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## THE CHINDOGU GYM: OR ZEN AND THE ART OF EXERCYCLE MAINTENANCE

Jane Venis

*Inherent in every chindogu is the spirit of anarchy. 'Chindogu are man-made objects that have broken free from the chains of usefulness. They represent freedom of thought and action: the freedom to challenge the suffocating historical dominance of conservative utility; the freedom to be (almost) useless.'*

Kenji Kawakami, *Chindogu: 101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions* (New York: WW Norton, 1995), 4.

The above quote is Tenet Three of Kenji Kawakami's Ten Tenets of Chindogu, "which in effect, form a manifesto for makers and consumers of chindogu."<sup>1</sup> It is the starting point in the creation of *Gymnauseum: Pimping of Body and Machine*, an interactive 'gym' which is open at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in New Zealand from October to December 2011. In this project, I critique the usefulness of products which are designed and promoted to achieve the impossible for most people – a perfectly toned body attained with a minimum of energy expended.

Chindogu is a Japanese art form for producing absurd and useless design objects. "It can be used as a useful lens to critique the proliferation of an endless stream of consumer goods produced on a planet with diminishing resources."<sup>2</sup> Some current gym equipment could already be given a reading as chindogu if placed in a different context. Consider the exercycle as a bicycle that goes nowhere or the rowing machine placed on dry land. Many of these machines, once purchased on a whim (or the good intention of a New Year's resolution), become obsolete, 'involuntary' chindogu stored under the bed.

At a time when the baby boomer generation is aging, an obsession with fitness and weight loss has resulted in a proliferation of machines designed to trim the body. Millions of people worldwide attend gymnasias in their efforts to balance an over-extended diet with obsessive fitness regimes in the face of worldwide poverty in developing countries. Makeover weight-loss programmes on television such as *The Biggest Loser* further encourage this obsession by promoting dramatic weight loss and focus on violent exercise by very unfit people to create a curiously compelling spectator sport.

Design solutions used in the manufacture of some home gym equipment result in machines that force the user into a series of movements that are truly hilarious. The Ab Circle Pro, a machine whereby the rider swings their hips from side to side with their buttocks raised in the air, is a current favourite of mine for this reason. It is yet another machine which purports to solve the not-so-pressing problem of creating perfect abs in under five minutes a day.

More complex exercise machines are set up as part of professional gymnasiums and health clubs. While these don't offer such absurdly quick-fix solutions as home-gym machines, they are part of a system which offers technologies for body transformation which create the desire for an increasingly distant goal of an 'ideal' toned and trim body – a desire which, according to sports theorists Frew and McGillivray, "serves both to capitalize on and perpetuate cycles of embodied dissatisfaction."<sup>3</sup>

Although the humour of chindogu is used to access the work on a direct level, there are darker issues of power and control of the body that underpin this project. I am focusing on relevant theories from Bakhtin, Foucault and Bourdieu to articulate this.

## THE GROTESQUE BODY

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts surrounding the carnivalesque can be useful when discussing situations in which taming the 'grotesque body'<sup>4</sup> is attempted. Bakhtin's analysis of the carnival in the era from the late Middle Ages to the early Renaissance is now famous. He used the picaresque writing of subversive French monk François Rabelais (1494-1553) as a starting point to give a worm's eye view of the world in which accepted social hierarchies were suspended, parodied and upended.<sup>5</sup> This inverted world-view or a World Upside Down (WUD) is at the very heart of the concept of carnival.

Bringing Bakhtin's thinking into the present, Pam Morris discusses his notion of grotesque realism and its central image, the grotesque body.<sup>6</sup> The grotesque body is a communal body, an exaggerated human form that emphasises bodily protuberances, eating and excrement. This grotesque body is a vital limb of the communal carnivalesque body.<sup>7</sup>

Looking at bodies engaged in activities within the latter-day gymnasium we see how social hierarchies are obliterated, as all involved are brought low in their endeavour to make docile the grotesque body to lose weight. Even the wealthy and the famous are in need of such exertions, and they are the ones who can afford going to the gym. The gymnasium becomes its own hierarchy of the fit and the trim, subsuming other hierarchies within itself. Thus it constitutes a carnivalesque context particular to our era.

Traditionally, carnival was a short time for the peasant population to let off steam before the deprivations of Lent and then the return to their daily lives of long hours of hard work. In First World Western countries in the twenty-first century it could be argued that we are now in a situation of perpetual carnival, indulging in excessive amounts of alcohol, fattening food and constant entertainment. The traditional time frames of carnival appear to have been reversed, and the period of Lent could be seen to correlate with shorter periods of strict dieting and hard exercise programmes for the penitent in their endeavour to lose weight.

In gym programmes like "Only Six Weeks to a New You" and workplace initiatives such as "Spring 2 It" (offered in my workplace at present), the status quo of the 'ideal bodies' forming a healthy, fit population is the message being pushed by health officials, employers and governments as they fight the much touted 'obesity epidemic.' The media hype regarding obesity has ensured that the fitness industry has a never-ending supply of grotesque bodies to be made docile. The obese or overweight 'underdog' may briefly obtain physical capital by achieving an 'ideal body' in the masochistic setting of the gym or on home gym equipment.<sup>8</sup> However, the 'ideal body' is virtually impossible to maintain when the lure of the 'carnival' is so pervasive and accessible and the return to the 'carnival body' is virtually inevitable for many people.<sup>9</sup>

## THE DOCILE BODY AND BEYOND

Another useful theoretical position in looking at how bodies are constructed and function within a gym setting is Foucault's concept of the 'docile body'.<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault has alerted us to what Mark Jackson calls the crisis of 'governmentality' or the disciplining of docile bodies.<sup>11</sup> In "Docile Bodies", Foucault discusses the connection between the discipline of repetitive exercise and political control of the body. He discusses how the ideal soldier was a machine that could be constructed to become an "automatism of habit."<sup>12</sup> The discipline of the repetitive nature of a series of exercises is the basis for exercise prescriptions in the non-military setting of the gymnasium.

Repetitive exercise prescriptions are also available on do-it-yourself home exercise on video with the help of celebrity presenters, a lineage which started with Jane Fonda in the early 1980s.

Connections between the machine which works through a series of repetitive movements and the “automatism of habit” of the docile body is the starting point for consideration of looking at the gym as a factory. Issues of consumption and production arise again whereby the gym users are the raw material, the workers and the product in a self-sustaining system. “Consumers displaying a lack of physical capital, who willingly locate themselves within the health and fitness club, in repentant acknowledgement of their sins and dreaming of physical transformation, provide the essential substance of physical capital.”<sup>13</sup>

In another discussion of power issues (related to surveillance in prisons), Foucault’s discussion of Bentham’s panopticon prison system could also be applied to the contemporary gymnasium whereby the constant surveillance by other gym users and personal trainers creates a self-regulating system of discipline.<sup>14</sup> The ever-present mirrors also increase the effect of a panopticon within the gym. The complex question of the gaze in the gym – who can look at whom, when and for how long – is an issue being perpetually addressed by the users.

## THE WORK

In *Gymnauseum*, the complexity of current gym equipment, bristling with digital screens that give up-to-the minute performance and calorie-burning data, is critiqued by the creation of nonsensical chindogu-inspired fitness machines. Ludicrous personal ‘data’ such as random BMI, weight readings and stomach contents is presented on screens attached to some of the equipment. The finished sculptures are sleekly seductive by the use of chrome, shiny wet-look vinyl and mirrors. They are lustrous fetish objects that invite the gaze (echoing the hopes of their riders for an equally buff appearance). The dark humour of a vicious spike-laden punch bag and weights echoes the notion of self-flagellation and repentance in exercise.

Obsession is an ongoing focus within the studio research. This is reflected in both the compulsive need for repentant exercise (sometimes to the point of physical illness; hence ‘gymnauseum’) and in the ‘pimping’ of the equipment, also to the point of obsession. In *Gymnauseum*, classic low-rider bikes have a makeover and become highly ‘pimped’ exercycles. These are gleaming fitness-machine equivalents of mid-life-crisis Harleys, inviting their overweight riders to obtain the bodies of their lost youth.

The concept of ‘pimping’ low-rider bikes with numerous rear vision mirrors began in Southern California in the early 1990s, reflecting an earlier craze developed by scooter-riding British ‘Mods’ in the 1960s. This was the visual catalyst for having multiple mirrors on my exercycles. The mirrors can be focused on specific muscle groups, which allows the rider a proscribed gaze on themselves and others while exercising and also references the panopticon and issues of surveillance.

Exercising on the spot on treadmills, steppers and bikes going nowhere is a metaphor for perpetually trying to make up for lost ground in the quest for physical capital. It is appropriate that the zen-like conundrum of trying to obtain the unobtainable body of one’s youth is (un)solved by the use of chindogu. The intrinsic riddle of purpose versus practicality inherent in chindogu makes it a suitable genre to critique products within a system that “has been freed from the chains of usefulness.”<sup>15</sup>

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Figure 1. *Lower than Lowrider* and a *Sidecar* named *Desire*  
Close up view. Photographed by Simon Higgs.





Figure 2. Foreground - *Lower than Lowrider* and *a Sidecar named Desire*, Materials, 'Pimped out' lowrider bike, chromed steel, and fake fur. Side car named desire: Chromed steel, aluminium, 1960's beehive salon hairdryer; fake fur and DVD infomercial.

Background: *Low - Fat Lowrider*; Materials 'pimped out' lowrider bike, polished aluminium, chromed steel, velvet and electronic and computer components. Photographed by Simon Higgs.

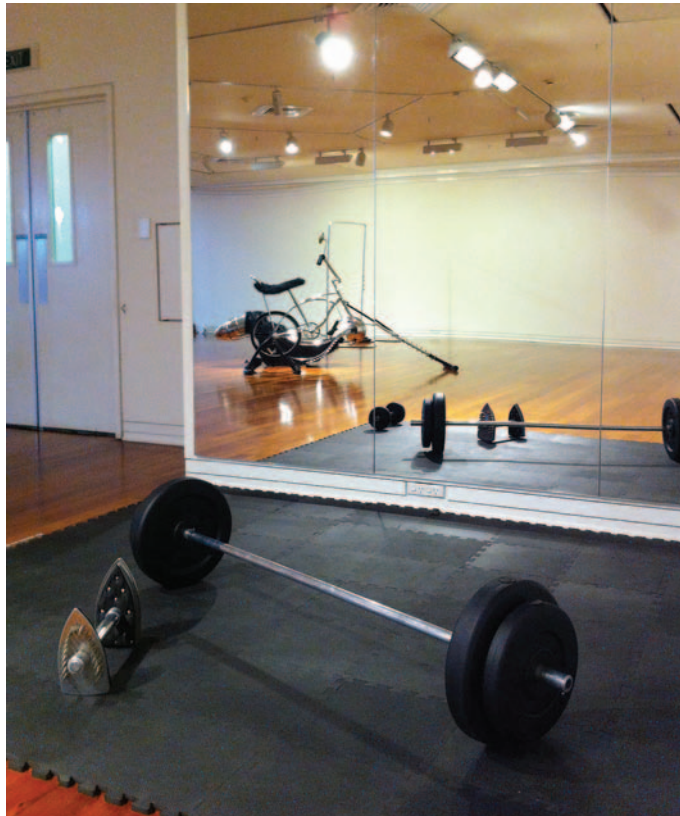


Figure 3. *Weightless Weights* and *Pumping iron*, Materials, Aluminium, plastic, recycled steam irons and glass. Photographed by Jane Venis.



Figure 4. Live at the opening: Lucy Weston Taylor lifts the Weightless Weights.



Figure 5. Duo of punch bags *Jab* and *Shiner*, materials, Wet look vinyl, stainless steel spikes, chains and electronic components. Photographed by Simon Higgs.

- 1 Jane Venis, "Chindogu: Not So Useless after All," *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, 5:5 (2011), 189.
- 2 Ibid., 202.
- 3 Mathew Frew and David McGillivray, "Health Clubs and Body Politics: Aesthetics and the Quest for Physical Capital," *Leisure Studies*, 24:2 (2005), 161.
- 4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984). Original ed., 1965.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (New York: Edward Arnold, 1994).
- 7 Susan Stewart, "The Imaginary Body;" in her *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 8 P Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
- 9 The notion that the grotesque carnival body can be expressed as a binary opposite of the classical 'ideal' was proposed by Featherstone in 1991. It is discussed in Frew and McGillivray's article "Health Clubs and Body Politics;" in which they discuss Bourdieu's proposition that the classical ideal body is a form of physical capital. Matthew Frew and David McGillivray, "Health Clubs and Body Politics: Aesthetics and the Quest for Physical Capital," *Leisure Studies*, 24:2 (2005), 161-75.
- 10 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
- 11 Mark Jackson, "Ethics of Design," paper presented at the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Art Educators Conference, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2009.
- 12 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.
- 13 Frew and McGillivray, "Health Clubs and Body Politics."
- 14 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. Frew and McGillivray, "Health Clubs and Body Politics."
- 15 Kenji Kawakami, *Chindogu: 101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions* (New York: WW Norton, 1995), 4.