Master Thesis

Sofi Häkkinen

*Anaesthesia of the Heart and Other Funny Things in Art*
Master Thesis

© Sofi Häkkinen

Aalto University
School of Arts, Design and Architecture

Master Program of Visual Culture
and Contemporary Art
2018

Set in Bembo
Printed in Netherlands by Pumbo
Anaesthesia of the Heart and Other Funny Things in Art
For Emily,
where ever I may find her
Thank you
Beiby
Pia Lindman, Lari Mörö, Ropsi, Leevi, Tuomo-serkku,
Hundulaatti, isä
# Content

Abstract .................................................................................................................13  
Tiivistelmä ..............................................................................................................19

1 What is Humour .....................................................................................................23  
1.1 The Relief Theory .............................................................................................25  
1.2 The Incongruity Theory ....................................................................................26  
1.3 The Superiority Theory ....................................................................................28  
1.4 Shift in Perspective ............................................................................................29  
1.5 The Three Theories of Humour  
as Theories of Art .................................................................................................31

2 I Don’t Get it ..........................................................................................................35  
2.1 Sidenote: Danto’s Testadura ............................................................................38  
2.2 Intelligently Funny and Awkwardly Enthusiastic ............................................39  
2.3 Aesthesia of the Heart and Camp ....................................................................41  
2.4 The Gallery or the Street?  
The Curious Case of the Hamburger Sculpture ...... 44

3 Cracks in Reality ...................................................................................................49  
3.1 Neutralizing Negative Emotion .......................................................................51  
3.2 Darker Side of Fun ............................................................................................52

4 Humour in Material and Form ..............................................................................57  
4.1 Kasitonni’s Vampire ..........................................................................................58  
4.2 Sidenote: Ite-taide / Outsider Art ....................................................................62  
4.3 Work Example: Käänteismylly  
(The Inverse Mill) .................................................................................................62
Abstract

“When it comes to what amuses us, we are all authorities, experts in the field. We know what we find funny.”


In this thesis, I write about humour in contemporary artworks. Humour is a recurring thing in my own thinking and my artistic work, and I find it an interesting viewpoint and an exciting aspect in contemporary art. The juxtapositions found in art and humour and those of them put together pushed me to study this subject for my Master Thesis at Aalto University in the program of Visual Culture and Contemporary Art. I find that art and humour go side by side, but in their different manners, and that humour has a lot to give to art.

Humour has, for a long time, been a part of my artistic work. Lately, I have realised that there is a line of thought that lights up a way of explaining and thinking about art, and that is the humour found in art. This thesis is more a cultivation of thinking than answering any particular research question. I use it as a way to further my thinking and to clarify certain aspects in contemporary art and my own art. I study art and humour side by side, focusing on looking at art in the light of humour theories. I study how the humorous characteristics of an artwork affect the artwork’s message, and how these mechanics are, either physically or on the idea level, put into

1 Simon Critchley, On Humour (Routledge, 2002), p. 2
the artwork. I use examples from the contemporary art world, and I also focus on my own works as objects of interest.


How does an amusing appearance or funny content of an artwork affect the viewers’ experience? Are there differences in how a funny artwork get its message through as opposed to a neutral or a sad one? What kind of effects does context have to an artwork being funny or not? These are among the questions I have been pondering, and among ones I talk about in this thesis. First, I write about humour and some of the ways it has been analysed before, and then look at art and humour together to try and find clues for how to combine them, why they are combined, what they have become in their symbiosis, and how they react when put under the same microscope.

The topic is relevant to me, because my own artworks are often rather funny, or humorously bizarre. By concentrating on this topic, I am aiming to better understand my own work and my process. Like I said before, this thesis is a tool for me to broaden my thinking and my own artistic work. The more I study art in universities, the more I have come to the stressful conclusion that a joke is not enough anymore: my art needs something more, too. Being funny has risen insecurities in me before, such as, “(how) can art be serious and at the same time funny”? And “Does the fact that an artwork is funny affect how its message is received by my audience”? I have overlooked going into the humour in my art before, but I see now that this is a path that can actually take me somewhere interesting and relevant if I just dare to get on it.
Also, the fact that I love making art and that being an artist is fun, at least most of the time, has often made me wonder about the justification of my profession. Since I make funny art, there are these two typical suspicions present; can funny art be serious, and can real work be fun? An exhibition in Brooklyn raised these very questions in 2015, the show was called *Anything for a Laugh: Humour in Contemporary Art*. The curator Dominic Molon writes in the press release as follows:

“Artists who dedicate their practice to the consistent engagement of all things humorous are typically taken less seriously overall”.¹

This is a common idea in my experience and in my own head, too, that I am now overcoming. Humour is seen as “easy” because it is more often than not easy to digest and consume. But it is hard work to be funny.

I think there is also such a deeply rooted Lutheran work ethic in the Finnish mind-set, that it has this kind of effects. Somehow working hard needs to be serious and not fun, or you aren’t really working hard enough. I have often had so much fun working on different art projects around the clock in terrible conditions, doing “real work” like pumping out water from dark caves at night, or cleaning out trash from abandoned factories for shooting a video, or making budgets, or laying down hundreds of meters of dirty electric cords for a show for hours on end, but almost all the time it has been super fun and the best times of my life. This forced seriousness, this “work must be sad and boring” is a feeling I want to shake, and by studying humour I think I can come closer to freeing myself from it.

Trying to break into the core of humour in art is a straight continuum to my Bachelor Thesis. In that work, I thought

and wrote about how to justify art and the artist’s profession as a young, graduating artist. The effort to try and break down the essence of art and understand it has now lead to concentrating on a smaller fragment; in this case humour. Trying to get a hold of art is an endless ocean that I am glad to be a part of, one grain of beach sand at a time.

This thesis is divided into 4 different topics and 14 subtopics, followed by a conclusion – or rather a gathering of thoughts. I will start by writing about humour and jokes in general. Then, I will explore how humour transfers from its common manifestation – often fast social situations between a certain group of people, namely jokes – into artworks. I am also interested in the artist’s process and motive behind creating a funny artwork, and how the context of its presentation affects the receiving and perceiving of the work from the part of the audience, and where exactly the humour hides in an artwork. I will break down ideas and forms, that make up the funny side in my own artworks. I will analyse them to see why or how they appear funny. By also analysing the process and what lies behind it, I am aiming to strengthen the basis on which my artworks grow.

I think the topic is also relevant today in light of the ongoing political situation. Without going into the actual politics, because this is not an analysis of the world’s political situation, I feel like stating that there is a need in humanity for a little tomfoolery in a frightening and unstable international situation. Laughter can be a good way to release suspense. But, it is also always a bit tricky because of its ambiguous and subjective nature, though. That is one of the things that makes it so interesting for me, in the context of art. Humour can easily be misunderstood, and so can art; I have personally seen this happen. Still, we have a primitive instinct to laugh at a joke, at a funny-looking animal or out of sheer excitement. I think we instinctively look for fun and we look for art in our lives.
I am interested in this particular set of things or ideas simply because they appeal to me. Art and humour go together well because both can be a loose cannon – they can have reactions that burst out into any direction. In the words of the contemporary artist Stanford Biggers: “- comedy can be misread, and misinterpreted, and become problematic. But that’s what art does: it problematizes things” (New Yorker, 2/2018). Art and humour can be equal as tools for making sense of our existence.

Fig 1 The ugliest and kitschiest classic yellow smiley face I could find in Google’s image search.

3 Vinson Cunningham, “The Playful, Political Art of Sanford Biggers”, The New Yorker (January 15th, 2018)
**Tiivistelmä**

“Kun pohditaan sitä, mikä meitä kutakin huvittaa, olemme jokainen eksperttejä asiassa. Me tiedämme mikä on meistä hauskaa.”

Simon Critchley, On Humour, (2002)¹ (Oma suomennos)


Huumori on jo pitkään ollut selkeä osa taiteellista työskentelyäni ja teosteni luonnetta. Olen huomannut, että siitä on itseasiassa hyötyä ajatusprosessissa, jossa pyrin jäsentämään taidetta ja taiteen tekemistä itselleni. Tämä maisterin kirjallen työ on enemmänkin ajattelun harjaannuttamista, kun vastaus mihinkään tarkkaan, tieteelliseen tutkimuskysymykseen. Näen tämän erinomaisena tilaisuutena jäsennellä ajattelun-, edistää sitä, ja selkeyttää taidetta ja sen osasia omassa työskentelyssäni. Tutkin taidetta ja huumoria rinnakkain, mutta keskitän huomioni kuitenkin *taiteeseen huumorin teorioiden valossa*. Miten taideteoksen humoristiset puolet vaikuttavat sen

¹ Simon Critchley, On Humour (Routledge, 2002), p. 2
sanomaan? Mitä nämä mekanismit ovat ideatasolla ja käytännössä, ja kuinka ne istutetaan teokseen? Käytän tekstissä esimerkkinä teoksia nykytaiteen maailmasta, sekä omia teoksiani.


Mitä enemmän olen opiskellut taidetta yliopistoissa, sitä enemmän olen tullut tukalaan loppupäätelään, että hauskuus yksinään ei riitä. Taide tarvitsee jotain muutakin elääkseen. Se, että teokseni ovat hauskoja, nostaa esiin erilaisia epävarmuuksia. Miten taide voi olla hauskaa ja tosissaan otettavaa samanaikaisesti? Vaikuttaako teoksen humoristisuus

Yksi tärkeä seikka, joka sai minut tutkimaan tätä aihetta, on hauskuuden aliarvostus. Minusta taiteilijan ammatti on lähes aina hauskaa, ja tämä on luonut tarpeen perustella ammatinvalintaani. Kun vielä lisäksi teen hauskaa taidetta, joudun perustelemaan asiaa itselleni tapoista. Mieleen nousee kysymyksiä kuten; voiko hauska taide olla vakavaa, ja voiko työ olla hauskaa?

Brooklynnissä, USA:ssa, järjestettiin vuonna 2015 taidenäyttely, joka kamppaili samojen kysymysten kanssa. Anything for a Laugh: Humour in Contemporary Art -näyttelyn kuraattorin Dominic Molonin sanoin:

“Taiteilijoita, jotka omistavat uransa humorististen aiheiden kanssa leikittelyyn, ei tyypillisesti oteta yhtä vakavasti kuin muita” 2 (Oma suomennos.) Olen huomannut tämän olevan hyvin yleinen ajatus. Omassa päätässänin se poukkoille, ja pyrin nyt pääsemään siitä eroon. Huumori nähdään usein ”helppona”, koska se on useimmissa ilmenemismuodoissaan helppo kuluttaa ja sulattaa. Mutta hauskuus ja sen luominen on vaikeaa!

Suomalaisessa mielenmaisemassa on tiukasti juurtunut luterilainen työmoraali, joka osaltaan vaikuttaa tähän ongelmaan. Työnteon on oltava rankkaa ja ilotonta, tai muuten et tee työä tosissaan. Minulla on ollut taiteen parissa työskennellessäni hullun hauskaa, vaikka hommia on tehty kellon ympäri järkyttävissä olosuhteissa. Eikö esimerkiksi veden

pumppaaminen kylmistä ja pimeistä luolista esitystä varten, tai roskien siivoaminen hylätystä ja likaisesta tehtaasta, saati sitten budjettien laatiminen ja satoja metrejä pitkien sähköjohtojen selvittely ole ”oikeaa työtä”? Kaikki tuo edellä mainittu on ollut lähestulkoon aina hauskinta ja ihaninta aikaa elämässäni! Pakotettu vakavuus, ja ajatusmalli, jonka mukaan työn on oltava vakava ja tylsää, on seikka, josta haluan pyristellä irti. Tutkimalla hauskuutta ja huumoria taiteen yhteydessä uskon pääsevän lähemmäs tätä tavoitetta.


Huumori aiheena on mielestäni ajankohtainen myös maailman poliittisen tilanteen vuoksi. En mene tässä kirjoitoksessa itse politiikkaan, sillä maisterintyöni ei käsittele sitä, mutta tuntuu ajankohtaiselta tuoda ilmi ihmisen perustavanlaatuinen tarve huumoriiin. Epävakaassa ja pelottavassa tilanteessa


---

3 Vinson Cunningham, "The Playful, Political Art of Sanford Biggers", The New Yorker (January 15th, 2018)
1 What is Humour

“A true joke, a comedian’s joke, suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal - -”


Humour is something humane. It is a natural part of being a human being and living life. It is a basic ingredient in our social quirks and communication. Humour is in the very core of being alive. When you start to think about it, you find it in surprisingly many places and moments. Like when you were bored as a kid and tested how many times you need to repeat a word fast until it starts to sound funny, or when you have a sudden moment of clarity during a heated dispute with someone and you suddenly hear how ridiculous you both sound. Humour is an ambiguous vital element. According to philosopher Simon Critchley, humour is an impossible object for a philosopher, and therein lies its infinite fascination.

The same way as humour, I think art escapes definition as well. The two seem to be growing from so deep in the core of human nature, that it can be difficult to step back and examine them. The more you try to put a finger on them, the more they seem vague. Still, both have this great aura of fascination, they keep luring me in to try and make sense of them. And both of them actually in themselves make trying to explain...
them redundant. Look again at the quote I began this chapter with but replace the words ‘joke’ and ‘comedian’ with ‘art work’ and ‘artist’. They are interchangeable in their vagueness, humour and art.

Humour, and especially a joke, is often tied to time and moment. It is a quick, witty social transaction. Having a sense of humour is also often associated with being smart. This is because it puts people on the same level with each other, or then it does not; you get it, or you don’t. This division, I think, easily and quickly reflects to who you feel comfortable with and who you think gets you and you find interesting. Either your worlds collide, or they melt together. Sense of humour, is an important part of a human being, and so very weird and difficult to explain.

In John C. Meyer’s words; “- - mental sophistication is required for humour’s appreciation and [a reason for] humour’s consequent rarity in the animal kingdom” (International Communication Association, 2002). One must first be able to recognise and comprehend the situation, its components and mechanisms, before humour can get through; there is a need for an intelligent and socially savvy mental state.

There are many theories on humour in the collective scriptures of philosophy and history, even different social sciences. I will now present three main theories, which I have decided to use as a basis for my research and thinking. They are all developed and spoken for by different thinkers of different times, and the categorization I use is from the philosopher John Morreall’s thinking from his book The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour (SUNY Press, 1986). He divides the

---

theory of humour into three different categories: the relief theory, the incongruity theory, and the superiority theory.

The relief theory has been advocated by Herbert Spencer and, later, Sigmund Freud; brains behind the incongruity theory are for example Francis Hutcheson, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Soren Kierkegaard and James Russel Lowell; and among thinkers who crystallised the superiority theory, the eldest of these three, are Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian and Thomas Hobbes. 7 These different approaches to humour have been developed throughout the western history, and this division made by Morreall is a base for my intentions in connecting theories of humour and art.

1.1 The Relief Theory

The first theory of humour I will address is the relief theory, which focuses on the physical side of laughter. According to this theory, laughter is born from a release of tension and nervous energy in the body. The theory explains humour as a bodily rush and a phenomenon of different stress hormones being released in the brain; laughter, usually triggered by humour, is an explosion in the body, similar to orgasm or weeping in its uncontrollable nature.

Due to this primitive uncontrollability of laughter, it has been frowned upon for example in the Middle Ages. Laugher has been considered as something that is not proper to express in public, and there have also been special meanings linked to different kinds of laugh later on. 8

I see the notion of time in humour contained especially in the relief theory. The telling of a joke, the humour building up, and finally the laughter or a smile that follows, is seen as sort of

7 Simon Critchley, On Humour (Routledge, 2002), p. 2-3
8 Simon Critchley, On Humour (Routledge, 2002), p. 9
a bubble that grows and then bursts. This adds the passing of time to the theory, too. Time stops as you engage in the joke, and when the relief comes, it suddenly speeds up again as you realise the passing of time. This feeling of the passing of time is something that can happen when engaging with art, too.

Anyway, I think the relief theory might not be as applicable to art as some of the other theories. An artwork rarely has the effect of actual laughter. I think context is one reason why; we are used to going to galleries to see art (very serious business), where art is usually displayed in a certain serious manner in a neutral white environment. Also, when you go to a gallery or an art show, there is a certain kind of social crowd there. You might not want to embarrass yourself by laughing out loud, you might care what the gallerist or other quests think about, due to a common fear that you might be wrong. Seeing an artwork out of the context of a gallery might allow a freer way to confront it, that could also trigger laughter more easily.

Also, the people you are with add to the equation; you might have an inside joke or a collective memory, and a certain artwork might trigger that in your social group. There is a contradicting idea to this, though, that claims that laughter only rises from blankness (much like the gallery space). I will address that idea later in chapter 2.

1.2 The Incongruity Theory

The incongruity theory claims that humour is created by surprising opposites. In this view, the hilariousness of a joke hides in the sudden realisation, the *getting it*, that comes after a juxtaposition of ideas or elements in the joke. According to professor John C. Meyer; “An accepted pattern is violated, or a

---

9 Simon Critchley, On Humour (Routledge, 2002), p. 7
difference is noted - close enough to the norm to be nonthreatening, but different enough from the norm to be remarkable”. In his article on humour, Meyer goes on to note that this theory also contains the social aspect of humour as a phenomenon, since it rises from social and cultural norms and agreements of what is accepted and normal, and then these agreements being broken.

The incongruity theory is the most interesting to me. Reading about it, I realised that I use similar methods in my artistic practice. There is a juxtaposition of ideas, materials, objects, pictures or what-have-you in my work, followed by association and by that, realisation. Opposites attract, and

unthinkable combinations are funny together. I have, for example, made a king’s crown and sceptre for a sculpture out of macaroni. This combination uses the basis of the incongruity theory; it toys with the ideas of importance, economic value, power, children’s macaroni artworks that we know from kindergarten, and food. The expensive gold is macaroni, the precious jewels are fusilli. Two very different things collide and create something; a joke and an artwork. A funny artwork.

1.3 The Superiority Theory

This is the most complicated of Morreall’s three theories of humour. The superiority theory examines humour from a point of view of power relations; ones’ triumph or superiority over someone else or something else is shown with humour and laughter. This is the oldest philosophical theory of laughter, dating back to ancient Greece. It is a complicated theory, because it is linked to ethnic humour and racist jokes, too.

The superiority theory explains humour in a social context. Humour has an undeniable ability to create a feeling of belonging amongst human beings. This sort of laughter can make people feel unified when laughing together as a group at the (inferior) other. Although the means are questionable, this sort of humour is a factor in binding people together. Dismissive humour in the superiority theory’s sense is also used to educate others about more abstract things that are not acceptable anymore, for example an old idea or habit; “disciplining by laughter’ was one of the functions of the royal fool throughout the ages. Foolish antics were laughed at to show
that such behaviours or beliefs were unacceptable in serious society”\textsuperscript{12}.

This kind of humour is something that humans use to define themselves. It has a very primitive and protective ring to it, which is why a person can spread it obliviously, I think. Like John C. Meyer put it “The disagreeable feelings of threat to our identity from being laughed at stem from such humorous messages of superiority. Often superiority is not a pleasant type of humour for those subjected to it”\textsuperscript{13}.

1.4 Shift In Perspective

The shift in understanding or perspective is the common thing responsible for the creation of humour. This climax and \textit{getting it} becomes most clear to me in the incongruity theory. I think the incongruity theory is the clearest of these theories, and I think it suits ideas of how an art work works pretty well. Of course, this is not to say the other theories of humour are not compatible.

However, I think shift in perspective, this \textit{getting it}, comes slower in art than in humour. I am inclined to think that this could be something that I can use to divide for example art from entertainment in my thinking, and thus have a new piece to the ultimate puzzle of what art is. Let’s look at the two; entertainment can fill the place of joke or humour in the example of the incongruity theory, in place of art. The perspective shifts relatively quickly due to fast association and


\textsuperscript{13} John C. Meyer, Humour as A Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humour in Communication (International Communication Association, 2002), p. 315
realisation of the preceding juxtaposition; you get the joke quickly. And that is humour – and entertainment.

Imagine you are sitting on your couch at night, watching a game show or a reality TV show on your telly. You become more of a passive recipient, and the pace is quick; the show needs to keep you interested, so it needs to have more of these moments of humorous or exiting climaxes and twists in the plotline. Art doesn’t have that need. It can bore you to death and still be valid and not necessarily bad art. Like Alva Noë argues; “- - the boringness of art is a clue to what art is and why it matters to us. - - art has the power to bore us. This is a power it maintains when everything else in our lives mitigates against boredom.”¹⁴ But this piece of entertainment I described before is not art and that is why it should not be boring. Also, it is bound by the laws of economics; it very probably needs to be commercially successful. So, the humorous crescendo is served easier, faster and on a silver platter.

In art, there needs to be a little more time and effort to reach this climax that entertainment throws at you at will. One needs to look, feel and study the artwork a little longer than a piece of entertainment, but the joy of solving the puzzle will come eventually. The act of looking is different in art than in entertainment. Seeing is a tool of thinking, and when looking at art it is most alert. The ‘conclusion’ or realisation has various forms, depending on the viewer; I want to say there is more options in art than in pure entertainment. Art is a slow burn. But even though the juxta-positioning and contrast works just as well in art as it does in humour or entertainment, eventually having the effect of a realisation or conclusion at the end, or then none at all which is great, too,

¹⁴ Alva Noë, Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature (Hill and Wang, 2016), p. 110
art can leave you undecided or feeling unresolved. Or like said before – bored to death.

1.5 The Three Theories of Humour as Theories of Art

In comparing art and humour and looking at my ideas of art in the light of these three theories of humour, I see similarities in the way art and humour are created and experienced. The incongruity theory catches my attention again as the most interesting one.

The shift in perspective from the theories of humour has a lot in common with my ideas of art and how artworks work. The superiority theory makes me automatically think of the going-to-a-fancy-gallery-experience where you don’t feel smart enough for the art or “in” enough for the scene. It evokes more the hierarchies in the art world, rather than a single art object and its effect on people. An artwork can of course be dismissive, the question is why, though. Maybe the artist in such a case has some deeper reaching meanings, double meanings, irony, satire and sarcasm that they play with. Another way I think of that could create an aura of superiority to an artwork is if you feel very small in its presence. This idea is very much connected to the gallery-going-experience I mentioned before, because I don’t necessarily mean you feel physically small in front of an artwork, but in front of its idea: maybe the work is difficult to crack, and you feel like you should know more, and so it feels like it’s mocking you.

The relief theory is interesting, because it is a very bodily explanation of humour and laughter, and that makes me think of bodily art; space art, impressive installations. This sort of art can have the same bodily effects as described in the relief theory, but I see a connection to the superiority theory. Here the feeling small comes to play in the actual physical meaning of the words; it is somehow a feeling of losing control of
your own physical being. Artworks that have a physical effect on people are often abstract-looking, either enormous or tiny in size, or create some sort of bodily contrast to oneself. Then there are the immersive installations as well, that completely suck you in.

One example for this could be the work of sculptor Richard Serra. His sculptures are often plain-looking, imposing and abstract artworks. To an uncultivated eye these artworks might seem scary at first in their huge abstractness; the commonly heard “is this art? I don’t get it”. Then they create a strong physical response when you go nearer or inside them. These two reactions could be compared to what happens according to the relief theory and the superiority theory of humour. Artworks like these have both in them for some viewers. I do, at least, remember feeling this way in the presence of some similar pieces.

The formulation of a joke comes close to that of an artwork. According to Jean Paul; “Joking is merely playing with ideas”\(^{15}\). That’s exactly what art is, at it’s very core. Or one of the things it is. Freud describes jokes as “a contrast of ideas, sense in nonsense, bewilderment and illumination”\(^{16}\). This evokes strongly the incongruity theory. A joke moves rather quickly, from initial bewilderment the release of laughter that is preceded by the illumination, the moment you get the joke. That is the way I work as well, and the way my works are often perceived, and how I habitually look at art. I use the quick thinking and the cleverness of a joke on the fly and transfer into combining things intuitively; thing that either

---

15 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) p.4
16 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) p.4
Fig 3 Richard Serra, Back Door Pipeline (2010)

Fig 4 Richard Serra, Dead Load (2014)
look funny together or create a comic association together. Almost like a comedian.

Studying theories of humour has brought interesting insight into the way I see art. I still think, however, that there is something in art that dodges all these theories of humour. Art is an interesting phenomenon exactly because you can try and squeeze it into all kinds of theories, like I have done here, and it somehow fists but still it is remains just itself. The theories do help in trying to create a more whole image or idea of art.

From what I have written so far, one major difference in art and humour that I can put my finger on at this point is *speed* or *time*. There is a difference in the amount of time art or humour require from the recipient. Art is slower, humour faster. There is also the social side; humour almost always needs to happen in a social group, between people who share some sort of a background. I would like to think that art, at least some kinds of art or some artworks, could travel over these kinds of barriers.
2 I Don’t Get It

Alva Noë, the main philosopher on whose work I have based a lot of this thesis, writes in his book *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (2016) as follows:

“- - This reminds me of what they say about jokes: you can’t explain a joke; you ruin it if you try. In a way this is right. If you need an explanation, it’s too late, you’ve already failed to get it. And the explanation won’t make you laugh.

But in a way this is quite mistaken. When it comes to jokes, there is always something to get, and so there is always something to explain. The question Why is this funny? is always appropriate, even if it can be difficult to answer adequately. And even if comprehending such an explanation is no substitute for the spontaneous achievement of the understanding in which a getting a joke consist. The point is, the explaining, the talking, the laying out the logic of the joke is not in direct competition with getting it and laughing. You don’t make somebody laugh through an explanation. And so, for these reasons, you can’t ruin a joke by talking about it.

And so with art. To understand art and its place in our lives is not to explain it away. You can’t break the spell of art by thinking about it. ” 17

In this citation, Noë makes one point where art and humour come close to each other. I agree with the idea and

differences of the *explaining* and the *getting* of a joke; these two can be separated. This already gives a joke, and humour, another side, a side I haven’t thought about in detail before. I have thought about understanding art, and how difficult that can be. There is a huge knowledge you might need to understand an artwork; there can be a certain way your brain is supposed to work to get an artwork; you need to see, think, know, remember, be able to point out certain things and then put all this into context. Or then you can just experience the artwork. Much like *getting* a joke or explaining it away. I think that understanding an artwork and *getting* a joke are similar thought processes, but the *getting* of a joke is a faster and more intuitive thing. Art is often slower than humour. Explaining a joke and explaining an artwork do have quite a similar role in my thinking. It is an analysis of the subject but with different contents and approaches. The goals, however, are much alike.

When I walk into a gallery and feel like I don’t get the work presented, it mostly feels like the pieces (as well as the person sitting behind the counter and anyone else visiting the gallery, of course) are looking down on me with a condescending, detached air. Maybe they are sharing a laugh about me! This seems to be a quite common feeling among people who don’t work in the arts, and even sometimes people who do. I have heard my mother, father and my brother (all of whom are not professional artists) say, that it’s not always that easy going into a gallery because of this exact condescending feeling. I have noticed a trend in my colleagues who run galleries and also work in the field of contemporary art as professional artists, that low-threshold galleries are in demand, along with forgetting the whole, a little dated, gallery concept in showing art all together and finding new ways to bring the works to people.

Anyway, getting back to the original point. What if I, at the same time as I confess I don’t understand, think that the
artworks are funny? Can something incomprehensible be funny? If so, wouldn’t it mean that I do actually understand those artworks, because you can’t explain the intuitive getting of a joke, since it is something that should come naturally? Like I argued before, I believe in the idea that you can talk about a joke and explain it, but it is a completely different thing than the initial getting it. You have to just get it.

Alva Noë’s point that I quoted earlier is an interesting one, that negates this “you cannot explain a joke” idea, that even Critchley seems to rely on. Noë argues that yes, you can explain and talk about a joke, and still not ruin it. But he separates the joke itself and the getting it in his reasoning. Following this logic, I would say that yes, you can find an artwork funny and still not get it. Because an artwork has many sides and many layers. Like I said, an artwork is a slow burn; it needs time and maybe many tries to fully understand it. It clicks slowly into place. But the artwork is different to the joke because it doesn’t require the intuitive initial getting it. You can analyse a joke, and you can analyse an artwork, but the first contact you have with each is different.

I like to think that there is something happening in a person’s mind every time they see an artwork, whether they get it, or not. There is a fragment of the message getting through each time, it is something very inconspicuous, and when repeated many times, it can lead to bigger breakthroughs. These could be changes in the person’s thinking, views, beliefs or consumer habits for example. So, I could claim that, unlike a joke that you should get right away, when looking at art the key is actually perseverance and willingness to confront the piece – again and again if need be. There is something like fearlessness needed. But you can talk about both; in the case of

the artwork it can guide you to certain conclusions and perhaps to one way of getting it, but in the case of the joke it turns around: the spell of the getting it has already been broken when you start the discussion about the joke.

2.1 Sidenote: Danto’s Testadura

In Danto’s Artworld, a person who does not understand modern art walks into a gallery. In the text Danto calls the person a Testadura, a hard head. He looks at the artworks and doesn’t understand them. He doesn’t think that they are art.19

I find a similarity in having a sense of humour and having a capability of understanding art. Of course, the latter can be taught, whereas the first one you either have or do not. Or you have a very different one that is not compatible with others. There is a similar error in transmission of information in the two cases of art and humour. When you don’t share the same sense of humour, it is a very frustrating thing. There is no way through it. You can’t reason your way out of it and force your sense of humour on someone. That transmission is, however, possible to resuscitate in the case of art. Education is always possible, and through education this Testadura could understand what the people in this mysterious and posh “Artworld” think art is, or what an artwork means.

There is another layer to add to this thinking, however. On the other hand, there is the dissimilarity in art and humour; you can educate someone on art, but not force them to have a sense of humour. But let’s look at a quote from Simon Critchley:

“So, in listening to a joke, I am presupposing a social world that is shared, the forms of which the practice of joke-telling is

going to play with. Joking is a game that players only play successfully when they both understand and follow the rules. Wittgenstein puts the point perspicuously; What is it like for people not to have the same sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other. It’s as though there were a custom amongst certain people for one person to throw another a ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people, instead of throwing it back, put it in their pocket.”

The similarity here is that both worlds work with the same mechanics. This quote could be about art if you change a few words. But again, art has the ability to slide through yet another explanation and go further. This fact, that you either have or do not have a sense of humour; art can use it as a tool, an ingredient, a starting point. But in humour, you are stuck in the getting it. Art can actually start in the moment when you put the ball in your pocket and break the spell of humour.

2.2 Intelligently Funny And Awkwardly Enthusiastic

In a funny artwork, there needs to be an intelligent idea. An artwork requires intellectual substance. I realised this again when I took a course called The Ed Wood Syndrome in the Universität der Künste (UDK) in the fall of 2017 in Berlin. We studied the methods of the eccentric film maker, trying to pin point what the special air, that his works have, is.

The American film maker Ed Wood, known as the worst movie maker of all time, was a director-actor-writer-producer who lived and worked in the 1940’s and 50’s Hollywood. Not only due to small budgets and short filming sessions, his movies are extremely bad; actors messing up, scenery falling down, props breaking… and these ruined scenes were used in the films anyway. Wood never made it as a big director in

20 Simon Critchley, On Humour (Routledge, 2002), p. 4
Hollywood; he died a forgotten alcoholic of a heart attack at the age of 54. His best-known films are *Glen Or Glenda* (1953) and *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959), which has reached a cult status now, long after Wood’s death.

*The Ed Wood Syndrome* we investigated during the course in UDK with the artist and curator Christina Ricupero, was about the essence of Wood’s life’s work. In his movies, there are so many mistakes repeated so many times that there is not much else left. This is done with an astonishing enthusiasm and happy positivism, which make the outcome so awkward. Of course, awkwardness alone doesn’t make a work “edwoodish”, it can also be just bad. Like Ed Wood’s works are commonly seen as. An artwork needs challenging subject matter, a conceptual approach, which Wood’s movies lack. But it is this aura of his person and his way of working that interested me in the course.

I relate to the awkwardly enthusiastic idea, and the do-it-yourself and make-shift aesthetics of Ed Wood’s, that I see as an important part of the *Ed Wood Syndrome*. But I understood that I cannot hide behind the visual façade in my own art, that there needs to be something else underneath this funny enthusiasm. Working like Ed Wood can be fruitful, but to be able to reach this “edwoodish” aura we were looking for during the course, there must be something more to the work. It feels like a fine balance between two very different worlds, trying to drink from both fountains at the same time. There it is again, humour and art side by side.

There is a correlation between Danto’s Testadura and Ed Wood. A straightforward simplicity and awkwardness of the mind; a lack of cultivation. As an artist I can use that, but I cannot rely solely on it, because art is not entertainment.

My idea of a funny artwork is that at first sight a humorous artwork can be just like a good joke; easy to get. But then, where the joke ends, and the art begins, the work must be able to stand closer examination and studying, and it needs to
take the viewer further. There needs to be intellectual substance, otherwise it really is a joke. In the words of Katrina E. Triezenberg: “One cannot simply juxtapose two incongruous things and call it a joke, but rather one must find a clever way of making them make pseudo-sense together”.\textsuperscript{21}

This thinking of Ed Wood brings me back to a “paradox” of art education I have encountered; you need to study your whole life to reach a state of unlearning, especially in the physical making of art. Teachers keep pushing you to unlearn manners, education pushes towards minimalism (in the mind at least), ultimately. And this, I think, is what links Ed Wood, Testadura, awkward enthusiasm, and understanding art and getting of a joke together; once you know enough, you can use these elements, but you need to use them knowingly. And you can’t unlearn that; you will always know what you know.

\textbf{2.3 The Aenesthesia Of The Heart And Camp}

This thought brings me naturally to kitsch and camp. According to Henri Bergson in \textit{An Essay on The Meaning of the Comic}, laughter only rises from a calm absence of emotion. This idea, that the comic aspect of something demands “something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple”\textsuperscript{22} rendered me puzzled at first. Because I hadn’t studied humour deeply before, I automatically thought that laughter and humour would be full of emotion! Then, as I read Susan Sontag’s \textit{Notes on Camp}, I found a continuum to this thought. Sontag argues: “If

\textsuperscript{21} \textbf{Katrina E. Triezenberg}, Humour in Literature (Primer of Humour Research, ed. Viktor Raskin, Mouton de Gruyter, 2008) p.537
\textsuperscript{22} \textbf{Henri Bergson}, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic (1900) p.1
tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment”²³. There it is again. The anaesthesia of the heart.

I want to bring this idea together with the superiority theory of humour. I think, that detachment and underinvolvement are intelligent, enlightened. Take kitsch for example. Kitsch is funny only in the eye of the enlightened viewer,

²³ Susan Sontag, Notes on “Camp”, (Partisan Review, 1964) p. 16 (point 44)
someone who knows why it is funny, but it is dead serious to the one who hasn’t been exposed to this kind of info and education. They think that the small porcelain kitten is beautiful, and beauty is always serious. But one who has seen the light of Camp, looks at the porcelain kitten with a smirk on their face, or at least a smirk in their brain. They see something more than the glittery, smooth cream-colored form of the porcelain kitten. They have burst a certain bubble in their thinking, and there is no going back.

I like to think that there is an uncountable amount of bubbles (a lot like soap bubbles) in our minds. When you learn for example a new language, you burst a bubble, and your conscience drips into a new territory; it is like your eyes open a little more and you understand more people, ways, cultures, expressions, body language, what have you. And when a bubble is burst it is gone, it’s impossible to go back.

Same with kitsch; when you study art and aesthetics enough, you finally burst a bubble in your mind, and your conscience and understanding flows out and fills the bubble of camp. The more bubbles burst the “wiser” you are and therein lies this underinvolvement and detachment Bergson and Sontag talk about.

I love camp, and I love kitsch, and I almost wrote down here that I find the glitter and the plastic beautiful, which would have made a mess out of my thoughts, but now I am not sure. The feeling I get from looking at pink plastic flamingos, shimmering golden paint or small garden fountains is very close to being sincerely and seriously in awe of them. But I am not in awe of their beauty, but rather their existence. So, I guess there’s no going back for me on this one, the campy heart surgery and damage is done. My kitsch bubble has been burst and I love it. I love the fact that I can look at these pink lawn flamingos as sculptures and works of art and laugh (with them or at them?)
2.4 The Gallery Or The Street?

The Curious Case Of The Hamburger Sculpture

I want to compare two very different possible places where artworks could be exhibited and try to see their differences in the light of this idea of hyperinvolvement and underinvolvement. Let’s take the traditional gallery space and its opposite, the city street.

The white cube of the gallery is a calm, disinterested and emotionless space. It is detached. The street is full of emotion, life and stimuli. It is hyperinvolved. The gallery is supervised and controlled, the street is unpredictable and uncontrollable. I believe that many artworks would make me laugh more if I saw them on the street, in the everyday life
context, than in a gallery cube. There is clearly a mechanism of the incongruity theory at work here; the contrast and surprise of two very different things that create humour. So, could it be that the artwork is not actually the thing that I find funny in the context of the street, but it is the juxtaposition of the artwork and the street that is hilarious?

I’ll use two sculptures of mine as an example. This work is from 2017, it is called the Hamburger Series. Here under is two sculptures from the series; Microwave Hamburger and Hamburger with Salad. These are about 40cm X 40cm x 60cm size sculptures, and the top part of both of the sculptures rotates with a motor. This makes a soft buzzing sound that envelopes the sculptures. They are both made out of polyurethane foam, in the shape of big hamburgers. Hamburger with Salad also has led lights and the salad is made out of clear plastic bags. When the top bun rotates it makes a nice rustling sound in addition to the motor humming. In this picture the sculpture Microwave Hamburger is on a microwave oven and Hamburger with Salad in an actual oven.

Imagine placing either of these artworks in the street; a context that is so opposite of where artworks are traditionally displayed creates a juxtaposition, which is funny. In addition to the context, the subject of the sculpture is also something that makes it funny. If you were walking down the street and found a hamburger sculpture that is twenty times the size of a real burger, and its top bun would rotate slowly on its axis, I think you would find it very funny. This size thing, a burger blown up to a bigger size, is also an incongruity, a mechanism that triggers humour in this sculpture. Also, if you saw this sculpture in an art gallery, you would be in a certain mental state and expecting to see something weird or out of place, you would be prepared for the challenge of looking at art, whereas in the street you would be caught off your guard. Another mechanism of the incongruity theory. The
Fig 7 Sofi Häkkinen, Microwave Hamburger (2017)

Fig 8 Sofi Häkkinen, Hamburger with Salad (2017)
hamburger on the side walk is a sudden crack in reality, and it might take a while to recognise it as art.

This sculpture uses the idea of fast food, and that fits the street. But it is still funny, because it is out of place. Imagine a delicate and abstract sculpture in the middle of a street instead of this one. I would find it a little melancholic and sad. So somehow the hamburger out of place and a more delicate or abstract one. Here is a picture of *Hamburger with Salad* photoshopped into the street. It actually looks a little sad. I am starting to doubt my initial hypothesis.

When I think of any artwork object in an out of place context, the street for example, it does have an aura of sadness to it. At first it might look funny, but when examined longer, it seems lonely. In a gallery people are interested in the work and pay attention. In the street they would probably just pass by, maybe stop for a quick social media snap. Humour and feeling blue seem to lurk in each other’s shadows. Isn’t the joker always the broken one!

![Photo of sculpture in the street](image)

**Fig 9** Photoshopped example picture of my sculpture in the streets.
The contrast alone isn’t enough to create humour. It is a complex and a many layered equation, that finally creates laughter. It can go so wrong very easily, if even one of the ingredients is off. And the ingredients aren’t objective, too. I will write about humour gone wrong later on in this thesis.

This absence of emotion that Bergson and Sontag call for is in fact in the viewer and in what they have learned and experienced, rather than the environment or context or artwork itself. Just like beauty is in the eye of the beholder, detachment that leads to humour is in the brain of the beholder, too. And perhaps also in the artwork itself, which is forever lonely.
3 Cracks in Reality

Critchley mentions in his book *On Humour* (Routledge, 2002) that jokes play with the same mechanisms as I think art does. They operate by *tearing holes in reality.* That is one of the thoughts I have had about art for a long time, and Critchley gave me the words for it. I think art works like this, as an example: the artist catches a fleeting idea, a small fracture in reality, and puts it out there for the audience to contemplate. The artist uses art as their tool for this. Like Alva Noë argues, art organizes us; we use it to look at ourselves, much like philosophy. It is these things that maybe one would not think about if it wasn’t for art. And same goes with jokes and humour, they can play with very delicate matters, and being funny is often dancing on the edge of a knife.

I have this theory, that an artist’s job is to keep an eye on the flow of ideas constantly rushing through their head, and also those they get for example through association from being in contact with others, and the ones given straight to them by others. And from complete solitude that turns thoughts inwards, too. The artist catches one idea, plays with it, discards it or keeps it and then forwards it to the audience, grinded into an artwork. The artist is both the birth mother and the catcher of the ideas. Jokes and humour are born like this, too, from a quickly passing idea. A light bulb goes on in your head.

---

**Anecdote:** I went to Schönhauser Allee one day to buy some sheets. I was sitting on the train when I realised how the whole way I kept looking for cracks in the homogenous uniformity of the everyday city life. My eyes almost subconsciously moved on the scenery, stopping at anything that might be out of the ordinary. I noticed I do this all the time. Then the best of these ruptures I find I might use in an artwork.

This made me think of survival instincts. Could this kind of behaviour have roots in trying to spot an attacker or a danger before it hits you? This idea then connects art to biology, somehow through humour. I see the relief theory of humour as an interesting way to approach this, because it sees laughter as a physiological reduction of tension in the body. Finding a crack in the present reality (an attack, a joke, an artwork) does sort of the same in my opinion. It can create a physiological tension, and then release it.

So, if I follow this line of thought, could an artwork also be perceived as a hostile attacker by the unconscious body? A crack in reality and in safety. This can be transferred into what is art’s purpose; making us think about ourselves, making us realise ourselves and our ways and habits and then ultimately perhaps having a changing effect. These cracks, these artworks are not comfortable and nice, they are ugly and unpleasant. Artworks attack the mind, they are warning signs or nudges for humans. The artist looks for ruptures in the surrounding reality, in order to make that reality visible for us.

This is also a point that separates entertainment and, in some cases, also “bad art” from art. Like I wrote in the chapter about the Ed-Wood Syndrome, that art needs intellectual substance. This idea of art as a warning sign, and not just something comforting can be seen as a part of that. Of course, art is so diverse, that art can also be just comforting, and play with other forms of substance. Or not.
3.1 Neutralizing Negative Emotion

I think one of the other problems of funny art is that no matter how good a way humour is to relieve stress and discomfort, because of its ability to make difficult or terrible things easier to digest and talk about, it also has a possible tendency to neutralize negative emotion.²⁶

Humour is a great way to help diffuse tensions in social groups. It is a tool that we use frequently and not always subconsciously. The way joking and laughing release tension, create bonds between people, make people feel more at ease with others are all examples of the positive effects of humour.

These applications of humour can work in art too, even though humour is often used to point out negative things in life or the things the artist personally doesn’t like. The important thing for me here is that humour must not overshadow the message of the artwork. This is a difficult task to accomplish because our reactions to humour and art are so varied and subjective. It is a double trap for the artist. The things people might see or focus on in an artwork vary, and their level of engagement with the work and its deeper meanings vary.

Also, humour can be too powerful a tool in a work that has a difficult idea as its starting point. It can guide to work in such a way that it over-shadows the message the artist meant to get through. In this way humour can neutralize negative emotions in art. But when used in just the right amount, I believe that humour can, in a soft way, point out these difficult subjects of artworks, and not squash them under its weight.

²⁶ Sue Mehrtens, “Jung and the Value of Humour”,
The Jungian Centre of the Spiritual Sciences (August 29th, 2014)
Mehrtens, 2014)
3.2 The Darker Side Of Fun

“When we laugh at an ironic remark, or a sarcastic cartoon, it is left to each of us to pause and reflect on whether laughter was the appropriate response to the situation, given all we know of the individuals and cultures involved”

Massimo Piugliucci, 2016

I have noticed during the time I have studied humorous artworks, that the undertone is often darker than what the work physically looks like or what the funny trigger in the work is. Maybe this is due to humour’s abilities to address difficult subjects in humane life. That is also the most dangerous side of it. It is pretty easy to dismiss a funny work or to misunderstand it in a crucial way, because what is funny is so subjective. I would like to quote here a press release of an exhibition from 2015, held in Art + Culture Projects in Brooklyn, that battles these exact thoughts; Anything for a Laugh: Humor in Contemporary Art. The text is written by curator Dominic Molon:

“From the manner in which a joke can resolve (or cause) the most difficult situation to a consideration of how satire can sway public/political opinion, humor, when used correctly and strategically, allows an artist to effectively communicate with their audience in ways that are both immediate and subtle. Incorporating elements of the comedic into one’s work, however, also carries the risk that it will be easily dismissed, with the suspicion
lingering in the viewer’s mind that delivering the joke was the artist’s sole purpose in making the work.”27

Humour has great powers in touching people’s minds. That is probably because it is often easy and fast to consume. It is likeable. Therein lies also this problem on misunderstanding and things possibly going terribly wrong. People get angry at jokes, jokes can be mean and hurtful, but doesn’t the old saying state that in the root of every joke there lies the truth? Jokes are often truths in disguise, something you don’t want to say to someone’s face. They are subtle – or not so subtle – proposals and opinions. Still, I am prone to think that a joke says much more of the one telling it, than it does often of its subject.

We try to affect people through humour, for example through political satire and sarcasm. And a thing like irony or sarcasm; these have similar qualities as the getting of joke and having a similar sense of humour: some people have it and some don’t, but irony and sarcasm enable new, very delicate but meaningful nuances in our verbal delivery and for example the communicating our self-image to others. And because there is so much room for misinterpretations and because humour is often very personal, there is a lot of room for getting hurt.

One group of artworks that immediately pops to my mind is those that have a religious or a sexual theme. If the subject of the work is a delicate one, and the chosen method is ridicule, one might say that the artist should have a certain sensitiveness when carefully addressing the issue. On the other hand, this is art I am talking about, and that is the one thing in life that can say anything and be anything, also hurtful. And again, an artwork needs to have something else to it too, and not just be an insult for the sake of insulting.

An ever-classic Finnish art work that comes to mind immediately in this context is Harro Koskinen’s sculpture *Sikamessias* (The Pig Messiah) from 1969. This work uses humour to comment the lifestyle of the bourgeois. Since the pig in the artwork is depicted on the cross, it also evokes religion, and not in a very flattering way from the believer’s point of view. There was a huge out cry from the public against the work at the time of its revelation. The artist was finally sentenced to pay fines for blasphemy.

Another more recent artwork comes from America. This is a painting by Ilma Gore, a nude portrait of Donald Trump. The artist says she comments on the male body, power and their relations to one another with this portrait. In the picture president Trump is shown with a micro penis. This is a very common joke – a dismissive one nonetheless, that is used to mock people that are disliked for some reason. It is a dangerous thing to attach some living, breathing persons being to a joke like this. Even if it is not meant as a joke, that is how people will probably take it. Gore got many threatening calls from Trump’s people to take the picture down from her social media and other platforms, saying she cannot use Trump’s image. She was also attacked on the street by Trump supporters for this artwork. 28

(Previous spread)

**Fig 10** Sikamessias (The Pig Messiah), Harro Koskinen (1969)

**Fig 11** Ilma Gore, Portrait of Donald Trump (2016)

28  *Ilma Gore*, “If somebody is going to be threatened by a small penis it’s Trump”, *The Guardian* (7/5/2016)
4 Humour in Material and Form

The choice of material in my artworks has similarities to the comic. I combine different objects, elements, ideas and materials in a way that relies on the incongruity theory of humour; the juxta-position.

Material itself is not funny; a roll of tape or a piece of cardboard won’t probably make you laugh just by lying on the floor. It is rather the combination of a theme or an idea and the material that triggers laughter. Shape, size and material in contradiction to subject. These are things that need the human brain, eye, and hand in order to come to focus. The humour in material is seen by a person, put together by that

Fig 12 Anssi Kasitonni, Plymouth (2009). Materials cardboard and gold paint.
person, and then given forward to others as a feeling of hilariousness or a smile.

In the case of Anssi Kasitonni’s work this is seen very clearly. Kasitonni uses a lot of cardboard and gold paint as materials for example. These two aren’t really funny in themselves, but when used to depict for example a car or a refined horse statue they suddenly became hilarious. He attaches the material to an expensive idea. The cheap gold paint on the cheap cardboard sculpted into the form of an expensive thing; the combination is the key, the clash of two things that have very different backgrounds, form, history, meanings, connotations and so on. This is one aspect in Kasitonni’s sculptural work that often makes it funny.

4.1 Kasitonni’s Vampire

There is one work by Kasitonni, that I want to take as an example for closer examination. It is a sculpture called Vampyyrin solarium, The Vampire’s Solarium (from the 2010’s). This work never fails to make me laugh when I come across it.

The sculpture is not quite a life size rendering of a vampire lying in a coffin. It is a bit smaller than actual human size (let’s assume that vampires would be human-size). The twist in the work is that the sleek white coffin has solarium tanning lights in its lid, visible to the viewer because the coffin is left open. The vampire figure bathes in this eerie bluish ultraviolet light, frozen in the traditional vampire pose with his hand resting crossed on his chest. I love it.

In this work, instead of the material, really, the two ideas colliding is the essence of the work and the thing that makes it funny. One inevitably sees the controversy between a vampire and the (artificial) tanning of skin. Vampires disappear in sunlight turning into dust, so it is funny to put one in a solarium bed. Also, the way people lie in a solarium device does
remind of lying in a coffin; a typical sleeping place for vampires.

The initial reaction to this artwork from a person who has been exposed to the idea vampires as it is told by the western entertainment industry, might go something like: “Ha ha, oh my God a vampire in a solarium, that’s hilarious!” It doesn’t end there, however, and that is why I think it is a good example of a funny artwork that works, that has meaning.

The viewer’s thoughts can go to many different directions after first contact with the sculpture. That is if one lets them and is not satisfied with merely laughing with or at the work. A few things that come to mind when analyzing the work: there is the actual concept of a solarium and the social pressure of looking a certain way. There is the idea of a vampire; a lonely and sad creature. These two assimilated create a sad story of maybe someone trying to desperately fit in.

Then there is the idea of light; all life needs light to thrive, but the vampire, the undead, cannot live in sunlight. Here, you have a clash of life and death at your hands. The immortal figure that is never alive, basking in electrical artificial light.
that is supposed to make you tan. It does also pose a question about whether a vampire can live in artificial sunlight, a solarium?

There are many layers in this work, and the fact that it is also funny doesn’t diminish them. It is an excellent joke and an excellent artwork.

Of course, there is also the do-it-yourself aesthetics at play here, that make the work visually funny in its awkwardness. The sizes and proportions are not quite right and so on. There accents create juxta positions in themselves that add to the humorous side of the work.

In conclusion, I think humor can be found in the mix of material and ideas. Material alone is rarely funny, and the idea or the subject of the artwork can be something dull or sad. An artwork can *look* funny, but one might find that it is actually not. Like the vampire bathing in a solarium box to his death. Also, the material can be something pretty uninteresting and plain, but the idea (the combination) so funny, that it makes the artwork hilarious. Such as the car made out of cardboard and gold paint. The incongruous ideas put together is the essence of the work. It is not a dull study of material.

Like, if I hold a lump of goo in my hand, the goo itself is not really funny, but the connotations attached to it are. It’s an appealing color, but it resembles disgusting bodily fluids, for example. It feels unnatural but so nice in your hand.

I did start out thinking that material can be funny in itself, but I realize now that it requires something more. Even if I think that goo or a small cardboard box is funny, that reaction is not triggered solely because of the material. That is why, I have come to realize, funny artworks actually have to work twice as hard. But I also think they are twice as good when they succeed.
Fig 14 A lump of goo and a master thesis draft in my living room.
4.2 Sidenote: ITE-taide / Outsider Art

In ITE-taide, the Finnish word for Outsider Art, aspects of humor come to play. These sovereign non-academic, not trained artists who work often alone in the country side, completely outside of the “Art World” are an interesting group of people. They often use at least two things in their art that connect with the theories of humor I have been unraveling here.

The first thing is the ITE-artist’s use of material. Their artworks are often created out of discarded materials, with methods that aren’t traditional art making practices. These materials look funny when combined together. Often also size is a thing the ITE-artists play with, which adds to the incongruity.

The second thing, also very closely tied to the funny in the material is the subjects these artists often pick. Most common themes in ITE-taide are politicians, religion and societal matters; the works are often comments to what’s happening at the moment, for example political letdowns. The weird material and the themes put together create a hilarious aura to the work.

I have always wanted to add some more of the ITE-feeling to my artistic practice. Still, the academic world interests me a lot as well. I want to go in the direction of ITE but have that sharp academic or intellectually purposeful edge to my work.

4.3 Work Example: Käänteismylly (The Inverse Mill)

I have been building a “machine” out of cardboard boxes, duct tape, and all kinds of junk that I collect. One day I saw a toothbrush that a friend left at my place, realised I have two more spare ones, decided to use black tape to “sculpt” them a bit, and made holes in the cardboard machine and stuck the toothbrushes in to make levers. Funny, right?
**Fig 15** A part of the Käänteismylly (Inverse Mill), work in progress. Sofi Hääkinen 2018
Once, I found a discarded old printer on the street, and broke off the command keypad to make a sculpture out of. The keypad is now also a part of the above-mentioned machine, *Käänteismylly* (The inverse Mill). The artwork is a machine that makes wind when you pour flour inside it and grind it. This is possible because it exists in an inverse land, a parallel dimension.

There are all kinds of gadgets in our everyday life that make for great material in artworks. I think the associations that people get from these very mundane objects are a much needed add to the humour that the combination of mismatched material provides. It makes the work more easily approachable because you recognize something familiar in it. Then it also subverts the customary function of the given object, sort of breaks it and allow new contemplation of the object.

There is also a smaller sculpture in the machine, a black electronic device that has RGB led lights and a rotating motor, with a 15cm piece of iron wire sticking out of it. When you turn it on, the lights don’t move but the iron wire rotates steadily, and it makes a calming murmur sound. It is the actual Mill (*mylly*) of the Inverse Mill.

I made a video where I turn the Mill on with a carrot. It’s very simple less than a minute-long movie, where nothing else happens except that I press the carrot to the middle part of the device, and simultaneously turn the switch off-screen and the device lights up and starts rotating. Then I do that again to turn it off. It is a shout out to Beuys’s *Capri Battery* (1985), but there is no natural electric current or “lemons-creating-electricity” happening.

---

29 *Joseph Beuys’s* Capri Battery (1985) is an object-trouvée sculpture where he has attached a light bulb to a real lemon. The light bulb is painted yellow, and the lemon creates an electric current that lights up the bulb.
I think it’s very funny. It’s actually so funny, that I’m very serious about it. It is simply a very random combination of things: that piece of sculpture I had lying around, and a carrot that happened to be on the table.

Like so many times already said, two opposites in contrast create a joke. Here you have a contrast between the carrot that is organic, and the electronic device, made out of metal and plastic, that is inorganic. In the video, in the space between these two objects as they approach each other, there is the element of surprise and bewilderment when the organic carrot turns on the device.

The video is a loop, so you watch it again and again, it also gives some sort of satisfaction. Like a gag, that is repeated until it is no longer funny, and that exactly makes it funny too. But there is a deeper meaning, something else to the work, so it can stand being funny. Whereas Beuys’s fruit-battery was a comment on the ecological balance in the world due to human’s actions, the Mill is a product of an age where everything is electric, even touch, and it starts to lose its meanings.

Fig 16 The Mill part of the Käänteismylly (Inverse Mill), work in progress: a still from video.
Sofi Häkkinen (2018)
5 Conclusion

This thesis has been a great tool for reasoning and analyzing my thoughts on art and my own funny artworks. I have gained more insight to what I am doing, and this research I’ve done has also made me even more enthusiastic about my career choice. I see more detail in art and in humour now. There is some major getting it that has happened. Another bubble burst in a sea of bubbles.

I have recognized many similarities and differences in art and humour, and both areas have come more into focus for me. There is nothing really wrong in making funny art, it is just a difficult field of it. Like a friend of mine, who is a professional musician, said that the reason why there are so many sad love songs out there is because those are way easier to make than a good one that is humorous.

Art can be both funny and serious at the same time. I have come to see that these two don’t cancel each other out, and that big thoughts and things can be handled in hilarious artworks. Much like work doesn’t have to bore you to death to be serious. A serious artwork that looks really funny and is made with great joy, that addresses serious issues can bore the audience and still be great. We are allowed to have fun in our work. Now I just have to remember that.

The biggest problem I encountered was the delicacy when combining art and humour. Somehow, I would want to see art as something very unique that has its own rules, in order for it to be effective and in order for it to have that even life-changing, enchanting aura that it has due to its intrinsic value. But I’m facing a new moral problem here; to hurt or
not to hurt on purpose? I keep coming back to these negative emotions funny art can trigger. If an artist feels the need to deliberately hurt somebody or something through their art, by the means of humour, is that okay? If that is what the piece really does need, can it be okay? Does art lose something of its ultimate strength and sovereignty if there is even this kind of moral censorship?

I don’t think that hurting someone through art and humour fills any of my own goals or needs as an artist. I want to always consider my works from all possible view-points. I will continue to dance with art and humour in this incendiary sweet spot of creativity, where writing this thesis has gotten me.
Bibliography in Alphabethical Order

Allan Antliff, Joseph Beuys (Phaidon Focus, 2014)

Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic (Alcan, 1924)

Simon Critchley, On Humour (Routledge, 2002)

Vinson Cunningham, “The Playful, Political Art of Sanford Biggers”, The New Yorker (January 15th, 2018)

Alex Danchev, 100 Artist’ Manifestos From the Futurists to the Stuckists (Penguin Classics, 2011)


Jessica Lack, Why Are We ‘Artists’? 100 World Art Manifestos (Penguin Classics, 2017)

Kari Matilainen, ”Bahtinin karnevalistinen groteski modernin kriisidiskusseissa”, Niin & Näin (3/1996)


Teemu Mäki, Näkyvää pimeys (WSOY, 2009)

Alva Noë, Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature (Hill and Wang, 2016)


Esa Saarinen, Länsimaisen filosofian historia huipulta huipulle Sokrateesta Marxiiin (WSOY, 1985)

Susan Sontag, Notes on “Camp”, (Partisan Review, 1964)
Jalal Toufic, What was I Thinking? (Sternberg Press, e-flux, 2017)


Gilda Williams, How to Write About Contemporary Art (Thames & Hudson)
Images

Fig 1  https://pixabay.com/fi/
    hymi%C3%B6-laughing-kasvot-onnellinen-304294/
Fig 2  Photo: Iida-Liina Linnea. c/ Sofi Häkkinen (2016):
       Kunkku / The King
Fig 3  © Richard Serra (2010): Backdoor Pipeline. Courtesy of
       Gagosian Gallery
Fig 4  © Richard Serra (2014): Dead Load. Courtesy of
       Gagosian Gallery
Fig 5  White Persian Cat Porcelain Statue Figurine - Michelle
       (Franklin Mint, 1992)
Fig 6  https://www.dhgate.com/product/pink-plastic-flamingos-garden-accessories/389847707.html
Fig 7  © Sofi Häkkinen (2017): Microwave Hamburger
Fig 8  © Sofi Häkkinen (2017): Hamburger with Salad
Fig 9  © Sofi Häkkinen (2017): Hamburger with Salad
Fig 10 © Harro Koskinen (1969): Sikamessias
Fig 11 © Ilma Gore (2016): Portrait of Donald Trump
Fig 12 © Anssi Kasittoni (2014): Plymouth
Fig 13 © Anssi Kasitonni (2010’s): Vampyyrin solarium
Fig 14 © Sofi Häkkinen (2018)
Fig 15 © Sofi Häkkinen (2018): Käänteismylly (in progress)
Fig 16 © Sofi Häkkinen (2018): Käänteismylly (in progress