of audiences was greatly reduced; the activities and confidence of art students also decreased; social connections relied on the internet and social media, and too much spam led to an information explosion and made us anxious... Artists went through an unusual time, but I also think this painful period was not entirely negative. Sometimes it trained me to look at problems more deeply from different angles, and it also allowed me to rethink the quote “art cannot change the

⁶³ A. Sooke, ‘What is the Meaning of The Scream? *BBC Culture*, 2016. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160303-what-is-the-meaning-of-the-scream>

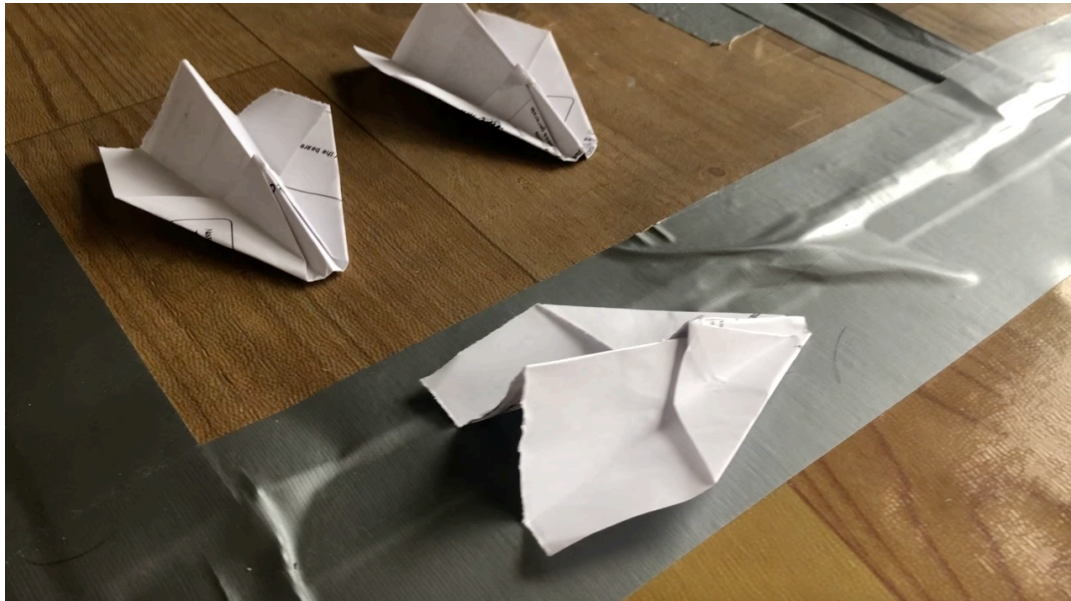
world, but art can change the way of seeing the world⁶⁴” in the context of what can art bring to people in the face of suffering. At the same time, the humorous works created during the pandemic also gave me a more dimensional understanding of humour, such as the difference between the humour created “before” and “during” the pandemic, and the meaning of creating humour during the period of lockdown, and how the public would evaluate this action... now I show my ideas through my own work.

The video work *Love and Peace*⁶⁵ (2022) that I first introduced in the chapter Play in Western art history was created during a tough time of self-isolation, which was also the most tense period of Covid-19 in China. Although this work was finally presented in the form of a video, I think one of the essential aspects of this work is that it can be defined as a site-specific work. This term explains better my intention in making this work and the way I played with objects, as well as the social context of my creation. During the strict ten-day quarantine, I used all the materials I could find in the isolation room and played with these objects, attempting to find inspiration. I made up a story about a king accidentally tripping over a stone and angrily and arbitrarily starting a war: he finally won the war and made a Peace Monument for his victory. I directed the storyline in a narrative way, making the objects I found participate in the story as characters. I used the tape wrapped around the floor as an airstrip, filled the bathtub with water as a naval battle venue, used the water bottles provided by the hotel during quarantine as missiles, etc. All potential resources were utilised. Although making this work in the isolation room with the themes, types and quantities of materials available was severely limited, the expression of humour through the only resources I had was also the most attractive part of this work. Thinking and searching for materials are also part of creative activity, because to a large extent my work has engaged with materials first and the story later. I started by looking at every corner of the room and thinking about what items I would have and what they could do in the place. Then I played with the found objects in my hands, and after a lot of interaction with them, I recorded all the scattered plots of these interactions (or actions) on paper. During this process, I found that limited materials did not limit my imagination, but forced me to a certain

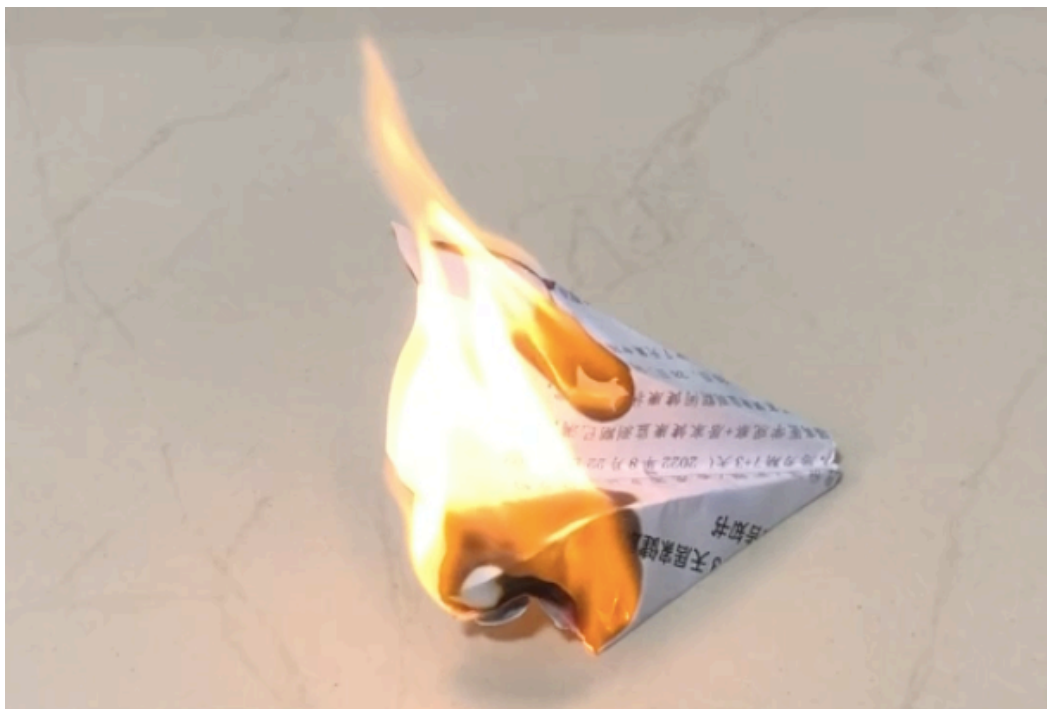
⁶⁴ Stated by the artist JR, in ‘My Wish: Use Art to Turn the World Inside Out’, TED talk (2011). Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/jr_my_wish_use_art_to_turn_the_world_inside_out

⁶⁵ The video is available at: <https://vimeo.com/751683611>

extent to improvise with what I already had. I acknowledge that this is a highly efficient way of creating, and I will introduce this approach in detail in Section Four.



Love and Peace screenshot one: the “fighter-planes” on “airstrip”.



Screenshot two: the “plane” is shot down by “antiaircraft guns”.



Screenshot three: the “monument” made by the “king” to celebrate the victory in battle.

DECLARATION

I would like to take this opportunity to address you, because we have come to the critical moment of the war. Just now, when I was walking, people in our neighbouring country put a stone on the road I used to walk, so that I fell down and got hurt. They didn't explain the reason, didn't apologise, and didn't compensate. We love and respect our neighbours, but I don't know when they were completely brainwashed and became so rude and cruel that you can't believe them. Maybe they are even more evil than you think. But please don't panic, as the king, I will bring you safety, I will give you enough food, because all people are my citizens.

I will write a letter to my neighbour, and I think we have to let them feel pain and shame, also we shall teach their leaders a lesson: "The world is not black or white. It's like you see a part of this world does not mean you know it well. My fall and pain are just phenomena, and the fundamental existence is fully the wave of reactionary in your country! So I need to protect my people. I wonder if you will consider your people as well? I won't let them get hurt, it will never happen!"

If we don't fight back, they will occupy our land and take away my people's wealth little by little. Then the sky will not be blue, and the water we drink will no longer be clean and our breath will cease. They will take away our loved ones and destroy our homes. My dear compatriots, my dear people, we are a great nation, and we have the supreme soul and blood lineage. When they let me fall, they showed their contempt for my whole country. So we must defeat them. You will become the pride of this country, and I will always support you and to be with you.

Finally, I want to say: My dear people, stand up, it is the time now. Their stupidity is beyond our understanding, and their evil is beyond what we expect. We will win in the end, because we have justice. Where there is justice, there will be victory and peace. My fellow citizens, here is your home, it is time to take up your arms and defend your country. Here, I want to give you my highest respect, because I love this country, I love you, and all we will do is to get the final freedom.

The "king's" declaration of war in the storyline.⁶⁶

In terms of the concept of the work, the notion of "fake" ran through my entire video. Airplanes and warships are papers, missiles are bottles, and even the sky where the

⁶⁶ The text will be printed and displayed alongside the video at the exhibition. The entire text expresses a strong desire to invade, but the unspoilt part can be organised to express the opposite meaning.

plane is flying is a laptop screen. However, these fakes do not hinder people's understanding of who they are: in contrast, the patchwork of different pieces of the image has deepened this sense of absurdity. In terms of the storyline, the meaning of the tainted declaration of war is problematic – it is full of ambiguity; the king's kindness and love for everyone at the end is false; and the king's introspection and the construction of the peace monument is also false – an excuse to rationalise the war. It is undoubtedly ironic that this work was created with the background of the epidemic in China and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Creating humour or creating art with humour during a dark period is worth discussing. One perspective is that humour can relieve our anxiety, but its function goes far beyond that: in art practice, humour is a tool for artists to engage with society and address social issues in a thoughtful way⁶⁷.

In the work discussed above, we also saw that artists used irony and black humour in the context of darkness and pain. Janet Gibson provided a psychological explanation for this phenomenon, stating that “humour involves deviations⁶⁸ from social norms, and dark humour exploits these deviations from social and moral norms. Instead of being offended (which happens sometimes), we are amused when we are surprised, when social expectations are violated, when we see that the literal meaning is absurd but the funny meaning has some truth in it”.⁶⁹ This is why artists use irony in their work, because in this way the intention and purpose have been explained before others find it offensive. This “polite” action can address social issues tactfully but directly. An example is the letter that the French writer Victor Hugo sent in 1861 to his friend Captain Butler, headed “The Sack of the Summer Palace”, that ironically (politely and euphemistically) reveals the looting and destruction of the Old Summer Palace by British and French invaders in 1860.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ U. Korkut and others, ‘Looking for Truth in Absurdity: Humor as Community-building and Dissidence against Authoritarianism’ *International Political Science Review*, 43.5 (2021).

⁶⁸ Deviant behaviour refers to the behaviour of social members in a specific society that deviates or violates existing social norms to varying degrees.

⁶⁹ D. Kolitz, *Why Do We Use Dark Humour to Deal With Terrifying Situations?* Gizmodo, 2020 Available at: <https://gizmodo.com.au/2020/04/why-do-we-use-dark-humor-to-deal-with-terrifying-situations/> The statement originally comes from J.M. Gibson, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Humor* (Routledge, 2019).

⁷⁰ Related link: <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/the-chinese-expedition-victor-hugo-on-the-sack-of-the-summer-palace/>

The interpretation of these few works as examples of Western art from ancient Greece to the Renaissance, and then from nineteenth century works to modern art does not offer a comprehensive view, however. In different periods of different Western countries, the ways in which artists play with humour are rich and complex. However, I think it is not difficult to find interesting or well-known highlights in their work in every historical and cultural context, because they are introduced in gallery settings and documented in books. What is crucial is how artists achieve such interest in their art in specific ways. Artists' unique conception, the imagination and the ingenious composition they bring to their work, are their way of creating a dialogue with the viewer and also a way for the audience to feel a sense of humour, and these are evidence of the artist playing. The arrangement of this playfulness requires a clear logic, as well as careful thinking and planning, and this is one of the most beautiful parts in a work. Before starting to play, an artist must have a deep understanding of the whole when they combine different media and materials in their sculpture or painting, whether in a traditional or a modern art context. It is necessary to make each part serve the whole, and the concept of the work must be visually and appropriately expressed. The setting of every aspect of contemporary art needs to be carefully considered, in the same way as the creation of art-historical works. The clothes worn by an artist in performance art, lighting settings, location selection, action design, whether the scene addresses the theme optimally... all these resemble the work required for a large composition in a traditional Renaissance painting – the positioning of characters, the texture and volume of objects, the spatial relationship between negative and positive, facial expressions and movements of characters, and the relationship between different colours of clothes etc. Any great artwork is inseparable from careful thinking, whether it is contemporary or traditional, they are mostly the same in this regard. Accordingly, in an effective humorous artwork, although it seems to be simply an artist randomly playing, in fact it may be far from that simple.

Artist as trickster

In the humorous works discussed earlier in the context of Western art, as I have already mentioned, “wit” can always be found. There are occasions in art history when the artist has performed tricks like a witty and astute magician to “cheat” the viewer’s eyes and emotions, thereby achieving not only humour, but more importantly, deeper philosophical thinking, and even presenting cultural issues. Sometimes the audience laugh in front of the work that has fooled them, even if they are ruthlessly deceived. Do they really know that they have been fooled? If they do, how can they comfortably accept this? There is probably something more complicated hidden there.

I often hear artists ask, or are asked: is artistic creation a search for truth? In his painting process, the artist David Baruch Wolk believes that “Man’s search for relevant form in art is coincident with his general search for truth”.⁷¹ The American philosopher John Hospers has suggested that “one of the things that has been alleged to be the purpose of art is its cognitive function: art as a means to the acquisition of truth”.⁷² It certainly seems that we live in a time of great earnestness in art. “[...]Works of art are used to throw light on political issues, to highlight identities, to be socially engaged, to try to change the world for the better – to do the virtuous work of reform.”⁷³ The intentions are good, but the reality is that such earnest truth-telling does not necessarily lead to particularly engaging art. It seems to me that sometimes what attracts people’s attention are the lies that dazzle them. These lies are not the lies that are told in business or politics, nor the lies spread on the internet to get attention, but the bold lies in art that are told with charm and humour. Lewis Hyde, in his book *Trickster Makes This World*, suggests that the trickster figure is different from a liar: “[...] [a] trickster isn’t a run-of-the-mill liar and thief. When he lies and steals, it isn’t so much to get away with something or get rich as to disturb the established categories of truth and property and, by so doing, open the road to possible new worlds”.⁷⁴ Picasso also asserted that “[...]”

⁷¹ David Baruch Wolk, <https://david-wolk.pixels.com/>

⁷² John Hospers, Entry ‘Philosophy of Art’, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 4 Oct. 2022 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy-of-art>

⁷³ John Paul Stonard, ‘The Dazzling Lies of Art’, *Tate Etc.*, 45 (2019) <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-45-spring-2019/opinion-dazzling-lies-art-john-paul-stonard>

⁷⁴ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* (Canongate, 2017), p.13.

Art is a lie that makes us realise truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know how to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies [...]”.⁷⁵ Thus, Hyde believes that this trickster is a cultural hero who plays a different role – they reshape and revive the world and take this world seriously, then they disrupt it, and give it a new form.⁷⁶

Throughout history there have been many dazzling lies in art. Is it possible that the prehistoric defeated lion depicted on the wall of Chauvet Cave in France was actually a hunter’s self-glorification? Did court painters deliberately beautify or even add make up to the monarch to gain their attention and commendation?⁷⁷ Often, what appears to be a grand search for truth turns out to be an elaborate fiction.⁷⁸ The jagged teeth (geometrising reality) in Pablo Picasso’s *Weeping Woman* (1937) are part of his portrayal of a woman in a hysterical state of anger and sadness; Damien Hirst’s shark, which connotes fear and potential death, is just a pitiful creature that looks ferocious but has actually been put into a tank as a specimen,⁷⁹ and Xu Bing staged “The Emperor’s New Clothes” in his work *Book from the Sky* (1988): Chinese characters were disassembled and recombined to form new symbols, which ironically make people mistakenly believe that they can all be understood.⁸⁰ During the process of their art practice, every artist confronts the limitations of their chosen medium, as the selection and use of each object has a certain symbolic meaning: in Middle Eastern countries, for instance, the hijab may be a symbol of women’s liberation, or, in contrast, can represent societal constraints on women’s thinking.⁸¹ Certain scenes may bring the audience into a specific social context. In my video work *Love and Peace*, the paper boats and fighter planes made with a Covid-19 vaccine certificate obviously represents the strict government control exerted during the Covid-19 epidemic. Therefore, artists need to make decisions about what to include and what to omit intentionally in their careful selection of materials. For example, I use the dagger as a material (representing

⁷⁵ Pablo Picasso statement in Marius De Zayas, 1923, ‘Picasso Speaks,’ *The Arts*, May 1923, pp. 315-26; reprinted in Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art* (Museum of Modern Art New York, 1946), pp. 270-1.

⁷⁶ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, p.13.

⁷⁷ It could be argued that they did, especially if they wanted further commissions.

⁷⁸ Stonard, ‘The Dazzling Lies of Art’.

⁷⁹ Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991)

⁸⁰ Xu Bing created more than 4000 “Chinese characters”, and these “writings” look exactly like real Chinese characters but in fact are fake.

⁸¹ Referencing Azadeh Fatehrad, *Departure Series* (2015)

violence) but wish to express sweet love. In this process, the trickster seems to be able to solve this problem, because they can make certain concepts in the artwork vague, or broaden the possibilities, and even rationalise something irrational.

“Nothing can be beautiful which is not true”,⁸² wrote John Ruskin. In the mouth and hands of an artist, a lie, or a trick, can be beautiful. People will discover something about the truth if they delve deeper into the artist’s work, and this is what the dazzling trickster of art can do. Cindy Sherman first exhibited her work in the late 1970s, using popular culture, rather than theory, as her material as a means of critique. The feminist visual culture scholar Laura Mulvey says: “Sherman’s arrival on the art scene certainly marks the beginning of the end of the era in which the female body had become, if not quite unrepresentable, only representable if refracted through theory”.⁸³ But, rather than sidestepping the issue, Sherman reacts and shifts the agenda. She brings a different perspective to the question of female imagery. Sherman focuses on using herself as the protagonist in a series of works, wearing heavy make-up, making unconscious facial expressions, and designing dramatic scenes and costumes as settings for the pictures, applying oversaturated colours and sometimes deliberately dressing as a man, to subvert existing impressions of gender, or to sharply and critically explore the role of women in society.⁸⁴ For example, set against opulent backdrops and presented in ornate frames, the characters in Sherman’s 2008 *Society Portraits* are not based on specific women, but the artist has made them look entirely familiar in their struggle with the standards of beauty that prevail in a youth- and status-obsessed culture.⁸⁵ “I wanted to make something which people could relate to without having read a book about it first. So that anybody off the street could appreciate it, even if they couldn’t fully understand [...] That’s the reason why I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture as I was doing it.”⁸⁶

⁸² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (1843)

⁸³ Laura Mulvey, ‘*A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman*’, *New Left Review* 188 (Jul 1, 1991), p.138. My understanding to the statement is that women were not completely free to express themselves in everyday life during that period: if they did, it was only in the works of books and texts.

⁸⁴ Referencing Cindy Sherman, *Untitled 355* and *Untitled 360* (2000) Margo Jefferson, ‘Playing on Black and White: Racial Messages Through a Camera Lens’, *The New York Times*, 10 January 2005.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/10/arts/design/playing-on-black-and-white-racial-messages-through-a-camera.html>

⁸⁵ Usually by referring to cinematic ‘norms’ and regularly used ‘feminine’ types (e.g. the femme fatale).

⁸⁶ Mulvey, ‘*A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body*’, p.137.

In terms of the relationship between the viewer and the work, sometimes the audience will reluctantly acknowledge the content of the picture,⁸⁷ as if accepting the information in the image with disgust and disbelief. In this sense, an “oscillation effect”, between reverence and revulsion, is created.⁸⁸ Sherman also explains that “I’m trying to erase myself more than identify myself or reveal myself. That’s a big, confusing thing that people have with my work: they think I’m trying to reveal these secret fantasies or something. It’s really about obliterating myself within these characters”.⁸⁹ This concept makes the viewer, already confused, continue to oscillate between the effect of Sherman’s different roles in the photos, which also deepens their questioning of “reality”. Sherman challenges beliefs about photography’s portrayal of “reality” in her “self-fiction” by allowing the photograph, which has always been limited to recording reality,⁹⁰ to explore new space and possibilities. It is a fictional scene, but it is described in such a realistic way that it enables the viewer to discover another intriguing aspect of photography.

Works such as René Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* (1929) also have contradictory and ambiguous effects. This work moves us in a “difficult” way, making the viewer confused. Some critics have attempted to understand and speculate about the painting, suggesting that there is a “conspiracy” behind these seemingly simple and innocent works – the artist’s trickster. Magritte said in interview in 1966: “[...] could you stuff my pipe? No, it’s just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture, ‘This is a pipe,’ I’d have been lying!”⁹¹ But the audience certainly knows that it is the image of a pipe! It can be made into a sign or advertisement which can arouse the interest of smokers. Thus, is this a pipe? This kind of doubt and mischievous trickery can also be found in the work *The Base of the World* (1961) by Piero Manzoni. This work seems at first like a somewhat silly idea and a joke. Take a plinth, turn it upside down and declare the entire world to be a work of art, dedicated to the memory of Galileo. Like all

⁸⁷ Referencing Quintin Matsys, *The Ugly Duchess*, c. 1513.

⁸⁸ Mulvey, ‘*A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body*’, p.147.

⁸⁹ ‘Cindy Sherman – Photographs’ New York Tuesday, April 4, 2023’, *Phillips*. April 4, 2023
<https://www.phillips.com/detail/cindy-sherman/NY040123/81/>

⁹⁰ Here we need to emphasise a problem: it also makes sense to say that photography hasn’t always been limited to real records because photography has been used in art, and to “deceive”, since it was invented in the nineteenth century. The correctness of this statement depends on how we interpret it.

⁹¹ Magritte discussing his work *Ceci n’est pas un Pipe*, in Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images* (Harry N. Abrams, 1977), p.118.

Manzoni's work, though, the more you think about it, the more intriguing it becomes. What Manzoni did here is to challenge the notion of art as an independent object. Structurally, the base is to a sculpture what the frame is to a painting; this mode of display also more subtly marks the object placed on it as a work of art. However, the artist, like a bandit, has taken the earth as the work of art. The audience wander in this state of "maybe yes" or "maybe not": if being placed in a gallery, in a frame or on a plinth, is what makes something art, then does that not almost make the gallery, or the frame or the plinth, more important than the work of art? Furthermore, what is the basis (apart from convention) for the plinth or frame being separate from the work of art? And if the plinth or frame is not separate, what about the walls, the floor, the road outside? We are constantly falling deeper and deeper into perceiving the artist's role as a trickster, but we are also guessing, imagining and thinking in the process, and building our understanding of things.

The artist's trick sounds like a trickster at work – using ambiguity in their work to put the audience into a state of confusion. Therefore, when we try to understand these works, we should first realise that we are brought into a "region" by it. In this "region", simple judgments and perceptions about the subject and material are no longer applicable, because the consistency of tone and unity of form and content within the work itself have apparently broken down.⁹² No matter how we think about it, we will be oscillating between art and common sense. Both are like traps: thus every statement we make about this work, and every definition we make, will only reinforce the likelihood of us falling into them. This makes the work itself powerfully deceptive.

The spirit of the trickster may emanate from the work of art, but for those who expect art to soothe, illuminate, or please, this quality in art is hard to accept, and it is difficult to see what the artist's motivation in producing such a contradictory, unsettling work. Hyde believes that seizing and blocking opportunity, confusing polarity, disguising tracks are marks of the trickster intelligence.⁹³ Just like an octopus or chameleon, the trickster can encrypt their own image by distorting or covering it up, and it is better to

⁹² J. Beebe, 'The Trickster in the Arts', from Stefano Carpani (ed.) *Anthology of Contemporary Clinical Classics in Analytical Psychology: the New Ancestors* (Routledge, 2022), p.26.

⁹³ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, p.51.

shift his ground than to stand inflexibly and fight. Through Hyde's writing and the practical examples above, we can see that the artist's role as trickster is to create cultural "chaos" subtly and unnoticeably. To argue this, I cite here one of my early kinetic installations. In my project *Obtain* (2016), I ruptured the normal usability of a number of domestic objects, making them "useless" to test whether I could make the viewer feel a sense of absurdity with this "trick". The functionality of chopsticks, a colander and a knife was challenged by making them engage with things they cannot cope with: using chopsticks to pick up fluid is a way of breaking their routine use; scooping up water with a colander does not work, and cutting water with knife is pointless. In this Zen-like work, these familiar tools suddenly become unfamiliar to the audience. The things that are often used in daily life start to seem clumsy, mechanical and useless within the "trickery". Their functionality seems to have been hidden, or stolen, by the artist in some way. Among the viewers, people with obsessive-compulsive disorder started to become impatient and restless; children wide-eyed with curiosity looked at the scenes they had never seen before; people who love imaginativeness expected a miracle – water is scooped up or cut. The audience constantly talked and discussed, exclaiming. They seemed to be deceived by the artist, as did the chopsticks, the colander and the knife. Everyone in the room was talking, questioning, and laughing, and "chaos" filled the whole space.



Obtain. (2016) kinetic art series. Video link: <https://vimeo.com/139185731>

The idea of creating “chaos” can be also found in Meret Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936); the story of the creation of this work has been told many times in art-historical texts. The piece consists of an ordinary cup, a spoon and a saucer, wrapped in gazelle fur, which make them extraordinary. The idea of this work came about when Oppenheim was wearing a brass bracelet covered in fur and Picasso and Dora Maar, who were admiring it, proclaimed, “Almost anything can be covered in fur!”⁹⁴ Now, imagine a strange sight – the familiar arrangement of a saucer, a spoon, and a cup, almost like an invitation to have tea on a pleasant afternoon. However, no one would expect to drink from a cup covered in fur. The fur may be pleasant to the touch, but the physical discomfort and absurdity of having wet fur stuffed in your mouth and throat is like a terrible nightmare. Oppenheim has taken practical, everyday objects beyond reality and placed them in a realm of irrationality and absurdity.⁹⁵ The artist was acknowledging the viewer’s familiarity with both a normal teacup (porcelain) and animal fur, and asked the audience to imagine what it would feel like to drink tea from this fur cup, and how the fur would brush against their mouths. She allowed the viewer to freely recall and piece together different feelings and memories, such as drinking and touching animal fur from life, creating metaphors and symbols from the imagined touch.



Meret Oppenheim, *Object*, 1936, fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon. cup 4–3/8" in diameter; saucer 9–3/8" in diameter; spoon 8" long, overall height 2–7/8" (The Museum of Modern Art, New York; photo: Steven Zucker.

Image source : <https://smarthistory.org/meret-oppenheim-object-fur-covered-cup-saucer-and-spoon/>

⁹⁴ Josh R. Rose, Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, *Meret Oppenheim, Object* (Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon). *Smarthistory*, April 9, 2022, accessed November 10, 2024, <https://smarthistory.org/meret-oppenheim-object-fur-covered-cup-saucer-and-spoon/>

⁹⁵ Bohai, 'Lessons from History: Meret Oppenheim's Object – Transcendence into a Realm of Irrationality', *Medium*, 2021 <https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/meret-oppenheims-object-transcendence-into-a-realm-of-irrationality-f3d834bb5fbb>

The artist sets a trap for the viewer in the work and tricks them into responding to the concept of the work, and this fascinates and disturbs the viewer. The “trickster” work of art exerts a similar fascination: often its trickery is to make us think or feel two different things at once, all the while exerting a hypnotic fascination that makes us want to stay within this ambiguity. The trickster is a kind of creative idiot, and therefore the wise fool, the grey-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of sacred profanities.⁹⁶ The trickster is the embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, double-crossing and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.⁹⁷ But the “trouble” and “stress” that the trickster causes us has meaning, because every time the trickster appears, they will reveal things about individuals and their social environment that were not previously obvious.⁹⁸ Through the trickster’s artwork, we experience the partiality of our understanding of things, and we are forced into a mode that challenges our basic assumptions. If, in a work of art, the trickster succeeds in shocking or confusing us out of our complacency, they do so in order to make us see the world anew and thus try to survive in it.

⁹⁶ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, p.7.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Some people think I exaggerate here, but we can look to Picasso, Manet, Duchamp and John Cage, who tried to reshape and revitalise the world they lived in: they destroyed certain existing forms and gave them new forms and expressions. They used seemingly absurd artistic expressions to reveal some difficult-to-solve problems, such as the question of whether the natural sound (“noise”) in John Cage’s experimental work can be defined as music.

SECTION THREE Play in Chinese art

I stated at the beginning of Section Two that there are differences in the expression and understanding of humour between East and West, and this leads to differences in the ways that play features in art in these contexts. Even though I have studied contemporary art in the UK for many years, I can still find some obvious traces of Eastern aesthetics in my creative practice. Also, the way I express humour in my work will also be a combination of East and West. Therefore, I feel it is necessary to discuss play in Chinese art so that my practice can be seen from a broader perspective and how I express play and humour through the influence of Eastern aesthetics can be understood.

The Chinese term for humour is “you mo”, which appears in “The Nine Declarations: Embracing the Sands” from The Songs of Chu, an early classical Chinese poetry collection: “With nothing but obscurity before my eyes, I find calm and complete silence”. In the second line, the “you” and the “mo” refers to “calm” and “silence” respectively. Nowadays, however, Chinese dictionaries explain it as something that is amusing but that has broader implications. Calm and silence seem have little relationship with humour, but why was this ancient term used to translate the word “humour”? Earlier in the twentieth century, it was the renowned writer-translator Lin Yutang who chose “you mo” as a phonetic rendering for the English word “humour”. I introduced Lin Yutang’s understanding of humour in Section Two when I was discussing Western art: he explains that “For those who are skilled at ‘humour,’ their wit is invariably calmer and concealed. And for those who are skilled at judging ‘humour,’ their appreciation lies particularly in a silent realization of the heart, which is often difficult to describe to others. Unlike crude jokes, the more ‘calm’ and ‘silent’ the humour is, the more marvellous it is”.⁹⁹ Whether in the East or the West, a person with a sense of humour has ability to understand and employ humour. Humour involves

⁹⁹ The English statement here was translated from Chinese by the author. The original text is by Y.T. Lin, *Lin Yutang’s Autobiography, Volume 2, On Humour* (Qunyan Press, 2010), p.155.

wit, acute observation and imagination,¹⁰⁰ using light-hearted associations and metaphors to convey life experiences, ways of thinking and something playful.

The points of interest in ancient Chinese paintings

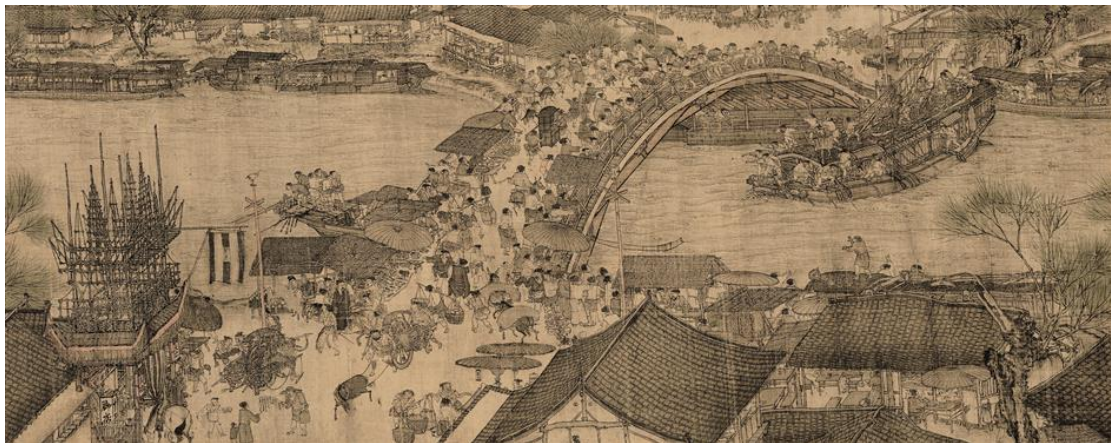
Unlike the one-point perspective of most Western paintings, Chinese painting employs the expressive method of “scattered perspective”: the painter’s observation point is not fixed in one place, nor is it limited by a fixed field of vision, but the vantage point is moved for observation according to need: everything that is seen from different standpoints can be organised into the picture. This method of perspective is called scattered perspective, and is also known as a “moving viewpoint”. The reason why this method of perspective is widely used in Chinese painting is that landscape painting occupies a considerable proportion of Chinese paintings, and Chinese painters know that the scattered perspective method could bring endless interest to landscape paintings.

For example, one of the most famous Chinese paintings, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (1085-1145) was painted with the scattered perspective approach. The painting is 24.8cm tall and 528cm wide,¹⁰¹ and it vividly records the prosperity, urban life and living conditions of people in the capital, Bianjing, in the 12th century (Northern Song Dynasty). In the picture, different kinds of people can be clearly seen: farmers, businessmen, doctors, fortune tellers and other characters, as well as livestock such as donkeys, cows, and camels. The scenes include markets, wandering, drinking, gathering, rowing boats, riding horses and so on. The streets and alleys illustrated in the painting are full of people, and what I want to ask here is that how the viewer should appreciate it in such a long narrow format? If it was presented in Western one-point perspective, the scenes we see would be very limited, and most of the characters and buildings would be blocked. Thus, the method of scattered perspective can effectively solve this problem: every character is depicted realistically and clearly, and we can appreciate each aspect of the content little by little along the way, as if we are the

¹⁰⁰ Please refer to the discussion about Lin Yutang and Congreve’s ideas of humour in Section Two.

¹⁰¹ The information on the size was offered by The Palace Museum.

characters in the painting, travelling and playing in this lively street: walking across the bridge, I see farmers going to the market to sell their fresh vegetables, children playing games, and various vendors asking if I need a suitable hat. After I decline these, I realise I'm a bit hungry, so I walk to a Chinese café, where the cooking smoke is rising: I sit down, and I order tofu curd and a piece of roasted pancake. Although the man who serves the food is stooped, he moves quickly and has a nice friendly face. While tasting the delicious food, I now see some locals playing chess not far away; they are surrounded by onlookers. Soon, with a sound of annoyance and the jingle of money, I am sure that someone has lost the game, and the winner has put the money he deserves in his pocket... in this imagined scene, all the characters seem to be vivid and right in front of the viewer's eyes: all we need is to be a traveller or an explorer in the painting, to enjoy the scenery along the river, wander in local culture, and play imaginary games in the picture. The most interesting thing is that when our own gaze falls on any place in the picture, there is a story, which is where the imaginative game begins.

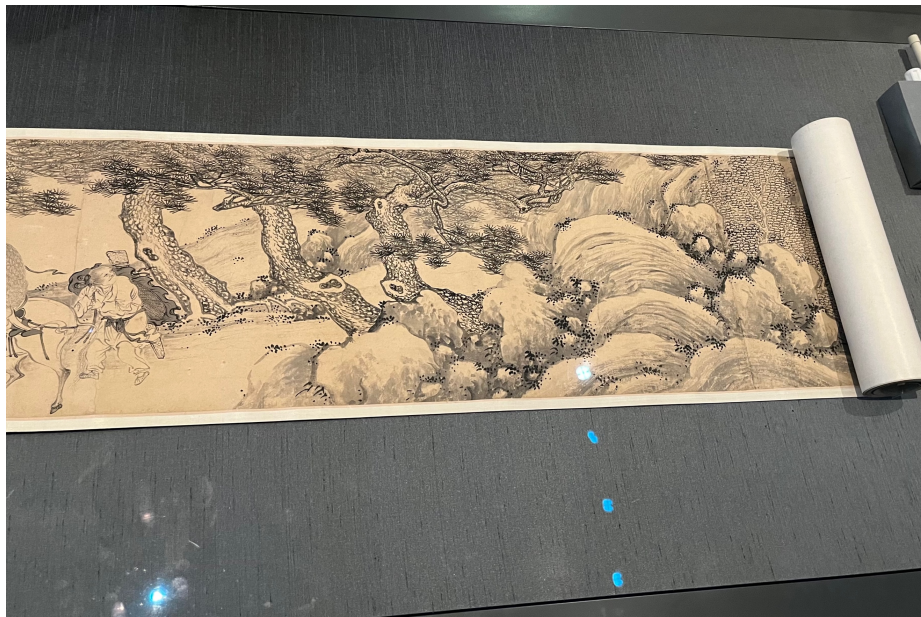




Along the River During the Qingming Festival. The image above depicts all kinds of businesses and the crowded, grandiose Rainbow Bridge, which is the focus of the whole scroll. The image below is the left part of the painting. Image source:

<https://minghuaji.dpm.org.cn/paint/appreciate?id=592d80e225aac624977fee2e19452c1f>

The above section described the fun brought by the use of scattered perspective. In addition, ancient Chinese paintings were usually presented in the form of a scroll. In terms of physical properties, the scroll is a way to preserve a painting. But in the relationship with the viewer, the scroll is a form of play, because we can unfold it at will or deliberately hide some parts of it. This method is different from other, open paintings that present the entire contents of the scene to the audience for the first time. The scroll allows the viewer's eyes to follow the movement of the hands, and every inch we unfold may offer another surprise. So this is why the word "humour" in Chinese (*you mo*), mentioned above, has the meaning of calm, quietness and silence, but also means leaving a blank space. Every part of the content is an unknown space for the viewer to imagine. Like the scroll continuously being unfolded, the viewer will also enter the painting to gain a richer and richer experience.



A typical Chinese scroll-painting. *Ge Zhichuan Moving His Residence*, You Qiu, 1500s. Photographed in British Museum.

There is a Chinese painting in the British Museum's collection that cleverly uses the skill of scrolling: *Fascination of Nature* by Xie Chufang. The subject is animals and insects feeding off each other. A toad lies in wait for ants, which in turn are dismembering a butterfly; a dragonfly attacks a smaller insect which the lizard is hunting, and the cicada seems destined to be eaten by the mantis. This work seems to be a harmonious picture, full of spring atmosphere, and the title of the painting is also positive and beautiful. However, it implicitly describes the background of the painter's era, which is full of violence and anxiety, and the painter is aiming to critique the rulers of the Yuan dynasty.¹⁰² This painting is also presented in the form of a scroll, and it is a very appropriate form for this work, because we never know what potential danger the animal in the picture is about to encounter in the next scene, and only by carrying on unfolding can we discover something more amazing. Every scene and detail in the scroll painting is thus meaningful, but every scene serves the whole, and when we only see a part, we never know what surprise we may find in the next.

¹⁰² The information was provided by the British Museum. Additional resources: R. Whitfield, R. and C.F. Xie, *Fascination of Nature: Plants* (Yekyong Publications, 1993).



Xie Chufang, *Fascination of Nature*, a handscroll painting, Yuan dynasty, dated 1321, China.
28.1 x 352.9 cm, Photo took in the British Museum.

In 2017, the National Palace Museum in Taipei held the exhibition “Expression of Humour in Chinese Painting and Calligraphy”. This show featured ten works of Chinese painting and calligraphy from the Museum’s collection to illustrate a particular culturally and historically specific form of humour. Whether it was a joke in the work, a humorous shape, the subversive characters, or a social satire, these works all demonstrated the artists’ creativity and their sense of humour.

In the exhibition, Hua Yan’s painting *Wasp and Tiger* breaks people’s stereotyped impression of tigers: this king of animals bows its body with its head down, the tail droops, and the thin waist creates an appearance of poverty. I was thinking about the

reason that the artist made this character, and what their purpose was. In my own interpretation, it is possible that the artist was implying that he was the tiger, a capable and intelligent person who was not valued and eventually had to bow to society? I considered that the artist wanted to express his feelings of frustration, so he used this dramatic technique to challenge people's inherent impression of a majestic tiger. This method in art practice is called "degradation", which means to relegate something or somebody beautiful to being humble and ugly. For example, in one of my early works *Money*, I turned the image of the Queen Elizabeth II into one that represented an extremely emotionally unstable person. As the perspective of the viewer changed, the Queen would have a smiling face and then a sad face. She no longer had her usual calmness and gentleness, which would have originally been in people's hearts in reality. Thus we can see that the use of degradation appears both in Hua Yan's tiger and in my work. The idea of degradation is a method that I frequently use in my art practice, and I will discuss this later in relation to my "kite" project.



Wasp and Tiger. Hua Yan (1682-1756), Qing dynasty. Album leaf, ink and colour on paper, 20.2*25.6cm.

Source: <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh106/ExpressionsOfHumor/en/index.html>

Another interesting work in the exhibition is Shen Zhou's *Cat*. The cat in the painting is almost spherical in shape, and he is looking to the right, with big, bulbous eyes. The open mouth and unfolded ears suggest that he has very acute hearing. Although cats in real life are very flexible and can easily curl up, the exaggerated form of the cat in this painting does not correspond to the real body of a cat. Accordingly, we can see the

painter deliberately summarising the cat as a spherical shape, and the most mischievous and lovely thing is that the artist simply drew two little paws on the cat's chest, mischievously giving the audience a delicate and unexpected touch of humour.



Cat. Shen Zhou (1427-1509), Ming dynasty. Album leaf, ink on paper, 34.8*54.5cm.

Source: <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh106/ExpressionsOfHumor/en/index.html>

Liang Kai's *Immortal in Splashed Ink* also has humour and charm. The immortal¹⁰³ is bare-chested, with his belly exposed, and demonstrates a leisurely appearance. Except for the careful depiction of the eyes, eyebrows, mouth and ears, which are drawn with thin lines, the body is freely painted with splashed ink. The sharp contrast is fascinating, because in terms of the inner characteristics of the immortal, there seems to be a contrast between restraint and relaxation, open-mindedness and distress. The Immortal is drunk, and all his emotions are squeezed into his face, which is crowded but hilarious. A few simple strokes by the painter are vivid, and it not only becomes the visual centre of the picture, but also gives a clue: the character in painting was carefully arranged, and the artist knew how to ingeniously express the beauty of humour and the wit of play.

¹⁰³ Immortal refers to a person or similar entity having a long life or being immortal in Chinese mythology.



Immortal in Splashed Ink. Liang kai, Song dynasty. Album leaf, ink on paper, 48.7*27.7cm. Source: <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh106/ExpressionsOfHumor/en/index.html>

The works above show humour in their characters, but some works express an interesting aspect through stories and scenes. *Ink Play of Cat and Mice*, by the artist Pu Xinyu, is an example. The cat in the picture is sleeping, and the mice beside it are playing games boldly: in the upper group, one mouse is dressed feminine clothes, and the other two are presenting some paperwork to her, and seem to be asking for help from her. In the lower group, the mouse on the right side is drunk and has fallen asleep on the table, and the other one on the left raises his wine glass and seems to be saying something momentous. Although the artist did not explain this painting in detail, the implication of the scene can still be guessed: it gives no idea about whether the cat was really sleeping or pretending to be asleep, and I feel the artist seems to satirise certain behaviour in the scene. In this work, the cat in the picture could be considered as an allusion to the artist, Pu Xinyu himself, and the mice allude to the estrangement of his second wife, Li Moyun, and his own students. The cat actually knows everything, no matter whatever the mice do, but does not criticise and reveal. Although in this painting we can see that the artist's method of expression is to use childishness and play, what I notice more is the irony in the painting. The painter arranged the mice, the natural enemies of the cat, to play under its nose and presented the acute-hearing cat doing

nothing about it, which is obviously an expression of irony. From the examples above, I provide some clues about artists' use of irony: Not only can it expose, critique and ridicule things by means of metaphor, exaggeration, satire and other expressive methods: it also contains fun and artistry, and has a sense of black humour.



Ink Play of Cat and Mice. Pu Xinyu (1896-1963), Republican period. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 57.4*28.3cm.

Source: <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh106/ExpressionsOfHumor/en/index.html>

The last painting I discuss here is *Auspicious Omen of Abundant Peace*. The main character in the picture is Zhong Kui, who specialises in challenging ghosts and exorcising evil spirits, a god that is worshipped in Chinese history and culture. In folk culture, it is customary to post a portrait of Zhong Kui on the door of one's house. People believe that ghosts will not dare to enter, and that Zhong Kui will bless the whole family and keep them safe and healthy. Although Zhong Kui is a righteous figure, his fierce, ugly appearance is frightening. In this painting, the god who fights ghosts accidentally sees himself and is shocked. This scene is very comedic, and the little ghosts caught by him under his body show no fear, but only a look of helplessness and disappointment. This character design raises the comedy in the painting to a higher level, and also reflects the painter's understanding of humour.



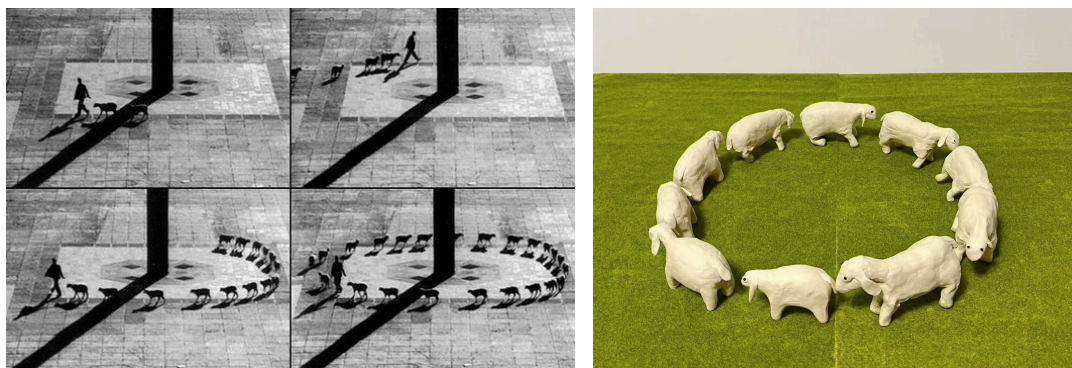
Auspicious Omen of Abundant Peace. Anonymous, Qing dynasty, Hanging scroll, ink and colours on silk, 128.2*49.3cm.

Source: <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh106/ExpressionsOfHumor/en/index.html>

In the paintings discussed above, the humour is mainly expressed through the anthropomorphism of the animals and the vivid look of the humans in the pictures, because I can create a human face from the tiger and human behaviour from the mice. Some techniques of expression, such as irony, metaphor and exaggeration, are also combined. Here I introduce one of my animation works, because my animal-related animation is related to these works in terms of interpreting humour. *The Artist's Sheep* is a stop-motion animation I made in China in February 2023. It tells the story of artistic ideas triggered by a flock of sheep. I originally wanted to cooperate with fifteen real sheep to complete a video work, but due to the outbreak of Covid-19, I was disappointed that I had to cancel the project and I shot stop-motion animation at home instead. Unexpectedly, from the perspective of the final effect, the animation met my expectations and needs. In terms of the expression of humour, the animation was even more interesting and lifelike than the real sheep could have been.

In the animation, the first thing that amused me is that the sheep are connected one by one and go round in circles. At the beginning, we can clearly see that they are advancing clockwise, until the ten sheep form a complete orderly circle: then we can no longer tell whether they are advancing or retreating. This scene is obviously a reference to Francis

Alÿs' performance artwork *Patriotic Tales*. This work alluded to Mexico, which was in turmoil due to the political unrest there in May 1968. In order to stabilise the situation, the Mexican government sent many officials to maintain order and support the government under the flagpole on the square, and these officials claimed that they were the just “the president’s sheep”.¹⁰⁴ The circle of sheep, the flagpole and its shadow in the picture seem to be a political inspiration. In regard to this, the artist stated that sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic.¹⁰⁵ In my animation, a group of sheep walking in circles also has some allusions to the current social issues. First, “sheep” and “positive” in Covid-19 have the same pronunciation in Chinese, and people prefer to say “I got a sheep” online to humorously express that they are infected by the virus. This animation was made under the serious impact of the epidemic, and it was extremely ironic in that social context that a flock of sheep were turning in circles with not knowing whether to move forward or backward. It is even poetic to see the sheep in my work playing games in every scene.



(Left) *Patriotic Tales*, Francis Alÿs, 1997. Source:

<https://shihlun.tumblr.com/post/50179942044/francis-al%C3%BFs-patriotic-tales-1997-in>

(Right) *The Artist's Sheep* video screenshot (01:14s)

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHLv6MkFL-c>

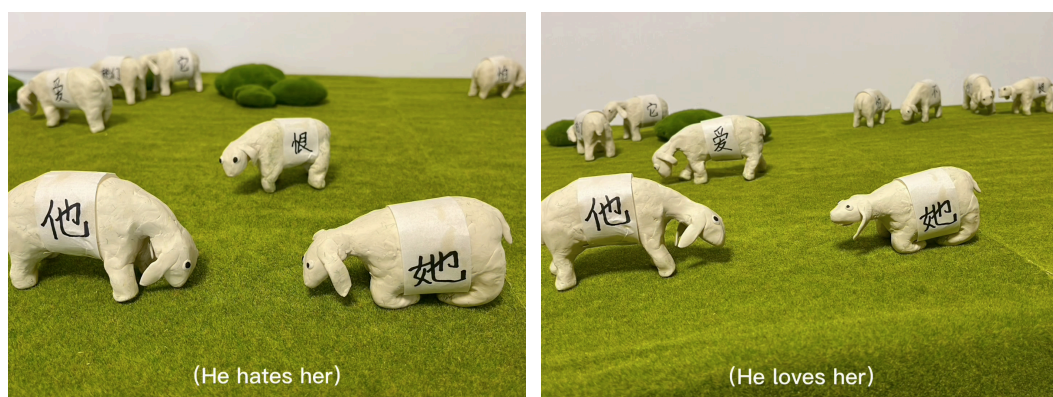
To achieve a more absurd and comedic effect, I wrote different words on the body of each sheep. The location of the sheep changed during the process of free movement;

¹⁰⁴ Zabłudowicz Collection, Francis Alÿs,

<https://www.zabłudowiczcollection.com/collection/artists/view/francis-aly>

¹⁰⁵ Francis Alÿs, *Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political and Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic* (David Zwirner, 2007).

thus the meaning of the sentences formed by the words would be modified as well. For example, “he loves her” in the picture below becomes “he hates her”. The reason I wrote in Chinese is that in the Chinese language, he/she can be directly followed by the original form of the verb, and the person they are addressing does not need to take the accusative form. Therefore, in regard to the grammar, it was much more convenient to present the words in Chinese, as changing the form of words is not needed. In the process of making this scene, apart from making the expressions and movements of each sheep as rich and vivid as possible, I also tried to make the meaning imparted by those words unexpected: “I love you” transferred to “I hate you” would give people a space to imagine and think about the reason. And “It loves her” got chased away by a ferocious dog, then turns into “It hates them”, which could make me think about what role the dog plays, and why can it drive away “love” and bring back “hate”.



The Artist's Sheep video screenshots, Left: 03:38s, right: 02:48s.

Another scene that impressed me is that to fight with the united sheep, the dog pretends to be one of them to gain the favour with the flock. When the sheep begin to accept the dog as their “kindred spirit”, it starts to secretly show its tail. This scene has an element of horror, but in fact it expressed in an absurd way the process of the individual integrating into the collective in an unexpected way. The dog realises that brute force did not work, so he decides to use play. The nature of play is collective and entertaining, and it also has a certain “safety”. I suggest that difficult problems can be solved through games, such as fights between different nations or groups, which gradually develop into sports competitions on the field. Sometimes we can ease tension and hostility through playing games. This could work because in addition to the entertainment of the game itself, it is human and animals’ instinct, as well as an activity that everyone

is familiar with. Thus, to a certain extent, solving problems will be made more appealing by playing games. Therefore, in the video, the dog in the animation turns on “game mode” when he is at a disadvantage: from the beginning, circling to confuse the sheep, and then hiding under a blanket, these actions are not aggressive, which makes the sheep relax their vigilance. When the dog finally shows its cunning, foxy, proud aspect by revealing his tail, the viewer will unexpectedly let out a sigh or nervous laughter.

When these sheep, who seem to understand art, were visiting the Museum of Strange Art in the animation, I thought about setting this part as the climax of the entire work: letting the sheep play with the artworks, and expressing as much comedy as possible in the museum setting. In the video, the tank and the Medici sculpture coming back to life make the sheep nervous and confused; and one sheep contorts its body to imitate the statue of the horse; also, the sheep who loves the hoop-jumping challenge is finally transformed into a bouncy ball... This series of scenes is influenced by Surrealism, and the design of the plot is also derived from my understanding of materiality. In other words, only by knowing what kind of material it is and what characteristics it has can I know how to put it in a comedic atmosphere. Therefore, the selection of these “museum collections” all came from the actual play between me and those objects from the beginning. Years of training in sculpture practice have given me a different understanding of materials and helped me to construct my own method of seeking inspiration. And here, one of the ways that I get inspiration is finding any item around me, and then playing with it in my hand. As I explained to the audience in the show “...with a toy tank, I can turn the turret and imagine how the sheep would hide, and when I turn on the piano metronome, my feet beat to the rhythm...” I let myself play the object first, then put the object into different circumstances and play with various materials, and finally let the audience come to play with the work. I feel this method has become one of my key approaches in my art practice, and this is also how I chose these “museum objects” to interact with the sheep in the video.

The funny sheep characters that I designed in the video work reminds me of some other interesting works related to animals. Chinese poet and historian Ouyang Xiu wrote a prose-poem, *Ode on Detesting Flies*, and the whole text expresses how he hates flies: “[...] marinated fat and brewed sauce, the lids of bottles and jars must be tightly covered. You should also concentrate on attacking and drilling in, trying to contaminate and steal [...]”¹⁰⁶ This seems is an interesting, vivid and absurd ode, but the author was subtly comparing flies to human villains, recounting their crimes, and exposing the harm they did to society. Flies also feature in Western art: insects can frequently be found as symbols in Dutch still life paintings of the 17th century. Blooming flowers and ripe fruit symbolise beauty while flies symbolise repulsion. Combining them together with seafood and wine offers a warning for the viewer – the pleasure brought by beauty and the satisfaction of desire is short-lived, and death follows like a shadow. For some time, the consensus seemed to be that flies were religious symbols, connoting sin, corruption and mortality.¹⁰⁷ Many other insects are associated with decay. Still life paintings with this message were known as “vanitas” (Latin for vanity) paintings. They were especially popular with the middle class in seventeenth-century Holland.¹⁰⁸ In the painting *Portrait of a Woman of the Hofer Family* (1470) by an unknown Swabian artist, the fly is a highlight. The interpretative information to the work at the National Gallery in London suggests that the presence of the fly on the woman’s headpiece represents the “impermanence” of life, reminding the viewer “that we’re supposed to do the best we can with the time we’ve got”.¹⁰⁹ In Western art, flies are mainly placed together with other still life elements as symbols to metaphorise the passage of time, death or spoliation. However, in many early Chinese works of art, in addition to illustrating insects in visual imagery, flies are often the subject of narrative literal description, with a strong element of humour, and even irony. The reasons for this expressive description may be due to the complex grammatical structure and the particularity of linguistic expression in Chinese, which makes the content of the image more humorous. For example, the works of Wang

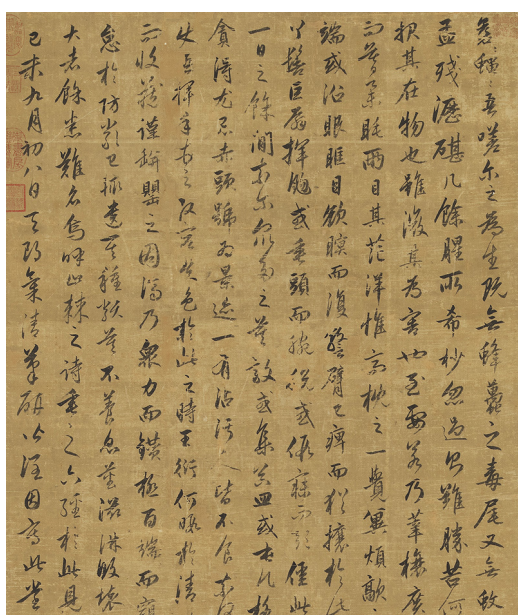
¹⁰⁶ Translated by the author Tianyou Huang from the *Ode on Detesting Flies*.

¹⁰⁷ Steven Connor, ‘Flysight: The Painter and the Fly’, *Steven Connor*, 2021. Available at: <https://stevenconnor.com/flysight.html>

¹⁰⁸ ‘Insects in Art, Idea Four: A Word of Warning’, *Minneapolis Institute of Art* Available at: <https://new.artsmia.org/programs/teachers-and-students/teaching-the-arts/five-ideas/insects-in-art#04>

¹⁰⁹ Hickson, Sally, ‘Mike Pence’s fly: From Renaissance portraits to Salvador Dalí, Artists used Flies to Make a Point about Appearances’ (The Conversation Canada), *Yahoo News*, 9 October 2020. Available at: <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/mike-pences-fly-renaissance-portraits-221341068.html>

Wei¹¹⁰ are praised by Su Shi¹¹¹ as follows: “When reading Wang Wei’s poems, one can conjure up a picturesque image; and when viewing his paintings, one can experience a poetic sentiment”.¹¹² Chinese phrases are often combined. One word can often be joined to another to form a new word, which can express multiple meanings: for instance, that “it’s perceivable but indescribable”.¹¹³ This indefinite atmosphere based on the philosophy of the Eastern approach to language is entirely appropriate for the Chinese expression of humour. Thus, this once again proves that the fundamental origin of the difference in sense of humour between geographic regions is their cultural differences.



(Right) *Portrait of a Woman of the Hofer Family*, 1470, Unknown Swabian artist. Photo by author. National Gallery London.

(Left) *Ode on Detesting Flies* (excerpts), a transcription of Ouyang Xiu’s (1007-1072) *Ode on Detesting Flies*. Written by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322), Yuan dynasty, Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 147.5 x 53.7 cm.

Source: <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh106/ExpressionsOfHumor/en/index.html>

Ode on Detesting Flies demonstrates the mastery of the art of language in poetry, and that poets are specialists at using various rhetorical devices, as well as their imagination,

¹¹⁰ A Chinese poet of the Tang Dynasty.

¹¹¹ Chinese poet, essayist, statesman, calligrapher, painter, gastronome, and travel writer who lived during the Song dynasty.

¹¹² From *Dongpo’s inscription and postscript Shumojie’s ‘Mist and Rain at Languan’*. (《东坡题跋·书摩诘〈蓝关烟雨图〉》). Translated by the author, Tianyou Huang.

¹¹³ Chinese proverb (只可意会，不可言传).

to bring artistic pleasure to their readers. Shen Fu's *Childish Joy* is a prose piece that indicates that the author was full of curiosity about everything when he was a child. He could observe very detailed things, and he achieved this state through imaginative play with his surroundings. The following excerpts are translated from classical Chinese to show the author playing imaginatively.

[...] On summer nights, swarms of mosquitoes screamed, and I imagined them as flocks of cranes flying in the air. When I observed them carefully, even my necks began to stiffen. Then I sprayed them with smoke, and in this way, the white cranes in cloud picture was formed, as if the cranes flying among the foggy mountains, which gave me pleasant. Also, I often squatted down at the bumps of the earth wall or where the weeds are, so that my eyes were as high as the platform. Then I regarded the grass as forest, the insects as wild animals, the protruding soil as hills, and the sunken parts as a ravine. I travelled in this realm imaginarily, and I felt pleased and satisfied [...].¹¹⁴

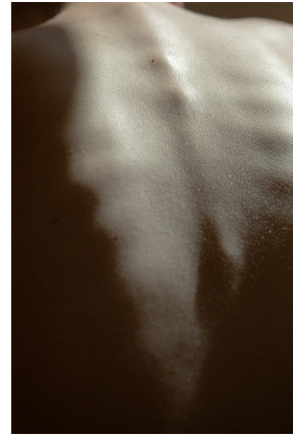
This prose is short, and it is illustrated with ordinary reminiscences. But the wonderful thing is that it provided people with infinite imaginary exploration. In addition to this, it also gave me a way of thinking in my art practice. In the story, the author moves closer to the objects to enlarge them: this is a clever way to achieve a stronger visual impact, and I suggest that this can describe the process of creating art. “Enlargement” and “miniaturisation” are among the practice methods that I learned as an artist from the very beginning of my study, and the origin of this method was influenced by this author’s special observational style. Changing the original symbolic relevance of something by enlarging or reducing it is an interesting idea, and this action will make a difference. This contradiction between the original and its changed version, which is a game-like trick, can give the original a new meaning.

¹¹⁴ The text was translated by the author, Tianyou Huang.

“Big” and “Small”

From Shen Fu’s *Childish Joy*, I understood how the author looks at things, and it inspired me to link his observational style to contemporary art. Many modern artists have used the technique of miniaturising something big or enlarging something small. In different environments, if we look at something macroscopically or microscopically, we may find unexpected artistic effects, and sometimes the things we see could be more real: a kind of hyperreality, beyond reality.¹¹⁵ For instance, American artist Robert Therrien magnified a chair, embodying a curiosity about everyday experience and the challenging the objectivity of things, which has a surreal feeling. However, the French photographer Laurent Castellani captures a small part of the female body for his “portraits”, expressing a rich sense of beauty by fragmenting the body, which I understand as “intentional incompleteness”. Furthermore, in terms of concept, when an experienced artist makes art based on a historical event, he does not need to state every aspect in a long speech, but grabs a certain element that can represent the whole event. This “big” to “small” artistic approach is a common one. On the other hand, sometimes the artist will complicate a very ordinary phenomenon, making simple emotions complex, enabling a single feature to contain symbolic and imaginative. I suggest that this movement between “whole” and “part”, “magnifying” and “miniaturising”, is a common trick used by artists. Therefore, when I share my artistic approach, I am communicating to the viewer that my practice is a process of playing, and this “play” is not random and arbitrary, but well-considered, flexible and adaptable, and it offers more space for my work to wander and progress.

¹¹⁵ This quote was my understanding of Rodin’s sculpture *The Age of Bronze*, and the author referred to it in a speech at Imperial College in 2018.



Left: *No Title* (folding table and chairs, dark brown), 2007, Robert Therrien. Photo by Joshua White. Picture source: <https://arthur.io/art/robert-therrien/no-title-folding-table-and-chairs-dark-brown>

Right: *Dos ensoleillé*, 2019, Laurent Castellani, 100 x 70 x 0.01 cm. Picture source: <https://www.artsper.com/hk/contemporary-artworks/photography/926007/dos-ensoleille>

At the beginning of my discussion of Shen Fu's prose, I mentioned the achievement of a pleasant state by engaging in subjective imagination, and this idea is also reflected in my work. In February 2023, I made an artist's book with poetry and images, titled *Imagination Takes Command*. I collected the photos in this book, taken on my mobile phone, over five years, they are scenes and people that I think are interesting or somehow have stimulated my imagination. I put a picture on each page and beside it a poem I wrote that relates to the image, thus enhancing the understanding, perception and imaginative interpretation of the photos.



"What food do you want?"

"Let me think, maybe chicken and seafood noodles"

"I'll get that one too then"

This photo was taken in a restaurant in Leeds in 2021, these two men were talking in their own language before ordering food.

Interesting scenes and dramatic images are common in life. Both artists and the public have been learning how to record these scenes. Memory, understanding, interpretation and thinking makes these scenes and events no longer fleeting, but somehow frozen, continued and explained. Humour prompts an emotion, and it would be very limited to explain it with pictures alone. Before doing this book project, I almost decided to express humour by working with video or installation art. But this time I decided to expand the way I expressed humour – by combining text and images. To a certain extent, photographs record objective existence, while the expression of words is spontaneous, personal, free, imaginative and comprehensible. When the two cooperate with each other, something unexpected may happen to enhance the exploration of humour. Reading this book in order, readers see the image on the left first, and naturally they will interpret it with some text in mind to explain it. Then they will continue to read the poem on the right to access the imagined image, because poetry brings us both stories and pictures. Thus, there are internal connections between different art forms, and they also share common aesthetic messages, relying on and absorbing each other. A reader commented after reading my book: “sometimes I can see that poems could be paintings and paintings could also be poems, but sometimes I found the irrelevance between poems and pictures.” There is nothing wrong with this: what I need is this harmonious and contradictory relationship, and within this subtle but complex relationship, I can let the pictures and poems play freely, let them communicate with the readers by themselves, and the readers will also find out how to understand humour through this playing.



*Where there is art,
there is argument*

*Where there is argument,
there is art*

This photo was taken in Birmingham in 2020.



*An old cleaner is mopping the floor
She's mopping*

mopping

mopping

mopping

mopping

mopping

mopping her bumpy life

This photo was taken in 2019, I was on the train and a cleaner was mopping the aisle.

In terms of artistic reference, this book project was influenced by Concrete Poetry. The main feature of Concrete Poetry is its anti-traditional poetic structures, which break the syntactic structure of sentences, rearrange or reverse words and sentences as a poetic practice, and change the style to the point of making it unfamiliar. I also relate Concrete

Poetry to Futurist and Dadaist poetry, and although I do not intend to elaborate on these movements further here, one point is crucial: German Concrete Poetry, above all, views language as having a purpose, sees language as being a map, and views the creation of poetry as playing freely with language: poetry is play.¹¹⁶ The British experimental novelist B.S. Johnson ingeniously published a novel with cut-through pages in 1969, titled *The Unfortunates*. This was published in a box with no binding, and readers could assemble the book any way they liked, arbitrarily combining and reading the chapters, except the beginning and end, to start their own game.¹¹⁷ When I designed my book, I followed most common way of book reading – from left to right, allowing readers to appreciate the pictures first, develop their own imagination and understanding, and then read my poems. It seems that the collision of two kinds of imagination and understanding would make this play more exciting. Furthermore, I did not design the pages, nor did I give the poems titles: the purpose was to allow readers to define each photo and poem by themselves. In addition, as I discussed earlier, people in different regions have different understandings of humour. Considering the cultural limitations of written language, I designed both English and Chinese language versions. This not only gives different native speakers more choice, but also offers people who are bilingual a chance to compare and gain more understanding of humour through the description of the same thing in different languages.



I will be fine
 fine
 fine
 fine
 fine
 fin
 fi

Shot in the winter of 2019, expressing a snowman that is about to melt by the depth of shade.

¹¹⁶ C. Aube and N. Perloff, *What Is Concrete Poetry? Exhibition at the Getty Research Institute Highlights Poems Made for Eyes and Ears*. Getty Institute, 2017. Available at: <https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/what-is-concrete-poetry/>

¹¹⁷ Jessica Norledge, 'Thinking Outside of the Box: A Text World Theory Response to the Interactivity of B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*. *Innervate*, Volume 4 (2011), pp. 51-61. Available at: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/documents/innervate/11-12/1112norledgecognitivepoetics.pdf>

Making a kite! Play in folk culture

Although the purpose and process of play have something in common in different regions, (“hide and seek”, for instance, is popular all over the world), some forms of play are closely linked to local culture: Chinese folk arts and crafts are different from Congolese tribal crafts. I talked about play in Chinese painting and literature above, and here I will discuss how play exists in Chinese folk culture through a case study, which will then lead to one of my related art practices.

There are many examples of cultural expression in the form of play all over the world. It can also be said that play is a product of culture. The Chinese kite, is a cultural symbol, and the history of kite-making is part of Chinese folk art. The development of the kite over thousands of years is not isolated: it embodies what a nation cares about and what it yearns for, so it is greatly influenced by its local culture. This is manifested in the making and drawing of kites, as well as the process of kite-flying. In the Chinese culture of pattern, the kite, is an important subject: people love to incorporate the character of animals into kites. Take the dragon for example: as one of the four fantastic beasts of China, the dragon is a symbol of great fortune and power, and dragons are believed to control the rain. The Chinese worship dragons and consider themselves the descendants of the dragon. Swallow kites are also very common. The swallow is a positive symbol in folk culture and it represents the beginning of the four seasons of the year – the arrival of spring, which means a new start. Through the examples of dragons and swallows, it is clear that people worship these animals because they want them to serve as important beings for their own cultural expression. Accordingly, we can better understand the existence of the many animal kites in Chinese history in terms of this cultural phenomenon. Kites can also be based on gods, ghosts, or famous local myths and folk tales. Examples are the “Longmen” story, “Chang’e Flies to the Moon” and so on. “Longmen” recounts that carp went upstream under the waterfall and wanted to jump over the dragon gate. After unbelievably hard work, they finally jumped over the dragon gate and became dragons. In Japan, the *Koinobori* is hung in family homes with boys on fifth of May every year to pray for the boy in the family to become a talent as

soon as possible. This is related to the “Longmen” story, as they both have the same meaning and positive wish.

From the above, we can see that kites carry the culture of different regions, but their meanings are different. The same is true of the creation of kites for a form of play, and now kite-flying has become a form of entertainment for children all over the world. People make and draw kites in playful ways, such as with an illustration of a tiger with a wide-open mouth, an eagle with sharp claws, a whale kite that can be up to twenty metres long, and even pictures are drawn on kites to tell stories. So as an artist, how can I start to play with the idea of the kite? I think the most important thing is the design of the character and patterns on the kite. In this process, the first problem I encountered was that there are so many beautiful patterns I could choose from, but what is their relationship to me, and why should I draw a pattern which is irrelevant to myself? I wanted to make a kite of my own, so I started with my own identity.

I come from Hubei province, and people from other parts of China will jokingly call people from Hubei “nine-headed birds”, an animal character that comes from the ancient Chinese book *Classic of Mountains and Seas*.¹¹⁸ This bird is the totemic symbol of the kingdom of Chu,¹¹⁹ so people today compare Hubei natives to nine-headed birds. The main reason for this metaphor originates in the perspective of regional discrimination: it is thought that Hubei people are too clever, even almost cunning and devious. Thus, in *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*¹²⁰ there is a saying which describes people in Hubei province: “Nine-headed bird in the sky, Hubei fellows on the land”. There is also a saying that people of Hubei are not united because it is difficult for the bird to coordinate its nine brains. There is a folk adage that supports this saying: “one head gets food, nine heads fight for food”. In fact, this quote inspired me to think about the scene that I was going to draw on the kite. I thought about how funny and crazy the interaction between nine heads is, and how fascinating it would be to draw a scene of a nine-headed bird fighting for food. If I just depicted a big bird

¹¹⁸ The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is a Chinese classic text and a compilation of mythic geography and beasts.

¹¹⁹ Chu was a Zhou dynasty vassal state, and it included most of the present-day provinces of Hubei and Hunan.

¹²⁰ A book written by Duan Chengshi in the 9th century. It focuses on a miscellany of Chinese and foreign legends and hearsay, reports on natural phenomena, short anecdotes, and tales of the wondrous and mundane, as well as notes on such topics as medicinal herbs and tattoos.

spreading its wings across the sea or flying against the light at sunset, this would certainly fail to communicate the comedy I imagined, and there would be no element of play, or free mischief in the painting. Thus, I looked for key information about the bird and the related folklore, imaging different methods of play and the potential humorous elements I could bring to this work. It was mentioned above that the name of the nine-headed bird has a derogatory sense and a meaning of regional discrimination. But in Hubei province, few locals care about this statement any more. On the contrary, children even like this metaphor, because they think it stands for wisdom, pride and power. Based on this point, I will apply the idea of “sudden glory” to this work. The founder of this concept, Thomas Hobbes, took the view that human laughter can be an emotion of viciousness,¹²¹ and he coined the term “sudden glory”, by which he meant that “[...] the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency and superiority in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities and inferiority of others, or with our own formerly [...]”¹²² This idea obviously shows a power relationship, which can be explained by the comparison between two sides. People laugh at this potential and virtual comparison and it raises a sense of pride in their minds. Thus, this idea needs to practically make fun of the nine-headed bird by taking it down a peg or two, and to achieve my humorous purpose I wanted to embarrass this bird a bit, since the nine-headed bird is usually described as clever. Just imagine how interesting it would be if my trap confuses this clever bird and makes it sluggish. So I started to design this “joke” step by step: I drew a hungry nine-headed bird, which is diving from the sky: he finds a peach tree growing on the ground. Just as opened his nine mouths, he suddenly notices that there are only eight peaches on the tree, so there must be one head that gets nothing. This painting humorously raised a question: how should a nine-headed bird share eight peaches? I didn’t draw only one peach in this painting – but if I had, the result can be imagined: nine mouths sharing the only peach together would lose much of the charm of the scene. However, eight peaches on the tree will make one of the mouths fail to get anything, and it is interesting to think about which one would be, so I have left the answer blank. Moreover, I

¹²¹ Hobbes discusses laughter in two places: in Chapter 9 of *Human Nature* (1650), and in Chapter 6 of *Leviathan* (1651). References are to Thomas Hobbes, *English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, 11 vols, ed. by W. Molesworth (Bohn, 1839-45), III (*Leviathan*) and IV (*Human Nature*).

¹²² Hobbes, *Human Nature* (1650), Chapter. 9, section. 13. pp. 45-47. The exposition of Hobbes’ view of laughter is based on these pages.

expressed the inner entanglement, tension, confusion and even anger of the bird through its five tails: each tail has its own personality, and they curl and flick angrily in the air, venting their dissatisfaction, but there is nothing they can change. My motivation for creating this work is to give the so-called clever, wily, and disunited nine-headed bird a difficulty as well as a challenge. In the way I presented it, I prefer not to rigidly copy this image in the way that ancient Chinese paintings did, but to portray some absurdity in this ancient Chinese mythology and make the beast more vivid. Moreover, I wanted to close the distance between the viewer and the amazing character in the classic story, so I personified the nine-headed bird, gave it emotions and designed an imaginary plot.



The Nine-headed bird statue in Wuhan, which has become the symbol that reflects the cultural spirit of Hubei province. Source: https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_12304465



Nine-headed bird kite.



Flying Nine-headed bird kite.

When the painting on the kite was finished, the most exciting part was when I flew it. This encapsulated the meaning of the kite, a continuation of this project and the extension of this play. However, what I was going to do is to constitute a real “conspiracy”. The kite was flying in the air, and the phrase “up in the air”, besides its literal meaning, has the meaning of being unresolved and unsuccessful in both in Chinese and English. In my prank, the nine-headed bird would never be able to figure out how to distribute the eight peaches. Like the absurd and pathetic story of the exhausted Sisyphus, the huge rock is “up in the air” forever and he can never get an answer during his endless journey.

Play in the internet age

The evolution of technology and materials has changed the nature of artistic expression. The earliest calligraphy was on bamboo slips (long, narrow pieces of bamboo), and the official script style¹²³ was created. Later, with the advent of papermaking, calligraphy became more expressive. Now, in the era of reading on screens, people rarely express emotions by using paper and pen. Objects have been replaced by symbols on the internet, and nowadays people usually convey information by using different styles of fonts, emojis or stickers, which become a kind of emotional communication on the screen. Xu Bing’s art project *Book from the Ground* was created in this context. This work is a project that Xu Bing has been working on since 2003. That year, the artist was inspired to create a long story with symbolic language from the environmental-friendly patterns on chewing gum wrappers.¹²⁴ He compiled a book based on public signs, which can be interpreted by readers regardless of their cultural background or educational level. *Book from the Ground* is also a project that continues to expand in various forms. With the widespread use of the internet, computer icon language is constantly enriched, and the symbols in this project are also in the process of constant updating and expansion, which makes it a project that will never end.¹²⁵

¹²³ A style of Chinese writing.

¹²⁴ The introduction to the exhibition “Xu Bing: Three-dimensional Books on the Ground”, Tokyo Gallery + BTAP Beijing Space, September 30, 2021.

¹²⁵ The statement was referred to by Xu Bing in a lecture on 30th September 2021.

Although the commonality of visual meaning makes it a book that would not need to be translated in any other languages, the “sentences” in the book are not easy to read, and people need to make up the story through the given icons and their own understanding. In each episode, the direction of the entire story has been planned, but readers can add more details to enrich the story. In addition to this, another interesting aspect of this project is its title. In contrast to the “fake Chinese character creation” in Xu Bing’s most famous installation work, *Book from the Sky*¹²⁶ (1987-1991), *Book from the Ground* aims to eliminate the barriers caused by language and writing, and achieve a universality and inclusiveness of knowledge. Both the title and the content of the work may be considered an expression of Xu Bing’s longstanding vision of a universal language.¹²⁷ Although this utopian ideal is currently unrealistic, I can see the possibility of using play as an experimental means to solve some of the problems in contemporary life.



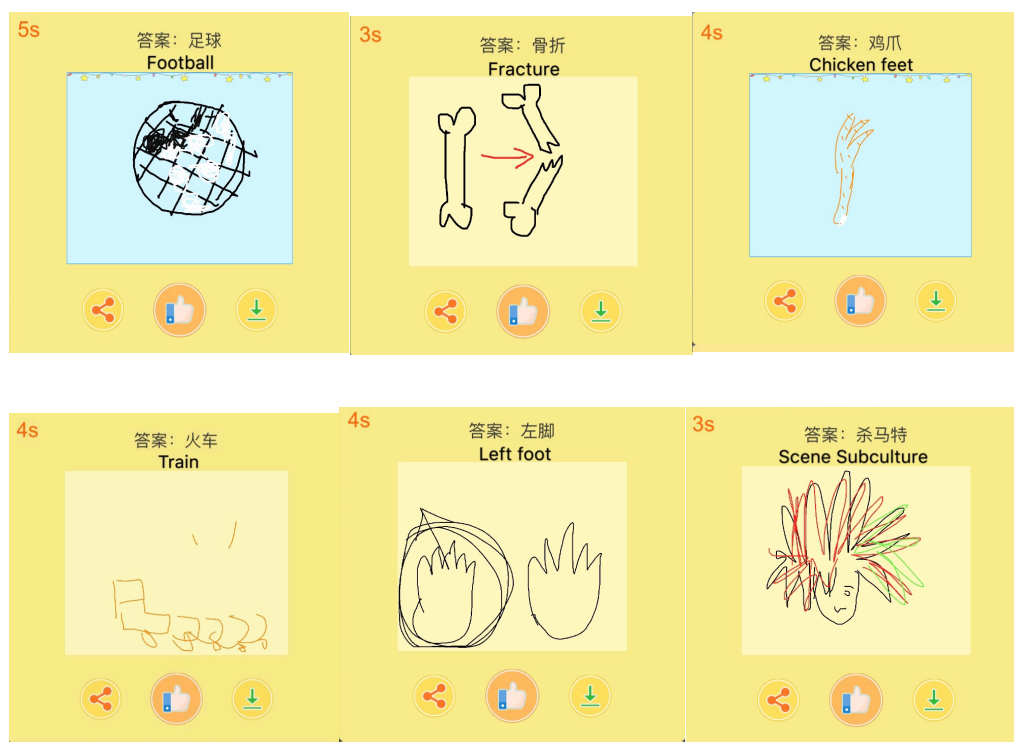
A page from the *Book from the Ground* (2012), Xu Bing, Print, 50 × 66 cm. Source:

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/xu-bing-xu-bing-book-from-the-ground>

¹²⁶ The project was produced over the course of four years. Xu Bing created more than 4000 “Chinese characters”, and these “writings” look exactly like real Chinese characters, but they are actually fake characters created by the artist.

¹²⁷ The statement was recorded in Xu Bing’s official website, available at: <https://www.xubing.com/en/work/details/175?classid=12&type=class>

Making art by using online symbols or social media seems to be favoured by many contemporary artists, especially during the lockdown in 2020, when online social networking became people's main way of communication. In May, I launched an art project based on the premise of collaborating with others online and using the actual conditions around ourselves to play at home. "Cooperation" and "individuality" seem contradictory, but in that unusual period people needed to establish connections with the outside world when they were so isolated. This project was divided into three parts, one of which was to organise twenty people to play a mobile game, Draw Something, and I planned to exhibit the result as an artwork after the lockdown. The game Draw Something involves one person drawing something after receiving an instruction, and other participants take guesses about the instruction based on what was drawn: the fastest participant to get the correct answer wins. Accordingly, I have collected some interesting cases and translated the answers into English. From the images and the final answers, we can see a certain degree of difference between the text symbol and the image symbol, which is the most humorous part of the game, and it also has a strong feeling of absurdity.



Selected images from the mobile game Draw Something.

It seems that the game Draw Something has brought a series of connected questions: Why it is funny? How can our perception of an object affect our practice, such as drawing? Does what the artist draws directly show what the artist thinks? There are no easy answers; however, what we can understand is that in fact, the environment we live is a human-made world,¹²⁸ which means we see everything in this world through the understanding we have already gained from our previous education and daily experience. Human beings define everything they can understand by giving each object a sign, and unlike other animals, human use signs not only to indicate things, but also to represent them.¹²⁹ Just as a human initially created the word “apple” to facilitate daily life, today we have many emojis to represent an apple. In the process of the drawing game, to win the game the participants would carefully observe the painter’s hand-drawn image and identify the answer as soon as they could. When the drawn lines are inconsistent with their understanding, or inconsistent with reality, then the participants would imitate the painter’s hand-drawing in their imagination, and after a comparison, a “sudden sense of glory” emerges spontaneously.¹³⁰ Another situation is when no one could guess the object correctly, the answer announced at the end surprised the participants. This surprise comes from the skewed comprehension between reality and the picture, and our expectations are suddenly lost,¹³¹ thus creating the humour.

With the globalisation of digital technology, expression using emoji and stickers has become an important part of modern entertainment. This has become an interesting theme – science and technology have intervened and affected people’s expression of humour today. The relationship between technology and humorous art in a broader sense may be a philosophical dialectical relationship: technology is a kind of rational thinking, and its essential purpose is to find uniqueness. The thing that technology does is “sorting”: it ends disorder and effectively constructs knowledge. In the field of technology, everything is organised and orderly, but this is not so with art. I think a major purpose of art, especially modern humorous art, in contrast to science, is to

¹²⁸ Y. H. Zhao, *Semiotics Principles and Problems*. Chinese edn. (Nanjing University Press, 2016), p. 6.

¹²⁹ L.A. Reid, *Mind*, Vol. 54, No. 213 (1945), pp. 73-83. Reviewed in Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key--A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948)

¹³⁰ Please refer to Hobbes’ “Sudden Glory” theory that was mentioned at page 78 in this Section.

¹³¹ Please refer to Kant’s theory of “expectance fails” at page 107 in Section Four.

disrupt order and destroy order. In this difference, “anti-intellectualism” has emerged, and it creates something that is difficult to classify, and cannot be classified¹³² in modern art. Susan Jacoby offered a profound critique of American anti-intellectualism in her book *The Age of American Unreason* (2008). But in the context of Dadaism and Surrealism, only by disrupting order can “looseness” and “uncertainty” be created, and in a “loose” environment, opportunities for creation and development appear. There is one method of playing which creates a different approach from everyday life and arouses people’s curiosity and interest. This approach can be also understood as a method: just like opening up thinking by creating obstacles to thinking, or achieving communication by not communicating. Whether it is the “book” written by Xu Bing that everyone can understand, or the mobile-game activity that I organised among a group of people to express humour through networked symbols, the relationship between modern network technology and art is complex, which tests how artists use them to critique and solve today’s social issues. I think that artists can engage in making the complex clear: not by simplifying, but by clarifying.

Failures? An investigation into Nainai Temple

Ridiculing particular public sculptures or architecture has become a common phenomenon in contemporary Chinese society. People express their aesthetic tendencies in various ways on various platforms, showing their derision and criticising them. Are they really failures? I am always curious about those so-called absurd and ugly sculptures, and wonder what factors in them activate people’s laughter.

Nainai Temple in Hebei province is an interesting place. Many celebrated statues of gods that are designed and made by local prayers can be found there, and this temple was entirely built based on demand from the public, but it does not conform to the orthodox religious model. The picture below shows the Car God with a red driving wheel, created to reflect the increasing number of people learning to drive. However,

¹³² Tommy Delp, ‘America, Art and the Anti-intellects’. *Reporter*, 25 December 2021. Available at: <https://reporter.rit.edu/culture/america-art-and-anti-intellects>

the Car God does not exist in Chinese Buddhism. As well as the Car God, there is a God of Childbirth, a god that can send a family a child, or even many children. In general, the “deities” here are specific gods who have particular power from people giving it a sign arbitrarily, and they will pray to a god based completely on how they define the god. The temple has a number of different gods such as the God of Offers,¹³³ the God of Mahjong,¹³⁴ the God of Study¹³⁵, the God of Bed,¹³⁶ and so on.



The “Car God” and the “God of Childbirth” (the wall painting left side) in Nainai Temple.

Source: https://www.mafengwo.cn/photo/poi/6644897_323998200.html

This temple is a mixture of Buddhism and Taoism, and the random placement of the statues and the ridiculous definitions people give to each god are undoubtedly offensive to orthodox religions and religious people. Also, for young people, this decaying religious place is undoubtedly strange. For this reason, I surveyed a number of local people and several non-local young people in a video meeting in 2021 and asked them about the special aspect of the temple for them, and how they feel about it. The result shows that the locals believe this temple can not only satisfy their beliefs in all aspects of life, but also can promote the development of the local economy. Therefore, this site is the local people’s spiritual habitat and economic source, and even when they heard the criticism from outsiders, they still maintained a positive attitude. On the contrary, although non-local young people think that Nainai Temple is a special cultural place,

¹³³ The god who can help you receive a job/school offer.

¹³⁴ The god who can help you win in Mahjong. Mahjong is a tile-based game that was developed in China.

¹³⁵ The god who can help you get good grades in study.

¹³⁶ The god who can help you sleep well and safely.

they feel that the local people's aesthetic judgement has deteriorated, and they feel the way people worship here is backward, ridiculous and ignorant. Although fewer and fewer young people today are religious, the main reason for this lack of acceptance by non-locals might be the huge discrepancy between typical traditional temples and Nainai temple, which makes it difficult for them to accept it. Personally, I do not view the Nainai Temple as a failure. It is just one of thousands of cultural phenomena in the world, it satisfies the spiritual desires of the local people in a specific way, and these humorous expressions would not exist in traditional religions. People laugh at these statues because they do not understand the local culture, or they are not familiar with the needs of the locals. Culture is a big word, although it is hard to define, it can be divided into mainstream culture and folk culture within a nation. In addition to the mainstream symbols of China such as the Peking Opera, Kong Fu, etc., there are many aspects of folk culture in China that people are unfamiliar with. It seems the majority of educated young Chinese people grew up under the influence of mainstream culture, therefore their unfamiliarity with the country's folk culture may make them prejudiced against places like Nainai Temple. Therefore, from a cultural perspective, I do not view this temple as an object of ridicule, even if many people laugh at it. However, there are certainly some failures of urban sculpture that people really laugh at. Accordingly, I feel that as researchers, we should look at the issue of culture comprehensively, understanding and respecting the local customs and protecting local people's self-esteem.

Humour, gender and morality

In the interview about Nainai Temple, when one of the male interviewers made a joke about its God of Childbirth, one female interviewer believed deeply that "[...] attaching the label of childbirth to women is an expression of objectifying women, this is extremely a negative social phenomenon and there's nothing interesting about it." The debate between them helped me to identify differences in the attitudes of men and women towards humour, and realise that humour and gender are closely related. In a strictly patriarchal society, women and girls are treated as disciplined and suppressed

objects, and they are constantly forcibly constrained by social laws. This meant that women in this social context are unable to be seen by men as funny, and men thus think of them as rather lacking in humour.¹³⁷ Whether in a traditional Chinese or British context, women's laughter must conform to etiquette and morals, and loud, unrestrained laughter has become a symbol of extreme indecency in women. This attitude towards women has always existed, in both ancient and modern times, but it is telling that a raucous laugh, when made by a man, is seen as brave, bold, and jolly. It seems that humour relating to women is often of a demeaning nature.¹³⁸ Until recently, thinking about humour and gender has reflected the chauvinistic attitude to women under patriarchy. This kind of regime, which has lasted for thousands of years, uses the male lifestyle as a framework and standard to measure the behaviour and morals of women. Within this, the position of women cannot be represented. From the perspective of social conditions, in the long history of the patriarchal dominance of society, female humour and laughter have been regarded as behaviours that required suppression, and have constantly been restrained by social laws, so that a biased social concept was formed: women have been seen as not funny, so it follows that the female gender lacks humour.¹³⁹

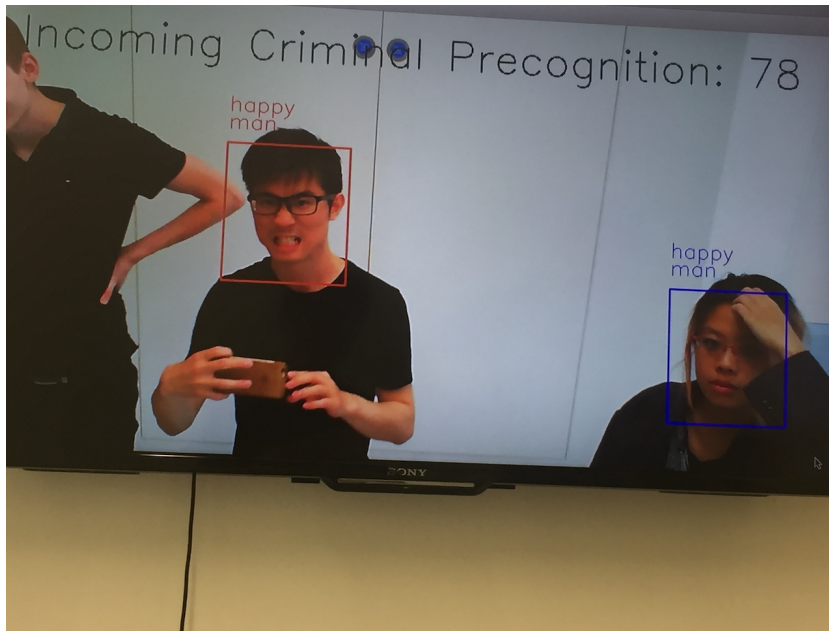
In this context of social awareness, the understanding of gender directly affects the creation of humorous art, and it is an unavoidable topic in art practice. The notion of gender will always be found in an artwork, as well as in its creator, in many ways. A distorted abstract sculptural form, a sexually suggestive symbol, a silk-embroidery painting, or video works documenting people can all express the concept of gender. Similarly, the relationship between humour and gender will be reflected in artistic practice. The humour of the work will change significantly if the gender of the person in the work is swapped: it could even become humourless and offensive.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ H. Kotthoff, 'Gender and Humour. The New State of the Art'. Section 4: Humour and "Indexing Gender". *Linguistik* 2022, pp. 57-80.

¹³⁸ T. Xu, and G.L. Yan, *Study on Key Words in Humour Theory*, Chinese edn. (Xuelin Press, 2010), p.20.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p.14.

¹⁴⁰ In the film *Mulan*, the audience laughed at Mulan rather than the male soldiers when they all fell down in training.



The facial recognition system in the show. Photo by the author.

For instance, in an RCA graduate exhibition, a facial recognition system performed an absurd facial analysis on viewers. During the recognition process, I became a “happy man” even though I deliberately made an angry facial expression, while the woman next to me was recognised as a “happy man”, as well. I noticed that the female viewers of the work were almost all recognised as “happy men”, and the misidentification in the work made every audience laugh without exception: many of them laughed at the female viewers laughing at the women who were mistaken for men. The mistakes made by AI were brought to a discussion of gender: however, we cannot blame AI but can only guess whether the artist did it intentionally. No matter what the purpose, the artist’s approach is controversial – generalising the signs of crime and attributing it to a particular gender. This work also asked the viewer exactly what a woman looks like. If a woman adopts a look that people are not familiar with, will she be laughed at? In response to this situation, many young artists in China today are making work that examines, questions and critiques the relationship between gender and society: artists have begun to challenge women’s traditional roles, exploring topics such as domesticity, women in the public sphere, and traditional standards of female beauty. For example, Xiang Jing’s sculpture *Are One Hundred Playing You or Only One?* (2007) shows a group of figures of bald women sitting together – naked figures that are silent, hesitant, restrained, with neutral, confused faces, dull eyes – they all appear to articulate the pain

that is often hidden.¹⁴¹ This work undoubtedly influenced my understanding of gender in my art practice. When sculpting from life, for instance, I am not seeking the so-called standards set by society in the model, but instead I look squarely at a real man or woman to discover the person's unique beauty and power. This is not an easy process, but it's something that artists who express humour should think about when facing the issue of gender in their work.



Xiang Jing, *Are One Hundred Playing You Or Only One?* (2007) (*Naked Beyond Skin Series*), Fiberglass painted. Image from CAFA website:

<https://www.cafa.com.cn/en/news/details/8325350#images-3>

Ancient Greek art is also relevant today in thinking about the relationship between humour and morality. The vase paintings of ancient Athens are known for depicting myths and heroes, but they also featured satirical pictures, which reflects moral implications for people today. In Section Two I noted that ancient Greeks believed any departure from the ideals of nobility, purity, and virtuousness was immediately considered absurd, laughable, and ridiculous. The “Tiny Dancer” skyphos (ca.475-450 BCE) demonstrates this.

¹⁴¹ ‘Sculptor Xiang Jing: Saying Goodbye to “Feminism”1’, *Guangzhou Daily*, 4 July 2010. Available at: http://art.china.cn/sculpture/content_3452186.htm



Red Figured Skyphos, used for drinking, ca. 475-450 BCE, made in Athens, Greece, via the Louvre.

Image source: <https://www.thecollector.com/vase-painting-ancient-athens-funny-humor/>

Ancient Greeks were extremely sensitive about showing any physical deformity in their imagery. Despite thousands of images of combat and war, there are no images of mutilated limbs. Instead, just a small stream of blood might drip from the wound when a spear pierces the soldier's body.¹⁴² Short stature seems to be an exception to this tradition, in view of the "Tiny Dancer" vase painting, although it is a mysterious example. On the other hand, people with short stature can be seen in images of theatre performances as part of the performing troupe. They mix with hunting scenes or musical performances alongside people of normal stature. These tiny people are always men, painted with a beard and a bald head, maybe to distinguish them from children.¹⁴³ Sometimes they are drawn as caricatures with hideously exaggerated proportions: a huge head, a large penis, exaggerated and rigid movement: as low-ranking figures, they became the butt of jokes to ancient Athenians. This is demonstrated in the fact that in this period, people with short stature were often shown as servants. However, a person with short stature drawn as a caricature doing calisthenics would certainly not be acceptable to laugh at today.

In the face of natural hazards, wars and disasters, can we still think about these problems in a playful way? From a moral perspective, it is not ethical to make such serious things

¹⁴² W. R. Agard, 'Greek Humor in Vase Paintings', *The Classical Journal*, 1991, pp.97-105.

¹⁴³ Gustafsson, 6 *Vase Paintings that Made Ancient Athenians Laugh*.

entertaining, or to “play” with somebody’s pain. The issue of ethics, morality, and the relationship of each to humour has been increasingly part of people’s lives today. For instance, people who say something objectionable but then attempt to excuse it by claiming they were “just joking”, or professional comedians who make satirical jokes that are not welcomed by audience because they are in bad taste.

Before exploring humorous art more deeply, I thought that actions by artists who make humorous work should be directed and motivated by the idea of “fun”. But now I have gradually understood the limitations of this idea: when someone can tell jokes tactfully and appropriately, it is called humour. In contrast, telling jokes about someone’s difficulty or misfortune viciously is not only unfunny, but also morally corrupt and disgusting. Therefore, an artist who makes humorous works, or is “thinking and doing in a playful way” will encounter this challenge, and they should think carefully about the relationship between playfulness and morality in their practice.

What should we do, then? In terms of standard approaches to the ethics of humour, the philosophers Thomas Wilk and Steven Gimbel believe these generally fall into three categories.¹⁴⁴ First, there are the highly restrictive views: when creating humorous works, artists should try to avoid expressions that may cause offence to the audience. This line demands that the artists “play it safe” and rule out all potentially offensive jokes. Second, in contrast to the first, there are some artists who believe jokes are just jokes, and shouldn’t be taken too seriously. They argue that artists should have the freedom to explore any topic, and if someone is offended, they should toughen up. Third, there’s the middle ground, which focuses on the context of jokes, particularly the power dynamics involved. This approach holds that some jokes aimed at others are morally allowed: maybe only jokes about groups to which the joker belongs, or jokes about those with more social power than you – but ones about those with less are unacceptable.¹⁴⁵ All three viewpoints contribute something valuable to the discussion. The “restrictive” approach emphasises that joking without considering the moral issues of the humour is wrong and should be avoided. However, artists from the other extreme

¹⁴⁴ J.C. Simon, ‘When Humor Hurts: The Ethics of Joking and Comedy’. *Psychology Today*, July 19, 2024. This interview with philosophers Drs. Thomas Wilk and Steven Gimbel delves into the ethics of jokes.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Wilk and Steven Gimbel, *In on the Joke: The Ethics of Humor and Comedy* (De Gruyter, 2024), pp.109-123.

believe that joking in art is a unique form of expression and should not be taken seriously. If the viewer is offended, then it's their problem and they should not watch it, or should endure it. They believe that this is the approach that art should take. Artists who adopt a middle position recognise the importance of social context and power dynamics in humour. However, making a humorous work, or telling a joke, means considering various factors about the people involved, their relationships, and the context in which the artwork or the joke is made. All the viewpoints above, therefore, provide too simplistic an approach for the complicated real world, like the viewers' feedback for my work *Love and Peace*, discussed earlier, which communicated that it is wrong to build humour on politics or war. However, on the other hand, suggesting that "humour should always be freely expressed" is also likely to be highly controversial. The notorious painting "*Corpus Christi (Only Women Bleed)*" (2008) by Adam Cullen was strongly criticised: "it has a kind of deliberate ugliness which has been exploited as a gimmick.", as one critic said.¹⁴⁶ Some people have critiqued it on the grounds of religion as blasphemous, however, Atheists, of course, will deny the basic assumption of God's existence. Thus, there is wide variation in people's views about what constitutes blasphemy, and the non-contextual moral critique of blasphemous humour is hard to defend, defying further discussion.

David Benatar takes the view that humour should be considered seriously, but is often treated too seriously. While humour is sometimes unethical, it is wrong much less often than many people think.¹⁴⁷ He states:

Thus we see that to joke about something is, contrary to what some people think, not necessarily to trivialize it. When jokes are told about serious matters, we are not necessarily treating these matters as though they were not serious. We can laugh at the serious, and sometimes we do so precisely because we recognise it to be serious.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ 'Religious Art Prize Judge Quits in Disgust', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 August 2008, accessed 13 February 2024, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/religious-art-prize-judge-quits-in-disgust-20080806-gdsp8w.html>

¹⁴⁷ David Benatar, 'Taking Humour (Ethics) Seriously, But Not Too Seriously', *Journal of Practical Ethics*, 2.1 (June 2014) <https://www.jpe.ox.ac.uk/papers/taking-humour-ethics-seriously-but-not-too-seriously/>

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

It should not be surprising that non-contextual criticisms of humour are hard to defend. But what I want to clarify is whether it is incorrect to believe that all humour of a particular kind is morally wrong. A much more measured view is that various kinds of humour can be morally acceptable in some contexts but wrong in others. In this way, we should evaluate not types of jokes but rather particular instances of a joke to determine whether they are morally permissible. Further, artists should ask themselves every single day “why does the world need what we are going to give to it?”. An artwork not only represents the artist’s personal beliefs, but more importantly, should carry social responsibility, whether this sense of responsibility is towards society or the creation of art. Understanding more about the social role played by the work we create may enable us to have a clearer understanding of the humour we express. This is important, because as artists we will always need to be called to account on a fundamental level for what we do.

SECTION FOUR Research methods

When thinking about how to make humour through play in my work, I have felt that methods in art practice are worth exploring, as viewers in the gallery are always curious about how a work of art is made. In the first year of my PhD, I did not fully understand the relationship between research methods and art practice, nor did I know what methods are needed for exploring play – the behaviour and consciousness that everyone has experienced and is familiar with. Therefore, I interpreted play by making a number of art projects to see whether this was applicable. In addition to my own art practice, I also used case studies in qualitative research, in Section Two and Section Three of this thesis, to observe, organise and analyse play in the works of other artists. I put my own works together with those of other artists to compare our different practical methods and also tried to find commonalities. In this section, I will continue to discuss cases to specifically talk about how I make humorous works in playful ways, and hope that my creative methods can provide ideas and references for other artists.

In July 2022, I attended a symposium at the Museum of Making in Derby, *Material, Economics & Ecology*, that discussed practical research. The artists who presented introduced their practical research method and the artist-in-residence projects during they had conducted over the previous two years to explore society and culture. Art practice research is an idea worth exploring and discussing. However, some scholars expressed doubts about practice research during the meeting, and they believed that doing research through artistic creation for solving social problems lacks rationality, because an art practice-led research programme that interweaves practice and theory is not practical enough, on the one hand, and not theoretical enough, on the other. But I argue that we should focus more on possibility rather than plausibility, because some complex concepts and ideas may be better solved by visual arts, or at least they can be tested visually. For example, the shocking image of the shark in Damien Hirst's controversial work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) makes people think about life and the relationship between humans and nature. And *Ice Watch* (2018), by Olafur Eliasson, that was positioned at the entrance to Tate Modern, not only encouraged people to be aware of climate change, but also gave its

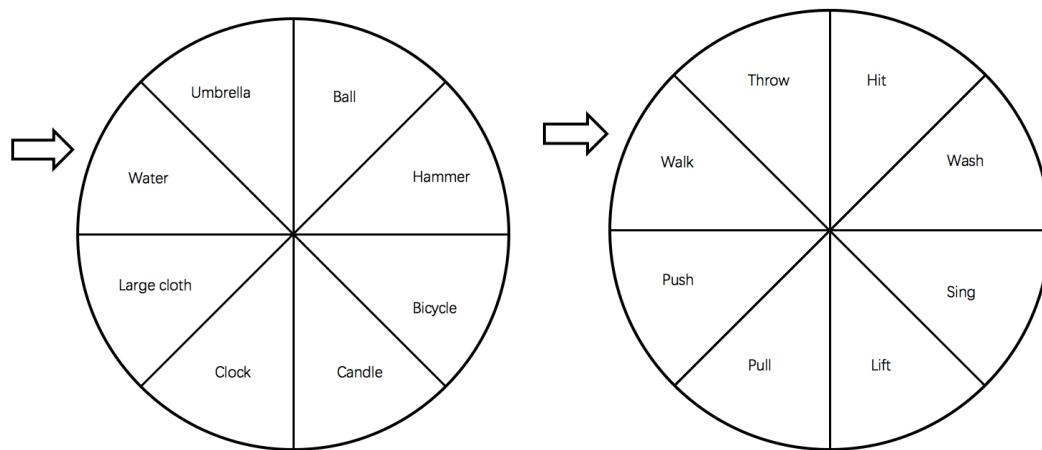
viewers a chance to physically interact with the ice. It seems that placing these works in different environments will lead to completely different interpretations. The effect brought by art practice research is not singular, it is open, experimental and diverse, and changes with the context. Therefore, I will introduce the concept of experimental art in this section – discussing what experimental art is through the cases of other artists' works, and then explain how my research emerges through this “experimental idea”. Before that, I will outline how I find creative inspiration.

Ways of gaining ideas

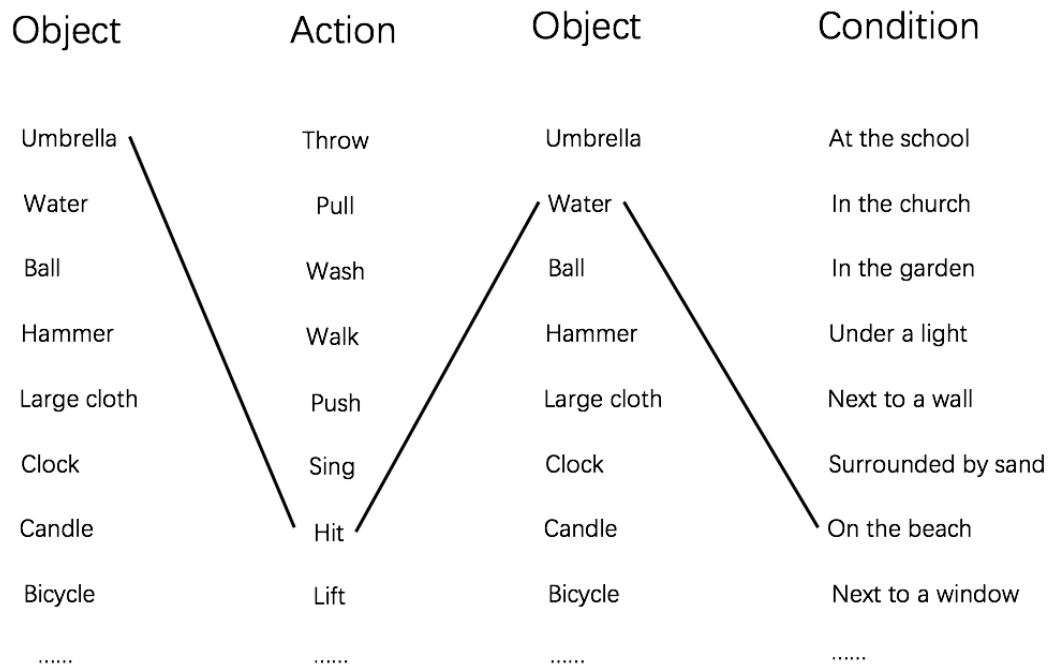
When I was an undergraduate, I always felt that the artist's inspiration came with no regularity or predictability. Brilliant ideas could burst out when an artist is in a positive state, or in a sensitive and emotional moment, or just by chance. I also thought about approaches to get inspiration, such as going to a gallery, talking to people, doing something that I had never tried before, or even meditating. But the effect was not successful, and the creativity was not satisfactory, thus sometimes I waited for inspiration to come to me by accidental chance. When I started my doctoral research, I no longer believed that this approach could work. I think inspiration can come from thinking about the relationship between different materials through a framework, rather than just relying on feelings. In my current opinion, no work of art is created entirely based on feelings. Everyone has feelings, so why is an artist's feeling a work of art while other people's feelings are not? This concept is obviously not convincing to me. The reason why artists can express amazing ideas in their work is that while they have strong feelings, they also know how to use certain methods to visualise these feelings artistically.

As an artist who likes to create with multiple materials, the emergence of inspiration could have a lot to do with “idea-structuring”. I made the diagrams below to explain how I gain inspiration. The “idea-structuring” I refer is to randomly combine different materials and add some other conditions, so that the entire thinking route is in a structure instead of unorganised. As shown in Picture 1 below, the first step is to think

about the theme I want to express, and then to list several materials that I feel relate to the theme, or materials that I want to use. This step is important because it can push an artist to bring subjective initiative to find potential materials rather than waiting for inspiration with an empty mind. This is the first step of building a framework, even though I might not yet have much inspiration. The second step is to make a rotating disc and label it with all the objects (materials) I had thought of before, then rotate the disc to get an item at random. In the third step, as shown in Picture 2, I will write down some actions in my mind on the disc, rotate the disc and get an action at random. Moreover, I can also add other conditions in this way, such as location and time. Finally, by connecting all these answers together (as shown in Picture 3), a preliminary sketch is formed – an imaginary process of artistic creation.



Picture 1(left) and picture 2(right)



Picture 3

This mapping method can push me to break my conventional way of combining materials. But if the matching result is really unacceptable, I can also change the elements in the map at will to achieve the state I want. The advantage of this method is that it opens my mind, brings me inspiration, and allows me to look for more possibilities with the potential combination of different materials. Therefore, I developed an “art proposal” below based on the materials listed here, which can provide a reference for my subsequent creations.

How can a few objects be made into a drama?

Objects: umbrella, ball, hammer, bicycle, water, a large piece of cloth

1. *I propose to hammer the wheel of a bicycle into an oval, then let someone step on it, and then watch the rider advance through the bumps.*
2. *I propose to insert an umbrella into one wheel of the bicycle to make it unable to turn, then make a person work hard on the bicycle, and at the same time sprinkle water like rain upon the rider.*
3. *I propose to place a small ball in the water, the ball floats, and then kneel by the water and hit the ball frantically with a hammer.*

4. *I propose to let four people pull the four corners of a cloth, placing a ball in the middle, and throwing the ball into the air together or letting the ball move as it will on the cloth.*
5. *I propose to book a large empty white space, slowly pour coloured water on the umbrella, and then someone holding the umbrella quickly rotates it, and coloured water splashes around.*
6. *I propose to place the rear wheel of a bicycle in the water: one person rides the bicycle on the spot, the water splashes backward. Another person holds an umbrella against the rear wheel to protect them from getting wet, and spins the umbrella quickly to splash water towards the audience on the left and right.*
7. *I propose to book a empty white space, where one person bats a ball, another person hits the ground with a hammer, and the third person hits the ground with an umbrella handle, forming impromptu music.*

As you can see from the above ideas, using mapping to gain creative inspiration is flexible and interesting. This process allows artists to better understand the characteristics of materials and how to use them. This was one of the approaches I used when I started my art practice, and it was also the beginning of my research through ways of playing.

What to experiment with, how to experiment, why experiment – art experimentation as a problem

The system to generate creative ideas that I demonstrate above enables randomness in combining objects. I am fascinated by the flexibility brought by chance and the relationship between different everyday objects presented by random matching. The American composer John Cage pursued the operation of chance through his studies of Zen Buddhism in the late 1940s.¹⁴⁹ Through these, Cage became interested in the idea

¹⁴⁹ The I Ching, an ancient Chinese classic text and decision-making tool, became Cage's standard compositional tool for the rest of his life. David Ryan, 'John Cage – Music of Changes', Tania Chen <https://taniachen.com/music-of-changes>

of aleatoric, or chance-controlled, music, which he began composing in 1951.¹⁵⁰ In his 1957 lecture “Experimental Music”, he described his music as “a purposeless play” which is “an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we’re living”.¹⁵¹

Cage believed that when we are making a choice, we are giving a specific answer (our likes or dislikes, for example), but during the process our perception and experience are narrowed.¹⁵² In reference to Cage’s idea, Hyde explains that “[...] Intention always operates in terms of desire or aversion, and we therefore need a practice or discipline of non-intention, a way to make an end run around the ego’s habitual operations”.¹⁵³ Cage thought his own art practice moved in the other direction, and he used chance operation to free himself from the ego. Cage’s work *Music of Changes* (1951), for some audiences, is experienced as disordered and free. Facing this “freedom”, Cage once explained that his music is not about “doing whatever you like”: the “freedoms” he has given “[...] have not been given to permit just anything that one wants to do, but have been invitations for people to free themselves from their likes and dislikes, and to discipline themselves”.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, the idea of “the intentions of non-intention” is what Cage pursued in his work. Cage distanced himself from improvisation, or automatic art, even though such approaches might initially seem related to his project. For example, in his *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1958), one of the woodwind instruments improvises on music by Stravinsky. Cage later commented: “he was just going wild – not playing what was in front of him, but rather whatever came into his head. I have tried in my work to free myself from my own head. I would hope that people would take that opportunity to do likewise”.¹⁵⁵ Cage’s approach made me start to think about all the objects around me. They always come into our field of vision, whether we like it or not, and this is the world we are given to see. Just like noise in

¹⁵⁰ D. Lejeunne, *The Radical Use of Chance in 20th Century Art*. (Rodopi Press, 2012), pp.185–189.

¹⁵¹ John Cage, *Silence* (Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p.12.

¹⁵² Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, p.142. My understanding of what Cage said here is that choosing between two options or choosing within a limited range of choices is often easier than not being given any options. However, in this way people cannot think more deeply and broadly about the problem, nor can they associate and restore the situation in the problem based on their own experience.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, p.143.

¹⁵⁵ R. Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, second edition (Routledge, 2003), p.72.

life, if we pay too much attention to the sound of the refrigerator we will be irritated, but our hearing and mind will not be bothered if we consider it as purposeless. Hyde explains: “chance operations can change the mind because they circumvent intention [...] we are more likely to appreciate chance if we stop trying to control what happens, and one way to do that is to cultivate non-intention”.¹⁵⁶

An example is one of Cage’s best-known compositions, *4’33’’* (1952), four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence broken into three movements. During the “playing” period, non-musical sound (“noise”) was welcome, along with its unpredictable arrangements. What the audience thought was silence was full of accidental sounds: during the third movement the audience made all kinds of sounds such as talking and walking out of the auditorium. As this performance offered a found soundscape, and potentially changed the listeners’ relationship to the “noise” they heard after the performance, these participatory events blurred the line between what was life and what was art, what was an everyday movement and what was a performance. Kaprow said that “The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps as indistinct as possible”. No doubt some were bemused by the events, and what to make of them, but *Happenings* became important, as I discuss later.

Apart from John Cage’s “chance operations”, the system that generates creative ideas also allows me to assemble objects arbitrarily to achieve absurd and dramatic states. Assemblage, conceptually, is potentially the most unbound of art forms.¹⁵⁷ Assemblage is made by assembling disparate elements – often everyday objects – scavenged by the artist or bought specifically.¹⁵⁸ The word “experiment” suggests, among its meanings, “the testing or trial of a principle”.¹⁵⁹ It is conventional to assume that human beings are creative and express their creativity in works called art. For example, in nonverbal art activities such as painting or sculpture, people accept creative art while challenging it, as Robert Rauschenberg did. In the 1950s and 1960s, assemblage became widely used as an artistic practice. Rauschenberg adopted an apparently anti-aesthetic approach to making art. He used scrappy materials and found

¹⁵⁶ Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, pp.145-146.

¹⁵⁷ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p.68.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Assemblage’, Tate <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/assemblage>

¹⁵⁹ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*.

objects alongside messily applied paint to create expressionist reliefs and sculptures, which became known as “neo-dada”.¹⁶⁰ However, it seems that the lines dividing the arts are rapidly disintegrating and everything is becoming confused. There is no clear distinction between assemblage and sculpture, painting and drawing, public art and art in the public realm... In 1966, Kaprow wrote that if the artist’s task was once to make good art, now it is to “avoid making art of any kind”.¹⁶¹ This sounds confused, perhaps, but I believe that Kaprow was just looking for an experimental state within the vague boundary. Today, we may say that experimental art is that act or thought whose identity as art must always remain in doubt. People, including artists, often don’t know what to call it in which circumstances, or when, but the term “Happening” may provide an answer.

The term “Happening” was coined by Kaprow: he chose this word to suggest “something spontaneous, something that just happens to happen.”¹⁶² Despite their allusion to chance, Happenings were tightly planned and participative. Like the Black Mountain untitled event of 1952, the environments, actions, sound, light and timing were all integral parts of *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*. Rather than being passive observers, the audience were participants – invitations to the event said, “you will become part of the happenings; you will simultaneously experience them”.¹⁶³ During *A Spring Happening*, members of the audience stood in narrow tunnels, exposed to rapidly flashing lights and eardrum-rattling sounds. The Happening concluded with a blank-faced performer walking towards the audience pushing an electric lawnmower, forcing them back towards the lobby. During most performances, one or two people would flee the room, overwhelmed.¹⁶⁴ The reason why Kaprow used this particular approach to creation is that he believed the modernist practice of art is more than the production of artworks, it also involves the artist’s disciplined effort to observe, engage, and interpret the processes of living¹⁶⁵. Thus, in Happenings, materials, colours, sounds, odours,

¹⁶⁰ ‘Assemblage’.

¹⁶¹ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p.xxi.

¹⁶² Beaven, *Performance Art: The Happening*.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ A. Cain, ‘A Brief History of “Happenings” in 1960s New York’, *Artsy*, March 2016.

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-what-were-1960s-happenings-and-why-do-they-matter>

¹⁶⁵ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p.xii.

common objects and events were orchestrated in ways that approximated the spectacle of modern everyday life.

In traditional art presentation, communication is often considered as a one-way flow, from the artist to the viewer through the medium. We, the viewer, find that we have been communicated with, and what is communicated to us is some of the artist's practical and creative experience. However, there is a mutual flow implied in the communication, and this interaction in art begins to turn the aesthetic experience into participation. Of course, we can say that any work of art, no matter how traditional, is "experienced" by the viewer, and this experience, including interpretation, fantasy or speculation about the artwork, constitutes a form of participation. Kaprow believed the notion of "forms" is situational, operational, structural, subject to feedback, and open to learning.¹⁶⁶ This is the key information we use to interpret how the viewer engages with the artwork. Actually, participation in a work of art provokes anarchy¹⁶⁷: it invites the participant to make a choice, about whether to participate or not. In making the choice to participate, one may also choose to change the work – its object, theme, meaning; In choosing not to participate, one is at least acting consciously. In either case, the work is influenced. Thus, if there is a central theme throughout Kaprow's essays, it is that art is a participatory experience and practice. And in participation, play is discovered. Play is, for some, frivolous and childish, but Kaprow always sought a certain innocence in his work, inviting humour and spontaneity, and being willing to accept the unexpected. For him, play is participatory, creative, and educational,¹⁶⁸ qualities of play I discuss in Section One. On the problem of participation in art, Kaprow believed that participating in an activity means crossing the psychological boundary between self and other. The experience of participation – especially when it is catalysed in play – transforms the participant, as well as the game.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, he invited himself to create, and invited the audience to participate in creating, and the "success" of a work depends as much on the artist as it does on the viewer.

¹⁶⁶ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p.xvii.

¹⁶⁷ I read in Kaprow's essay that he mentioned "anarchism" in his discussion of participatory art. Happenings emerged from the theatrical elements of Dada and Surrealism. Dadaism is an anarchist art movement, and anarchism is a political concept. Using political concepts to explain Dada also includes the relationship between the two. Dada intervenes in politics through artistic behaviour, but the purpose is not to fight for the rights of art through politics, but to use artistic behaviour to express disgust with bourgeois society and despair at the war.

¹⁶⁸ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p.xxii.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Most works in art galleries will be exposed to viewers for many years and will be continually appreciated and criticised. But Happenings can escape from this, because they are designed for a brief life, they can never be overexposed.¹⁷⁰ However, the most common questions from the viewer might be “How long will it last?” and “How can I keep going?”. Kaprow thought about it and once wrote that to the extent that a Happening is not a commodity but a brief event, from the standpoint of any publicity it may receive it may become a state of mind.¹⁷¹ In this case, the artist may achieve a beautiful privacy, famed for something purely imaginary while being free to explore something nobody will notice. Specifically, the purpose of imaginary play is to stimulate as much fantasy as possible, and that will enable a Happening to be something that breathes, rather than a documentary-like work that is judged. Experimental artists sometimes create art like this – throwing an empty plastic bottle high up in the air and then catching it before seeing how many numbers they can count while the bottle is in the air; or like my performance *Drinking Series* that I discussed in Section Two. Here I stood in the crowd and drank water by my eye, feeling the discordance between my psychological rhythm and physical rhythm. These play-like behaviours in life do not offer a stage for the artist to rehearse and re-enact, nor can they be recorded for exhibition. However, play, of course, is at the heart of experimentation. Kaprow has pointed out the crucial difference in the English language between playing and gaming. Gaming involves winning or losing a desired goal. Playing is open-ended and, potentially, everybody “wins”.¹⁷² Play is an inalienable part of human life, so I think the playground for experimental art is ordinary life. This is one of the reasons that I discuss the idea of experimental art in this thesis.

The essence of practical art research is a kind of artistic thought and action.¹⁷³ Based on my experience, I started with thinking about art and issues in a playful way to explore “play”, and then I carried out artistic actions: testing things with playful idea to demonstrate whether my ideas could work. When I did my art practice with this concept,

¹⁷⁰ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p.59.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid., p.250.

¹⁷³ C.P. Buschkühle, *Joseph Beuys and the Artistic Education: Theory and Practice of an Artistic Art Education*. (Brill/Sense, 2020), pp. 29-50.

I found that my works were full of uncertainty – chance and accident¹⁷⁴ often appearing in the works. Uncertainty frequently emerges from play too, and the surprises and unexpectedness it brings are also among the charms of play. During the process of creating art, no one knows what will happen next. Thus, the majority of my artworks are defined as experimental art, and making art through play is actually a way of making experimental art. Then what is experimental art? Personally, I think it is a state in which art is placed to be tested. My own practice is also in a state of being tested and unfixed. This open, free state can bring many possibilities. In the process of making, although I know what idea I want to present, I never know what kind of effect I would get if I group different materials together; nor do I know what kind of approach can give people the fullest impression and what kind of reaction the audience will have after visiting the work; and whether the entire exhibition reached my expectations... The charm of experimental art is to find answers through constantly attempting, thus what I can do is to test things and collect feedback. Some people may wonder: if creation in this way is so frameless, aimless and arbitrary, won't it be too outrageous? Actually, I don't think so. In my practical experience, it is impossible for an artist to be very clear that every step they take is well planned, and they cannot predict the attitude of the audience. But the artist will more or less know what they want to express, and this is the prerequisite for starting experimental art. From what we have discussed here, we can find that the artist's "not-knowing" runs through his experimental art practical process. This interesting concept is worth exploring, and I will discuss it specifically in a chapter later.

In my research, it is clear that my purpose is to achieve humorous and absurd effects in a playful way in my work, then I need to think about how to create humour and absurdity before I play and experiment. The following is a summary of some practical ways to create humour that I have used in my art practice over the past few years:

1. Transformation.

I think transformation between symbols plays a very important role in my art practice. After the change in the symbolic role of an object, the meaning will also change, and

¹⁷⁴ "Accident" here refers to something unexpected happening in the work. This is a very common phenomenon in practice. During creation, external influences, or inspirations bursting out from the art experiment will change the artist's original ideas to some extent.

the viewer may synchronously refresh their understanding of the original object.¹⁷⁵ The difference between before and after will prompt the audience to interpret the work in a new context through comparison. This method includes beautification, uglification, and character deterioration. In the work *Face*, for instance, I folded the key area on a British twenty-pound banknote to make the figure on it show different expressions through different viewing angles. The face of Queen Elizabeth II switches back and forth between smiling and crying, in a funny but absurd way. I can guess that people could hardly imagine the Queen with such an exaggerated face if they had not seen this work, and this transformation broadly gives chance to people to come up with different ideas.



Face (2019). Banknotes, wood, mechanism and metals. Video link: <https://vimeo.com/256992824>

2. Fraud, lying and fakes

During the exploration of humour, I found that fake things can also bring interest. This idea came from the “lie” I made. If an audience stares at the photograph *Two Light* and ask me what it is about, I would patiently introduce that from the photo, our general knowledge tells us there are two lights in the room, as two shadows of the power switch can be seen. However, the thing should not be that easy. The truth is the right shadow is false and artificial, because the shadow is deliberately painted by me. It means there was only one light in the room when I was painting. In this prank, I used a fake 2D photograph to present an imagined 3D space, an unreal space with a non-existent environment. If a real thing becomes unreal and absurd because of artistic intervention, then what is the real reality? Therefore, in the future I can use a mischievous way like this to create deceptive means to put the audience in unexpected situations, which can bring them surprise and humour.

¹⁷⁵ Zhao, 2016. pp.33-36.

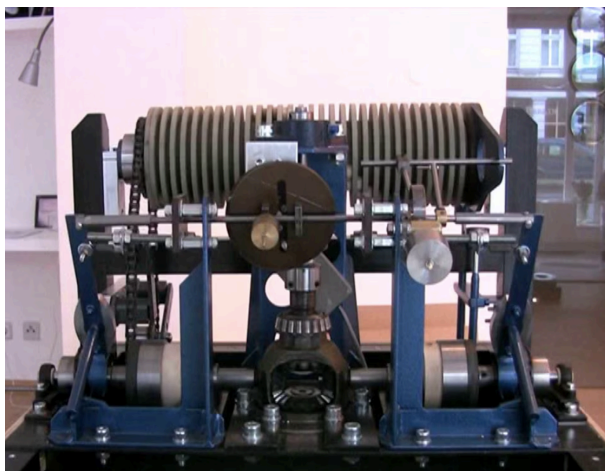


Two Light (2017). Painting on the wall.

3. Repetition and “resultlessness”

The early French film *The Trip to the Moon* (1902) shows explorers taking a huge cannonball as transportation to go to the moon, and this short imaginative film inspired me to make “resultlessness” part of my art practice. The photo below is a textual work I wrote during the most serious lockdown of Covid-19 in China. I illustrated a story and repeated the movement, showing an endless absurdity.

Simon Lewandowski is a combination of seemingly very complex mechanical devices. When the switch is turned on, various complex gears inside a gearbox mechanism that are protected by glass start to operate. However, no matter how complex the structure is, the regularity that the machine performs is clear and easy to identify, because the machinery is working in a constantly repetitive way. What impressed me most is that the artist put the seemingly simple concept of “repetition” into a complex mechanical system. This felicitous combination reminds me of the absurd situation in which one of the simplest and cheapest goods is manufactured by the most advanced and complex factory.



The Reversing Machine (2012), Simon Lewandowski. Video link: <https://vimeo.com/62506698>

4. Combining irrelevant symbols.

Symbols between which there is no direct relation can produce absurd results when combined. Moreover, the combination of symbols that have opposite properties has a comical flavour: examples are metal and cotton (hardness and softness), fossils and AI technology (old and new). Thus, I take any materials that I can find to make a “random” assembly to show something interesting. Balloons, as one of my favourite ready-made materials, I always carry with me, which allows me to make balloons have conversation with other unrelated objects in different places at any time. The dialogue and cooperation between the balloon and the objects are full of unknowns and contradictions, and at the same time there may be surprises and possible harmony. For example, the following work *Balloon No.1*, will explain why I used the method of combining irrelevant symbols in my practice. In May, a sudden desire for making led me to go to the beach, taking some discarded cardboard boxes. I didn’t know what

specific works I would make, but I knew that the boxes could hold some items, which could be wood, stones or the balloons in my pocket. I have always been interested in site-specific art because I need to adapt my work to the site rather than having the site adapt to my art, and this kind of creation brings me challenges and unexpected surprises. With excitement, I was walking along the seaside to find inspiration, and the rocks on the beach became the object of my attention. Different from my yellow balloons, they are hard and grey in colour. However, the greater the difference is between them, the more I want to put the two together to see what kind of effect there would be. During the practical process, several balloons exploded due to the compression of the rocks and their weight. I had to prepare more balloons and then carefully placed them and adjusted their location. The whole process was not easy, and the wind from the sea even made it more difficult: thus this site-specific work was not finished until an hour later. Interestingly, somehow I could see the conflict hidden inside the seemingly peaceful work as the balloons and the rocks silently squeezed and confronted each other in the box – just like the undercurrents surging beneath the flat surface of the sea, or like the pressure and pain that a person silently endures under their calm appearance.



Balloon No.1, 2017, Edinburgh.



The detail of *Balloon No.1*.

After the *Balloon No.1* project at the beach, I had experienced the joy in this approach and gradually became interested in combining different symbols in art-making. *The Balloon at Home* is not a purposeful creation but an ordinary everyday artistic act. One day, a balloon amazingly happened to fall on my head from a tree near the station, then I brought it home on a tube train and placed it in various locations in the house by the method of creating static to attach it to surfaces by rubbing the balloon with my hair.¹⁷⁷ Every state it presented had a kind of poetic beauty. Therefore, combining irrelevant symbols together will produce both conflict and harmony, and the produce of this relationship will also be accompanied by a comic atmosphere.



The balloon at home, 2021.

¹⁷⁷ Physics: electrification by friction.

5. The unexpected.

This is an approach I have used a lot in my video art. As Kant's theory of laughter, suggests, people laugh when their expectation comes to nothing.¹⁷⁸ So I can rearrange the causal relationship of an event in the video, and I can also combine the "transformation" that is mentioned above with the idea of "breaking the regular usability of the object" below to create a state with an unexpected result. *The Flag* is an interesting piece. The simplicity of this work was expressed by a standing white flag and a working electric fan. Looking at them carefully, the viewer might have found something strange, even unscientific: the flag is not waving in the direction of the fan. It is not what we usually see in everyday life. But the joke will not end here. If we explore more, the work would be funnier, as the white flag stands a symbol of surrender and obviously someone has lost the game. However, the opposite flying direction of the flag appears to show a silent revolt as it essentially did not give up and never surrendered.



The Flag, 2019.

6. Exaggeration and antics.

This method is widely used in comedy, but it is also effectively applied in sculpture and painting. The Chinese painter Yue Minjun is best known for oil paintings depicting himself in various settings, frozen in laughter.¹⁷⁹ Exaggerating the expressions of the

¹⁷⁸ See the explanation at page 107.

¹⁷⁹ K. Tong, 'Big Ideas', *Vancouver Biennale*, 2010. Available at:

characters is his strong feature. The work *Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-Sublimated Libidinal Model* (1995) by Jake & Dinos Chapman is on the edge of exaggeration. The artists used fibreglass to shape a life-size group of girls. The bodies, the limbs and the heads are ridiculously combined together, creating a group of deformed humans with extreme anatomy.¹⁸⁰ As a strategy in my practice, I could exaggerate a figure or an object by deforming it. Also, I could speed up or slow down something or somebody, or change the shape and size of an object or a person. In one scene of my animation *The Artist's Sheep*, the sheep came to the Museum of Strange Art. In the plot I designed one sheep wanted to imitate the statue of a horse, so he stretched his neck as long as he could, and when it almost reached the length of his body, it was difficult for him to control his balance and he eventually fell over. Besides this action, I also applied exaggeration in other scenes of the video, and the effect it brings makes the work more humorous.



The scene (08:46s) in *The Artist's Sheep*.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHLv6MkFL-c>

7. Breaking the normal usability of the object.

This practical method is one of the first ways I used to create absurdity and comedy, and traces of using it can be found in many of my early works, as well as in current projects. This idea for a method came to me when I was designing a series of “useless” kinetic art. The uselessness of material has always been a very interesting topic to me.

<https://www.vancouverbiennale.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Yue-Minjun-Amazing-Laughter.pdf>

¹⁸⁰ Jake Chapman and Dinos Chapman, *Hell* (Jonathan Cape, 2003), pp. 51-78.

In the kinetic work *Obtain* that I introduced in the Chapter Artist as trickster in Section Two, I broke the regular function of the chopsticks, the colander and the knife, and challenged them with something they cannot cope with. After *Obtain*, I used the same idea to derive *Obtain No.2*, which also placed objects in a “useless” state. In this live performance art, I spent three hours on my knees transferring liquid from one bowl to another with chopsticks instead of a spoon. I wanted to test the audience’s psychological reaction to this “stupid” act, and judge whether the purpose of making something absurd was achieved through the viewer’s feedback.



Obtain No.2 (2017) Live performance. Video link: <https://vimeo.com/256841335>

8. Irony.

In art practice, in order to express irony, as an artist I could express a meaning via its opposite. I made a site-specific work to interpret the relationship between “irony” and “absurdity” in 2019. The BROAD Group is a privately-owned enterprise in Changsha, China. An enormous European-style building, called Athens Academy, is a landmark building in an industrial park, and the rooms there are basically used for training labourers for the factory. The concert hall in the “Academy”, the Golden Hall, is a copy of the Golden Hall of the Musikverein, Vienna. These ersatz European-style buildings are dramatic and upmarket, and even from the first glance can be seen as seriously expensive. However, their construction has been delayed for a long time, and many of its spaces are not functioning. The walls are not marble but fibreglass, and the oil paintings are not real, but inferior prints. The buildings, as well as the décor, seem absurd to me, and I guess the meaning of this massive project is to show that the enterprise has an international vision and great economic strength. How to deal with this fake thing, then? Irony is the word that came to mind. Thus I collected a huge number of towels, shirts, and bed sheets, as well as underwear from the labourers

working in the factory, and provocatively hung them on a rope, aiming to make a sharp ironic contrast between the workers' clothing and the apparent elegance of the hall. On the public open day, I was dressed bizarrely and playing classical music on a million-dollar Steinway piano, making the original absurd even more absurd.

On the first day of the show, many local visitors came to see the exhibition and my live performance. I saw confusion on some of their faces, and some laughed. When I introduced this project, some visitors thought I was playing a prank while some thought I was trying to make the workers' voices heard, and some believed I was expressing my dissatisfaction with politics through ridicule and irony. The media came to interview and report on it, and in the process I had been observing the social impact of this absurd work, and what value it offered the visitors when they saw it. However, on the third day of the exhibition, due to the media coverage and an increasing number of visitors, the show was strongly criticised by the directors of the enterprise. In order to protect the corporation's image, a director required me to withdraw this work and restore the appearance of the hall. Although the curator and I argued and negotiated together, the exhibition was finally removed on its fifth day, due to this pressure. This incident meant a lot to me. It was not a failed experience, because it once again deepened the absurdity of this absurd work and continued this absurdity into a social context. For me, the social impact of a completed work is also part of the practical process. It tests the artwork in another way and gives not only the viewer and the reader, but also the creator, further thought and points of reference, and I think this is characterises the meaning of art practice.





The Golden Hall (2019). Site-specific installation and live performance.

As a conclusion of this introduction to practical ways of creating humour and absurdity in art practice, I sum up that through the cases discussed in relation to the eight practical methods I outline, I have proved that I applied methods of bringing humorous effects into my work. I have tried to place the works in different contexts to constantly challenge them. In fact, there may be many more ways to create humour than those I have mentioned. However, these are just the practical methods that I have used in previous projects, and they are still helpful to my current research, and hopefully they can provide further reference for artists as well as students. So far I have listed eight practical methods to create humour; however, there are also many challenges encountered in the process of creating humour, which require constant attempts, demonstrations, tests and verification. This is the entire experimental process, and this process brings the viewer and the artist surprises, humour and accidents. In his theory of laughter, Kant put forward that (laughter is) “[...] an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing [...]”.¹⁸¹ One of the reasons that people laugh is because of something accidental and unexpected. According to its nature, experimental art, as I just mentioned, is determined to bring possibilities, surprises and chances to people; thus I can understand that humour already exists in experimental art, and as an artist, what I need to do is to use the methods to foreground humour so that people can experience it. This is also the difference between experimental art and scientific experiments: the aim of scientific experiments is to

¹⁸¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* [1790], ed. by Werner Pluhar (Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

obtain effective results for the outcome, while the process, rather than the final completed work, of experimental art is actually its ultimate goal and meaning. This relates to the notion that the process of play is the purpose of play, that I referred to in Section One.

When viewing a work in a gallery, I usually think about which school, style or category the work belongs to. However, I abandon this habit when I see experimental work, because it is meaningless to classify it into a certain style, as I define experimental art as a state of being tested. For example, Monet, radically, moved his easel outdoors and painted in the sun. In his *Rouen Cathedral* series (1892-1894), he depicted the cathedral under different natural light conditions. From the relationship between light and colour, he discovered new skills and expression that predecessors had not explored.¹⁸² Pollock's action painting is also a state of experimentation: in the work *Lavender Mist: No. 1* (1950), there is no clearly visible image, only paints of different colours, shades and shapes mixed with twisted lines. Pollock's body anticipated the result in this action painting, thus his body was very much a part of his work, when his marks are seen on the painting, they communicate the movement of his body, which had become a creative form, as in performance art.¹⁸³ This kind of painting is unique, and even the artist himself cannot copy this painting completely. Through his understanding of painting, I can see the importance of experimentation in his work. Another work that focuses on the experimental process is the performance work *Rope Piece* (1983) jointly performed by Hsieh Teh-ching and Linda Montano. This performance lasted for a whole year, with an eight-foot-long rope tied around the waists of the two artists. From 1983 to 1984, regardless of time, location and circumstances, for the performance Teh-ching and Montano had to be tied together with this rope and live together with no physical contact. When the agreement was signed before the start of the work, no one, including the artists themselves, knew what would happen. This year was full of unknowns and challenges, and the conflicts caused by their different cultural backgrounds and lifestyles became more and more intense as time went by. They both broke down at one point, arguing and protesting, and wanting to cut the rope to end the performance, but eventually they both calmed down with their determination to

¹⁸² D. Daniel, *Monet, The Triumph of Impressionism* (Taschen, 2014).

¹⁸³ L. Emmerling, *Pollock* (Taschen, 2022), pp. 82-90.

complete the work. This rope brought the two artists physically closer, but it also became a chain between them. Obviously, they were challenging unknown things and the limits of body and mind, using this experimental performance to express the absurdity of life and to interrogate the notion of freedom. In the following section I will introduce the work of some experimental artists and my art practice in detail, and these art projects may help me explain experimental art better.

Roman Signer is an installation artist as well as a video artist, his character and his humour go along with absurdity in his work and his interesting way of producing it. He uses physical objects as his material, such as rubber boots, umbrellas, buckets, and tables, and he combines them in all sorts of ways. “Signer seldom uses objects in their normal functions, but exposes them deliberately to complex procedures or explosive events that are able to unleash the most diversified layers of meaning inherent in the thing-world.”¹⁸⁴ It sounds confused, but to clarify: the function of an umbrella is to protect us from wind and rain, but in Signer’s world, an umbrella can be converted into other symbols, such as a cane, a bridge, a weapon, or a rocket. He never creates from the perspective of the inherent function of umbrellas, so people have to look again at this object in his work, and re-think their inherent knowledge of what an umbrella is. At the same time, his work also allows us to imagine and see the material world from a broader perspective. By means of this artistic transformation, the familiar suddenly appears alien, and a normal function becomes senseless or absurd. Signer’s work makes the everyday world visible as something ambiguously amusing that can become inscrutable or frightening.

Although I mentioned earlier that it is meaningless to classify an experimental artwork within any definite style, and Signer does not classify his work into any genre, his creative approach is similar to Surrealism. Surrealist works are mostly characterised by elements of surprise, which strongly contrast the juxtaposition and the illogical use of objects. But many Surrealist artists not only regarded their works as art, but also as a philosophy, and explored the contradictions in the subconsciousness and the world, such as life and death, the past and the future, etc. Surrealist painters also use specific

¹⁸⁴ Roman Signer, *XLVIII. Biennale Di Venezia 1999, Svizzera*. (Verlag Unikate, 1999)

techniques of expression, such as rubbing and pasting, automatic techniques for creating. For example, there are no clear, specific shapes in the painting *The Hunter* by Joan Miró (1923), just some lines and shapes similar to children's scribbles, with weird, humorous features, including twisted shapes and strange geometric structures. In addition, in order to express the distortion or contradiction between imagination and the real world, they often use finely detailed and realistic techniques to express a surreal world, even with humorous effects. In the work *Regenschirm mit zwei Ventilatoren* (2015) and *Wasserstiefel* (1986), we can hardly imagine boots exploding or two fans blowing an umbrella in everyday life: they are behaving out of their normal routine. But at the same time, the objects seem alive, as they look as though they are interacting with each other. Signer's work in one way shows us disorder and randomness, but at the same time everything happens for a reason, and we can find a potential order. His approach is the typical and principal method of making experimental art.



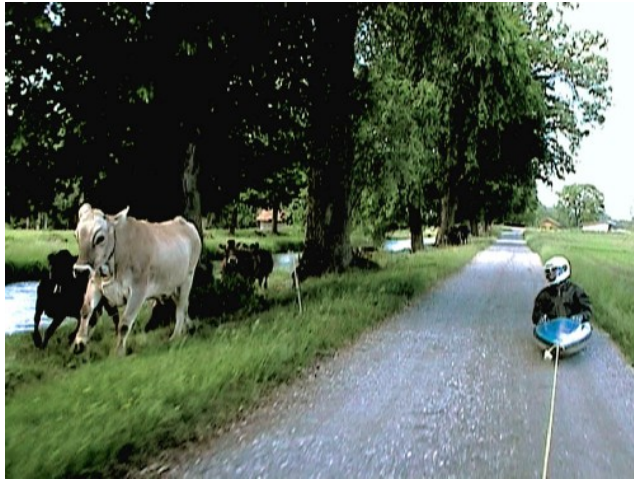
Roman Signer, *Regenschirm mit zwei Ventilatoren*, 2015. Photo: Aleksandra Signer.

Picture source: <https://kultur-online.net/inhalt/roman-signer-neue-arbeiten>



Roman Signer, *Wasserstiefel*, 1986, Photograph by Marek Rogowiec.

Picture source: <http://www.robgarrettcfa.com/content/2008/06/01/exploding-water>



Roman Signer, *Kayak*, 2000, Rhine Valley, Canton of St Gallen, Still video.

Picture source: <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2008/10/01/roman-signer/>

In his work *Kayak* (2000), Signer is wearing a suit, sitting in a kayak, and racing against cows. Signer mentioned in the interview that he never planned to see some cows reacting fantastically and run along with him when he was sitting in the kayak, which is pulled by a vehicle. His film works seem perfectly planned: Signer says he “wished everything would come out right, but sometimes it’s more interesting when it doesn’t, it gives me new ideas”.¹⁸⁵ Some performance artists would agree with this. Nigel Rolfe, for instance, once mentioned that the instability in performance is an opportunity for artists.¹⁸⁶ Signer’s and Rolfe’s approaches to art practice have similarities. They both enjoy constantly experimenting with things and playing with difficulty, as well as paying great attention to the unexpectedness of their works. Play is a human as well as an animal instinct - it is open, and sometimes unsure, unstable and unpredictable. In everyday experience, things will change due to the influence of external forces. For example, we don’t know what will happen at a social event, or what new challenges we will face. The surprise will come at any moment: that is the appeal of making experimental art. Signer also mentioned that chance is very important: he never expects things, and he often gets new ideas from failure.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ G. Mack and Roman Signer, *Roman Signer* (Phaidon, 2006), p.23.

¹⁸⁶ The conversation recording from the The Fifth International Performance Festival workshop in 2014.

¹⁸⁷ Mack and Signer, *Roman Signer*, p.23.

Works that have also experienced a significant element of failure include the *Butter Dance* series by performance artist Melati Suryodarmo. In the performance *Exergie-Butter Dance* (2000), Suryodarmo walks towards blocks of butter placed on a dance mat, placed there earlier. She stands with her back towards the audience, then turns to the front and steps on the butter blocks. She starts to dance and let herself fall, then she tries to stand up. This process is repeated until she eventually runs out of energy. Taking off her shoes, she stands up slowly and leaves the space. Once, when the artist was playing the video of *Butter Dance* in a lecture, it caused uproar in the audience. Exaggerated expression, comical movement and continual falls in the video made the audience laugh from the beginning, but feel pity and discomfort at the end. During the process of the performance, we don't know when the next time she falls will be, and how she will fall, but I may feel that the audience even expects that to happen. The artist indicated in an interview about this project that she was inspired by the concept of time, especially how the human body relates to its biological, psychological and physical time. She believes that everything that is happening in the world does not stop, even when one is dead. We can deal with it only by adjusting our body to the "time", whether it is physical or biological. The absurd repetition of falling and getting up in Suryodarmo's dance represents the unpredictability of life and the panic we feel when facing the unknown. The artist's emphasis on letting the body adapt to time is not through physical pain, but the spiritual will to stand up again. This strong will is also in the understanding of, and attitude towards, time. Suryodarmo is also interested in a specific moment in time, a moment when her body relates to a specific delicate moment – the moment before she falls down. This moment is where she consciously tries to control her body, but at the same time the risks are unpredictable. She might lose control; however, what is important to her is the will to get up again. She goes back and forth between getting up and falling. Later, Suryodarmo continued to do a performance art series in this way with different background music, aiming to interpret the contingency and inevitability of time and to test her idea.



Melati Suryodarmo, *Butter Dance*. Performed at the “Navigate- live art”, BALTIC & Stubnitz, Gateshead Newcastle. UK.2005. Photo: Kamal Akarie.

Source: https://www.melatisuryodarmo.com/works_Exergie_Butter_Dance.html

The idea of failure is a very important part of experimental art. If you make experimental art, please believe that failure will always come to visit you. “We should not forget that 99 percent of all art-making attempts are failures.” Thus declares the essayist Phillip Lopate, in his book *Portrait of My Body* (1996). Although we do not have the faintest notion how many works of art are in fact failures, artists are no strangers to it, and they have to coexist with uncertain attempts. How to define and face these failures is a very interesting question. Carrying out experiments is actually a process of accepting and pondering failure, and only through this can we get closer to what we want. In experimental art, “failure” does not refer to the complete death of an artwork, but to a challenge. During the art-making process, some situations may occur temporarily or unexpectedly, or may even directly deviate from the trajectory that was originally designed. In fact, these are new challenges, and they are worth rethinking, or re-improving the works from different angles. There is a Museum of Bad Art in Dedham, Massachusetts, whose permanent collection includes over seven hundred pieces of “art too bad to be ignored”. Failed works of art also have value, and they can also give people points of reference and encourage critical thinking. It can even be said that sudden obstacles and accidents in art practice are opportunities and gifts that allow us to test our works. There is no complete death or failure of objects or ideas in art. If there is, it must be to stop creating, stop participating and stop thinking.

In November 2021, I made a sound installation, *Drop*. This piece was definitely a “failure” to me. I suspended nine tanks filled with water, allowing water droplets to fall from the tanks into corresponding bowls below. My idea was to make different sounds when water drops fall into the bowl to form a specific rhythm. The idea excited me, but when I tested them I found problems and obstacles. The droplets fell from the three-metre-high, slightly swaying water tank into the small bowl. The lack of accuracy would always cause some droplets to fall on the floor. In less than five minutes, the entire exhibition hall was as wet as if it had been washed. The audience was shocked by this scene: I could clearly feel that on the one hand they really wanted to get closer to the work to listen to the unusual sound brought by the “Water Drop Symphony Orchestra”, but on the other hand they could only watch from a distance because they hated their thought of their shoes and trousers being splashed by my water drops. As the creator of this “disaster”, I did not feel that I had too many regrets. On the contrary, this work brought me a different experience. Before the exhibition, although I had made sufficient experiments in the studio to simulate the entire movement, I never expected such a scene and the comedic reaction of the audience. Thus I wondered whether there are some works that are deliberately aim to keep audience at a distance, or some works that are made just to create inconvenience? Richard Serra’s work is an example. The site-specific sculpture *Tilted Arc* (1981), which was located near government buildings, was strongly criticised by the public, who campaigned for it to be demolished. This work was a twelve-foot high steel-plate wall, 120 feet long. The sculpture asked the office workers and other pedestrians to leave their usual hurried route and follow a different one (which was also Serra’s purpose). Its placement and arrangement created a dramatic and threatening presence, thereby affecting the spectator’s physical and psychological environment.¹⁸⁸ Serra deliberately interfered with people’s daily habits through his sculpture from the perspective of politics, while what my work *Drop* brought me was unpredicted chaos. However, this attempt surprised me, in that the audience was attracted by the melodious water drops and had come to visit with much curiosity but they left with a mood of feeling it was not safe to stay.

¹⁸⁸ R.E. Krauss, L. Rosenstock, L. and D. Crimp, *Richard Serra/Sculpture*. (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1986), pp. 52-55.



Drop, 2021, mixed media, The Project Space at Leeds University.

In order to continue to explore this “chaos”, I decided to experiment to see if I could better understand artists’ play and jokes. For better experimentation, I focused on objects. Daily objects are ordinary and they can be seen everywhere in life, but they carry emotions, or are interesting, if humans participate with them. A new toothbrush, for example, is not humorous, but a toothbrush that has been used so many times that the bristles blow off is. Humour is a product of consciousness, and there is no humour among objects without human intervention or interaction. So I started to play and experiment with everything I could find. I started taking as many interesting photos as I could. I took many because humour exists everywhere in life, and I could make analogies from different scenes, characters and even stories if I gathered enough materials, and then interpreted humour from multiple angles. I wrote a poem about the content of each photo and then compiled them all into a book, which I introduced earlier, in Section Three. This book of photos and poems has been revised several times, and the purpose of this work is to allow me pay attention to minutiae and explore humour from the details of everyday life, at the same time identifying whether my idea could work through continuous experiments.

Erwin Wurm is an atypical sculptor. He found his sculpture class at school disappointing, then he started to question the basic conditions of sculpture and its primary meaning. Also, this subversive artist began questioning what it meant to make sculpture today in relation to the past, and under what conditions sculpture can be redefined. He had to deal with some basic questions: what happens when you go from

two to three dimensions, and when does an action become sculpture? Wurm is not interested in the conventional concept of a game, with its rules and consequences. On the contrary, he finds it boring and conservative.¹⁸⁹ It represents the controlled social game of middle-class mentality. As Wurm states,

“[...] to me, the nature of game always has a subversive element, as in the arts. By ‘subversive’, I do not mean the inciting of a state coup, but rather the visible evidence of an independent spiritual world beyond our material one. The world we are subjugating is not everything. It also consists of what is conceivable and thus potentially, also of its opposite. In this way, the idea of a counter-image is always present, which keeps imagination vivid. For this reason, we need them both.”¹⁹⁰

The way that Wurm carries out his practice can be found in Surrealism: it can subvert our inherent views of traditional things and explore the human subconscious, advocating breaking through logical reality and abandoning the image of reality based on orderly experience.



One Minute Sculpture series: *Ice head*, Mixed media, 2003, Performed by the public.

Source: <https://www.erwinwurm.at/artworks/one-minute-sculptures.html>

¹⁸⁹ D. Eccher, *Erwin Wurm: Macro/Hall* (Edizioni Electa, 2006), p.7.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.

In Wurm's work, the performative element has always played an important role. In his *One Minute Sculpture* series, time is interpreted as a crucial concept – people perform actions that may last just a few moments: a human sculpture only lives for a few minutes and then it fades away. His time-based sculpture is more like a play or a game. Participants can make any pose they like and explore the possibility of using the body as a sculptural material. It is clear that Wurm constantly questions the definition of traditional sculpture and interprets it through his own practice. This is a typical experimental mind.

There are many more cases of experimental art that could be discussed here: starting from the birth of modern art, which can be represented by Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, the development of art has been a complex process of constant exploration and artistic subversion. John A. Walker points out that in E. H. Gombrich's celebrated book *The Story of Art* (1950), the whole of 20th-century art was originally embraced in a chapter called "Experimental Art".¹⁹¹ Experimentation usually involves expanding the boundaries of art in terms of materials or technology, and then exploring different possibilities. Thus the meaning of experimental art is to challenge, try, and collide. It is created with the idea of "what will happen if I do this?" and is more about raising questions and allowing the audience or the artist themselves to find the answers they want. Accordingly, we can temporarily draw a conclusion: sometimes experimental art is messy, intuitive, spontaneous, and works with multiple forms of knowledge, including tacit, embodied and ephemeral knowledge. As mentioned above, the process of experimental art is the purpose of experimental art. In this process, with the premise of not knowing what to express or what to do, artists make experimental art by "not knowing" during the practice and try to maintain a sense of this "not knowing" in their art.

There are many interpretations of experimental art, the table below is my personal understanding. I have made a comparison between art practices to better explain the different ways of creation.

¹⁹¹ I. Chilvers and J. Graves-Smith, *A Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*. 2nd edn. (Oxford University Press, 2009).

The practice of non-experimental art creators is roughly as follows:

- | |
|---|
| 1. Come up with a theme or content you want to express. |
| 2. Choose one or several methods that you are good at or familiar with to create. |
| 3. Continuously observe and compare during the practice, and adjust the work based on feelings until the work is completed. |

The practice of an experimental art creator is roughly as follows:

- | |
|---|
| 1. Come up a theme or content you want to express. |
| 2. Find a novel, non-traditional, experimental, or even unfamiliar method to create a series of art works, and constantly adjust them during the practical process. |
| 3. Complete a series of works. |
| 4. Request feedback from viewers, identify the one or several works that have the greatest impact on the viewers from the result of the experiment, and draw conclusions. (This is the reason that many artists name their artworks “Work No. 1”, “Work No. 2”, etc.) |

From the above, it seems that experimental art is in a state of waiting to be tested, it is flexible, and it does not even have a definite result. This “vague” artistic expression may seem a bit abstract to people who are not familiar with it. From my experience, the public is more willing to appreciate a figurative work, or an abstract art in a museum that can be clearly interpreted by a guide or with a little imagination. However, the ambiguity of experimental art means it is like a sapling that is always growing, and no one knows when it will grow up and what it will look like in the future. It is by using this experimental method that I can better conduct my research. I don’t think it is easy, as an artist, to want to create humour in my work. The difficulty is not that making this

work is beyond my ability, but that after I finish it, nobody thinks it is funny. Just as it is impossible for a comedian to please everyone. In this case, it is very important to create with an experimental attitude, and the process of “play” is an effective experiment. At the beginning of the thesis I talked about the nature of play as practical, free, complex, and full of possibilities. This is the same in experimental art, these are all issues that need to be considered when making experimental art.

Not-knowing

I briefly mentioned the artist’s “not-knowing” above. This is an interesting concept and one that is a very important aspect of how artists play and experiment.

I remember attending a lecture two years ago. Shi Yigong, a Chinese structural biologist, explained that scientific innovation is to make something that has not been made previously by scientists, and to make a new theory, method and result. When he asked the pianist Lang Lang what innovation in art (piano performance) is, Lang Lang replied that as a performer, playing classical works requires following certain rules and respecting the original composer and the original work. However, it is possible to exercise the greatest freedom within a feasible range – by reinterpreting the work from the performer’s own cultural perspective and their own experience, incorporating their personal characteristics, to reproduce the classics that have been played by countless people before, and bringing a “dead” work to life. This is the innovation involved in playing classical music.¹⁹² Perhaps many people will still not be satisfied with this answer, because artistic innovation seems to be general and vague, and the artist’s ideas are full of unknowns and mystery. Creating something “new” is a difficult problem for many artists, and even the idea of the unknown cannot be easily explained.

I categorise my own art works as Dadaist or Surrealist in the sections where I discuss humour in Eastern and Western art. But as a PhD student, sometimes I am still making

¹⁹² ‘Science & Art: Lang Lang’s Masterclass at Westlake’, Westlake University, 23 August 2023.

works like those that appeared a hundred years ago, such as traditional figurative paintings and sculptures, and the reason why is worth thinking about. I can rephrase what Lang Lang articulated: respecting the art of the composition of the original work is what artists do in their early work, by spending a lot of time learning and imitating, which is what artists can grasp – that is, “knowable”; later on, however, integrating the artist’s own cultural background and experience is flexible, unknown and difficult to control. The thinking models and value orientations of different disciplines make it impossible for us to use the innovation of scientific and technological research to benchmark the innovation of artistic practice, and quantitative research methods cannot fully express what art practice research insists on. On the rise of practice-led PhD programmes, the artist Ian Kiaer notes that the forms of knowledge embodied in art and in writing about art are very different, and some PhD students find it difficult to move between one and other.¹⁹³ I have also found this problem in my doctoral studies. The “not-knowing” often exists in different forms at the beginning, middle and end of my art practice. For instance, having no ideas at first; not knowing how to materialise ideas, even when I get them; I doubt my own practical methods; after completing the work, the difference between the final presentation of the work and what I originally wanted to express, or the viewers’ reaction to, and interpretation of, the work is beyond my expectations, etc. Art as a form of research or a way of thinking provides the means to engage with unknown,¹⁹⁴ and it is difficult to express these “unknowns” in persuasive academic writing with clear, logical, well-structured arguments. Moreover, knowledge can be explained well in a thesis, but strictly speaking, art is not a specific form of knowledge, because, after all, thinking is not equivalent to knowledge.¹⁹⁵

“Not-knowing” is a central aspect of how artists play. When artists create, it is possible to identify certain general stages, processes and techniques in the creative process. However, the philosopher T. J. Diffey points out that “To create is to engage in undertakings, the outcome of which cannot be known or defined or predicted, though there may be some presentiment of the outcome.”¹⁹⁶ The American novelist Donald

¹⁹³ E. Fisher, ‘In a Language You Don’t Understand’, in *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, ed. by Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum (Black Dog Publishing, 2013), p.11.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ This idea refers to Simon Sheikh’s interpretation of art. Simon Sheikh, ‘Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research’, *iArt & Research*, 2.2 (2009).

¹⁹⁶ T.J. Diffey, ‘On Steering Clear of Creativity’, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 3. 2 (2004), p.95.

Barthelme also explained in his book *Not-Knowing* (1985) that “The not knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made [...] Without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention”.¹⁹⁷ These thoughts lead me to cite one of my early performance works, which was completed with the idea of not knowing and being able to prove my argument. One day I found a well without lid on a street, which was very dangerous for passers-by and vehicles. The strong desire to create made me stop to observe and think, but I couldn’t think of how this well would interact with the materials in my studio. I also wondered whether this potential work would affect traffic, or even cause a greater safety hazard, if I started it. After thinking about it from many angles, I found no inspiration or materials I wanted to use; thus, I directly engaged with the well, with my body as a material. I felt like a soldier who had been through all the weapons he had in his hands and found nothing that could be used and then spontaneously fought with his body. Then I decided to cover the hole with my body, which lasted for thirty minutes. In this process, it seemed that all the previous doubts and the idea of “not-knowing” did not matter to me any more. I only knew that I was doing it and carefully felt every single minute. The first ten minutes made me worried: I was concerned that a car would accidentally run over me, or that passers-by would call me crazy, or even that the police would come to arrest me for disturbing public order. These feelings were stressful and my body began to stiffen, but this unexpected situation also became part of my work. Sure enough, passers-by stopped to talk about me, and some vehicles began to honk their horns at me, but I kept my posture in silence. Gradually, in this chaos and potential danger, I realised the significance of what I was doing at this time: if no one was lying on the well, would the passing vehicles identify the danger? Would pedestrians spot it? What would blind people do? This hole was not just a potential danger, it seemed to reflect a problem in society – a huge hole that no one comes to fix, probably happening in education, medical care, and people’s well-being, I guess. I was disappointed that no one had filled this hole, and I didn’t know when it would be filled, but I liked doing it in such a “stupid” and ironic way, to make the public think.

¹⁹⁷ Donald Barthelme, *Not Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme*, ed. Kim Herzinger (Random House, 1997), p.12.



Fill, 30 mins performance, Guangzhou, 2015. Video: <https://vimeo.com/139258741>

Artists often describe how the material processes of making art unfold in unexpected ways. For me, it is always significant to work with materials, and there are often things that surprise me during the practical process. While I was preparing for my PhD exhibition in June 2024, I often encountered the problem of not knowing what theme to set for the exhibition, even though the materials had already been prepared. It seems that sometimes, when an artist has doubts about the appropriateness of the subject of a work or an exhibition, it feels as if the medium will save the artist. Before creating the installation work *The Deepest Secrets* (2024), it was difficult to find an idea of making. Then I started to do things again and again with my body, such as wrapping a ribbon around my hand and spinning it, sometimes throwing it high up or using it as a whip to lash other objects, which then led me to understand what I was trying to express through this work. The spinning ribbon formed a cylindrical space that seemed vague and indistinct, and this space was like a protective cover that seemed to keep the viewers out. Based on such movement and expression, I finally designed a scene in which a piece of paper was “hidden” in the centre of the cylindrical space created by the ribbon, and on it was written the deepest secrets in my heart in very small type – some words I want to tell my father – also something I was ashamed of and will never say to him in

person. This work unexpectedly aroused the curiosity of many of the viewers. Everyone bent and lowered their heads to watch more closely. They were eager to see my secret, but they needed to keep a certain distance from being slapped by the ribbon. I had contradictory feelings –I wanted this secret to be seen but was ashamed for it to be seen, and the concept of this work was established based on the interaction between my body and materials in the early stages of creating the work.



The Deepest Secrets (2024). Mixed media.



The audience tried to observe the “secret” on the plinth.

I think the process of making this work is interesting, because artists sometimes press a “pause” button to carry on thinking while creating, and to recall, simulate and create feelings in this “pause”. Every object has its own voice, language and even its own will, and I hope they will talk to me. As the Portuguese painter Paula Rego puts it, “The painting is a thing on its own, apart from you [...] When I’ve finished, it’s telling me something”.¹⁹⁸ For artists, not-knowing is not an end, not a form of giving up, and certainly not a stumbling block that prevents them from continuing to create and research. In contrast, the making process conjures challenges that the artist responds to: moving towards something that is unknown is important. When artists feel that they have encountered not-knowing, they will not discard it but will purposefully put it aside temporarily and spontaneously explain this “unknown” in a particular situation and context. Artists will “enrich” this unknown from other perspectives. The Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, for instance, spent his whole life studying bottles and landscapes to explore the relationships between shapes and tones.¹⁹⁹ With great sensitivity to tone, colour, and compositional balance, he would depict the same familiar bottles and vases again and again in paintings notable for their simplicity of execution.²⁰⁰ Zheng Xie²⁰¹ (Qing dynasty), the Chinese artist who painted bamboo for forty years and at the end of his life realised that his painting required removing complexity and refining the essence,²⁰² and that was something he had never noticed before. Therefore, it is clear that the artists enjoyed this challenge, even if they had spent decades interpreting the “not-knowing”. For artists, the search for the unknown outcome is not only welcome, but also provides a driving force within the creative process. As Rego says, “you are doing it to find out what the result will be”.²⁰³

Rego’s phrase “doing it” reminds me that “thinking” and “making” are the things that artists will do every day, and I am curious about what an artist’s “making” looks like

¹⁹⁸ Rebecca Fortnum, *Contemporary British Women Artists in Their Own Words* (I B Tauris, 2007), p.155.

¹⁹⁹ Kappelto2013, ‘Research Giorgio Morandi’, *Understanding Painting Media Learning Log* <https://kappeltonupm.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/research-georgio-morandi/>

²⁰⁰ ‘Giorgio Morandi’, *Galerie Karsten Greve* <https://galerie-karsten-greve.com/en/artists/detail/giorgio-morandi?tab=start&cHash=7206c8f2b002243a6da6d7a434cb19ea>

²⁰¹ 郑燮, commonly known as Zheng Banqiao (郑板桥), was a Chinese official, painter and calligrapher of the Qing dynasty.

²⁰² 竹：冗繁削尽留清瘦，画到生时是熟时，Link: <http://www.rmshy.org/yidali/2015/0120/252.html>

²⁰³ Fortnum, *Contemporary British Women Artists*, p.155.

when they don't "think", or when there is something they don't know. When asked "how much are non-visual matters or thoughts a part of your working process?" the British painter Beth Harland replied, "For me making is thinking and I can't separate them, so just as in the same way as I don't want to separate form and content."²⁰⁴ In Kaprow's book, the phrase "doing is knowing" can also be found. What Kaprow wants to know is the meaning of everyday life. To come to know that meaning, he must enact every day. This is where pragmatism becomes a practice.²⁰⁵

Even if "doing" and "thinking" can be established in such a relationship, artists will still face a challenge – that is, to express their intention, practical methods and processes in non-artistic practical forms, such as interviews, lectures, research projects, and even a PhD viva exam. From my personal experience, in both my PhD exhibition and my MA exhibition viewers seemed more interested in my work than me as a person. I was told by many artists that they occasionally find it difficult to speak about their work when explaining the work to viewers, especially the works in progress. This is because the artists themselves do not know what they are doing yet. Therefore, interpretations of the works are often added later. To be honest, in some cases, the interpretation of the work and the artist's concept during the practical process are different.²⁰⁶ Of course, I fully understand that the purpose of the artist's interpretation of the work when it is completed is to make the work richer and fuller, both externally and internally, or to deepen the artist's understanding of the work and enhance its identity. However, when viewers experience the work and listen to the artist's statement, they often ignore the artist's "not-knowing", because they have no chance to participate in the artist's whole creative process, and this "not-knowing" is hidden. What I want to emphasise here is that this not-knowing is not "I can't feel it" or "I can't understand", but the state of "I haven't decided yet" or "will there be other possibilities?" This state can be understood as a temporary "silence": The artist knows this "unknown" and, as I mentioned above, the artist puts this not-knowing aside temporarily and spontaneously interprets it in a certain situation and context. On the "silence" in creation, the Laotian-born British artist

²⁰⁴ Harland, 2004.

²⁰⁵ Kaprow, p.xxiv.

²⁰⁶ This happens to me occasionally. I once tied red scarves on every sculpture in Liang Mingcheng Sculpture Park with the intention of mischief. But when faced with a media interview, I said that this work reflected the problems when art is under the political intervention.

Vong Phaophanit has observed that: “I like the idea that the work starts with the silence to rest your mind and then things, ideas, sort of come, start building up and questions start coming from that silence. But it is important, it is crucial for me to impose that silence through the work”.²⁰⁷

Throughout my doctoral research, in terms of both my art practice and my thesis, I am grateful for “not knowing”, because I feel that being over-prescriptive is deadening and destructive for an artwork or research project, and working with issues of humour and play requires a certain openness. In relation to this, Ian Kiaer has noted that

...This openness is not just to do with a feeling of being incomplete, that things are left unsaid, but also that in the making there is something being found. In this sense the introduction of a new material or a found object that jars the harmony or destabilises the rapport is important... that something unforeseen can rescue the work.²⁰⁸

For artists who create humour or use it in their work, the perception and understanding of humour is relatively personal, whilst what is humorous differs within different cultures. This complexity often makes me feel that I am taking an unknown direction, constantly challenging the feasibility of my practical methods, and persistently refreshing my understanding of humour in art, including my own. In the face of this situation, it seems that artists need to maintain an approach of thinking “maybe it would be better that way” in their work, always experimenting and playing. For me, if I create a work that I completely recognise or understand, it will be a failure (although I guess this situation will never happen).²⁰⁹ Because an artwork is created by an artist, and only part of the work belongs to the creator – or, more accurately, is related to the creator – these include the artist’s emotions, values, worldview, style, etc. However, another large part is beyond the artist’s understanding and open to viewer engagement and interpretation. The artist and writer Andrew Warstadt has said “What the artist believes

²⁰⁷ Rebecca Fortnum, ‘Creative Accounting: Not Knowing in Talking and Making’, in *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, ed. Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum (Black Dog Publishing, 2013), p.83.

²⁰⁸ Ian Kiaer, ‘Visual Intelligences Research Project’, *Visual Intelligences* <http://www.visualintelligences.com/ian-kiaer.html>

²⁰⁹ I mentioned above that Paula Rego believes the painting is a thing on its own and apart from the artist.

they are doing when they are making a work will never be available to them as a final achievement”.²¹⁰ “Cruelly” speaking, artists are probably destined to live in an eternal “uncertainty”, because they can never fully align what they are doing with what they have done. At the same time, artists can never receive the ultimate answers to some questions. What they can do is to constantly approach the answers they need, or that they feel are right, through actions. As Warstadt suggests, “the activity the artist is engaged in is infinite”.²¹¹ The artist is thus in a continual state of process, compelled to repeat because he can never know how (or even if) he has achieved his intention.

²¹⁰ Andrew Warstadt, ‘Teaching the Unteachable and Learning the Unlearnable’, paper given at the AAH Conference 2008.

²¹¹ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

It seems that I am about to approach the conclusion of the thesis now. This means that my thesis is coming to an end, and it is time to give an explanation of the past six years. This is really a strange and incredible moment, as I never feel that this research has been completely finished. In the future, I will probably pull out another concept from today's thesis to strengthen the research, or start a new research path. In any case, doctoral study has allowed me to spend many years systematically solving a specific problem. It has slowed me down and let me solve various research problems step by step along the way. In addition, the doctoral research pushed me to look for the context of my art practice and think about the relationship between my artworks. Honestly, I had never done these things systematically with a research attitude before the PhD. It is meaningful to have such an experience in my career as an artist. It combined and assembled all the knowledge I have acquired, established my strengths and research interests, and also helped me to identify what I am lacking. No matter where I go next, I won't be worried because I have established a systematic research method during the doctoral study to face the changes and challenges ahead, even if there will be many things I am not familiar with yet. I know how to learn them methodically within a framework, with an exploratory belief.

I mentioned that this research is not completely finished, because “play” is a big word, as is “humour”. They can both be very simple or very complex, and they cover many fields and have always been in people's lives. How artists play in art has always fascinated me. Ever since I studied fine art in my early years, my curiosity about how artists create interesting and playful works has been building. Until one day one of my works made people laugh, and I felt that the relationship between the artist, the work, and the audience is the topic that I want to spend a long time exploring, rather than the period of an exhibition, a few nights or weeks. The title of my thesis is a very simple literal question, but it is impossible to give an easy answer. I guess many artists feel that “I love this theme and playful work but I will not consider it as academic research” when they face this subject. It is this kind of thing, that everyone enjoys but no one can fully understand, that fascinates me. My research title comes from the topic that I have

been most interested in during my twelve years of fine art study – making playful works. However, having received an exam-oriented education before I had no idea about what practice-based research was: I thought that research should essentially be serious when I first started doing the PhD., and even require a desk full of books. Thus, I had spent too much time on reading the complicated theoretical models rather than looking for solutions from art practice. That idea and method made my research process slow and difficult. During this process, I did have doubts: “is it detrimental for an artist to only care about one thing and keep focusing on one issue every day for six years?”, and I thought it would not substantially improve an artist’s practical and creative abilities. But by the third year, I found the worry was completely unnecessary: art researchers are not just exploring a single problem during their doctoral studies but are solving problems from different ranges of knowledge. Sometimes starting from the basic issues of research, personal feelings and experiences instead of interpreting complex theories will greatly improve the effectiveness of the research and be able to apply the research questions into real life and personal art practice. Moreover, when discussing play and humour, it is pointless to talk about them within the scope of their basic meaning. Instead, we have to jump out of the original circle and discuss them from a broader perspective. For example, as I discuss in the thesis, rhythm and geometry in an artwork can bring a sense of humour, the meaning of undertaking experimental art, and the understanding of play in darkness and pain, etc. These are the concepts that are related to play but are different, as properly exploring them and positioning them appropriately can better contribute to my research into play and humour. I gradually stopped forcing myself to absorb difficult theories, but instead found a sense of relaxation, more appropriately looking for the things outside of play and humour, which can provide a wider range of ideas. Sometimes it may be desirable to look at a concept flexibly in divergent ways, but sometimes it requires the gathering of all the divergent content and identifying the key point and strengthening the arguments in the iterative process. The knowledge-learning during the PhD period is not point-like, but sheet-like. Even if the ideas are scattered at the beginning, they need to be integrated to form a plan later to better meet the research needs. Therefore, the research habits I developed during my study will enable me to explore a problem comprehensively from multiple angles in my future creative practice, and I will be able to invest more patience and steadily build an

understanding of things step by step, instead of constantly generating new ideas and jumping between them but being unable to implement them.

The possibilities for the exploration of play and humour are endless, so in subsequent practice I will still make works in a playful way. I've found myself using playful ways to express humour in both my past and current work, and this will carry through to my future, because it will be an interesting process to present my understanding of humour at different ages. Additionally, even though my artworks do not have very strong similarities to each other visually, play is able to connect my works so that they are no longer isolated from each other. Before the PhD study, I had a strong motivation for creative practice and could come up with many interesting, and sometimes mad, ideas: I hated to be restricted by materials or themes in my work. However, when it came to how to explain my work to an audience, I had always contextualised the concept, such as introducing the form of the work, what it expresses, what it reminds me of and why I expressed it in this way. These are indeed what an artist needs to think and do, but now I see the problem: why should people care about my story or feelings, and how do I want to solve the problems through these works of art? It seems that it is limiting to deal with practical issues only through the visual appreciation of works. Practically speaking, I think art practice-based research can give people an opportunity to discover the connection between artistic creation and other fields or disciplines, or identify how they can be integrated, and allow art practice to be seen and understood through social or wider perspectives. For instance, now I will still introduce one of my humorous works in the same way as before, but I will interpret it in a specific context, such as looking for a literature review in art history, clarifying the position and meaning of the work, and then discussing it through different understandings of humour between the East and the West. Therefore, the artwork is no longer an independent "hardware", but has become a vital and cultural "software", which can allow the audience to engage in more practical discussions, rather than just focusing on a certain aspect or a few single elements of that work. If that was the case, I could only raise topics through the work but would not be able to solve any problems.

In addition to the effect of the doctoral study has had on me, and my feelings about it, I also want to discuss the content of the research. In this thesis, the methods of

expression in artists' work are complex and diverse, and the viewer can feel the artist's sense of humour through the intelligent, mischievous, evocative artistic expressions articulated through the practical process. I call this act of artistic expression "artist's play". "Play" in this thesis is defined as a process that accompanies the brilliant concept and arrangement designed by the artist in the work. In this research, I mainly explore different ways of playing by artists from different regions and periods, and also by citing aspects of my own art practice as examples to explain the role of play in art, and discussed the comedic elements in these plays. However, in the process of explanation and discussion, I feel that there are certain difficulties: in Section Two and Section Three, I used only a few works as cases to discuss humour in Eastern and Western art, which is very limited. In different periods of different Western countries, ways of expressing humour are multiple and complex. Similarly, the development of art in China is full of twists and turns. In different social backgrounds and with different political influences, ways of expressing humour are diverse: some are freehand and relaxing while some are subtle and satirical, and some are direct and provocative. I am not able to discuss the humour of a specific period in detail according to the timeline, but only provide readers with an idea: as a cross-cultural researcher, this is how I created a series of humour-related works after absorbing and understanding Eastern and Western humour, and my work can provide a reference for other cross-cultural scholars.

The idea of play is an interesting element which is appealing, but elusive. As I suggested at the beginning of the thesis, it is always both dangerous and attractive for artists to bring playfulness into their works. It seems that many people believe that these interesting, humorous works are both high-quality work and popular.²¹² However, this is just a kind of "disguise" for this type of work. As a matter of fact, what the humorous works really intend to express may not be playfulness: perhaps behind the funny elements, they try to present an ironic or negative state, and these are also part of the humour. Accordingly, many artists create work in a playful way, because this method can attract people's attention and leave a deep impression. If I put it this way, it seems like this is a cunning routine. When I mentioned specific ways to create interesting work in the Methodology section, I was suggesting that those methods are not just tools

²¹² Because "interesting" is a positive word, and it will arouse people's attraction to humorous works.

for making humour, but my way of understanding humour. My intention is certainly not to teach others how to make eye-catching work, or what practical methods we use to win the attention of art galleries. A good critical work impresses the viewer not only with its theme, but also for many other reasons, and one of the keys is to see whether it can solve difficult issues in an appropriate, clever, and artistic way. When an artist who expresses humour raises awareness of social issues, or critiques social problems in real life, they seem to put themselves in a “safer” position to criticise without suffering too much public backlash. I say this because I think that artists who use humour can better understand the degree of this: on the one hand the critical attitude should not be too direct and tough: it must be based on humour; on the other hand, the degree of humour and the element of entertainment in the work should not be so strong that it drowns out the power of the critique. This is what an artist who explores humour needs to think about when producing critical work.

Inspired by the well-known list compiled by the Guerrilla Girls feminist art group,²¹³ I have made my own, “Some advantages of being a humorous artist”:

1. *Not having to work with extremists.*
2. *Not being attacked or arrested for your work.*
3. *Being able to confidently laugh at others without bearing hate.*
4. *Not having to read too many books, like a historian.*
5. *When a viewer asks you questions, having no need to explain too much but just saying: “you find it interesting, that’s enough.”*
6. *Having a chance to choose a role between “smart person” and “cool person”.*
7. *Finding it easy to be popular.*
8. *Not having to frequently argue with other artists.*
9. *Being able to earnestly engrave on your tombstone: I am immersed in this fun world and I never left.*
10. *Being the curator’s favourite type of artist.*
11. *Not having to be good at maths.*
12. *Knowing your project will never be out of fashion.*
13. *Even after your partner abandons you, still being popular with many others.*

²¹³ Guerrilla Girls, text from the poster-work *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* (1988); reproduced in Guerrilla Girls, *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* (Harper Collins, 1995), p. 53.

14. *When a child sees your work and says to his parents “I want this big toy”, being able to proudly tell him that “this is the only one on earth and is not for sale.”*
15. *Being able to successfully come across as mysterious by going to your own exhibition and showing your sad face in front of your humorous pieces.*
16. *Knowing that whatever kind of art you do it will be labelled “liberal”.*

The above is a piece of creative writing written in 2023, intending to playfully express the benefits of creating humorous art. Some of the statements in this list are based on my imagination, while others are my own experience. As a part of my practice, the purpose of writing the list was to examine my own position as an artist through the relationship between humour, artists and society, and to critique the meaning of making humorous art; it also allowed me to think about the problems of making humorous art in reverse. Being a humorous artist is also “dangerous” in other ways. First of all, everyone has different perceptions and feelings about humour, which leads to people having different attitudes towards humorous works. There are even works that one considers to be humorous but others find offensive. At the beginning of Section Two, I discussed regional influences on humour: the differences in the understanding of humour between the East and the West, which sometimes leads to cultural conflicts and misunderstandings in real life. In addition, in Section Three, I also mentioned that the impact of gender on humour can sometimes reflect moral issues. These situations are what artists have to face when exploring humour. Humour is a theme that the whole world has in common but it is not the same for everyone; what an artist has to do is not to tell the viewer what humour is, nor to tell them how to discover it, but to establish an attitude of “I have created a work of humour here in a certain method, what do you think of it?” or the idea that “I interpret humour by making this work, do you have any suggestions?”

“Creating and thinking in a playful way” is not as fun and simple as its literal meaning, it is a challenge, rather than being an easy thing. Making art in a playful way is not to pursue appealing effects, but to exercise artistic creativity and the ability to use materials and media and critical thinking skills: just as I have always believed that looking at things in a playful way is not simply about establishing a positive attitude, nor about entertaining myself, but to broaden the understanding of things and increase

my imagination, and develop a way to better understand our surroundings and environment. Specifically, in my art practice, I incorporated the non-art forms of rubbish, finger skin, balloons, fossils, noise, love, privacy, technology, pop symbols, daily necessities, and fleeting events as humorous elements in my work, allowing them to resonate with the viewer in the gallery space. Thus, the thinking and the practical method can establish dialectical judgments – a judgment about humour, about different cultural experiences, about material language, morality, and right and wrong. This constantly blurs the boundary between life and art, enabling the viewer to question these things. But it can also enable people to recognise the time they live in and to understand themselves.

Although the expression of humour and how it is interpreted in different contexts are critical, we have to acknowledge the importance of creating humour both in history and in the present. Furthermore, my research is not only a review of examples in art history and how they are reflected in the present, but also a prospect for the future. With the development of science and technology in society, methods of artistic creation will continue to develop and change over time. So how we should respond to future changes and challenges has become a concern for art researchers. In this situation, I think establishing a systematic research method is key to solving the problem. In addition to working with readers to discover humour through the artist's various uses of play, this thesis also plays an important role as a study of creative methods. No matter what advanced media artists will use to create in the future, they will always need to confront how to transform a theory, an experience, a story or an idea into a visual artwork. The practical methods of creating humorous art that are introduced in this thesis are experimental, creative, and require critical thinking. These practical methods can benefit different groups of people: children can make art and understand humour in this way and learn and imitate in their play, while artists can apply the methods in their own practice to open up more ideas. Meanwhile these methods can provide artists with a broader perspective for understanding and critiquing other humorous works.

In terms of the future, although the exact time when humour originated has not been precisely identified, what is clear is that humour and play have accompanied

humankind to the present day.²¹⁴ Their influence on human beings will continue, and give us more thoughts about the challenges that will happen in the future. Even if the robots of the future become closer and closer to being like real humans, what troubles scientists is getting these robots to learn humorous ways of expression to be more human-like. In the future, my research will provide value as a reference point for future artists and scholars in other academic fields such as cultural comparative studies and social anthropology. As global cultural exchange is becoming ever closer, cultures continue to diversify while they are also constantly moving towards unity, so cultural conflicts will become more and more obvious. My cross-cultural research will provide people with a solution as a reference – how to address humour in different arts within different cultural backgrounds. The development of humour is not stagnant, it will change with the integration of cultures around the world and changes in society, and humans will continue to explore humour in changing times for ever. In addition, public art nowadays plays an increasingly important role in urban construction. I think the practical ways of creating humour that I have proposed in my research can be applied to the design of public art to improve the entertainment and cultural value of the work, and the dynamic, open and inclusive urban cultural spirit can be better expressed in the process of interaction between the public and public art. This is also an area where current research can continue to develop in the future. Public artists can enliven the atmosphere of the city through humorous expression in their work, and enable the public to find a humanistic ethos in this context. However, a significant point here is that this research does not simply offer practical ways that artists can make humorous public art, but explores the close link between humour and local culture. Public art should not become an empty shell with work that is merely humorous but with no cultural connotation. Instead, the humour expressed in public artworks should arouse people's attention and thinking about history, the memory of the city, and the acknowledgement of self-identity. This is the meaning of humorous public art.

Making art in a playful way is an idea that gives us an explanation of the past, a guide to the present, and a direction for the future. This is the reason I stand here right now.

²¹⁴ McGhee, *Humor, its Origin and Development*.

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