



ABSURDISM

Jürgen Habermas has provided a substantial treatise on the relationship between modernity and counter-rationalist philosophy {Habermas, 1987 #91}. The aesthetic parallel to this aspect of modernity is absurdism which came into prominence with Dada and Surrealism and burgeoned further in art since 1960. Absurdism can be understood as a comment on the (post)modern human condition; also, it overlaps with humour which, like art, has a limited license to break social mores. And when conventions are broken we can see how deeply art and humour can penetrate our innermost hopes and fears. This is evident in contemporary installationism, especially when one considers that at a certain point the apparently whimsical humour of Andreas Slominski resonates with the hard-hitting political art of Santiago Sierra (see Chapter 5). The ideological absurdism of Sierra employing people to perform useless and arduous tasks communicates a socio-political message regarding exploitation, but possibly Slominski is pointing to something similar when he goes to the trouble to contract municipal workers to dig up a street sign so that he can place a bicycle wheel around it.

ANDREAS SLOMINSKI

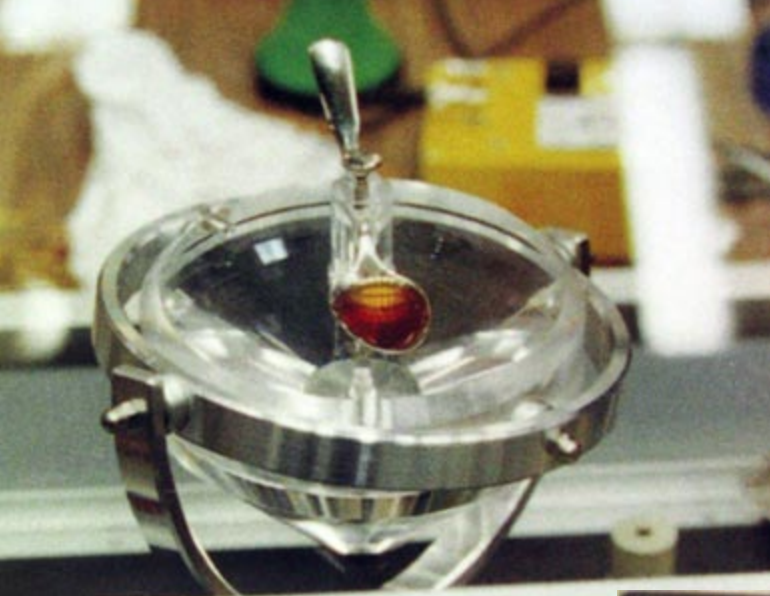
radical absurdism



The work of Andreas Slominski is remarkable for its apparent stupidity. He pushes absurdism to its limits. But his work succeeds because of his peculiar ability to transmute nonsense into a logic and logic into nonsense. His work is an exploration of the structure of the idiotic. Its validity lies in the fact that irrationality is part of the fabric of human existence: even the most intelligent and capable of us will think or behave stupidly at times.

Humour reaches deep into the human psyche—one thinks here of Freud's discussion of oneiric language in terms of *condensation* and *displacement* {Freud, 1991 #541}, notions that resonate with the Surrealist's 'juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities' {Breton, 1972 [1924] #18}. We would not laugh at a genuinely stupid action but we can be amused when presented with a cleverly conceived fabrication of such an action. It is possible to understand Slominski in terms of an intellectual account of humour that points to its deconstructive credentials.

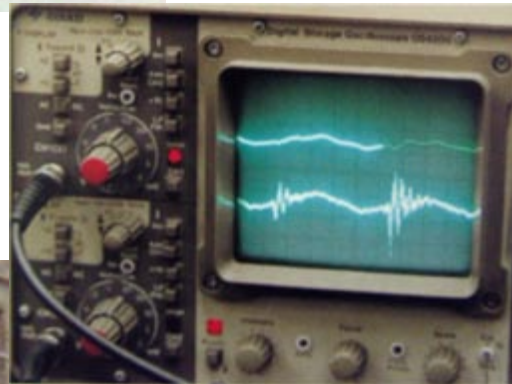
In *Self-Portrait with Sombrero*, 1998, Slominski cut a hole in the corner of a room near the ceiling so that he could take a self-portrait photograph. He wore a sombrero to make the event more risible due to the fact that the sombrero had to be cut to fit into the corner. Slominski's work appears to be the



antithesis of the social-critical interventions that come under the rubric of reintegrating art into the praxis of life. In contrast his works are an apparent waste of time and money.

His *Cough Syrup Transport System*, 1998, is a case in point. This work entailed placing a spoon carrying a dose of cough syrup into a Cardan's suspension apparatus used to keep mariner's compasses horizontal. This was in turn placed within a Vibro-Shock safe. The safe was placed in a van and carried from one end of Berlin to the other, completing its journey in the Deutsche Guggenheim at Unter den Linden:

During transport, one could watch two shock waves on the instrument screen of the oscillograph. The top wave measured the frequency of disturbances within the safe, while the bottom wave measured the disturbances to the outer frame. As the van traversed the city, the screen recorded various bumps and turns, with the bottom line always indicating the greatest level of turbulence, since the inside of the safe is outfitted with shock absorbers. On two occasions during the journey—a sharp curve made at a crossroad, and when the van accidentally drove onto a curb while parking outside the museum—the bottom wave on the screen showed an enormous shock outside the safe while the top wave remained almost still. {Guggenheim, 1999 #797}



Slominski's *Cough Syrup Transport System* amplifies the uselessness of art to a point where it cannot be ignored. Yet at the same time one's curiosity is awakened, which is a productive effect in itself.

In spite of the fact that thought is ultimately directed towards practical purposes, to achieve this aim it must be able



to detach from what is known in order to explore that which is not known. In Slominski's work the activity of thought is presented in its purist form as oblique and distracted. He explores an intellectual territory in which the joke intersects with the mathematical puzzle. His work offers a perspective on everyday objects and situations that subjects them to transformations that are both unexpected and unfathomable.

For another work, *Bucket of Water*, 1998, the basic concept is simple, to place a bucket of water in an art museum's shop. But Slominski went about this task in the most convoluted manner. He commissioned a plumber:

to come install a 15-meter long pipe from the nearest bathroom to the bucket. In no time the pipe, including a faucet, was installed and the artist was able to fill the bucket. After that was done the pipe was removed and all traces of the action were eliminated, leaving only the bucket full of water behind. It is important to mention that this action took place with no audience present. The only thing the audience was able to see later was the relic of the action, a bucket of water, sitting lost and seemingly forgotten in a museum shop as if the cleaning personnel had left it behind by accident. As with the work in Zurich, the only documentation of the activity were photographs in the publication. {Hoffmann, 2003 #798}

One's immediate response is that the work would have had much greater sculptural impact if the plumbing had been left. If the act of installing a cumbersome extension to the existing water supply to fill a plastic bucket was absurd then was removing it an erasure or amplification of that absur-

dity? In this work what is not said, not seen, not known is more important than that which is in evidence. Perhaps at this point the dimension of the ludicrous intersects with that of the Zen *no-mind*.

MAURIZIO CATTELAN

art into the joke of life



ABOVE Maurizio Cattelan Emanuel Perrotin in a rabbit-penis suit. 2000. Cattelan contracted his famously promiscuous Paris gallerist to dress up in a rabbit-penis costume for one month.



MIDDLE Cattelan forces office staff in an art gallery to walk into the exhibition space by blocking off their normal door and creating a new door constructed out of office furniture. **BOTTOM** Cattelan digs a grave-like hole in the gallery floor.



The integration of art and life has been on the radical avant-gardist agenda since Duchamp, Dada and Surrealism. There have been innumerable variations on this theme. But few have used humour as a weapon against the administered world to the extent evident in the work of Maurizio Cattelan. Like Slominski, Maurizio Catalan uses humour as a tool of transgression. In 1994 he persuaded his famously promiscuous Paris art dealer Emmanuel Perrotin to spend a month dressed as a giant pink phallus. The history of twentieth century avant-gardism is one in which gallerists have had to be increasingly more than reasonable in accommodating transgressive art practice. Cattelan is a trickster who uses his artistic licence to the full. And there can be a more serious side to his actions, as one commentator notes:

the comic and the abject are not dissimilar: the feelings they evoke, pity or disgust, often hide behind the mask of the joke: a technique which Freud considered as a form of pleasure, loosening inhibitions within a socially acceptable framework. {Consortium, 1997 #799}

This particular commentary continues noting Cattelan's use of 'situational aesthetics', an evident reference to the Situ-

ationist movement headed by Guy Debord. This reference indicates an attempt by the commentator to imbue Cattalan's work with social significance.

In his 1997 installation at Le Consortium, Dijon, Cattalan placed a bland, grey office cupboard in the pristine white gallery reception area. The object of this door was to make the gallery staff who normally inhabited their own secluded zone to enter into the gallery space, effectively becoming the installation. In this way Cattalan played with the political boundaries of the art institution, making visible what was previously invisible and connecting what had previously been unconnected. As the Le Consortium commentary notes, Cattalan forced the staff to 'come out of their closet' at least at least once a day {Consortium, 1997 #799}. The rest of the gallery was bare apart from another aggressive intervention in the form of a 'grave' dug in the floor of one of the galleries. This pit reveals various strata with pebbles and neatly cut plastic pipes. **Again the gallery becomes the plaything of the artist: a kind of mini-world that indicates what might happen if art ever did escape out into everyday life.**

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

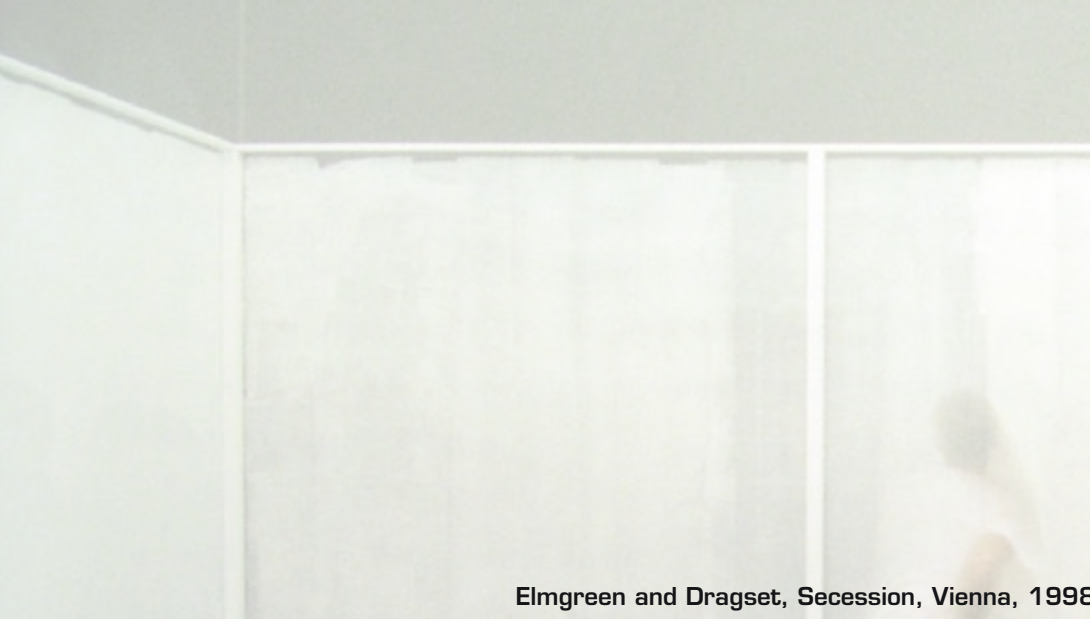
deconstructive games



Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset take minimalism to its illogical conclusion. Their primary focus is on what they understand as the quintessential modernist concept of the art gallery as minimalist ‘white cube’. Commenting on their first ‘painting performance’ (*12 Hours of White Paint*, Ex-Teresa, Mexico City and Galleri Tommy Lund, Odense, 1997) the artists note that:

For twelve hours we continuously painted and washed down the walls of a smooth white cube space, until the physical features of the gallery blurred and became an accidental landscape. By adding more of the gallery’s main signifier, white paint, the gallery became relieved of its so-called sublime qualities and could no longer function as just a neutral backdrop for the presentation of art. {Winkelmann, 2000 #855 n.p.}

In this work Elmgreen and Dragset appear to set out not to erase the white cube but to amplify it out of its quiescent purity via an artistic intensification of its iconic whiteness. In



Elmgreen and Dragset, Secession, Vienna, 1998



another version at the Vienna Secession they increased the self-reflexive nature of their endeavour by creating a ‘white cube’ within the white cube in the manner of the Russian doll-like logic of the *mise en abyme*:

At the Secession in Vienna (1998), we constructed a 6 x 6 metre glass cube in the middle of the exhibition hall. From the inside of this box we painted and scraped down the transparent walls over and over again. We wanted to create a constantly changing space within this old, venerable institution. This performance defined its own space through the painting activity, and through the shifting transparency and enclosure it entered into this peek-a-boo-like dialogue with the audience. {Winkelmann, 2000 #855 n.p.}

These early works were performances but in the case of *Zwischen anderen Ereignissen (Between Other Events)* they decided to hire two professional painter and decorators. They note that ‘it was important for us to avoid any of the romanticized ideas that cling to the artist’s body or the artist-subject performing. By employing professional house painters to do the job, we took one step away from issues related to the artistic self’ {Winkelmann, 2000 #855}. Yet when Elmgreen and Dragset continue to discuss *Between Other Events* it becomes evident that there is a significant degree of respect for the aesthetic traditions they are allegedly confronting and confounding. This is evident when they discuss their relationship with the people they hired: a ‘Mr Richter’ and a ‘Mr Rothe’. Elmgreen and Dragset talk of their ‘collaboration’

with Rothe and Richter, yet one can note that this did not extend to Rothe and Richter's names being added to those of the privileged *artistic selves*: Elmgreen and Dragset. The two artists continue:



The more we spoke about the project, the more the painters could also relate to it with a deeper personal engagement. Somehow it must have appeared quite weird to them in the very beginning to be asked to paint the same venue white over and over again for seven weeks. But while we were working in the space together ... the painters gradually hooked on to the idea. They figured out that this was not just a joke or a provocative gesture on our part but that we were serious about the whole thing that we cared for the details and that we had a great respect for their professional skills. {Winkelmann, 2000 #855}

What is interesting here is that an apparently pointless activity is taken so seriously by Elmgreen and Dragset. Their reference to the 'deeper personal engagement' of the painters they employed seems distant from Dada and Duchampian anti-aesthetics. Elmgreen and Dragset's absurdist gravitas leads one to the conclusion that post-Duchampian transgression has become aestheticized. **Which is to say the antiaesthetic has acquired what Walter Benjamin referred to as 'cult value'.** Elmgreen and Dragset continue their report on the indoctrination of Rothe and Richter into the dogma of High (Anti)Art:

Later on, when they [Rothe and Richter] were interviewed by a local newspaper, the journalist tried hard to get them to complain about their participation in this project. Instead

of doing so, they replied in a very insightful and loyal way. And, don't you remember when you once got corrected by one of them. You said something about just painting white over and over again, and I think it was Mr. Rothe who told you that white was not just white, but that each room of the space would always have a slightly different tone. {Winkelmann, 2000 #855}

Rothe's response reminds one of the white on white minimalist paintings of Robert Ryman, and Rauschenberg's Zen-inspired *White Painting*, 1955. From such reports one could be forgiven for assuming that what appears to be the deconstruction of the 'white cube' is actually a *reconstruction*, or recapitulation of High Modernist aesthetics. But that is not accurate because this is not an action that leads to a heroic object such as Donald Judd's minimalist boxes. Instead it is intertwined with the everyday via the employment of people previously untutored in avant-gardist art. This leads one to read this action as a situational extension of the minimalist aesthetic into a poetics of the everyday.



JASON RHOADES

overconsumption

Elmgreen and Draget's poetics of the everyday stands in stark contrast to Jason Rhoades' adoption of an absurdist exaggeration of American new world aggressiveness. Russell Ferguson reports that at the Cologne 'Unfair'—an alternative to the Cologne Art Fair—in 1993 'Rhoades repeatedly fired a gun in his installation, smashing a number of beer glasses. He caused panic outside the fair when he pulled out the gun in a Cologne bar, later going on to shoot out some shop windows and streetlights' (Ferguson, 2000 #857). Ferguson's account makes one wonder why Rhoades was not gunned down by the German police, on suspects an element of myth-making. Or, alternatively, perhaps it was explained to the police as performance art: after all the Germans are known for their dedication to *Kultur*.

Whatever the facts of the matter it can be noted that Rhoades has cultivated a persona that could be described as stereotypically 'American redneck' and this auto-parodic persona plays key role in Rhoades' peculiar twist of the anti-aesthetic. One could draw a comparison here with the Swiss artist Sylvie Fleury who has programmed herself to be the ideal late-capitalist feminine consumer making her identity an integral part of her sculptural installation. The connec-



tion with Fleury is not random: speaking about his Impala project, 1998, for which he imported a Chevy Impala into Germany. Rhoades reports that he ‘asked Sylvie Fleury for something for its glove box ... she advised: “You must have Chanel 22, the only *American* Chanel perfume”’ [my emphasis] (Birnbaum, 1998 #856). Rhoades’ Impala project was realized in Europe and it is interesting to hear his comments on the differences between America and Europe:

What I want is this big American space. Something comfortable and elegant. And now this space exists in-between these pathetic European Kunsthallen that seem completely outdated. These old European art institutions just aren’t meant for artists who work today. If you need something mechanical, like screws, they won’t have what you need. I wanted this truly progressive space that moves forward. So I shipped this car over. (Birnbaum, 1998 #856)

Rhoades plays the arrogant American in Europe despised by the European intellectuals for his crassness and pilloried by anti-globalization protester for his elevation of the car to the status of deity. The centrality of the gas-guzzling automobile to American culture (which helps underscore the causes and effects of 9/11) is reinforced further by Rhoades’ adoption of a Bush-like arrogance towards ‘old-Europe’. His self-consciously excessive Americanness was obviously appreciated by European artists such as Fleury who might also appreciate the machismo inherent in Rhoades’ reference in the above passage to ‘screws’, and ‘cars’: elements that were evident in Rhoades’ work from the start. For instance,



his first New York installation (1993) consisted of a messy mechanic's shop transplanted to the gallery complete with a dirty, greasy engine overhaul performance {Avgikos, 2001 #858}.

The portrayal of America as the land of prodigality *ad absurdum* is also prevalent in Rhoades' mentor, Paul McCarthy, the doyen of West Coast satirical grunge. And the fact that there have been significant collaborations between the two artists affords Rhoades' histrionic redneckness an acerbic-parodic pedigree. The crux of McCarthy's work lies the representation of a kernel of psychotic hubris and grandiosity that lies at the core of any all-powerful culture.

A McCarthyesque parody of American anal-expulsive over-production/consumption is evident in Rhoades' Portikus (Frankfurt am Main) exhibition entitled *Costner Complex (Perfect Process)*, 2001. Rhoades transformed Portikus into a surrealistic species of food processing plant. White-capped workers chopped, pickled and preserved a selection of vegetables. A David Zwirner Gallery press release adds that this:

Gardenia alla Potpourri was then placed on slow-moving Lazy Susans [food carousels] and in turn exposed to the complete filmic oeuvre of Kevin Costner on 23 television monitors. The essence and aesthetic principles of Kevin Costner's work were thus captured in 1000 glass jars/jugs. {Zwirner, 2002 #859}

Like gasoline, food is a particularly American obsession as is evident in the amount of obesity evident on just about any American street. Rhoades' simulacral food factory makes



great play of an over-abundance of processed food as a metaphor for First World excess. And a surfeit of Costner's all-American boy image projected into the jars will imbue their contents with unending cultural pulp. Costner becomes the mass media mirror of this useless exercise in overproduction.

Rhoades takes the metaphor a step further in his invention of a new, and especially disgusting, sculptural material he calls 'PeaRoeFoam' (pronounced pea-roe-foam). This substance is made from:

whole green peas, white virgin beaded foam and fish bait-style salmon eggs, which combined with non-toxic white glue, creates a versatile and fast-drying building material that hardens completely and can be used in various applications. With the help of many assistants ... [the] Rhoades studio now has produced 5000 PeaRoeFoam units {Zwirner, 2002 #859}

Again, in a very McCarthyesque manner, Rhoades organizes large-scale operations to produce a truly disgusting product the cultural function of which is to turn a terrifying mirror onto American grandiosity and narcissitic potlatch. Rhoades twists the knife further by packaging PaeRoeFoam in Ivory Snow soap boxes. Apparently these soap boxes are of particular interest to Rhoades as the beautiful "99.44% pure" mother featured on these boxes was the actress Marilyn Chambers:

who in the same year that these boxes came out, had starred

in one of the first feature length-porn films ever made: *Behind the Green Door*. The wide appeal of the image of the Ivory Snow mother, ultimately led to the mainstream success of *Behind the Green Door* and this cultural intersection created what the artist refers to as: ‘a great accident’. Rhoades does not see an ‘accident’ such as this as coincidental, but rather as a trigger that creates changes in perception. {Zwirner, 2002 #859}

‘Mental instability’ seems the wrong term to describe such productions and deliberations, ‘paradox’, ‘imperfection’, and ‘chaos’ (in the Chaos Theory sense) seem more appropriate. Perhaps there is method behind Rhoades’ madness.

PeaRoeFoam is certainly designed to be disgusting. It recalls Damien Hirst’s giant ashtray filled with hundred of cigarette butts in the Saachi Gallery in London. But Rhoades’ reference is culturally specific. It refers to overconsumption which is the bedrock of the American economy and the global pollution and Third World decline that is its inevitable by-product. Although Rhoades describes PeaRoeFoam as ‘virgin’ his use of pure white Styrofoam beads also carries with it the undeniable fact that this is one of the most environmentally unfriendly packaging materials in existence. PeaRoeFoam is more honest because one imagines that this disgusting product will eventually, inevitably putrefy and stink. Rhoades’ metaphorical conflation of cleanliness with corruption in his ‘new material’ PeaRoeFoam is reinforced by his reference to the 1972 Ivory Snow soap box and the ‘99.44% pure’ mother-cum-porn star. It would be foolhardy to frame Rhoades as deconstructing American culture because he is so much

a part of it. But there does appear to be a critical edge to his particular spin on absurdist-grunge installationism.