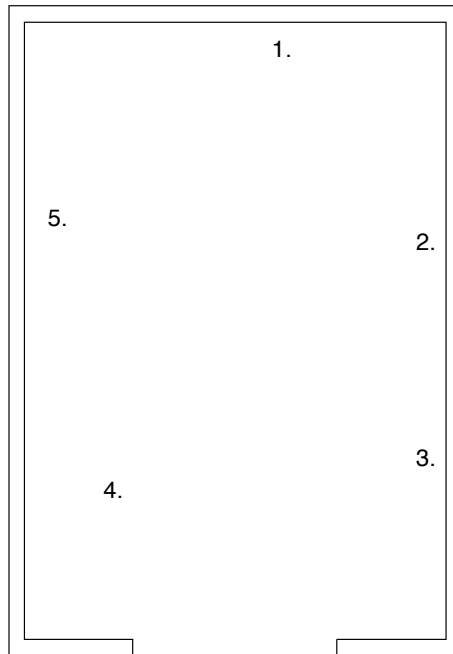


## This is what the edge of your seat was made for



1. *Straight Edge*  
Stuart Bailey  
2008
2. *I Love You (fragment)*  
Simone Tops  
2001
3. *Winners are Grinners*  
Tom Polo  
2007
4. *Yo Mama!*  
Stephen Russell  
2008
5. *Ugly but Effective; or;  
What Fucken Bullshit is  
This!?!? GOD!*  
Bart Weiss  
2009

The act of writing about or engaging with a practice that traverses the terrain of humour in contemporary art is complicated. When writing, there is the risk of explaining the joke to such an extent that it is no longer funny, or presuming that you have to be funny yourself. And when humour becomes the subject of an art practice, the problematic expectation that the artist should be funny all the time rears its ugly head.

To a great extent, humour in contemporary art succeeds when it's incidental: when things turn out (usually for the better) different than expected. I would probably go even further and argue that humour is *inherently* incidental. In many instances, comic effect is derived from some kind of unintentional chain of events, unity of contradictions, or exposure of hypocrisy. The slapstick antics of Buster Keaton and the comic and vitriolic barrages of Bill Hicks and John Safran (to name only a few) provide ample proof of this.

However, in saying this, I feel as though I am coming close to giving the impression that humour can be achieved by following a simple formula. That it's an attractive, neat little package. It isn't.

And now for a brief historical digression...

I don't know how old this thing called humour is. It is quite possible that the pachycephalosaurus found tyrannosaurus' stupidly small forearms funny as all shit. Nevertheless, in medieval times and with the advent of the Carnival, humour

emerged as a kind of pressure-release valve. As Pamela Hansford observes, “in Carnival, laughter represented both an aesthetic response to the crisis of institutions and traditions, a celebration of change, and the creative power which accompanies the disintegration of order.”<sup>1</sup>

Maybe the term pressure-release valve is incorrect. It seems to imply a certain level of control. Perhaps humour is more like a fart or burp or maybe even something as painful (yet, ultimately exorcising, and thus alleviating) as diarrhoea.

The comic is untidy. The incidental is unplanned and subordinate. Yet, clichés of humour laced with sheer spite; the image of the clown struggling with a quintessential existential nightmare; and the slogan of many an uncomfortable situation “If I don’t laugh I’ll cry” don’t help the situation. They primarily serve to reinforce a misconception of humour as formulaic.

Whilst these clichés ultimately detract from the multifaceted nature of humour, they do reveal something very important. The general truths that lie at the core of these maxims are that the comic is unsettling, contradictory, disruptive, and critical. In other words, it has an incredible ability to create mess.

In contemporary art, there is also a certain level of discomfort associated with the act of laughter. One is often left wondering why they found something funny, and whether or not they should have found it funny in the first place.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hansford, P. *Wit’s End: The Comic Spirit and Contemporary Art*, in *Wit’s End*, ed. Pamela Hansford, Sydney: Barberism and the Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992, p. 36.

Humour in art comes at a price and that price is often doubt and guilt.

The unsettling, contradictory, disruptive, and critical (in short, the ability to create mess) nature of the comic has prevented the successful development of comprehensive theories of humour. It is something that is difficult to categorise, and in our current, classification-obsessed<sup>2</sup> climate this can prove problematic, and even disconcerting. Thus, humour functions particularly well as a critical device which engages with and interrogates aspects of our cultural, political, and social conventions.

The artists in *This is what the edge of your seat was made for*: Stuart Bailey, Tom Polo, Stephen Russell, Simone Tops and Bart Weiss all explore the potential for engaging humour as a device to rethink our relationships to art and the everyday. Some elicit laughter from the gut, others through the nose. The activities of these artists implement humour as a strategy to explore the in-between-ness of things. Their work negotiates the untidy spaces between art and craft; painting and sculpture; performance and sculpture; adolescent activity and art; banality and originality.

Joseph Breikers

---

<sup>2</sup> Flick through any recent metal magazine and you will see this hard at work. Black-metal, death-metal, technical-death-metal, doom-metal, prog-metal, thrash-metal, Bay Area thrash-metal, war-metal, Viking-metal, Viking-war-metal, American-metal, traditional American-metal, new American-metal, grind-core, gore-grind, gore-crust. And this is just tip-of-the-iceberg stuff.