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A Thesis For The Degree Bachelor of Fine Arts

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TOPIC: Comparisons of Energy

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Content

1. INTRODUCTION

When I started working on my thesis, I decided that the topic should be something that relates to my work processes. In a book 'Dictionary of Critical Theory' I found the word 'bricolage' which was interesting because the related French for tinkering about or do-it-yourself, a bricoleur, is committed to the odd job and is a jack-of-all-trades, as distinct from a craftsman. This sentence is what I can use from the description in Claude Levi-Strauss's book, *The Savage Mind*, 1962.
It's hard for me to write, and it feels like a model of Sisyphean failure and repetition and waste of energy or time, as in Marcel Broodthaers movie *La Pluie* where he sits in the pouring rain and tries to write but has to start over again and again.

Marcel Broodthaers *La pluie (Projet pour un texte)*, 1969

I have chosen to involve Buster Keaton, Fischli and Weiss and Roman Signer in my thesis because Fischli and Weiss and Signer tell about inspiration from, among others, Buster Keaton.
I will write about three artists who use everyday things, humour and experiments in their works, and where 'failure' is a natural part of the process.

All individuals know failure better than we might care to admit - failed romance, failed careers, failed politics, failed society, failed humanity, failed failures. What happens, though, when artists use failure to propose a resistant view of the world, when failure is released from being a judgmental term, and success deemed overrated?

2. BRICOLAGE, THE ARTISAN AND THE CRAFTSMAN

Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of bricolage in a literary way

Bricolage is French for 'tinkering about' or 'do-it-yourself'. In its old sense the verb 'bricoler' applied to ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting and riding. It was however always used concerning some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle. And in our time the 'bricoleur' is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. A bricoleur undertakes odd jobs and is a jack-of-all-trades, as distinct from a craftsman. [1]
Because of the difficulty of finding a strict equivalent, the French term has been retained by the translators of Levi-Strauss, who uses bricolage to describe a characteristic feature of mythical thought.

Mythical thought, or the thinking that creates myth, expresses itself with a heterogeneous but limited repertoire of oddment left over from a variety of human endeavours. Its themes are a subset of a wider culture and already have their own meaning, but they can be rearranged in new combinations and contexts. Mythical thought uses them because it has nothing else to hand, and cobbles them together to create new myths and stories through the process of intellectual bricolage. Bricolage in this context is not a primitive form of thought that is transcended through evolution, but a fundamental aspect of human intellectual activity; all societies use it to create their myths.

Like 'bricolage' on the technical plane, mythical reflection can reach brilliant unforeseen results on the intellectual plane. Conversely, attention has often been drawn to the mythopoetic nature of 'bricolage' on the plane of so-called 'raw' or 'naive' art, 'outsider art', in architectural follies like
the villa of Cheval, the postman. [2]

'The 'bricoleur' has no precise equivalent in English. He is a man who undertakes odd jobs and is a Jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself man but, as the text makes clear, he is of a different standing from, for instance, the English 'odd job man' or handyman.[3]

What can you do when you always walk in the same setting, if not dream?
As a distraction, in my dreams, I built a fairy palace.
(Ferdinand Cheval)

The analogy is worth pursuing since it helps us to see the real relations between the two types of scientific knowledge we have distinguished. The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project: his universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’, that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. [2]

Don’t need no Chevy, no Ford, no Dodge. Got my own hot Bricolage, John Horlivy
http://wordsworthonline.blogspot.nl

The set of the ‘bricoleur’s’ means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project (which would presuppose besides, that, as in the case of the engineer, there were, at least in theory, as many sets of tools and materials or ‘instrumental sets’, as there are different kinds of projects). It is to be defined only by its potential use or, putting this another way and in the language of the ‘bricoleur’ himself, because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that ‘they may always come in handy’. Such elements are specialized up to a point, sufficiently for the ‘bricoleur’ not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of actual and possible relations; they are ‘operators’, but they can be used for any operations of the same type. [4]

Consider him at work and excited by this project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it and, before choosing between them, to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer his problem. He interrogates all the different objects of which his treasury* is composed to discover what each of them could 'signify' and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize but which will ultimately differ from the instrumental set only in the internal disposition of its parts. A particular cube of oak could be a wedge to make up for the inadequate length of a plank of pine, or it could be a pedestal – which would allow the grain and polish of the old wood to show to advantage.[5]

Arthur Simms, "Globe, The Veld" (2004).
Metal, Wire, Plastic, Artist's Nails, Wood, Objects, 17" by 14"by 14"

2.1 The Craftsman

In Richard Sennett's perspective the craftsman is one who works with specific professionalism: "The carpenter, the technician in the laboratory and the conductor are all craftsmen because they are committed to the work for their sake. Their work is practical activities that are not only a means of achieving a goal."
The crucial thing is not what you do, but how to work. The craftsman sees the work as an end in itself. The craftsman does not form himself about his 'resources' and his 'attitude', but about professionalism. Technique for the craftsman is not an unconscious routine, but an engaged process in which skills are developed and refined:"The emotional gain of the workmanship is double: people get rooted in physical reality, and they are proud of their work."
The craftsman leaves behind concrete works, whereas the constant psychological self-processing without professional standards is an infinite process. The craft works in the optics release because the craft sets the scale for the work itself. According to Sennett, it takes 10,000 hours of work for a carpenter, a musician or a scientific expert to be able to master his subject. But mastery is not an endpoint. Even the master reflects on his work while it is being performed. Repetitions are for the violinist and the goldsmith not the same as monotony, but perceived as a rhythm: "Doing the same thing, again and again, is stimulating when organised in the future. The content of the routine can change and improve, but the emotional gain is the experience of the repeat."

The craftsman can work with resistance - those facts that stand in the way of the will.
Resistances themselves come in two sorts: found and made. Just as a carpenter discovers unexpected knots in a piece of wood, a builder will find unforeseen mud beneath a housing site. These found resistances contrast to what a painter does who scrapes off a perfectly serviceable portrait, deciding to start over again; here the artist has put an obstacle in his or her path. The two sorts of resistances would seem entirely unlike: in the first something blocks us, in the second we make our difficulties. Certain techniques are shared in learning to work well with both.

2.2 The Hand

"Technique has a bad name; it can seem soulless. That's not how people whose hands become highly trained view technique. For them, technique will be intimately linked to expression.Two centuries ago Immanuel Kant casually remarked: "The hand is the window on to the mind". Modern science has sought to make good on this observation. Of all the human limbs, the hands make the most varied movements, movements that can be controlled at will.
Science has sought to show how these motions, plus the hand's various ways of gripping and the sense of touch, affect how we think. That link between hand and head I will explore among three sorts of craftsmen whose hands become highly trained: musicians, cooks, and glassblowers. Advanced hand technique of their type is a specialized human condition but has implications for the more ordinary experience". [6]

2.3 The Craftsman vs the Artisan

Although Artisan and Craftsman are two words that are sometimes categorized as synonyms, there exists a key difference between these two words. First, let us define the words artisan and craftsman. An artisan is a skilled worker who makes things by hand. On the other hand, a craftsman is a worker skilled in a craft. The key difference can be observed in the object produced by an artisan and a craftsman. In the creation of an artisan, a spark of creativity can be found. However, in the case of a craftsman, the creation is a result of replication, more than creativity.

A craftsman is a worker skilled in a craft. There is a range of crafts that a craftsman can perfect in ranging from carpentry to pottery. A craftsman needs to have a lot of experience so that he can be skilled in creating various crafts. When a craftsman is new to a field, he often works under the supervision of a master craftsman.
In each country, some crafts are unique to the country or region. For example, in Sri Lanka, the creation of masks in various traditional forms is considered as a craft. However, along with the new technological development, most crafts are dying away due to the increase in various industries that replace the roles of the craftsmen with machinery.

An artisan is a skilled worker who makes things by hand. Artisans create various objects. This includes sculptures, jewellery, furniture, clothing, mechanical goods, tools, etc. The speciality of an artisan is that most of the objects that they create have a functional value. This is why a distinction can be made between an artist and an artisan. In the case of an artist, the objects have more of aesthetic value than anything else, but the objects created by artisans have both functional as well as aesthetic benefits. However, it must be highlighted that in some cases, the objects can have merely decorative value only.
It is believed that to be an artisan, the individual requires a lot of experience and creativity. Some can even excel to the levels of artists as well. In the ancient days, before the industrial revolution which resulted in the mass production of goods, artisans held a high position in the society as people consumed various objects from artisans. Even today, such objects have a high value on the market because they are handmade, hence carry a unique value. [7]

2.4 Bricolage in the artistic context and in the age of YouTube

In the artistic context, bricolage became popular in the early 20th century because funds were limited, and, for example, collage became popular. Surrealism, dada, cubism had the character of bricolage such as Picasso's collages, or Jean Tinguely with his sculptural machines in the dada tradition.
On YouTube, where you can often find references or ideas for bricolage projects, it's easy to find both small and large, simple and complicated bricolage works, 'inventions' and ideas as well as the engineer's idea or guidance. However, it can be difficult to distinguish ideas and projects, but the 'free approach' and recombining objects make a difference and the possibilities are great. For example, use a wiper motor from a car to make a robot arm.
It can also be difficult to distinguish between your own ideas and what you discover, when investigating using the easy information available today at, for example, YouTube. These opportunities for information or impressions Tinguely didn't have. Conversely, you were not influenced by the creativity of others when searching for information.

Le Safari de la Mort Moscovite, 1989, Jean Tinguely
Material / technique: Renault Safari, scrap iron, skulls, fabric, scythe, lamps, electric motor.
Size: 270 x 520 x 180 cm

2.5 The Villa of Cheval the Postman

Born in 1836, Ferdinand Cheval was a rural postman at Hauterives Drôme in southeastern France. During his rounds, he dreamed of building an ideal palace, one that would "outstrip the imagination". He went on dreaming for about twelve years without taking action. Like most people in his walk of life, he assumed architecture to be a matter for professionals and art to be the monopoly of a caste.
As he wrote in his autobiography: "I kept calling myself a madman and a fool. I was no bricklayer; I had never touched a trowel; no sculpture, I knew nothing of the chisel. I do not even speak of architecture; I had never studied it. I told no one about it, for fear of being ridiculed. I found myself ridiculous enough as it was".

"In 1879, on one of his daily rounds, he stumbled over a stone of unusual shape. It aroused his curiosity and led him to look for others like it.
"It was a sandstone. It was a sculpture so strange that it is impossible for man to imitate it: it represented all kinds of animals, all sorts of caricatures. I said to myself: since nature wants to do sculpture, I'll do my masonry and architecture".
For over thirty years, he went his daily round of fifteen miles with a wheelbarrow to bring home any stones of odd or fanciful shape that he could pick up in the hills and gullies. Public opinion had soon settled the matter: 'It's just a poor fool filling up his garden with stones.' Everybody was prepared to believe that it all came from a diseased imagination.
"People laughed at me, blamed me and criticized me, but as this kind of insanity was neither contagious nor dangerous, nobody thought it worthwhile calling in the mental doctor and so I was able to indulge my passion freely in spite of everything, turning a deaf ear to the scoffing of the crowd, for I knew that people always ridicule and even persecute the men they don't understand". [8]

"In his autobiography Ferdinand Cheval has some shrewd things to say about madness, which apply equally well to other makers of Art Brut.It was not, he says, because he was crazy that he built his Palace; it was because he built his Palace that he was called crazy, and if he had let his imagination carry him much further, he would have been interned". [9]

My foot had stumbled against a stone which almost made me fall: I wanted to know what it was. It was a stumbling block of such an unusual shape that I put in my pocket to admire it at my leisure.
Ferdinand Cheval

The Villa of Cheval the Postman, 1912

With primitive tools (a trowel and a few basins to mix cement in), he went to work in his spare time, which was mostly at night, and built his palace 85 feet long, 45 feet wide and 33 feet high.

3. Roman Signer, Time Sculpture

Biography

1938 Born in Appenzell, Switzerland
1966 Studied at the School of Design, Zurich
1969-1971 Studied sculpture at the School of Design, Lucerne
1971-1972 Studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw.
Since 1971 Lives and works in St.Gallen

In 1969 Roman Signer visited The Bern Kunsthalle's exhibition *Live in your hand*: *When Attitudes Become Form*, curated by Harald Szeemann. His visit to this exhibition became a kind of catalyst, and he has often indicated that the show was significant to his artistic development: "*When Attitudes Become Form*"… affected me greatly. My ideas were already there, but the exhibition showed me the language I needed to articulate them"

Roman Signer says that 1975 was a turning point in his practice because new opportunities developed. He bought a Super-8 camera and started filming his working process. He went into the countryside with a camera and made spontaneous and comic experiments that could be shot and used for documentation. This method also helped him to discover the explosions as a medium.
His attention shifted from physical objects to short actions. The film became a crucial means for developing his artistic awareness. He made Super-8 films until video cassettes arrived on the scene.(1989)

More than anything else, experiments are very crucial to Signer. Even when nobody is watching, the test is essential and enriching to him and gives him a good feeling of satisfaction.
"It's like a drug: when it works, there's an enormous feeling of delight. For me, this isn't just an art practice; it's an absolute necessity."
But, failure is an essential condition for experimentation - and making art. Practice things never happen as you imagine, because nature likes to do things otherwise.

Signer's works have acquired the label 'time sculptures'. They have the same work processes as traditional sculptures in three dimensions, but have been added another dimension: the dimension of time. His preference is to make objects that show the process and expanding the concept of sculpture, so the event itself is the sculpture.
The viewer can imagine the transformation of the materials or the free movement in the air of the process showed by live action, still photography and moving-image. The word 'anarchic' often attaches to his time sculptures and gives the idea of limitation and release of energy with fascination, ingenuity, swiftness, absurdity and humor.
Roman Signer's sculptural and performative approach often relies on instability, free-fall, melting, evaporation, or flow, explosion, flight, etc., which threaten the assembled elements and sometimes the artist himself. For that purpose he uses common objects: fans and radio controlled helicopters for suspension and flight; boots, bicycles, canoes, skis, rockets, and fireworks are often the favorites.

The first work he did with explosives and films as documentation was in 1975,
Kiste (Box 40x40cm), 1975. After the explosion, the fragments were marked with a white flag. The intension with this work was the expansion of the box's enclosed space into a different form. The documentation shows that there are more events (sculpture), the ignition, the explosion, the object that changes to fragments until the fragments have fallen.

*Kiste (Box 40x40cm),*1975

Kiste (Box 40x40cm),1975

Aktenkoffer (Attaché Case),1989
A concrete-filled briefcase is at a particular moment dropped by the artist from a helicopter at a height of about a hundred meters and crashes into a grassy field, making a deep crater; then the case was photo documented. The work could give an association to when a meteorite crashes to the ground. Simply done!

Aktenkoffer (Briefcase) ca 100 x 85 cm
Galerie Martin Janda, 2001

3.1 Time and Continuity: A Bergsonian View of Time Sculpture

For Bergson, it was a brainy delusion, symptomatic of imposing abstract mathematical thinking on time - mistaking time as analogous to space. Clock-time presents the passage of time as the succession of mathematically-divisible chunks. Physics characterizes space-time as a fourth dimension which can be geometrically plotted using spatial measures (light years, light seconds, parsecs, etc) in the same way as the universe's three flattened-out spatial dimensions. But, Bergson insisted, real-time can't be comprehended or represented using such models. Unlike clock-time or space-time, official, lived time possesses the characteristic of quality, not quantity. Bergsonian time theory asserted that through intuition, opposed to intellect, we can perceive time for what it is: a smoothly continuous duration marked by qualitative changes, not a stuttering sequence of mathematical stops and starts.
"In his book "*Time Sculpture*", the philosopher Paul Good argues that Signer's time sculptures are Bergsonian in spirit".[10]

Tisch mit Hut, 2005

3.2 Time in Pieces: A Bachelardian View of Time Sculpture

““What changes, endures”; “what has passed, though past, does not cease to act”: the idea of time as continuous duration threatens to reawaken the dilemma over time sculptures and tenses referred to earlier in this text. Is the past tense or the present tense truer to work? On balance, Good’s characterisation seems more in tune with the living quality invoked by present tense description: time sculptures somehow keep previous ‘nows’ alive within the present ‘now’ in which we view them. However, as noted, present-tense (or, as suggested in the introduction, in reality tenseless) descriptions of time sculptures seem ill-equipped to register the irrevocable pastness of the events which constitute the works.

Relativizing ‘now’ also relativizes the status of past events. This indicates a problem not just in a Bergsonian account of time sculpture, but with Bergson’s time theory per se, which has been criticized on the basis that it fails to articulate the simple pastness of the past and the absolute newness of the new. One such critical voice was Gaston Bachelard’s: “We must recognise the fact that new experience says no to old experience. Otherwise, we are quite evidently not up against a new experience at all,” he insisted. In “*The Dialectic of Duration*” Bachelard argued that real-time is, in fact, compatible with quantum theory. “The thread of time has knots all along it,” he wrote; time “with all its small quanta twinkles and sparks”. We, therefore, experience time as discontinuous - as a dialectical rhythm alternating between an intellectually-based temporal awareness and a kind of reposeful ‘switching off’ of time-consciousness. It’s a rhythm with which human minds deal very well, he argued, if they’re given some training and thinking space to do it. “Our mind, in its pure activity, is an ultra-sensitive time detector. It is very good at detecting the discontinuities of time.”

For Bachelard, recognising that “time can break” was crucial to understanding that time takes, it deprives us of things - material objects, memories, other people, one’s existence - absolutely and irretrievably. In his view, the Bergsonian idea of duration fudged the issue of absolute change. Bergsonism in general - ” so rich, so multifarious and mobile that it cannot be contradicted” - drew up a falsely comforting picture of existence that banished the threat of drastic, catastrophic transformation. “In Bergsonian conditions, life cannot go in fear of total failure,” he argued.”[11]

“Catastrophic events are conclusive and definitive. In classical drama, catastrophe brings the action of the tragedy to an end - it’s a terminus, not a state of transition.
Bachelard’s declaration that “time can break” responds to the sense that temporal experience may involve total rupture as well as mutation. Maybe, therefore,
time sculpture’s catastrophic dimension makes it more Bachelardian than Bergsonian. Maybe the thesis that time sculptures in some paradoxical way keep previous states alive within present ones dilutes the gravity of catastrophic and ‘total failure’ as they are figured in Signer’s work.”[12]

Stühle mit Raketen, 2011

“This characterizes temporal discontinuity in tragic terms. But definitive change can also be a benefit, and the awareness of transience can increase the preciousness of an experience. (Freud made an economic comparison: “transience value is scarcity value in time.”) Maybe Bachelard’s theory more vividly articulates the delicious, unrepeatable surprises that many of Signer’s experiments issue in. One’s first viewing, on film, of the shutters of the Kurhaus Weissbad, simultaneously propelled open by live fireworks (*Aktion Kurhaus/Kurhaus Action, 1992*) triggers an unrevisitable thrill of pure delight. So does *Tisch mit Hut* (*Table and Hat*, 2005). A hat sits on a table; suspended from the gallery ceiling, a garden leaf-blower is aimed at the hat. Visitors are invited to activate the blower. The consequence is absurd, stupidly obvious: the jet of air will cause the hat to fly off the table. And of course that’s what happens - but the experience of the event is sharp, utterly ‘other’ to the anticipation. Activated, the work induces a momentary, unique blend of hilarity and shock. “Before intuition, there is the surprise ... We need the concept of the instantaneous to understand the psychology of beginning”, Bachelard argued. “Embracing the possibility of radical, absolute newness means accepting the extinction of the old.” [13]

“But here, once again, we need to pull the brakes. Where is this argument leading? One implication might be that time sculptures will tend to lead exquisitely short lives, dazzling and delighting us in a fleeting, unrecapturable instant. To embrace this idea would be to endorse a particular, yet significant, belief as to the true nature of poetic experience. But the problems continue. When, correctly, do all these instants start and finish, beginnings begin, and endings end? With its reassertion of temporal fragmentation -”we ... need to arithmetice Bergsonian duration to give it more numbers,” Bachelard joked.
The Bachelardian take on time sculpture threatens to revive the itch of infinite divisibility that the Bergsonian version so nicely resolved. Maybe that’s not so grave in itself; but Bachelard’s theory also harbours a problem about memory - one that harks back to the thesis of presentism couched upon in the introduction.
If time is fragmented, there can be no such thing as a continuous stream of consciousness. Qua Bachelard, ‘psychic continuity’ is an intellectual montage, improvised from ‘the memory of events that have created us at the certain instants of our past. Our personal history is therefore simply the story of our disconnected actions and, as we tell it, it is with the help of reasons and not of duration that we consider ourselves to be giving it continuity. We retain no trace of the temporal dynamic, of the flow of time. Knowing ourselves means finding ourselves again in these scattered personal events.”[14]

Bachelard's argument doesn't go so far as to say that memories are fictions. But it begs the question of why new experience should matter. If our sense of existential continuity is a rationalization that's invented and reinvented in each new moment of consciousness, how do we detect changes, discern when the narrative has been interrupted and rewritten?

As the old vanishes and is replaced by the new, what similar materials remain that might allow us to comprehend or appreciate the original's newness? Despite its dialectical ingenuity, Bachelard's temporal schema might be said to share one of the difficulties bugging the doctrine of presentism. While not exactly denying the past the status of reality, it seems to place experience, in a sense, beyond retrieval. By implication, this re-categorizes time-sculptural objects and documents, labelling them "forensic evidence", banishing them from the agora of live propositions and shunting them off into cold storage - a most inappropriate location.

Kurhaus Action (1992)


Kurhaus Action (1992)

Kurhaus Action (1992)
It started just as a drawing (1982), and a memory of an image of flying chairs. Drawing inspiration from other works he developed the idea. He eventually found an abandoned hotel that he was allowed to use. The building had seven identical windows on the second floor. He would have seven identical chairs flying freely out of the windows, but it required both ingenuity and technical skills.
So, seven stools each equipped with four electric detonators, twenty-eight in total, had to be detonated simultaneously (calibrated to a thousandth of a second) so they could follow the same trajectory. In the end, a small explosion triggered the catapulting. It worked perfectly and looked like an ornament with the feeling of liberation - and then the 'time sculpture' was made.

4. Buster Keaton

The General, 1926

Buster Keaton Biography

Joseph Frank Keaton was born on October 4, 1895, in Piqua, Kansas, to Joe Keaton and Myra Keaton. Joe and Myra were Vaudevillian comedians with a famous, ever-changing variety act, giving Keaton an eclectic and exciting upbringing. In the earliest days on stage, they travelled with a medicine show that included a family friend, illusionist Harry Houdini. Keaton himself verified the origin of his nickname 'Buster', given to him by Houdini, when Keaton, at the age of three, fell down a flight of stairs and was picked up and dusted off by Houdini, who said to Keaton's father Joe, also nearby, that the fall was 'a buster.' It was normal for Joe to throw Buster around the stage, participate in elaborate, dangerous stunts to the reverie of the audience. Their act soon gained the reputation as one of the toughest in the country, for their wild, physical antics on stage.

Buster Keaton as a child

This made him a show business veteran by the age of 21.

While in New York looking for work, a chance run-in with the wildly successful film star and director Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, resulted in Arbuckle asking him to do a small part in the film he was shooting -- *The Butcher Boy*. It went exceptionally well, and, by the end of the day, Buster was dying to get inside the film camera, understand the cutting process, the projection room and all of the mechanics. He was almost instantly struck with the enormous potential of this medium and fascinated by it. Fatty, too, was excited about working with Buster and picked away at his reserve. Do another scene? Finish this film with us? Why don't you just stay on with us? Keaton didn't need much arm twisting. He was hooked from the moment he first examined the motion picture camera.

By 1920, after making several successful shorts together, Arbuckle moved on to features, and Keaton inherited his studio, allowing him to begin producing his films.
In 1921, Keaton came into the powerful Talmadge dynasty, which he was already a part of when he got married to his first wife, Natalie Talmadge. The marriage gave Keaton two sons.
Keaton's independent shorts soon became too limiting for the growing star. After a string of favorite films like *One Week* (1920), *The Boat* (1921) and *The Cops* (1922), Keaton made the transition into the feature film.

One week, 1920

His first feature, *Three Ages* (1923) was produced similarly to his shorts and was the start of a new era in comedic cinema, where it became apparent to Keaton that he had to put more focus on the storylines and characterization. the last two he regarded as his best films.

One week, 1920

At the most renowned of Keaton's comedies is *Sherlock Holmes, junior* (1924), which used cutting edge special effects that received mixed reviews as critics and audience alike had never seen anything like it and did not know what to make of it.

Modern day film scholars liken the story and effects to Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), for its high-level concept and ground-breaking execution.

At the height of his popularity, he was making two features a year and followed *Three Ages* (1923), with *Our Hospitality* (1923), *The Navigator* (1924) and *The Generator* (1926), the last two he regarded as his best films.

T*he General*, 1926

Keaton's Civil War epic *The General* (1926) kept up his momentum when he gave an audience the biggest and most expensive sequence ever seen in the film at the time. At its climax, a bridge collapses while a train is passing over it, sending the train into a river. This excited the audience but did little for its long-term financial success. The audience did not generally respond well to the film, disliking the higher level of drama over comedy, and the main character being a Confederate soldier.

After a few more silent features, *The College* (1927) and *The Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, Keaton signed with MGM in 1929 a business decision that he would later call the worst of his career.

> Too many writers had taken the condescending view that Keaton didn't understand himself, not being tutored in psychology, and didn't know what he was doing when he made his movies because he insisted he was only trying to be funny. It's no wonder he creates confusion. He was an artist and a comedian, director and performer, stuntman, subtle actor, the icon of the machine age and lyrical portraitist of America's past.

In 1964 Jean-Patrick Lebel concluded one of the first books devoted to Keaton with the comment, "Another study is called for that would examine the origins of Keaton's kind of comedy, and look for its significance in respect to that reality from which he issued. In other words, Keaton's comedy must be returned to its real origins, and through a biographical, sociological and aesthetic study of the man Keaton, one might discover what the comedy Keaton incarnates is the authentic expression of".[15]

For Keaton, there was only one way to convince the audience that what they were seeing was real. He had to actually do it. He was so strict about this that he once said “Either we get this in one shot…” or we throw out the gag.
And this is why he remains vital nearly 100 years later.
Not just for his skill, but for his integrity. That’s him.
And no advancement in technology can mimic this. Even now, we’re amazed when filmmakers do it for real. But I think he did it better 95 years ago. So no matter how many times you’ve seen someone else pay homage to him.
Nothing beats the real thing.

His first film with MGM was *The Cameraman* (1928), considered to be one of his best silent comedies, but the release signified the loss of control Keaton would incur, never regaining his movie-making independence.
He made one more silent film at MGM entitled *Spite Marriage* (1929) before the sound era arrived.
His first appearance in a film with sound was with ensemble piece *The Hollywood Revue* of 1929, though, despite the popularity of it and his previous MGM silents, MGM never allowed Keaton his production unit, and increasingly reduced his creative control over his films.

The Cameraman, 1928

By 1932, his marriage to Natalie Talmadge had dissolved when she sued him for divorce. Natalie changed the children’s last names from Keaton to Talmadge and disallowed them to speak about their father or seeing him. (about ten years after, when they became of age, they rekindled the relationship with Keaton).

Since the fifties, Buster Keaton has been treated as a genius and an honorary member of the avant-garde, compared to Beckett and Kafka, called a surrealist and a poet. Buster was deeply uncomfortable with the intellectuals who claimed him as their hero, and he had reason to be wary of highbrows.
He has attracted more attention from intellectuals than any other silent comedian, and the body of writing devoted to him offers a variety of lenses that clarify or distort his nature. Keaton repudiated attempts to elevate him to a higher rank in the cultural pantheon, but it was the peculiarity and ingrained seriousness of his work that attracted his sometimes humourless admirers.

5. Der Lauf Der Dinge (The Way Things Go)**, Fischli and Weiss, 1987**

David Weiss:
First there were the '*Equilibriums*'. We were sitting in a bar somewhere and playing around with the things on the table, and we thought to ourselves, this energy of never-ending collapse - because our construction stood for a moment and then collapsed before we built it up again - should be harnessed and channelled in a particular direction.

Der Lauf Der Dinge (The Way Things Go), 1987

Boris Groys said:
"To produce unusual objects is as exceptional as to use ordinary objects unusually. And it is precisely this myth of the exceptional subjectivity of the artist that Fischli and Weiss systematically question. They produced artworks, but they produced them in a way that suggests that they could potentially be produced by anybody". [16]

Biography

Peter Fischli
1952 Born in Zurich, Switzerland
1975-1976 Studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Urbino, Italy
1976-1977 Studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna, Italy

David Weiss
1946 Born in Zurich, Switzerland
2012 Died in Zurich, Switzerland
1963-1964 Studied at the Kunstgewerbeschule, Zürich, Switzerland
1964-1965 Studied at the Kunstgewerbeschule, Basel, Switzerland


Sausage series, 1979

Fischli and Weiss started their collaboration in 1979 and worked together for 33 years. Their first group of photographs they called *'Sausage Series'.* And this set really generated the key terms that would run throughout their entire career: their trademark wit and humour, working in series; and their interest in popular culture.
In their works, they have thematised and analysed the symbolic value of both arts in general and their art in particular. All the works produced by them up to this time have been structured as different collection: of simulated 'ready-mades': flowers, views of airports, clay figures, travel videos, philosophical and non-philosophical questions, etc.

The materials pictured are lowly, and their forms often mangled or distressed; the arrangements in which they are placed seem awkward, and colour, when it appears, does so apologetically and with a shrug.
The series is thus infinitely open - not only in the sense that they are open to the outside world, but also in the sense that they are open to themselves.
As Fischli has remarked, "In the *Equilibres (A quiet afternoon*), 1984-86) we were slightly relieved of the question of which object must be selected according to which criteria: it doesn't matter whether the colour of the cigarette lighter that establishes and maintains the balance is a beautiful green or not - if it stays up, then it can only be good".

The Equilibres pieces led to the film *The Way Things Go*. Playing with the idea of balance and using slapstick humour the artists devised a chain of causal events – a trash bag hits a tire, which rolls down a piece of wood; explosions, fires, bubbling chemicals – one dangerous and unpredictable act after another. The viewer is held in a state of suspense but rather than feel fear the overriding emotion is amazement.
The process can be seen to occur quite clearly throughout *The Way Things Go*, with everyday objects removed from the everyday and performing tasks that are both the same as those they are used to - filling, falling, emptying, rolling - and different, tasks that they would and would not ordinarily do.
Be aware of the significant shifts that are taking place. Where a barrier of sugar acts as a dam against frothing white liquid for a time, until it becomes saturated, dissolves and then is breached, allowing the liquid to move on. When this breakthrough might occur, it is difficult to say, and there is little to do to accelerate this process, even had we been able so to intervene; like Bergson, we must wait, willy-nilly for the sugar smell.

Shot over many months in an empty wares studio in Zürich, this 16mm film, just under 30 minutes in duration, is related to the series of photographs the artists had made only previously.
It is clear that *The Way Things Go* does not depend on such technical perfection; we can see how it was made, and where the cuts are, but that does not detract from the work at all. Indeed, it would seem to enhance it in some way, showing us that it is part of an ongoing process of creation in which we too are involved, rather than an automatic procedure of which we are no part. It is widely agreed that timing is crucial importance to comedy. In sensing a pause, we are made aware of an act occurring time and of the possibility that it might have happened in time, and of the possibility that it might have occurred rather earlier, or somewhat later.

5.1 Duration

“Gaston Bachelard seems particularly relevant when considering *The Way Things Go*.
He developed a new theory of science based on epistemological obstacles and breaks. Bachelard believed that these epistemological obstacles, or unconscious patterns or structures of knowledge, were widespread within the science, and often hindered the development of new forms of scientific knowledge by denying the possibility of conceiving of new types of questions, let alone providing new answers”.[17]
“As such Bachelard’s concept of duration opposed to that of Bergson’s duration was multiple and discontinuous, and should be considered as a series of micro-events:
“When we still accepted Bergson’s notion of duration, we set out to study it by trying very hard to purify and consequently impoverish duration as it is given to us. Our efforts would always encounter the same obstacle, for we never managed to overcome the lavish of duration. In due course, as one might expect, we tried to find the homogenous nature by confining our study to smaller and smaller fragments. Yet we were still dogged by failure… However small the fragment, we had only to examine it microscopically to see in it a multiplicity of an event””.[18]

The Way Things Go also has a lot of shifts in time between the slow and the quick, the calm and the catastrophic, which is why it makes us laugh so. Perhaps we might think of the epic within *The Way Things Go* as somewhat parodic, then ‘brought low’ represented on a plane equal with contemporary life in an everyday environment, in the low language of contemporaneity.
Why we find the objects - and their actions, their reactions - so amusing? We become aware of incongruity, and at that moment it makes us laugh.
Jeremy Millar wrote: “I would go further and say that *The Way Things Go* is a master in comic delivery, almost a compendium of techniques used by great comedians.”

6. The world turned upside down

In 2013 there was an exhibition in the Mead Gallery, Warwick University, Britain, entitled *The world turned upside down*: *Buster Keaton, sculpture and the absurd. The World Turned Upside Down* places the work of over twenty international artists working in film, sculpture, installation art and performance, in direct relation to Buster Keaton's films, to track a lineage from the melancholic and at times anarchic comedy of Keaton to the dry wit of conceptual practice.
By examining Keaton's approach to art through making – the processes of failure, risk and repetition – the exhibition also establishes a nuanced presentation of the developmental relationship between slapstick film, sculpture and performance and highlights parallels within modern and contemporary sculptural practice which continue to resonate today. Slapstick is unsurprisingly featured in much of the show through artists such as Wood & Harrison, Roman Signer, Marcel Broodthaers and Miranda Pennell. This side to the works linked in all cases to a wanton abandoned and a celebration of failure.
Fischli and Weiss's film *The Way Things Go* was shown together with Bas Jan Ader (*Broken Fall*), made in Amsterdam Bos, Amsterdam, and Gordon Matta-Clark (*Splitting*). These works exhibited along with 3 of Buster Keaton's early films *One Week*, *The Cameraman* and *The Boat*, as a mirror or relationship.

Gordon Matta-Clark (*Splitting*), 1974

7. Roman Signer vs Buster Keaton

Signer has stated that Buster Keaton's *The General* is one of his favorite films, a very beautiful film, a historical parody during the civil war, and as a matter of course, it is about a relentless pursuit, where Buster Keaton is on foot, making use of trains, hand truck and bike. In connection with an exhibition in St. Gallen in 2003, Roman Signer had the film running throughout the exhibition, which would help to show Signer's studies and workflow.
The use of everyday objects highlights comparisons, and the film is worth showing because there are so many key aspects of Signer's work from Keaton's production. *The General* belongs to at least three movie genres: comedy, historical, and chase.

In comparison to Buster Keaton's film *The General*, Signer travels from St. Gallen to Stromboli with his suitcase, creating artistic installations and actions.

But many believe that there are in Roman Signer's works more references to Keaton's film *The Navigator* than to *The General*.
The navigator is placed on board of an abandoned ship whose cabins, tires, portholes, fixtures and fittings serve as raw material for its humourous episodes. Like *The General* with its beloved steam engine, *The Navigator* is one of different Keaton films organized around a single giant prop.
Signer's work with the simultaneous flying-open of the Kurhaus Weissbad's shutters, for instance, strongly resembles the moment in *The Navigator* when the ship lists and a row of cabin doors swing open in uncanny, magical unison. Elsewhere, Keaton's character is embroiled in a glorious comedy of repetition as a gale blows away, one by one, his absurdly extensive supply of hats.

8. Failure

Samuel Beckett: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

The works of Roman Signer have a tendency to be incomplete or failed in the case of something unexpected appears and creates a success. If this doesn’t happen, it doesn’t matter. The important thing in this case is not if the artist loses or fails, but that he is willing to accept the idea of not achieving perfection.
Happenings, which favorize and use explosives over construction, refer to weight and the forces of mechanics. In his short actions the purpose is to create shapes, which are random, or that it doesn’t go as expected.

Nevertheless, talking of failure is not just drawing on a melancholic, radical doubt, but finding the possibilities between intent and realization. There is also a potential and pleasure in failure. A concept, that has long been used in art examinations – art production, which can actually be seen as an activity where doubt lies in the wait, and where failure is not always unacceptable behavior.

Signer's 'accident sculptures' use experiments to test things out, with the proceedings documented as evidence. In *56 Small Helicopters* (2008) he sets off a swarm of insect-like model helicopters in a room far too small for their movement to be unimpeded. One by one they collide, and fail in a joyful choreography of not working.

56 Small Helicopters 2008

Fischli notes: “For us, while we were making the piece, it was funnier when it failed, when it didn’t work. When it worked, that was more about satisfaction.”
Perfection is satisfying, but failure is engaging, driving into the unknown. After all, if an artist were to make the perfect work, there would be no need to make another one.

Fischli and Weiss’s *The Way Things Go* takes the issue of tinkering with gravity one step further, setting it in motion. It is staged with exciting technical means, inventive ‘do it yourself’ items and a carefully calculated flow. It took two years of shooting the sequences to put the film together.
This artificial effect contributes to the shift to the fun and childish side of their artistic discourse, while proposing another underlying theme: order or chaos? With sophisticated simplicity, without big tirades, these two artists work with humour, the contrasts, nuances and the fragile balance that determines life. Their work is available to all audiences; informed viewers or curious visitors can all find something to feed their curiosity.

In 1920, Buster Keaton released his first solo film, *One Week*, at around the same time as Duchamp was working on *The Large Glass* (*The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*). *One Week* uses beautifully executed visual jokes to tell the story of a man’s doomed attempts to build a flat-pack house - the utopian modernist readymade - for his bride. Keaton not only performed his own stunts; he also designed the mechanics by which the scenes were created, along the way inventing shots and editing sequences that have now become the accepted syntax of cinema. Viewed shot by shot, these scenes undermine certainties about the world we inhabit and represent the inevitability of failure when we try to exert control.

9. Afterword

When I started at the Rietveld Academie almost 5 years ago, I remember that the first night a clip from a Buster Keaton film was shown, *One Week*. Newly wed, he has to assemble a 'build yourself a house kit' for his wife. Doors and windows end up in the wrong places,
the kitchen is on the second floor, the roof is smaller than the wall perimeter. A completely unsuccessful house.

The clip was, as I recall, used to tell us about construction and demolition, and about failure. This was the first time I saw slapstick in an artistic perspective.

At the beginning of year 3 I was doing some experiments. I was told to look at a Swiss artist called Roman Signer, who often made sculptures with energy. The works were created from everyday objects, and were often built out in the open, surrounded by nature. These sculptures were difficult to put in a specific artistic category.

Around the same time I became aware of the Swiss duo Fischli & Weiss with their video *The Way Things Go*, when I was planning on building a 'Painting Machine' and create a transformation and a movement/flow.
This work ended up half sculpture with paint flowing from various directions, half performance.

The word 'bricolage' I found in a book in my 4th year, while trying to find a more critical approach to a concept.

So these artists became part of my considerations when working on my thesis.
It might as well have been Bas Jan Ader and his series of *Falls*, which can be about 'being stuck' or 'failure. Likewise Erwin Wurm with his simple *One Minute Sculpture*, or Panamarenko with his huge self-constructed, but not simple machines.

These artists have inspired me to do performance, build sculptures and machines
in a clumsy way.
Furthermore I am inspired by constructing, demolishing, not having to be perfect, to be a success. Allowing things to happen rather than letting yourself be stopped.

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