

HITTING WHERE IT HURTS: ABSURDITY AS AN ARTISTIC METHOD

GABRIELE JUTZ*

* University of Applied Arts Vienna (Austria)

Gabriele Jutz is a professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. She was a guest professor of film studies at the Freie Universität Berlin and at the Wolfgang von Goethe Universität Frankfurt. Her habilitation *Cinéma Brut. Eine alternative Genealogie der Filmavantgarde* (Springer 2010) focuses on cameraless practices of experimental cinema. Along with participating in many international conferences, she has published numerous articles on the history, theory and aesthetics of film – in particular on the cinematic avant-garde, expanded cinema, experimental film sound, art and the moving image and experimental animation.

Corresponding Author:

Gabriele Jutz

gabriele.jutz@uni-ak.ac.at

University of Applied Arts Vienna

Institut für Bildende und Mediale Kunst

Institute for Fine Arts and Media Arts

Department of Media Theory

Abstract

This article frames absurdity as an artistic method related to the context of an artwork's making. The artworks introduced here are (very broadly) situated at the interface between animation and documentary. Their absurdity is not a matter of their content, but is deeply inscribed in the process of their making. Though they do not explicitly address political questions, they strike at the heart of given power systems or established hierarchies and thus hit where it hurts. "Make it absurd!" is a way of transgressing standards and norms and thus undermining established power relations. The article offers close-readings of a small number of contemporary artworks that can be apprehended as stimulating examples of how absurdity as a method deploys its critical potential. As the examples demonstrate, disrupting a given context can be achieved in many ways: By "inflating" formal devices in order to subvert typical elements of televisual language from inside-out (*House* by Andy Birtwistle, Great Britain 2013); by rendering a source text (and not just any text!) literally unreadable by investing an enormous amount of time to its dismantling (*On the Road* by Jack Kerouac by Jorge Lorenzo, Mexico 2013); by hijacking a male masterpiece and placing the "copy" as well as the female appropriator at the same level as the "master" (*A Movie by Jen Proctor* by Jen Proctor, USA 2010); by demonstrating that the technique of animation itself bears the mark of the absurd (Anna Vasof's series of works, gathered under the headings of *Non-stop Stop-motion* and *Muybridge's Disobedient Horses*, Austria, 2017–); and finally, via a method called "slapstick avant-garde," by launching an attack on purist self-restraint (*Dont Know What* by Thomas Renoldner, Austria 2019).

Keywords: Absurdity as an artistic method, appropriation, animation, slapstick.

Introduction

If “absurd” is understood through its Latin etymon *absurdus*, meaning “out-of-tune, discordant” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., Etymology), then the very condition of something that might be called “absurd” is its being straightforwardly “in dissonance” or “out of harmony” (Ball, 2020, p. 22) with a given context. This more general understanding of the term, which distinguishes itself from particular usages in literature or existentialist philosophy, clearly shifts the emphasis from absurdity as a subject matter to absurdity as related to the context of an artwork’s making. Merely dealing with an absurd theme does not necessarily result in artworks classified as “absurd.” Instead, absurdity, as I will frame it here, is a technique, a device, a strategy, in short: a *method* through which a given art practice proceeds.

Dave Ball’s concept of “tactical absurdity,” described as “a particular mode of operation that forms part of the toolkit of the artist” (Ball, 2020, p. 21), equally acknowledges absurdity as a method that gets to the intestines of art making itself. According to Ball, “tactical absurdity” is a “gesture of resistance against the sovereignty of common sense, a symbolic intervention into the conventions and orthodoxies of behavior, language and representation, and [...] a departure from the ‘frameset’ of legibility that obtains at any given moment” (Ball, 2020, p. 23).

But how can the concept of absurdity be understood in theoretical terms? Ball discerns three theoretical approaches to absurdity: First, absurdity can be imagined “as a relative concept, negotiating the issue of what it is not” (Ball, 2020, p. 24). This perspective is modeled on the oppositional relationship of sense and nonsense and stresses their mutual interdependence. A second understanding proposes “an

affirmative theorization of absurdity as capable of departing a given symbolic order altogether” (Ball, 2020, p. 25). In this case, absurdity is appreciated as a creative practice, able to liberate productive forces. Finally, a third theoretical approach goes a step further and concedes to tactical absurdity a critical, disruptive potential. It is proposed as “an ‘other’ to a dominant and pervasive discourse whose authority is maintained through a highly conventionalized architecture of meaning” (Ball, 2020, p. 25). It is this third understanding – absurdity as a destabilizing power – that I will primarily pursue here. Thus conceived, absurdity as an artistic method can also be seen as a possible response to our contemporary condition. When social and economic inequality, sexual and racial discrimination, the impending climate breakdown, unequal access to health care, data-driven politics, the establishment of surveillance systems, imploding democracies, and so on, are widely perceived as the *norm*, then this manifest incongruity between given problems and their perception can rightly be called “absurd.”

Nevertheless, the artistic examples discussed here do not overtly confront the just mentioned issues of existential crisis. Instead, they are linked to absurdity by their very method, which I have called as being “out of tune” with a given context. Although very different in their *modus operandi*, all the artworks presented here are situated at the interface between animation and documentary (in a very broad sense). Their absurdity is not a matter of content, but deeply inscribed in their process of making. Though they do not explicitly address political questions, they strike at the heart of given power systems or established hierarchies and are able to hit where it hurts.



Fig. 1 to Fig. 5 *House* (Andy Birtwistle, 2013). Copyright: Andy Birtwistle.

Inflating

Andy Birtwistle's short experimental video *House*¹ dates back to 2013, but despite all its whimsicality it easily could pass for a COVID-19 lockdown film, as it deals with spatial confinement. Nevertheless, *House* can be seen in the tradition of that small sub-genre "journey around my room,"² as it systematically documents the interior of the filmmaker's house. While the content of the visuals is completely banal (and at the same time funny), the formal strategy used builds up a sense of excitement and anticipation – which is again and again disappointed by the unspectacular objects the camera reveals. That formal strategy consists of dynamic whip pans in conjunction with rapid montage, with the pans moving, for example, from one end of a radiator to the other, from one pillow on a bed to the one next to it, from a roll of toilet paper to the toilet tank, and on and on (Fig. 1 to Fig. 6). The soundtrack of *House* moves in the same direction, namely,

creating expectations that are never resolved. It consists of a looped ascending scale played on strings, repeated about 30 times and played once per each shot over the four minutes of the film's duration. The strings' rise in pitch together with the jazzy beats of percussion instruments (conga drums, vibraphone, possible tubular bells) gives the music a driving, insistent feel. In sum, the music, the whip pans and the montage all promise something that is never delivered.

Birtwistle regards *House* as part of a series of "empty" films, meaning films with deliberately reduced content that – as opposed to content-driven works – direct attention toward their formal devices. As he states, the inspirations for *House* were the title sequences of low budget television programs that he saw as a kid growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in Britain.³ As he remembers it, whip pans would be used to add a sense

1 <https://vimeo.com/70283366> (*House*), accessed May 31, 2021.

2 Though this sub-genre is mostly literary, for example Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1794), it also includes filmic examples such as Mati Diop's *In My Room* (2020).

3 Andy Birtwistle: <https://vimeo.com/70283366>, accessed May 31, 2021.

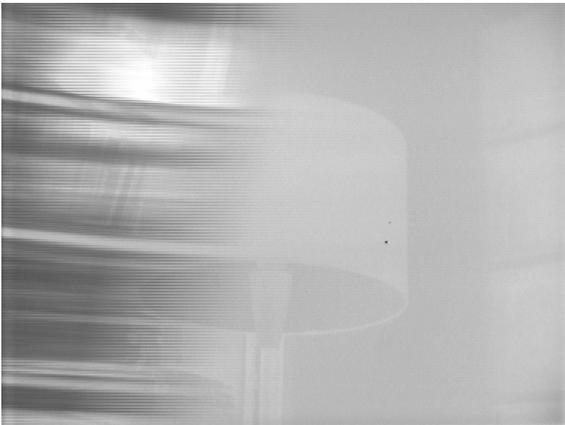


Fig. 6 *House* (Andy Birtwistle, 2013), whip pan. Copyright: Andy Birtwistle.

of drama to the banality of the programs they introduced. To shoot *House*, Birtwistle used vintage video equipment – two Sony AVC series black and white cameras from the 1970s, whose video tubes produce a characteristic “trail” when the image is rapidly panned. Again, this choice of technical equipment links back to a period when a rapid montage of whip pans was the staple of televisual title sequences. According to Birtwistle, *House* both *follows* and *subverts* the logic of these outdated elements of televisual language.⁴ Moreover, its bloated, puffed up formal devices bespeak a kind of “inflation” at work here. And indeed, the music, the whip pans and the montage are apparently inflated in the more literal sense of the term. Pitted against the banality of the film’s visual content, inflation is the method by which *House* brings absurdity to the fore.⁵

Appropriation 1: Illegibility and Waste

One of the most recent works of Mexican filmmaker Jorge Lorenzo is *'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac* (2013)⁶. This 14-minute film is an exact re-typing of Jack Kerouac’s legendary 1957 novel *On the Road*, considered a defining work of the Beat generation. The long paper scroll on which Kerouac’s manuscript was typed – in its shape not unlike a roll of film – inspired Lorenzo to type the entire book on – instead of paper – 35mm black leader. When projected at 24 frames per second, Lorenzo’s painstaking and time-consuming procedure (the typing took him three years) results in a film consisting exclusively of screen-filling black characters on white ground, and whose verbal content is mostly illegible. The flickering words, though in discernible lines, flash by so quickly that one is unable to grasp the meaning of the text. According to Lorenzo, *'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac* “attempts [...] to convert Kerouac’s romantic rhythmic writing method onto a cold and mechanical transcription in order to give the work new possibilities and readings that [...] transform the text into illegible blotches of letters that demystify and question language at its most elemental levels (Fig. 7 to Fig. 13).”⁷



Fig. 7 *'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac* (Jorge Lorenzo, 2013), beginning. Copyright: Jorge Lorenzo.

4 Andy Birtwistle: <https://vimeo.com/70283366>, accessed May 31, 2021.

5 The analysis of *House* is based on an e-mail from Andy Birtwistle sent to the author, April 6, 2021.

6 <https://jorgelorencocine.mx/en/on-the-road-by-jack-kerouac/> (*'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac*), accessed May 31, 2021.

7 <https://jorgelorencocine.mx/en/on-the-road-by-jack-kerouac/>, accessed May 31, 2021.

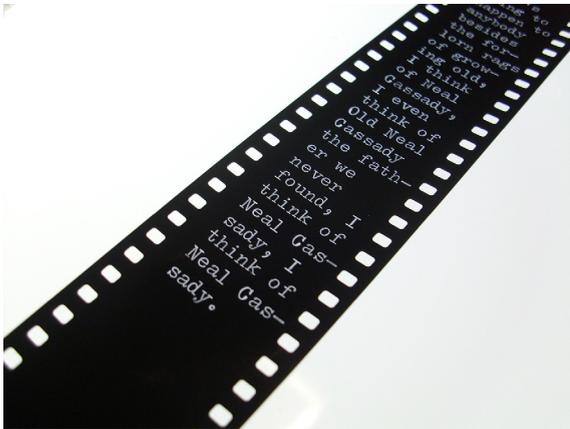


Fig. 8 'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac (Jorge Lorenzo, 2013), ending. Copyright: Jorge Lorenzo.



Fig. 9 'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac (Jorge Lorenzo, 2013), reel and book. Copyright: Jorge Lorenzo.

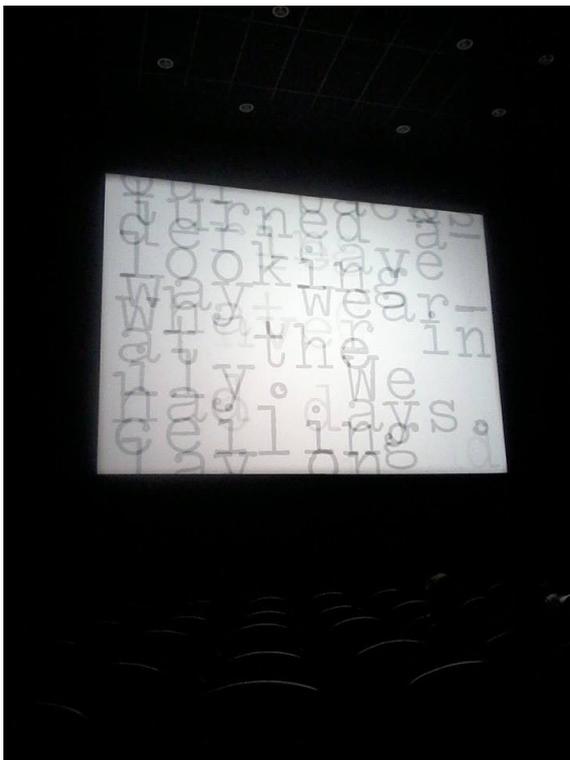


Fig. 10 'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac (Jorge Lorenzo, 2013), screening. Copyright: Jorge Lorenzo.

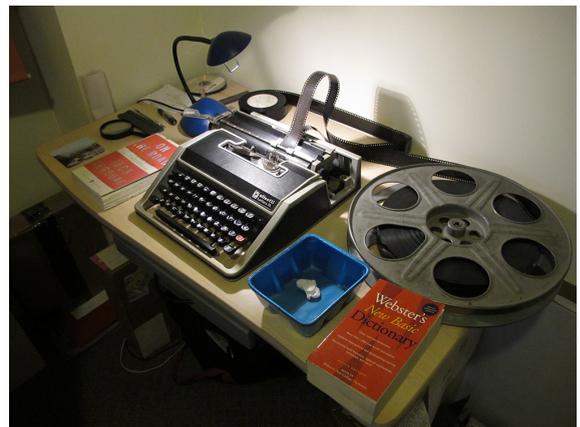


Fig. 11 'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac (Jorge Lorenzo, 2013), typing (1). Copyright: Jorge Lorenzo.

On one hand, Lorenzo's "touch" on Kerouac's text brings about "the most faithful adaptation of Kerouac to film, and indeed the most complete cinematic version of any book" (De Bruyn and McIntyre, 2013); on the other, it moves the source text to a near illegibility, renders it opaque, and thus subverts conventional reading habits. In being "out of harmony" with its source, we recognize the mark of the absurd. Nevertheless, the filmmaker's hijacking of a piece of literature – and not just any



Fig. 12 *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac (Jorge Lorenzo, 2013), typing (2). Copyright: Jorge Lorenzo.

work, but one of the most influential works of postwar North American literature – and then making it unreadable pursues a precise strategy. This provocative gesture gets its particular edge from Lorenzo's background as a transnational Mexican artist, who has lived in San Francisco for three years. As Dirk de Bruyn and Steven McIntyre in their dialogue on *'On the Road'* by Jack Kerouac argue, this migrant experience of culture and language is deeply embedded in Lorenzo's piece. They compare the film spectator's viewing experience with the way "a migrant grapples hesitatingly with a new language. At first come letters and percussive sounds, the occasional word – was that a word? – and maybe even evanescent flashes of insight. By the end of it though, it's an experience without

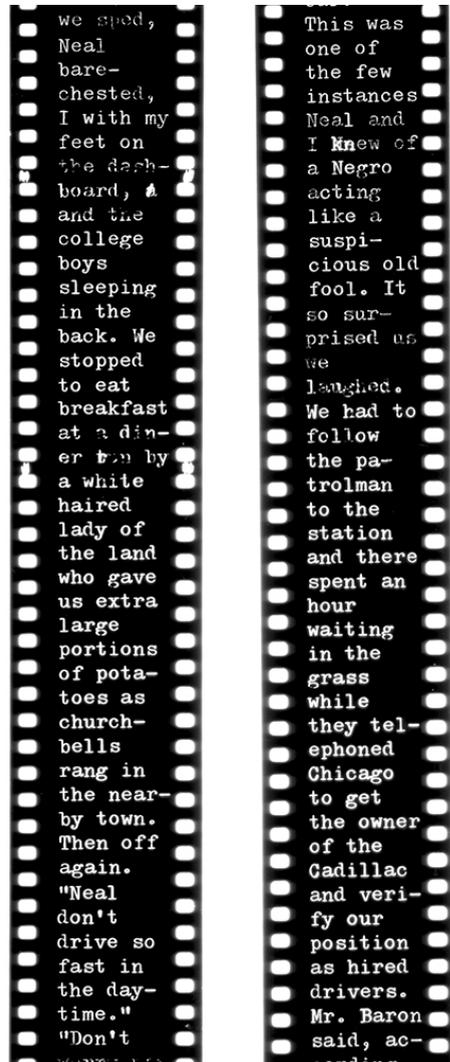


Fig. 13 *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac (Jorge Lorenzo, 2013), typing (3). Copyright: Jorge Lorenzo.

the firm, deeply felt correspondences that make meaning" (De Bruyn and McIntyre, 2013). Intimately linked to migrant experiences, Lorenzo's appropriation of Kerouac's novel is charged with political force. At the same time, the "strategic 'mis-use' of source texts" (Dworkin, 2003, p. 5) is also apt to disrupt

relations of power between the appropriated and the appropriation.

Lorenzo's fondness for the use of celluloid and typewriter is much more than a nostalgic play with so-called obsolete technologies, but feeds into his interest in the materiality of filmmaking and writing. The physical nature of typewriting allows for character imprints that correspond exactly to the pressure exerted and the length of time the user's finger remained on a key. Some "blotty" letters in *'On the Road'* by Jack Kerouac read as the outcome of a good deal of pressure applied to the corresponding keys, whereas faint figures seem the result of a lighter touch. Despite the filmmaker himself calling his own writing method – as opposed to Kerouac's – "a cold and mechanical transcription,"⁸ his re-typing can be described as an appreciation of the corporeal and material value of writing. The type itself in *'On the Road'* by Jack Kerouac may lack the "obedience" and 'self-effacing humility' before the 'meaning' of the text (Gill, 1936, p. 47, quoted in Dworkin, 2003, p. 63); but by being anything but invisible it foregrounds the specificity of its material production.

The "slowness" enacted in the making of *'On the Road'* by Jack Kerouac (those three years of day-to-day typing on leader) bespeaks a time lavishly spent, or better put, an *expenditure* of time, to use a term introduced by Georges Bataille in his *General Economy* (1949)⁹. In contrast to "restricted" economies, which are based on scarcity, general economies are motivated by surplus energy and excess. Expenditure – more precisely, "non-productive" expenditure – is a form of profitless loss and goes against rational economy because it implies squandering without reciprocation, giving without ever receiving in turn. According to Bataille, non-productive expenditure is the very condition for a human being to gain

the "sovereignty" (distinct from royal sovereignty), by which an individual achieves "freedom" by casting aside pettiness and utilitarian calculations: "General economy evinces, firstly, that excesses of energy are produced which, by definition, cannot be utilized. That excessive energy cannot but be lost without the least goal, and hence without any meaning. It is this useless, meaningless loss, which is sovereignty" (Bataille, 1954, p. 233, translated by Dworkin, 2003, p. 80). Sovereignty as understood by Bataille can be achieved through different means: festivals, holy orgies, drug consumption, poetry, love, eroticism and – why not? – through gloriously "wasting" time by laboriously creating a work that (in monetary terms) will never pay back the energy and time invested in it.

Appropriation 2: The Master and the Mistress

In the context of contemporary feminist media art, the strategy of appropriation unfolds its critical potential precisely when female artists capture male "masterpieces," as shown in the example of Jen Proctor's *A Movie by Jen Proctor* (2010)¹⁰. Proctor's video is a nearly shot-by-shot remake of Bruce Conner's canonical experimental film *A Movie* (1958), which is itself made entirely of found footage. While Conner randomly discovered and gathered celluloid strips for his "archive," Proctor resorted to the almost inexhaustible pictorial worlds of the Internet in her endeavor to translate *A Movie* into digital form. The outcome is a critical commentary on contemporary media culture as well as on female appropriation of male works of art.

Conner's *A Movie* is a fast-paced collage of film material that he had collected, such as snippets of Westerns and ethnographic films, recordings of nuclear explosions and car races, travel films and striptease scenes, all of them colliding in

8 Jorge Lorenzo: <https://jorgelorenzocine.mx/en/on-the-road-by-jack-kerouac/>, accessed May 31, 2021.

9 For an expansion on the idea of a general economy, see George Bataille: *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. New York: Zone Books 1988 (part I), 1991 (part II and III).

10 <https://vimeo.com/11531028> (*A Movie by Jen Proctor*), accessed May 31, 2021.

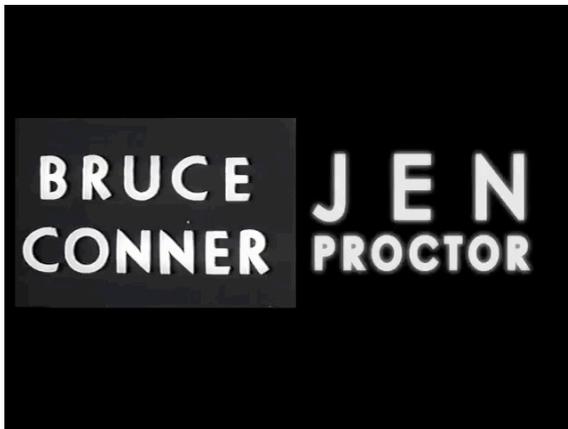


Fig. 14 *A Movie by Jen Proctor* (Jen Proctor, 2010).
Copyright: Jen Proctor.

bizarre juxtapositions of horror and humor. Proctor's method consisted of searching on YouTube and LiveLeak for visual material that seemed suitable to reproduce the denotative content of every single shot of Conner's film, while at the same time taking into account the different social, historical and technological contexts. For example, at the point where Conner shows starving, weeping Africans, in Proctor's remake we see teenagers crying. "[Today] images of [...] privileged adolescents weeping are more ubiquitous than images of real victims of natural disaster or war, and [...] such images are largely performed explicitly for the camera [...]" explains Proctor (MacDonald, 2015, p. 331) (Fig. 14 to Fig. 20). Content aside, another feature of contemporary media culture becomes visible here: While the images available to Conner in the 1950s were taken from different camera perspectives, subjective, first person point of views predominate in Proctor's video: "[It's] all about ME, documenting MY point of view, giving it priority," she comments (MacDonald, 2015, p. 333). The availability of mobile, small-format cameras tempts subjects to stage the "I" in a way that has never been seen before. This proliferation of subjective perspectives is one of the essential characteristics of Internet culture.



Fig. 15 *A Movie by Jen Proctor* (Jen Proctor, 2010), building explosion.
Copyright: Jen Proctor.



Fig. 16 *A Movie by Jen Proctor* (Jen Proctor, 2010), infrared explosion.
Copyright: Jen Proctor.



Fig. 17 *A Movie* by Jen Proctor (Jen Proctor, 2010), missile tracking shot. Copyright: Jen Proctor.



Fig. 18 *A Movie* by Jen Proctor (Jen Proctor, 2010), World Trade Center on fire. Copyright: Jen Proctor.



Fig. 19 *A Movie* by Jen Proctor (Jen Proctor, 2010), woman with stockings. Copyright: Jen Proctor.



Fig. 20 *A Movie* by Jen Proctor (Jen Proctor, 2010), ending. Copyright: Jen Proctor.

Proctor's appropriation of a male "masterpiece" possesses gender/political weight. A comparison of the respective opening sequences makes this particularly clear: Where in the original "Bruce Conner" appears repeatedly and nearly hysterically in giant letters that fill the screen, in the remake, equally in huge letters, "Jen Proctor" can be read, with the color, size and font being near-exact copies of Conner's title sequence. Proctor's name thus occupies the space previously claimed by a male author. Moreover, the female artist also inserts her name into the film's title: "A Movie by Jen Proctor." This escalation of authoritative gestures critically comments on categories such as authorship and originality. But that's not all: Proctor adds little animated stars to the lettering of her name so that it glitters artificially; in a word, "Jen Proctor" is flavored with a dash of "cuteness." Cuteness is a highly suspect category because it relies on highly uneven power differentials, as Sianne Ngai, who has identified cuteness not only as an aesthetic category, but as *the* dominant aesthetic of consumer society, underscores. Drawing on Lori Merish (1996), an earlier scholar of cuteness, Ngai writes: "[T]he fact that the cute object seems capable of making an affective *demand* on the subject – a demand for care that the subject is [...] compelled to fulfill – is already a sign that 'cute' does not just denote a static power *differential*, but rather a dynamic and complex power *struggle*" (Jasper and Ngai, 2011, p. 48). Viewed in this light, Proctor's method is to be understood as strategic absurdity. On the one hand, with tongue in cheek, she seems to acknowledge the asymmetry of power between the giant of American experimental film and herself as a little-known female artist; on the other she establishes herself as the "mistress" and impishly places herself at the same level as the "master."

The Absurdity of Animation

Architect and media artist Anna Vasof has coined the term "Non-stop Stop-motion" for a series of filmless animation experiments she developed during her studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. She documented her research in a film entitled *Non-stop Stop-motion*¹¹. Unfolding in 14 chapters, from "Misunderstanding" to "Everything is an Excuse," *Non-stop Stop-motion* shows her attempts – including failures – to understand the core mechanisms behind the production of movement out of a series of still images (Fig. 21).

Based on the idea that the illusion of movement is a result of the projection of discontinuously still images, her series of works (gathered under the overall heading of "Non-stop Stop-motion" on Vasof's homepage¹²) translates intermittency – that most basic cinematic mechanism – into performances and installations. Many of Vasof's pieces can be regarded as attempts to lay bare the usually invisible workings of the cinematic apparatus – but without the use of a (conventional) apparatus at all. Creating an absurd contrast is at the core of Vasof's method; for example, she defamiliarizes everyday inanimate objects (shoes, brooms, pots, etc.) or combines objects or situations that do not fit together. Vasof is convinced that animation itself, in its bringing the inanimate to life – thus combining irreconcilable opposites together – is already permeated with the absurd.¹³

An excellent example is Vasof's interactive installation *Self-Portrait* (2017)¹⁴. The piece is made out of simple everyday objects: a metal bucket, a small wooden ball, an LED lamp, magnifiers, rope and seven paper cups. When a visitor moves the rope up and down, the lamp starts to swing, and the installation turns into an audiovisual machine animating

11 <https://vimeo.com/annavasof> (Documentation *Non-stop Stop-motion*), accessed May 31, 2021.

12 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsnBS_bOZL8RL2u0dtp0ARQ (Series *Non-stop Stop-motion*), accessed May 31, 2021.

13 Anna Vasof in a telephone interview with the author, April 6, 2021.

14 <https://vimeo.com/188787694> (*Self-Portrait*), accessed May 31, 2021.



Fig. 21 *Non-stop Stop-motion* (Anna Vasof, 2020), still from the chapter "Misunderstanding." Copyright: Anna Vasof.

a figure of the upper body of a young woman with closed eyes and wearing a headscarf. This figure has been cut out from the bottoms of the paper cups, each cut-out representing a slightly different stage of movement. When the lamp starts swinging (and thanks to the magnifiers attached to the paper cups), the very small image of the figure's upper body is projected (at a much-enlarged scale) on to the wall. It moves backwards and forwards as if it were trapped in an endless loop of bowing. Additionally, and with fantastic precision, exactly at the moment the woman's head hits a thin, projected line we hear a loud bang, the result of the clapper striking the bottom of the metal bucket. Finally, though it was important for Vasof to find the appropriate mechanism for *Self-Portrait*, the piece cannot be reduced to its technical aspects. As its title suggests, the artist is also interested in narrative, in this case, the universal story of female struggle (Fig. 22 to Fig. 25).

If we consider the numerous, centuries-long attempts to make images move and look for historical affiliations or resonances between these ventures and *Self-Portrait*, it is neither the Lumière's cinematograph nor the popular optical toys of the nineteenth century, but the magic lantern, first described by the Dutch scientist Christiaan Huyghens in 1659 (Mannoni, 2000, p. 33), that seems to be the template for Vasof's installation. The magic lantern is an early type of image projector that used pictures on transparent slides, one or more lenses, and a light source. As Laurent Mannoni explains, "[t]he image was generally 'fixed,' but could also be animated if the slide included a mechanism which allowed the subject to be moved. All that was necessary was to place the slide upside-down in the 'slide carrier,' in front of light focused from a candle or oil lamp" (Mannoni, 2000, p. 33–34).



Fig. 22 The making of *Self-Portrait* (Anna Vasof, 2017).
Copyright: Anna Vasof.



Fig. 23 Detail of *Self-Portrait* (Anna Vasof, 2017).
Copyright: Anna Vasof.



Fig. 24 Bowing female figure in *Self-Portrait* (Anna Vasof, 2017).
Copyright: Anna Vasof.



Fig. 25 Installation view of *Self-Portrait* (Anna Vasof, 2017).
Copyright: Anna Vasof.

Vasof's wondrous Rube Goldbergesque contraption clearly references the concept of the magic lantern as *Self-Portrait* is a *live performance* in which magnified images made without recourse to a camera are projected on to a white surface. However, Vasof's continuation of the "old" into the "new" also contains considerable modifications. Instead of slides she uses cardboard cut-outs (the underside of the paper cups); a simple lamp serves as a light source; and sound comes directly from the apparatus itself when the clapper hits the bucket.¹⁵ Unlike the magic lantern shows, often involving travelling

showmen – so-called "lanternists" – going from town to town putting on entertaining performances, the interactive setting of *Self-Portrait* demands that viewers themselves set the apparatus in motion with a touch of their hand. As the audience is not merely watching from a distance, but becomes instead part of the machine's functioning, *Self-Portrait's* apparatus is one that more properly fits under the category of the "player mode" (to use Wanda Strauven's terms) of moving images, as opposed to the original magic lantern's "viewer mode" (Strauven, 2011, pp. 148–163).

15 One should add that magic lantern shows could be accompanied by sound (music, singing or storytelling), but that any sound source was external to the apparatus.



Fig. 26 *Travel to the Window* (Anna Vasof, 2015).
Copyright: Anna Vasof.



Fig. 27 *Travel to the Window* (Anna Vasof, 2015).
Copyright: Anna Vasof.

A comparison of proto-cinema (magic lantern) and contemporary expanded animation (*Self-Portrait*) necessarily entails further differences, most remarkably the interplay between light source and image carrier. In the original magic lantern, the slides were mobile and the light source fixed; in *Self-Portrait* however, the light source moves, but the images stand still. While the magic lantern, during its long history, aimed at constant improvement (for example, more complex design, a larger number of lenses, various cinematic techniques including fades and dissolves), Vasof's endeavor moves in the opposite direction by emphasizing limitations to work, favoring DIY-practices and "cheap" materials. As a hacked magic lantern, *Self-Portrait* demonstrates how obsolete apparatuses can be retrieved from oblivion, but also how an ingenious modification and defamiliarization of everyday objects – through mischief and wit – can be made accessible to a larger audience.

Another example of how to turn a limitation into an advantage is the filmic performance *Travel to the Window* (2015)¹⁶. Vasof's basic arrangement consists of seven long curtains fixed to a rail hung from the ceiling in an ample space. Each of the curtains depicts a silhouette of the artist on a swing seen from behind and in a slightly

different stage of movement. Vasof successively pushes the curtains aside, from left to right, from right to left, and vice versa. After having revealed the fundamental mechanism of her piece, thanks to enhanced speed after filming, the swing starts to move, faster and faster, until it hits the window behind the curtains – followed by the sound of shattering glass (Fig. 26 and Fig. 27).

Banknotes (2018),¹⁷ from Vasof's series "Muybridge's Disobedient Horses," again uses everyday objects for animation's sake. The manner in which an electrical banknote counter counts banknotes is another perfect object for animation inquiry because it interrupts continuous movement. *Banknotes* consists of a short loop of 16 ten Euro banknotes fed into the machine. On either side of each note Vasof attached a transparent sticker showing either the upper or the lower part of a mouth and its set of teeth. When the machine starts counting, either the top or bottom of the mouth can alternatively be seen in rapid succession, giving the impression that the mouth is opening and closing. Moreover, *Banknotes* frees the counter from its usual function of meeting the capitalist need to count and record its funds, and instead turns it into a money-divouring kind of flip-book (Fig. 28 to Fig. 30). In her documentation, *Non-stop Stop-motion*,

16 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cujZATqZ29Y> (*Travel to the Window*), accessed May 31, 2021.

17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqkBmGvO9lQ> (*Banknotes*), accessed May 31, 2021.

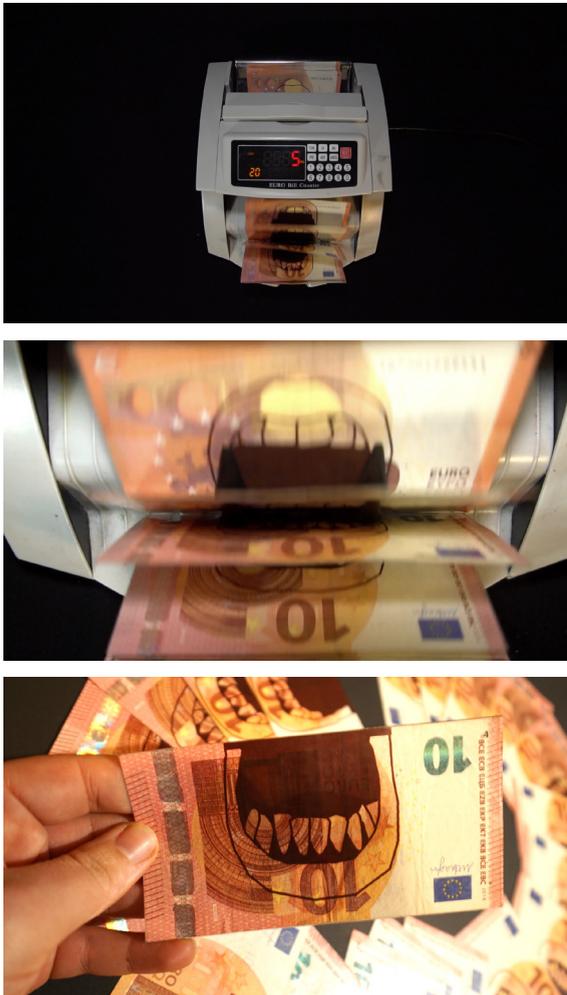


Fig. 28 to Fig. 30 *Banknotes* (Anna Vasof, 2018).

Vasof incapacitates capitalist market logic to absurdity by calculating that, for a ten-minute animated film she would need 960 ten Euro bills, amounting to a “production budget” of 9,600 Euros, whereas a feature-length film would require approximately 8,640 ten Euro bills, corresponding to a total sum of 86,400 Euros.

Vasof’s experiments bear witness to her fascination with the mechanics behind the illusion of movement. Her works are driven by playfulness and show how simple the creation of that illusion is, and that it is all absurd. Furthermore, her gesture of making everyday objects unfit for service is a comment on the anthropocentric notion of “affordance,” where – according to the logic of utility value – the only *raison d’être* of the non-human world is to meet human needs.

A Slapstick Avant-Garde

Traditionally, film scholars have created an opposition between experimental film and commercial entertainment cinema, despite the fact that there are – throughout film’s history – more than tangential links between avant-garde and Hollywood on the one hand and between avant-garde and entertainment on the other. Think of the first American film avant-garde (1919–1945), flourishing right within the Hollywood system itself (Horak, 1995); Dada films of the 1920s with their rich repertoire of “gags”; straightforwardly funny experiments, like those of the Kuchar brothers; and, not to forget, the great number of avant-garde films made of footage from Hollywood movies. Austrian artist and curator Thomas Renoldner’s prize-winning short *Dont Know What* (2019)¹⁸ can easily be added to the list of films in which “high” (avant-garde) and “low” (entertainment) meet; what is more decisive is that the filmmaker himself calls his method of filmmaking a “slapstick avant-garde” (Durkin, 2020), thus taking the risk of overstepping a line in an art landscape that calls for earnestness. It is interesting to note that “art with slapstick,” as Jörg Heiser calls it, is being taken more and more seriously as an artistic *method*, although operating “under the radar of stiff seriousness” (Heiser, 2010, p. 10).

But let’s first take a look at *Dont Know What*. This short, experimental animation is based on a video recording of a live performance by Renoldner in which, while gazing into the

18 <https://vimeo.com/412906856> (*Dont Know What*), accessed May 31, 2021.

camera, he speaks three sentences: "I don't know, what I'm doing"; "I am just experimenting"; and "I have no idea what the result might be." Each of these sentences structures one section each of the eight-minute film. At the very beginning of *Dont Know What*, the first line is delivered in such a deadpan manner that the audience expects an utterly dry experimental film. To a certain degree, the film might remind us of John Baldessari's video *I Am Making Art* (1971), an ironic reference to contemporary body art, and in which the artist facing the camera, limply raises different body parts while stating in what seems to be a sedated voice after each move, "I am making art." Unlike Baldessari's work, *Dont Know What* quickly picks up speed, the performer adding gestures while uttering his lines so that the initial seeming sobriety is disrupted by humor. A big part of *Dont Know What*'s humor stems from the frame-by-frame micro-editing of both, sound and image. As Sharon Katz explains, Renoldner "set up some rules to dictate how he would edit the frames. One of the limitations was to create sequences only from consecutive frames of a length from 8 to just 2 frames. For example, the rapid fire blinking of the eye is made up of only two neighbor frames from the same take" (Katz, 2019). The particular comic effect of this "eye glimpse sequence," for example, "is based on the fact that this blinking is accompanied by the audible 'flicker sound' – usually blinking eyes don't generate sound," Renoldner elaborates (Katz, 2019) (Fig. 31 to Fig. 37).

The filmmaker's musical background – a musician and composer in several musical genres, he often composes the soundtracks of his films – feeds into his interest in sound and prompts him to begin his editing process not as one would expect, with the image track, but with the soundtrack. Having in mind a musical composition assembled exclusively from the original soundtrack (the three lines spoken in the performance), Renoldner's first step is to deal with the phonemes of "I don't know, what I'm doing," by isolating its vowels: /ai/, /o/, /ou/, /a/, and then concentrating on the first neighboring

vowels, the /ai/ from "I don't know." The filmmaker's phoneme-based approach to language echoes his frame-based approach to editing: as the phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in speech, so the frame is the smallest image unit of cinematography. After having broken down the audio into micro-segments, Renoldner tested out possible combinations of frames in circular (12341234) and pendulum (1234321234321) loops of various lengths. The micro-editing of the spoken words transforms the vowels (and, as the film progresses, the consonants too), into a pounding staccato of noise that creates bizarre rhythmical patterns. As to the combination of sound and image, Renoldner elaborates: "One strict principle was to always edit image and sound simultaneously, so every sound you hear comes exactly from the very moment when the image was recorded" (Durkin 2020). In other words: Sound and image are strictly synchronous, not only in temporal terms – the sound occurs at the same time as the image – but also in causal terms – the sound is faithful to its source. The micro-editing of sound and image creates surprising new meanings, absent from the original: "My voice and my body are the central tools for this exploration. I transform language into music, turn my voice into a drum machine, and my body becomes a surreal fantasy with a dozen arms and impossibly wild movements."¹⁹

Calling his method of filmmaking a "slapstick avant-garde," sounds at first like an oxymoron, as "slapstick," is usually associated with entertainment, and "avant-garde" is supposed to be "serious" art – thus the seeming contradictory register. Nevertheless, the two terms have more in common than expected. According to Jörg Heiser, "[b]oth, slapstick and art, have a tendency toward the anti-narrative, and both aim to use the mechanisms of the media in which they are situated to achieve something that would not be possible without them" (Heiser, 2010, p. 19). *Dont Know What*'s chopped rhythm, a principal source of its absurd humor, depends on the specific editing possibilities offered by the medium. It's

19 Thomas Renoldner: www.thomasrenoldner.at, accessed May 31, 2021.

jerkiness – instead of smooth movement – denotes *Dont Know What*'s affinity to slapstick, defined "as a sudden jolt in a smooth sequence, an absurd attack of hiccoughs in everyday life [...]" (Heiser, 2020, p. 17). Slapstick should not be mistaken for a "clown interlude" (Heiser, 2020, p. 17) as in the circus, but has to be acknowledged as an important method by which dogmatic ideas about the "essence" of an artwork or about experimental film in particular loses its grip. The slapstick-loaded *Dont Know What* demonstrates the notion that



Fig. 31 to Fig. 37 *Dont Know What* (Thomas Renoldner, 2019). Copyright: Thomas Renoldner.

(to paraphrase Roland Barthes) “a little slapstick turns one away from avant-garde, but [...] a lot brings one back to it.”²⁰

Conclusion

The five case studies gathered here establish a connection between absurdity and art, one that goes beyond their subject matter. Nothing would be easier than to imagine something like “absurdity in art,” on the same pattern as, for example, “the horse in art.” Instead, the focus lies on media practices that use absurdity as an artistic tool or method. Consequently, before elaborating on the works’ textual and contextual meanings, particular attention has been paid to their making, to the operations and gestures involved.

“Making it absurd” is a way of transgressing standards and norms and thus undermining established power relations. As the examples have shown, disrupting a given context can be achieved in many ways: Through “inflating” formal devices in order to subvert common elements of televisual language from inside-out (Andy Birtwistle); through rendering a source text (and not just any text!) literally unreadable by investing an enormous amount of time to its dismantling (Jorge Lorenzo); through hijacking a male masterpiece and placing the “copy” as well as the female appropriator at the same level as the “master” (Jen Proctor); through demonstrating that the technique of animation, bringing unanimated objects to life, itself bears the mark of the absurd (Anna Vasof); and finally, through a method called “slapstick avant-garde,” launching an attack to any call for purist self-restraint (Thomas Renoldner).

References

Ball, D. (2020). *The use of tactical absurdity in (post-)conceptual art practice*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Southampton]. Author’s digital archive. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from

<http://www.daveballartist.co.uk/2020/DaveBall-phd-thesis-final-version.pdf>

Bataille, G. (1988). *The accursed share: an essay on general economy* (Vol. 1). Zone Books.

Bataille, G. (1991). *The accursed share: an essay on general economy* (Vols. 2–3). Zone Books.

Bataille, G. (1954). *L’expérience intérieure*. Gallimard.

Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. The Noonday Press.

Dworkin, C. (2003). *Reading the illegible*. Northwestern University Press.

De Bruyn, D., & McIntyre, S. (2013). 24 tweets per second: a dialogue on Jorge Lorenzo’s ‘*On the road by Jack Kerouac*.’ *Senses of Cinema*, 68. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/24-tweets-per-second-a-dialogue-on-jorge-lorenzos-on-the-road-by-jack-kerouac/>

Durkin, I. (2020, April 2019). *Staff pick premiere: ‘DONT KNOW WHAT’ by Thomas Renoldner*. [Online blog post]. Vimeo. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <https://vimeo.com/blog/post/staff-pick-premiere-dont-know-what-by-thomas-renoldner/>

Gill, E. (1936). *An essay on typography*. Sheed and Ward.

Heiser, J. *All of a sudden: things that matter in contemporary art*. Sternberg Press.

Horak, J.C. (Ed.). (1995). *Lovers of cinema: the first American film Avant-Garde 1919–1945*. University of Wisconsin Press.

20 Roland Barthes’ line reads: “[...] a little formalism turns one away from History, but [...] a lot brings one back to it” (Barthes 1972: 111).

Jasper, A., & Ngai, S. (2011). Our aesthetic categories: an interview with Sianne Ngai. The cute, the interesting, and the zany. *Cabinet Magazine*, 43, 45–51. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php

Katz, S. (2019, October 16). *Thomas Renoldner definitely knows what he's doing*. [Online blog post]. Ambling Around. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <https://www.awn.com/blog/thomas-renoldner-definitely-knows-what-hes-doing>

MacDonald, S. (2015). Jennifer Proctor. In MacDonald, S. (Ed.), *Avant-Doc: Intersections of documentary and Avant-Garde cinema* (pp. 325–335). Oxford University Press 2015.

Mannoni, L. (2000). *The great art of light and shadow: archaeology of the cinema*. University of Exeter Press.

Merish, L. (1996). Cuteness and commodity aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple. In Garland-Thomson, R. (Ed.), *Freakery: Cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body* (pp. 185–203). New York University Press.

Ngai, S. (2012). *Our aesthetic categories: zany, cute, interesting*. Harvard University Press.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Absurd. In *Oxford English dictionary*. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from 1, from <https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/792>

Strauven, W. (2011). The observer's dilemma: to touch or not to touch. In Huhtamo, E., & Parikka, J. (Eds.), *Media archaeology: approaches, applications, and implications* (pp. 148–163). University of California Press.