THE LOST OBJECT ENSEMBLE: ABSURDITIES OF THE 'MULTI-FUNCTIONAL' OBJECT

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I am a multi-media artist and musician from Dunedin, New Zealand, working across sculpture, sound and performance. In this paper, I discuss my recent studio project *The Lost Object Ensemble*, an installation featuring absurd multi-functional musical instruments and an associated video work. This project toured to several venues in New Zealand in 2016. Subsequently, *The Brass Section*, a small selection of works from this show, has been included in "Anything Could Happen" (2017), a juried exhibition in Yu Gallery, Shanghai, of art and fashion from artists with links to Dunedin.

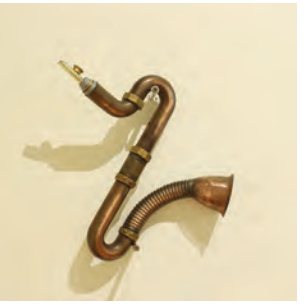

Figure 1. Jane Venis, *You Saxy Thang*, 2016, copper and brass plumbing components. Exhibited at Forrester Gallery, Oamaru.

The Lost Object Ensemble lies in the tension between instrument design and contemporary art practice. In this paper, I discuss how this body of work critiques some of the absurdities prevalent in contemporary popular culture, in particular, the continuing obsession with reality TV cooking and talent quest programmes. Secondly, I focus on the ways in which my objects also reference the history of instrument-making, whereby instruments were once made from whatever materials were freely available. I have used this notion when making instruments from common kitchen utensils and 'retired' plumbing components associated with the kitchen. This article follows "Behind the Scenes with Dr Clawhammer," published in *Scope Art & Design 11*, where I invited the reader into my studio to look at some of my stringed instruments in progress.

My third key area of focus in this paper is the use of irony and satire in my work to point up the proliferation of 'must have' multifunctional products as advertised through daytime television infomercials and mail-order catalogues. I discuss how objects such as these can be critiqued through the lens of the Japanese art of *chindogu*, 'products' that according to their initiator Kenji Kawakami, "have been freed from the chains of usefulness."[1] As part of this section, I also look at the practices of some contemporary artists whose work I consider may be given a reading as chindogu.

Figure 2. Jane Venis, *Drainsax*, 2016, copper and brass plumbing components. Exhibited at Forrester Gallery, Oamaru.

In *The Lost Object Ensemble* I overturn the concept of using 'found materials' by creating musical instruments from objects that appear to have lost their way. For example, the ancient copper U bends I use as a starting point to create a pair of playable saxophones show that some beautiful materials may have an unpromising provenance. Their previous lives as part of drainage systems is something I would rather not dwell on, as I reconstruct and ultimately play them as wind instruments

Copper is a material that creates a visual link between the saxophones and stringed instruments such as the *Panjo*, a banjo constructed from a copper-bottomed frying pan. The instrument's former life as a frying pan is evoked in the satirical video *The Eggs Factor*, a pivotal work in *The Lost Object Ensemble*. In this video, I explore the current obsession with reality television cooking and talent quest programmes. The *Panjo* is an ironic work that functions as both a cooking utensil and a playable instrument. It is designed to critique the desire for the instant fame that reality TV programming engenders.

Michael Foley, in *The Age of Absurdity*, contends that the increase in attention-seeking behaviour in Western society is the new normal. He proposes that the need to be seen is linked to "an inner emptiness requiring identity conferred from without: I am seen therefore I am."[2] There appears to be a link between this behaviour and the increasing use of transparent building materials and open-plan design of public places to facilitate people-watching.[3] The need to be seen has now reached absurd proportions, to the point that people are now paying to be stalked. According to Foley, "These services are increasingly popular because they give their customers a unique sense of significance. As the founder of one such service puts it, 'We've had clients who say they wear nicer underwear or start taking better care of themselves simply knowing they're being observed.'"[4]

The growing need for recognition and adoration in contemporary culture is reflected in the making of The *Panjo*, a shiny object of desire created for the ridiculous scenario of the 'wannabe' reality TV star who is so obsessed by fame that they need a designer object to facilitate simultaneous entry into multiple competitions such as *Masterchef* and *The X Factor*. In the *Eggs Factor* video, I start by playing the *Panjo* (which functions as a five-string banjo) and then deconstruct the instrument through a hybrid performance that echoes the presentation style of both cooking programmes and infomercials. Finally, after an elaborate preamble, the skin is removed and I use the instrument to fry eggs in the demonstration style of a television celebrity chef.

Figure 3. Jane Venis, *Panjo*, 2015, 'Magnamail'-style catalogue.

The popularity of internationally syndicated programmes such as *Masterchef* and *My Kitchen Rules* comes at a time when less and less time is spent in the kitchen and convenience meals are on the rise – yet cooking programmes have a huge following. As food journalist Michael Pollen wryly commented in a *New York Times* article headed "Out of the Kitchen, onto the Couch," "How are we so eager to watch other people browning beef cubes on screen but so less eager to brown them ourselves?"[5]

In many homes, cooking has stopped being a family-orientated activity to become a spectator sport where teams of winners and losers compete against the clock. The kitchen is a site of nail-biting tension where we watch the burning of other people's meals and the sinking of others' soufflés while we slump into the couch waiting for the microwave to beep. The television kitchen is replacing our own. It also continues as a highly gendered site where all-male trios of presenters sit in judgement on both male and female contestants. Scenes of public humiliation, endemic to reality television programming, are all too common. The competition kitchen as a site of psychological stamina is what media theorist Tasha Oren playfully calls "culinary S&M."[6]

Reality TV shows us that some people will do almost anything for money: eat live bugs, form relationships with complete strangers, endure a televised ousting by public vote, and be filmed 24 hours a day. In reality TV cooking shows, we are privy to disputes and dramas happening both inside and outside the kitchen. This easy access to that which has been traditionally hidden is termed by French theorist Jean Baudrillard "the ecstasy of communication," an ecstasy which he describes as ultimately obscene. "In this state we are no longer obsessed with the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible: it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication." [7]

Reality TV appears to be in a perpetual state of "ecstasy of communication," offering potential stardom at the price of constant surveillance. *The Eggs Factor* comments on this ubiquitous form of popular culture.

Secondly, it critiques the over-abundance of infomercials for pointless consumer goods, with a focus on multi-functional objects that "have so many uses around the home" yet don't appear to work well in any of their guises. The irony of creating objects that are so multifunctional that they become absurdly impractical references the Japanese art of chindogu.[8] Chindogu, a collective noun for 'products' that have been purposefully designed to be particularly useless, was first conceived by Japanese creative Kenji Kawakami when he was the editor of a Japanese mail order catalogue in the 1980s.[9]

The notion of creating 'designer' objects that are truly pointless is a ploy that artists have engaged with over many decades. Many artworks, particularly from the Dada and Surrealist eras, could be readily examined through the lens of chindogu. Meret Oppenheim's 1936 fur teacup, *Breakfast in Fur*, Salvador Dali's 1938 *Lobster Telephone*, in which the phone mouthpiece was overlaid with a lobster body; and Oscar Dominguez's absurd satin-lined *Wheelbarrow* of 1931 are a few key historical examples of artworks that employ recognisable objects to echo the notion of futility.

Some contemporary artists and designers are also engaging in practices which critique the futility of products, machines and systems. Unlike the modernist examples noted above, they address issues surrounding consumerism, in particular sustainability. This reflects my own practice, whereby I use chindogu as a starting point to address issues surrounding the design and proliferation of arguably pointless and wasteful consumer goods and systems.

Belgian conceptual artist Wim Delvoye created his absurd digestion machine named *Cloaca* in 2000. Since then, it has been exhibited internationally in numerous high-profile public galleries. The machine is 'fed' two restaurant meals per day and bares its digestive system, a succession of large clear tanks containing a series of stomach enzymes, to close public scrutiny. The idea that *Cloaca* mimics human digestion is evidenced by its very human complaint of 'indigestion,' that occasionally causes unpleasant odours to emanate throughout the gallery. This is a truly ludicrous machine that not only defecates, but neatly parcels up and presents the viewer with a numbered edition of its 'product.'[10]

Cloaca could be viewed as chindogu by virtue of its profound uselessness. In common with chindogu, it could be seen as a critical system that makes a comment on hunger, consumption and sustainability. However, unlike chindogu, *Cloaca*'s end product is a tradeable commodity. As Kawakami states in his Ten Tenets of Chindogu, "chindogu are not for sale … they must not even be sold as a joke."[11] With *Cloaca* this is clearly not the case, as "the machine daily delivered turds that were signed and sold for $1,000 each."[12] Although Delvoye has made little comment on any specific meaning surrounding the work, one can't help thinking that he must be 'laughing up his sleeve' at the gullible members of the public lining up to purchase excrement for a seemingly exorbitant amount; excrement that has the same chemical makeup as their own and is therefore essentially the real thing. This work is my benchmark for a project that severely tests the credulity of the audience.

A second contemporary artist who makes objects that can be discussed under the lens of chindogu is Mona Hatoum, a British-based Palestinian sculptor, performance and installation artist of international status. She has made a series of works using common kitchen utensils as a starting point. One of these is *Daybed* (2008), a faithful steel replica of a kitchen grater up-scaled to bed-sized proportions. This is one of many works in which Hatoum uses

scale to imbue simple domestic objects with the possibility of impending threat or danger. By creating domestic utensils of human-sized proportions, the implication is that these are objects that can potentially slice, dice and grate the human form in much more damaging ways than their more docile (and yet still dangerous) normal-sized selves. *Slicer* (1999), another huge utensil (in this case an egg slicer), brings to mind the slicing injuries caused by shrapnel. However, to be confronted by that possibility in an oversized kitchen utensil somehow makes the reality all the more unnerving.

A vegetable grater also appears in my work, *The Carrot Grating Ukulele*, one of the instruments that feature in *The Eggs Factor* video. Although I have not used scale to imply threat in this object, the placement of a vegetable grater over the sound hole is an invitation to shred the player's fingers once the safety of the vegetable 'pick' has been grated away. In both *Daybed* and *The Carrot Grating Ukulele*, the grater has the power to evoke unwelcome visual memories of kitchen accidents and the promise of even worse damage should these objects be used.

In Hatoum's installation *The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (2000) at the Tate London, a giant hand-operated vegetable shredder of the kind found in a 1950s kitchen had shed its discs onto the floor of the gallery. In *Mona Hatoum: The Eye*, a documentary filmed at the Tate London in 2000, Hatoum describes this work, in which a harmless kitchen utensil "becomes an infernal machine … which has a feeling of threat but is also quite humorous."[13] A recurring theme in Hatoum's oeuvre is the questioning of the ontological status of objects: "I like taking a harmless everyday object and turn it into something uncanny and give it a different status, which makes you question the status of all objects around you."[14]

To question the status of objects is one of the fundamental purposes of chindogu. This is a key commonality shared with the works of Hatoum, Kawakami and myself. However, both Kawakami and I question the status of objects to discuss the power of consumerism, whereas Hatoum uses her objects to evoke "a feeling of instability and restlessness."[15]

Chindogu objects lie in the tension between art and design as they fulfill the purpose of societal critique as art objects, yet they are created through an iterative design process to be purposefully useless. The absurd chindogu-influenced objects 'promoted' in *The Eggs Factor* are also 'advertised' in an accompanying 'Magnamail'-style mail order catalogue (Figure 3). This is the type of badly designed, low-cost publication that Kawakami edited when he was inspired to create the nonsensical 'products' he launched as chindogu.

In *The Eggs Factor* video, I have taken the notion of multi-function to an absurd level. I achieve this by purposely choosing mismatched products or 'lost objects' to create the hybrid 'product.' Making instruments out of materials that are not meant for that particular purpose has its challenges, particularly as I wanted the final work to look and sound good, and (in the case of the *Panjo*) be stripped down quickly and revert to its former use as a frying pan, for use in *The Eggs Factor* performance. Initially, I struggled to make the frying pan body strong enough to take the strain once the strings were under tension. The *Panjo* passed through many iterations before this problem was solved by welding a robust strengthening plate onto the side of the pan to allow the neck to be attached without movement under stress. The experience of making the *Panjo* was hugely helpful when I was faced with the same issues in making a larger stringed instrument based on the fabrication style of the *Panjo*. I developed the *Cellok*, a cello-style instrument with a wok body as a 'kitchen-mate' for the *Panjo*. This instrument has very heavy strings and so the body is under even greater pressure when the strings are tightened.

My interest in the banjo led to some research into different playing techniques, and I was particularly drawn to the style of 'clawhammer' – "a rhythmic and percussive banjo-playing style that originated in Africa, as did the banjo itself."[16] Early African banjos were made from gourds covered with stretched animal skin.[17] Historically, this has always been an instrument poor country people made 'from scratch,' using whatever materials came to hand.[18] I have referenced this concept in the development of my instruments – for example, the use of a common kitchen fork as a tail piece is a feature of the multi-purpose *Panjo*.

Figure 4. Jane Venis, *Cellok*, 2016.

Figure 5. Jane Venis, *Cellok*, 2016 (detail).

Figure 6. Jane Venis, *Panjo with fork tail piece*, 2016 (detail).

In *the Lost Object Ensemble* not all works are made from repurposed materials, nor are they all multi-functional. For example, the work *Heavy Metal*, a life-size hollow cast bronze ukulele, struggles to function on any level and is essentially a chindogu object. The instrument is powder-coated in hot pink to look like a cheap learner model and appears to be extremely light (Figure 7). It is only on picking up the work that one finds that it weighs 16 kilos. While many of the lost objects play really well as instruments, the weight of *Heavy Metal* makes it a struggle to play, despite its sweet yet quiet voice. As is true with all chindogu, in solving one problem – in this case, to create an extremely robust instrument – a new and more exasperating problem quickly follows in its wake.

Making the three ukulele works in *The Lost Object Ensemble* has been informed by the resurgence in popularity of the ukulele – hence *Heavy Metal* appearing in the guise of a bright pink learner instrument. Sadly, the reputation of the ukulele as a kitsch tourist souvenir or child's 'toy guitar' has been hard to shake off.[19] This perception has now started to change, and there is a growing list of virtuoso ukulele performers.

The embracing of the ukulele by contemporary popular culture is a catalyst for the 'tongue in cheek' use of the ukulele in my exhibitions and performance works. *The Carrot Grating Ukulele*, discussed earlier in relation to Hatoum's *Daybed*, has been reprised as a giveaway in *The Eggs Factor* infomercial (Figure 8). This ridiculous work, designed for the 'niche market' of multi-tasking musicians who wish to play music while cooking, also has a darker side; as is implicit in its design, it doubles as an instrument for the masochists if no carrots are used. "*The Carrot Grating Ukulele* positions the ukulele against the prevailing popular image of the extra cute instrument that 'is just too damn happy.'"[20] Both ukulele works consider the resurgence of the ukulele and its place in contemporary culture.

Figure 7. Jane Venis, *Heavy Metal*, 2016.

In conclusion, I think that the role of the artist as a commentator on current trends, fads and themes is increasingly important. The absurdities prevalent in much of global popular culture, in particular, the intense focus on the possibility of 'stardom for all' in a media-hungry age is something I explore through the making of rather ridiculous multifunctional 'products.'

The absurd chindogu-inspired merchandise, exploited to aid the rise of potential stars, provides not only a critique of the hunger for fame, but also of the endless stream of unnecessary consumer goods advertised daily through infomercial-style television.

Figure 8. Jane Venis, *The Lost Object Ensemble*, 2016. Gallery view showing exhibits and video, *The Eggs Factor*, in situ.

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1 Kenji Kawakami, *Chindogu: 101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions* (New York: WW Norton, 1995), 8.

2 Michael Foley, *The Age of Absurdity* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 32.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Michael Pollen, "Out of the Kitchen, onto the Couch," *New York Times*, 2 August 2009, http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/out-of-the-kitchen-onto-the-couch/.

6 Tasha Oren, "On the Line, Format Cooking and Competition as Television Values," *Critical Studies in Television*, 8:2 (2013).

7 Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds S Redmond and S Holmes (London: Sage, 2007), 59.

8 Kawakami, *Chindogu*.

9 Jane Venis, "Chindogu: Not so Useless After All," *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* 5:5 (2011), 189-202.

10 Els Fiers, "A Human Masterpiece," *Artnet*, 2001, http://www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/fiers/fiers1-9-01.asp (accessed 20 June 2009).

11 Kawakami, *Chindogu, 9*.

12 Fiers, "A Human Masterpiece."

13 From an interview with Mona Hatoum in *The Eye: Moma Hatoum* (London: Illuminations Media, 2011).

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Jane Venis, "Behind the Scenes with Dr Clawhammer," *Scope: Art & Design 11* (2015), 78.

17 Karen Linn, *That Half-barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

18 Venis, "Behind the Scenes with Dr Clawhammer."

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid, 77.