The Self Is a Funny Thing:
A Critique of Humour and the Self in Art

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Declaration

I, David M. Thomas, declare that this work, *The Self Is a Funny Thing: A Critique of Humour and the Self in Art*, has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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David M. Thomas

/ /2013
Abstract

A concern with one’s personal appearance and sense of self and the resulting performance and communicability of this self is particularly relevant today. States of alienation that are present in the experience of electronic social media are analogous amplifications of those experienced in non-virtual contexts. Overcoming electronically amplified states of alienation is important for contemporary life and art-making because it is a direct pathway toward improved communication, self-knowledge and individual freedom.

My recent visual art practice reveals that humour has a direct effect on alienated states of the self. Central to the phenomenon of the subject is the way humour engages with the objective and non-objective qualities of self. Through cross-disciplinary visual, theoretical and art-historical research, I address the question how does humour in contemporary art confront, critique and dissolve self-conscious states of alienation? My visual practice and associated research also address the way we modify and construct selves in order to deal with public and private spaces, such as the art museum and the artist’s studio. Towards this aim, my approach to this project has been to develop my visual art practice through studio experimentation and public exhibition. These exhibitions and events (broadly titled Expanded Portraits) have occurred in tandem with an art-historical case study of key works by German visual artist Martin Kippenberger.

Working through the methods involved in producing and presenting Expanded Portraits and analysing Kippenberger’s self-portrait paintings and Peter sculptures, I make a conceptual link between Bergson’s theory of the comic and Hegel’s concept of alienation. Both theories describe similar visual and conceptual phenomena where people appear or are thought of as things and things as people. The subject/object relationship is superimposed onto the artist/artwork discourse and discussed as a form of what David Goldblatt (1993) refers to as ventriloqual exchange. These discursive processes, central to how I make art, extend to involve groups of agents, collaborators, assistants, writers and audiences. This inter-subjective activity is also a means of constructing and maintaining our own works in progress, our selves. These processes have been important ways to expand the conceptual complexity of my interdisciplinary art and a way of linking historically discrete projects in my practice under the one overarching visual approach.
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On the Submission

My submission for candidature is presented in two parts: a selection of 15 video sequences and a 40,000 word research submission, including documentation of practice-led research produced during my candidature. My practice-led research is grouped under the project title *Expanded Portraits*. The project is presented as a series of videos made from photographic and visual material I collect and produce. They are metaphors for the collection, presentation and maintenance of personal beliefs and self-images. In these elaborate portraits, I attempt to present self-construction as an ongoing process of subjectivity at work. As the central elements of these works are electronic media, I have chosen to present my work here as accurately as possible through photographic documentation and video sequences. I have chosen to submit my practice-led research in the virtual space and to address the specific subject matter because the electronic mediation of subjectivity creates its own particular mood. This mood is in turn a humour I see as both the subject and spirit of my work.
Practice-led research is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy please refer to following URL for high resolution video;

https://vimeo.com/channels/expandedportraits

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Chapter 1: Hello Me, Meet the Real Me, Humour and the Self an Introduction

A concern with one’s self and the often humorous public performance and communicability of the self is of particular relevance today. My aims when beginning this research paralleled this concern. As I approached the midpoint of my art career, I wished to consolidate and develop ideas, through more direct research practice, that I had until then tended to avoid or skim across. Throughout the period of my candidature, I have come to realise that the self and its involvements with humour are complex phenomena that are politically, philosophically and professionally connected (Žižek 1999; Curtis 2002; Atkins 2005; Seigel 2009).

Subjectivity as a ubiquitous process is not just a matter for artists. Indeed, the self, a direct result of subjectivity, is a cultural and political zone that has been formed throughout modernism and is inevitably involved with every communication we, as contemporary subjects, make (Žižek 1999; Curtis 2002; Atkins 2005; Seigel 2009). This thesis presents my work in dialogue with key works of Martin Kippenberger, where there is a shared interest in the problematic role of the artist as author and self. Appropriately enough, my works have consciously tested Kippenberger’s important discursive methods of inter-modal and inter-subjective art making. In order to achieve this, the focus of my research into Kippenberger’s practice is not primarily in relation to his discrete works, but on how he managed discursive and generative situations for producing multiple works and expansive installations. What I have discovered is that discourse does not always create identical understandings; because of this the dialogues and interviews I have staged and performed, intentionally cultivate the comical effects of misunderstanding and are intended to generate and benefit from these mistakes.

States of alienation that are present in the experience of electronic media are analogous amplifications of those experienced by all of us daily. Examples of the omnipresence of this social concern with the self are seen in contemporary televised talent shows, such as The Voice, that might easily be re-named The Subject. Another, the un-ironically named program X Factor tasks itself with a monstrous mission of locating and quantifying the unique quality of its competitors, the thing that defines or differentiates one individual from the next, what sets one above another, what makes someone special. In these programs, the contestants present themselves and their performance of self for the consideration of ‘the panel of judges’; these situations are allegorical magnifications of the alienation we all experience when our own self is judged.

I shall refer to ‘alienation’ often in this research, and it has several relatable consequences for both humour and the self;

Most definitions agree that alienation involves estrangement from (or disillusionment with, or lack of faith in) the larger social world or oneself. The term has come to imply: powerlessness, self-estrangement, normlessness, isolation (or cultural estrangement), and meaninglessness. (Rey 2012, 401)
I am also interested in the idea of the artist's persona, and the idea of an individual's personality as a public abstraction and objectification of subjectivity. I am also interested in how much of this can be consciously understood, controlled and thought of as a type of creative work. I see an analogous relationship between the processes of making objects for exhibition existing between being and presenting one's self in public.

In “Narrating the Self” (1996), Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps describe the self as ‘an unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the world, including a sense of one's past and future’ (Ochs and Capps 1996, 20). Meanwhile, in her book *Bird by Bird* (1994), Anne Lamott describes a phenomenological relationship between self-knowledge and character construction as necessary for truthful storytelling. In this, she stresses the importance of overcoming personal and inter-subjective alienation for this awareness to occur, Lamott says:

> Your job is to present clearly your viewpoint, your line of vision. Your job is to see people as they really are, and to do this, you have to know who you are in the most compassionate possible sense. Then you can recognize others. It’s simple in concept, but not that easy to do. (Lamott 1994, 99)

The importance of knowing oneself is also important in the context of professional development. When I recently attended a “Job Search Strategies Seminar” at Griffith University, it was suggested that in order to gain employment, it was important ‘to know your product’. The product, of course, is you, and in this context, ‘self knowledge’ means economic survival. For Milton Berle, success as an actor or comedian is predetermined by a quest for self-knowledge. Berle says:

> You gotta know who you are before you know what you are—before you do what you do. There are three stages and it works just as well in comedy as it does in dramatics, who am I? What am I doing here? And why? (Berle in Wilde 2000, 62)

For philosopher Rick Roderick, the larger and vastly more immanent problem is ‘whether or not we will find selves worth being’ (Roderick, 2013). To achieve self-knowledge, one must first engage in an internal dialogue, where the subject asks specific philosophical questions like the ones above; who am I? What am I doing here? Why am I doing it? This questioning creates a dual self that considers itself as a reflected other. For the artist, this dialogue may make them think about the kinds of artistic selves they may wish to be and the self-characters one may be obliged to perform publicly. As I have discovered, the contemporary self is often presented as a comic character (Zupančič 2006, 2009) performed by the individual in order to negotiate various public as well as private situations.

The self also has an osmotic relationship with authorship; Michel Foucault refers to this as the ‘author function’ (Foucault 1983), and to the kinds of texts that require this function. Importantly, the subject is not simply self created but also negotiated and agreed upon through discourses with other subjectivities (Habermas 1990). These self- and group-generated works may exist as artworks, or rock bands, spoken and written texts and the negation or fulfilment of social and political responsibilities (Foucault 1983).
The sometimes-problematic questions outlined above are both visual and phenomenological arenas of great interest for my research. Moreover, they describe a comical terrain that is central to my research question—what is the relationship between the self, humour and making art?

In the following chapter, in order to introduce important methods for my practice; I map key approaches to humour and the idea of the self through a theoretical discussion of my early photographic self-portraits titled, *Everyday I am Day Older*. These works are seen through the lens of key theories of humour, firstly the Earl of Shaftsbury’s (1743) *sensus communis*, or common sense, secondly, as an inter-subjective contract and as something mechanical imposed on the living, as described by Henri Bergson in his important text on humour, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (2005) first published in 1911 and lastly in reference to Simon Critchley’s *On Humour* (2002).

Like the idea of the self, the concept of humour has changed radically throughout modernism (Critchley 2002). Before modernism, the word ‘humour’ typically meant ‘mood’ or ‘comportment’ (Critchley 2002). In contemporary parlance, ‘humour’ has come to mean something more specialised. However, the word and idea of humour still retain an obligation to mood and one’s bearing towards objects and people. Daniel Wickberg discusses the development of concepts of humour in his book *The Senses of Humour: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (1998). He describes a direct relationship between the development of the modern subject and this subject’s relationship to objects:

> From antiquity through the Middle Ages … ‘humour’ referred always to objective entities. Laughter was understood as an unmediated physical reaction to deformed or inferior things that were objectively humorous. Before the 19th century…referring to a ‘sense of humour’ would have made no more sense than referring to a ‘sense of temperament’ today. From the 17th century on through, with the rise of individualism as a political prescription and a sociological description, humour was gradually unmoored from its objective correlates and came to be understood as a subjective mental phenomenon, rather than an objective physical one. (Wickberg 1998, 34)

In this way, a sense of humour became conjoined to a sense of self and the self’s lingering interaction with objects. Bergson’s concern with humour is strictly as a human phenomenon, which infers a direct relationship between humour, the self, and its being and comportment in a specific social and phenomenological world. In Bergson’s words, ‘The comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human’ (Bergson 2005, 2).

Central to my inquiry is the way in which humour affects self-consciousness. Specifically, I address the question *how does humour in contemporary art confront, critique and dissolve self-conscious states of alienation?* I argue that a concern with one’s own idea of self and the public performance and communicability of this self-idea and actuality is particularly important today. This is clearly seen in the humorous communication of self as a ubiquitous experience of social electronic media. An example of this is the explosion of the phenomena known as ‘selfies’. Selfies are self-images taken by the subject using their camera phone and then posted on
social network web pages. In these virtual and psychological spaces, we live in a perpetual curfew of ironic good humour, an alienated happy consciousness that overstates Hegel's unhappy one, described by philosopher Peter Singer as one disconnected from itself:

the unhappy consciousness is an alienated soul: it has projected its own essential nature onto a place forever out of reach, and one which makes the real world in which it lives seem, by contrast, miserable and insignificant. (Singer 2001, 84)

Today, we are burdened with an obligation to connect, and for this desire to connect to be acknowledged and immediately reciprocated. Our photographs must be ‘liked’ and our comments responded to; this is a perilous virtual space, one where transparency and sincerity are too often misunderstood as irony, even sarcasm. This irony and alienation lead to a negative humour due to the absence of physical presence and engagement, a state amplified by the electronic documents of presence that comprise this virtuality. In both my research and in the art of Martin Kippenberger a physical actuality and positive mood is pursued, one of being there, of in fact having to be there in order to expand the inter-subjective and comically engaging possibilities for art.

This modern project of overcoming alienation has a long philosophical history. The highly mediated and therefore always unsatisfying acknowledgment one seeks and expects from one’s smart phone, tablet or computer and the kinds of anxiety the denial of this creates, are ones Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger may well have predicted. These philosophers often expressed their distrust in the comforting and convenient qualities of new technology, in tandem with the project of overcoming the sometimes-alienating effects of inter-subjective communication and interaction. Overcoming electronically amplified states of alienation is important for contemporary life and art-making because it is a direct pathway toward improved communication, self-knowledge and individual freedom.

My research method is cross-disciplinary in relatively equal parts: visual, social, theoretical and art historical. The visual aspects of my research are presented here as an online Vimeo Channel that presents a group of my most significant projects. These works are significant as research because they demonstrate a synthesis of visual practice and theoretical research. The Vimeo channel and included digital video discs contain documentation and complete works that are intended to be consulted throughout the reading of this exegesis, and considered as the primary submission that is supported by this written submission. It is my intention that this exegesis should theoretically and historically frame my production and enquiry, placing my work and approach into an historical and philosophical context.

This research is organised into four chapters, each divided into several sections. Following this introduction chapter, I begin with a detailed analysis of my recent practice and its engagement with key art processes and theories. My project entitled Expanded Portraits is a body of work that combines video performances, scripted video productions, paintings, collages, sculptures and installations. This ongoing series incorporates theoretical and visual strategies drawn from
my investigations into humour and alienation of the self. The works deal with how an artwork or exhibition can address the way subjectivities are formed, considered, projected and reformed as a continuous and purposeful process. The Expanded Portraits also address how ideas discussed in the theories of humour and subjectivity can be used to form discursive situations with an art audience. Central to these works are the themes of subjectivity, self-consciousness and the construction and maintenance of individual personality. Functioning as zones for the projected idea of the viewer’s own subjectivity, the works also address the challenges and opportunities for subjectivity present in such spaces as an artist’s studio, an art gallery or museum. Practically and conceptually discursive collaborative processes are central to my Expanded Portraits. They intend to directly engage audiences through demonstrating and portraying inter-subjective situations, such as biographical narratives, group meetings and one-on-one interviews.

In Chapter 2, I discuss works that mark milestones in the development of the Expanded Portraits project. In hindsight, I have realised that the Expanded Portraits began with the photographic project Every Day I Am a Day Older, which I completed in the early 1990s, and I refer to this older project to introduce the central themes of my art practice. The work Dream Job, a video installation exhibited at Griffith University Art Gallery in 2010 and in 2012 at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, is a major outcome of my visual research and is analysed in detail in the following section of this chapter. One of the most recent of the Expanded Portraits resulted from a collaboration with artists Joseph Breikers and Stephen Russell, and it is entitled A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as a Party (2012). My role in the collaborative process is similar to the role of the band leader in a jazz quintet; here, I assume the role of organiser, arranger, composer and conductor. This type of directed collaboration is discussed as a means toward expanding the subjective, conceptual and material complexity of these works, and to question the role of my subjectivity for the authorship function (Foucault 1983) of the work. A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as a Party also addresses the hidden labour involved in art and self-making and is an attempt to define the work I wish to do. Another recent work that is part of the Expanded Portraits project discussed in relation to these ideas and processes is First Name Basis: Present Day Art in Australia for G.H. (2012), produced at Sydney College of the Arts as part of their research residency program.

I have deliberately developed this process of collaborative solicitation in order to make the works less about myself and more about what it might mean now to be and to perform one’s self. Solicitation is an activity that approaches and confronts alienation as a barrier between selves in direct relation to a given context or world. This inter-subjective way of working addresses the isolation that is itself a function of disembodied communication technology that isolates as it promises intimate and meaningful engagements. A way of addressing this process has been making and managing groups of agents, and transferring decision-making to these collaborators.
A key process for my recent works has been appropriating written or spoken texts from one-on-one interviews, personal correspondence, DVD special features, music and art magazines, and so on. I am drawn to these texts because of the relationship between storytelling and its formative function for subjectivities. An ever-present metaphor in my work is that the self is a text that we co-author with worlds we and other people occupy. This inevitably involves written or recorded biographical texts. These personalised, first-person narratives and the formation of one’s self are closely associated. In these texts, there is a generative relationship between the subjectivities that speak and those that receive them. The authorship of these texts is ambiguous and a dance around the self that is often imagined to be, yet is not necessarily always the author’s own self.

I begin the construction of Expanded Portraits by collecting outrageous assertions from a cross section of cultural ideologues. These ideologues may be visual artists, filmmakers, musicians or philosophers. The one-on-one interviews are a key situation for this collecting practice, as it is a dialectical situation where the roles of the two protagonists often shift. Appropriating photographic, video graphic and textual statements from these narratives is a significant source of ideological content for my practice. These visual and narrative texts are combined with a collection of personal photographic and moving-image content. The images and audio material I use are a means to think about the projection of subjectivity that occurs internally and externally in relation to appearance and poses of the individual (Owens 1992). In works such as Dream Job, which I discuss in section 2.4, I used the process of mime and mask-making to present myself as a comedic work in progress; a ventriloquial puppet that demonstrates a metonymical transference of subjectivity between the artist and artwork. David Goldblatt (1993) refers to this as ventriloquial exchange, where the artwork speaks for the artist and the artist is obliged to speak the artwork.

Collage is also an important aspect of my studio practice and relates directly to arranging the ideological material described above. I use collage as a model for working between related disciplines, and through it, I aim to synthesise painting, writing/editing, photography and sculpture. The collage works inform and prefigure working with larger-scale exhibitions, gallery spaces and installations. The installed works deal with the peculiarities of gallery spaces, while the collages deal with pre-existing materials; both intervene with these different but given actualities. A key concern for my research is the critical movement between thinking and making; paintings become a discussion and a means to question sculpture, which might propose a video project. The resulting video that may begin as documentation, through the digital post production and editing process, becomes a hybrid of all of these methods. The ability to critically discuss the processes of one form from the vantage point of another is an important critical strategy for my research. This quest for perspective on making is a metaphor not just for a broad idea of visual research, but also for an objective glimpse at subjectivity.
In Chapter 3, I extend my research into art history and philosophy in order to better understand the role of humour and the self in the work of German artist Martin Kippenberger. This chapter aims to connect Kippenberger’s practice to a history of German art and philosophical investigation that often considers visual and theoretical relationships between humour and the alienated subject.

I have discovered that Kippenberger is often discussed as an influence on contemporary art practice; however, his preoccupation with the self and its philosophical relationship with alienation and humour are often omitted or, at best, underplayed in discussions on his work. In this light, I have used Kippenberger’s art as a means to focus and organise my theoretical and art-historical enquiry. As many of Kippenberger’s works are jokes about subjectivity, artistic personae and their roles for the institutions of art (Zdenek 1999, Baumann 2008, Diederichsen 2009, Baker 2009), his practice is particularly useful for my investigations. By shifting the focus of the discussion from my own art practice to Kippenberger’s serves a practical function for the whole project. The change of perspective addresses problems I encountered in the first section of the paper, namely identifying those key methodologies that have been particularly successful for my work.

Early in Chapter 3, I discuss how Kippenberger often used art objects and even entire exhibitions as proxies for depicting and performing subjectivity. Kippenberger’s self-proxies performed his comedy about being and performing his public self as a master and a slave simultaneously.

The humorous performances evoked by his works are symbolic visual ventriloquisms, conducted by the artist in dialogue with the artwork. David Goldblatt in his article, “Ventriloquism: Ecstatic Exchange and the History of the Artwork” (1993) discusses ideas that relate theoretically to this process in Kippenberger’s work. These ideas are demonstrated in Kippenberger’s works collectively known as ‘the Peter sculptures’. The good mood Kippenberger intended to create through these works was designed to operate upon the physical and psychological states of alienation people often experience in art galleries and museums. This section also focuses on how this mood was created and the various modes of collaboration that solicited the involvement of other artists and employed assistants.

In Kippenberger’s practice, humour is a discursive means to address various states of alienated self and inter-subjective consciousness—specifically, the kinds of subjective alienation dealt with in relation to Hegelian notions of self-consciousness. Subjective states of alienation described by Hegel in Phenomenology of the Spirit (1807, 1977) are viewed directly in relation to The Odd One In: On Comedy (2008) by philosopher Alenka Zupančič. Zupančič describes Hegel’s approach to comedy in Phenomenology of the Spirit as a spectrum of representation from the abstract wearing of masks in the Greek epic to the concrete absolute of the comedic.
character. For Kippenberger, these ideas were visually manifest in his movement back and forth between painting and sculpture; I see this movement between artistic forms as Kippenberger’s primary means of confronting alienation and addressing the related problems of being and having a self and to the parallel and related problem of making and exhibiting art works.

The problem of considering and consciously constructing one’s self is a joke about looking at one’s self objectively. Kippenberger told this joke often throughout his practice (Zdenek 1999, Baumann 2008, Diederichsen 2009, Baker 2009). In 3.5, I discuss the ideas of German philosopher Martin Heidegger in relation to Kippenberger’s first series of painted works, titled Uno di voi, un tedesco in Firenze (One of You, A German in Florence) (1976–77). This work, I argue, is an early example of an expansive conceptual approach to self-presentation that attempts an objectively absurd depiction of self as a series of metonymical self-portraits and simultaneously as a sculptural object. This body of works will be considered in reference to Heidegger’s (1977) reaction to an over-determined and self-reflective modern subject (Seigel 2009). The significance of physical presence, or being there, which is at the core of both Heidegger’s existential phenomenology and Kippenberger’s activist art practice, is an important corollary for my discussion. Physical bodily presence is then contrasted with the contemporary experience of tele-presence (Dreyfus 2009, 50), a disembodied, electronically mediated experience of being in multiple worlds at once, thereby making possible multiple subjective states and opportunities. Heidegger scholar and internet theorist Herbert L. Dreyfus’ ideas concerning the experience of the subject in relation to tele-presence are important for this discussion.

Through the production and public presentation of my Expanded Portraits, in conjunction with the analysis of Kippenberger’s self-portrait paintings and the Peter sculptures, a conceptual link is made between Bergson’s theory of the comic and Hegel’s concept of alienation. Both theories describe a similar perceptual state of mind where people appear as things and things as people. The subject/object relationship is superimposed onto the artist/artwork discourse and discussed as a form of what David Goldblatt (1993) refers to as ventriloquial exchange. The mapping of Kippenberger’s practice and his relationship to a German art history has been particularly useful in terms of tracking the trajectory of at least some of these key ideas and strategies and how they relate directly to humour and the self.

I have discovered that many of Kippenberger’s strategies for art making and professional practice are now memes for current artistic practice, in the sense that his approaches to art making were not invented by him but filtered and sharply focussed through his personally and institutionally self-managed oeuvre. These discursive practices, also central to how I make art, extend to involve groups of agents, collaborators, assistants, writers and audiences. This inter-subjective activity is also a means of constructing and maintaining our own works in process, our own selves. These processes have been important ways to expand conceptual complexity.
of my inter-disciplinary art and a way of linking historically discrete projects in my practice under the one overarching conceptual approach.
Chapter 2: Expanded Portraits, Zones of Subjective Projection

2.1 Every Day I Am a Day Older

To introduce *Expanded Portraits*, it is worth discussing the project *Every Day I Am a Day Older* (1993–98) and the context in which it was made. This photographic and painting project is key for my research as it describes my first conscious dealings with the self and humour. It also demonstrates the longevity of my interest in images and philosophical ideas about being, making and having a self. Further, it was the first time I approached how humour might affect an alienated state of being and constructing a self.

Before moving to Brisbane in 2002 I lived in Sydney and managed the art project space CBD *gallery* in the city of Sydney. In the early 1990s a section of the Sydney art scene modelled itself after the highly competitive and highly critical Cologne art scene. It was populated by very defined characters, asserting themselves in “white cube” theatres of alienation, such as artist-run spaces, commercial galleries and museum spaces. As a young artist, it was both disaffecting and desirable to be part of this scene. As a response, I initiated and managed CBD gallery, located at 62 Erskine Street in the city centre. I also lived above the gallery.

I was unaware at the time that CBD gallery had become metaphorically for me an anti-alienation machine. The theatrical nature of the conjoined gallery and living spaces allowed me to see and move behind the walls of the white cube. It also enabled me to collapse the domestic, private home-studio space into the public theatrical space of the gallery shop front (figure 1). In this public space, I could connect with varying degrees of success or failure with the commercial world around me. This is discussed through the work *A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as a Party* (2012), a significant component of my research that will conclude this section.

The CBD exhibition program followed a strict schedule of singular ephemeral installations that differentiated the gallery from mainstream gallery practices. The gallery program followed a formalist structure—one artist per week, every week for seven years. In tandem with this, I initiated a photographic project, *Every Day I Am a Day Older* (figure 2) that was determined by a similar simple directive: take a photograph of yourself once a day, every day.

When I began *Every Day I Am a Day Older*, I had a well-worn copy of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1973), where I first engaged with themes emanating from existentialism, such as ontology and the everyday. Driven by a desire to escape the social obligations of presenting a single “self”, I was interested in the action of considering myself as appearance and as an object that changed over time. The project documented my being in the world, my appearance, and a way of performing, through blank posing, my dumbfounded-ness. These images, taken in my studio, the office or the gallery space, are not highly crafted and reflect an immediate gritty Punk Rock energy and the anti-art aesthetics of the Situationist Internationale.
Figure 1. David M. Thomas *CBD Gallery* (1995) colour photograph, 10 x 15cm, collection of the artist.

Figure 2. David M. Thomas *Every Day I Am a Day Older (Muppet Christmas Carol)* (1993) black-and-white photograph, 10 x 15cm, collection of the artist.
I would often pose in front of movie posters (figure 2) or images of famous rock stars, such as Kurt Cobain or Iggy Pop (figures 4,5,6). The first of these self-portrait photographs were presented in a monograph (figures 7, 8). The project alludes to the laughable condition that every one of us experiences of being a body, matched simultaneously with the existential awareness of having a body (Plessner in Berger 1997, 48). This gap between being a bodily posited self and a state of reflective awareness of bodily selfhood is discussed later in relation to the *Expanded Portraits* works in the project *Dream Job*.

Examining *Every Day I Am a Day Older* now, through the lens of my *Expanded Portraits*, I see the process of photographing myself-as-a-thing as a way of making visual metaphors for alienation and self-consciousness. Exhibiting or publishing the photographic objects was also a way of making self-proxies or producing multiple self objects that could act as stand-ins for me in multiple contexts at once.


Figure 7. David M. Thomas *Every Day I Am a Day Older (Monograph)* (1993) ink jet print x 50, 15 x 21cm, David M. Thomas publisher and designer, collection of the artist.
I intended the photographs to be viewed separately as a series of objects. Importantly, I considered my appearance and the space my body occupies with an equivalent and sometimes opposite emphasis. My body in the photographs is often incidental, and it is the background that is significant. In these early photographs, my image and sense of selfhood were imaged more as a totality of visual information. The photographs are intended to document being in and being subject to my surroundings (figures 3, 4, 5, 6). My figure is not always the one depicted and on occasion is not present; just the background is photographed. Some photographs depicted stand-ins for me in the form of friends and artists who exhibited in the gallery taking my place in the photographs.

In these works, there is a mechanical resistance present in the process of photographing oneself. The subject appears motionless, the human body presented as a thing. I will discuss this indifferent, repetitive mechanical action throughout my research; it creates a humour that is unavoidable (Bergson 2006). Henri Bergson’s theory of the comic asserts a central idea about the mechanics of the comic process:

Let us then return... to our central image: something mechanical encrusted on something living. Here, the living being under discussion was a human being, a person. A mechanical arrangement, on the other hand, is a thing. What therefore incited laughter was the momentary transformation of a person into a thing... (Bergson 2005, 97)

Thus, highly repetitive and mechanical approaches to images of the same person transform them into a thing, and are received by viewers as humorous. Another example of this can be
seen in the work of Noah Kalina, whose digital portrait project _Noah K Every Day_ presents a singular self over a more than a decade. From 11 January 2000 onwards, Kalina has photographed himself every day, and continues to do so (figure 9). In 2006, Kalina began to publish the photographs on YouTube as a continuously updated video sequence. Kalina’s photographs unambiguously depict his bodily self as a rapid and frantic continually evolving animation. Kalina’s eyes anchor the compositions and remain constantly fixed on the viewer. As everything in the background that surrounds the eyes change, the subject’s eyes remain unchanged and unmoving, signifying an idea of consistent, unchanging selfhood. Yet, there is a deadpan sameness in Kalina’s pose, which posits him as an object or a thing.

Kalina’s images became one of the very first viral video memes. Kalina says, ‘Overnight, I woke up and I had hundreds of emails... My website was shut down, it basically got over one million views overnight’ (Kalina in Wei 2010). His image was appropriated as a readymade joke by other YouTube users and also parodied by mainstream media such as the animated television series, _The Simpsons_ in a sequence known as _Homer Every Day_ (Gannes 2012) or via his inclusion as a special guest at VH1’s ‘Big in 2006’ Awards, where a ‘deadpan’ Kalina is photographed with ‘real’ celebrities of the day (figure 10).

As I re-examine _Every Day I Am a Day Older_, I realise I had an unconscious desire to use humour in order to deal directly with my alienated state of consciousness (Hegel 1977). Further, the exaggerated desire to conform, to be the same as those around me, combined with the repetitive, slightly insolent quality manifested by my lazy posing, inadvertently created a deadpan humour that embraced and made fun of my alienated state. Altering or alternating my appearance through variations of facial hair and clothing emphasised my physical appearance as an object but also acted as the costume of a comic character. I was in effect documenting myself as a work-in-progress. Treating my appearance as a physical thing on the same level as perceiving any other thing in my studio (Bergson 2005, Critchley 2002) deferred, at least temporarily, my feelings of self-consciousness.

Parallel to the photographs, I made graphic and painted works on packaging, cigarette packets, shoe boxes, videocassettes and video recorders (figure 11). Initially I chose those supports as a resistance to the material codes of commercial art. Compared with the photographs, my self-image in these works was more overtly presented as an object that stood in for me. This substitution of a disposable object as a deliberately abhorrent proxy for myself was intentionally humorous (Bergson 2005). At the time, I had also unintentionally inverted Bergson’s theorem, I had incrusted something living onto something mechanical. My self-image transposed onto mass produced objects activated a direct physical and metonymical association between the simplified image of the mechanically mass-produced packaging and myself.
Figure 9. Noah Kalina  
*Noah Takes a Photo of Himself Every Day for 12.5 years (2012)*
digital photographic sequence, 7:48 min, source [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPPzXIMdi7o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPPzXIMdi7o).

Figure 10. Noah Kalina and Flavour Flav  
Figure 11. David M. Thomas *Every Day I Am a Day Older* (1995) New Kids on the Block VHS video cassette, felt tip pen, 3 x 12 x 20 cm, collection of the artist.
2.2 I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand the Question

The video work *I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand the Question* (2008) was first screened in the exhibition *Every Artist Is an Institution* held at Metro Arts in Brisbane, 11–28 June 2008 (figure 13). The exhibition comprised two high-definition video works (including the above), 24 paintings, five collages, one sculpture, modifications to the gallery space and a publication also titled *Every Artist Is an Institution* (figure 13). Central to the exhibition, the video *I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand the Question* will take up most of the discussion in this section. The title of the exhibition is a re-working of Joseph Beuys’s maxim, ‘Every person is an artist’ (cited in Kippenberger, 2011), and also alludes to Kippenberger’s inversion ‘Every artist is a person’ (Kippenberger, 2011). The assertion that every artist is an institution describes my anxiety that my practice may become a purely administrative job, rather than a productive research activity that involves social, visual and physical interactions with people other than myself. My desire was and still is to create situations for work that result in surprising outcomes. *Every Artist Is an Institution* marks the beginning of an important phase of my practice as well as the beginning of this research project.

What I had discovered from the previous 15 years of carrying out an artistic practice was that I spent eighty per cent of my time selling myself and planning ahead. This involved organising exhibitions, which entailed defining who I was and what I did, for someone else, often in the third person. From the outset of writing a exhibition proposal, one is left to oneself to create autobiographical materials, such as websites, artist statements, curriculum vitae and so on. The necessary and inevitable outcome of this, and one that is both comical and central for my
work, is that the self that an artist is attempting to communicate becomes an abstraction of the artist’s actual self—ultimately a synthesis of self-alienated dialectics (Hegel 1977). If an artist is successful in this, they may well identify with the outcome; they may feel self-actualised by this process. If they are not successful, they may well exist as an unhappy consciousness. For me, the latter is the more common outcome, as I often feel alienated from what I do and trapped in the process of doing it for the sake of completing the work and maintaining my practice.

When planning Every Artist Is an Institution I was already aware that an exhibition could be a unique zone in which to investigate the phenomenon of self-presentation and self-invention. In 1995, a friend and mentor John Nixon said to me, ‘The trick to art world survival was for one’s work to become recognisable in direct relation to the person who makes it…people need to be able to look at any image of your work and say, that’s a David M. Thomas.’ (Nixon, personal communication with the author, 1995). However, presenting oneself in public via the proxy of one’s work brings this often-alienating phenomenon into sharp focus. The artist’s name becomes a brand for the work they make, and then potentially a substitute for the artist. Diedrich Diederichsen encapsulates this alienation through his description of Martin Kippenberger’s motivation for his Peter sculptures, discussed in Chapter 3:

> Even great achievements could lead to a situation in which an artist is gradually replaced by his work and forced to lead his life in the shadow of a homunculus that is either dead or left to the reception of other people as a parasitic extension of his work, which had assumed a life of its own. (Diederichsen 2009, 123)

In this way, this exhibition’s theme underlines one of my primary concerns about the metonymic relationship between the art object and the artist subject. This exhibition also marks the first time I consciously produced works that use the interview situation as a mode of narrative production as well as a compositional element.

Adam Curtis’s BBC series The Century of the Self (2002) informed the exhibition’s political ideas. This documentary maps the development of the self as a political territory and a psychological zone that has been categorised by governments, corporations and cultural institutions. For the video work I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand the Question, I was particularly intrigued by Curtis’s description of psychographic market-research techniques, such as Values Attitudes and Life Styles (VALS), that sought and still seek to categorise, describe and name consumers as personality types.

Launched in 1978 and revised in 1989, VALS remains a world-wide standard bearer in consumer market research. Developed by consumer futurist, Arnold Mitchell for SRI International, the VALS system divided consumers into eight types: Innovators, Thinkers, Believers, Achievers, Strivers, Experiencers, Makers and Survivors (SRI 2013).

I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand the Question (Video 1) represents my first use of an interview/questionnaire—in particular, The US VALS™Survey—as a way to focus upon an internalised dialectical discourse, to appropriate narrative content and form a compositional logic. Conceptually, the written and videoed interview, as seen in my research, has been used
to frame works and thereby generate situations where complex generative approaches to art can be explored and expanded. For Beuys and Kippenberger, interviews were ways to frame, communicate and develop new work. Beuys's Office of Direct Democracy (1972) and Kippenberger's Happy Ending to Franz Kafka's Amerika (1994) are just two examples of very different ways the interview and its furnishings and physical spaces have been used.

_**I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand the Question**_ demonstrates how I have used the mechanics of the comic to address and consider a Hegelian concept of self-alienation and the dialectical nature of this alienation. It also unwittingly engages with Henri Bergson's _Laughter and the Meaning of the Comic_ (2005). These texts developed my understanding of the mechanism of comedic discursiveness. The relationship between the character of the clown and the interviewer, both played by myself, was intended to metaphorically present how one might feel in a situation where one is being prompted by personal propositions regarding one's most internalised beliefs. Making the sort of statements that I say in the video, such as 'I like trying new things', tend to make one feel self-conscious, even embarrassed. These feelings are natural given the personal nature of these questionnaires. As writer and curator Nicholas Chambers observed of the work:

'I consider myself an intellectual', 'I like to dress in the latest fashions', etc. On the other screen, Thomas is heavily made up as a clown and responds with one of the four predetermined responses: 'mostly disagree', 'somewhat disagree', 'somewhat agree' and 'mostly agree'. Designed to categorise respondents as belonging to one of eight different personality types, the VALS questionnaire (which we might see as analogous to any of the systems and institutions that govern contemporary life) allows for only a limited range of possibilities for defining the subject's self. The most rational option in the face of such a system, as suggested by Thomas' clown, is insolence, and his maniacal voice and out of time responses are a childish way of not playing by the rules. It's an emblematic work in Thomas recent oeuvre, one that short-circuits the usual systems by which we might seek to define each other and ourselves. (Chambers 2010, 2)

In its original form, the VALS questionnaire was not intended to be read aloud and was initially mailed to respondents (Curtis 2002) for market research purposes. For my video work, I turned the questionnaire into a script. In this way, the questionnaire was used as a means to question myself. The use of the statement-and-response format in the performance demonstrates a self considering itself objectively and becoming a comic character in the process.

As I have stated, I enjoy reading and watching interviews and they present context and content for other works I discuss later, such as _Dream Job_. These situations are ways of recording and communicating personal and shared ideological information. In these contexts, as my performance as the clown demonstrates, the interviewees are not always truthful or convincing. Attitudes and feelings are received through non-verbal cues, physical resistances and facial expressions. Often, a suppressed emotional struggle between the interviewer and the interviewee takes place; a Hegelian master/slave dialectic plays itself out (Hegel 1977). This is significant for the video in question, since I present a situation where I am interviewing myself as two discreet comic characters: the straight man and the clown. This, I now know from my reading of Hegel's _Phenomenology of the Spirit_ (1977), comically abstracts and illustrates a
The process of self-alienation is one that is seen in Hegel’s description of alienated self-consciousness (Hegel 1977, 10). For Hegel, alienation is a process where something that is in fact part of us seems separate or foreign, even hostile (Singer in Magee, 2009, 195). Hegel describes the ego as a unifying state of consciousness that is present only through encountering itself as a negating differentiating awareness. Hegel states:

> the living Substance is being which is in truth Subject, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement positing itself, or is the mediation of itself-othering with itself. This Substance is, as Subject, pure, simple negativity, and is for this reason the bifurcation of the simple; it is the doubling that sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its anti thesis [immediate simplicity].

(Hegel 1977, 10)

Hegel’s concept of self-alienation is echoed in the VALS questionnaires and self-actualisation movement that prefigured the market-research phenomenon of the late 1970s and beyond. (Curtis 2002). Abraham Maslow, a pioneer of self-actualisation in psychology, and on whose ‘hierarchy of needs’ (Maslow 1943) the VALS system was based, alludes to a central idea in Hegel’s discourse of the alienated soul or consciousness when he states, ‘We fear to know the fearsome and unsavoury aspects of ourselves, but we fear even more to know the godlike in ourselves’ (Maslow 2001, 163). Philosopher Peter Singer states that overcoming alienation is central to an understanding of Hegel’s philosophy. Importantly, the overcoming of alienation is a direct pathway towards absolute self-knowledge and a truthful experience of freedom (Maslow 1943)

The intent of the VALS questionnaire is to separate and categorise personality types. When I looked at the categories that I was supposed to fit into, such as ‘Believers’, ‘Strivers’ or ‘Makers’, I identified with all of them at once. I also felt a strong resistance to being categorised, as one would an object or a thing or a certain ‘type’ of artist. That I became a quantifiable object was alienating but it also became the source of humour. The humour was in this work used to overcome my alienation.

In the clown performance, I actively tried to exaggerate my responses to the types of assertions being made. However, the only verbal responses that were allowed were ‘mostly disagree’, ‘somewhat disagree’, ‘somewhat agree’ and ‘mostly agree’. This is another instance where Hegel’s master/slave dialectic and Bergson’s theory of the mechanical nature of comedy should be considered. The limitations placed on the interviewee render the clown object-like. The interviewer can be considered the master as he has the freedom to ask anything of the clown. The clown thus becomes the slave because he is compelled to respond but within strictly defined limits. What we see in this video, however, is a catatonic and mechanistic interviewer, while the clown is freely acting up as the comic character embodying a freedom in his insolence. By playing both characters simultaneously, it is implied that the seemingly opposing attributes of both comic characters are present in the same individual.
In this work and the related exhibition, I planned to address the problem of my own alienated state of self-consciousness through a series of planned engagements with collaborators and agents. In the past, I had struggled with the idea of agency in my practice. I sought to question very conservative ideas I held about authorship in art-making. As an artist, I have sometimes thought that I should make every decision and visual element of the work, and complete every action in it, to the point of researching, planning, making, installing, and documenting and writing about the work. Reflecting on this now, especially in view of my current research, these ideas seem almost pathological, resulting not only in exhaustion but more, rather than less, isolation.

The way that Kippenberger worked with networks of agents to expand the professional, subjective and discursive possibility of his works (Diederichsen 2009, Felix 1999, Loers 1999) was an important discovery that resulted from this research. With a desire to develop this kind of expansive and complex practice, I set about forming these kinds of working relationships. I asked my partner, Suzanne Howard, an experienced filmmaker, to work with me on the central video work. I also asked Peter Alwast, a friend and artist, to help with the installation and construction of the sculptural works. This then expanded to include Grant Stevens and Christopher Howlett, both artists who currently live and work in Brisbane.

An important aspect of the exhibition was the accompanying publication titled Every Artist Is an Institution (figure 15) that included an essay “Comeuppance” by artist/writer Clint Doyle (2008). This part-fiction and part-factual biography described what Doyle knew about me, blended with a fictional narrative of his own making. The story in “Comeuppance” was designed to familiarise people with my personal history and practice and my general moral attitude towards the world. Clint’s own narrative describes the pathology of the artist as a heroic and comically tragic figure, a character trapped in a teleological fairy tale. Clint’s story describes my life as a series of misadventures that echoed Kippenberger’s and Beuys’s own quasi-fictional personal narratives (Buchloh 2007, Duve 1988, Kuspit 1995). This fact-spattered fiction demonstrates how the self that we present and the stories we tell about ourselves are always amalgams of fact and fiction (Elinor & Capps, 1996). Importantly, the distinction between what was fact and what was fiction was not as significant as the political and emotional content of the narrative.

Suzanne’s role in I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand The Question was to direct me and manage the video production, including videography and lighting. What became clear in the development of this process was that planning and discussing the project was both important and more challenging than expected. The discussion enabled the work’s ideas to develop a generative momentum of their own, with the clown’s make-up being one example. Suzanne researched clown makeup, and I drew versions of the make-up that were variations of these sourced images. These were then discussed and reworked again for the final design (figures 14, 15).
The direction given by Suzanne encouraged and goaded me to play two distinct comic characters: one dead pan and the other more exaggerated. When reviewing the footage, I saw that I was playing two sides of one conflicted personality.

The nature of the script and its adherence to a formalist dualism meant the editing and compositional decisions were determined by this logic. The split-screen video creates the illusion of playing both characters simultaneously and presents a parody of the interview situation and Cartesian dualism. The character of the interviewer is the metronome for the piece.
and the clown reacts to his mechanical repetition. Out of necessity, I used the footage of the clown to fill in gaps in the sequence, so that the questions and answers would synchronise to simulate dialogue. However, the clown’s responses were occasionally out of sync. These mis-cues, brought about by the editing process, seemed funny, so the glitches were kept.

The suited interviewer makes his propositions in a repetitive mechanical way, which demonstrates Bergson’s idea that people acting in a mechanically repetitive manner can engender comedy (Bergson 2005). The clown’s responses accentuated by the video glitches repeat certain facial expressions, exaggerating the clown’s own mechanical responses. This closely parallels Bergson’s description of the comic properties of mechanistic facial expressions:

One would say that the person’s whole moral life has crystallised into this particular cast of features. This is the reason why a face is all the more comic, the more nearly it suggests to us the idea of some simple mechanical action in which its personality would forever be absorbed. Some faces seem to be always engaged in weeping, others in laughing or whistling, others, again, in eternally blowing an imaginary trumpet, and these are the most comic faces of all (Bergson 2005, 12).

I sympathise with the resistant nature of the clown’s comebacks, which are often not what I believe, are politically incorrect and delivered in a silly voice. The restrictions placed on responding to the propositions are analogous of resistant feelings I have toward the institutionalism that permeates modern life. Many of the clown’s facial expressions mock and, at once, mask my self-reflection. These resistances are central to the process of creating the comic character of the clown.

What I have discovered is that the dual use of my own image (figure 15) can be read as ventriloquism or ecstasis, a state of being beside myself (Goldblatt 1993, 390). I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand the Question demonstrates the idea of the ventriloquial exchange that Goldblatt (1993) describes as being a simulated and externalised dialogue. With this in mind, the dialogue in the video simulates my self-conflict and alienation. Goldblatt states:

Central to my analysis of ventriloquism is the notion of ecstasis, the ancient Greek word designating a being beside itself. I then attempt to apply a concept that grows out of that treatment something I am calling the ventriloquial exchange to an important art-historical idea, the work in progress. The history of art is most often taken to be the history of the finished work: how it is understood, how it moves through the world of galleries and museums. In the context of art world history the prehistory of the finished work, including the work in progress, is usually neglected or devalued. I deal with the idea of a work in progress by drawing an analogy between it and ventriloquial exchange. (Goldblatt 1993, 389)

Goldblatt posits the ventriloquist dummy as a metaphor for the work of art in progress, with which the artist maintains an ongoing and developing dialogue. I am interested in the idea of the artist’s persona and the idea of an individual’s personality as a public proxy for the self. I am also interested in how much this can be consciously understood and controlled and thought of as a type of ongoing work. In this video work, there are three implied subjective roles: David M. Thomas, the author of the work; the interviewer character, who makes the propositions; and the clown character, who reflects on himself through his insolent responses. What I have become increasingly aware of, and discuss in further detail in Chapter 3, is that artists as diverse as
Kippenberger, Mary Lou Pavlovic, Andrea Fraser and Andy Kauffman use the freedom of comic characters to misbehave, to do and say things their authors cannot. In this way, these comic characters provide a context of a certain limited form of freedom. For my work, this demonstration of freedom in the form of insolent resistance is an element that audiences are attracted to.
2.3 Dream Job


Figure 17. David M. Thomas Untitled (video still from Five in One, One in Five) (2011–12) high-definition video projection, 6:48 min, collection of the artist.
Part of the *Expanded Portraits* project, *Dream Job* is an elaborate collage of found ideological material. It is a complex metaphor for the collection, presentation and maintenance of personal beliefs and self-images. *Dream Job* reifies processes of self-construction and expands upon my interest in portraying an ongoing process of considered subjectivity as work.

In *Dream Job*, I consider the artist’s studio as a place where subjectivities are sometimes unconsciously, but often consciously, conjured. In this place of work, I ask formative questions of myself, such as ‘what kind of artist am I?’, ‘what kind of person am I?’, ‘what do I like?’, ‘what kind of thing would an artist like me do?’, ‘what role do I play in the story of art?’ As seen, these questions may, at times, unintentionally mimic modern concern with self-improvement. In turn, the quest for self-improvement is often linked to physical appearance. The artist’s studio can be a place where, among many other actions, these appearances are considered and manufactured, critiqued, and redressed. However, these appearances do not exist purely within this context, nor do they exist hermetically; they are, at least ideally, interconnected and are part of an existing world and art exhibition system. Daniel Buren states ‘the Museum on the one hand and the studio on the other are linked to form the foundation of the same edifice and the same system’ (Buren 2010, 156). I argue that in the studio as much as in the gallery or museum, the artist works equally on their self as on the art object, or project. In this way, the studio provides me with a physical space in which to imagine and enact multiple outcomes for myself.

*Dream Job* continued themes first developed in the exhibition *Every Artist Is an Institution*, discussed above, and resulted in two substantial public exhibitions, the first at Griffith University Art Gallery (GUAG) in 2010 and the second at the National Portrait Gallery of Australia in 2011–12. To focus my discussion, I will direct my investigation to the main video installation that comprised the core of both exhibitions. This suite of videos existed firstly as a synced three-channel video installation that progresses through a 20-minute cycle and secondly as a single channel version of 16.53 minutes. Both works consist of three related video sequences of approximately seven minutes in duration each: the first is titled *One in Five, Five in One*; the second, *Dream Job (Mask Sequence)*; and the third, *Dream Job (Moving Paintings Sequence)*. In both exhibitions, the suite of videos was imbedded into an abstract, geometric painting installation (figures 16, 24 and video sequences 2–3).

*Dream Job* was informed by a range of ideas sourced from a diverse group of media. Some of these were the previously mentioned series *The Century of the Self*, Kippenberger’s untitled self-portrait series from 1988 and Heidegger’s critique of phenomenology presented in *Being and Time*. My reading of Heidegger was directed by research presented by Hubert Dreyfus, Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley (2007). Dreyfus’s work on Heidegger clearly describes his significant reaction against the centrality of a Cartesian subject in German idealist philosophy.
Heidegger replaced the dualism of a reflective subject seeing itself as separate from the world with an integrated and temporal understanding of being immersed in the world (Heidegger 2006, Dreyfus 2009, Seigel 2005). I will not attempt to describe Heidegger’s entire elaborate system of thought; I will, however, describe how certain ideas he originated have become woven into contemporary culture. An important example for my research is seen in the film directed by Hal Ashby, Being There (1980, figure 18), based on the novel of the same name by Jersey Kosinski. Being There can be viewed as allegorical and comical abstraction of Heidegger’s ideas of being, even though this idea is highly abstracted and simplified. Being There is still useful as a metaphor for my discussion of Dream Job.

Figure 18. Hal Ashby (1979) Being There, Video stills, Warner Brothers.

The central character in Being There is Chance, the gardener, played by Peter Sellers. This non-character is unencumbered by personal opinion and void, it would seem, of internal reflection. Indeed, Chance is unburdened by reflective subjectivity. Sellers is well known for being able to play multiple characters, as in Stanley Kubrick’s Dr Strangelove (1968). In contrast to these highly mannered performances, in his role in Being There, Sellers’s performs Chance in a deadpan way. His blankness reinforces the idea of the subject as an empty canvas that is coloured only by worldly involvement. For as long as he can remember, Chance has lived in relative isolation in the house of a wealthy industrialist where he cares for the garden. His only actual human contacts are a housekeeper and his bed-ridden benefactor whose clothing and appearance he eventually assumes. This is the only world Chance knows, other than those he experiences virtually through watching television. Chance’s self-immersion in these televisual worlds demonstrates a dissolving of the membrane that separates actual experience from mediated television events. Chance’s utterances and mannerisms are quotations that he collects from television and repeats. His organising statement ‘I like to watch’ reinforces this. Chance is totally defined by what, how and where he acts, the world he finds himself ‘thrown into’. Chance’s primary world is televisual.
Heidegger attempted to do away with subjective reflection essential for Cartesian thought by focussing on processes of being that are always immersed in worldly phenomena (Dreyfus 2007). The German word ‘Dasein’ can signify either existence or more literally ‘there being’ (Dreyfus 2007, Seigel 2005). Put simply, being is always determined by a significant situation or world.

Ashby proposes in the film Being There that the opportunities for worldly immersion, or what Heidegger refers to as ‘throwness’, have changed since 1927, when Heidegger wrote Being and Time. While at the time, the expansion of cinema and the ubiquitous presence of television had not yet fully occurred, Heidegger did predict new opportunities for being in multiple worlds at once, when he talks of the effects of radio on Dasein’s being. He states,

In Dasein there is an essential tendency towards closeness. All the ways in which we speed things up, as we are more or less compelled to do today, push us on towards the conquest of remoteness. With the ‘radio’ for example, Dasein has so expanded its everyday environment that it has accomplished a de-severance of the ‘world’ a de-severance which, in its meaning for Dasein, cannot yet be visualised. (Heidegger 2006, 140)

For this reason, Chance’s television-watching presents an important allegory for our current immersion in multiple convergent visual worlds. As we now do with any number of electronic devices, Chance quickly switches from one world to another. This channel-surfing is seemingly non-selective and uncritical; he submerges himself in multiple televisual worlds at once. The implication here is that the abundance of electronic worldly immersion makes a singular subjective reflection impossible, maybe even unnecessary.

Chance’s Heideggerian quality is expressed by his sense of teleology, which is determined by the actual world he is thrown into, and the real people he comes into contact with. At the film’s outset, Chance is depicted as inauthentic Dasein that has no direction or project, which would push him into the future at the same time make sense of his past and present. Heidegger asserts that only through a projected and purposeful understanding of one’s finitude—one’s own death—in relation to the past, present and future can one become what he refers to as ‘Authentic Dasein’ (Heidegger 2006). Dasein needs to know and accept its own inevitable death and develop a purposeful project in accord with the end of existence. In its inauthentic state, it denies this (Seigel 2005). The more Chance is immersed in the actual world and is subject to other selves, who project their own aspirations and desires onto his blankness, the more he is imbued with a heroic, authorial trajectory, an ultimate purposefulness.

The film ends with Chance being nominated for the Vice Presidency of the United States of America. This was not the job for Chance, however, who, in the final scene of film, walks on water and disappears into the heavens. The sequence implies that he may be god, the ultimate being, being there; being everywhere, in fact. Ashby and Kosinski critique Heidegger by showing that in all this, Chance at no point sits and thinks, ‘what do I need to do to be the Supreme Being?’ He simply immerses himself as a purposeful simple gardener, with a bodily understanding of temporality of life and it all happens.
What is most significant in this film for thinking about the work *Dream Job* is Chance’s television channel-surfing and his immersion in these multiple worlds, which he stores and refers to later in the actual world. This is retrieved by Chance at critical moments, when he is questioned or interviewed. These moments in the film are highly charged with comic energy. This selective retrieval is the only internal reflection Chance displays. The ambiguous blank delivery that Sellers renders Chance with suspends any immediate understanding of the character’s purpose or direction. The deadpan quality in Sellers delivery is a necessary resistance for this comedic release and is an example of a resistant automatism (Bergson 2005, Critchley 2002) required to evoke the comic character (Zupančič 2006).

**Five in One, One in Five (2010)**

For the sequence *One in Five, Five in One* (2010, figure 17, video 5), a process of ideological collage similar to Chance’s channel-surfing took place. One of my modes of research is to watch, as obsessively as Chance, interviews on the Internet. In viewing these I am essentially looking for artistic, personal and professional direction from other artists, filmmakers, musicians and actors, such as Richard Prince, Werner Herzog, Marlon Brando, Charles Bukowski, Brooke Shields and Iggy Pop. The Dick Cavett Show from the late 1970s is one rich source of interview material, and one used for this project. I am interested in the content of the interviews, and have become increasingly interested in the psychological and physical situation of interviews, including the visual presentation, the sets, the performances of the interviewers and interviewees, their posing and self-presentation. I am not as interested in factual historic accounts of events, as I am in outrageous assertions about deep emotional beliefs.

Another important part of the preparation for this work was watching the American cult film *The Breakfast Club* (1984), written and directed by John Hughes. For *Five in One, One in Five*, I decided to imitate the 1980s-teem-film idiom of *The Breakfast Club*. I saw this film many times as a teenager, and it always had an intense emotional effect on me, since it portrays teenagers in the midst of examining their own self-development as they come into conflict with a dominant institutional ideology. The characters in *The Breakfast Club* represent different character types: athlete, debutant, nerd, weirdo and stoner. These seemed to echo the VALS personality types discovered in my research for *Every Artist Is an Institution*.

A particular situation that struck me in this film happens two-thirds of the way through. The five teenagers meet in a circle in the school’s library. The scene, configured by a circle of confession, is a metaphor for similar group research and therapy situations derived from the self-actualisation movement that became the market-research focus group (Curtis 2002). In his article “The Empty Western Self” (1990), psychologist Philip Cushman describes the crisis of young people in the process of publicly constructing themselves;

The awareness that they are falling short of society’s central expectation is a further
wound to the self-esteem of young adults, increasing the dichotomy between their outward presentation of self and their internal sense of self. This dichotomy exacerbates a characteristic symptom of narcissism, a sense of personal fraudulence described as a "false self" that masks the frightened, hidden "true self" (Masterson, 1981; Miller, 1981; Winnitort, 1965). Thus, even the current dichotomy between expectation and experience appears to be used in service of constructing the empty self. (Cushman 1990, 605)

The kinds of self-questioning that occurs in the scene in the library challenge their pre-existing understandings of themselves. This confrontation, it would seem, creates a collaborative situation to develop a new freer self.

To develop the script for my work, I watched, rerecorded and edited hours of interviews, distilled these to focus on the idea of working in the studio, personal development, self-determination, freedom and the pitfalls of being an artist. These interviews were then edited to electronic music that I had composed at the same time. The music was deliberately composed to evoke the electronic soundtrack made for the original film by Keith Forsey. This largely electronic music composition produced an intense dream like mood in the film. The order of the narrative, as it appears in my sound composition, was then transcribed and used to construct the shooting script.

At this point, I discussed with Suzanne, who directed the sequence, where we should find our actor/subjects. I intended to approach a youth theatre group, because I wanted early teens of the actual age of the people being represented in The Breakfast Club. Suzanne suggested that this would result in noticeably mannered performances. We both wanted the subjects to be themselves rather than perform a character. Martha, Danny, Julian, Olivia and Eddy, the actors in the sequence, were eventually found via friends. Like Peter Sellers as Chance, the young actors in Dream Job, for the most part, deliver their lines in deadpan fashion. But the comedy here does not derive from the deadpan delivery as with Sellers; instead, it surfaces in their resistance to the process of participating in the video. In his essay, "The David M. Thomas Show", Nicholas Chambers pinpoints the effect of these unconscious physical resistances, when he states: ‘As the camera lingers on an actor’s face after the delivery of a line we find an unscripted smirk, a pursing of the lips or a knowingly raised eyebrow which brings the relationship between ‘being’ and performing’ into sharp relief’ (Chambers 2010, 5).

Dream Job (Mask Sequence) (2010)

The series of pitfalls and resistances that lie between being one’s self and performing one’s self are also a condition of my performative video and photographic portraits, including Dream Job (Mask Sequence) (2010) and Empire of the Free Man (2009) (figure 19, video 4).

In 2009, I began making a series of photographic and video self-portraits wearing masks. In Empire of the Free Man (figure 19), my makeshift mask is made from a baseball catcher’s mask, a panel of wood and portrait photographs torn from fashion magazines, such as Marie Claire and Vogue. Some of these staged portraits depict me in the act of crudely forming an effigy
from clay with two pieces of timber. I am posing for the camera not as myself, but as a tragic amalgam, a deliberately failed self-presentation. Nicholas Chambers describes the work as such:

Thomas’ self-portraits are…. almost always, performative. The performances, however, never seem entirely trustworthy and they prise open an awkward zone between our privately acknowledged self and the one we project to the world. His works emphasise the anxieties and ambiguities that exist between perceptions of ‘being’ and ‘performing’ and reveal the self to be unstable, pathetic and, quite often, a laughing stock. (Chambers 2010, 1)

Chambers picks up on the previously mentioned comic space created between the experience one has of being a body and then becoming suddenly visually aware of having a body. The body is perceived in this awareness as a thing that poses and that is objectified. I agree with art critic Craig Owens’s views regarding the nature of posing as an essentially political act of self-creation. He says, ‘The subject poses as an object in order to be a subject’ (Owens 1992, 215).

The idea of appearance and posing is crucial in Dream Job (Mask Sequences). In my videoed and photographed self-portraits, the only physical aspect of myself that is shown is my body—the thingliness of myself. The mask functions to throw the image of my body into tragic relief, contrasting the idealised image of beauty with my ordinary thing like torso. According to
philosopher and social theorist, Alenka Zupančič, tragedy is described by Hegel as an imaginary figurative form of representation; the mask in this situation is not content in itself but pure surface, an interface between performer and character. For the comic character, which is a concrete instance of the ongoing shared movement of the universal absolute, the mask is no longer required (Zupančič 2006). Zupančič states:

With tragedy, we are dealing with real human beings, the actors, who put on their masks and represent the essence with the help of the mask. The self of an individual (the actor) puts on a mask and, with it, puts on the character he is playing. In this way we come to a new mode of representation, which is not narrative (and in this sense figurative, imaginary), but is linked to the Real of the mask itself as the gap or the interval between the actor and the character. The mask as such has no content, it is more like pure surface—or, most literally, it is the inter-face—that separates the self of the actor from his stage character as (represented) essence. When the actor puts on the mask, he is no longer himself; in the mask, he brings to life the (universal) essence he represents. (Zupančič 2006, 179)

In *Dream Job* (*Mask Sequence*), the humour begins with the images that I have chosen to appropriate for the masks, which are, in most cases, images of women who appear as objects of desire. What is left of me when wearing the mask is my body without my face; my body appears as a thing. Strangely a-thing-wearing-a-mask-of-a-model is made to appear as another order of object, one of desire. Chambers expands on this dualism:

In Thomas’ photograph, the face of the artist is replaced with that of the young woman, creating a strange amalgamation two different systems of representation: one in which the image seeks to work on us, to elicit a particularly consumerist sense of desire; and the other in which we are invited to work on the image, to analyse its composition, to decode sets of references and, in doing so, to find the artist. (Chambers 2010, 4)

Chambers alludes here to the way the photographs and sequences depend on an incongruous gap between the banal qualities of my physical image that undercuts the idealised images of the fashion models. Further, in some of the performances, I have projected digital animations over my body, introducing another order of imagery and movement and one that alludes to the television set design, discussed in the following section.

By objectifying myself, the studio space in which I am located becomes a significant component of the series. The artist’s studio is not only utilitarian, a space for making, but is also used here as a philosophical zone of questioning, imagining, constructing and projecting possible subjectivities. A filmic metaphor I have found useful for thinking about these works is found in Martin Scorsese’s 1982 film *The King of Comedy* (figure 20). The basement studio of protagonist Rupert Pupkin (played by Robert De Niro) is a similar site for the projection of subjective and professional transformation. Pupkin, in his makeshift television studio, aspires to become a great artist, literally the ‘King of Comedy’; his studio is used not as place of practice, rehearsal or training but as a space of self re-creation and projection.
Figure 20. Rupert Pupkin’s Studio, film-still from The King of Comedy (1983) © Regency Enterprises, 20th Century Fox.
Dream Job (Moving Paintings)

Figure 21. Francis Picabia Very Rare Picture on the Earth (Très rare tableau sur la terre) (1915) Oil and metallic paint on board, and silver and gold leaf on wood, with artist's painted frame, 125.7 × 97.8 cm, Peggy Guggenheim Foundation, Venice, Italy.
The Dream Job (Moving Paintings sequence) (video 6) presents a liminal digital space that is purely imagined. For the animation, I had in mind a statement from the introduction to Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977). Hegel’s general all-encompassing concern is the historical development and movement of ideas, which he refers to as ‘Begriffe’. In his introduction to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, J. N. Findlay states;

> his concern is always with Begriffe or universal notional shapes that are evinced in fact and history, and with the ways in which these align themselves and lead on to one another, and can in fact ultimately be regarded as distinguishable facets of a single all-inclusive universal concept. (Findlay 1977, vii)

The rectangles, head mandala and set drawings are intended as visual metaphors for an endless aligning and movement of historical ideas and ideological forms. The motion of these animations has an intentionally unending, repetitive and mechanical quality, which demonstrates quite literally metonymical and comic theories. The heads in the animated mandalas are drawn from the thinkers, performers and artists whose aphorisms and interviews I have used for the video script for *One in Five, Five in One*.

As research, I also photographed television sets screening British ‘sketch comedies’, and then animated them. One instance of this was from *The Benny Hill Show* of the 1970s (figure 22). By appropriating then animating these very formal shapes, I was attempting to demonstrate the constant bilateral movement of forms and ideas between discrete worlds. To achieve this, I made paintings and digital drawings from photographs of television sets screening Benny Hill, and then separated these images into figure and ground layers and then computer-animated these elements.

What this also revealed was how the formalism of modern painting, such as Francis Picabia’s *Very Rare Picture on the Earth* (*Très rare tableau sur la terre*) (1915, figure 21), had been absorbed by popular culture as an element of television set design. It amused me that Benny Hill’s comedy was presented inside a stage setting that looked to be painted by Picabia, whose ‘machine’ and ‘mechanomorphic’ paintings were, in themselves, a joke about metonymical and mechanical objectification of human subjects (Rozaitis 1994). In the quote below, Picabia expresses his attitude to the machine image as a metaphor for human qualities:

> The machine has become more than a mere adjunct of life. It is really a part of human life—perhaps the very soul. In seeking forms through which to interpret ideas or by which to expose human characteristics I have come at length upon the form that appears most brilliantly plastic and fraught with symbolism. I have enlisted the machinery of the modern world, and introduced it into my studio…. (Picabia in Camfield, 1979, 77)

Picabia’s drawings and paintings sometimes referred to as Mechanomorphs (1915) are visual demonstrations of Bergson’s theory of the comical representation of people as machines or things; graphically, these works are things standing in for people or human attributes. The machine works present a critical pre-Dada phase in Picabia’s practice (Baker 2001), and are a crucial development for modern art in the use of diagrams as a mode of both visual composition and signification (Baker 2010). The specific mode of titling and inscribing the works further frames them as a system of signification. The particularly poetic combination of symbolic and iconic signs is an important process that alludes to the internal discursive nature of these works;
they were intended to embody discourse, even act as a kind of joke, that elicits not only metaphoric qualities of machine imagery but also the mechanistic qualities of language. Picabia’s engagements with visual metaphor and word play are a direct influence on Kippenberger’s use of visual metonyms and jokes (Kippenberger 2011).

Figure 22. David M. Thomas Untitled (The Benny Hill Show) (2009) research photograph, dimensions variable, collection of the artist.

Figure 23. David M. Thomas Untitled Benny Hill Drawing (2010) digital graphic work, dimensions variable, collection of the artist.
The three video sequences are designed as modular elements that can be configured and reconfigured to suit the exhibition context. For the *Dream Job* installation at GUAG (video 2), three video projectors were synchronised through a computer network to run the sequences simultaneously. I designed this in order to fold the components of conventional narrative, past, present and future in on the one space. To achieve this, the video qualities of these three sequences are intentionally different. *One in Five, Five in One* used a filmic quality made possible through the use of a Canon 5D DSLR with a shallow focus lens that emphasises the figure, while giving the background an out of focus quality. Suzanne Howard directed this sequence with Mark Broadbent as cinematographer.

I videoed the *Dream Job* (*Mask Sequence*) myself, in my home studio, using a Panasonic GF1 digital four-thirds camera. (Both cameras for both sequences demonstrate an advance in the convergent nature of moving and still-image photography.) When researching cameras in 2009, I planned to use this camera primarily for portrait video rather than stills photography. To my surprise, I realised that I could achieve the video quality I wanted from a stills camera. This choice gave me the lens options, and high resolution and definition in the image. Importantly, both cameras used did not intimidate the subject, which helped achieve the intimacy I was striving for in both sequences.
The circular panning and syncing of the sequences created a spinning effect that deliberately echoes the confessional sequence from *The Breakfast Club*. The triple-screen-synced video installation echoes the idea of continuous motion of subjectivity (video 2). The intention of this was to create an immersive video environment, which created a zone of endless contemplation to enable viewers to reflect on their own process of maintaining and constructing subjectivity.

Thus, by combining the three sequences, in both the triple-screen installation and the combined single-channel version of *Dream Job*, I address how subjectivity is a contingent process that responds to the different worlds we all occupy. In the video, these worlds are presented as the artist’s studio, the liminal virtual space, and the institutional world of the classroom. Contrasting the nature of these worlds through the video-editing process creates a particular humour, as the visual nature of one world breaks and contrasts with the next. The soundtrack composed for the works becomes an important amplifier and moderator of these shifts from one world to the next. The overall effect of the musical score and contrasting visual worlds creates a humour that is both immersive and liminal. In this space, I hoped the viewer would imagine his or her own subjectivity as an ongoing process.

In both installations, the deliberately overstated formalism in the animations was echoed by the wall paintings as a way to frame the video screens of the installation (figure 24, video 3). This aspect of the installation was developed further for the National Portrait Gallery installation. I have referred to the paintings as ‘housing estate formalism’. In this case, the wall paintings are abstractions of the projected video frame. My appropriation of these forms that use the diagonal of the triangle emphasises movement in the space and alludes to osmosis of formal ideas from one discreet cultural world to another. Importantly, I did not want to present the videos as a cinematic experience, i.e., where, in a darkened room, the viewer loses their sense of their body in the space. Rather, I wanted them to be aware of the video, themselves and other people as aspects of that space. The wall paintings emphasise the physical aspects of the space, so people’s bodily presence is not negated, but rather their bodily presence becomes part of the exhibition. Their presence in the space activates it.
2.4 Expanded Portraits

David M Thomas  Expanded Portraits 24.6.2011

David M Thomas gratefully acknowledges the support of MAAP Media Bank and Griffith Artworks. This project is part of Free Range 2011 and has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. Images: Awareness of lack (2011) assisted by Elizabeth Willing and Ruth McConchie.

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Figure 25. David M. Thomas Expanded Portrait (2011) promotional poster, digital inkjet print, 60 x 45cm, collection of the artist.
The *Expanded Portraits* developed out of the research and outcomes of the two major works discussed above. The first time I grouped my visual and philosophical research under the one umbrella title was during my participation in the ‘Free Range’ residency at Metro Arts in June 2011. This activity resulted in an exhibition, performances and videoed performance works. Free Range is an annual developmental component of the Metro Arts program where practice-based experimentation and ‘risk taking’ are encouraged. With this in mind, I made works with Howard, Breikers and Moore during the residency period. In this way, the collaboration and making of work was an important performative aspect of the exhibition. The work closely followed my research into Martin Kippenberger’s collaborative process of soliciting agents for the production and discussion of work. This directed collaboration is a means toward expanding the conceptual and physical nature of artwork. Working with these agents was a way of expanding the inter-subjective content of the work and also a means of making the works more engaging. I shall discuss the following works presented in this exhibition: *Awareness of Lack (Ruth, Daniel and Channon)* (2011), *Awareness of Lack (Elizabeth and Stephen)* (2011), *Artists Gamble with Time* (sets) (2011), *Everything Good in this Goddam World* (2011), ∑ggvein, cassette single (2011) *Artists Gamble with Time*, The Sue Brenner theatre performance.

**Awareness of Lack (2011)**

The *Awareness of Lack* project (figures, 26, 27, 28; video 7, 8) focused on soliciting people as agents for and subjects of the work. The process of breaking what I call the alienation barrier, by soliciting people I did not know, was the most challenging and rewarding aspect of this work. The way I broke this invisible barrier was to create the *Awareness of Lack* project as a pretext to ask people to participate, thereby creating a ‘limited province of meaning’ (Schutz 1962) within which to play and discuss art. My interest for this work initially was engagement with people I did not know, who probably shared very similar sets of interests with me. At this time, my studio was located next to an artist project space known as In-between Spaces, which Danielle Cleg and Ruth McConchie, both women in their early twenties, managed. Eventually, I asked them to participate in the work and they both agreed. At this time, I was reading the book chapter, “The Concrete Universal and What Comedy Can Tell us About It”, by Alenka Zupančič and was struck by the following reference to Jacque Lacan’s interpretation of Hegel’s theory of alienation and otherness:

> What can be so traumatic about [encountering] Otherness is its dimension of Sameness. Precisely by being the same, the other is not reducible to the subject. What is at stake here is not the identity of the otherness but the otherness of identity itself. Otherness has its place in the gap that separates or prevents any identity/sameness from coinciding with itself in any immediate way. (Zupančič 2006, 175)

Lacan posits what the other and the subject in fact share is not a sameness (an identity) but a coincidental lack (Zupančič 2006, 175). My similar experience to Ruth’s and Danielle’s of running an artist project like In Between Spaces and the fact that I am a middle-aged man brought this idea of otherness and lack into sharp focus. By coincidence, the objects used to make the sculptural works were the components for IKEA ‘Lack’ coffee tables.
The work consisted of building a sculpture from a set of nominal geometric objects – the Lack coffee table components. The only instruction given to the participants was to make up their own rules and then to modify them if they needed to. I recorded this process on video, which became the object of the work. The process of making the works had unexpected outcomes. Ruth, for example, reported that she enjoyed the freedom of making up her own rules, and that this freedom afforded her endless possible outcomes. Some of the subjects’ activity resulted in recordings of up to half an hour.

In his book *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (1997), Peter Berger describes the comic realm as a 'finite province of meaning', a term that he borrows from Alfred Schutz’s essay “On Multiple Realities” (1962). In this temporary zone, individuals escape the serious actuality of everyday ontological experience. Because of this, they are gifted with a critical perspective on the everyday. In Berger’s description of the zone of the comic he does not explicitly use the term 'mood', but comes close. Berger (1997, 13) describes comic moments as ‘intrusions’ on the ontological experience of the everyday. One can begin to understand *Awareness of Lack* in light of Berger’s analyses of the comic when he refers to Dutch historian Johan Huizinga’s book *Homo Ludens* (1955) that proposes that all human culture has its origins in play. Huizinga connects play to laughter and the comic. ‘Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil’ (Huizinga in Berger 1997, 13).

In addition to the idea of play as a humorous and abstract province of meaning, the videoed performances, when looped, demonstrate endless movement of self-consciousness. What was pleasing when viewing these sequences was that this self-awareness did not appear alienated, because it is suspended in a limited aesthetic activity outside the subject’s own art project or everyday activity. This seemingly meaningless activity becomes a form of play (see figure 26, video 7) and a way of entering an abstract world. The significance of this limited province of meaning became most apparent when I left the camera and two subjects, Liz Willing and Stephen Russell, alone in my studio. The project quickly became a game of skill and an immersive world determined by this activity, the game quickly resulted in both discourse and laughter.

The continuous movement directed towards an abstract formal task is one of the most important attributes of these recordings, as we have already seen for the *Moving Paintings* sequence in the *Dream Job* project. The continuous movement in *Awareness of Lack* is extended to address the sculptural and figurative forms seen constantly changing. Change, driven by individual’s reflection on shifting their own subjective criteria, is a quality that links this work to the way formalist ideas have been incorporated into my previous works.
The resulting video recordings from these works were projected onto rear projection screens built for the gallery space (figures 26, 27, video 8). The deliberate insertion of screens in the gallery was intended to create new spaces. It is common for artists exhibiting at Metro Gallery to install video works by simply projecting them onto existing walls of the gallery. However, the current gallery design is a series of open thoroughfares. Having exhibited in this space before, I had noticed that this quality of the space forced people to simply move through the space, quite quickly and not spend time looking at anything. For these works where the action happens over a extended period of time, it was important to close off these corridors with the projection screens, to create smaller, more intimate spaces (figure 27, video 8).
The screens were also deliberately positioned opposite the Metro Arts administration offices (figure 29), displaying the playful subjective configuration and reconfiguration of these formal objects as work (figures 27, 28). The significance of this juxtaposition was to contrast two worlds of labour: the world of arts administration and the formal aesthetic play of the agents I had solicited. Further, as these videos were looped and ran from early in the morning until late in the evening – beyond the working hours of 10am to 5pm – to the Metro Arts staff, it appeared as if the artists in the video performance were engaged in a never-ending work.

While I presented what appeared to be a video demonstration of the idea of play as work, the Awareness of Lack project was a discussion about how our motives in work might be hidden even from ourselves. My motives for Awareness of Lack, and broadly speaking for much of my practice, are visual, but also equally, professional, philosophical and social. I seek to dissolve feelings of separateness and ask questions such as, what is the difference between activities we call work and the ones we call play? Which might be rephrased as, why do some activities leave you in good mood and others in a bad one? What does it mean to assert that I would rather play than work? These questions are addressed more thoroughly in section 2.6, which discusses A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as a Party (2012).
Figure 28. David M. Thomas *Awareness of Lack (Danielle, Elizabeth and Stephen)* (2011) high-definition synced video projection, rear projection material, dimensions variable, collection of the artist.

Figure 29. David M. Thomas, *Awareness of Lack (Metro Arts Offices)* (2011) video installation still, high-definition synced video projection, rear projection material, dimensions variable, collection of the artist.
Artists Gamble with Time (sets) 2011

Figure 30. David M. Thomas, Joseph Breikers Artists Gamble with Time (Sets) (2011) plywood, acrylic paint and animated video projection, variable dimensions, collection of the artist.

Artists Gamble with Time (Expanded Portrait of Everyone) was initially proposed as the central work for the Free Range residency program. The proposed work was a video portrait where I again solicited agents to perform; in this instance, a script devised from letters to me by a long-time friend who lives in a type of self-imposed exile from mainstream society. The video portrait has not yet been realised to a point of satisfaction, for either myself or the other artists involved in making it. I have accepted this as one of the outcomes of practice – projects do not necessarily work as you expect or on the timeline you expect. However, being engaged in the process of working and making art throws up surprising outcomes as a consequence of collaboration.

The set for Artists Gamble with Time was developed as another pretext; on this occasion, to collaborate with Brisbane-based artist Joseph Breikers, whose interest in comedy and its relationship to art was a motivating factor of the work. This joint work was a reworking of Hans Arp’s Untitled assemblages from 1917 (of which figure 31 is an example). These works seemed to parody painting’s mimetic and formal limitations, dismantling the rules of painting while at the same time sustaining themselves in a place in-between sculpture and painting. The idea for our work was to use these coloured relief layers to produce a type of mobile and modular television
set, the kind one might use in an interview talk show. This concern with the televised interview follows on from *Dream Job* (2010), that used this idea of visual information as a constant movement back and forth between contexts – the art gallery, the television studio, the shopping mall, the housing commission flat and so on.

My collaboration with Breikers tested Kippenberger’s process of deliberately stretching these kinds of co-operative relationships and processes. I was trying to make a work where my ideas were misinterpreted or extended by someone else. When Breikers started to build the works, we both quickly became humorously aware that the sets could not possibly stand up.

![Image Removed for Copyright Purposes](image-removed.png)

Figure 31. Hans Arp *Untitled (Forest)* (1917) painted wood, relief 41.3 x 53 x 8.3cm, collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

When the shapes were attached to the support, they were too top heavy, potentially crushing the performer. Undeterred, Breikers continued to produce the shapes. Breikers designed the shapes by using a game that he had invented when he was younger to create cartoon characters (Breikers, personal communication with the author 2011). He would scribble in an area of the page and then draw around the scribble, creating the form. After the shapes were cut out, Suzanne then realised that they required no additional support, other than each other. What now seems like an obvious fact was, at the time, an economic, poetic and revelatory solution. Liberated from the support the shapes became self-supporting, freestanding sculpture, and importantly for the production of the video they were easily moved. This meant that they functioned in the same way as a conventional television set, that they were easily reconfigured for different scenes in the video.
Figure 32. David M. Thomas *Everything Good in this Goddam World (Joseph)* (2011) still from high-definition video (55 sec), collection of the artist.

Figure 33. David M. Thomas *Untitled (American: The Billy Hicks Story)* (2011), research photograph, dimensions variable, collection of the artist.
The phenomenon of mimetic Internet performance, such as *Techno Viking* (http://technoviking.tv/), directly inspired the video performance work *Everything Good in this Goddamn World* (2011) (Video 9). An Internet meme is a phenomenon that occurs when certain characters or situations inspire people to such an extent that the viewer wants to repeat what they have seen. They restage and inevitably modify what they have seen, while attempting to embody the character of the performer in the original video. In this work, I chose a well-known outburst by comedian Billy Hicks. Hicks specifically interested me because of his highly ideological and very personal stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy interests me because I see it having very similar subjective concerns as those of being an artist.

Hicks performs an extremely convincing self-image to his audience, but only after years spent developing his comic character. Yet, in this particular YouTube video, Hicks does the unthinkable, when, after being heckled by an audience member, he turns on the audience and delivers a tirade of abuse. I appropriated this vitriol for the script, and, taken out of context, it is easy to interpret the monologue as a more general attack on institutionalism; the individual standing against the group. During the course of my exhibition/residency, visitors would perform this appropriated outburst. These performances were videoed and compiled into the final video sequence (video 8). I was surprised to discover that some participants found acting out Hicks’s toxic outburst liberating, even enjoyable. The opportunity to step outside of the obligation to be themselves and be able to play out feelings of frustration and alienation was, for the participants and myself, enjoyable.
Σggvein, Performance + cassette single (2011)
In early 2011, I formed a musical project called Σggvein in collaboration with Magnus O’ Pus (Archie Moore). Our initial aim was to produce a ten-inch EP of original recorded musical compositions composed by Moore and myself. For the Expanded Portrait event, we produced an audiocassette single titled Too Never Feel Alive Again (duration 10 min, edition of 10). Σggvein also performed publically for the first time during the residency. The music reflects our shared interests in rock, punk and electronic music, and the narrative content mythologises Magnus O’ Pus’s biography. I thought it would be appropriate to include this project in the Free Range residency as it also involved subjectivity, solicitation, collaboration and the development of freedom of the individual. The relationship that Archie and I have formed is one that enables shared vulgarity, humour and a sense of possibility. Being in band certainly presents an adolescent teleological fantasy we both share. Specifically, during the residency, we both developed fantasy characters as our band personas. I became David Eggveinien (who later became David Ethix), complete with a borrowed blonde wig to hide my baldness. In becoming Magnus O’Pus, Archie constructed an oversized wig (video 9) that masked his face and parts of his body.

Figure 34. David M. Thomas, Archie Moore (2011) Σggvein cassette single Duration 10 minutes, collection of the artist
The Sue Brenner theatre. 2 X 30 minute performances, mixed media video projection and performance.

After two-and-a-half weeks in the Metro Arts galleries, we moved the exhibition into The Sue Brenner theatre. We had expected to present the works in the traditional setting of the gallery space, where each would be read as a discrete work, connected by the framing effect of the gallery space. However, Metro Arts administration had booked out the gallery space, so we were told we had to present the works in The Sue Brenner theatre. We only had a day to reinstall the works and another day to develop and rehearse our performance/presentation. Initially, we were resistant, but, surprisingly, we discovered that the re-install process gave us a chance to compress the sets from the gallery spaces and to see some of the formal and theoretical relationships in the works more clearly. The performances, although chaotic and under developed, were exciting and certainly would have improved if we had a longer period to work in this space (video 9). Douglas Leonard, writing for *RealTime* magazine describes the performance:
nomenclature doesn’t go far enough to describe a work that was so refreshing and resonantly witty, seamlessly playing off elements of performance, music, photography, painting, installation and video like a form of free style jazz, “in order to explore the construction and maintenance of one’s self”. (Thomas in Leonard 2011, 14)

One of the successful elements of The Sue Brenner theatre performances was the audience participation in performing Hicks’s rant (video 9), Everything Good in This Goddamn World. Every member of the audience was given a script and Suzanne then began reciting it over and over, urging them to participate until they did. From personal experience, I know participating in a situation such as this is often alienating and people are naturally resistant. However, after a short period, audience members began joining in and laughing.

In this situation, and throughout the Free Range residency, I reflected on Bergson’s ideas of the inter-subjective and social nature of humour. Laughter, he asserts, requires a response and seeks its ‘echo’ or validation from the group; ‘However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret free masonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary’ (Bergson 2005, 3). This is where I see a direct relationship between laughter, subjectivity and states of alienation. While developing, constructing and performing these works, I could see humour as an inter-subjective negotiation and laughter acting as a performance indicator that evidenced a zone of agreement and importantly a direct connection with others.

Further, Bergson describes a socially corrective tendency of laughter. This points towards the political function and an important mechanism of humour as a form of control, Bergson describes the social significance of this dynamic:

Laughter, then, does not belong to the province of aesthetics alone, since unconsciously (and even immorally in many particular instances) it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement… And yet there is something aesthetic about it, since the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art. In a word, if a circle be drawn round those actions and dispositions implied in individual or social life – to which their natural consequences bring their own penalties, there remains outside this sphere of emotion and struggle - and within a neutral zone in which man simply exposes himself to man’s curiosity – a certain rigidity of body, mind and character, that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability. This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective. (Bergson 2005, 10)

By positioning the entire audience as Hicks, Moore and myself were left on stage to become the audience; we, in fact, reversed a situation that, for Hicks, was professionally self-destructive and for his audience, deliberately alienating. In this reversal, Hicks’s breakdown, which echoes my feelings of professional alienation, were momentarily redeemed, while the audience, for the most part, enjoyed the function of humour as a communal agreement and participation.
2.5 Present Day Art in Australia

Figure 36. David M. Thomas *Present Day Art in Australia for G.H.* (2012) high-definition video projection (16 min), dimensions variable, collection of the artist. Installation at Peloton Sydney, photo Adrian Gebes.

Figure 37. David M. Thomas. *Present Day Art in Australia (Special Feature)* (2012) high-definition video (7 min), dimensions variable, collection of the artist. Installation at Peloton Sydney, photo Adrian Gebes.
The Expanded Portrait, Present Day Art in Australia for G.H. (aka First Name Basis) (2012, video 10,11), is a digital animation that re-images portrait photographs from the book Present Day Art in Australia (1969), published by Ure Smith publishers of North Sydney. The audio for the work is a series of recordings of students from Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), reading the first-person artist statements from this book as if they were reading their own artist statement (figure 38).

Colleague and friend George Hubbard gave me this book in 2009. The format of the book is very formal: each artist is represented by one portrait photograph, one short biography, one artist statement and one photo documenting an artwork. For my work, I saw the format of the book as a series of resistances. However, each photo was a different style of photographic portrait. It seemed as if the artists themselves had chosen their own image and that this image was a deliberate way for them to communicate information about themselves to the reader. The formal differences between the artworks in the book, which are almost entirely painting, were less dramatic. On arrival at SCA for a research residency, I decided to get students from the college to read the associated artist statements, and then simply superimpose these audio recordings over the images of artists from the book.
My only requirements for soliciting people for this work were they had to be enrolled at SCA and want to participate. I had announced the project after giving an artist talk on my second day of the residency. One student asked if I wanted people who had Australian accents, which was something that had not occurred to me up until then. However, this underlines one restrictive element of the book; since most of the artists in the book are Anglo Saxon Australians, European Australians or Europeans, it is impossible to know if these artists had accents or not.

What was more important, however, was that the students I was attempting to solicit had not yet found their authorial voice, the voice that one develops through repeated worldly, professional involvements. My friend Elizabeth Pulie had begun her PHD at SCA, so I asked her to do one of the interview/readings. Elizabeth chose the statement written by Yvonne Audette. Her reading resonated with confidence and self-assuredness and echoed the image and appearance of the confident looking Audette (figure 39). In this case, Elizabeth’s reading and its congruence with the image was not as engaging as the recordings I made with the younger and less confident students. Their hesitations and slight mis-readings created the resistant effect that I have discussed as a mechanism of the comic (Bergson 2005, 4). Being inexperienced or unsure of what words meant or how to pronounce them created the mechanical resistance or inelasticity that is a function of being a human thing. These verbal resistances were similar to Bergson’s example of a comic character involuntarily tripping in the street (Bergson 2005, 4).

The recording sessions became interview situations, a theme that runs through the Expanded Portraits. In this instance, they were camouflaged under the auspices of producing audio recordings for the video work. What was hidden was my interest in the subjects doing the readings. Over the three weeks of the residency, I completed twenty-four recordings. These interventions usually entailed walking around the studios and introducing myself to people in order to solicit their participation. This then involved a sometimes-lengthy discussion about my work and theirs. While I found the process of initiating contact initially awkward, the discussions that followed were among the most rewarding aspects of the work. The project became a way of spontaneously initiating new relationships with people with a similar interest and professional direction.

The expansive aspect of the work is generated by combining the photographic images with the voices of the SCA students who all, to a varied extent, have a desire to be and think of themselves as artists. Present Day Art in Australia is an Expanded Portrait that demonstrates the epic, tragic and comic situation that is being and thinking of one’s self as an artist in relation to the historical description of art. Juxtaposing the often-heroic nature of the photographic imagery with the, at times, childlike quality of these young voices created a particular humour in this work.
Present Day Art in Australia was significant for my research since it focused the concerns of the project on the relationship between professional practice and self-determination and communication. A common experience for artists and for anyone presented with the task of defining oneself, is communicating what is important to you and what is significant about your work in a 150-word artist statement. Many of the participants could easily identify with this problem. Many also felt that objectively approaching another artist's statement forced them to consider themselves as artists in a fraternity of artists, as I had when Hubbard initially gave me the book. Some found this to be a liberating experience.

Figure 39. David Moore photograph of Yvonne Audette, in Present Day Art in Australia (1969), Ure Smith Sydney, London.
The Expanded Portrait titled Present Day Art in Australia for G.H. (Special Feature) (video 12) was exhibited simultaneously with Present Day Art in Australia for G.H. at Peloton in April 2012, after I had completed my residency. This ‘Special Feature’ video is, as the title suggests, a pastiche of a behind-the-scenes supplement that often accompanies the feature film on a commercial DVD. The bonus material describes how the production was made, opinions of the actors, political situations of the shoot and so on. This material I often find more interesting than the main feature.

Once more because of the portability of the convergent camera and computer technology, I was able to spontaneously record specific personal moments of my experience during the residency. Situations that I found comical were ones where I experienced internal resistances; one example of this was when I was forced to complete a Health and Safety Powerpoint tutorial in the painting department. On other occasions, the resistance came from the external world; sometimes, as I would sit down to write my research thesis, the gardener would, as if on cue, start edging the grassy strip outside my window (video 12). The action of documenting the mundane and often banal everyday parts of an art practice was a way of focussing the video work on the content that almost always gets edited out of the final work. It was also a way of mediating the humour and significant emotional content of the residency. This process has been developed further, as seen in the other special feature videos that accompany my submission and in the final work discussed in the next section.
The installation *A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as a Party* 2012 (figures 41, 42, 43, 44; video 13, 14) synthesised the modes of research explored and developed over the previous four years. This section will conclude this chapter, describing the major outcomes demonstrated by this installation and its related events. In this project, I tested processes of collaboration and humorous interventions with the gallery space in order to invert what I often experience as an alienating situation that is the art exhibition. I wanted to see if I could use the mechanisms of humour to create a discursive situation out of an existing gallery space. I was also testing Heidegger’s related idea of worlds and fields of significance by recreating a world from my past as an *Expanded Portrait* of my subjectivity.

The exhibition presented a physical interpretation of the artist project space CBD gallery that I initiated and ran in the 1990s, as discussed at the beginning of the chapter. In addition, it recreated my subterranean studio that existed underneath that space (figure 42; Video 13, 14). Materials included sea grass matting, hessian covering the ceiling, musical equipment, fluorescent lights, an LED sign and paintings made in the original space. Also included was one day of TV – a twenty-four-hour televisual mixed tape in the basement space, featuring my video sketches for proposed works, CBD video documentation, TV shows and movies that I had
collected that were all related to my research. Some of the films included were David Holzman’s Diary (1967), Being There (1980), The King of Comedy (1982), Being John Malkovich (1999), and I’m Still Here (2010). In addition to the televisual mixed tape, I placed records and books and musical equipment into the space, which visitors would interact with.

These elements worked together to create a site of subjective construction. The studio and gallery space was presented as a place for action and research, not as a representation of self as a singularity in a Cartesian sense. The exhibition functioned as an ontological clearing (Heidegger in Cushman 1990), in this case, two physically and conceptually connected spaces. To achieve these clearings, my collaborators and I physically divided the Boxcopy space horizontally by building a false floor/ceiling. The bottom space was filled, the space above empty; the former dark and the latter painfully bright. Connecting the space were three holes in the ceiling (figures 41, 43, 44) that the viewer could pass through when standing straight up. Moving through the spaces, one found it possible to be in both spaces at once, being in one place and somewhere else simultaneously. The only object in the ‘gallery space’, the LED sign, echoed the minimal singularity of many of the exhibitions held at CBD in the 1990s. The message on the sign stated mechanically ‘I am the shit’ one moment and as the ‘the’ blinked on and off, ‘I am shit’ the next (videos 13, 14).

Responding directly to my exhibition, artist and academic Grant Stevens wrote:

The question of how and when an artwork transitions form studio to gallery – from the safe, dimly lit, unfettered creative space, to the alienating, bright white ‘nowhere to hide’ space of public presentation – is analogous to how subjectivity manifests. Clearly for Thomas, this process of transition isn’t always straightforward or glamorous. Importantly however, by actively acknowledging and engaging with this threshold Thomas located a humorous and liberating agency in what can otherwise be a creatively and socially debilitating activity. (Stevens 2012, 2)

The dual spaces were also intended as a metaphor for telepresence, the type of being one may experience on the Internet – being between worlds. Telepresence positions subjectivity between a physical and an electronic space in a liminal risk-free interstice of being nowhere and everywhere at once (Dreyfus 2009). In order to emphasise the difference between these two worlds, raw fabrics and physical objects of the basement contrasted with the electric LED sign and neon of the empty gallery above. I deliberately undermined the metaphor by making the floor of the upstairs gallery out of 3mm wood panelling, which meant that the upper level could only be walked on at visitor’s own risk, which was clearly not advised.

Curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s influential essay, “Relational Aesthetics” begins with a chapter heading, “The Work of Art as Social Interstice”. Bourriaud borrows the word and idea of the interstice from Karl Marx, who explains the particularities of this kind of space as follows:

An interstice is a space in social relations, which although it fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system. (Marx in Bourriaud 2008, 161)

The interstice is similar to Schutz’s (1945) idea of comic play as a ‘limited province of meaning’;
the interstice is a space within, or between, social spaces as is Schutz’s province. The studio space I made at Boxcopy was both an interstice and a limited province of meaning; physically, it created a new space between the floor and ceiling of the given space, and conceptually, it provided a context for discursive social activity. The studio space I created is presented also as a gap between work and play, which is again a metaphor for the way our electronic leisure time is mapped, and becomes somebody else’s research, a hidden and alienated labour. There is an idea in this show that reflects what P.J. Rey discussed in her article “Alienation, Exploitation, and Social Media”, that directly relates to a Marxist notion of alienated labour;

Production is increasingly enacted at sites of consumption, and consumption is increasingly being made productive. In fact, when it comes to digitally mediated activity, virtually everything we do can accurately be described as prosumption (Rey 2012, 400)

The paradigmatic example of the prosumption of digital information is Facebook, where users simultaneously produce and consume a variety of information: profiles, status updates, photos, ‘likes’ and other clicks, streaming media, wall and direct conversations, and so on (Rey 2012, 400). Rey gives a description of Marx’s well known theory of alienated labour, that for me strangely echoes my emotional state when on Facebook, Rey quotes directly from Marx, stating:

the worker does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind… His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague. (Marx in Rey 2012, 30)

The conflation of work and play that I refer to in the exhibition’s title relates to this phenomenon of recreation time spent on the Internet being a type of alienated labour, camouflaged as unwitting market research. Through social expectation of maintaining a perpetual good mood, we are corralled to participate in the never-ending stream of comments, profile updates and making and gathering ‘likes’. More significantly than this, it is an experience of not being there, a distancing or alienation from actual life.

I was aware when planning this ambitious work that the substantial modification to the space and related opening and closing events could only happen with the help of multiple agent collaborators. The decision to work once more with groups of people was not only to help construct the installation, it was also to develop a complex approach to the work. These agent/collaborators were Joseph Breikers, Stephen Russell, the writer/curator Naomi Evans and the members of the (now expanded) band Σgg\ein who performed at the closing event, Magnus O’ Pus (Archie Moore) Rand M. Strange (Paul Wrigley) and D. Wight Yokum (Geoffrey Vagg) (video 14).

Because of the physical work involved in modifying the gallery space, I had decided to divide my artist fee of $1500 three ways between Breikers, Russell and myself. Artist and writer Grant Stevens discusses this aspect of the work;
Far from the utopic coming together of equals, Karl Marx taught us long ago that payment introduces an imbalance in power relations. The younger collaborators are therefore interlocutors and labourers, active contributors and subjugated workers. It’s a paradox willingly entered into by Thomas (and his collaborators) as a means of circumventing the often-unpleasant feelings that inevitably emerge from imbalanced group activity (inevitable in this instance because the exhibition is attributed first and foremost to Thomas). Perhaps more importantly, it is also another signal that for Thomas, the making of artworks, exhibitions and subjectivities are convoluted processes that always necessarily involve other, external protagonists. One might as well be upfront about it and pay the protagonists for their contributions. (Stevens, 2012, 2)

Because of the number of meetings Breikers, Russell and I had, this strangely felt like I was paying them to be my friends, as Kippenberger seemed to do with Michael Krebber and Merlin Carpenter (Kippenberger 2011). I was also paying them to alleviate the alienating aspects of making work and exposing my process of public subjectivity to the audience. The directed collaboration was successful in this aspect of the work, in dissolving my own resistances in a communicative and collaborative public action (Habermas, 1990).

This installation masquerading as a party was activated and most effective at the opening and closing events. These events brought people together differently than at other Boxcopy opening events (video 14). Because of the physical modifications made to the space, my design forced people to sit on the floor, to converse with each other. The closing event involved a live music performance by Σgg√ein. The expansion of Σgg√ein to include a rhythm section meant that rather than a project that consisted of writing and recording, it became a performing group, a transformation that was metaphorically like moving from a collaborative painting project to a sculptural one. This again echoed activity that occurred in the CBD space, where the improvisational group I was involved with, Ovine Yonie, rehearsed and played. During the opening-night performance, the three holes in the ceiling were used for the three standing members of the group, with the audience seated on the floor around us, adding to the communal atmosphere of the performance.

The performative nature of the opening and closing events was an echo of the development phase of the exhibition that involved multiple meetings with the various groups involved. I met with the managers of Boxcopy, Rachael Haynes and Anastasia Booth, with my production team and rehearsed with Σgg√ein, over a span of six months. Later, I thought I should be videoing these meetings to see how the show was developing, in terms of the way I was performing it as a narrative.

By the time I had realised that I should have videoed or recorded all the meetings, all there was left to document was the installation process and performance rehearsals (video 13). This was where much of the humour resided; as Stevens states

Thomas deliberately recoups the activities around art making that are sometimes written out of an artist’s practice. Whether it is being involved in an artist-run initiative, a band, or a more loosely aligned social grouping, Thomas acknowledges that these peripheral activities are precisely what constitute an engaged and engaging art practice. (Stevens 2012, 2)
What Stevens aptly describes here is the maxim that work is in fact the work and, as with humour, work is always an activity that is in the process of becoming objectified.

I recall that immediately after the exhibition had ended, I felt loneliness because I had no one to talk to. I thought to myself, this is how Kippenberger must have felt after every big exhibition or event – lonely, with no one left to tell his story to, the title of one of his exhibitions ringing in his ears *The Applause Simply Dies (1987)*. Thus, unlike Bourriaud’s assertions in the 1990s, I am not sure that ‘Collaboration is (always) the answer’ (Bourriaud in Foster 2008). What I thought would make for less work – through the delegation of labour and the sharing of thoughts and their development with groups of participants – actually made for much more work. Rather than turn my work into play, my social activity became frantic, multi-layered labour.

By creating a place from my past in the present, I had hoped to objectify something about my potential future. This was also a demonstration of Heidegger’s idea of the ecstatic temporal state of Dasien – that, ‘at any given moment Dasein is what it is, what it has been, and what may potentially become. Because Dasein always exists in these three moments at once, it inhabits a special kind of time’ (Heidegger in Seigel 2009, 571). Because of this ability, Dasein has to project itself across this primordial temporal spectrum. It has the ability to be outside itself; Heidegger, like Goldblatt (1993), refers to this as ecstasies, a state of being beside the self.

As discussed above, the studio/gallery space is, for me, sometimes like Rupert Pupkin’s basement studio space in Martin Scorsese’s film *The King of Comedy* (figure 23). The basement space is a pathological space for both temporal as well as teleological projection concerned with subjective and professional improvement. Curiously, as will be seen in my subsequent discussion of Kippenberger’s *Peter* works and *The Happy Ending to Franz Kafka’s Amerika*, the ontological aspirations encountered in the studio and the artist’s dialogue with the work in progress connects to a ventriloqual and ecstatic experience of the work’s performance in the art museum or gallery. For *A Part Disguised as Work, or Work disguised as a Party*, I intended to address this idea of the studio as a clearing set aside for self-construction and the art gallery as a site for personal confession, reflection and mediation. I partially agree with artist Gabriel Orozco when he remarks, ‘I take the word “studio” literally…not as a space of production but as a time of knowledge’ (Orozco in Foster 2008, 192). My only adjustment would be to add that the studio must be both a space and time for the production of knowledge.

Figure 42. David M. Thomas *Untitled (Kyle and Cameron, CBD Basement Studio Sydney)* (1998) colour photograph, 30 x 15cm, collection of the artist.
Figure 43. David M. Thomas *A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as A Party (CBD Gallery)* (2012), mixed media, dimensions variable, collection of the artist. Installation at Boxcopy Brisbane.

Figure 44. David M. Thomas *A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as a Party (Basement Studio)* (2012), mixed media dimensions variable, collection of the artist. Installation at Boxcopy, Brisbane.
Chapter 3: Subjective Transformation and Generative Trans-studio Practice

3.1 Kippenberger’s Joke about the Self

In this chapter, I will shift the focus from my own work to that of Martin Kippenberger, because his work, like mine often engages with notions of the self and institutional humour. Kippenberger’s self-proxies performed his comedy about the pitfalls of being an artist as well as a known personality. His famous maxim ‘Every Artist Is a Person’ inverts Werner Herzog’s belief that fame and the processes of being an artist inevitably entails a performance of the artist as a public clown (Blank 1980). These professional and private performances are ones I have reflected on and demonstrated in my research above.

The comedic performances Kippenberger’s art often enacts are part of an ongoing ventriloquist’s dialogue between makers, works and viewers. He performed his joke about the self as different comic characters, such as the travelling salesman, the drunken big mouth or the lonely studio inmate. These characters played their own roles and took on lives of their own; they are also seen in his self-portrait paintings such as Uno di voi, un tedesco in Firenze (One of You, a German in Florence) (1976-77) discussed in Chapter 3.5, as well as being objectified in the works collectively known as the Peter sculptures (Diederichsen 2009) discussed in Chapter 3.6.

A key interest for my practice that is mapped by Kippenberger’s work, is his interest in humour as a particular mood or state of being that can be evoked by artwork. As art historian Rudolf Schmitz states:

He ruined solemn moods in a knowing and critical way and increased the spread of obsolescence in contemporary art, this demonstrating that he only studied the rules in order to rewrite them immediately. (Schmitz 1999, 69)

Kippenberger's self-performance and the relationship between artist and artwork was often presented through self-effacing humour as criticism of the philosophical idea of the self (Gingeras 2004). Kippenberger’s interest in the idea of the artist’s self was motivated by a very personal belief that he was born an artist and was therefore different from other people (Diederichsen 2009). However serious Kippenberger was about his life and work, his practice of clowning often worked against him, in Germany in particular, preventing critical discussion of his work (Kippenberger, 2011). This institutional denial, resulted in frustration that would become comic material and the required resistance for his highly comic character (Kippenberger 2011). He would contrast his own failure to fulfil these artistic ambitions and personal beliefs with images of heroic artistic figures. The effect of contrasting these images with his own would, on many occasions, portray Kippenberger not as a genius, but as a drunken and lonely individual; a deeply flawed but sadly comic being.
Kippenberger’s joke about selves and their maintenance sometimes exploited his colleagues and their role as characters in a field of art practice (Kippenberger 2011). The focus of his comedy was often the limiting conventions and the resistant qualities of artists and art institutions (Diederichsen 2009; Kippenberger 2011). What seems always present in his various works is a performance of a public self-character. In order to deal with the sometimes-lonesome nature of this self-performance, Kippenberger would cultivate relationships with other artists who would assist him with his cottage industry of exhibitionism and personal myth making. Schmitz (1999, 69) describes Kippenberger’s method of working with his art labour force as ‘rigid systematism’ rather than the anything-goes approach it may have sometimes appeared as being. This exhibitionism would result in events that were both self-effacingly referential and engagingly inter-subjective.

Humour for artists such as Kippenberger was not, as I have already to some extent argued, simply a discursive tool or a means to gain the audience’s attention. Humour is also both an ideological and philosophical space (Critchley 2002), in which the individual – in this case, the artist – asks the group to agree with their ideas about perceived worldly phenomena (Bergson 2005), If the artist succeeds, then they have created understanding; a shared solidarity with that group. How does one develop an understanding about themselves, or even more abstractly, about a shared idea of what a self is with others? How can one form an understanding about something one cannot look at objectively? For Kippenberger, this project of the self is both artistically and phenomenologically amusing; ‘I think therefore I am’, but who is this ‘I’ that thinks? (Sartre 1973) Is he/she the ‘I’ that is? And, if both ‘I’s’ are identical, how could they both perceive and understand each other simultaneously? If they could, what would their conversation be like?

Kippenberger’s method of circumventing some of these practical problems for considering one’s self was through his professional relationships with others; agents, dealers, writers, assistants and collaborators (Schmitz 1999). These interactions were often mediated by jokes that generated and amplified misunderstandings about the production and the content of works (Kippenberger 2011; Diederichsen 2009). An important and easily overlooked aspect of his methodology is that this discursive activity is directly related to a desire to short-circuit alienated states of art-making. This is a particular aspect of Kippenberger’s practice I clearly identify with, as I have demonstrated in my own works described above. Kippenberger humiliates the mythology of the heroic and isolated practitioner. His humorous inter-subjective strategies for dealing with alienation are subversive and critical tools that directly address this mythology. In her excellent essay, “The Concrete Universal and what Comedy Can Tell Us about It” (2006) and her book The Odd One In: On Comedy (2008), Alenka Zupančič discusses different uses for humour that result in opposing outcomes. Certain modes of humour support and reinforce the dominant ideology, while others confront, challenge and even transform it (Zupančič 2006). What Kippenberger’s and my work subvert is the idea of singularity and autonomy of artists and selves, and the lingering belief in this modern art myth for both art and individuals.
3.2 Lifework

After quitting art school in Hamburg in 1976, Kippenberger wanted to become a movie star. He dressed like Helmet Berger, one of his idols, and moved to Florence, where he would make his first major self-portrait work *Uno di voi, un tedesco in Firenze* (One of You a German in Florence, 1976–77). With his dream of movie stardom unfulfilled (Kippenberger 2011), he self-consciously assumed the role of the professional commercial artist, a part he had already written for himself as an adolescent. (Kippenberger, 2011) However, throughout his life, he sought to escape the confinement of this limited role through a professional strategy that manically imitated the institutions of art, pop music and the cinema. Importantly, he did this not simply as part of a localised art community in Hamburg, Cologne or Berlin, but through his highly mobile international art project. His multi-layered practice was unavoidably filtered through his teleological reframing of biography, self-performance and humour (Baumann 2006, Diederichsen 2008, Kippenberger 2011).

Kippenberger’s conflation of life and work was an in-joke about artists becoming alienated from their work. As a model of this Joseph Beuys humorously confronted the separation of life from work in his biographical text *Life Course/Work Course* (1964–70). Beuys and Kippenberger used alienated labour as raw material for their particular biographical comedies. Kippenberger’s Peter sculptures, as I discuss later in section 3.6, sought to address a tacit understanding of the separation of life from work, artist from artwork, subject from object. These shared understandings also depend on an existing institutional and phenomenological world: the world of art, artists and institutions. Kippenberger’s approach to life and work seemed to further consolidate Beuys’s antidote to Marxist alienation of life from work, to bring them together, to make them the same thing.

Kippenberger’s lifework was obsessively self-published as evidence of an artist’s life. Exhibition collateral worked as a purposefully driven, expanding and absurd fictional narrative (Diederichsen 2009; Kippenberger 2011, 104), as evidenced by the forty-three catalogues and monographs he published during his quite short life and career. He made deliberate use of documentation of artwork and personal photographs and combined these discrete materials to form the one narrative. In publications such as *Al Vostro Serviso* (At Your Service), published in 1977, he presented the kind of comic character discussed in section 3.4 “The Comic Character a Work in Progress”, pictured and narrated in the third person. Kippenberger’s professional comic character and his career history was comically described in *Life and Work*, his own fictitious CV, which appears in the Taschen monograph *Kippenberger: Ten Years After* (1991).

*Martin Kippenberger Life and Work* (1991) was written in a similar way to Beuys’s *Life Course/Work Course*. This narrative incorporates embarrassing everyday occurrences such as: ‘1969 Fired from his Job for taking drugs. Trip to Scandinavia’ (Kippenberger 1991, 150). Like Beuys, Kippenberger’s *Life and Work* appropriates the institutional frame
by using the resume as a means to build and control his personal and professional narrative. Kippenberger also levels the significance of art events and life events by including both in the same listing. Unlike Beuys, the language Kippenberger uses is deadpan and direct; it describes both his successes and his embarrassing failures, suggesting their equivalent significance for his education and career. For Beuys and Kippenberger alike, this was a program of combining everyday life into art and art into everyday life. Kippenberger expands upon this attitude:

Observations are the basis for being noticed, things about an artist that can make people cry. And that's the point: to once achieve this! To see the things one sees in the street in another way. And! Very important! It can't be didactic! That's the special trick about it: … to achieve this you must make your own life the basis! And you have to get yourself there for once. (Kippenberger in Koether 1998, 81)

The failures and sad observations of the everyday that Kippenberger makes in these narratives are a means of mythically building his public clown character.

Kippenberger's art practice began with an informal art education as a child in Essen and later a formal art education in Hamburg at the Hochschule fur Bildende Kunste from 1972-1976 (Zdenek 1999, 65). His father Gerd was an enthusiastic amateur artist, who, even during his time as a German soldier in the Second World War, was able to entertain himself by making art.

It sounds as though the only thing he did during the whole war was art: Diary sketches, landscape pictures, illustrations: invented scenes, real events, horses, people, caricatures village idylls, Hungarian scenes, transferring ordnance maps onto three dimensional sand table models, and whittling with a pocket knife while a prisoner between May and July 1945. (Kippenberger 2011, 25)

Susanne Kippenberger, Martin's sister, describes how the conflation of life and art began in their childhood with the manic whirl of creative activity and celebration generated by their father. Their life was all recorded 'in pictures, home movies, photos…. our life was turned into art' (Kippenberger, 2011 59). Further, it seems plausible that Kippenberger's use of the everyday and banal in his art stems directly from his father who, in his first book, The Kippenberger Museum (n.d) a single print-run edition, posited the family apartment as a museum with everyday objects such as 'the sink and coffee pot and furniture…described as works of art' (Kippenberger, 2011, 63).

When Kippenberger lived in Hamburg, he too connected his domestic world with the world of art. 'Here Martin did for the first time what he had been groping toward in our house in Essen-Frillendorf…he turned his home into an exhibition space, an art space', Susanne writes (Kippenberger 2011, 114). Two shows took place there in 1977: Chimerical Pictures and then Al Vostro Sevizio (At Your Service), discussed above. Significantly, this activity is very much like my own involvement with artist project spaces discussed above in sections 2.1 and 2.6.
Kippenberger struggled with institutions all his life. Susanne notes, 'He would always be on battle footing with institutions, whether art schools, hospitals or museums. He had something against fixed walls, narrow limits, hierarchy and authority' (Kippenberger 2011, 72). As a strategy to combat his alienation from the institutionalised world of art, he became his own institution, in various incarnations through his career. In Berlin, Kippenberger wanted to be in charge of his life and his work, and on 20 May 1978, he opened the Buro Kippenberger (Kippenberger Office) (Kippenberger 2011, 148).

Journalist Werner Lange, describes Kippenberger's Office:

on the seventh floor of a 1920s high rise, is used as a store room, roller-skating rink, editorial head quarters, dance hall, and garage for mopeds, an all-purpose room so to speak, and the sharp young Mr. Kippenberger is there as the all round multipurpose manager. Now, to fill the long dreary walls with some life, he has turned it into a gallery too. (Lange in Kippenberger 2011, 149)

Throughout his life, Kippenberger used this strategy of becoming the institution to combat alienation and broaden opportunities for his practice in other countries. In Los Angeles in 1993, when Kippenberger felt ostracised from the glamorous Hollywood set whom he admired and desired to be part of, he set up his own restaurant, named ‘Capri’ where he was able to guarantee that he would ‘have decent spaghetti Bolognese’ (Baker 2009, 146). Baker also describes how ‘Kippenberger had the restaurant entrance arranged so that if he stood in a particular spot, no one who entered or left could possibly avoid speaking with him. He had to be confronted’ (Baker 2009, 146). Living in self imposed exile on the Greek Island of Syros, Kippenberger created his MOMAS (Museum of Modern Art, Syros) as a way to elevate himself and at the same time undermine the perceived all powerful status of museum curator. It was Kippenberger’s statement against the “globalized art business” (Kippenberger, 2011, 439). MOMAS was in actuality a partially destroyed building that Kippenberger appropriated and managed art projects by friends, including works of Hubert Kiecol, Ulrich Strothjohann, Christopher Wool, Cosima von Bonin, Stephen Prina, Christopher Williams, Michel Majerus, Johannes Wohnseifer and Heimo Zobernig (Lee 2008, 211).

In Berlin, Kippenberger also initiated and experimented with modes of inter-subjective self-promotion that would further develop into a full-blown career strategy. The Buro Kippenberger and the Punk music club S.O. 36, which he also helped manage (Bauman 1998, 62) were public stages for Kippenberger and ones he would have considerable control over. His twenty-fifth birthday at S.O. 36 (Kippenberger 2011, 167) was accompanied by a monograph, ¼ of a Century Kippenberger from Impression to Expression (1978), printed by Verlag Pikasso’s Erben (Picasso’s Heirs Press). Events such as these confirmed Kippenberger’s presence as a public figure – as simply “Kippenberger” (Diederichsen 2008).
These social-life activities would later become the biographical material for publications, recordings, paintings, sculptures and Installations, exhibited in the commercial galleries of Cologne in the 1980s. One art critic asked Kippenberger what all this inter subjective/social activity had to do with art, to which he answered ‘Being young, being where it’s at. Everywhere it’s at, what it has to do with art? Dunno’ (Kippenberger 2011, 181).

At Buro Kippenberger, Kippenberger would also develop strategies of organising others to do work for him and of collecting other artists’ work as well as interesting people. These were important methodologies for later industrialised endeavours. Art Historian Thomas Krens describes in the catalogue to the exhibition by Refigured Painting: The German Image (1989); 1978 establishes Kippenberger’s Buro in Berlin an Office for consulting, advertising and the selling of art, and stops painting. Although Kippenberger refuses to paint he generates themes and ideas for conceptual artworks, which are completed, to his instructions by another artist…Kippenberger is an important person in the cultural scene of Berlin at this time. He has the ability to bring people and ideas together. (Krens 1989, 268)

Kippenberger is first exposed to a directed form of collaboration in Hamburg through his relationship with Sigmar Polke whom he described as ‘The great artist of the seventies’ (Kippenberger in Kippenberger 2011, 103-104). Kippenberger experienced first-hand the
idea of soliciting agents to undertake work when Polke tasked him, while on an excursion

to Berlin, to ‘take photographs of drunk people’ (Kippenberger 2011, 103). The images, of
course, came from Kippenberger’s own life experience. One image taken shows
Kippenberger, the drunken clown, with his pants around his ankles and Polke in the
background with his pants unbuttoned. The images, themselves taken by Andreas Zust in
a Berlin bar, depict Kippenberger and Polke together, enjoying the company of their fellow
revellers. The marked image (figure 46) is used in the poster, ¼ of a Century of
Kippenberger, mentioned above (Kippenberger 2011, 103) (figure 47).
Figure 46. Andreas Zust Sigmar Polke & Martin Kippenberger (Berlin) (1978), contact prints, 42 x 30cm, estate of Andreas Zust, Zurich.
Kippenberger would use this kind of networking to increase the industrial scale and quantity of work he produced. Inter-subjective networking would also affect the material complexity, conceptual depth and, most importantly, the ability to deal with the idea of Kippenberger as others saw him (Diederichsen 2008). He describes the process of working with assistants and collaborators: ‘Normally I begin my productions “frank pious, cheerful, free” – or it’s determined in part by what my assistants add to “my production”. They work on “my view”, controlled, but with their own means and talents. (Kippenberger in Koether 1991, 313).

For example, Berlin in the 1980s was the location of a gestural expressive painting revival through the Moritzplatz painters (Kippengerer 2011, 201). To distinguish himself from them, Kippenberger hired a film poster painter named simply Werner to paint for him. His new works were large, almost industrial, in scale – 240 x 300cm – deeply subjective and painted in a way that negated the gestural and expressive qualities of the Moritzplatz Painters. Not painting these works himself was also a way of circumventing the residual prohibition on painting of the time.
Figure 48. Martin Kippenberger **Untitled** (from the series *Lieber Maler, malemir/Dear Painter Paint for me*) (1981) oil on canvas, 300 x 200cm, Adam and Lenore Sender collection.
The works were included in the exhibition Lieber Maler, malemir (Dear Painter Paint for Me) (1981, figure 48) Diedrich Diederichsen describes this work as;

a pointedly non-naive conceptual work that at the same time expressed the greatest enthusiasm for naiveté, simplification and sentimentality. What underlay it was the deepest, but also the most cheerful, mistrust of the artist-subject. (Diederichsen in Kippenberger 2011, 201)

When Kippenberger shut his Berlin office and moved to Cologne in 1983 he would refine and focus many of the inter-subjective and self-promotional qualities he began developing in Hamburg and Berlin. From the end of the 1970s, Cologne was going through a cultural and economic rebirth. Daniel Birnbaum describes this ferment in his article, “Ripening on the Rhine: The Cologne Art World of the 80s” (2003).

Artists began to move to Cologne from all over Germany, and with them came new galleries. This industrial town on the Rhine, with roughly a million inhabitants, emerged as not only the art capital of West Germany but the world’s most important city for contemporary art outside New York. (Birnbaum 2003, 56)

The Cologne scene was intensely competitive. It included artists from the First Generation of New German expressive painting, including the Morizplatz Painters and the Mulheimer Freiheit artists who had been practicing for a slightly longer period than Kippenberger and his contemporaries. The Hetzler group was essentially a drinking club that included Kippenberger, Markus and Albert Oehlen, Werner Buttnar and Georg Herold. They would engage in impromptu drunken rituals that included group sing-alongs at exhibition openings (Kippenberger 2011, 171). Vienna gallerist Peter Pakesch observed that Kippenberger in his ‘double role as strategist and clown’ defined and drove the Hetzler group to prominence. (Kippenberger, 2011, 247).

Provocative and polarising humour bound the group together. Max Hetzler is quoted: ‘For the first time artist and galleries saw themselves as each others competitors. You had to assert yourself, define yourself, stand out’. (Kippenberger, 2011, 245)

Kippenberger and the Hetzler’s Boys’ extreme approach drew its critics, among them German art historian Heinrich Klotz (1989). In the exhibition catalogue Refigured Painting: The German Figure 1960–88 (1989), Klotz disparagingly refers to the group as “Hamburg Artists”. He criticises their vulgarity and bad taste, citing their use of Swastikas and Albert Oehlen’s self-portrait as Adolf Hitler as evidence of their insensitive depiction of German history. Klotz is irritated by the Hetzler group’s perceived acceptance of art’s inability to change the social political ideology, and their shared lack of interest in acting as a mechanism for social improvement, even at the level of good or bad taste.

Similarly in Cologne he also orchestrated the artist group, the Lord Jim Lodge, an expanded drinking club that included both German and international members. The lodge founded by Jörg Schlick and including artists such as Albert and Marcus Oehlen and Wolfgang Bauer affirmed this sense of not just ‘belonging to’ the world of art, but belonging to an even more
elite club inside this world. The official slogan of the group is ‘Keiner Hilft Keinem’ (Nobody Helps Nobody), that sometimes appears in Kippenberger’s paintings and graphic works in the form of the acronym ‘K.H.K.’ (or N.H.N.) (Williams 2003).

Kippenberger’s approach to art and his desire to be centre stage drew criticism all his life. He was pilloried for his extreme antics as the boorish drunken clown. During his life, art, social activity and bad investments consumed Kippenberger’s finances. His alcoholism coupled with an unstoppable drive to work took their toll on his health. Towards the end of Kippenberger’s life, his sister Susanne recounts a conversation that Kippenberger had with a friend, where he stated that the inter-subjective conflation of art and life ‘had ruined him by giving him the idea of turning his own life into art, “throwing one’s physical bodily existence onto the scales. We had to, back then, at the price of destroying our selves”’ (Kippenberger in Kippenberger 2011, 104).

The relationship between work life and everyday life is a theme that underscores Kippenberger’s practice and use of humour. This is also a dynamic that is reflected in my research, where my art practice is sometimes perceived by me as a way of avoiding the alienating effects of work, but becomes in a practical sense a means of transforming everything I do into work. This problem was demonstrated in my project A Party Disguised Work, or Work Disguised as a Party, where I found a way to work all the time, which is another danger of combining art and life – of ‘throwing ones body on the scales’, as Kippenberger describes it. I think this statement has a particular contemporary resonance and one that may describe a current problem with convergent communication technologies. These electronic devices and spaces give us all a portable and therefore inescapable workspace. For my practice, the question has become, how to attain a sustainable life/work equilibrium?
3.3 Being There, Not Being There: How Humour Confronts Self-Examination and Alienation

A key point for my research is the idea that humour has a direct effect and reliance on the phenomenon of subjective alienation. As evidenced in the preceding chapters, perceiving oneself and other selves as things is one source of humour. However, as already stated, seeing oneself and others as things and not complex processes of ongoing subjectivity is also a primary source of alienation (Hegel 1977; Sartre 1973; Singer 2001). With this in mind, I am concerned with the alienated experiences of individuals in public places, such as art galleries and art museums, just as I am increasingly interested in the alienating affects of electronic disembodied spaces like the Internet.

In contemporary art galleries and museums, one may often feel the work they experience as an overarching situation or mood. This mood, I have already established, is closely associated with an etymology of humour, and, because the gallery or museum visitor feels excluded from the understanding of the group that creates this mood, they may feel in turn excluded from the experience.

In “Alienation, Exploitation, and Social Media” (2012), P.J. Rey describes a contemporary electronic environment that has splintered to create new layers of subjective alienation:

> The circumstances in which we presently find ourselves are not simply characterized by an abundance of material goods (and the distinct processes of production and consumption that surround them); instead, our time is defined, first and foremost, by an abundance of digital information. (Rey 2012, 400)

In addition to the abundance of information about the world(s) one might project oneself into, the opportunity for self-images and self-presentations has also increased. The expansion of this electronic liminal space has an uncanny outcome that contrasts real presence with ‘telepresence’, a state of ‘being there’ without the physical experience of being there. Telepresence promises the potential, in a limited sense at least, of being everywhere at the same time (Barlow in Dreyfus 2009, 4). However, according to scholar Hubert Dreyfus, not physically being there eliminates physical engagement and suspends actual risk. Dreyfus states that our disembodied experiences in these electronic spaces undermine the importance of risk for the learning process, including:

> our ability to make sense of things so as to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, our sense of the seriousness of success and failure that is necessary for learning, our need to get a maximum grip on a world that gives us our sense of reality of things. (Dreyfus 2009, 7)

The absence of danger and the lack of risk are of course attractions of the Internet. The absence of actual confrontation with people that Sartre famously referred to as Hell may be another allure of the Internet. This is an electronic space where one can leave the acknowledgement-craving body behind. In this fantasy zone, one can project oneself into any order of subjective actuality, anonymously if desired. And yet, without the physical visual signs
of acknowledgement that we usually receive from others, we are left in an increased state of anxiety because we cannot experience being acknowledged by another virtually. With telepresence, I argue, the physical absence of another self leads to an even greater burden on the subject to act as its own self-defining other, its own reflected self-consciousness (Singer 2001, 77). The separation from one’s body that one experiences when immersed in these virtual worlds evokes a humour, as one is unavoidably reminded that their self is also a bodily thing that occupies actual space.

More than inadvertently referring to, or prefiguring telepresence, Kippenberger’s practice presents and demonstrates the importance of objects, actual presence and the significance of real physical commitment and risk; essentially, the importance of being there. Even when ‘being there’ ends badly in an alienated state brought about by language barriers, misbehaviour or misunderstanding, Kippenberger would then document these events and they would be thus mediated and transformed into art. Kippenberger’s endless professional networking and networks of communication are analogous of the electronic experience of contemporary alienation of the self. His anxieties in relation to the acknowledgement he sought from his audience and institutions can be seen as echoed by the contemporary individual’s desire for similar levels of engagement and approval from an electronically distanced and always ontologically absent other.

Kippenberger’s Metro Net (1993–97, fig 49), a series of life-size subway entrances in remote locales, unintentionally prefigures and comically contrasts this condition of alienated, disembodied, electronic subjective experience. Making the Metro Net project required an immense physical, emotional and financial commitment. I argue that one can read this major work now as if it had been intended as a joke about the failure of modernism’s technological promise to bring people together. The utopianism attached to technology, from public transport systems to the World Wide Web, essentially promises to dismantle inter-subjective alienation. The ongoing assertion is that modernity will inevitably bring us together and allow us to communicate better, rather than separate us even more, and replace actual engagements with virtual ones. For example on the Samsung website, a review of the Galaxy s4 describes the smart phone in the following way:

The Samsung GALAXY S4 is all about ‘togetherness’ – it brings people together when they’re apart. When your friends also have a Samsung, GALAXY S4, you can share screens as well as explore each other’s favourite music, files and games. The Samsung GALAXY S4 not only helps overcome barriers of distance but also helps to break down language barriers. (Samsung Electronics Australia 2014)

Samsung goes as far to suggest that the phone can and will care for its owner, as an actual life companion;

As a real life companion, the new Samsung GALAXY S4 helps bring us closer and captures those fun moments when we are together. Each feature was designed to simplify our daily lives. Furthermore, it cares enough to monitor our health and well-being. To put it simply, the Samsung GALAXY S4 is there for you. (Samsung Electronics Australia 2014)
The irony of mobile phones, and the communication networks they are connected to, is that they capture our attention so much that they prevent spontaneous engagements with people who may be physically close to us.

Kippenberger’s practice depended on actual physical presence, his personal performance and this inevitably entailed actual risk. Further, the specific collaborative nature of Kippenberger’s practice demonstrates that humour not only has a discursive function but a function that dissipates and confronts bodily alienation. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* (1973), discusses alienation and shame as he describes a discursive and redemptive tendency of humour that seems particularly significant. Sartre states; ‘the very notion of vulgarity implies an inter-monad relation. Nobody can be vulgar all alone’ (Sartre 1973, 302). Sartre also importantly describes alienation in accord with Hegel’s master/slave dialectic, previously mentioned. Philosopher and Hegel scholar Peter Singer describes Hegel’s concept of alienation as a process where qualities that are part of us seem separate, foreign and ultimately hostile (Singer 2001, 73) beyond the everyday individual. The individual lives with the knowledge that they cannot ever achieve these special qualities, the realisation of which creates a state of anxiety and unhappiness.

Figure 49. Martin Kippenberger *Metro-Net Subway Entrance Syros* (1993), concrete, cast iron 3.96 x 13.72 x 6.10 m.
The basis for Hegel’s dialectic is the need that consciousness has for recognition and acknowledgement from another consciousness:

To understand the point we need to note the German word for self-consciousness, ‘Selbstewusstsein’, also has a sense of ‘being self-assured’ (unlike the English word, which is associated with embarrassment and hesitation); it is this sense of the German word that gives support to Hegel’s idea that my self-consciousness is threatened by the existence of another person who fails to acknowledge me as a person. (Singer 2001, 78)

Overcoming my own feelings of isolation was an important development for the Expanded Portraits. Importantly, this could only occur when I was in the same physical space as the people I was working with. These inter-subjective situations were a pathway towards both a development of self-knowledge and a greater experience of the people and world I was working in. In this same way, Kippenberger would often work with groups of agents, as discussed, and I assert because of this he freed himself from a state of self-imposed studio alienation. Artists Michael Krebber and Merlin Carpenter would do considerably more than simply assist with the construction of Kippenberger’s work; they would bring their own subjective perspectives to bear on Kippenberger’s presented self (Diederichsen 2008).

A good example of shared vulgarity is seen in the works Kippenberger made with painter Albert Oehlen. The artists shared a house while living in Vienna, which was bisected by a large table for making collages (Kippenberger 2011, 278). Oehlen states:

We had a joint stock of pictorial material on a large table, and we started on a collage individually and together. Mostly, he stood a bit closer to the Hustler issues and the spray where the latex sausages emerge. (Oehlen in Groetz 2005)

Together, they would encourage each other’s vulgarity and the irreverent content of their collages. Importantly, it was the humour and vulgarity that the two shared that gave license to the use of confronting imagery they may have avoided when working alone. Oehlen states that his approval functioned quite dramatically in certain cases. He discusses Kippenberger’s increasingly irreverent painting practice:

He was unsure about these pictures, and looked at me strangely when I revealed my enthusiasm. He saw it somehow as a lot of nonsense, and almost apologised for the frame, which he just slapped together from old pieces of stretcher. (Oehlen, interview with Groetz 2005)

Kippenberger’s close relationship with Oehlen resulted in the collaboration Orgon Box by Night and Capri by Night (1982, figure 50), at the Tanja Grunert’s garage gallery (Kippenberger 2011). The opening was held in the dark at 11pm because the gallerist had not paid the electricity bill. The exhibition consisted of a Ford Capri painted red-brown with oat flakes mixed in, a reference to Beuys’s signature ‘Braun paint’. The car boot was filled with paintings that were for sale but impossible to look at. All the lights of the car were on, including the cigarette lighter. Grunert states:

There were cheap cans of beer and steaming dry ice; everyone was drunk, and one Stuttgart artist felt so outraged by the work that he picked up a fire extinguisher and started spraying the art and the artist. (Kippenberger 2011, 235)
In contrast to the collaborative practices discussed above, when left to the lonely practice of painting, Kippenberger often lampooned his own isolation, depicting himself as an alienated comic book character. An important work for Kippenberger’s approach to the self and alienation is the *Untitled* self-portrait (1988) where he is depicted in an ethereal liminal studio space. In the painting, Kippenberger appears to agree with Heidegger as he enacts a comedy about subjective reflection, as it is often socially understood as the only means toward authentic self-authorship (Dreyfus 2007, Heidegger 2006). In *Being and Time* ([1926] 2006) Heidegger attempts (unsuccessfully according to Dreyfus and Seigel), to escape Phenomenology’s problematic subjective reflectivity by pre-empting it as always being in a particular ‘World’ and temporal field (Dreyfus 2007, Seigel 2005). The painted work depicts Kippenberger in the process of becoming a self through the action of making an abstract comical thing, one that will stand in for the artist.
In *Untitled (1988)*, Kippenberger paints himself as a negative reflection of Pablo Picasso: overweight, ageing and caught in a never-ending process of self-maintenance. The mechanical contraption he is constructing is an image of one of his sculptural works – an early ‘Peter’ sculpture made with one of Kippenberger’s agent collaborators. The actual sculptural work is titled *Worktimer* (1987) and the image (figure 51) includes the Lord Jim Lodge’s emblem; a sphere-shaped sickle, with a hammer and a pair of breasts dangling from the bottom. The work poignantly encapsulates and combines these narrative elements, ruminating on the problems of being, perceiving and performing one’s self in parallel historical and personal contexts. The imagery and objects referred to in this work contrast with the lonely comic-book character of Kippenberger presented. Importantly, the *Peter* work and the emblem of the Lodge both signify the result of collaborative practice and joking.
In this and many other Kippenberger works, these types of insider jokes engage us, insofar as we as viewers want to be part of this raillery, and to also be included in the group that is Kippenberger and his band of art makers and revellers. This is essentially how Kippenberger uses humour to engage with his audience inter-subjectively.

Critchley (2002, 4) describes jokes as a social contract and extends their inter-subjective significance;

Joking is a specific and meaningful practice that the audience and the joke teller recognize as such. There is a tacit social contract at work here, namely some agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke (Critchley 2002, 4)

Critchley, like Bergson, states that jokes connect their participants with the sensus-communis through the use of conceptual and sometimes philosophical propositions, which seek social agreement (Critchley 2002, 80). A force that counters this is the complexity of social life that obscures this common understanding and creates a sense of amnesia around subjects, which humour, in its blunt incisiveness, sheds light upon (Critchley 2002, 86). One such amnesia is of critical interest here, and this is that one often forgets who and what one is and is reminded often shockingly by laughter.

Peter Berger (1997, 45) asserts that laughter is both a social and intellectual activity. ‘Laughter clearly is a phenomenon that involves both body and mind. It thus points to the curious relationship of human subjectivity and its embodiment.’ (Berger 1997, 45) Berger refers to Helmuth Plessner’s anthropological study of laughter that pinpoints the reflexive and conceptual awareness being and having a body as one way of distinguishing humans from animals, while Plessner maintains the unity of mind and body and negates the dualism that the mind/body model suggests. He does state (in Berger 1997, 45) that when humans laugh, they are made critically aware of having and being a body. The laughter comes upon them as a reflex, while at the same moment, the subject is intellectually aware of what they are amused by. ‘Plessner agrees with Bergson that the comic always has a human referent. If we laugh at animals or inanimate objects, it is because they remind us of human beings’ (Berger 1997, 48) Berger also notes;

Plessner adds the insight that man’s eccentricity is the quality that enables him both to perceive the comic and to be an object of comic perception. Only man belongs to different levels of being, and this multiple experience of reality is the basis for comic perception. This is a fundamental anthropological fact that cannot be reduced to this or that historical situation. (Berger 1997, 4)

Throughout his essay, Bergson expands upon the inter-subjective nature of humour. The subject’s laughter, he asserts, requires a response and seeks its ‘echo’ or validation from a group (Bergson 2005, 3). With this in mind, Kippenberger’s joke about the objective nature of his body is an inter-subjective negotiation, in this case with himself. Bergson discusses the function of laughter for joking;
To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification. (Bergson 2005, 4)

For my work, and I believe this is true for Kippenberger also, the collaborative making situation of the studio is where the laughter of others is an important phenomenon. Laughter is a reliable performance indicator because it is a visceral reflexive response to physical phenomena. For my expanded portrait works A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as a Party, Awareness of Lack and I Am Quite Sure I do Not Understand the Question, laughter was often an indicator that the collaborative process was working and that ideas were indeed worth pursuing.
3.4 The Comic Character: A Work in Progress

Kippenberger’s self-focusing humour confronts and often depicts the ludicrous situation of perceiving his or other selves as things. Many of the works that I will discuss remind us that we only have conditional control over our bodies and selves. Kippenberger’s humour lives in the gap between being and embodiment, between constructing a self and perceiving oneself as a public clown. Bergson states this explicitly:

The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. (Bergson 2005, 43)

Bergson outlines tendencies in humour that depend upon a mechanical objectifying of the subject. In Bergson’s theory of humour, when people act in a mechanical way or are mistaken for objects, it is essentially funny. This occurred, to a limited extent, in the afore-discussed photographic and painting project Every Day I Am a Day Older that appear unintentionally amusing because of the repetitive mechanical tendency present in the photographic process.

In order to illustrate his assertion, Bergson describes physical attributes and movements that are funny: ‘A deformity that may become comic is a deformity that a normally built person could successfully imitate’ (Bergson 2005,12). Facial expressions can appear as comical if they reproduce actions that seem involuntary, and are performed in a mechanically repetitive manner (Bergson 2005). My own facial expressions as the maniacal clown in the video I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand the Question exemplify this (video 1, figure 18). Bergson’s description of comic facial movement, also describe my improvised facial expressions;

[the facial expression] is a unique and permanent grimace. One would say that the person’s whole moral life has crystallised into this particular cast of features. This is the reason why a face is all the more comic, the more nearly it suggests to us the idea of some simple mechanical action in which its personality would forever be absorbed. Some faces seem to be always engaged in weeping, others in laughing or whistling, others, again, in eternally blowing an imaginary trumpet, and these are the most comic faces of all. (Bergson 2005,12)

As referred to in the previous section, Kippenberger performed the character of a sad, sometimes desperate, clown and then objectified his public performances in paintings, publications and sculptures (Gingeras 2004). Kippenberger, in these works, constructed a comic character. Importantly, it was one that embodied an alienated self; one that we, as equally alienated selves, can easily identify with. He used this character to engage his audience and transpose his life and the lives of his collaborators into the works he made (Frazer in Williams 2003). In so doing, he also invited us to look at his world from the vista of his elaborate and always expanding subjectivity.

Kippenberger’s comic works generated both a positive and negative understanding about his use of a comic character. Importantly, some of these works also presented opportunities for viewers and other artists to think about their own subjectivities. Many of Kippenberger’s self
portrait works are images of Kippenberger seemingly caught in a process of imagining himself as other people. He appears, as we have seen, as Picasso, but also Joseph Beuys, Beuys’s mother, or even Picasso’s wife Jacqueline. The humorous metonymical and teleological nature of these works are, I argue, also ‘Jokes [as] reminders of who “we” are, who “we” have been and of who “we” might come to be’ (Critchley 2002, 87), as they also demonstrate a polymorphous inter-subjective condition we invariably share.

Bergson (2005) describes why certain physical attributes of comical characters are always humorous. These attributes include the appearance of rigidity in movement, absentmindedness and vice (Bergson 2005, 8). For my own works mentioned above, there is similar importance placed on this idea of the internal resistances of comic characters. Bergson, when describing the resistant nature of vice in accord with certain comic characters and comic performances, states:

More frequently, however, it plays on them as on an instrument, or pulls the strings as though they were puppets. Look closely: you will find that the art of the comic poet consists in making us so well acquainted with the particular vice, in introducing us, the spectators, to such a degree of intimacy with it, that in the end we get hold of some of the strings of the marionette with which he is playing, and actually work them ourselves; this it is that explains part of the pleasure we feel. Here, too, it is really a kind of automatism that makes us laugh, an automatism as we have already remarked, closely akin to mere absentmindedness. To realise this more fully, it need only be noted that a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. (Bergson 2005, 8)

It should be underscored that the comic character is not necessarily the actual artist. The comic character, for Bergson, Hegel and Zupančič, is a socially understood abstraction temporarily brought to life by the actor, artist or comedian. Kippenberger’s public clowning was to some extent self-consciously constructed and served a professional and artistic comic purpose, not unlike comic Andy Kaufman’s alter ego, Tony Clifton. The character of Tony Clifton is a good analogy for Kippenberger’s own comic persona, as both act out through well-documented drunken buffoonery, and yet both were able to ultimately engender affection from their respective audiences. Another similarity is that other people could play the characters of Clifton and Kippenberger.

Mary Lou Pavlovic’s photograph, Kippenberger for a Day (2003, figure 52), is an example of an artist performing or posing as Kippenberger’s comic character. Pavlovic poses as Kippenberger from the invitation card Dialogue with the Youth (1981, figure 53). In the early stages of my research, I interviewed Pavlovic about this work and her interest in Kippenberger specifically. I asked her about her use of this particular image:

David M. Thomas: Why did you choose that particular work to embody Kippenberger?

Mary Lou Pavlovic: I was teaching at the VCA, I’d just come back to Australia, and I was in Melbourne, and I was really struck by the conservatism of the art scene at that time, and there didn’t seem to be any larrkinism here or any sort of critique of the art world itself, or … the systems and structures … I wasn’t having a very good time teaching either in the art school because I found that also very … politicised and heavily institutionalised, and very conservative and they didn’t seem like people who wanted to challenge things very much, or challenge the whole structure of it. I came across that Dialogue with the
Youth in Matthew Colling’s book, *This Is Modern Art* and I just couldn’t get it out of my head.

DMT: So it talked to you about your own ‘dialogue with youth’.

MLP: Yeah I think so; I was laughing to myself because I was thinking, ‘Dialogue with youth – yes, I know how you feel’. Kippenberger was kind of the post-modern anti-hero who became a hero, so I wondered whether, seeing I’ve always been interested in the depiction of the female body … but I wondered whether an image of a woman could operate in the same way, could hold the same sort of value as the anti-hero who becomes the hero (Pavlovic, interview with the author, 2009)

Figure 52. Mary Lou Pavlovic *Kippenberger for a Day* (2003), photograph mounted on aluminium, 60 x 120cm, collection of the artist.

Figure 53. Martin Kippenberger (1981) *Dialogue with the Youth*, invitation card, Hamburg, Estate Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.

Pavlovic appropriates Kippenberger’s comic character, one that for her articulates an insolent resistance to the highly politicised institutionalism she was immersed in. Similarly, the American
performance artist Andrea Fraser used the Kippenberger character by publicly appropriating one of the artist's drunken rants in her performance entitled *Art Must Hang* (2001). Fraser describes her reasons for this:

Kippenberger's drunken, impromptu dinner speech... for example, is full of what, from an American perspective, are misogynous, homophobic, and xenophobic elements. Now, it may be that misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia were attributes of a certain position in the German art world and society that Kippenberger consciously took up and performed. It may also be that he was, in fact, misogynistic, homophobic, and xenophobic on some level. But rather than simply disavow such attitudes, he performed them in extraordinary acts of self-objectification that were at once comic, violent, pathetic, and grotesque. (Fraser in Williams 2003)

Bringing to life the comic meme need not tell us anything truthful about Pavlovic or Fraser – or Kippenberger, for that matter. However, these two works may in fact demonstrate a universal truth about any human being who aspires somewhat manically to be accepted as a historically significant artist. And the artist character here is one that Kippenberger presents publicly as a comical abstraction. Zupančič describes this comedic process;

A true comedy... has to play its cards in such a way that the very universal aspect of this concept produces its own humanity, corporeality, subjectivity. Here the body is not an indispensable basis for the soul; an inflexible belief in one's own baronage (comic character) is precisely the point where the soul itself is a corporeal as possible. The concrete body of the baron, which repeatedly falls into the puddle of human weaknesses, is not simply the empirical body that lies flat in the mud, but much more the belief in baronage, his 'baronness'. This 'baronness' is the real comic object, produced by comedy as the quintessence of the universal itself. (Zupančič 2006, 183–84)

This also echoes the dual self that is necessary for self-alienation described earlier, in that, in order to generate the comic character one has to be intensely almost painfully aware of one's subjective actuality. What may seem to contradict this self-awareness is when Bergson asserts that the comic character needs to seem unaware of its own shortcomings and inflexibilities. What this suggests is that only through an objective and clear understanding of what makes one a self, including the comical inflexibilities, can one create a truly comic character.

An interesting model for this distinction between self and comic character is clearly demonstrated in David Goldblatt's, “Ventriloquism: Ecstatic Exchange and the History of the Artwork” (1993) that I have already mentioned. In this work, Goldblatt discusses Edgar Bergen and wooden collaborator Charlie McCarthy (figure 54). Charlie is a similar character in many ways to Kauffman's Tony Clifton and Kippenberger's public persona. Charlie, like Kippenberger, was known for saying precisely the wrong thing at the right time. Goldblatt describes the genesis of Charlie as a comic character:

Coming on stage at three o'clock in the morning for their final performance before an almost empty club, Charlie suddenly turned on his master, asking, "Who the hell ever told you, you were a good ventriloquist?" Telling Edgar to go back to the farm, the dummy refused to be shushed by a blushing Bergen; ... The management was catatonic, but the customers collapsed in laughter, hooting, howling, pounding on the tables. Later, a serene Bergen was found backstage saying, "I simply had to get that off my chest." (Goldblatt 1993, 390)
Golblatt elaborates on the idea of ventriloquism as an example of the ancient Greek term ecstasis – ‘a being beside itself’. Bergen and his alter ego Charlie are described thus: ‘As I see it, Bergen’s success had something to do with what the Greeks thought of as ecstasis, a stepping outside the self, a being beside itself, of which ventriloquism is a special case’ (Goldblatt 2003, 392).

Goldblatt describes the origins and attributes of ventriloquism:

Unlike acting, where the actress may or may not speak in some voice different from her own, the ventriloquist must resort to another voice to help facilitate the appearance of conversation. The ventriloquist must not simply speak in another voice; she must efface herself as speaker while simultaneously promoting herself as listener. … There are, then, at least two ontological levels happening in a ventriloquist’s act. But it is important to point to another phenomenon characteristic of most ventriloquist acts, especially those that involve comedy. Here I want to call attention to what I think of as a falling between the ontological levels – the level of the mild illusion of Bergen talking to Charlie, on the one hand, and Bergen talking to himself, on the other. (Goldblatt 2003, 392)

Goldblatt sees a similarity in the relationship between the ventriloquist and his puppet with the artist and their work (Goldblatt 2003, 394). This ‘ventriloquist exchange’ is analogous for
Kippenberger’s sculpture and installation practice that depended on ‘the appearance of conversation’ in works, and for the production of work that emanated from actual comic dialogues with his assistants. This was an active dialectical activity that involved the correction and acknowledgment of misunderstandings and mistakes as an intrinsic part of the work (Diederichsen 2008). Goldblatt describes this relationship;

I am imagining here that during the work in progress, the artist sees the work at one time and asks, "What does the work say?" and sometimes, "What am I saying?" Sometimes as if she were dealing with another person, one with a distinct character, a style, a vision that needs fixing, completing and so forth and sometimes as if she were talking to, perhaps expressing herself. In the first set of instances, the work has a character independent of the artist something like the way Charlie is taken to have a personality independent of Bergen. (Goldblatt, 2003, 394)

These ideas are especially significant for artists like myself, Pavolovic, Fraser and Kippenberger, whose practices are so closely linked with particular modes of mediated personal speech. This is seen in Pavlovic’s photograph, which depicts this state of ecstasies, or being beside her self, in the process of becoming somebody else. And not just anybody else; rather, another artist who is particularly well known as an anti-hero, and who is also famous for publicly performing a character that says the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person, regardless of the potentially professional or life-threatenining consequences.
3.5 Uno di voi, un tedesco in Firenze (One of You, a German in Florence) 1976-77

In the next two chapters to demonstrate the relevance of the theories engaged with above, I shall discuss two specific Kippenberger projects. The first of these Uno di voi, un tedesco in Firenze (One of You, a German in Florence) (1976–77) is one of the first of Kippenberger’s self-portrait works, and, in some ways, one of his most complex. A self-portrait work is often expected to be a clear depiction, even a visual likeness of the author of the work. However, Kippenberger is not pictured in any of the 84 canvases that comprise the work (figures 55, 56); still, the series of works is considered by art historian George Baker (2009, 143) to be a self-portrait. If Kippenberger is not depicted in any of the canvases, how could Uno di voi, Un tedesco in Firenze be considered a self-portrait, and further, how could a series of paintings be considered a single portrait? If it is a self-portrait, what self is being portrayed?

He painted copies of postcards, newspaper clippings, and his own photographs and experiences. He painted his room, his ice cream parlour, his drinking buddies, the backside of the lion monument on the street where he lived, a cop killer, his worktable, the palazzo Pitti porter, …. “The fixed stare unconsciously looking up at the ceiling”…Eighty-four black and white paintings in three months, usually one in the morning and one in the afternoon…” (Kippenberger 2011, 120).

Figure 55. Martin Kippenberger Uno di voi, un Tedesco in Firenze (One of You, a German in Florence) (1976–77) oil on canvas, 50 x 60cm, 70 paintings, Estate Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.
Baker notes the inter-subjective nature of this work and the way it in fact functions as a self-portrait:

in the form of a collection of vistas representing random encounters, forgettable moments, insignificant detritus and fleeting events, a negotiation between the self and the other, between watching and being watched – the war ultimately waged between the vacuous totality of media-vision and the infinity of individual acts of human perception. It is a "one" made of "you": the self as a failed catalogue of its immediate surrounds, a function of the unceasing mobility of potential perspectives and views. (Baker 2009, 143)

Kippenberger’s self image is displaced, deferred and inevitably projected onto the viewer, who sees through the eyes of Kippenberger’s subjective movement. The totality of the work accumulates to express almost cinematically what constitutes Kippenberger’s world, a world that he mediated through his directed and conceptual approach to painting. Here he describes the making and main influence for these works:

Then I ordered canvases; when you stacked them up they reached 1 metre 89 centimetres, my own height, a whole stack of canvases. Each morning and each afternoon I painted a picture, working from an original. In between times I took photographs and cut up newspapers, so I always had plenty of originals. My paintings were always in the same format, always grey and white. In a way [Gerhard] Richter was still a role model for me then. I’d fallen for his trick. When you are young you are always impressed by gifts you yourself don’t have, you’re bluffed by them. The pictures of sheep dogs – there was something appealing about the subject matter, I fell for them too. Added to which he was a good-looking man. (Kippenberger in Baumann 2006, 60)
Figure 57. Gerhard Richter *Christa and Wolfi* (1964), oil on canvas, 150 x 130cm, private collection Hamburg.
Impersonating Gerhard Richter’s idiom (figures 57 and 58) *One of You a German in Florence* pre-empts his later critique of particularities of artistic styles and how these can be seen as subjective positions in a spectrum of potential art practices.

*Uno di voi, un Tedesco in Firenze* also significantly demonstrates Kippenberger’s way of dealing directly with his own emotional alienation. His experience of being in Florence was initially confronting; Susanne Kippenberger states: ‘Florence was too much for him at first, too beautiful, too chic, too old’ and in his own words, “let’s just say it made me insecure” (Kippenberger in Kippenberger 2011, 118). This culture shock was compounded by the professional disappointment of not achieving his goal of becoming a famous actor. Mediating this alienation by painting these moments of estrangement in Richter’s style circumvents his emotional state. Kippenberger’s selection of images reinforces his mapping of subjective and geographical displacement. The titling of this work narrates an alienated self in the processes of immersion in a world not of his making (Baumman 2006). ‘One of you’ underlines his feelings of self-consciousness and empathy that signify Kippenberger’s desire to connect with a social network he feels separate from. At the same time, ‘a German in Florence’, underscores this cultural displacement. The combination of image selection and prosaic titling describes his physical presence in Florence as if he were in fact the star of his life movie. The sequence of images
function in the same way as the strange metaphysical tunnel in the film Being John Malkovich (1999); anyone who enters the tunnel gets to exist inside the subjectivity of a famous movie star. Kippenberger uses the point of view of the camera in a similar way, thereby activating a metonymic and autobiographical quality of the work.

There is a joke imbedded in the seemingly arbitrary nature of the individual paintings. In one way, they parody conceptual art's seriality and cool ambivalence through the impersonation of Richter's black-and-white painting style. In another, they subvert this when they are displayed as intended – as a sculptural monolith, a stack 189 cm high, which was Kippenberger's physical height. Notably, the final stack was 10cm short, and Kippenberger openly admitted to failing to finish this project. However, the stack, in its incompleteness, still stands in for Kippenberger; they appear as an objective accumulation of subjective moments. The physical relationship between artist and work is something central for Kippenberger's practice (Goldstein 2008, 50).

The significance of Kippenberger never completing this project meant the project was left open, like subjectivity in a state of unending progress and negotiation. This kind of discursive metonymic relationship between subjectivity and objects is important in Kippenberger's practice, especially, as I will later describe, in his Peter sculptures.

The work of art as a metonymical stand-in for the artist is one that is described in a famous debate between Heidegger and art historian Meyer Shapiro. In his article “Beyond Recognition, Representation Power and Culture” (1992), Craig Owens describes the crux of the debate that oscillates around the ownership of a pair of worn shoes depicted in a famous painting by van Gogh, titled Old Shoes (1886–87).

For Heidegger, writing in an article titled “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935), the shoes are those of an old peasant woman who has laboured in the fields. Heidegger sees the evidence of this as a series of indexes of wear depicted in the painting, and by no other art-historical means. Shapiro proves art historically in his article, “The Still Life as a Personal Object: A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh” (1968) that the shoes belong to the artist and are significant biographical objects for van Gogh who stated;

My father ... was a pastor, and at his urging I pursued theological studies in order to prepare for my future vocation. As a young pastor I left for Belgium one fine morning, without telling my family, to preach the gospel in the factories, not as I had been taught but as I understood it myself. These shoes, as you see, have endured the fatigue of that trip. (van Gogh in Shapiro 2009, 300)

Owens states that for Jaques Derrida, in a text that roughly translates as "Restitutions of the Truth of Painting" (1978),

Derrida does not defend Heidegger against Schapiro's attack; nor does he adjudicate between their conflicting claims. Rather, he demonstrates that there is, in fact, no contest. For Heidegger and Schapiro are in perfect agreement; confronted with the painting, both ask themselves the same question: "Whose shoes are these?" "To whom do they refer?" "Whom do they represent?" Both presume that, if they are to interpret the painting, they must first attribute the boots to the specific human subject to whom they may be said to belong. Thus, both interpretations rest upon an initial substitution: of the person for the
thing, the animate for the inanimate, the organic for the inorganic. This substitution is not, however, preliminary to the interpretation of the painting – it is the interpretation of the painting. For once the identity of the owner of the shoes has been established, everything else falls effortlessly into place. As Derrida observes, in attributing the boots to the peasant woman or the artist, Heidegger and Schapiro have actually claimed them for themselves, via their own identifications with the peasant and the cosmopolitan (Owens 1992, 94).

Kippenberger, in a similar manner, invites the viewer of his Florence paintings to identify with his observations of this world he is thrown into, to stand for a moment in his shoes. Through his quite conscious process of documenting his being in this other world of Florence, he also metonymically mediates his own alienated subjectivity. The resistant nature of this mediation, its lack of colour and its deadpan approach, creates the humour he no doubt intended. From what at first appears like a simple travel log, something to do while on holiday, expands into a complex conceptual work. This first major work of Kippenberger’s, like many works he made, contains signifiers of work in progress – deliberate signs of the unfinished, which, I argue, are metaphors for the endless process of subjectivity.
3.6 Peter – Kippenberger’s Joke about the thingliness of the Self – Humour as (Anti) Alienation Machine

As a philosopher, I am struck by the way in which ideas and embodiment in art parallels the way in which our minds are embodied in ourselves as persons. But works differ from one another as personalities differ from personalities...greatness in works is like greatness in human beings ... There are certain works, as certain persons, one likes or dislikes for reasons having nothing much to do with their excellences or failures (Danto 1990, 17).

The Peter sculptures began in 1987. First Shown in Cologne at Max Hetzler gallery in Peter: Die russische Stellung (Peter: The Russian Position), this particular Kippenberger joke again physically confronts alienation, the kind one often experiences in the street, studio, gallery or museum. This series of sculptures was later reframed to become his installation The Happy Ending to Franz Kafka’s Amerika in Vienna (1994).

The Peter works were a deliberate artistic shift from painting, a process Kippenberger had only recently committed himself to. Painting was the popular medium of the time, particularly in the commercial galleries of Cologne. In the mid-1980s painting sales were peaking and sculpture was almost always seamless and highly crafted. German art critic Manfred Hermes states that painting had
just recently seemed empty, invalid, and irrelevant, then “to paint again” seemed like an
unavoidable slogan among contemporary artists. It was a specific kind of painting that
ruled the day: large pictures figurative often coarse and with an aura of emotional
directness. (Hermes in Kippenberger 2011, 200)

In this context, Kippenberger’s move to sculpture was driven by his interest in the uncanny
thingly quality of objects and their anthropomorphic relationship to human figures (Diederichsen
2008). In addition to the Peter works, he produced figurative works in the style of Henry Moore
called Family Hunger (1985), and realistic figures such as his self-rendering in resin and
cigarette butts titled Martin, into the Corner, You Should Be Ashamed of Yourself (1989). The
Peter sculptures are makeshift, poorly assembled objects that deliberately over fill the gallery
space. Susanne Kippenberger (2011, 294) describes the overall effect of these works, ‘forty-five
tragicomic objects in total [fill] the space to capacity and [make] it seem like a junk shop. These
works were a concise way of occupying an opposite and critical position to the boom in painting’
(Kippenberger 2011, 294). According to Cologne gallerist Gisela Capitain, ‘Peter was a
bombshell, the show divided the art world at the time even more clearly into two camps: those
who admired his work and those that despised it’ (Capitain in Kippenberger 2011, 294).

Kippenberger worked with artists Michael Krebber and Barbara Sievert to produce the Peter
project (Diederichsen, 2009). Kippenberger would refer to himself as MK1 and to Krebber as
MK2. In later works and installations, Kippenberger made Krebber his proxy rather than his
assistant. Their working relationship would determine the particular comic tragedy that was the
many Peter exhibitions to follow. As a stand-in for Kippenberger, Krebber was particularly
appropriate, as Diederichsen states:

Krebber seemed particularly well suited for the task; among Kippenberger’s friends, he
was famous as a merciless observer of art and the art industry, as well discovering the
painful, forced, and pretentious aspects of even the tiniest technical details and most
unintentional gestures in a painting. At that time, Krebber had only stepped forward as an
artist on rare occasions and with big quotation marks, because their principal suspicion
that he harboured as an observer, friend and fan of certain artists (all of whom, however,
usually disappointed him at some point along the way, so that only their early works
continued to enjoy his respect), and as a charismatic and entertaining figure of Cologne
and Berlin nightlife, was that in general making art is a deeply embarrassing affair.
(Diederichsen 2009, 125)

Kippenberger used ‘Peter’ as a suffix to signify when an artist had become too dependent on a
recognisable visual or theoretical strategy, and to emulate what Kippenberger recognised as a
laziness of curators, gallerists and collectors of their way of understanding and referring to
individual art practices; Diederichsen laments:

It was the structure of this deterioration of the critical Conceptualist exposure of the idea
into an artwork that, for marketing reasons, was identical to the concept that
Kippenberger described with the suffix “peter”... (Diederichsen 2009, 123)

Importantly, Kippenberger did not see himself, or his practice, as separate from the problems of
this system, and sought to include his own peter-hood into his works. This became a central
reason for the solicitation of assistants in the work’s production (Diederichsen 2009). These
working relationships with other artists would create a conceptual space for the objective
rendering of Kippenberger’s “thingee”, in a way that would have been impossible for the artist to manage by himself.

Kippenberger wanted to take his own Peter-hood as an Object. But how can one observe one’s own thingamajig? How can one see the suffix that is trailing behind one’s self? This is why, for the first time, his assistants became so important in his work as observers of the observer. (Diederichsen 2009, 123)

The aim of the process was ‘to explore the problem of individuality and authorship, the magic of personal presence in art objects, and the controllability of that which is uncontrollable and contingent’ (Diederichsen 2009, 148). Through these elaborate collaborative workings, Kippenberger played with the metonymic relationship between artist, art object and the objective actuality of the viewer. The transfer of the artist’s subjectivity into the art object occurring as a consequence of this phenomenon, the awareness drawn from this was to become a central strategy across Kippenberger’s manufacturing of self-proxies.

The role of Krebber and other assistants was not the same as the role of artisans that produced work for American artist Jeff Koons, for example. Krebber and others would interpret and often misinterpret instructions given by Kippenberger, who often described projects and objects in an increasingly idiosyncratic manner (Kippenberger 2011, 192). Kippenberger’s motto regarding mistakes was ‘Wrong, I write wrong things, never mind, I am Dyslexic’ (Kippenberger in Kippenberger 2011). Krebber embraced and continued these mistakes, adding; ‘Isn’t misunderstanding what someone says the most acceptable misunderstanding in communication?’ (Krebber in Kippenberger 2011). An example of such a misunderstanding was when a Spanish carpenter had totally misunderstood Krebber’s translation of instructions relayed from Kippenberger. Both artists were so excited by the results that they started building in ‘errors’ themselves (Kippenberger 2011, 192).

The Peter works also demonstrated a visualised semiotic game (Diederichsen 2009) and referenced not just a history of sculptural objects, particularly of ready-mades and modified found objects, but employed an elaborate system of identification and naming. They also reference museological systems of positioning things in a gallery space. Part of the exhibition title The Russian Position refers to a Salon style hanging of paintings known as the “Petersburg Hang”, after the Russian city whose Hermitage Museum uses this method of display. The use of the ‘Peter’ suffix in Kippenberger’s specialised vernacular meant ‘thingy. For Kippenberger, this word would often be used to identify people in terms of their occupation or job, ‘a baker [would be called] “Roll Peter” or [he] gave other people names like “Catalogue Peter”, ’[Kippenberger] expanded this relatively standard German usage of “peter” into all sorts of other meanings applied to both things and people’ (Kippenberger 2011, 293).

The process of naming and describing people as things was a means of locating them in Kippenberger’s personal and professional lexicon (Diederichsen 2009). One of the Peter works, titled Model Interconti (1987), which looks exactly like a coffee table (figure 60), is in fact a modified painting by Gerhard Richter that Kippenberger purchased from the artist for this
Another Peter work appears to be an open cabinet or shelf, is named after the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (figure 61). In the first case, there is a metonymical proxy, an artist’s thingee, ‘a Richter’ transformed into furniture; in the other, a piece of furniture bears the name, the ‘Peter’ of the philosopher Wittgenstein. This is a good example of a Kippenberger joke that relies on Bergson’s logic of presenting people as things and things as people.

Figure 60. Martin Kippenberger Modell Interconti (1987) Gerhard Richter painting, wood, metal, 32 x 79.5 x 59cm, Gaby and Wilhelm Schurmann Collection, Herzogengrath-Berlin.

Kippenberger’s Peter works humorously illustrate Heidegger’s meditation on the thingly qualities of artworks. Heidegger’s perspective on the origin of the work of art is in line with his earlier view of the potential of the subject to exist as authentic Dasein. The subject is an objective result of work; the individual, in effect, is completely defined by the work they do, have done, and will do. The question concerning the origin of the work of art asks about the source of its nature. On the usual view, the work arises out of and by means of the activity of the artist. But by what and whence is the artist? What he is? By the work; for to say that the work does credit to the master means that it is the work that first lets the artist emerge as a master of his art. (Heidegger 2009, 284)
In Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935), he attempts to deal with substance of the artwork as separate from its institutional context. Its substance is as evidence of work.

If we consider the works in their untouched actuality and do not deceive ourselves, the result is that the works are naturally present as are things. The picture hangs on the wall like a rifle or a hat…all works have this thingly character… But even the much-vaulted aesthetic experience cannot get around the thingly aspect of the artwork (Heidegger 2009, 285).

Kippenberger seems to be comically echoing Heidegger’s desire to deal with art objects separate from an art-historical context. Kippenberger presents these things as they are, not as valued art objects but as things that are mere components of an installation work.

What then is the ‘thingly quality’ in his Peter works? Heidegger underlines the material and conceptual nature of the artwork as an objective weight and physical substance. He references the Greek word *sunballein* (Heidegger 2009, 285), which means to bring things together, and proposes that the artwork as such is a symbolic system of things brought together by artists. In this way, Kippenberger brings together the object ‘thingy’ and combines the thing with the ‘Peter’ subjective suffix. Kippenberger’s Peter sculptures, particularly those that appropriate the names of famous artists, philosophers or filmmakers and combine them with objects or equipment, could be read as illustrations of Heidegger’s description of the work of art.

The thingly feature in the work should not be denied; but it belongs admittedly to the work-being of the work, it must be conceived by way of the works workly nature. If this is so, then the road toward determination of the thingly reality of the work leads not from thing to work but from work to thing. (Heidegger 2009, 287)

The name of a three-person exhibition (Buttner, Oehlen and Kippenberger) at the Folkwang Art Museum in Essen in 1984, was curiously enough *Truth Is Work*, which seems to reference Heidegger, who wrote ‘Art is truth setting itself to work. What is truth itself that it sometimes comes to pass as art. What is this setting-itself-to-work?’ (Heidegger 2009, 295)
The installation *The Happy Ending to Franz Kafka’s Amerika* (1994) is a key work for understanding Kippenberger’s lexicon (Zdenek 1999). This installation had a practical as well as an allegorical purpose, as a way of reframing the *Peter* works and inserting them into a ready-
made narrative, the ending of Franz Kafka’s book titled *Amerika* (sometimes referred to as *The Man Who Disappeared*). Kippenberger’s *The Happy End To Franz Kafka’s Amerika*, through an objective poetry, dealt with the constancy of creating and selling one’s self through the public and private presentation of subjectivity objectified in one’s artworks (Zdenek 1999, 65). Here Kippenberger parodied the German philosophical tradition of the subject, in exact a concentration camp of the self, the same way that Mel Brooks ridiculed Hitler and Nazis in his film *The Producers* (1967).

The general themes of Kafka’s book are analogous to those of being an artist and the struggle any individual has to find a place in an indifferent world: the quest for freedom, betrayal by those closest, the desire for family, being thrown out of a family and the overarching uncertainty of what life has in store. Kafka evokes the concerns of anyone dependent on the support of individuals and institutions, whose favour is dependent on the subject’s personal and professional performance and popularity.

The central character of Kafka’s book, Karl Rossmann, who Kippenberger clearly identifies with, was cast out at the beginning of the book for a sexual dalliance with a servant. He is sent from his family to live with strangers and find his way in the new world. Kippenberger had not completely read the book, but had absorbed its themes and general mood and was told by friends that a happy, even hopeful, ending for once relieved Kafka’s mood of comic desperation. Kippenberger states:

> Quite frankly I did not finish reading Franz Kafka’s *America*, yet there was someone in the circle of my acquaintances who did and reported to me that for the first time in a work by Franz Kafka an unfinished happy end was in the offing. (Kippenberger in Schmitz 1999, 67)

The dimensions of the work (20 x 30 metres) represents a soccer field, and its green carpeting marked with white lines, with bleachers at opposite ends of a field of play, reminds the viewer of Picabia’s maxim that art is a game like love and sport (Camfield 1979). Individual works such as “Haubar Simon de”, “Indiscreet or LTU - Lord Jim Patience” were taken from the exhibitions *Peter and Petra*. *Barbie-table* was part of *Peter II* in Vienna in 1987 and Henry Moore figures from the *Family Hunger* exhibition in Frankfurt in 1985. Specific pieces of furniture were given to Kippenberger by artists Tony Ousler and Donald Judd, along with pieces by renowned designers Arne Jacobsen, Charles and Ray Eames, Marcel Breuer, Archile Castiglioni and Aldo Rossi (Zdenek, F. 1999). The work, like the Florence paintings, functions as a collection as much as an arrangement of objects; as a collection, however, it is also an autobiographical document.

These objects have a modernist story of their own to tell, one that maps a continuous movement of objects from the gallery to the living room to the museum, to the side of the street and back to the artist’s studio. This movement of aesthetic information from revolution to redundancy and all stations in between was laid out in an idiosyncratic and highly subjective re-evaluation of the objects included (Diederichsen, 2008). The referential nature of
Kippenberger’s use of objects and their complex system they relate to refers to ‘social conditions, immediate surroundings, the art market, art history and other meta subjects’ (Diederichsen in Zdenek 1999, 66). It was not just a polemic between the art world and the everyday, but an attempt to address hybrid forms of art in regards to ‘actuality and importance’ (Diederichsen in Zdenek 1999, 66).

More than anything else, this three-dimensional collection of monstrosities is suited to illustrate the program of life-long examination, self expression, investigation, preparation and organisation which is tailored to fit and accommodated to the buttocks and which we all have to endure. It furnishes the zoo of mentalities with corresponding pedestals and embodies the compulsory program of forming one’s identity by interaction, which the artist ridiculed, yet to which he ruthlessly exposed himself and his friends due to a deep social understanding. (Schmitz 1999, 67)

What is significant about this reframing of the Peter works is Kippenberger’s appropriation of Kafka’s narrative situation of the interview. In the last chapter of Kafka’s novel, the chief protagonist Karl finds himself at a cattle call for hands for the “Great Theatre of Oklahoma”. A sign states; ‘The Great Theatre of Oklahoma calls for you! it only calls today, only once! Whoever misses this opportunity misses it forever! Whoever thinks of the future belongs to us! Everybody is welcome!’ (Kafka 1980, 66)
‘Kippenberger was not interested in translating a literal model into visual form, but in evoking the atmosphere of permanent ‘interviews’ (Zdenek 1999, 66) Zdenek describes the situation of the interview as a metaphor, which presents an opportunity for success as well as failure. The outcome of the interview may well determine the nature of multiple changes in the direction of one’s life; as such, it is a source both excitement and anxiety. Zdenek (1999, 66) states that the work evokes resistance to institutionalism, and the feeling that to be an artist one should resist institutional systems of control. What interests me and has become relevant for my work is that this situation is a demonstration of inter-subjective alienation.

Figure 63. Martin Kippenberger The Happy End to Frans Kafka’s Amerika (detail) (1994), mixed media, tables, chairs, electricity, green carpet painted with white lines, and two bleachers, Kippenberger Estate, Gallerie Gisela Capitain Cologne.

Originally, the Peter works would have confronted the viewer in the Hetzler space – a white cube, a site of acute alienation, where Sartre’s idea of shame is played out to its most extreme. To dismantle this alienating zone, Kippenberger filled the gallery with his tragi-comic dialectical effigies. Changing the emptiness of this space prevents alienation from occurring. Instead of the viewer being one of the few objects, if not the only object, in the space, the viewer becomes part of the crowd, a thing among many other things.
The Happy End depicts a different kind of alienation that occurs between two people confronted by each other in an interview, the Hegelian master/slave dialectic. This is circumvented once again by the abundance of works that appear as a forest of comedic office bearers abstracted as furniture. The utilitarian figures engaging each other in their own internalised dialogue of modifications and substitutions. The dialogue between MK1 and MK2 is objectified as a Heideggerian clearing, a situation of multiple professional subjective projections and interpretation of being in relation to the other. The term clearing is in accord with what psychologist Phillip Cushman describes as a “horizon of shared understandings [and misunderstandings]… carved out by the particular practices of a particular culture” (Cushman 1990, 599). Therefore, the expansive furniture arrangements are evidence of, a metaphor for and a situation where Kippenberger and Krebber engage in a humorous discourse. This is how The Happy End of Franz Kafka’s Amerika reveals and revels in Kippenberger’s ecstatic ventriloquist act; the subjects of this playful dialogue are objects beside each other. The being of the subjects is displayed quite literally as work in progress in a narrative without end (Goldblatt 2003).

An understanding of this work was particularly important for the production of my work A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as a Party (2012). In a similar way, my installation presents the exhibition as a possible allegorical scene that demonstrates my artist’s studio as a site of subjective dialectical work. This responded to Kippenberger’s Peter work in the way I incorporated the gallery attendant, the person who would spend the most time with and inside the work. The attendants at Boxcopy are usually volunteers, and I worked as a volunteer when running CBD back in the 1990s. The nature of the CBD space was such that I was able to work in my studio, and hear people walk in the gallery above. The confrontations that followed were always anxiety inducing and also quite comical – I would acknowledge the visitor and they would acknowledge me. Like the Peter works in the Hetzler space, I wanted to present an exhibition that was the opposite of a site for an alienating confrontation. Because the attendant at Boxcopy had to sit on the sea grass floor of the space, as the space was cut in half, visitors would also sit on the floor; naturally, this created a context for dialogue. This aspect of the installation made the work a site for dialogue and therefore functioned as an anti-alienation machine.
Chapter 4: Jailbreaking a Self a Conclusion

This project has succeeded in unifying my art practice under the umbrella project entitled *Expanded Portraits*, which achieved the more important goal of making my political purpose and personal direction of practice more explicit. Throughout my research, I have seen a particular humour when unconscious resistances in subjectivity become objectified. This is a process where self-conscious being in a particular world is mediated by language or a recording process that transforms as it documents the experience of a subject. The resistant self-alienating qualities of this mediating process when shared with a group often results in humour. Because of the ubiquitous nature of electronic self-mediation present in convergent media, this humorous atmosphere of electronic common understanding is now hard to escape.

What I have discovered is that the contemporary self has become a prison of infinite possible subjective opportunity, co-opted and managed by capital and government interest to a point where an idea of absolute autonomy or authenticity of the individual is both impracticable and unlikely. In direct reaction to this, subjectivity has become concerned with the possibilities of constructing plausible contingent selves from a potpourri of existing and ever growing shared electronic biographical material. In the first half of the twentieth century, subjects drew from a Petri dish of information, which now has exploded into an electronic multiverse of mediated perspectives and possible experiences.

In this way, the social and professional obligation of a predictable singular self is presented with a challenge. The burdensome nature of this endless endeavour arises from a drastic increase in scale. The project of self-construction is now monumental as is the increasing need to define and differentiate a singular or authentic individual. Knowing what we know now about everybody else, how could anyone be authentic? This is the importance of a personality like Lemmy, the monolithic fountainhead of the heavy-metal band Motörhead. The equally singular Joan Jett says of Lemmy, ‘in a world where everyone gets along, to get along’, Lemmy does not do this; he is self-authored, self-determining and self-directing (Jett in Oliver & Orshoski 2010).

Kippenberger’s painting of Lemmy appears with the caption ‘Lemmy is nearly fifty, a chronic alcoholic and totally burned out, No question about it, every young person wants to be like Lemmy – he’s a cult figure’ (Kippenberger 1988, 47). Significantly, Kippenberger inadvertently describes Lemmy as a cultural meme and an effective one if the growing popularity of heavy metal is anything to go by.
What I argue is that Lemmy’s resistant, almost geometric, individualism is a contemporary impossibility. Lemmy, unlike most of us, lives in a world of significance entirely of his own making. He is an author of a genre of music and the only original member of a group unquestionably responsible for the international phenomenon of heavy metal. His is a near-unique achievement in the authenticity of world and self. He did not just invent his unique appearance, but also the world in which he and it operates. I think of Lemmy as Heidegger’s ultimate example of authentic Dasein, or Picabia’s Nietzschean ideal, an individual capable of bending the will of the world to suit himself.
What I have discovered is the world(s), zones of practice or limited provinces of meaning are directly connected to the ways we author ourselves and our work in order to negotiate our own movements and exchanges through and with them.

In Chapter 2, I described my Expanded Portraits as the creation and testing of the exhibition, work and performance of art as zones for subjective projection. To introduce my project, I discussed an early phase of my practice that dealt emblematically with the self in a deadpan and unintentionally humorous manner. Through analysing the project Every Day I Am a Day Older (1993–98), I discovered that, from an early stage of my work, there existed a dialectal approach to art making that used humour to confront and challenge my own feelings of personal and professional alienation. In addition to this, I have realised that humour in my practice often reveals a criticism of alienated labour in traditional work situations.

A great step forward in the development of my theoretical understanding of humour, the self and alienation, was demonstrated by the production and analysis of the video work I Am Quite Sure I Do Not Understand the Question (2008). This work, made at the beginning of my research project, presents a crystalline demonstration of some of the pitfalls of a Cartesian perspective on the self. At the same time, it parodies the public selves we are all involved in producing daily. The discursive qualities of this work underpinned the direction my work would take over the next four years.

In order to develop these processes further, it was important for me to extend and refine these methods that included the appropriation of narratives, the dialectical nature of the interview and a focus on the idea of the comic character as discursive form of work. This was achieved through further practice and testing of these approaches, as seen in Dream Job (2010 – 2012), which tests the authentic construction of self as an appearance and a system of personal beliefs. This work prefigures the titling of my project Expanded Portraits and analysed modes of collaboration to expand on the possibilities for subjectivity through the performance of another self.

In the production of The Awareness of Lack (2011) project, I found a way to demonstrate the idea that humour is similar to and related to play, a finite abstract province of shared intersubjective experience (Huizinga in Berger 1997). The related provinces of humour and play are places where the subject gains a critical perspective on everyday experience.

A key finding as demonstrated by the Expanded Portraits is Foucault’s take on the author function and its relationship to first-person narratives. I examined these narratives in the form of artist statements and portrait photographs as transposable vessels for subjectivity. The appropriated materials were then remixed to form the basis for First Name Basis, Present Day Art in Australia for G.H. (2012).
Finally, in relation to the production of the substantial installation *A Party Disguised as Work or Work Disguised as a Party* (2012), the studio as a site for subjective formation is linked to the art gallery as a space for subjective projection. The work reveals insight into the relationship between melancholia and mania for the role of the artist as self-manager, producer and performer. The process of making the exhibition and related events was a practical demonstration and testing of the collaborative methods used by Kippenberger. Through a process of meetings, social situations, misunderstandings and a frenzy of installation and performance activity, my practice became a labour exchange, bypassing Marx via Habermas and back to Hegel. That is, rather than being overwhelmed by a state of alienated labour (Marx in Rey 2012, 30), I sought to circumvent this through multiple instances of communicative action and interaction (Habermas, 1990) in order to deal directly with my own state of self-alienation (Hegel 1977).

Parallel to developing strategies for my own art practice, I engaged in art-historical and philosophical research to map my particular interest in humour of the self in the practice of Martin Kippenberger. The joke about becoming a slave to and therefore alienated from the work one chooses creates a tragic comedy that I discovered Kippenberger was particularly fond of performing. The art practice becomes a repetitive and self-serving homunculus dragging the artist behind them in a vain and somewhat desperate attempt to keep it moving forward.

In Chapter 3, I discussed important findings in relation to Kippenberger's joke about the self and his use of humour to ridicule the German philosophical investment in subjectivity. I have discovered that the self, especially in terms of the centrality of the subject in Western thought (Seigel 2009, Atkins 2005), has had an unbroken tradition in German philosophy. Further, the subject and the self are central themes in modern art.

Nowhere has the debate been more full-blown or more intense than in the modern West, the locale in which individuality has both been most fervently celebrated and most ardently denounced. On the one hand, Europe and America have been the scene of ‘the emancipation of the individual’, of the politics of rights and ‘careers open to talent’. The celebration of self and even of self-interest, of the search for originality and the artistic and scientific cult of the sovereign and sometimes lonely genius. (Seigel 2009, 3–4)

The section “Being There, Not Being There”, maps theoretical and philosophical relationships between humour and the self. Important findings for my *Expanded Portraits* and my understanding of Kippenberger's practice were discussed in this section. The idea of bodily alienation experienced in electronic telepresence was contrasted with a state of being exposed as an actual body in public spaces. Here I demonstrated that the dialectical and collaborative function of humour is important as a zone for the expression of shared vulgarity. Further, that vulgarity is not just a form of anti-aesthetics, but, because of the ‘inter-monad relation’ in this form of humour (Sartre 1973, 302), it can act as a subversive tool.
What has made this project challenging is that humour and the self are very broad and pervasive concepts. The inescapable nature of these elements also makes it difficult to examine either in an objective or quantitative manner. It is difficult to dissect things as instinctive and reflexive as the processes of subjectivity and humour. One reason for this is that both processes are constantly evolving. This constancy of motion and the tendency of both humour and subjectivity to exist temporally direct my media choice toward working with moving images. For Kippenberger and I, the slippery nature of subjectivity and the self and the resistant qualities of humour are the motivation for working with assistants, agents and other artists to make and disseminate work.

Self-consciousness and self-knowledge, I have discovered, do not always equate with self-assurance. Ironically, one’s existing and resistant idea of oneself, albeit sometimes funny, can also be a substantial obstacle preventing personal and professional development. Indeed, this idea of oneself, the character one becomes obliged to perform, can become life-threatening. Kippenberger demonstrated a need to project a particular character into his work, one that behaved inappropriately in order to be truthfully comical.

I discussed Kippenberger’s comic character as an allegory for a universal practice of personality construction, as a necessary, even unavoidable, creative act. When this act becomes self-conscious, a resistance crack is created between being, perceiving and then performing one’s self that is in accord with Henry Bergson’s and Helmuth Plessner’s theories of the comic. These public puppets are, I propose, an ongoing form of social as well as professional maintenance and therefore can be considered a form of work.

Further, I discussed how Kippenberger compressed and played with the relationship between his everyday life and his artwork in view of his relevant practices and approaches to art-making. Through this research into Kippenberger and my own recent art-making, I have discovered that the compression of life and work that Kippenberger proposed may not always be desirable. Ironically, a program of living sculpture as proposed by Beuys’s Life Course/Work Course or ontological performance, as seen in Kippenberger’s non-stop and systematic oeuvre (Zdenek, 1999), may well prefigure the way many of us live our work today. Erasing the line between life and work creates a zone where every waking moment is an opportunity to work. In this, we may not be alienated from our labour or work but from the space to reflect and develop our selves.

Through an analyses of the work Uno di voi, un tedesco in Firenze (One of You, a German in Florence) (1976–77), George Baker’s idea of these works as a metonymic self portrait was proposed. I discussed Kippenberger’s early painting practice as a mode of being in relation to others, a way of coping as a displaced ‘foreign guy’, a travelling salesman who self-objectifies with the help of his cohort of acquaintances and agent collaborators.
Following this line of research, the comic character was revealed as both the artist's public persona and the objectification of this character in the thingliness of the work itself. An important finding is that the relationship between the artist and comic character in both instances is metaphorically a form of ventriloquism. Ventriloquism, in this case, is a dialectical act that reveals the artworks’ function as a comic character in an ongoing discussion between an artist and their artwork. This metaphor contests the selfhood of both artist and art object, one often presented institutionally, where artists and their works are often dealt with as finished texts, as fixed positions in a field of always moving cultural activity.

These ideas present a frame for my reading of Kippenbergers’s 1984 Peter sculptures and The Happy End to Franz Kafka’s Amerika (1994). The idea of ventriloquist exchange also points to a way of understanding the reasoning behind Kippenberger’s movement between painting and sculpture. I discovered that Kippenberger’s approach to the thingliness of the self was as elaborate an allegorical system as Heidegger’s phenomenological one. In addition, what I have discovered and demonstrated through the works I have made, both with and without collaborators, is that a directed form of collaboration may well be the only way of dealing humorously with an objectification of the subject. ‘Truth is work’, asserted Kippenberger and company, what I have discovered regarding collaborative practice is that the harder one works, the harder the work gets.

The recent video and installation works I have called Expanded Portraits are a way of integrating the different strands of my art activity writing, sculpture, painting, performance and electronic music into an exhibition event. These works also importantly fulfill one of my main goals for this project, which was to make more discursively engaging work. In Dream Job, for the first time, I was able to create a large body of conceptually complex and yet sharply focused work. The works engage a broad audience on both an emotional and intellectual level. An indicator of this work’s success is that it was chosen by the director of the National Portrait Gallery of Australia for display from 2 December 2011 until 18 March 2012.

My primary goal in this research was to discover my ‘forth the sake of which’, which Heidegger saw as the essential reason for doing what one does, more than this even, it is the why where and who one is. My ‘forth the sake of which’, is to express a resistance I feel towards the divisions often imposed on living. These divisions exist as technological alienation, life/work alienation and on a fundamental ontological level as self-consciousness. We as physical objects are separated by our individual experience of consciousness. We are also divided as selves when we experience our self as consciousness. This unavoidable comic quality of consciousness may explain why, when given the opportunity – as now we often are – to lose ourselves in other selves, we do.


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