I DUN GOOD:

Making interactive objects that uncover conditions underlying 'protest' on social media

Lauren Edmonds

Queensland College of Art

Griffith University

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Bachelor of Fine Art with Honours

Supervisors:

Dr Tim Mosely

Dr George Petelin

October 2015

Contents

Abstract

This research sets out to develop and discover studio methods for making interactive objects that are able to critically engage participants, whilst uncovering uncomfortable conditions underlying protest and social action on social media. A multi-method research process is employed, combining practice-led and heuristic research methodologies. It considers Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and Walter Benjamin's *The Author as Producer* to form a critical framework to recognise and understand key areas of concern regarding interactive methods and protest actions on social media in terms of spectacle, processes of production and participation. A set of promising methods are recognised in relation to Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect such as interruptions, humour and montage. These are explained and evaluated through the analysis of interactive works.

Statement of Originality

This work 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.

(signed) _____   Date: _____

Lauren Edmonds

Acknowledgements

List of Images

Introduction

When this project began I was making interactive automaton objects that draw attention to constructed 'images' and spectacularised media events surrounding Australian politicians. The work *They liked the onion* [Fig 1] directly refers to the viral circulation of a six second Vine[1] video uploaded by ABC News. It shows the then Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott biting into a raw, unpeeled onion.[2] The video's viral spectatorship quickly informed media outlets nationally and internationally resulting in the production of media and television coverage.

Fig 1

They liked the onion 2015
Mixed media automaton
28 x 16 x 15.5cm

With their dependence on participant interaction to animate the images, I was interested in how these objects draw the spectator in to become a participant in the spectacle making. I had hoped to use this to critically engage the participant to consider their role in the production and circulation of spectacles, particularly on social media. However, the objects often failed to critically engage participants and bring to light the issues I sought to interrogate. Instead participants would succumb to the novelty of the interaction and found complacent amusement in interpreting the objects as simply ridiculing political figures. In many ways this project looks at addressing this failure by developing methods to make interactive objects that critically engage the participant to consider underlying conditions of social media in relation to processes of production, spectacle and participation.

As this project progressed the content of my work shifted focus on spectacularised Australian politics to critically questioning and exposing conditions surrounding the use of social media in

---

[1] Vine is a video sharing website where users are able to produce, share and watch 6 second loop videos.
[2] ABC News, "Prime Minister Tony Abbott eats an onion, skin and all, while touring an onion farm in Tasmania," Vine, last modified 13 March 2015, https://vine.co/v/O9deFBO6HZW.

protest or social action. I am particularly interested in interrogating expectations surrounding social media's promising appearance to break down barriers in production and social relations, and its capacity for mass participation. This leads me to my inquiry question: How can I create interactive objects that critically engage participants and uncover conditions underlying 'protest' and social action on social media, particularly regarding processes of production, spectacle and participation? I have taken a multimethod approach in this research, combining Practice-led and heuristic processes.

Patricia Leavy notes the 'congruency' between qualitative research and artistic practice in that they aim to, "…shed light on some aspects of the social world and requiring that the researcher possess flexibility, creativity, intuition, storytelling proficiency, analytical ability, and openness."[3] Heuristic methodology relies on qualities such as indwelling, intuition, focus and tacit knowledge allowing for multiplicity, flexibility and openness to discover unanticipated areas of inquiry, meanings and knowledge.[4] I have integrated the 6 phases of heuristic research as outlined by Clark Moustakas[5] with my practice-led methodology which has been considered in structuring this paper.

The first section of this paper will act to define key terms, concerns and concepts of this inquiry and in doing so begin to contextualise this research in its field and form a theoretical framework. This resonates with the first two phases of heuristic research, initial engagement and immersion.

In the next section I will begin to recognise and define a studio method of distancing in order to uncover conditions and critically engage participants, appointing the heuristic phases of illumination and explication. This will be framed through an understanding of Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect and explained through the analysis of interactive works by other practitioners.

The final section will evaluate my studio outcomes from this project in terms of achieving my research aims, with particular focus on methods of distancing and exposing conditions using interruptions, humour and montage.

---

[3] Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009).
[4] Clark E. Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 1990).
[5] Ibid., 28-32.

I.　**Framework & Context** (Initial Engagement & Immersion)

Overall this section serves to contextualise this inquiry and in establishing a theoretical framework. The initial engagement phase of this inquiry is the process of defining the terms of the problem I wish to illuminate or answer.[6] The first subsection will introduce key texts that form my theoretical framework and provides a brief historical context in regards to spectacle, processes of production and participation. The second will define my use of interactivity and consider key criticisms and concerns of this method.

The immersion phase of this inquiry requires the researcher to become fully immersed in the question; everything the researcher encounters that can be connected to the inquiry becomes material to critically engage with to draw understanding from.[7] Given the practice-led component of this inquiry, my studio work contributes a significant part of this material. However this heuristic process has been particularly constructive in my critical investigation into underlying conditions of social media in protest and social action. The third subsection will discuss my findings and understandings developed through a sustained critical focus on my research in my everyday engagement with the internet.

Spectacle, Processes of Production and Participation

Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle and Walter Benjamin's critical theories on political art and processes of production remain prevalent in contemporary discourse surrounding spectatorship, participation and the politics of art. Debord was a founding member of Situationist International[8] (SI), to which the 'spectacle' was a central concept. Debord's 1967 text *The Society of the Spectacle*[9] critiques a society where capitalism with its characteristics of zealous mass production and consumption have resulted in passive spectators, societal alienation and the valuing of representations over the authentic. He identifies concerns that are potent to creating political art in a society where, "All community and all critical sense are dissolved…"[10]

---

[6] Ibid., 15.
[7] Ibid., 28.
[8] Situationist International: a social revolutionary group of artists and intellectuals from 1957- 1972
[9] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).
[10] Ibid. thesis 25

Walter Benjamin in *The Author as Producer*[11] shares similar concerns to Debord. Benjamin states, "Social relations… are determined by production relations."[12] He advises artists to make art politically by transforming existing processes of production and break social barriers between the 'intellectual' status of the producer and the public in distributing power in the production process. This text resonates with Debord and SI theory as it identifies the need to mend a fractured society as a result of zealous mass production. In transforming processes of production, Benjamin proposes an approach that he suggests will incite the passive spectator into critical thought or action, outcomes which I judge the effectiveness of my own work.

Since the early 20th century artists have attempted to diminish social barriers as identified by Debord and Benjamin by playing with ideas of audience participation.[13] A prominent example from the 1960s is the Fluxus Movement. Artist George Maciunas and founding member of Fluxus created a collage-text 'manifesto' for the group in 1963 in which it states:

> Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectual", professional and commercialized culture. PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art… promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be grasped by all peoples, not only critics dilettantes and professionals.[14]

The works produced through these efforts were political in their process of production. Displays of skill and use of valuable materials were unnecessary, they broke down barriers between various art forms, performed and presented art outside established art institutions and invited the audience to become active participants in their performances.[15]

Since the 1990s there has been a surge in artistic interest in participatory art as a 'politicalised working process'.[16] Claire Bishop notes the significance of the spectacle to participatory methods.

---

[11] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1998).

[12] Ibid., 87.

[13] Earliest examples of artists experimenting with interactive methods in the Western art canon can be traced back to Dada artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst.
Söke Dinkla, "From Participation to Interaction: Towards the Origins of Interactive Art," in *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*, ed. Lynn Hershman-Leeson (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996).

[14] George Maciunas. "Fluxus Manifesto," 1963, Offset. "Unpacking Fluxus: An Artist's Release," MoMA, last modified 30 June 2010, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/06/30/unpacking-fluxus-an-artists-release.

[15] Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (2001).

[16] Art historian and professor Claire Bishop uses the term participatory art to describe works that involve many people collaboratively, and the, "participation in which people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance."
Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012), I.

Debord's critique strikes to the heart of why participation is important as a project: it rehumanises a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production.[17]

Participation and Interactivity

Participatory art have become overwhelmingly respected in art discourse, to the extent it can become exempt from art criticism and valued instead on ethical precepts.[18] On the contrary, interactive methods in political art are often criticised. Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds define the term 'interaction' as being used to describe interplays between people and artefacts, often implying

> …a two-way process in which, we expect to give, as well as to receive, an expectation that is fundamental to the kinds of interactive experiences we are likely to encounter throughout our lives.'[19]

The audience also has no part in the conception and development processes but in the reception, their actions effect the expression and meaning of the work.[20] As I am the sole creator of my objects and the participant's interaction is with an artefact, my methods identify as interactive rather than participatory.

Criticisms of interactive methods can be partly attributed to the term 'interactivity' being highly associated with the mass production and consumption of technological goods. In the 1990s interactivity became a mantra in promoting technological goods, along with ideas of novelty and the enhancement of personal agency, commercially saturating interactive multimedia.[21] As more sophisticated technology is used in interactive art, concentration on technology can overshadow the quality or meaning of the interaction itself.[22] These associations have been important to consider in my own practice especially in relation to spectacle, hence contributing to my decision to keep interactions physical, use non-precious materials and limit use of technology to commonly used devices.

---

[17] Ibid., II.

[18] Ibid., 23.

[19] L. Candy, R. Ascott, and E.A. Edmonds, *Interacting: Art, Research and the Creative Practitioner* (Libri Pub., 2011), 1.

[20] Ibid., 4.

[21] Kristine Stiles and Edward A. Shanken, "Missing in Action: Agency and Meaning in Interactive Art," in *Context Providers: Conditions of Meaning in Media Arts*, ed. Christiane Paul Margot Lovejoy, Victoria Vesna (Intellect Books, 2011).

[22] Ibid.

The idea of fostering an individual's agency can also be found at the roots of criticism towards interactive art.[23] The quality of the interaction is often questioned given the pre-determined, structured conditions the artist intended and seemingly trivial forms of interaction, particularly with computer based works.[24] In deliberating this criticism, I will bring into consideration Benjamin's text. Given that the procedure and outcomes of the participation are pre-determined by the artist, there is no distribution of power between the artist and participant in the production process. Therefore this process fails to transform traditional processes of production and in eradicating the traditionally elevated role of 'intellectual' artist. An interactive work of this nature will not incite the spectator to take a critical position towards the work; instead they simply play out a planned series of actions without any fostering of their individual agency. Perhaps it can be said that Debord's passive spectator has become a passive participant. The interaction can become one of novelty, amusement, entertainment or spectacle rather than one that incites critical thought. This could perhaps be observed in the failure of my interactive automaton objects in that participants would not think past the novelty of the interaction or the initial amusement.

Participatory art is so well received in creating political art because the distribution of power in the production process is between the artist and the participants whilst fostering agency is a defining objective. This poses the question: if I am to follow Benjamin's proposal, how do I create objects that take myself out of the role of 'intellectual' artist in transforming artistic processes of production when I am the sole creator of the work and set the parameters of the participant's interaction? This has been a lingering question in this investigation, one made more complex when recognising the effects of the internet in transforming production relations.

Social Media: production, participation, protest, spectacle

I will now briefly discuss the conditions surrounding social media as a tool or platform for protest and social action that I hope to bring to light with my interactive works. Early in this project I began relating my observations of the apparent collapse of production and social barriers on social media to that in art and back to Benjamin and Debord's texts.

Social media theorist Clay Shirky notes that, "Every time a new consumer joins this media landscape a new producer joins as well… the idea that professionals broadcast messages to

---

[23] Stiles and Shanken, "Missing in Action: Agency and Meaning in Interactive Art," 31-54.
[24] Ibid.

amateurs is increasingly slipping away."[25] We can witness this looking back to the Vine video of Tony Abbott biting into an onion [Fig 2].[26] The distance between the professional producers of media and the everyday internet user is reduced through this chosen method of production, something I frequently observe on the internet and social media.

Fig 2

ABC News, via Vine

Prime Minister Tony Abbott eats an onion 2015

(screenshot)

Furthermore, art critic and media theorist Boris Groys proposes that given user generated media on the internet cannot be distinguished from any post-Conceptual artwork; art has entered a new era from mass art consumption to an era of mass artistic production as well[27]. In the media landscape, social media seemingly allows for what Fluxus set out to achieve: the purging of elitism, "intellectual" and professional culture and the promotion of art being for everyone. These assertions perhaps bring into question Benjamin's suggestion to change traditional processes of production to make art politically in a world where anyone can become a producer with the internet. This is an interesting point of discussion I am unable to investigate further in the scope of this project, but nonetheless has influenced my thinking.

Social media's promising appearance to transform production relations and therefore move towards re-connecting a fragmented society and distribute more power to the public makes it appealing as a tool or platform for protest. I speak here from observing countless examples of

---

[25] Clay Shirky, "How social media can make history," TED, June, 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history/transcript?language=en.

[26] Although being uploaded by the ABC, the clip in its production used processes that anyone on the web with a camera can use. The way in which it is filmed appears as if it could easily have been filmed by an amateur on a smart phone with its awkward cropping and jerky, handheld movements. Then it was uploaded to a well-known social media website that anyone on the web is able to make an account to produce and publish their own content.

[27] Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," in *Going Public*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood Julieta Aranda, Anton Vidokle, E-Flux Journal Series (Sternberg Press, 2010), 98.

its use in this way, but also from first person experience. [28] This appeal, in combination with the commercial pairing of multimedia technology with ideas of enhancing personal agency, has resulted in heightened expectations on power and effectiveness of participation, 'protest' and social actions performed online.

Some frequently encountered examples of social media being used in this way include: users uploading photos of themselves holding handwritten signs, posts asking users to share or like content suggesting real-world implications will concur, satirical or parody videos and YouTube channels, users changing profile pictures en masse, montaged images and videos, copious online petitions, political cartoons and illustrations, Facebook events organising protests, and satirical 'news' websites. I acknowledge that some of these may not be regarded as protest actions but simply as satire, parody or entertainment. I bring them into discussion as to point out the blurred distinction that often occurs on social media. From my observations I would say that often campaigns that attempt to use social media as their fundamental platform to conduct protest fall into becoming a stage for politicalised entertainment and spectacle, or a platform for self-gratification in a form of 'pseudo-protest' or 'pseudo-action'.

Unfortunately I am only able to analyse one example here in this paper. *The George Brandis Live Art Experience* using Facebook, Instagram and Twitter began in May 2015 in response to the Australian Government's funding cuts to the nonpartisan Australia Council of the Arts. [29] [30]

> We believe that the arts shouldn't be subject to Brandis' political control and personal tastes, so we set up THE GEORGE BRANDIS LIVE ART EXPERIENCE - a real-time, community-based art protest movement! The concept was simple - create artworks in which George Brandis is put into existing works of art or images from pop culture. [31]

---

[28] I began my own social media campaign titled *Can Newman Campaign* in 2012 against the Queensland Government's mass cuts and forced redundancies in public services. Essentially the campaign failed in my intentions to use predominately Facebook as a platform to organise a form of protest online.

[29] The project has gained 7 396 likes on Facebook, 956 followers on Twitter and 192 followers on Instagram. (as of 26/09/15)

[30] The plan was to cut $104 million in funding with the money instead going into launching a National Programme for Excellence in the Arts in which the committee would be hand-picked by the Minister for the Arts at the time, Senator George Brandis.

Annabel Ross, "The George Brandis Live Art Experience sends up the Minister for the Arts on social media over Australia Council cuts," The Sunday Morning Herald, June 4, 2015, http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/the-george-brandis-live-art-experience-sends-up-the-minister-for-the-arts-on-social-media-over-australia-council-cuts-20150604-ghgm7c.html.

[31] The George Brandis Live Art Experience, "The George Brandis TINA Experience!,"Pozible, accessed 15 September 2015, http://www.pozible.com/project/198989.

Followers send in the superimposed images of Brandis, Minister of the Arts at the time, which are then posted and shared on their media sites, often accompanied with a sarcastic or comical statement [Fig 3].

Fig 3

The George Brandis Live Art Experience

Facebook post (screenshot) 2015

Featuring montaged image using Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat*

If we assume that the project's main objectives are to make noise, spread awareness and bring attention to the unfairness of the funding cuts, it is largely ineffective in that it: places too much focus on Brandis as an individual and does not inform the spectator on the issue, the amusement and obscurity of the images detract from the issue at hand, and the reach of their spectatorship is governed by the algorithms set by the corporate companies running the media websites. This leads to a situation where the content's audience is limited to people already obtaining compatible perspectives.[32] The project becomes a consumable spectacle for the enjoyment of participants and followers with a mutual resentment and sense of humour. The project relies heavily on participatory efforts, driven by contributed content produced by followers. However this participatory element only functions as a trope. It virtually masses people together not in the direction of progressive action but in the way of politicised entertainment and self-gratification. This of many examples, points to the idealised expectations of participation in actions of protest performed online which I observe of a frequent basis.

In his essay, *The Political Power of Social Media*, Shirky notes that as the communications landscape gets denser and more participatory, "…the networked population is gaining greater

---

[32] The people running the project have organised a few small exhibitions in real life spaces, but it is fair to say that these also have restricted audiences. Likewise, minimal real-life demonstrations have occurred with followers holding Brandis face masks, however invitation to participate in these were not well publically organised, if at all.

access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and enhanced ability to undertake collective action."[33] However, recent quantitative studies seem to suggest that the potential of social media lies in supporting an existing civil society and public sphere[34] and its effectiveness on social change is probably more evident in the long term, to be measured in years and decades rather than weeks or months. Furthermore, Shirky advises that social media is effective when it does not replace real-world action but is used to coordinate it.[35] These assertions seem disconnected to the apparent expectations of the public using social media in protest and social action I have identified in my own observations.

---

[33] Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011): 29.

[34] Meaning that the use of social media in push for social change "have the most dramatic effects in states where a public sphere already constrains the actions of the government." Ibid., 30.

[35] Ibid., 38.

II. Recognising a studio methodology
(Illumination & Explication)

In this section I begin to recognise and further define a studio methodology to make interactive objects that uncover conditions and critically engage participants. As seen in the heading, I have appointed the heuristic phases of illumination and explication to this section. The illumination phase of the heuristic method comes in moments of realisation when the researcher becomes aware of new connections and understandings.[36] This may mean awakening to something that had always been present but not in immediate awareness.[37] This was the case in this investigation when I was able to identify and define my own developing studio methods through understanding Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect.

Following illumination is explication, in which the researcher interrogates and examines what has been realised and illuminated.[38] I will do this by applying my developed understandings to the analysis of two interactive works by other practitioners.

Distancing and Exposing Conditions

In reflecting on the failure to critically engage participants through their interaction with my automaton objects, my initial thought was there needed to be something that takes them a step back in their thinking - reflect on their own role in the work itself and onto a broader societal media context. Later in this project I realised this idea of distancing the audience from the work resonates with the alienation effect[39] used by Brecht in his epic theatre. By furthering my understanding of Brecht's alienation effect I began to realise the extent to which the concept of distancing had been intuitively influencing my own choices in materials, processes and methods since the beginning of this project.

Benjamin presents Brecht's epic theatre in *The Author as Producer* as a successful example of transforming traditional processes of production in order to incite the passive spectator into critical thought.[40] Through the alienation effect, Brecht's epic theatre does not work to

---

[36] This follows the incubation phase, in which the researcher takes time to retreat from an intense focus on the inquiry to allow for tacit knowledge to process itself in the inner workings of the mind
      Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*, 29-30.
      [37] Ibid.
      [38] Ibid., 31.
[39] Also known as: Verfremdungseffekt , A-effect, distancing effect and estrangement
[40] "… [Brecht] succeeded in altering the functional relationship between stage and audience, text and production, producer and actor." Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 99.

reproduce conditions through dramatic processes but instead works to expose and uncover conditions through interruptions.[41] As Benjamin notes:

> … such interruption does not act as a stimulant; it has an organizing function. It brings the action to a standstill in mid-course and thereby compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action…[42]

Through methods and attributes such as montage, astonishment and humour, interruptions distance the audience from becoming complacent and emotionally involved in a theatrical spectacle. Instead interruptions expose conditions and incite spectators to take a critical stance towards the work.

> The art of epic theatre consists in arousing astonishment rather than empathy. To put it as formula, instead of identifying itself with the hero, the audience is called upon to learn to be astonished at the circumstances within which he has his being.[43]

Benjamin identifies montage as being a significant method employed by Brecht in creating interruptions in his plays as, "montage interrupts the context into which it is inserted."[44] He also identifies the effectiveness of humour in stating, "…there is no better starting point for thought than laughter; speaking more precisely, spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul."[45] Montage and humour have also emerged as prominent components of my own developing methods. With my interactive objects I hope to achieve a similar distancing effect as in Brecht's epic theatre, to critically engage participants and expose conditions surrounding social media being used in protest and social action.[46]

Analysis of works by others

I will now analyse two contemporary works to begin investigating how these identified methods and concepts may be applied to physical, interactive works. The first work is not

---

[41] Ibid., 100.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), 18.

[44] "The Author as Producer," 99.

[45] Ibid., 101.

[46] As I am working with objects, it may seem appropriate for me to consider the closely related Russian Formalist notion of 'defamiliarisation', coined by Viktor Shklovsky in 1917 in his essay *Art as Device.* Shklovshy argues that art's function is to make the familiar strange and in doing so creates a distance that allows the viewer to *see* the object rather than just *recognise* it. Both Brecht's alienation effect and the notion of defamiliarisation function in the distancing of the spectator to create a critical or heightened perceptive experience. However Brecht's alienation effect creates a distance in exposing situations and roles whereas in defamiliarisation, there is more of a focus on objects, their form and function. Given that my interests lie in interrogating roles and production in relation to the spectacle and actions of protest on social media, Brecht's alienation effect appeals more to my concerns. Both concepts however, in their similarity can be related to my own methods of distancing.

necessarily considered an artwork but is described as a 'social experiment' created earlier this year by Fashion Revolution.[47] Although encountering the work as a viral video[48] on YouTube, I will focus my analysis on the actual interactive work given my interest is making interactive objects.

A bright turquoise vending machine offering T-shirts for only 2 euro was set up in in Berlin [Fig 4]. On interaction, customers follow a prompt to select their shirt size on a touch screen. A short video appears which shows black and white photographs of sweatshop workers with text fading in and out that reads 'Meet Manisha…one in millions…making our cheap clothing…for as little as 13 cents an hour…each day for 16 hours' [Fig 5]. The question 'Do you still want to buy this 2€ T-shirt?' then appears and two options are provided, 'buy' or 'donate' [Fig 6].

Fig 4, 5, 6

Fashion Revolution

The 2 Euro T-Shirt - A Social Experiment 2015

Video stills from YouTube upload

The vending machine lures participants in, playing on consumer expectations and eagerness for a bargain. The video disrupts the typical transaction process and the participant is confronted with a brief personified account of how the product they sought to consume was supposedly produced. In this disruption and moment of shock, the conditions of the

---

[47] Devan Joseph, "There's a new vending machine that spits out $2 T-shirts with a big surprise," Business Insider Australia, May 6, 2015, http://www.businessinsider.com.au/t-shirt-vending-machine-educates-people-factory-working-conditions-2015-5.

[48] The well-polished video shows unexpected participants' shocked and dismayed responses to the work, all selecting the 'donate' option at the end. The video ends with text, 'People care when they know. Help us remind the world. Share this to start the Fashion Revolution.' The video now has over 6 500 000 views.

Fashion Revolution, "The 2 Euro T-Shirt – A Social Experiment," YouTube, April 23, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfANs2y_frk.

participants' expectations and consumer eagerness are exposed. Little, however, is really exposed on the issue the creators sought to bring participant's awareness to. Unlike in Brecht's epic theatre and in my own work, it provokes a strong emotional response, primarily on the lines of guilt and regret. The potential to create a critical distance is overrun by the emotional response generated. This is exemplified in participants' hastily, emotionally driven response to 'Donate' for a quick fix, without critically considering where this donated money would go or how this might help the people shown in the video.[49] Furthermore, in its manipulation of emotional responses, this work ironically resonates more with tactics of commercial advertising and mass consumption culture and hence, echoes Debord's critique of the spectacle in that all 'critical sense is dissolved'. In this sense it also fails to transform processes of production. This kind of emotional spectacle is what Brecht set to avoid in his epic theatre and why humour is often employed through astonishment, something that is absent in this work and that I choose to employ in my own work for this reason.

In Helmut Smits' interactive installation *Photo Tip* (2004) participants are able to sit as the hostage in a mock-up construction of a CNN broadcast of an extremist ransom video. The scene is simply constructed out of wood, print, sandbags and a chair [Fig 7]. A point is indicated with a wooden post and cutout, where a photo can be taken to capture the illusionistic set-up in an almost convincing photo [Fig 8].

Fig 7

Helmut Smits
Photo Tip 2004
Wood, print, sandbags, chair
220 x 244 x 450cm

---

[49] In fact donations where not actually planned or intended to be donated to a cause and instead were often returned to participants except in cases participants still explicitly wanted to donate the money even after knowing there was no real plan of donation in place.

Fashion Revolution, May 2015, comment on Fashion Revolution, "The 2 Euro T-Shirt – A Social Experiment," YouTube, 23 April 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfANs2y_frk.

Fig 8

Helmut Smits

Photo Tip 2004

An example of a photo taken at the allocated point

Astonishment, and perhaps even dark humour, is generated through the employment of montage. The work montages the serious representation of a news broadcast of a hostage situation with the function of photo-opportunistic stand-in cutouts often associated with festivity, fun, playfulness and entertainment. This estranges the spectator from the often emotionally provocative representations of likewise situations in the media. In this way it begins to uncover or lay bare the conditions of the spectacle surrounding media representations of similar situations encountered in real life. In their detachment, spectators are able to consider these conditions in a more critical way. The spectator's role and own conditions are directly thrown into the equation through the opportunity to interact with the work.

The interactive element of the work is so integrally connected to the meaning of the work that it avoids criticisms of the interaction being used simply as a trope or novelty. In terms of transforming processes of production, ultimately the terms of the interaction are still very structured and predetermined by the artist and there is no significant distribution of power in its production. However, the work does transform dominant expectations of participation and the ability to produce media as being rewarding or empowering experiences due to the work's uncomfortable nature.

If we compare Smits' work with Fashion Revolution's vending machine, we see two works that attempt to expose dark hidden truths or conditions by employing an element of astonishment or shock. However, the vending machine superficially attempts to bring the participant emotionally closer to the issue, manipulating the participant towards performing a certain action and employs tactics that reinforce the effects of the spectacle. Smits' work however acts to distance the spectator, expose conditions and allow the spectator to take up a critical position towards the work, resonating with Brecht's alienation effect and my own intentions.

15

I.   **Studio Outcomes** (Creative Synthesis[50])

This section will evaluate my studio outcomes from this project in terms of my central research aim of making interactive objects that can critically engage participants to consider underlying conditions of protest and social action performed on social media. In particular, conditions in relation to processes of production, spectacle, participation and heightened expectations. It will look at where and how I apply the methods outlined in the previous section, including: estranging and distancing, montage, humour, interruptions, and play on expectations. This section is divided into three subsections: Humour, The Object, and Physical Action.

Humour

By figuratively representing Australian politicians in my automaton objects, I unavoidably draw attention to their public personality. Humour's capacity to simultaneously unite and divide[51] results in the participant becoming complacent in their own position as they laugh at the political class, working against my notion of critically engaging participants. Additionally, this use of humour can easily be reduced to entertainment, similar to that in *The George Brandis Live Art Experience*. In "*We need more flags*" I decided to keep the figure absent for this reason [Fig 9].
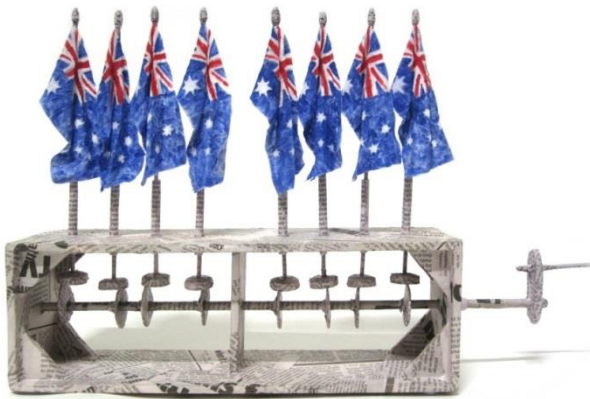
Fig 9

"We need more flags" 2015
Automaton
Foam core, balsawood rod,
tissues, newspaper

27 x38 x 10cm

---

[50] Creative Synthesis is the final phase of heuristic research. "Once the researcher has mastered knowledge of the material that illuminates and explicates the question, the researcher is challenged to put the components and core themes into a creative synthesis…." My creative output is of course my interactive objects. However, I have been making work throughout this project and not just at the end with my studio work becoming material to critically reflect upon throughout the earlier phases.
     Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*, 31-32.

[51] "It long has been noted that humor can simultaneously unite and divide those experiencing it; laughter 'produces simultaneously a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders'."
     John C. Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication," *Communication Theory* 10, no. 3 (2000): 317.in citing Konrad Lorenz, On aggression. (New York: Harcourt, 1963), 253

This work shows more potential in bringing attention closer to the conditions I want to expose, however it still lacks a disruption in my use of humour that unsettles the participant enough to incite a more critical engagement. This assertion led me to focus the humour and content of my work closer to my intentions of inciting the participant to consider their own position and role. Hence there is an evident shift towards uncovering conditions of social media in protest and social action, where I refine my focus on interrogating the actions and role of the everyday internet user.

In the work *I dun good*, humour functions in a way closer to my intentions. At one end of the work a self-inking stamp connects to a cardboard mechanism by a dangling string. On the other end of the mechanism is a stylus pen, positioned in front of a tablet [Fig 10, 11]. Pressing the stamp on supplied paper, the stylus pen moves forward and taps the tablet's surface, 'clicking' on a blue 'Like' or orange 'Sign Petition' button, interchanging every click, only to be separated by a brief circular loading symbol. The stamped image reads 'I DUN GOOD' [Fig 12].

Fig 10

I dun good 2015
Recycled cardboard, self-inking stamp, string, tablet, stylus pen, wood
115 x 77 x 30cm

Fig 11

I dun good 2015

Fig 12

I dun good (detail) 2015

The humour is not directed at a political personality but is turned towards the participant themselves. The humour comes as an interruption in a moment of astonishment[52], where uncomfortable conditions are revealed in the moment the participant reads the results of their actions. The work uses humour to do so in a way that does not shut down critical thought but organises it, similar to that in Brechtian Theatre.[53]

Humour works differently again in the work *What's goin' on?*. The work directly references a well-known and reoccurring video meme nicknamed 'He-man sings'[54]. Taking one memorable scene from the video[55], I reconstruct it into a physical form [Fig 13, 14, 15]. At one end of the work sits a set of pink headphones and a turning dial that participant's turn to animate the scene [Fig 16]. The participant's immediate view of the scene is blocked by cardboard and instead they look to a live camera view of the scene on a smartphone at the other end of the work, held by a selfie stick [Fig 17, 18]. The sound heard through the headphones is a slightly slowed down, edited snippet of audio from the meme which uses a rendition of the 1993 4 Non Blondes hit *What's Up?*.[56] The snippet has been cut to the following lyrics:

---

[52] I use the term 'astonishment' in similar terms to Benjamin's writings on Brechtian theatre, not necessarily to describe overwhelming surprise or amazement, but in the sense of seeing conditions in a new (preferably critical) light through a distancing effect.

[53] If we compare this work with Fashion Revolution's vending machine in the way that it draws direct attention to the participant's actions and role in a form of interruption, we can see the valuable use of humour in that it establishes a distance to avoid critical sense becoming compromised by strong emotional responses of guilt or regret.

[54] The video was originally uploaded on YouTube in 2005 titled *Fabulous Secret Powers*. It was created by Slackcircus Studios, taking footage from the 1980s cartoon *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe.* The video features Prince Adam, the renamed He-Man, singing a rendition of the 1993 hit *What's Up?* By the 4 Non Blondes.

"He-Man Sings," Know Your Meme, last modified August 2015, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/he-man-sings.

[55] Current most popular uploaded version: "HEYYEYAAEYAAAEYAEYAA," YouTube, last modified 7 Novemember, 2010, accessed 21 September, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZ5LpwO-An4.

[56] Ibid.

18

And he tries
Oh my God, do I try
I try all the time,
In this institution

And he prays
Oh my God, do I pray
I pray every single day
(Nyaaah)
For a revolution!

And I say hey, yeah, yeah, yeah yay
Hey, yay, yay
I said hey, what's goin' on? [57]

Fig 13

Slackcircus Studios
Fabulous Secret Powers 2005 (still)

from *HEYYEYAAEYAAAEYAEYAA* 2010,
YouTube

Fig 14

What's goin' on? 2015 (detail)
Recycled cardboard, paper, foam core,
headphones, smartphone, selfie stick
132 x 80 x 45cm

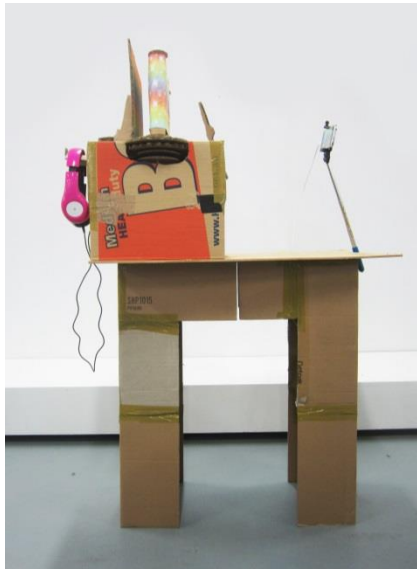[57] "He-Man Lyrics," last modified 4 May 2015, https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/He-Man-Huff/He-Man.

Fig 15

What's goin' on? 2015

Fig 16

What's goin' on? 2015 (detail)

Fig 17

What's goin' on? 2015 (detail)

Fig 18

What's goin' on? 2015 (detail)

Humour is not so directed at the participant as an individual but on the collective 'us' as consumers and producers of online media. Although humour is a strong element in the work, I will argue that its function is less concerned with creating an interruption or distancing effect as in *I dun good*, and more concerned with simply opening a door for a more critical engagement.[58] Methods of distancing to uncover conditions of spectacle and production are

---

[58] From the limited feedback I've gathered for this work so far, the work provokes a 'why would someone make this?' response, accompanied with humour in response to the work's absurdity.

more evident in the overall estrangement of the meme in its transformation into a physical object and in the decisions regarding the work's physicality.

The Object: handmade, materiality, physicality

In all objects I use cheap and easily accessible materials. I particularly use recycled cardboard boxes given the material's associations with handmade protest signs. Initially I wanted to use materials and a handmade aesthetic that would contradict the glossy, clean aesthetics of mass produced media which epitomises the spectacle. Sympathising with the ideas of Fluxus, I also felt that by using these materials and aesthetic, perhaps I could strip down illusionistic barriers between the 'intellectual artist' and general audience and abolish ideas of elitism, edging closer towards Benjamin's suggestion of transforming processes of production.[59]

However, I began to draw connections to how such use of materials and non-elitist aesthetics in creating protest paraphernalia can also become a trope that is absorbed into the spectacle.[60] I also drew connections to how content and actions on social media may appear more sincere to a cause in the process of production, in their immediacy and non-professionalism. My works begin to uncover these concerns when montage is used to combine the handmade and non-valuable materials together with technology or objects associated with the production of social media content such as smartphones, tablets and selfie sticks.

The work *I made this* compromises of a miniature cardboard sign with a smartphone set within it [Fig 19]. On the phone is an app. The background is a photo of the area of cardboard the phone replaces with the words 'I'M SO <u>ANGRY</u> I MADE THIS SIGN'[61] digitally drawn on top. If a viewer touches the screen a 'Follow' button appears and automatically presses down [Fig 20].

---

[59] By using materials such as recycled cardboard, I am also working against the ideas of commercial value and preservation which are important in the collecting, selling and exhibiting of art by collectors, dealers and art institutions; therefore begins to challenge the traditional processes of art production and consumption. This approach however has been used by artists such as Fluxus since the mid 20th century and perhaps the use of these materials is less politically effective as it once was.

[60] One such example is the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011. Protesters deliberately used scruffy, handmade signs in an effort to make their message more authentic.
Blake Gopnik, "Behind Occupy's Messy Signs," The Daily Beast, November 3, 2011, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/11/03/occupy-wall-street-protest-s-deliberate-use-of-messy-signs.html

[61] A statement I have frequently observed written on cardboard protest signs in viewing photos taken at various protests in Australia and abroad, and in my own participation in protests in Brisbane in the last few years.

Fig 19 (left)

I made this 2015

Recycled cardboard, smartphone, app

25 x20 x 2.5 cm

Fig 20 (above)
Still from phone app

By montaging the handmade, cardboard and smartphone together, I bring into question the function of the protest sign as well as communications technology through estrangement. The conditions just discussed surrounding production are also brought into consideration through montage and is reinforced by the text that brings the matter of the object's production to the forefront. Other conditions may also be uncovered through montage. For example, the illusion created with the background image makes the merging of the handmade and physical, with technology and digital appear so intertwined it brings forth a sense of not being able to have one without the other, resonating with Shirky's assertions on the effectiveness of social media being in conjunction with physical, real-life action.

In some works such as *I dun good*, mechanisms are clearly exposed. In this, the physical construction itself points to an unveiling of processes and conditions that would normally be hidden or concealed to heighten an experience of spectacle or illusion. In *What's goin' on?* the physical structure of the work also points to notions of concealment and exposure in that participants are restricted to what they can see of the work when interacting with it. Elongated mechanisms also create a physical distance between the trivial actions and participant to draw participants attention to the processes.

Physical Interaction

In a few works, I estrange online actions such as clicking a mouse, 'Like' or 'Sign Petition' button, or watching a Youtube video by developing physical interactions that correspond to these actions. I do this through various methods such as; montaging and comparing actions,

playing with scale, making actions elongated or more arduous, and playing with expectations and restrictions. I do this to create a distancing effect to incite participants to consider their position and actions and to uncover conditions. For example, in some works I associate and compare the physical action of stamping to mass produce an image with the digital action of clicking online buttons. In doing so I begin to uncover conditions of the mass produced action or response and question expectations of social media as an enhancement to personal agency.

In *Click*, a functional oversized mouse made of wood and cardboard and a hidden remote clicker sits on the floor at a distance in front of a fairly small TV screen [Fig 21, 22]. The screen features a watermarked stock image of a sick person with overlayed text which reads,'\$100 will be donated for every (x number) clicks' [Fig 23, 24]. The number of clicks is increased every time a participant clicks the mouse.[62] Every third click a quick snippet of a CPR tutorial YouTube video pops up, quickly showing footage of 3 chest compressions [Fig 25].[63]

Fig 21

Click (Mouse) 2015
Wood, cardboard, newspaper, remote clicker
Mouse: 110 x 45 x 68cm

Fig 22

Click (Mouse) 2015

---

[62] The stock background image changes to another after every 12 clicks, rotating between five different images.
[63] There are seven of these snippet videos, rotated through after every third click.

Fig 23

Click (still 1 from app) 2015

Displayed on 21.5 inch TV screen

Fig 24

Click (still 2 from app) 2015

Displayed on 21.5 inch TV screen

Fig 25

Click (still 3 from app) 2015

Displayed on 21.5 inch TV screen

The scale estranges the action of clicking a mouse by making it more physical and arduous. The interruption of the pop up CPR videos immediately draws comparisons between the chest compressions and the action of pushing down the mouse button, further estranging the participant's actions and inciting a more critical engagement with the work. In this work I not only use this montage of actions to create a distancing effect but also to expose 'distance' as a condition underlying social action online.

In the work *Progressive action*, I use a play on expectations to create a distancing effect. The work resembles a sort of miniature catapult. A mock Molotov cocktail appears ready to be projected by a selfie stick as part of a mechanism, activated by pushing down a stamp [Fig 26, 27.] However, When the object is activated, the work falls short of expectations as the work fails to throw the bottle and instead remains attached to the selfie stick as it moves up to a vertical position before pathetically falling back down into place. The object literally brings the

action to a standstill in mid-course and incites the participant to take up a position towards the work. The stamped image reads, 'I showed dem'.

Fig 26

Progressive Action (detail)
2015

Cardboard, plastic bottle, tissue, selfie stick, wooden rod, self-inking stamp, string

140 x 85 x 28cm

Fig 27

Progressive Action 2015

Conclusion

Recognising the failings of my interactive automaton objects to critically engage participants, I was led to investigate the following inquiry question: How can I create interactive objects that critically engage participants and uncover conditions underlying 'protest' and social action on social media, particularly regarding processes of production, spectacle and participation? In doing so I have employed practice-led and heuristic research methods and a theoretical framework derived from Debord and Benjamin's texts on spectacle and processes of production. In identifying my methods with Brecht's alienation effect, I was able to recognise and define my own studio methods. Through the analysis of Fashion Revolution's 2€ T-shirt vending machine and Smits' *Photo Tip*, I begin to exemplify how these methods may be applied to interactive objects.

As in Brecht's epic theatre and Smits' *Photo Tip*, I use elements of montage, astonishment, and humour in my own work to create disruptions that distance the participant from the work and expose conditions. However, I also pay attention to the materiality and physicality of the objects and actions, particularly in my use of montage. As in Smits' work, the participant's interaction is fundamental to the meaning of my works, avoiding criticisms of participation being used as a trope or novelty. However they still do not emulate Benjamin's suggestion of transforming processes of production to distribute power with the participant. Instead they work inside existing processes to play on and disrupt dominant expectations of participation, interaction and the ability to self-produce media in regards to these being two-way rewarding processes, enhancements to personal agency, and predetermined methods of success in protest or social action.

These developed methods have allowed me to create interactive objects that have been far more successful at achieving my aims. This project has also identified room for further investigations in relation to Benjamin's critical theories and social media's transformation of production relations. Comprehensive trialling of these works within a gallery setting would be valuable in further asserting the effectiveness of these methods; something that has been limited given the time restraints for this project.

Reference List

Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer." Translated by Anna Bostock. Chap. The Author as Producer In *Understanding Brecht*, 85-103. London: Verso, 1998.

———. *Understanding Brecht*. Translated by Anna Bostock. London: Verso, 1998. Versuche fiber Brecht 1966.

Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso Books, 2012.

Candy, L., R. Ascott, and E.A. Edmonds. *Interacting: Art, Research and the Creative Practitioner*. Libri Pub., 2011.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

Dinkla, Söke. "From Participation to Interaction: Towards the Origins of Interactive Art." In *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*, edited by Lynn Hershman-Leeson, 279-89. Seattle: Bay Press, 1996.

George Maciunas. "Fluxus Manifesto," 1963, Offset. "Unpacking Fluxus: An Artist's Release," MoMA, last modified30 June 2010, http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/ 2010/06/30/unpacking-fluxus-an-artists-release.

Groys, Boris. "Comrades of Time." In *Going Public*, edited by Brian Kuan Wood Julieta Aranda, Anton Vidokle. E-Flux Journal Series, 84-101: Sternberg Press, 2010.

Higgins, Dick. "Intermedia." *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (2001): 49-54.

Leavy, Patricia. *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*. New York: Guilford Press, 2009.

Meyer, John C. "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication." *Communication Theory* 10, no. 3 (2000): 310-31.

Moustakas, Clark E. *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 1990.

Shanken, Kristine Stiles and Edward A. "Missing in Action: Agency and Meaning in Interactive Art." In *Context Providers: Conditions of Meaning in Media Arts*, edited by Christiane Paul Margot Lovejoy, Victoria Vesna, 31-54: Intellect Books, 2011.

Shirky, Clay. "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change." *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 28-41.

Image Reference List

Fig 1.   Lauren Edmonds, *They liked the onion* 2015 Mixed media automaton 28 x 16 x 15.5cm

Fig 2.   ABC News. "Prime Minister Tony Abbott eats an onion, skin and all, while touring an onion farm in Tasmania." Vine. last modified 13 March 2015. accessed 13 September, 2015. https://vine.co/v/O9deFBO6HZW. (screenshot)

Fig 3.   The George Brandis Live Art Experience Facebook page. "Citizen Brandis…..having signed the decree dismembering the Australia Council….. is struck down (metaphorically, of course) by the wrath of the people." last modified June 3, 2015. accessed 20 September, 2015. https://www.facebook.com/ TheGeorgeBrandisLiveArtExperience/photos/pb.456236024534926.- 207520000.1445963981./463852543773274/?type=3&theatre

Fig 4.   Fashion Revolution. "The 2 Euro T-Shirt – A Social Experiement." 2015. Video.YouTube. last modified April 23, 2015. accessed September 16, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfANs2y_frk. (screenshot at 1:07)

Fig 5.   Fashion Revolution. "The 2 Euro T-Shirt – A Social Experiement." 2015. Video. YouTube. . last modified April 23, 2015. accessed September 16, 2015. ttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfANs2y_frk.(screenshot at 0:42)

Fig 6.   Fashion Revolution. "The 2 Euro T-Shirt – A Social Experiement." 2015. Video. YouTube. last modified April 23, 2015. accessed September 16, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfANs2y_frk. (screenshot at 1:20)

Fig 7.   Helmut Smits. "Photo Tip," 2004. Wood, print, sandbags, chair 220 x 244 x 450cm. "Photo Tip." Helmut Smit. accessed September 20, 2015. http://helmutsmits.nl/ work/photo-tip

Fig 8.   Helmut Smits. "Photo Tip," 2004. Wood, print, sandbags, chair 220 x 244 x 450cm. "Photo Tip." Helmut Smit. accessed September 20, 2015. http://helmutsmits.nl/ work/photo-tip

Fig 9.   Lauren Edmonds, *"We need more flags"* 2015. Automaton, Foam core, balsawood rod, tissues, newspaper, 27 x38 x 10cm

Fig 10. Lauren Edmonds, *I dun good* 2015. Recycled cardboard, self-inking stamp, string, tablet, stylus pen, wood, 115 x 77 x 30cm

Fig 11. Lauren Edmonds, *I dun good* 2015.

Fig 12. Lauren Edmonds, *I dun good* (detail) 2015.

Fig 13. Slackcircus Studios, "Fabulous Secret Powers," 2005. Video. "HEYYEYAAEYAAAEYAEYAA." YouTube. last modified 7 Novemember, 2010. accessed 21 September, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZ5LpwO-An4. (screenshot at 0:34)

Fig 14. Lauren Edmonds, *What's goin' on?* 2015. Recycled cardboard, paper, foam core, headphones, smartphone, selfie stick, 132 x 80 x 45cm (detail 1)

Fig 15. Lauren Edmonds, *What's goin' on?* 2015.

Fig 16. Lauren Edmonds, *What's goin' on?* 2015. (detail 2)

Fig 17. Lauren Edmonds, *What's goin' on?* 2015. (detail 3)