

The Kynic Impulse: Kynismus as Contemporary Art Practice.

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Abstract

This practice-led research examines Peter Sloterdijk's proposal, presented in his 1987 book *Critique of Cynical Reason*, to revive the tradition of kynismus as a counterstrategy to cynicism, described by him as the 'dominant operating mode of contemporary culture.' Defining kynismus as 'self-embodiment in resistance', the significance of Sloterdijk's proposal lies in its insistence on the direct involvement of the body, conceived by him as material as argument. Kynismus manifested as a contemporary art practice, however, reveals fundamental flaws in Sloterdijk's purely literary analysis. Foremost is his conception of the kynismus - cynicism relationship as dichotomy and the subsequent inability to conceive an autonomous kynicism, one that is not contingent upon cynicism for its existence. Addressing these issues by re-examining kynismus from a biological, somatic perspective and developing a theoretical approach based on the research of Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson, this research affirms kynismus as a *playfighting-with* rather than a *resistance-against*. Testing the cogency of this new position not only contributes towards a kynic revival but also moves beyond existing debates concerning cynicism. Establishing the body as the focus of a practice that uses material as argument, I examine not just how kynismus might be revived as a contemporary art practice but also how an engagement with kynicism might re-model aspects of art itself.

The main conclusions that this research draws are firstly, that the direct involvement of material as argument and the body conceived as material as argument are paramount in any attempt to counter cynicism, the materialisation and physical coalescence of cultural alternatives being critical in cynicism's undoing. Secondly, that kynismus manifested as a contemporary art practice challenges a perceived predominance of product value within contemporary art in favour of practice values. Finally, that an engagement with kynicism not only disables cynicism but also challenges, reconfigures, and reconstitutes the production of knowledge. In drawing these conclusions, I argue that not only is a definition of kynismus as *playfighting* a more accurate description of it but also that such an understanding represents a far more productive notion than one founded on *resistance*.

Introduction

In a recent BBC interview, former US president Barack Obama described America as a country facing a huge task; that of reversing a culture of ‘crazy conspiracy theories’ in which people increasingly disagree over the most basic facts.¹ He called this ‘truth decay’, a phrase which succinctly describes a culture where ‘facts no longer matter’. In such a culture an Enlightenment-style correction of errors has no effect since consciousness is reflexively buffered and no longer feels affected by critique. In an environment such as this, therefore, there seems an urgent need to search for strategies that might resist an endemic cynicism and lift the pervasive sense of political and cultural disillusionment.

Peter Sloterdijk’s 1987 work, *Critique of Cynical Reason* remains fundamental to such a search. In it, Sloterdijk investigates the role of cynicism and its antagonist, kynismus for contemporary critical intellectuals. Claiming that cynicism is the ‘dominant operating mode in contemporary culture’,² Sloterdijk proposes reviving the tradition of kynismus as a counterstrategy, defining kynismus as ‘self-embodiment in resistance’.³ The significance of Sloterdijk’s proposal lies in its insistence on the direct involvement of the body, conceived by him as material as argument. *Being* kynic, however, reveals fundamental flaws in Sloterdijk’s purely literary model of kynismus. Developing a radically different methodology to that employed by Sloterdijk, one in which a notion of kynismus as ‘Gervaisian’ *playfight* replaces Sloterdijk’s definition of kynismus as *resistance*, this research in the form of a contemporary art practice aims to determine exactly how the direct involvement of the body might indeed facilitate kynismus in antagonising cynicism.⁴ Contributing to a kynic revival and moving beyond existing debates concerning both the nature and role of kynismus, I pose three key research questions:

How does the direct involvement of the body facilitate the antagonising of cynicism by kynismus?

How might kynismus manifest itself as a contemporary art practice?

How might an engagement with kynicism challenge, reconfigure, and reconstitute the production of knowledge?

¹ ‘Barack Obama: One election won’t stop US ‘truth decay’. *BBC News*, 15 November 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-us-2020-54910344>. Accessed 14 December 2021.

² Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) xi.

³ As opposed to cynicism, defined by Sloterdijk in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 218 as ‘self-splitting in repression’.

⁴ Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson. ‘The Evolution and Functions of Laughter and Humour: A Synthetic Approach’. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, 80, no. 4 (2005). 395 – 430.

The following chapters now examine kynismus in detail. **Methodology** not only explores the implications of research by Gervais and Wilson but also scrutinises cynicism's relationship with the public sphere, *straying* as method, and the notion of cynic 'criminality'.

Chapter 1 establishes the urban public space as my practice's primary domicile. Via the artworks *Six Days* and *Signal* I explore the potential of both material as argument and the body conceived as material as argument. Examining aspects of cynicism that emerge as a direct result of practice (themes that remain completely uncharted in Sloterdijk's purely literary exploration), I consider visibility, time, and occupation from a cynic perspective. Doing so begins to answer the first of my research questions, 'How does the direct involvement of the body facilitate the antagonising of cynicism by kynismus?'

Chapter 2 considers David Hammons' *Shoe Tree* (1981), examining how this work not only demonstrates cynicism but also realises a notion of 'public art' that is very different from that manifested by its host, Richard Serra's *T. W. U.* (1980). Following this, an analysis of David the Clown's circus act helps to define 'pantomimic humour',⁵ facilitating an understanding of both kynismus' ability to engineer a relatively safe space in which to operate and its ability to generate a predicament. Asserting the significance of the predicament, I go on to consider how kynismus might manifest itself as a contemporary art practice, describing a threefold approach involving the 'act of daring', a modelling of what, exactly, an artist is, and a practice published by the anecdote.

Chapter 3 examines Žižek's description of cynic mechanics⁶ and asks how useful such an analysis is in facilitating our understanding of kynismus. Through a consideration of the artworks *Cop Socker* and *Chicken*, and via comparisons with works by Sarah Lucas,⁷ Jeremy Deller,⁸ David Hammons,⁹ and Voina¹⁰ I determine that although Žižek's analysis remains pertinent, significant omissions are evident, the foremost being the failure to acknowledge kynismus' ability to posit tangible cultural alternatives. Having thrown new light on the cynic mechanism I go on to consider how an engagement with cynicism might challenge, reconfigure, and reconstitute the production of knowledge.

⁵ David the Clown (b. unknown) Performer with Chipperfield's Circus, 2016.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek (b. 1949). Slovenian philosopher, cultural theorist and public intellectual.

⁷ Sarah Lucas (b. 1962). British artist.

⁸ Jeremy Deller (b. 1966). Turner Prize winning British artist.

⁹ David Hammons (b. 1943). American artist.

¹⁰ Voina: Russian Actionist group founded in 2005 by philosophy graduate Oleg Vorotnikov.

Throughout these chapters as I examine kynismus' apparent ability to antagonise cynicism, what emerges is not the formation of a manifesto or policy but instead a singular, productive disruptiveness and a process of self-cultivation. In **Conclusion I** consider the outcomes of this process and posit a unique reading of Lucas's and Hammons' practices before speculating on the role that kynismus manifested as a contemporary art practice might have in shifting custom, manners, and a predominantly cynical culture.

An examination of Sloterdijk's proposal to revive the tradition of kynismus as a counterstrategy to cynicism reveals why his work seems pertinent. Kynismus as the defining theme of Cynic philosophy first manifested itself as a lived alternative to Platonic idealism, the values of the *polis*,¹¹ and the imperial claims of Alexander the Great. Taking Diogenes of Sinope as his kynic model, Sloterdijk proceeds to define kynismus as 'self-embodiment in resistance'.¹² He goes on to describe Diogenes' public acts of masturbation and defecation as 'an early climax of reason', acts in which the body alone affects critique. Suggesting that our current 'crisis culture or culture in crisis' shows a marked resemblance to the Athens that gave birth to Cynic philosophy, Sloterdijk proposes reviving the tradition of kynismus as a counterstrategy to cynicism.

Hegel,¹³ Foucault, and Žižek¹⁴ can all be seen to challenge this proposal on the grounds that, far from being any sort of counterstrategy to cynicism, kynismus is in fact the product of cynicism, only arising as a result of an inherently cynical society.

¹¹ *Polis*: a city-state in ancient Greece, especially as considered in its ideal form for philosophical purposes. The defensive wall surrounding such a city. Etymological root of 'police'.

¹² Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 150. Diogenes of Sinope's (412 or 404 BC – 323 BC) father, Hicesias was a banker who at some point, enrolled his son in banking. Both became embroiled in a scandal involving the adulteration of coinage, and as a result, Diogenes was forced into exile. Myth has it that Diogenes consulted the Delphic oracle for advice and was told to 'change the currency', subsequently using this phrase to describe his kynic activity, that of changing cultural values.

¹³ Hegel (1820) *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Section 195. Quoted in Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, ix. 'The entire cynical mode of life adopted by Diogenes was nothing more or less than a product of Athenian social life, and what determined it was the way of thinking against which his whole manner protested. Hence it was not independent of social conditions but simply their result; it was itself a product of rude luxury'.

¹⁴ Žižek writes: 'The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality but he none the less insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be 'they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.' Cynical reason is no longer naïve but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.

We must distinguish this cynical position from what Sloterdijk calls kynicism; kynicism represents the popular, plebian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm; the classical cynical procedure is to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology ...and to hold them up to ridicule. This procedure, then, is more pragmatic than argumentative: it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation. ...Cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture to this cynical subversion'. Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso Books, 1989), 25-26. Thus, Žižek believes not only that kynicism is the product of cynicism (because what else is 'the official culture' if not cynicism?) but also that the result of kynicism is more cynicism.

Foucault goes so far as to claim that ‘the resistance of the self-conscious body is produced by the culture of cynicism itself as a regenerating and legitimating device,’¹⁵ a claim that Sloterdijk fails to counter. A cynical analysis, however, will only discover cynicism. What none of these thinkers is willing to consider is the possibility of a kynismus whose existence is not contingent upon cynicism.

Despite the significance of Sloterdijk’s proposal, *being* kynic reveals four fundamental flaws, not just in his literary model of kynismus but also in how he proposes to use it. First, that by proposing that kynismus be employed to shift what he describes as the ‘dominant operating mode of society [...] at an institutional level’, despite his assertions to the contrary, Sloterdijk is creating a *Grosstheorien*, a ‘grand narrative’; an *ideal* kynicism tasked with combatting cynicism and as such, unfit for purpose. Second, a danger exists as Huyssen points out in the foreword to *Critique of Cynical Reason*, that a kynicism conceived as a counterstrategy might simply hold one captive to the very thing one wants to overcome. Third, that Sloterdijk’s conception of the kynismus - cynicism relationship as dichotomy fails to acknowledge the body itself as evidencing something quite different, a failure which seems remiss given his insistence on the direct involvement of the body throughout his entire proposal. Finally, that an exclusively literary analysis of the kynismus - cynicism relationship leaves Sloterdijk unaware of themes that only arise when one enacts kynicism.

To address the first of these issues: by proposing to revive the tradition of kynismus as a counterstrategy to cynicism, Sloterdijk attempts to shift ‘the dominant operating mode in contemporary culture, both on the personal and institutional level’¹⁶ In doing so, he effectively introduces a ‘grand narrative’, since a fundamental cultural shift at an institutional level would have profound practical political consequences. Yet throughout *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk repeatedly attacks the notion of the grand narrative and asserts that kynicism rejects such a position, writing; ‘Kynical reason culminates in the knowledge – decried as nihilism – that we must snub the grand goals. In this regard we cannot be nihilistic enough [...]’.¹⁷ What my *being* kynic highlighted was that an individual actually doing the thing eliminates any pretence of a grand narrative. In no way was it possible for me to imagine that my actions alone might precipitate a cultural shift at an institutional level. The focus of this research, therefore, remains grounded in the body, and aims to determine exactly how the direct involvement of the body might indeed facilitate the antagonising of cynicism by kynismus.

¹⁵ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xx.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

Secondly, a danger exists as Huyssen points out in the foreword to *Critique of Cynical Reason*, that a kynicism conceived as counterstrategy might simply hold one captive to the very thing one wants to overcome.¹⁸ Emerging just after the publication of *Critique of Cynical Reason*, works by Russian Actionists such as Petr Pavlensky,¹⁹ Alexander Bremer,²⁰ and Oleg Kulik²¹ may well represent direct attempts to realise Sloterdijk's 'self-embodiment in resistance'. Characterised for the most part by a dour earnestness and a distinct lack of humour, Pavlensky for one '[...] demonstrates a person who is willing to inflict injuries on himself more devious, more painful than others could inflict on him' as Guelman writes, '[...] as such he demonstrates the weakness of the system.' Kulik too, roaming Moscow's streets on all fours, barking, and even biting people merely serves to illustrate 'kynicism'. Despite an obvious engagement with embodiment the perceived failure here is that by raging against cynicism, Russian Actionism remains fixated on opposition, existing in such a hermetic relationship with cynicism as to be inconceivable without it.

This fixation on opposition may be due in part to Sloterdijk's conceptualisation of the kynismus - cynicism relationship. Having postulated that kynicism and cynicism are the result of an historic split within the Cynical phenomenon itself, Sloterdijk posits an intimate and inextricable relationship.²² Conceived as a dichotomy, one cannot visualise a kynismus without cynicism. To extricate the kynismus - cynicism relationship from this notion of a dichotomy it seems necessary, therefore, to attempt to envisage it in a completely new light, one that is not so much a theory but rather its embodiment.

¹⁸ Andreas Huyssen, 'Foreword: The Return of Diogenes as Postmodern Intellectual', in Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, p. xx.

¹⁹ Petr Pavlensky (b. 1984). Author of '...a string of profound, if sensationalist performances', including 'Stitch'- sewing his mouth shut outside St. Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral in protest at the jailing of the punk protest group Pussy Riot. 'Fixation' – nailing his scrotum to the cobbles of Red Square as a metaphor for the apathy, political indifference, and fatalism of modern Russian society, and 'Separation' – cutting off his earlobe at the Moscow Psychiatry Institute. Noah Sneider, 'Body Politics: the Artist who Taunts the Kremlin. Noah Sneider Presents Petr Pavlensky'. *The Economist*, May 3, 2016.

²⁰ Alexander Brener (b. 1957).

²¹ Oleg Kulik (b. 1961).

²² Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 218. 'The concept here undergoes a split into the dichotomy: kynicism – cynicism that, in substance corresponds to resistance and repression, or more precisely, self-embodiment in resistance and self-splitting in repression'.

Research by Gervais and Wilson²³ into laughter points toward a more somatic understanding. Two distinct kinds of laughter were discovered in the nineteenth century by French neurologist, Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne. By applying electrodes to faces, he produced a kind of smiling, the kind of expression that we use when we grin or laugh to be polite. This mannerism, he discovered, involves the face's zygomatic major muscles raising the corners of the mouth. Duchenne discovered a second kind of smiling and laughter when we find something genuinely (and uncontrollably) funny. This second expression was more complex, involving both the zygomatic major muscles and the orbicularis oculi muscles that form crows' feet around the eyes. Despite repeated attempts, Duchenne was never able to reproduce this with his electrodes – now known as a Duchenne smile. These two very different kinds of laughter are believed to have evolved at two separate points in human evolution. Gervais and Wilson hypothesise that the first, Duchenne laughter, may have evolved between two and four million years ago as a medium for playful emotional contagion. This purely physical, visceral reaction, a development of the breathy panting displayed by primates during play fighting likely appeared before any language. Promoting resource-building social play during fleeting moments of safety, its function was to signal amongst a small group that everything was fine. What it signalled was perhaps a novelty, an opportunity for learning, recruiting others to play and explore cognitively, emotionally, and socially. Sometime after this development, and probably triggered by larger social groups, a non-Duchenne laughter evolved in response to non-funny situations that required confirmation or reassurance. As hominids developed cognitively and behaviourally, they learned to mimic Duchenne laughter in order to take advantage of its effects but failed to copy the complexity of muscular reaction. This false, mimicked laughter was a tool with which to manipulate others, operating most successfully in aggressive, nervous, or hierarchical contexts, serving to appease, manipulate or feign agreement. Whereas Duchenne laughter is driven by instinct, a bodily, muscular, pre-language response, non-Duchenne laughter has been fabricated to facilitate social constructs, social norms, economic and ethical views. The triggers for this kind of laughter are highly context specific and rely on a form of cultural insider-knowledge.

Given this information, the relationship between Duchenne and non-Duchenne laughter seems to provide an unparalleled biological model for the kynismus - cynicism relationship. In this new light, kynismus is akin to Duchenne laughter, where physical, material play results in a laughter that signals novelty and an opportunity for learning. The positive nature of this play is manifested by the body itself which reacts in a manner that cannot be faked (the involvement of both the zygomatic major muscles and the orbicularis oculi muscles in laughter). Cynicism on the other hand, can now be seen as a much later development, manifested somatically as non-Duchenne laughter (involving solely the zygomatic major muscles), the body's attempt to fake Duchenne laughter in order to manipulate others within larger social groups.

²³ Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson. 'The Evolution and Functions of Laughter and Humour: A Synthetic Approach'. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, 80, no. 4 (2005). 395 – 430. For a further summary of Gervais and Wilson's research see also 'Why do Humans Laugh? The Evolutionary Biology of Laughter'. Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, 25 March 2014. <https://slate.com/culture/2014/03/why-do-humans-laugh-the-evolutionary-biology-of-laughter.html> Accessed 24 September 2018.

Whilst it is true that this is purely argument by analogy, conceiving the kynismus - cynicism relationship from this perspective allows three things to happen. First, it posits an embodiment of the kynismus - cynicism relationship. Second, it dismisses Sloterdijk's attempt to establish a kynicism - cynicism split as an historic event. Third, and most importantly, that to conceive kynismus as being akin to Duchenne laughter is to acknowledge its fundamentally joyous nature. Trapped in a definition that ties 'self-embodiment' to 'resistance', Sloterdijk denies kynicism its essential joy. It is perhaps precisely kynicism's joyousness rather than any aspect of resistance that antagonises a cynicism bound to appeasement, manipulation, or feigned agreement. Viewed from this somatic, evolutionary perspective, kynicism and cynicism are no longer locked in a dichotomy. Instead, an autonomous and enfranchised kynismus can now be seen as a thing in itself, an ancient form of social interaction that precedes the cynical impulse.

Finally, addressing the issue that an exclusively literary analysis of the kynismus - cynicism relationship leaves Sloterdijk unaware of themes that only arise when one enacts kynicism: establishing the body as the focus of a contemporary art practice allows this research not only to examine the validity of Sloterdijk's proposal but also to move beyond it. Examining how time, mobility, and visibility effect an embodied kynicism, this research is able to determine exactly how the direct involvement of the body might indeed facilitate the antagonising of cynicism by kynismus by scrutinising the kynic corpus in its entirety.

Examining Sloterdijk's proposal to revive the tradition of kynismus as a counterstrategy to cynicism, this research finds it both vital and pertinent on the grounds that the adoption of a strategy where the body alone is able to effect critique may well succeed where an Enlightenment-style correction of errors fails. Hegel, Foucault, and Žižek all contest the validity of Sloterdijk's proposal by claiming that, far from being any sort of counterstrategy to cynicism, kynismus is in fact the product of cynicism; but what all these thinkers fail to consider is the possibility of an autonomous kynismus, one whose existence is not contingent upon cynicism. Developing a theoretical approach based on the research of Gervais and Wilson, this research, in the form of both a contemporary art practice and a written argument, posits just such a kynismus, aiming to determine exactly how the direct involvement of the body might indeed facilitate the antagonising of cynicism by kynismus. Examining how kynismus might manifest itself as a contemporary art practice, I expand this to consider how an engagement with kynicism might in turn challenge, reconfigure, and reconstitute the production of knowledge.

Methodology

Obama's statement and the notion of 'truth decay' struck a real chord with this research, as did the idea of a reflexively buffered consciousness unaffected by verbal critique. In a culture where 'facts no longer matter', the idea of material as argument began to seem increasingly important. What became clear though, was that Sloterdijk's definition of kynismus as *resistance* not only ties it to the very thing he wishes to overcome, exactly as Huyssen had warned, but also that kynismus conceived as *resistance* denies its defining characteristic, that of a physical, visceral, essentially joyous humour. Re-examining kynismus from a biological, somatic perspective and developing a theoretical approach based on the research of Gervais and Wilson served to reposition kynismus as a *playfighting-with* rather than a *resistance-against*. Testing the cogency of this new position by manifesting kynismus as a contemporary art practice, I searched for sources that might support it, examining not only Beck's²⁴ study of the stray but also those aspects of Sarah Lucas's and David Hammons's practices that struck me as being kynic. Seeking to make this revised notion of kynismus concrete, I adopted the principle of embodiment and with it, sought to prove that material as argument would indeed have traction.

A Revised Kynismus.

What Gervais and Wilson's research provides is not only a somatic model of the kynismus - cynicism relationship but also clues concerning the nature of kynismus. Sloterdijk himself acknowledges a direct link between kynismus and Duchenne laughter but fails to follow the lead. Attempting to reconstitute Aufklärung (enlightenment) on the basis of what he calls 'physiognomic thought' (embodied thought)²⁵ he writes, 'kynical laughter comes from the intestines; it is grounded at the animal level and lets itself go without restraint [...] total, uncramping laughter that wipes away illusions and postures.'²⁶ There can be little doubt that what Sloterdijk is describing here is Duchenne laughter, but if 'kynical laughter' and Duchenne laughter are one and the same thing then the impulse which manifests itself as Duchenne laughter must also be fundamental to kynismus. Despite this insight into the nature of kynismus, Sloterdijk pursues the idea no further, returning instead to the notion of kynismus as *resistance*.

²⁴ Alan M. Beck. *The Ecology of Stray Dogs – a Study of Free-Ranging Urban Animals* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1973).

²⁵ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xvii. Sloterdijk insists that one of main problems of the Enlightenment was its inability to include the body and its senses in its project of emancipation. Physiognomic thought or embodied thought is his literary attempt to address this.

²⁶ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 143 – 144.

Furthermore, Gervais and Wilson's research seems pivotal in formulating an autonomous kynicism, one that challenges Hegel's, Foucault's, and Žižek's assertion that kynismus is the product of cynicism. If one accepts the idea that the relationship between Duchenne and non-Duchenne laughter can be read as a somatic manifestation of the kynismus - cynicism relationship, then by preceding the cynical impulse at an evolutionary level, kynismus cannot be the product of cynicism. This revised conception of an uncoupled and emancipated kynismus not only liberates it from a seemingly inextricable dichotomy and a definition tied to the notion of resistance but also serves to reposition it at a pre-language level, one compatible with both a contemporary art practice that establishes the body as its focus and with the adoption of animal behaviours as part of a de-civilising process, something that will be discussed in Chapter 1. As a direct result of Gervais and Wilson's research, the methodology underpinning this research embraces *playfighting* as its model, one that wrestles with culture itself, serving to recruit others to explore cognitively, emotionally, and socially.²⁷ Fundamentally important to this model is the principle of embodiment where the body conceived as material as argument physically challenges a cultural currency. This physical challenge, a bodily testing of cultural values and boundaries, is to be understood not as *resistance-against* but as a joyous *playfighting-with*, one that appears to antagonise cynicism by making live cultural alternatives public.

Kynismus as a Contemporary Art Practice

If I now attempt to conceive this *playfighting* as a contemporary art practice, I again turn to Sloterdijk who writes, 'The kynic, [...] has to challenge the public sphere because it is the only space in which the overcoming of idealist arrogance can be meaningfully demonstrated. Spirited materialism is not satisfied with words but proceeds to a material argumentation that rehabilitates the body.'²⁸ In this somewhat confusing statement, Sloterdijk attempts to site kynic activity, ostensibly within the public realm. 'Challenging the public sphere [...]', however, might mean any number of things. It may mean that Sloterdijk believes that Habermas's notion of the public sphere as a conceptual resource renders it an ideal, a thing that simply does not exist in the real world and, therefore, an example of the 'idealist arrogance' that the kynic must challenge. Alternatively, it may mean that, accepting the notion of the public sphere as something viable and useful, Sloterdijk sees the job of the kynic as being one of expanding this space so as to include the body as material as argument. Whichever of these is more accurate, what is clear is that by proposing a material argumentation, Sloterdijk promotes the involvement of the body above a position occupied by words. Both interpretations seem valid in the light of Fraser's definition of the public sphere as 'a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is

²⁷ 'In its least muddled definition, the term 'culture' refers to grooming systems for the transmission of regionally essential cognitive and moral principles to subsequent generations'. Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2013), 271.

²⁸ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 104 - 105.

enacted through the medium of talk'.²⁹ Use of this theatre for pantomimic activity not only reveals the inadequacy of this definition but also satisfies Sloterdijk's proposal to shift the emphasis of a *bios politikos* away from speech, back towards action.³⁰ A material argumentation that challenges the public sphere as both an ideal and as a space purely for *talk* needs real public space in which to act. This research in the form of a contemporary art practice, therefore, adopts the urban public space as its primary theatre of activity facilitating not only direct interaction with an unfiltered audience but also returning 'kynicism' to its etymological root.

When Plato (424 – 347BC) found himself unable to engage in materialist dialogue with his antagonist Diogenes, he resorted to slander, calling Diogenes 'The Dog' (Greek = *Kyon*, etymological source of 'Cynic'). The intended meaning of this insult was clear; that Diogenes' shameless public acts of defecation and masturbation were no more 'philosophy' than the actions of a stray. Plato's insult, however, far from crushing his opponent not only confirmed the significance of Diogenes' stance but also revealed the limitations of his own philosophy. A cultural affinity with the dog, eponym of Cynicism, is explored in detail by McHugh,³¹ who examines its scientific, social, and political significance. It is Beck,³² however, who realises the specific potential of the stray, the dog that was once domesticated but that has now left the house. Freed from human regulation the stray is able to enact an alternative to domestication whilst remaining within an urban environment. This self-exile gives the stray a unique freedom, one where it is not wild in the sense that it has never experienced social

²⁹ Nancy Fraser, *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 56–80.

³⁰ Arendt, in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. 2nd. edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). writes on the ancient Greek city-states; 'In the experience of the *polis* ...action and speech separated and became more and more independent activities. The emphasis shifted from action to speech,' (26). As a result of this, a man's *bios politikos* (his political life) became defined by 'head' arguments that did not allow the materialist position a place. Kynicism attempts to rehabilitate the body as material as argument.

³¹ 'Representatives of mixed non-breed / breed / stray / mutt sexual relations likewise radically disrupt conventional ideas about dogs as separate from (and dominated by) humans, even fostering new models of sex and identity. If breed dogs have come to figure modern social hierarchies, the mongrel in turn holds out the possibilities of their dismantling.'" Susan McHugh, *Dog* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 54.

³² He states: 'Man's influence on the dog amounts to having created the species, with human selection and habitation being the main factors influencing the dog's evolutionary radiation. Furthermore, the dog probably affected human development. John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller, *Genetics and the Social Behaviour of the Dog* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) view the dog, domesticated about the time that humans started to develop group relations, as a genetic pilot experiment for the human race. If domestication means evolving in a human-protected and human-controlled environment, then both dogs and human beings represent domesticated populations. Indeed, "urbanization and domestication have so much in common that it is not possible to define them as fundamentally distinct'. A. E Parr, 'Psychological Aspects of Urbanology' *Journal of Social Issues*, 22, no. 4 (1966). 39 – 45.' Alan M. Beck. *The Ecology of Stray Dogs – a Study of Free-Ranging Urban Animals* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1973), xv.

contact, but not domesticated either in that its social training quickly unravels, exposing impulses previously overwritten by domestication. What Plato's insult reveals is the impact Diogenes' use of the urban public space has on prevailing cultural values and Platonic idealism. By *straying*, that is, by becoming more stray-like, Diogenes is able not only to shed internal controls that amount to a 'domestication' but also to rehabilitate the body as material as argument by physically moving 'out of place', socially, sexually, and politically.

A contemporary art practice that deliberately embraces animality (becoming stray-like), intent on moving 'out of place' will naturally find itself at odds with regulation.³³ As a result, the notion of kynic 'criminality' is formed by fixed cultural institutions threatened by mongrel mobility.³⁴ Nowhere is this notion of kynic 'criminality' and its apparent potential to antagonise cynicism more joyously expressed than in Sarah Lucas's 'the caper',³⁵ a term used by her to describe not only the process of making art but also its presentation and the cultural heist that preceded it. Slang for illegal or criminal activity such as robbery or burglary (as well as having an affiliation to the prank or shenanigans), 'the caper' epitomises kynismus as the means of punching through the wall that buffers the consciousness from critique. Having also adopted the urban public space as his primary theatre of activity, David Hammons' 'acts of daring' likewise have kynic overtones. Saying of his work, 'it's *not* the art object itself. It's the daringness of the act, of presenting it [...]',³⁶ Hammons not only shifts our entire understanding of his art, but also embraces kynic 'criminality'. Here the 'daringness of the act' acknowledges the risk involved in public acts that circumvent regulation.

Taken together and adopted by this research, Lucas' 'the caper' and Hammons' 'acts of daring' constitute contemporaneous kynic methodology and as such will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Just as Lucas transcribes 'the caper' and Hammons the 'act of daring' into art, so within this research acts of *playfighting* will also be described as contemporary art; they are, after all, acts that constitute cultural activity. What this research approach demands, however, is not a conception of kynismus as

³³ The significance of movements 'out of place' and matter 'out of place' as described by Douglas (1966) will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

³⁴ Laws such as the 1824 Vagrancy Act constitute the modern state's response to those who threaten to move 'out of place' or stray, whether that might mean socially, culturally, politically, racially, sexually, economically, or spatially, with vagrancy laws remodelled by the state and deployed against almost any perceived threat to public order or safety. 'Every person committing any of the offences herein ... (being) an idle and disorderly person, ... every person wandering abroad and lodging in (an) ... unoccupied building ... and not giving a good account of himself or herself. ... Every person wilfully, openly, lewdly, and obscenely exposing his person in any street, road ... or in any public (place). ... Every person endeavouring to procure charitable contributions of any nature or kind. ... It shall be lawful for any justice of the peace to commit such offender ... to the house of correction.' Vagrancy Act (Great Britain, House of Commons 1824). Various sections of the original act have been repealed (but not those shown) by subsequent Criminal Justice Acts or amended by the Vagrancy Act (Great Britain, House of Commons 1935) and the Criminal Justice Act (Great Britain, House of Commons 1982) but these amendments and others like them have often served to target specific perceived threats rather than modernise archaic law.

³⁵ Unpublished conversations between Shaun Doyle and Sarah Lucas. (2019 – 2022).

³⁶ Elena Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale*. (London: Afterall Books, 2017), 70.

a thing manifested *by* a contemporary art practice but instead kynismus as a contemporary art practice where the resultant art is not a vehicle for a theory but the thing itself.

A contemporary art practice that embraces *playfighting* as its methodological model and *straying* as method will, by its very nature, challenge what Rogoff³⁷ calls the ‘neo-liberal structures for the daily management of knowledge [...] the demands and the imperatives of cognitive capitalism [...] to be useful, to be applied, to be entrepreneurial and generally integrated within market economies at every level’. Yet beyond this challenge to knowledge management, an engagement with cynicism might reconfigure and reconstitute the production of knowledge itself. The significance of kynic enquiry lies not so much in what questions it asks, but in *how* it asks them. Sloterdijk writes:

The academic conversation among philosophers does not concede the materialist position a fitting place – indeed, it cannot because the conversation itself presupposes something like an idealist agreement [...] In the dialogue of heads, only head theories will ever come up [...] Socrates copes quite well with the Sophists and theoretical materialists if he can entice them into a conversation in which he, as a master of refutation, is undefeatable. However, neither Socrates nor Plato can deal with Diogenes – for he talks with them “differently too”, in a dialogue of flesh and blood.³⁸

This ‘dialogue of flesh and blood’ neatly encapsulates Sloterdijk’s insistence on the direct involvement of the body, one that conceives the body as material as argument. If, however, as Sloterdijk states, ‘the principle of embodiment cannot be upheld anymore by modern intellectuals, for reasons of cultural constitution’,³⁹ then the production of cynical knowledge must take place outside of an ‘intellectual’ milieu. Research that *strays* is uniquely placed in one such ‘outside’, rehabilitating the body as material as argument by physically moving ‘out of place’. It is, above all, research that wants to have some fun with its subject.

³⁷ Irit Rogoff, *Creative Practices of Knowledge*. Lecture at the conference ‘Black Mountain: Educational Turn and the Avant-Garde’, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, September 25-26 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCn8sq98sro> (Accessed 8 January 2022).

³⁸ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 104. *Straying* from a linguistic domesticity and adopting instead the principle of embodiment allows Diogenes to pose philosophical questions and responses in a manner that clearly *bewilders* Socrates and Plato and reveals how much their philosophy is embedded in and indebted to *talk*.

³⁹ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 107.

Chapter 1

Material as Argument and the Body Conceived as Material as Argument.

Having developed a theoretical approach based on the research of Gervais and Wilson, and a method founded on Cynic activity, an analysis of the stray, and the praxis of Lucas and Hammons, I now examine what happens when these strategies are implemented.

Adopting the urban public space as my practice's primary domicile, I begin to consider parts of the city as a range or territory, zones that I move through daily. Roaming throughout the city during the day and night reveals how this space functions, exposing usage that remains hidden to temporal visitors, or to those indoors. Each zone of the city has a distinct energy and identity, each with varying degrees of activity, usage, and visibility, embodying similarly varying levels of regulation, value, and power. Only by wandering do I learn how to exploit this environment, taking advantage of the sudden appearance of new materials or people, a lapse in security, or the opportunity to intervene. Here, in a space that represents urban consciousness in material form, *straying* and *play-fighting* cultivate a mobile, creative practice that seeks to antagonise established cultural values. In practice this means lifting, shifting, and presenting material, occupying, and simply being in the urban public space advertising a presence. This manipulation of material deals exclusively with what already exists, creating new meaning by shifting things, including myself, 'out of place'. The results of this activity (or lack of activity) might be removed or destroyed immediately. Alternatively, they might remain in place for months. What becomes important, as Hammons states, is not so much the resultant art object or its durability but the 'act of daring' that presents it.

Unlike the insular sanctity of the studio or gallery, the urban public space is a far more demanding, riskier, less stable place already peopled and loaded with materials that have both purpose and meaning. Usage of this communal, shared space, however, means that kynic activity taking place here directly involves an unfiltered audience, one that has not been primed to view art. Moreover, in this environment the status of the artworks themselves shifts. As Hammons says, 'That's why I like doing stuff better on the street, because the art becomes just one of the objects that's in the path of your everyday existence. It's what you move through, and it doesn't have any seniority over anything else.'⁴⁰ As a result, what an audience experiences here is the thing itself, raw and unannounced, stripped of its commodity status, and left label-free. What the urban public space represents, therefore, is a territory with an almost limitless potential for the shifting of materials and bodies into new configurations. A place in which to *stray*, where domestication can be eroded and where regulation can be caught off-guard. In the vastness of this space is the potential for being known and unknown, for being seen and unseen. It is a place to influence others, a material forum where material as argument generates immediate debate. It is a shared, social space making what happens here a shared, social activity.

⁴⁰ Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 97.

1.1 Six Days

Having established my creative practice in the urban public space, I was interested to learn what effect a prolonged occupation of this space would have. *Six Days* (2019) was thus conceived with the intention both of observing how people would respond to me and what effect my presence here would have. Examining other examples of urban occupation,⁴¹ I chose to focus on London's commercial centre, taking as my model instances of shoppers who had queued outside flagship stores awaiting the release of new products, sometimes for days on end.⁴² Choosing Regent Street and specifically, the pavement area directly in front of the Apple store, I consciously selected one of the busiest areas of the city in terms of the volume of people using it, during both the day and the night. Moreover, as the very first purpose-built shopping street for London, Regent Street has a unique identity, one inextricably tied to consumerism. Dostoyevsky's portrait of Paxton's Crystal Palace might easily have been written about it, describing as it does 'a cult container [...] of money and pure movement [...] where being human becomes a question of spending power and the meaning of freedom is exposed in the ability to choose between products from the market.'⁴³ Occupation of this space, therefore, became not only an opportunity to antagonise such notions of power and freedom but also a space in which to realise alternatives. These, however, were not objectives, nor was my occupation intended as protest aiming to block or thwart the functioning of business. *Six Days* was instead simply intended to be a brief but very conspicuous inactivity in a zone of the city created specifically for busy-ness.

The occupation of this space (commencing at midday on 17 June and ending at midday on 23 June 2019) brought with it a profound shift in my understanding of what 'public' could mean. With it came the realisation that I was now visible all the time, physically present on a very public stage. This state, of having virtually no privacy, no interior into which I could retreat or become invisible was at first deeply disconcerting. After a short while though this sensation was replaced by one of calm confidence. It no longer mattered to me that others could observe me, in fact, I became aware of now being able to watch them. Heightened visibility and with it a certain vulnerability seemed to facilitate an enhancement of my own awareness, where changes in light, the movements of people, and sounds such as church bells took on a new significance. Divorced from the activity around me the nature of this activity became all the more apparent as droves of self-absorbed shoppers, evening drinkers, and early morning workers came and went in tides.

⁴¹ The most obvious example here is that presented by the urban homeless population who have little choice in the matter. Occupy, however present something very different. Conceived as a socio-political movement opposing social and economic inequality, their use of urban public spaces, particularly those associated with capitalism, formed the basis of a political protest, manifested in London as a camp outside St. Paul's Cathedral (established on 15 October 2011 and subsequently removed by authorities on 28 February 2012).

⁴² Andrew Griffin, 'iPhone 6s Released: Apple Fans Queue Outside Shops as New Handset Goes on Sale'. *Independent*, 25 September 2013. <https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/iphone-6s-released-apple-fans-queue-outside-shops-as-new-handset-goes-on-sale-10516397.html> (Accessed 11 April 2020).

⁴³ Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Books, 1989), 12.

Those who watched me were not the select few who frequented art galleries but were instead an unfiltered audience, unafraid to comment or physically intervene. In stark contrast to the contemplative and rather subdued response one might expect from a gallery audience, it became clear that my embodiment of concepts in the urban public space encouraged a similarly embodied response from the public, many of whom engaged me in conversation at pavement level, encouraged my occupation, or physically challenged my right to be there. On most mornings when I awoke, I found that gifts of food had been left near me. Although obviously intended as acts of charity, such offerings served another, probably unintentional purpose. Physically extending the zone of my occupation, such donations not only claimed more of the pavement as my own but also acted as an almost magic barrier around me, one that the public became reluctant to cross. Food and drink left beside me acted as an extension of my own body and as such, amplified and augmented my presence. Not only serving to extend my occupation, these materials also challenged the regulation of this space in a manner that my body alone could not.

The very few possessions I had with me now took on an enhanced significance, made evident by my interaction with them. As Sloterdijk writes, 'Psychologists have observed that people who travel a great deal show behavioural patterns which they interpret as mobile cocooning; the models for this are nomads ...(who) use deterritorialization itself to reterritorialize themselves.'⁴⁴ Manifested by packing each morning, the ritual of folding my clothes and sleeping bag and placing these in my rucksack quickly established itself, with each day finding me able to fold both into ever tighter forms, making ever better use of the space within my bag. Time too became something experienced bodily, becoming felt rather than counted. It became mine, not as a reclaimed commodity but as a visceral sensation of potentiality. Initial fears that such an occupation would be a 'waste of time' evaporated as mental space opened outwards. Hour after hour of pure thought became available to me in a manner I had not experienced before, having previously been occupied mentally by what seemed like a stream of endless (necessary) activity.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 257.

⁴⁵ Maurizio Lazzarato writes: 'Whereas in the Middle Ages time belonged to God and God alone, today, as possibility, creation, choice, and decision, it is the primary object of capitalist expropriation / appropriation. If we distance ourselves from the economic point of view in which everyone seems to be caught up, what are the enormous quantities of money concentrated in banks, insurance, pension funds etc and manipulated by finance but potentialities, immense concentrations of possibilities? Finance sees to it that the only choices and the only possible decisions are those of the tautology of money making money, of production for the sake of production. Whereas in industrial societies there still existed an "open" time – in the form of progress or revolution – today, the future and its possibilities, quashed by the huge sums of money mobilized by finance and devoted to reproducing capitalist power relations, seem to be frozen. For debt simply neutralises time, time as the creation of new possibilities, that is to say, the raw material of all political, social, or aesthetic change.' Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*. (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2012), 48.

For long periods my occupation of this space seemed to be ignored, however, at certain times of the day and during certain activities (including teeth-brushing, changing clothes, and lounging during daylight hours) my presence became deeply antagonistic. Pushing at the boundaries (often completely unintentionally) of what was permissible here was enough to cause regulatory structures including the private security forces who patrolled the area, to make themselves known. In short, a self-permissioned de-regulation of this space rapidly revealed the cynical nature of the 'polis-ing' of this 'cult container'. Anyone not testing the limits of these regulatory boundaries might remain completely unaware of their existence. In these moments of clothes changing or lounging it became clear that I was not simply a resting shopper, but someone physically at odds with the cultural currency. In an environment expressly created for consumerism, where 'being human becomes a question of spending power and the meaning of freedom is exposed in the ability to choose between products from the market', being human whilst visibly disengaged from such activity seemed strictly taboo.

Not only did my simply *being* here bait an ideal of consumerism - it also challenged the economic and imperial ambitions of the state made palpable in the fabric of the street itself. A precedent for this can be found in the work of Valie Export, whose *Body Configurations* (1972 – 1976) captured her own attempts to rehabilitate the body as material as argument.⁴⁶ In *Body Configurations* Export explores psychologically by somatically challenging what she sees as patriarchal architecture and material forms of male dominance. By stretching, draping, and bending herself over the steps, columns, and Neoclassical structures of the city itself, Export shows not only how, as a woman she is coerced into adapting, forced to accommodate, and persuaded to acquiesce; she also exposes how such seemingly benign forms embody authority. Acting as live critique amidst a display of might in the form of stone, Export's warm body highlights a cold, hard geometry that serves to regiment, dominate, and enforce order. By making herself plastic, Export antagonises a now very palpable performance of power, a performance that again might otherwise perhaps have gone unchallenged or even unnoticed without her intervention. Documented through the medium of photography, however, Export's *Body Configurations* read more like a performance for the camera than a 'live' critique. A complete absence of all other human bodies reveals that, unlike other examples of Export's work, even though *Body Configurations* take place in the urban public space this is work that is not meant for consumption during its production.

Like Export, during *Six Days* I also adapted my posture in relation to the architecture around me, often forced to do so by cramp, tiredness, or through the physical intervention of others. In a prolonged interaction with the architecture of Regent Street, one that in complete contrast to Export's was deliberately meant to be interpreted during its production, rather than as an attempt to highlight a performance of power, in a gesture of insouciance, simply made myself comfortable. As embodied disinterest in the concrete expressions of dominance, regulation, and authority around me, my own body configurations antagonised not by challenging the meaning or rule of these forms but simply through an animal indifference towards them.

⁴⁶ Valie Export (also styled VALIE EXPORT) (b. 1940). Austrian artist.

Despite the sole concern of Export's *Body Configurations* with the fabric of the city itself, and *Six Days*' focus on how the urban public space itself is regulated, the significance of 'attitude' is apparent in both. Originally a seventeenth century technical term in art, *attitude* was later generalised to mean a posture of the body implying a particular mental state. Attitude is aptitude's doublet: both stem from the Latin *aptitudo* meaning a natural capacity to learn. By the 1960s, 'attitude' had gained connotations of antagonistic or uncooperative behaviour. This in turn colours our contemporary understanding of *attitude* as slang for an antagonistic manner of carrying oneself. Despite this misleading association with what might be perceived as resistance, *aptitudo*, and attitude's ability to embody a mental state make it particularly pertinent to kynic research. Nowhere is this notion of *attitude* better illustrated than in Raphael's *School of Athens* (1509 – 1511). Here, amongst huddled groups of noted scientists, mathematicians and philosophers, Diogenes alone lounges on the steps of the portico, enacting his own pantomimic performance of idleness. Acting as the embodiment of material as argument, Diogenes' dossing serves not only to lower himself but also to 'lower the tone',⁴⁷ to de-civilise the lofty idealism manifested not only by the architecture but also by the academic conversation around him. Dropping to the ground antagonises every *upright* mannerism and gesture and reveals the artifice inherent in the notion of culture as elevator. Like Diogenes' animal indifference to the business of academia around him, my lounging on Regent Street proved how strong the cultural connections are between dropping down and 'dropping out'.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ To 'lower the tone'; to make less cultured, less intellectual, or less polite.

⁴⁸ 'Dropping out': leaving an educational institution or other group for practical reasons, necessity, inability, or disillusionment with the system from which the individual in question leaves.



Six Days (2019), 12.00am, Monday 17 June – 12.00am, Sunday 23 June 2019.
Photo: Veronika Neukirch.



Six Days (2019), 12.00am, Monday 17 June – 12.00am, Sunday 23 June 2019.
Photo: Veronika Neukirch.

(Image redacted)

Valie EXPORT. *Fit Into* (1976) photograph, b/w 55.6 x 78.7cm. From the series *Body Configurations* (1972 – 1976).

1.2. Signal

Wanting to explore further, I returned to Regent Street some weeks later with the same materials I had brought with me before (a rucksack containing a sleeping bag, some clothes, and a toothbrush). Dismissing another bodily occupation of the space I instead attempted to make a similar statement with material, this time not by dropping down but by lifting material up (*Signal*, 2019).

My sleeping bag left lying on the ground seemed a pathetic object. Abandoned in a doorway it appeared to advertise little more than the absence of its owner. Lifted, however, and tied to a lamp post it became a far more adversarial object. Now in full view and at eye level it confronted an audience with physical evidence of occupation in a manner that was impossible to ignore. Filthy from its contact with the pavement, this embodiment of 'matter out of place' had a comparable energy to my own body acting as stray. Empowered by its elevation from ground level to eye level, the sleeping bag became a body-double - and not just any body, but specifically the lounging, reclining, inactive body. As a material extension of my own 'attitude', the sleeping bag, in what could be described as a flaccid 'flag' form was now able to antagonise surrounding material performances of power, amongst them the commercial standards and nation state flags billowing from the rooftops above.

Just as the flag of the nation state is an *ideal*, a set of forms and colours policed in such a way as to represent state values, the fixed nature of nationality, and an embodiment of patriotism that has distinctly military associations, so the corporate flags on Regent Street represent similar values of loyalty, power, and identity. Indeed, it could be argued that these emblems of corporate interest now embody more power than the standards of the state – 'what was previously the largest possible scale of political dwelling.'⁴⁹ Offering their own 'immune structure', one might see the flags, standards and logos of multinational businesses as representing an even larger political dwelling where citizenship is conferred through spending. In the same way that my occupation and subsequent inactivity during *Six Days* antagonised the regulation of this space, so the sleeping bag now antagonised the notion of citizenship conferred through spending by evidencing a moneyless occupation.

⁴⁹ Sloterdijk writes, 'The Nation State – what was previously the largest possible scale of political dwelling... Looking back, we can see more clearly the extraordinary achievement of the nation-state, which was to offer the majority of those dwelling there a form of domesticity, a simultaneously imaginary and real immune structure'. Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 150.



Signal (2019). Photo: Scarlett Platel.

Despite being offered money during *Six Days* by those who took me for a homeless person, gifts of food meant that I had no need of it for the duration of my stay. Becoming divorced from the activity of spending, at least temporarily, for the first time since childhood brought my relationship with money sharply into focus. As Žižek writes,

When individuals use money, they know very well that there is nothing magical about it – that money, in its materiality, is simply an expression of social relations. The everyday spontaneous ideology reduces money to a simple sign giving the individual possessing it a right to a certain part of the social product. So, on an everyday level, the individuals know very well that there are relations between people behind the relations between things. The problem is that in their social activity itself, [shopping] in what they are *doing*, they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishists in practice, not in theory. What they ‘do not know’, what they misrecognise, is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity – in the act of commodity exchange – they are guided by the fetishistic illusion.’⁵⁰

To a degree then, *Signal* represented a challenge to this notion, this fetishization of money, but perhaps more significantly represented an unintentional challenge to the notion of citizenship (one conferred via the same fetishistic illusion that Žižek discusses).

Viewed in the light of Diogenes’ famous statement, ‘I am a citizen of the world’, *Signal* also seemed to proclaim a sense of kynic cosmopolitanism.⁵¹ Where, however, Diogenes’ statement might be interpreted as either an embracing of all citizenships or an outright rejection of every available citizenship option, *Signal* functioned in a slightly different manner. In an age of globalisation, to claim that one is a citizen of the world no longer seems like a rejection of the nation-state: it is rather an embracing of that contemporary notion of a citizenship conferred through spending. By evidencing a moneyless occupation, however, *Signal* suggested that cosmopolitanism refers not to ‘citizen of the world’ but rather to the ‘self-without-a-place’.⁵² Manifested perhaps most clearly by diaspora, the self-without-a-place is neither an embracing of all citizenships nor a rejection of every citizenship option but is instead simply a not-being-at-home in any of them. This unhomely-ness or *Unheimlich* is perhaps the very essence of the stray, the same *Kyon* / Cynic mobility that so unsettled Plato.⁵³

⁵⁰ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 28.

⁵¹ Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism: from Diogenes to the 6th Century AD* [1937]. Second edition. (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2003), 34.

⁵² Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 150-152.

⁵³ Hammons also seems interested in the idea of the self-without-a-place. “I like being from nowhere, it’s a beautiful place. That means I can look at anyone who’s from somewhere and see how really caught they are.” Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 34.

What makes the sleeping bag such a potentially incendiary object is not just its ability to embody the self-without-a-place but also those same movements ‘out of place’ legislated against in the Vagrancy Act of 1824. As a visual signifier of mobility and hence of something ungovernable or unregulated, a sleeping bag can easily be perceived as a ‘dirty’ or ‘unlaw’ object, directly at odds with more fixed or static aspects of society. Nowhere was this made more evident than in Northern France throughout the 2010s. Attempting to thwart the establishment of a permanent migrant camp for those attempting to travel to the UK, army and police patrols around Dieppe, Le Havre and Calais regularly confiscated the sleeping materials of those found camped in parks and woodland. Not just an attempt by the state to dissuade others from following suit, the removal of objects such as sleeping bags was an attempt to erase visual evidence of the unfolding crisis, one that threatened to undo an entire system of border control, nationality, and identity. Made material as argument by its context, what a sleeping bag left unattended in the urban public spaces of Northern France represented was an embodiment of unregulated mobility, one that threatened the authority of those who policed and the very stability of the nation state. As a result, sleeping bags quickly became politicized objects, deeply antagonistic to those who attempted to regulate the public spaces they appeared in.⁵⁴

What made the sleeping bag so antagonistic in the case of *Signal* was not just its evidencing a moneyless occupation, nor its proximity to the corporate flags of multinational businesses but its ability to act as stand-in for the body, advertising my unregulated activity even in my absence. In terms of the stray, not so much a claim to ownership of the space as signalling a movement through it, *Signal* represented a territorial pissing, a signature mark-making denoting presence. Unlike citizenship, presence denoted by ‘marking’ in an animal sense forgoes permanence existing instead as an ephemeral energy, an extension of the body that communicates the physical and even mental state of the mark-maker. Knowing full well that my sleeping bag would quickly be removed by the regulators of this space, the visual impact of this empowered (previously powerless) object nevertheless not only gave ample evidence of not only an occupation but also suggested that the mark maker remained in the vicinity.

Such material challenges to a cultural status quo (and here I include *Six Days*) not only serve to manifest kynismus but also to examine that other Cynic theme, the Minimum – reducing one’s needs to an absolute minimum and satisfying those needs in the simplest possible manner. Whilst an engagement with the Cynic minimum was clearly non-essential to a manifestation of kynismus, it nevertheless seemed to facilitate animality, unencumbered as I was with belongings and the psychological anchors these provide to a more domesticated existence.

⁵⁴ The confiscation and removal of sleeping materials in Northern France was something that I subsequently experienced first-hand, having travelled to Dieppe some two weeks after *Signal* to see the migrant camps for myself. What happened here had very little to do with kynismus. It did, however, provide abundant examples of material as argument.

Twenty years previously and only one street away, Michael Landy had demonstrated his own critique of consumerism and the relationship between object and identity with *Break Down* (2001) the systematic destruction of all his belongings. As Landy later explained, the purpose of *Break Down* was to examine the process of *becoming* without and not to sustain and examine the state of *being* without.⁵⁵ The result, however, was a consumables vacuum into which more belongings would inevitably be sucked. Landy later admitted that the state of *being* without belongings only lasted for a few seconds. As the last of Landy's possessions were destroyed, friends at the closing event immediately offered gifts to replace the objects lost. What *Break Down* did herald, however, was a shift in focus away from product value towards instead practice values, where enlightenment resided in understanding and participating in the act (of becoming without) rather than in the contemplation of any resultant art object.⁵⁶

What led me to discuss *Break Down* with Landy was the mistaken idea that the process of becoming without somehow related to the Cynic minimum – the reduction of one's needs to an absolute minimum. Landy, however, cited 'Catholic poverty envy' as his inspiration, describing how accounts of saints swapping clothes with beggars had affected him during childhood. Here the desire to emulate a becoming without amounts to a ritual cleansing. This process of atonement, however, has little to do with the Cynic minimum – As Sloterdijk writes, 'A dogmatism of poverty does not come into question; it is rather a matter of discarding false weights, which hinder one's freedom of movement. Self-torture is definitely a stupidity for Diogenes.'⁵⁷ Despite the significance of Landy's work, what the Cynic minimum explores, therefore, is not abasement but instead a becoming disencumbered. Discarding false weights (in the case of *Signal* and *Six Days*, not only in the form of possessions but also a discarding of habits that amounted to a domestication) facilitates mobility. A mongrel mobility, as Diogenes showed, serves to rehabilitate the body as material as argument by allowing one to physically move 'out of place', socially, sexually, and politically. Becoming disencumbered, however, also serves a second purpose where the shedding of false weights and a physical lightness propagate a mental one. Here a connection between lightness and joyousness can be made where the discarding of false weights equates to an instruction to the self to 'lighten up', to have some fun, to become less serious – all of which facilitate the *playfight*.

⁵⁵ Unpublished conversation between Shaun Doyle and Michael Landy, 2019.

⁵⁶ This shift away from product value towards practice values is significant and is something that will be discussed in the Conclusion.

⁵⁷ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 158.

Taken together, *Six Days* (2019) and *Signal* (2019) represent significant steps in my adoption of the urban public space as practice domicile. Resulting in fundamental shifts in my own conceptions of time, activity, and what 'public' might mean, they established the urban public space as both a legitimate zone of activity and as a material in its own right – a contrived, structured environment that could be antagonised simply by occupying it. My activity in this space, not only by facilitating interaction with an unfiltered audience but also by encouraging an embodied response from that audience, began to realise Sloterdijk's 'spirited materialism' and a 'material argumentation that rehabilitates the body'. Both *Six Days* and *Signal* challenged the *polis*-ing of the environment they occupied. Both works did so through a manifestation of what one might see as a physical wrestling with culture itself. This physical wrestling, however, should not be interpreted as protest and the reason for this lies in part in cynicism's rejection of grand goals. Lazzarato writes, "The most urgent task consists in imagining and experimenting with forms of struggle which are as effective at bringing things to a halt as strikes were in an industrial society".⁵⁸ Yates McKee takes this idea even further, proposing the 'Human Strike', a concept that acknowledges exploitation not just in work but in every aspect of life.⁵⁹ A rage to 'change' is what characterises both, a 'demand to make the whole of one's life into a tool of a (good old idealistically) planned "praxis"'.⁶⁰ Yet, despite similarities between the simply 'being' of *Six Days* and the 'Human Strike', both Lazzarato and McKee fall wide of the cynic mark by conceiving a disengagement from activity in terms of a struggle and in their goal of bringing things to a halt.

A verbal critique of consumerism in Regent Street might well fall on deaf ears. As Sloterdijk writes,

When someone tries to "agitate" me in an enlightened direction, my first reaction is cynicism. The person concerned should get his or her own shit together [...] Admittedly, one should not injure good will without reason; but good will could easily be a little cleverer and save me the embarrassment of saying; "I already know that." For I do not like being asked, "Then why don't you do something?"⁶¹

In such an exchange we return to the situation in which an Enlightenment-style correction of errors has no effect since consciousness is reflexively buffered from critique. An embodied disengagement from consumerism, however, is a different matter. Here is someone *doing* something, even if that doing is simply 'being'. Not only is this highly visible inactivity publicly re-appropriating and reclaiming time – 'the raw material of all political, social, or aesthetic change' – but it is also positing a live alternative to a prevailing cultural currency. It is antagonistic, not as 'struggle' or as an attempt to bring things to a halt but simply through an indifference to the values of this 'cult-container': the body alone effects critique through a self-permissioned de-

⁵⁸ Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, 163.

⁵⁹ Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2016), 33.

⁶⁰ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 290.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

regulation of space. What is at play here is 'attitude', a wordless, somatic (disruptive) statement. Just as a verbal critique might fall on 'deaf ears', so this somatic statement might present itself to unseeing eyes and yet the thing is much harder to ignore simply for its being in the direct path of everyday existence in a form that reflects those who pass it. There is a pantomimic, almost slapstick quality to this confrontation that rather than asking 'Why don't you do something?' it directly enacts a radical alternative in the 'safe space' created by kynismus itself, where, to paraphrase Gervais and Wilson, everything is fine and there is no real danger. In this space, such clowning or *playfighting* signals an opportunity for learning - an enlightenment process that includes and involves the body and its senses. Only by adopting the principle of embodiment can this happen, suggesting that Sloterdijk's insistence on the direct involvement of the body was well founded.

CHAPTER 2

Laughter

2.1 Hammons' *Shoe Tree* (1981)

Having adopted the urban public space as my primary theatre of activity and having conceived this space as a forum for material debate, (what Robert Farris Thompson describes as '[...] material banter, a search for counter-wit'),⁶² a pantomimic kynismus not only grounds all exchange in matter but also allows access to non-verbal forms of communication, including gesture, 'attitude' and behaviour. Insisting on the validity of material as argument and the rehabilitation of the body as material as argument, kynic activity questions not only established cultural values but the mechanism of questioning itself. As discussed in the previous chapter, Export's *Body Configurations* ask questions that are highly significant not only because of what they ask but also because of how they ask it. Using the body as material as argument, Export questions and discredits ideal assertions made by 'man-made' forms such as architecture in a manner that would be impossible through verbal exchange. What Export's art fails to confront, however, is the stuff in the urban public space that is already named and functioning as art.

David Hammons' practice is far more willing to engage with such material. As a result, Hammons' kynicism focussed on one specific public artwork on at least two separate occasions. On view from 24 April 1980 to 30 July 1981, Richard Serra's *T.W.U.* (an acronym for Transport Workers Union) (1979 / 1980) stood at the entrance to the Franklin Street subway station in New York.⁶³ Consisting of three 2.75-inch thick Corten Steel plates, each 12 feet by 36 feet, and weighing 72 tons, *T.W.U.* represented an undeniably authoritative presence. The significance of this colossal work as public art lay not only in the configuration of its giant elements but also in its context. Superficially a paean to unionism, the sheer scale of the work and its permissioned status suggested an official narrative that (despite what Serra might say) clearly celebrated the industrial might and capitalist power of its host. Endorsed by a powerful elite, whatever meaning Serra had intended for the work was at least partially subsumed into the ideology of its commissioning as public art. Having himself adopted the urban public space as his primary theatre for activity and living and working nearby, Hammons could hardly ignore such a gesture and so, over several consecutive nights in the first of two interventions, he responded by throwing around twenty-five pairs of shoes (mostly trainers but also work boots and at least one pair of high heels) tied at the laces, to hang over the edge of Serra's work. The vernacular meaning of hung shoes tied at the laces might differ according to location, but the significance of Hammons' intervention lay not only in the meaning generated by the shoes themselves but also in 'the act of daring' that presented them. Not only was Hammons asking viewers to consider what this new configuration of materials might mean but also (by doing something forbidden) questioning the way art itself is used.

⁶² Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (London: Afterall Books, 2017), 97.

⁶³ Richard Serra (b. 1938). American artist.

In Western culture, fine art is often seen as the unique expression of a unique artist and as such, is valued for its singularity. Any intervention that threatens an artwork's aesthetic, historical, and monetary status and value is for the most part, strictly taboo. Hammons, however, has other ideas. Referencing cultures (and Western sub-cultures) that have very different values, *Shoe Tree* performs a conception of art no longer represented by unique objects valued for their singularity. Their place is taken by objects that form a material exchange of ideas, a flow of creativity that readily accommodates not only the renewal of forms but also multiple players. In this conception of art synonymous with aspects of contemporary music, forms can be sampled, covered, or worked over (often without permission) in the continuation of a tradition that values interpretation over a continual search for the unique. What might be interpreted as an attack on the integrity of a (traditional) artwork could also, as Rose comments, '[...] indicate the importance of collective identities and group histories', where 'publicness' facilitates just such a re-purposing.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 95.

(Image redacted)
Richard Serra, *T.W.U.* (1980)

(Image redacted)
David Hammons, *Shoe Tree* (1981).

In a slightly different interpretation, removed from the security of the gallery space and installed as a public artwork *T.W.U.* can now interact with the real world. Unfortunately for those who endorse an ideal narrative, the real world can now interact with *T.W.U.* Not only does Hammons' gesture relegate Serra's work to the role of plinth or 'support act'; it also constitutes a witty put-down for which there is no comeback. Any effort to remove the shoes would simply confirm their significance whilst leaving them in place would amount to an admission of defeat. Even if the shoes were to be removed, there would be no guarantee that they would not reappear the next evening.⁶⁵ In a David (Hammons) and Goliath-like encounter where one expects an artwork of the magnitude of *T.W.U.* to be able to hold its own, Hammons' material visibly outperforms its static opponent with an attack that makes its host look cumbersome and dumb. Wrong-footed by being forced to display what might be interpreted as the trophies of a somewhat different 'productive disruptiveness',⁶⁶ any aesthetic or capitalist ideals *T.W.U.* might stand for now seem to be in serious doubt. (If this material performance of power can be undermined and collapsed so effortlessly, was its authority actual or real in the first place?) Wrestling with 'fine art' and using the shoddiest of materials, Hammons manages to throw his opponent by using *T.W.U.*'s own weight and momentum, a throw where rupture engineered as antagonism collapses a seemingly immutable performance of power. It will take some effort to remove the tied shoes – yet, despite this, no physical damage has been done. Permanent damage though has been done to what *T.W.U.* stands for, however, and this cannot be repaired.

As graffiti writers are aware, it is not only the design but also the timing, scale, placement, and risk involved in the work's execution that convey meaning. In short, the 'act of daring', as Hammons puts it, is as important if not more so, than the resultant object / image. Hammons' 'act of daring' not only *exhibits* risk by circumventing regulation (making an ephemeral and intangible risk palpable) but also, by employing *timing* and *placement* begins to resemble the practical joke in which the physicality of kynic humour bewilders the cynical impulse.

⁶⁵ Examining the phenomenon of graffiti and its removal in a manner particularly pertinent to kynicism, Rose writes, 'as Hall observes, it is almost as if the ideological dog catchers have to be sent out every morning to round up the ideological strays, only to be confronted by a new group of loose mutts the next day'. Rose, *Black Noise*, 102.

⁶⁶ *Shoetree*; 'where we took the lives of your shoes and put them into our mo fukin trees', by Northside Cash, October 31, 2003. Urban Dictionary, 2020. Accessed 19 June 2021.

2.2. David the Clown – Pantomimic kynicism

Four years earlier, at David Chipperfield's Circus in Stoke-on-Trent, I had watched the muscular, threatening performance of David the Clown display a comparably pantomimic kynicism. Entering the ring with a bucket of popcorn, David tosses a piece of corn into the mouths of everyone in the front row, all except the men, who are teased, then denied. David then focusses his attention on one man and corn is tossed impossibly high, with 'dad' failing to catch a single piece. Feigning helpfulness, David carefully positions the man's head, mouth open wide before emptying the whole bucket over him. In the next act David dives into the audience before frolicking back into the ring with four shame-faced men forced to hold hands. Having linked their arms and arranged the men in a swastika shape on four stools, David then removes the stools and runs off. Forced back into the ring by the ringmaster, rather than rescuing the men from their predicament of mutual support (each man now sits in his neighbour's lap), David lifts a leg of each man and undoes their arms before finally allowing them to collapse in a heap on the floor (provoking wild laughter from children and wives). In the final act, David and an older clown open a pretend restaurant. In one scene, the older man gets his finger stuck in a bottle. David bends down in front of him to pick something up and the vigorous jerks of the older man trying to release his finger make it look like he is fucking David up the arse (provoking wild laughter from the grown-ups and confused laughter from the children). Throughout the whole performance David crept around the ring, rolled, swaggered, pranced, and walked like a muscular tart. A wild cheekiness made David hilarious but behind this was the sense that at any moment he could punch someone's lights out.⁶⁷ The motivation behind his games seemed to be sheer joy in rule breaking.

What David's act displayed was a permissioned kynismus, a joyous *playfighting* that collapsed cultural ideals of authority, sexuality, and propriety and allowed instead (albeit within the context of a circus performance) radical alternatives. Remove this physicality and humour from the permissioned environment of the circus ring and remove those things which signify 'clown' (make-up, wig, costume) and one begins to see how a kynic humour might function in the urban public space.⁶⁸ Neither Hammons' *Shoe Tree* nor Export's *Body Configurations* strike one as being overtly 'clownish' - at least not initially - and yet the same pantomimic humour is evident in both, both in the seeming absurdity of Export's 'attitude' and in the slapstick nature of Hammons' 'throw up'.⁶⁹ The same physical mechanisms as those employed by David the Clown (the element of surprise, a collapsing of authority or order, a thwarting of expectations, engineering of a predicament, and a crossing of boundaries, all within a relatively safe context) collectively constitute a form of *playfighting* that allows cognitive, social, and emotional exploration. Forming not only the basis of humour but also kynic method, what in the circus ring results in Duchenne laughter results in the urban public space in a Diogenesian questioning of the mechanism of questioning itself.

⁶⁷ Punch someone's lights out: to render unconscious, the very opposite of a process of 'enlightenment'

⁶⁸ Activists CIRCA (Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army) employ similarly pantomimic strategies to bewilder forces of regulation. They, however, retain those signifiers of the clown (make-up, wig, costume) to appear to act 'in character': that is, as culturally permissioned entertainers.

⁶⁹ Throw up: graffiti in the form of a rapidly executed 'tag' or name, as opposed to a pre-planned design.

The same 'cheekiness' that characterised David the Clown's performance might, therefore, be perceived as being characteristic of kynismus manifested as a contemporary art practice. Sloterdijk too recognises that the defining characteristic of kynismus might lie within 'cheekiness' but not, he insists, within its modern usage. He writes:

By the way, only in the last few centuries has the word "cheeky" (frech) gained a negative connotation. Initially, as for example in Old High German, it meant a productive aggressivity, letting fly at the enemy: "brave, bold, lively, plucky, untamed, ardent." The devitalisation of a culture is mirrored in the history of this word. Those who are still cheeky today were not affected by the cooling-off of the materialist heat as much as those who are inconvenienced by brazen people would like. The prototype of the cheeky is the Jewish David, who teases Goliath: "Come here, so I can hit you better". He shows that the head has not only ears to hear and obey but also a brow with which to menacingly defy the stronger: rebellion, affront, effrontery.⁷⁰

The problem here lies in the emphasis on both 'rebellion' and 'affront', with 'rebellion' cementing kynismus to *resistance* and 'affront' jeopardising non-violence. What the word 'cheeky', at least in the sense in which Sloterdijk uses it, lacks is both an acknowledgement of the capacity of kynismus' ability to generate a predicament and its ability to engineer a relatively safe space within which to operate.

Both *Body Configurations* and *Shoe Tree* represent material attempts to antagonise (cynical) ideals, yet, despite their physicality, neither Hammons nor Export's work constitute a display of machismo. Nor can one dismiss them as 'anti-social' behaviour, as to do so would be to dismiss the possibility (as Rose suggests, citing graffiti as an example), that engaging in such behaviour might be communally beneficial. Furthermore, to class such actions as 'anti-social' is to assume that the thing being challenged is performing a positive social function (a fallacy most effectively collapsed in Export's *Body Configurations*). These though, are superficial arguments against a charge of 'anti-social' behaviour. What might be interpreted as 'anti-social' behaviour in the urban public space is not an attempt to disrupt societal life per se but something which appears to antagonise the cynical mechanisms adopted to facilitate larger social groups (appeasement, manipulation, and feigned agreement). A charge of 'anti-social' behaviour is, therefore, nothing more than a manifestation of the notion of kynic 'criminality', one that resists a joyous form of social interaction in order to maintain a complex and essentially cynical cultural status quo.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 102 - 103. (By using this quote, I do not wish to condone Sloterdijk's use of 'Jewish' to describe David. It is both unnecessary and unacceptable).

⁷¹ The resultant activity might easily be viewed as anti-social rather than social, however, adopting this view is to dismiss the *play-fight's* recruitment of others. As Rose writes of Hip-Hop (graffiti), 'Developing a style that nobody can deal with... a style that has the reflexivity to create counter-dominant narratives... may be one of the most effective ways to fortify communities... and simultaneously reserve the right to communal pleasure. ...Afro-diasporic youth have designated the street as the arena for competition... Hip-Hop style is black urban renewal.' Rose, *Black Noise*, 61.

The predicament that kynismus engineers from such encounters as Shoe Tree now becomes a significant factor, since it guarantees that the ideal being antagonised is either forced to display its inadequacy or acknowledge its defeat in collapse. This ability to engineer a predicament seems a particularly kynic trait, one in which a material questioning reveals not only a failure in that thing being antagonised but also an inability to respond in kind (to do so would be to renounce the principles on which the thing was constructed in the first place). Only by dismissing such material questioning as being 'immature' or 'criminal' can the ideal attempt to retain a degree of authority. Such accusations of 'immaturity' are in themselves significant. In the same way that Plato's canine slur revealed an unpalatable truth concerning the 'domesticated' nature of his own philosophy, so an accusation of immaturity reveals cynicism's aversion to physical play.

Just as Hammons' 'acts of daring' constitute art (to be understood more in terms of empowering acts rather than the resultant objects), so within this research *playfighting* will also be described as contemporary art. What this research approach demands, however, as stated previously is not a conception of kynismus as a thing manifested *by* a contemporary art practice but instead kynismus *as* a contemporary art practice where the resultant art is not a vehicle for a theory but the thing itself. And not only this, for, as Stern writes of Hammons, 'The artist is an exemplary figure, a figure who demonstrates a way of being in the world. And so, part of the work of being an artist involves modelling what, exactly, an artist is.'⁷² So it is with Diogenes, whose way of being in the world allows him to ask questions that philosophy finds very difficult to answer (primarily because of the embodied nature in which those questions are asked). Because the posing of these questions is so undeniably pertinent, the act of posing them must be considered philosophising, and yet, the nature of this questioning seems to lie completely outside of what a contemporaneous 'philosophy' is equipped to examine. Thus, if I return to the second key question of this research, 'How might kynismus manifest itself as a contemporary art practice?' the answer lies not only in the direct involvement of the body (where the body alone is able to effect critique), but also in the act of remodelling what, exactly, an artist is. This, in fact, may be more significant to an antagonising of cynicism than any resultant artworks.

Filpovic writes:

Hammons too [...] knows that to be black in an art world as white as the walls of its museums, and in an America where privilege and presence go hand in hand, is to realise that visibility is something to mess with, to disavow. As a result, he rarely accepts requests for interviews, largely dodges the inquiries of scholars, refuses to send out press releases or make artist's statements. He doesn't have a website and isn't officially represented by a gallery. He scorns the art market even as he astutely plays it, selling his work out of his studio, cutting out the middleman [...] He snubs most invitations to exhibit and has eschewed retrospective at any number of venerable institutions interested in showing his work. Once he even went so far as to get a lawyer involved to make sure a certain prestigious museum *wouldn't* organise a retrospective devoted to him. He declines, quite simply, to

⁷² Steven Stern, 'A Fraction of the Whole', *Frieze*, 121 (March 2009). 114.

cooperate in the dissemination and promotion – the making widely visible – of an artistic ‘oeuvre’ of the type that artists are typically preoccupied with. Rather than trivial anecdotes of one artist’s cagey behaviour, all of these accounts describe gestures that occupy the very core of Hammons’ larger practice. Arguably, these gestures *are* his practice.⁷³

Key, then, to what Filipovic sees as Hammons’ modelling of what an artist is, lies in Hammons’ *visibility*, but is this assertion perhaps more indicative of the challenge that such an artist poses to someone like Filipovic’s modelling of a critic and curator? More significant than visibility in Hammons’ modelling of what an artist is, so it seems to me, is Hammons’ own version of *straying* and the subsequent movement this allows, a deregulated, nomadic, mongrel mobility that allows the mutt not just to move between the different rooms within the house but to quit the house altogether.⁷⁴

Far more interesting than Filipovic’s assertion of the importance of visibility is her use of the word ‘anecdote’, one that is echoed by Stern, [...] and off the record anecdotes about his [Hammons’] eccentricities circulate as a form of art world currency.⁷⁵ The significance of this quote lies in Stern’s recognition of anecdote as *currency*, and with it, the suggestion that Hammons is its deliberate moneyer. In the absence of the artist himself, what better way to *replay(fight)* the act than through the anecdote – the ultimate means of *playfight* transmission and pleasure/knowledge-transference.

It comes as no surprise to find that almost all our knowledge concerning the early Cynics arrives in the form of the anecdote. Most of the original texts have been lost, or thoughts were never committed to writing in the first place: it is later historians or critics of the Cynics who supply us instead with a library of kynic anecdote. Whilst this may seem a purely incidental twist of fate, the nature of anecdote itself has facilitated this process. Whilst the apothegm or aphorism can condense, only anecdote encapsulates the energy, brevity, and wit of a specific act. Not every act, though, lends itself to this encapsulation. What one might describe as the ‘act of daring’ or ‘the caper’ lend themselves most readily, since an anecdote of a higher denomination demands an element of both ‘criminality’ and the prank. When Stern describes anecdote as currency, he acknowledges the ease with which Hammons’ gestures are circulated from person to person and remain in circulation, as coinage does. If the ‘caper’ as defined by Lucas epitomises kynismus as the means of punching through the wall that buffers the consciousness from critique, then the anecdote represents the documentation and transmission of this breach *par excellence*.

⁷³ Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale*. 16 – 33. Hammons status has shifted somewhat since this was written and is now represented by White Cube.

⁷⁴ When Duchamp signed his *Fountain* (1917), ‘R. Mutt’ he claimed that the name derived from Mott (Works), a large sanitaryware manufacturer. ‘Mutt’ though is slang for mongrel and in a ‘high art’ context, it is hard to imagine that such a reference to the stray or non-breed dog would have gone unnoticed.

⁷⁵ Stern. ‘A Fraction of the Whole’, 114.

'How might kynismus manifest itself as a contemporary art practice?' now branches off in three directions. First, in the production of the kynic art object, or more significantly, in the 'act of daring' or 'caper' that presents or empowers the object. Second, as a modelling of what, exactly, an artist is, the demonstration of a way of being in the world, an autoplasmic or public self-sculptural process. Third, as a practice circulated, shared, and broadcast by the anecdote.

CHAPTER 3

Action

Cop Socker (2019 -2021)

Having considered how kynismus might manifest itself as a contemporary art practice, I now wish to examine the kynic mechanism, the agency or means by which kynismus might antagonise cynicism. Having established that embodiment plays a crucial role, one in which the body alone is able to affect critique, key to the success of any kynic practice is the comprehension of what kynismus *does*. When *Critique of Cynical Reason* fails to investigate, Huyssen's frustration is palpable, '[...] and Sloterdijk never really addresses the question of what kynics actually do to the person they laugh at.'

⁷⁶ Sloterdijk, however, is in no position to describe what kynics do because his is a purely literary analysis, one in which the adoption of the principle of embodiment has been precluded. The only relevant material that lies within Sloterdijk's reach is that contained within historic anecdote and whilst this material undoubtedly contains clues as to the nature of a kynic mechanism, an analyst who confines himself to literature is unlikely to be able to differentiate between what is significant and what is not.

Žižek makes what seems the most convincing effort to describe the kynic mechanism when he writes:

The classical kynical procedure is to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology – its solemn, grave tonality – with everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing behind the sublime noblesse of the ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power. This procedure, then, is more pragmatic than argumentative; it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation. ⁷⁷

It is, in short, the 'popular, plebian rejection of official culture by means of irony and sarcasm'.⁷⁸ He goes on,

'Let us recall Otto Fenichel's interpretation of the obscene gesture called in German 'the long nose' (die Lange Nase). Spreading the fingers in front of the face and putting the thumb on the nose supposedly connotes the erect phallus. The message of this gesture would appear to be a simple showing off in front of an adversary: look

⁷⁶ Andreas Huyssen, in Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xx.

⁷⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso Books, 1989), 25 – 26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

how big mine is, mine is bigger than yours. Instead of refuting this simplistic interpretation directly, Fenichel introduces a small displacement; the logic of insulting an adversary always involves the imitating of his/her features. If this is true, what then is so insulting in an imitation which points out that the other has a large and powerful virile member? Fenichel's solution is that one has to read this gesture as the first part of a sentence, the second part of which is omitted. The whole of it reads: 'Yours is so big and powerful, but in spite of that, you are impotent. You cannot hurt me with it.' In this way the adversary is caught in a forced choice which, according to Lacan, defines the experience of castration: if he cannot, he cannot; but even if he can, any attesting to his power is doomed to function as a denial – that is, as a masking of his fundamental impotence, as a mere showing off which just confirms, in a negative way, that he cannot do anything. The more he reacts, the more he shows his power, the more his impotence is confirmed."⁷⁹

Mirroring or mimicking a display of power suspected of impotency by publishing that impotence through gesture - a somatic 'saying out loud' - does in some circumstances appear 'to subvert the official position by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation', but how useful is such an analysis in facilitating our understanding of kynic mechanics? Is this somatic 'saying out loud' an accurate analysis of kynicism's workings? Doubts arise with Žižek's insistence that kynismus as a procedure is more pragmatic than argumentative. By stressing the practical consequences of a kynicism that recognises its own usefulness is Žižek suggesting that kynismus has a goal – the overthrowing of an official position? If so, such a pragmatism is surely at odds with Sloterdijk's notion of a kynical reason that 'culminates in the knowledge – decried as nihilism – that we must snub the grand goals. In this regard we cannot be nihilistic enough.' Further misgivings appear with Žižek's suggestion that irony functions as one of kynismus' primary agents. As Colebrook (2004) notes, 'Satire recognises the lowly animal being behind all our ideas of self-creation. Satire is immanently historical; looking at the ways in which ideas of 'man' have been produced from the flow of life. By contrast irony is transcendental; any history of ourselves must be narrated by some historicizing subject.'⁸⁰ Thus irony, by adopting a point of view 'above' a context is essentially disembodied in nature, directly at odds with an embodied kynismus actively engaged with the here and now. Finally, to categorise kynismus as a popular, plebian movement is to correctly recognise its vulgar, decivilising aspect. Pigeonholing this impulse at the lowest level of a class structure, however, only serves to position it in opposition to an upper level, re-affirming Sloterdijk's definition of kynismus as *resistance*. The question of what kynics actually do to the person they laugh at clearly needs to be reassessed and not just through talk but 'differently too', through a dialogue of flesh and blood.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 176.

⁸⁰ Claire Colebrook, *Irony: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 141.

Having walked for some time without shoes my socks were filthy. Soiled with grime from the street, this footwear now forensically evidenced not only my body but also its movement through the city. Knowing that a plethora of cultural forms actively attempt to exclude dirt, the sock clearly had kynic potential. Attempting to realise that potential would mean finding a way to empower this object in such a way as to allow it to flaunt that exclusion, but exactly how this could be achieved was unclear. Putting two rocks into the sock, I made a cosh, or 'socket'.⁸¹ Swinging this cosh around gave me a sense of power, but without my swinging it the thing itself posed little threat. By weaponising this object, I had created something that might physically harm someone, but doing so meant that the sock itself was no longer the argument, nor was the dirt. Leaving this object hanging from a fence or post was equally ineffectual, since the sock now looked like a stretched scrotum or castration object, an association that did nothing to empower it. Removing the rocks and rolling the sock into a ball, I stuffed it into my pocket and continued walking. Sock, suck, cock sucker, cop, suck, cop socket. A walking rhythm rocked both the object being carried and its identity until the sock suggested the means of its own empowerment. Outside the police station three vehicles stood idle. I slipped the sock onto the windscreen wiper of one of them, took a photo on my phone and walked away.

What this anecdote illustrates is not only how a specific series of events unfolded, but also how a mongrel mobility facilitated that unfolding. Walking with an object (which I now recognise as a habitual strategy), leads to very different understanding of the thing than that generated by a static investigation. How easily the thing is packed away, draped over my shoulder, or cradled in my arm, coupled with its kynic potential to antagonise, the thing's ability to riff off other forms, and its name, determines the object's *stray* value. As I move through the city with the object, potential exchanges with other existing forms offer themselves up. Whereas in the studio, the object would most likely be investigated in terms of its singular qualities, on the street, the thing's qualities are ascertained in relation to what it moves through or is pushed up against. Offering the object up to other objects acts as a material rhyming, a search for alternative meaning, often realised through the friction created or power relation between the two materials. In a similar manner, the object being carried also changes me (as material as argument), suggesting not only how I might intervene on behalf of the object but also how I might model being an artist.

⁸¹ Socket: Prison slang for a cosh made from a sock, usually containing a pool ball.



Cop Socker (V) (2019).

Cop Socker (2019 – 2021)

Cop Socker (I). Bethnal Green (date unknown), vehicle registration BX13 DZL.
Cop Socker (II). Hanley Museum (03/11/19), vehicle registration BX66 HYU.
Cop Socker (III). Hanley police station (18/11/19), vehicle registration BX17 JVF.
Cop Socker (IV). Stoke station (24/11/19), vehicle registration LX13 DFK.
Cop Socker (V). Stoke station (date unknown), vehicle registration LX13 DFK.
Cop Socker (VI). Hanley police station (date unknown), vehicle registration SV69 AUT.
Cop Socker (VII). Belgravia police station (date and vehicle registration unknown).
Cop Socker (VIII). Hanley police station (26/12/20), vehicle registration BX15 GKF.
Cop Socker (IX). Hanley police station (01/01/21), vehicle registration BX66 HZE.
Cop Socker (X). Bethnal Green (24/01/21), vehicle registration BU12 AXG.
Cop Socker (XI). Bethnal Green (07/02/21), vehicle registration BX70 CYH.
Cop Socker (XII). Bethnal Green (28/02/21), vehicle registration BX15 LCE.
Cop Socker (XIII). Liverpool St. station (02/04/21), vehicle registration LM09 SGU.
Cop Socker (XIV). Liverpool St. station (11/04/21), vehicle registration LW09 LHM.
Cop Socker (XV). Guildhall, London (25/04/21), vehicle registration WX21 FWZ.
Cop Socker (XVI). Love Lane, London (30/05/21), vehicle registration LY05 KNE.
Cop Socker (XVII). Hanley police station (27/06/21), vehicle registration BX14 LWY.
Cop Socker (XVIII). Sheffield Snig Hill station (04/07/21), vehicle registration YN20 DMF.



Cop Socker (XIII) (2021).

Using the phallus as a Lacanian signifier of castration does seem to explain what is happening in *Cop Socker*.⁸² With the sock functioning as a 'long nose' to an 'official culture', any response to this object/act of daring might well be doomed to function merely as a denial of impotency. A similar interpretation might also be formed from Lucas's *Wanking Arm* (1999). Here the short-lived masturbatory gesture as insult is made concrete in a kinetic form similar to *Cop Socker* (especially if we imagine the car windscreen wipers turned on and jerking backwards and forwards). Rather than empowering the object through an act of daring, Lucas makes a powerful object but one that still retains a Fenichial displacement. Not only is Lucas acknowledging the subject's virile member, she is also calling the (male) recipient of the gesture a wanker,⁸³ one whose dominance will never be consummated. Once again, the more violently the patriarchy this work is aimed at reacts, the more its impotence is confirmed.

Where these two works part company lies in the use of dirt, for whilst both deal with something 'filthy', it is *Cop Socker* that places a specific emphasis on *dirt*. 'Dirt is matter out of place', theorised Mary Douglas, '[...] a by-product of systemic ordering and classification of matter'.⁸⁴ If dirt is 'matter out of place', then a creative practice that deliberately *strays* has an intimate relationship with it. Collected by the sole of my foot, a body part strictly taboo in many cultures, the dirt that saturates the sock of *Cop Socker* is not only the very lowest form of dirt but also one that attests to a mongrel mobility.⁸⁵ An insult to the cleanliness of the vehicle, whose spotlessness signifies legitimacy, order, and uprightness (the verticality of a 'higher' authority), grime collected by the sock signifies a descending, lowering, de-civilising process – a dropping-down to 'drop out'. The significance of this gesture, coupled with the act of daring that positions the sock means that it not only acts as a signifier of castration but also posits a cultural alternative to that represented by the car, a deliberate movement 'out of place', socially, sexually, and politically. More fundamental, then, than an unreturnable slur of impotence is the cultural alternative being published by the act of daring.

⁸² Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 176.

⁸³ Wanker: predominantly British or Australian slang suggesting a contemptible person, someone who masturbates.

⁸⁴ Mary. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966).

⁸⁵ Many Eastern cultures consider showing the soles of the feet to be unacceptable behaviour. The lowest part of the body and that part of the body in contact with the ground the feet are seen as physically unclean, equating to a metaphysical impurity.



Sarah Lucas, *Wanking Arm* (1999).
Photo by permission of the artist.



Cop Socker (IX) (2021).



Cop Socker (IV) (2019).

When Diogenes threatened the cultural status quo in his bid to ‘change the currency’, no police force intervened. In ancient Greece the *polis* (the etymological root of *police*) was quite literally a wall that defined a city state, outside of which an agglomeration of houses might occur, but this lacked the status of a city and the power of a political community. This physical boundary, rather than the immediate presence of an authority, was what kept order and unity through a shared identity and value system. Within this wall citizens were, for the most part, expected to govern and police themselves. A modern juridical system presents a very different environment, with an ever-present police force acting as an arbiter of acceptable public behaviour. In a contemporary art practice that uses material as argument and one that insists on the validity of the urban public space as a theatre of activity, it would be wrong to dismiss or attempt to ignore this force and its cultural impact. Far better to test the boundaries of this force through a deliberate *straying*. As Sloterdijk writes, ‘Sophocles has a splendid word for this disposition towards immoderation: *ápolis*, “cityless”, overstepping the *polis*, “apolitical” in the sense of a sacrilegious non-participation in the citizen’s religion of golden mediocrity.’⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2013), 124.



Sarah Lucas, *Supersensible* (1995).
Image by permission of the artist.

Early on in her career, Lucas also seems to have acknowledged the cynical aspect of *polis-ing*. *Supersensible* (1995) shows her relaxing in an armchair outside a second-hand shop. Two helmeted policemen have just walked past but Lucas seems to ignore their presence, gazing directly at the camera. Ignoring all the other seats on offer outside the store including bicycle saddles, stools, and office chairs, Lucas occupies the armchair as the most solid signifier of domestic patriarchal power. Like a fragment of an interior temporarily shifted outside, Lucas' performance of power presents a satire of 'dad-ness', moving a private, domestic cultural stereotype into the public space. Sat on her throne, (here an old armchair but later to be replaced by that other 'throne', the shitter)⁸⁷ Lucas replaces 'dad' to become sovereign of the street. During this occupation - what might be interpreted as a 'Long Nose' to the father - it seems that Lucas also encountered the two police officers. Seizing (and satirising) this second manifestation of patriarchal power seems to have been too good an opportunity to miss and both are captured in the final image, in which Lucas as the embodiment of an alternative to 'dad', mocks both a real 'dad' and the 'police'.⁸⁸ After this work, though, Lucas makes no further reference to the police. It seems that this exchange between artist and the law was not the fight Lucas wanted to pick, nor was the public urban space to become the theatre of her activity. Instead, Lucas' practice moved off the street but took kynismus with it in the form of 'the caper'.

Less passive a gesture than Lucas' kynic enthronement, Jeremy Deller's *I Love Joyriding* (1998) is a slightly more complex work, if only for its usage of both kynic and cynic elements. Here a bumper sticker has been surreptitiously attached to a patrol car, inferring that the occupants enjoy an illegal activity. Whilst the act of 'sticking it to the man'⁸⁹ certainly requires an 'act of daring', what the sticker itself suggests is a level of cynical resignation towards police corruption. The irony of the sticker, acting in judgment on the car, is that we already know about police corruption and yet have failed to do anything about it. What this work tells us about the kynic mechanism, therefore, is that whilst Žižek's interpretation of the Fenichial 'Long Nose' has some truth to it, 'confronting an official proposition with the situation of its enunciation' is by no means a full explanation of kynic mechanics. Not only does kynismus seem to antagonise the cynical nature of an official culture but more significantly, simultaneously poses radical cultural alternatives to it. Where Deller's work fails is in its absence of such alternatives, for whilst his act of attaching the sticker to the car might excite us, the sentiments expressed by the sticker itself reaffirm the position already held by a consciousness reflexively buffered from critique.

⁸⁷ 'The shitter': slang for the toilet, also known as 'the throne'. A recurring motif in Lucas' work both as throne, vagina (*Cnut*, 2004) and signifier of the sexual act (*The Old In Out*, 1998).

⁸⁸ '(Matriarchy is) a society without law; "law" being a specifically patriarchal creation' – Jung. In Deirdre Bair, *Jung: a Biography*. (New York: Little, Brown, 2007), 590.

⁸⁹ 'Sticking it to the man': slang meaning to resist or show opposition to authority.



I ♥ Joyriding

Jeremy Deller, *I Love Joyriding* (1998).
Image copyright of the artist, courtesy Paul Stolper Gallery, London.

The same cannot be said for Hammons' *Pissed Off* (1981), his second interaction with Serra's T.W.U. Attacking the rigid material strength and monumental authority of T.W.U. with his own smelly, formless, and ephemeral 'work' and reversing Duchamp's action of turning the urinal into art, Hammons pissed against T. W. U. Whilst urinating, he was noticed by a passing police officer, and, as the story goes, was given a citation.⁹⁰ The appearance of the officer may have been a chance event, but as in Lucas' *Supersensible*, it is no chance event that the officer appears in the subsequent 'artwork'.⁹¹ In this encounter, Hammons' misdemeanour is too slight to warrant arrest, the officer, however, is compelled to intervene in what is obviously an infringement of the law. In what seems a double 'Long Nose' not only does Hammons insult Serra's 'erection' but also reveals the fundamental impotence of the officer who desists from arresting him for fear of over-reacting. A radical cultural alternative is simultaneously posited by Hammons' pissing which, like the sock in *Cop Socker* not only serves to lower or decivilise but also enacts 'matter out of place'. In Hammons' work, where a social systemic ordering and classification has involved a history of slavery and continued racial prejudice, dirt - and all things dirty - as well as the positioning of his work on and of the street, becomes a metaphor for blackness itself: 'matter out of place' might well be how Hammons sees all African Americans. Yet despite this challenge to an 'official culture', Hammons' act remains resolutely non-violent. Clearly posing no physical threat and operating within the 'safe space' created by kynismus, such action instead signals an opportunity for learning, in this case an opportunity to acknowledge the social, economic, and political grievances of many African Americans.

⁹⁰ Filipovic writes; 'The officer may even have issued a citation ...though I myself could not find a trace of it [in the NYC Police Department's log].' Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 69. In an uncanny echo and prelude to Hammons act in *Skulptur Projekte Munster 1977*, Richard Serra's contribution – a pair of giant steel plates functioning as screens - were labelled 'Damen' and 'Herren' by unknown vandal(s) and thus rendered a public toilet.

⁹¹ Documented by photographer Dawoud Bey, images of the action were subsequently exhibited by Hammons as *Pissed Off*. Whilst it could be argued that the work itself was the act of urination, capturing the gesture photographically prolongs and extends its exposure, allowing a secondary audience to 'witness' the act. Like Lucas' *Supersensible*, the act, a performance of power, generates an image of power with the photograph functioning to extend its lifespan. As well as being another means of sharing the event the photograph itself serves to propagate anecdote when a secondary audience who see the photograph now relate its content to others without necessarily having to share the image.

(Image redacted)
David Hammons, *Pissed Off* (1981).

If any proof were needed that a kynic mechanism shuns violence, Voina's *Palace Coup* (2012) serves as perfect evidence. Breaking into a police compound, members of the group doused a vehicle with petrol before setting it on fire. Whilst undoubtedly 'material as argument', such an act has nothing to do with kynicism as Agamben explains:

When constituting power sets the constituting process in motion, every determination is free and remains free. Sovereignty, on the other hand, arises as the establishment – and therefore as the end – of constituting power, as the consumption of the freedom bought by constituting power [...] The troublemaker is precisely the one who tries to force sovereign power to translate itself into actuality.⁹²

Here, then, a clear difference arises between Agamben's 'troublemaker' and the kynic. Whereas the kynic propagates predicament, manifesting radical cultural alternatives in the relatively safe space generated by kynismus, Agamben's 'troublemaker' deliberately instigates violence, goading sovereign power to realise and exhibit the violence it implicitly threatens. Gone is any sense of Fenichial displacement and instead we simply witness a 'mine is bigger than yours' gesture. Confirmed by their later statement, 'Feds don't fuck us, we fuck feds,' Voina's actions in this instance represent nothing more than direct resistance to a ruling cynicism in which violence and the brutal claims to power made by the state are met with brutal counter claims.

⁹² Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998) 47 – 49.

Chicken (2017 – present)

Like Hammons and Lucas, it excites me to use material as argument, to present an argument made palpable, corporal, and public. To manifest such a challenge in a public space not only empowers the material in question but also seems a life-affirming act. Manifesting a palpable, and therefore, tangible cultural alternative, kynismus not only disables cynicism but also demolishes the ideal. No better example exists than Diogenes' famous exchange with Plato. 'When Plato put forward the definition of the human as a featherless biped and was applauded for it, he (Diogenes) tore the feathers from a rooster and brought it into Plato's school saying, 'That is Plato's human'.⁹³ Within this anecdote are the three branches of an embodied cynicism that were identified when I asked the question, 'how might kynismus manifest itself as a contemporary art practice?' First, the production of the art object (in this case the plucked rooster) and more significantly, the 'act of daring' that presents it. Second, a demonstration of a way of being in the world – here a display of showmanship and comedic genius, a productive disruptiveness, and a distinctly feral manner that despite its combativeness does not culminate in violence. Finally, an action that not only lends itself to anecdote but one in which anecdote almost seems the deliberate and intended product of the action.

⁹³ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 103.



Chicken (I) (2017).

At the very start of this research, it was this anecdote that led me to use chickens. Not in an attempt to illustrate Diogenes' challenge to Platonic logic but instead to examine the effects of a very different kind of body to my own. Rejecting the possibility of using live birds I instead decided to use them in the form most readily available, as the processed carcass. Here was a body, in fact an endless supply of bodies that one could buy from a shop and immediately take out on to the street. Using the chicken, I could make an argument with the body without having to *be* the body in question. The chicken (a body in its own right) could be presented and then left in place, a substitute for either myself or 'bodies' in general. As a result, and as an on-going artwork, *Chickens* (2017 – present) represents multiple presentations of this naked body in the urban public space.

Having purchased the bird and brought with me some cable ties, I often walk for some time, looking for a suitable site in which to hang, or 'post' it. Carrying the chicken around with me in a carrier bag has a similar effect to me carrying the sock in *Cop Socker*. Not that the carrying of this material suggests its subsequent means of empowerment: instead that the carrying gives me a sense of its significance, both materially and psychologically. It is the 'dead-weight' of this thing that now excites me, the realisation that this mass can be converted into kynic energy. When carrying becomes almost gravity and the desire to unburden myself grows, a feeling of agitation mounts as I search for a site in which to display the body. What I am looking for is a spot in the city that represents a junction, a meeting place where tides of people, gazes, or paths might converge or focus – a spot that I will subsequently claim ownership of through the posting of the bird. In a sense, this is a very similar gesture to that displayed in *Signal*, a territorial mark-making denoting presence. The difference here is that the stand-in for the body is itself a body.

It is the cadaver's qualities of nakedness, rawness, and a perceived uncleanliness as well as the 'act of daring' that presents it that generates each *Chicken's* impact. Cable-tied to a lamp post, this is now a very visible, naked body in an environment where bodies are very rarely naked. Its rawness suggests another kind of nakedness, that of a brutal or gross frankness, an 'uncivilized' state – the very opposite of that suggested by things cooked. Nakedness itself suggests a kind of shamelessness, a rude, uninhibited energy that wants to make nakedness visible. This shamelessness is compounded by the uncertainty surrounding the body's provenance where a threat or at least a perceived threat of contamination or contagion exists. The question arises as to whether this an untouchable body, a forbidden, unclean, or unlawful body. Here the notion of the 'unclean' extends beyond just the carcass's contamination through its contact with dirt and grime from the street. Also present is the notion of uncleanliness in the form of bacterial infection, decay, and putrefaction - but beyond this, even, is the notion of uncleanliness as something that is not only immoral but also unlawful, a concept encapsulated by the Islamic word *haram*. Not just the opposite of *halal*, an animal slaughtered and prepared in a manner compliant with Islamic law, *haram* quite literally means 'against the law', in this case the embodiment of an 'overstepping of the *polis*' as described earlier in *Cop Socker*.

The carcass's qualities of nakedness, rawness, and uncleanliness are amplified and made more visible by its being lifted. In the same way that predators lift up prey items up out of the way of scavengers, so the *Chickens* are positioned some five or six feet above the ground. Using the road sign or lamp post as support, each posting or publishing of the body takes advantage of street furniture already loaded with connotations of animality (perching, urination, and scent marking). Functioning primarily to direct and facilitate the flow of traffic through the city, such posts are utilised as readymade vantage points, supports that, with the addition of the body now advertise a very different kind of movement or mobility, that of the stray. More charismatic than any other material simply for its being 'body' and, therefore, representing a life lived, the posted chicken commands attention in a way that materials such as the sock or sleeping bag cannot.

Cable-tied to the lamp post in a rapid and irreversible garrotting gesture, each carcass is fixed in place in the simplest and quickest manner. Once the bird is hung, I immediately leave, leaving providence to decide how long the work remains in place. Some are removed almost immediately whilst others hang for days, the deciding factor in the work's duration being completely out of my hands in this 'live' environment. At first, I took the *Chickens* to those parts of the city where commerce or the display of power were most evident or human traffic heaviest.⁹⁴ Repeated hangings, though, began to assume a far more territorial aspect and so later *Chickens* were confined to my own neighbourhood in Hackney, North London. Subsequent hangings, totemic and threatening, marked that part of the city that I chose to claim in a manner similar to Lucas's *Supersensible* through an animal gesture of ownership. Witnessing this act, a material 'flipping' or 'giving the bird'⁹⁵ that again echoes Fenichel's Long Nose, members of the public twice asked if I intended to leave the carcass in place but never prevented its hanging. As with *Cop Socker*, on a very few occasions after hanging the body on the post I remained in the vicinity to witness public reaction. Unlike *Cop Socker* this reaction was never humorous but was instead marked by confusion, bafflement or incredulity brought about by the incongruous nature of the display. Chickens as a commodity, however, are far from incongruous in the context of the high street fast-food economy.

Early in 2017, whilst teaching at the South London Gallery, I asked the students to create a narrative. Three short stories, all focussing entirely on the selection, purchasing, and consumption of fried chicken were the result. Whilst this was not particularly surprising, what was surprising was the ignorance surrounding the origins of the product. Many students believed *chicken* to be a homonym, a shared word that describes two completely different things. The revelation that the bird and the fried foodstuff were one and the same thing came, therefore, as a profound shock. Even in this moment of realisation, cynicism produced denial and a palpable reluctance to acknowledge facts. Against this backdrop which, one assumes, is more prevalent than imagined, a raw chicken, cable-tied to a lamp post, is something of a jolt, an almost

⁹⁴ Early *Chickens* were positioned within the City of London, at London Bridge, Trafalgar Square, and Kings Cross.

⁹⁵ Giving the bird: An offensive gesture made at someone in which the middle finger of the hand is raised whilst the others are folded down.

traumatic realisation of the raw materials of this cultural phenomenon, the unprocessed base from which products emerge battered, branded, and bucketed.

Chicken (2017 – present), clearly has, therefore, something of Žižek's somatic 'saying out loud' by confronting a proposition (in this case, a product) with the situation of its enunciation. This product, though, and those who consume it are not exclusively part of any ruling class and whilst fried chicken might indeed be seen as a form of 'official culture', the notion that kynismus represents the popular, plebian rejection of such an official culture seems in doubt when the 'official culture' is itself predominantly plebian in nature. Unbound by any recognition of a *polis* - legal, economic, or social – committed, in fact, to a deliberate 'overstepping of a *polis*', the kynic impulse must be seen as something independent of social structure, as likely to challenge plebian values as those of a ruling class.



Chicken (VII) (2022).

Before examining the implications of this revised understanding of the kynic mechanism and its impact on cynicism (and on the production of knowledge) I should also discuss the role of the photograph. No-one reading this thesis is likely to have witnessed at first hand the works that constitute *Chicken* (or indeed any of the works discussed). What the reader might imagine, therefore, is that the image appearing alongside this text *is* the work. It is not, although if this image assists the mind's eye, it serves a useful purpose. Transient and ephemeral in nature, a need exists to prolong and extend the 'act of daring', as well as a need to reach a wider audience, to share the work, and to publish the resultant 'art object' – a need acknowledged most clearly by Hammons. In this respect, the photograph as documentation is very convenient and can in some instances constitute a 'caper' in its own right by allowing kynic content to infiltrate cultural structures already at ease with photography. What the photographic image does though (unlike the anecdote) is to propagate a single version of the event at the expense of all other versions and interpretations. The anecdote, in contrast, allows the event an uninhibited freedom to persist and propagate itself unhindered by an 'ideal' depiction, leaving the visualisation of the event entirely up to the recipient. Regarding *Chicken*, the very first photograph trumps all others. Its 'double whammy'⁹⁶ of carcass and sleeping homeless man is the equivalent of Lucas' chance encounter with the two police officers in *Supersensible*.⁹⁷ This means very little, however, to subsequent art works where hanging a new chicken is the equivalent of the work being created for the very first time.

⁹⁶ Double whammy': slang term for a double blow or brace of hits; also has connotations of a jinx, the evil eye or a spell of sorts.

⁹⁷ Like the chicken, the man sleeping on the ground who was already occupying the spot I had chosen to hang the bird before I arrived, will be removed. Like the chicken, this man offends the sensibilities of a society who feel uncomfortable in his presence.



Chicken (IX) (2022).

The preceding reflections on the work of Lucas, Deller, Voina, Hammons, and my own kynic practice lead towards a clarification and re-evaluation of the kynic mechanism. Despite Žižek's assertion that kynismus is a procedure that is more pragmatic than argumentative, it seems difficult to locate an obvious practical application for it. If its purpose is indeed to 'subvert the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation,' then kynismus alone seems too insufficient a force to affect the deposing or overthrowing of authority. Neither does kynismus appear to be ironic in nature, existing as it does as an embodied rather than disembodied force. Nor, I would argue, is kynismus exclusively plebian in nature representing 'the popular, [...] rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm,' as it is as likely to challenge plebian values as those of a ruling class. Žižek's understanding of a kynic mechanism, it would seem, stems directly from the notion of kynismus as *resistance*, a definition shared by Sloterdijk. If, however, as this research suggests, we see kynismus not as a fighting-against but as a *playfighting-with*, a very different understanding of the kynic mechanism appears.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the power embodied by the 'dads' singled out by David the Clown is useless in the predicaments they find themselves in, predicaments in which the application of physical strength is futile and where authority is obsolete. Like Lucas's and Hammons' works, David's actions do not constitute subversion, a situation in which one power is attempting to overthrow another, since David has no intention of usurping or deposing the authority these men represent. Instead, David's actions clearly represent attempts, albeit very challenging ones, to play. Because these attempts are recognised as constituting play and pose no real threat, kynismus engineers a safe space in which to test and publish cultural alternatives. Generated by the kynic and not by Agamben's 'troublemaker', these acts do not culminate in or precipitate violence. They do, however, manage to *materialise* radical cultural alternatives. Because kynismus *materialises* these alternatives (rather than verbalising or hypothesising them), the fact of their actualisation or coalescence makes them palpable and, therefore, tangible as alternatives. Žižek's definition of kynismus as the 'confronting of a proposition with the situation of its enunciation' is thus only one half of a kynic mechanics. More significant than this is kynismus' ability to confront the proposition with the materialisation of a tangible alternative in a manner that does not precipitate violence.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ In the case of Diogenes' plucked rooster, not only does the 'featherless biped' confront Plato's proposition with the situation of its enunciation but through an act of showmanship and daring, Diogenes also presents himself as a tangible alternative, "Here is Plato's (ideal) 'man'" says Diogenes (being thrown by a 'real' one).

What this re-assessment and re-evaluation of the kynic mechanism now facilitates is an answer to the question of how an engagement with kynicism might challenge, reconfigure, and reconstitute the production of knowledge. Challenging what Rogoff refers to as 'neo liberal structures for the daily management of knowledge', the impulse to *playfight* with its subject overrides any immediate usefulness or entrepreneurialism. More significantly, by adopting the principle of embodiment kynic research takes place outside of an intellectual milieu, marking a shift in knowledge production away from established institutions, disciplines, and policies. The very fact that such knowledge is produced outside of an intellectual milieu is perhaps what leads Žižek to mistakenly assert that kynismus is essentially plebian in nature. Enacting a strategy of *straying* - a mongrel mobility characterised by reflexivity, heterogeneity, and movements 'out of place' - an engagement with kynicism not only signals a shift not only in the traditional sites of knowledge production but also in how such knowledge is communicated, disseminated, and published. Just as Duchenne laughter is contagious, so kynic activity seems to possess an almost infectious quality - if this was not manifested bodily by those who joined me in my activity then it was evidenced anecdotally by those who shared the 'joke', either verbally or on social media. An activity or an attitude that is copied begins to shift custom in a new direction. In a culture where 'facts no longer matter' and where an Enlightenment-style correction of errors has no effect, kynismus as the progenitor of such a shift might well prove to be significant.

CONCLUSION

This research was founded on Sloterdijk's proposal to revive the tradition of kynismus as a counterstrategy to cynicism, described by him as 'the dominant operating mode in contemporary culture'. The significance of Sloterdijk's proposal appeared to lie in its insistence on the direct involvement of the body, conceived by him as material as argument. In a culture in which consciousness is reflexively buffered and no longer feels affected by verbal critique, the body conceived as material as argument seemed a strategy worth investigating. Practising kynicism, however, revealed fundamental flaws in Sloterdijk's purely literary model of kynismus, foremost being his notion of kynismus as *resistance*. Developing a radically different methodology to that employed by him, one in which a notion of kynismus as 'Gervaisian' *playfight* replaces Sloterdijk's definition of kynismus as *resistance*, this research in the form of a contemporary art practice aimed to determine exactly how the direct involvement of the body might indeed facilitate the antagonising of cynicism by kynismus. Contributing to a kynic revival and moving beyond existing debates concerning both the nature and role of kynismus, I also asked how kynismus might manifest itself as a contemporary art practice and how an engagement with kynicism might in turn challenge, reconfigure, and reconstitute the production of knowledge.

A gut feeling that kynismus had very little to do with *resistance* was compounded by Sloterdijk's cursory yet significant analysis of what he called 'kynical laughter'. The question also remained unanswered as to whether kynismus could be defined as 'self-embodiment in resistance' in the wake of Foucault's claim, that "the resistance of the self-conscious body is produced by the culture of cynicism itself as a regenerating and legitimating device". Left unchallenged, such a claim renders any kynic revival meaningless because if Foucault is right and kynismus is the product of cynicism then it cannot possibly represent any sort of counterstrategy. Sloterdijk must, therefore, deal with Foucault's claim if his proposal is to have any weight or impact in a debate concerning what he sees as a 'pervasive political disillusionment' and 'lack of political and social alternatives'. Exactly why he fails to do so remains a mystery.

Research by Gervais and Wilson into the nature of Duchenne and non-Duchenne laughter now facilitated a fundamental shift in my thinking. What it provided was a somatic model for the relationship between kynismus and cynicism, one that extricated kynismus from Sloterdijk's notion of a dichotomy. Furthermore, viewed from an evolutionary perspective, by preceding the cynical impulse kynismus could no longer be considered the product of cynicism. Redefining kynismus not as *resistance* but as the *playfight* (an opportunity to explore cognitively, emotionally, and socially) whilst simultaneously countering Foucault's claim that kynismus was the product of cynicism, the methodology developed by this research allowed me to both develop kynic method and to examine a kynismus whose existence was not contingent upon cynicism. The first of three fundamental research questions now arose as a direct result of practice, 'How does the direct involvement of the body facilitate the antagonising of cynicism by kynismus?'

A Dialogue of Flesh and Blood.

Central to Sloterdijk's proposal to revive the tradition of kynismus as a counterstrategy to cynicism is his insistence on the direct involvement of the body. Grounding *Critique of Cynical Reason* on a study of Diogenes of Sinope, it is Diogenes' success in bewildering Socrates and Plato by 'talking with them differently too, in a dialogue of flesh and blood' that convinces Sloterdijk of the significance of the body conceived as material as argument. What this 'dialogue of flesh and blood' amounts to is kynic method, where the body alone is able to affect critique. In a contemporary crisis culture where 'facts no longer matter' and where an Enlightenment-style correction of errors has no effect, the significance of a material, pantomimic critique is clear. Questions regarding the exact role of the body in a kynic revival, however, are left unanswered by Sloterdijk who, to quote Huysen, 'never really addresses the question of what kynics actually do to the person they laugh at.' The task facing this research, therefore, was twofold, first to elucidate exactly how kynismus antagonises cynicism and second to define the role that the direct involvement of the body might play in facilitating this.

In a typically kynical manner, in which the direct involvement of the body is paramount, it was an examination of the role of the body that helped to elucidate a kynic mechanism. Creative practice supported the view of kynismus as an opportunity to explore cognitively, emotionally, and socially but only after I had overcome feelings of shame or embarrassment associated with visibility and publicness. This breaking of habit through practice is something that I will discuss in the question of how kynismus might manifest itself as a contemporary art practice. At this point it suffices to say that despite kynismus being somatically inherent, practice de-activates the urge to suppress it and instead, hones and amplifies the impulse. The regularity of such activity now makes it second nature, something that happens freely rather than me having to think about it or consciously engineer it. The primary role of the body in a kynic revival, therefore, is to practise kynismus: to allow the kynic impulse to manifest itself, to nurture this impulse, and to practise satisfying this impulse; to become material as argument.

What my occupation of Regent Street (*Six Days*, 2019) showed was that such practice was hard to ignore simply for its being in the direct path of everyday existence. Experienced as what Lucas might call 'the caper', an embodied kynicism characterised by a productive disruptiveness elicited a similarly embodied response from its audience. Practising kynismus in the urban public space means that the body now fulfils a second function, that of publishing the impulse, of making it tangible through embodiment, and of acknowledging its quality of contagion or to use social media terminology, of realising its potential to 'go viral'.

Defining the role of the body, not as the agent of *resistance* but as the author and embodiment of the *playfight* now helps to clarify the kynic mechanism. What kynic practice invariably results in is a predicament in which a show of force by the person or power being antagonised would simply amount to an admission of impotence. As discussed previously, engineering predicament does not constitute an attempt to overthrow an authority or remove it from office. Instead, what I am doing amounts to an attempt to play and as such, is perceived to pose no real threat. Even if what I am doing is not understood as *playfighting*, its nature means it is still regarded as something relatively harmless despite its being annoying, exasperating, or inconvenient. Perceived as posing no real threat, kynismus establishes a safe space in which to test and publish cultural alternatives. Generated in a manner that does not force sovereign power to translate itself into actuality, kynic acts do not culminate in or precipitate violence. What they achieve is the *materialisation* of cultural alternatives where their actualisation or coalescence renders them palpable and, therefore, tangible as alternatives. What has not been discussed previously, however, is what Žižek notes – that the cynical subject is already aware of such alternatives:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality but he none the less insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.’ Cynical reason is no longer naïve but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.⁹⁹

The reason behind its not being renounced is fear of retribution. What cynical reason amounts to is a defence system, a means of self-preservation. To drop the ‘ideological mask’ would be to drop one’s defences. The risk involved in embracing an alternative is, therefore, deemed too great and the ‘ideological mask’ is retained. Kynismus’ ability to engineer a relatively safe space in which to test and publish cultural alternatives now resolves the deadlock. By demonstrating a palpable and, therefore, tangible alternative in a manner that does not force sovereign power to translate itself into actuality, kynismus displays a ‘getting away with it’, *ápolis* activity that goes unpunished. In the presence of such gleeful rule-breaking (*playfighting*) cynicism finds itself floored since a mechanism that operates most successfully in aggressive, nervous, or hierarchical contexts serving to appease, manipulate, or feign agreement, finds itself instantly redundant in a non-hierarchical, non-aggressive, safe space. The result is an enlightenment process instigated directly by the body manifesting other ways of *being* and *doing* that do not result in annihilation (at least not in the context of the *playfight*). Once the validity of such alternatives has been established, then there can be no going back – the wall that buffers consciousness from critique has been breached. Once breached, the gap will only get bigger as more material rushes through.

⁹⁹ Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 25-26.

Here an analogy with psychoanalysis seems pertinent, one recognised by Sloterdijk who writes, '[...] the cognitive cynicism of psychoanalysis could breach social consciousness – at first through a small opening, but later there was scarcely anything left of the wall [...] Kynics could not possibly fulfil their task more elegantly than Freud did [...] (psychoanalysis) managed [...] to talk about almost everything that one does not talk about.'¹⁰⁰ What Sloterdijk describes as 'cognitive cynicism', however, relies on talking and not on material as argument. It is Lucas who advances a material argument analogous with psychoanalysis by presenting us with material manifestations of things said – concepts manifested as objects whose origins often lie in words snatched from streams of casual conversation - vernacular idioms and suspect phrases hiding in plain sight that when made material become both shocking and hilarious.

All this might explain how the direct involvement of the body facilitates cynicism but it does not explain how the body facilitates the antagonising of cynicism by kynismus. It does, in fact, suggest something quite different. What practice revealed was that by *playfighting*, kynismus does not antagonise cynicism so much as disarms, disables, and defuses the cynical impulse, allowing cultural alternatives to surface in safety. Cynicism's being 'switched off' or overridden by the kynic impulse is highly significant. Whereas the antagonising of a thing might well lead to its being strengthened by forcing it to find new means of defending itself, making it a more vigorous adversary, or encouraging it to find new forms of expression (the process of regeneration and legitimation described by Foucault), the incapacitation of cynicism by kynismus represents its undoing.

Sloterdijk's attempt to reconstitute Aufklärung (enlightenment) based on what he calls 'physiognomic thought' (embodied thought) is not just limited by its being a purely literary attempt. Having defined kynismus as *resistance* and then gone on to describe kynismus as 'a source of enlightenment',¹⁰¹ what Sloterdijk proposes is an enlightenment process founded on *resistance*, a concept that seems counterproductive. Conceiving kynismus in terms of a 'Gervaisian' *playfight*, however, shifts our understanding in a very different direction and is valuable on two fronts. First, kynismus conceived as the playfight clearly facilitates the production of knowledge having engineered an opportunity to explore cognitively, emotionally, and socially. Second, such a kynismus can be seen to disable cynicism since a mechanism that operates 'most successfully in aggressive, nervous, or hierarchical contexts serving to appease, manipulate, or feign agreement', finds itself instantly redundant in a non-hierarchical, non-aggressive, safe space. The means of nullifying cynicism it would seem, lie within the production of knowledge itself. What practice led me to conclude is that kynismus is not a tool with which to antagonise cynicism but a means of producing knowledge which, in the process of its production, nullifies cynicism – a process in which the body plays a crucial role.

¹⁰⁰ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 294.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

A Kynic Practice

If the driving force behind Sloterdijk's proposal to revive the tradition of kynismus was his insistence on the direct involvement of the body conceived by him as material as argument, then a contemporary art practice seemed well suited to perform this task. As Sloterdijk himself writes, '(Embodiment) [...] gives rise to a general logic of *participation* [...] I refer again to the fact that contemporary art [...] has achieved a significant head start on philosophical analysis in this respect'.¹⁰² What Sloterdijk is acknowledging here is that to understand kynismus, one must adopt the principle of embodiment. If philosophy as practised by intellectuals precludes embodiment, then a contemporary art practice that embraces it has the upper hand. By constituting kynicism rather than simply advocating it, a contemporary art practice outperforms philosophy.

Searching for existing examples of kynismus manifested as contemporary art, this research focussed on the work of Hammons and Lucas, not as artists deemed to be exclusively kynic but as artists who were perceived to exhibit kynic traits. Of particular interest to me was Hammons' notion of the 'act of daring', a phrase used by him to describe the empowering acts that bring art objects into being. Lucas' description of her practice as 'the caper' was also highly significant, suggesting that not only was this activity 'criminal' but also tremendous fun.

Identifying the 'act of daring' and 'the caper' as contemporaneous kynic methodologies not only helped to form the foundations of my own methodology but also facilitates an unprecedented view of both artists. Seen from a uniquely kynic perspective Hammons' quote, 'It's not the art object itself. It's the daringness of the act, of presenting it...' takes on new significance. What it heralds is a shift in emphasis that places more value on the practice than on the resultant art object. A recalibration of one's reading of Lucas's work sees a similar shift in emphasis. Whereas Hammons' quote is an attempt to elucidate each work in terms of the 'act of daring', Lucas' 'caper' enlightens us as to the nature of the whole game. What 'the caper' represents is kynic 'criminality' in its entirety. It is not just the heist, planned, executed, and its success made public (the 'act of daring') but also the public consumption of the spoils – those cultural forms 'owned' by patriarchal institutions, robbed by Lucas, and now used for her own ends. Whilst Hammons might not want to 'draw heat'¹⁰³ from his 'acts of daring', Lucas' subsequent swagger is all part of the game.

From such insights and from my own activity, an answer to the question of 'How might kynismus manifest itself as a contemporary art practice?' begins to form. First, as discussed above, not so much in the production of art objects as in practice itself. Second, and perhaps intimately associated with the former, as a demonstration of a way of being in the world, an autoplasmic or self-sculpting process fuelled by practice. Finally, as activity published by the anecdote.

¹⁰² Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, 256.

¹⁰³ 'Draw heat': slang meaning creating unwanted or unnecessary attention. Attracting the attention of the police.

To address the first of these points, In a practice that uses material as argument it seems paradoxical to assert that to understand such a practice, one's focus must shift away from the object, towards instead the 'act of daring' that presents it. This, though, is exactly what kynismus demands. If kynismus is the *playfight*, then kynismus manifested as a contemporary art practice is a manifestation of that 'wrestling with culture itself', not the production of objects associated with the wrestling nor in illustrating the *playfight*. This is not to say that the art objects that result from this activity are of no consequence. What kynismus demands, however, is that practice is paramount. If I cable-tie a chicken to a lamp post, I have not made the chicken kynical or somehow imbued the carcass with kynicism. Kynismus is the compulsion to move it there and to present it. The chicken represents material as argument through its qualities of nakedness, 'unlawfulness', and rawness but these qualities are only activated by its being moved out of place. A contemporary art practice that constitutes kynismus amounts, therefore, to a series of movements out of place and an 'overstepping of the *polis*' evidenced by shifts in material. What both the 'act of daring' and 'the caper' (and my own *straying*) represent are a re-engagement with risk, albeit risk tempered by the ability of kynismus to engineer a relatively safe space in which to operate ensuring that acts perpetrated in this space do not precipitate violence.

Intimately associated with a re-engagement with risk, a strategy of *straying* facilitated both movements out of place and an auto-plastic or self-sculpting process. Straying amounted to me quitting the studio and moving out onto the street. Once in the urban public space, a constant movement through it meant that what had been habitual indoors was simply no longer possible. What this mongrel mobility facilitated was the formation of a feral practice very different to my previous, more domesticated studio practice. Feelings of shame or embarrassment associated with dirt, visibility, or being taken for a homeless person quickly evaporated, leaving dirt, visibility, and mobility as qualities or materials that were there to be exploited rather than avoided. A public practice that amounted to a series of movements out of place and an 'overstepping of the *polis*' fostered not only a degree of showmanship but also *attitude* and an aptitude for the *playfight*. In the same way that physical exercise enhances one's ability (one becomes fitter) and makes one more adept (more skilled at the activity), repeated attempts to instigate the *playfight* meant that such activity became not only easier but also more affective. Not only this but in the same way that intense and habitual training might, after a period of time, lead one to identify as an athlete, *straying* and a persistent 'overstepping of the *polis*' ushered in a similar shift. For every act of kynicism I performed, kynismus acted on me – a practicing self-shaping.

Whilst social media, photography and the written word were all used to publish my activity and to generate a secondary audience (my primary audience being those who witnessed the works at first-hand), anecdote retained an unforeseen significance. *Cop Socker* in particular became a work that was transmitted as much by anecdote as by Instagram. When asked what I was doing for my PhD, 'putting dirty socks on police windscreen wipers' was a response that many seemed to enjoy sharing, if not for the comment's ability to deflate expectations of academia, then simply for its comedy value. Comedic value became just that, *value* equivalent to economic performance, a performance that helped to stabilize the anecdote as 'currency'. The repetitiveness of the act (there were eighteen works in total) added to the notion of a stable currency. It became clear that using coloured socks rather than the white sports socks I habitually

used or interacting with police motorbikes for example rather than patrol cars or vans, would only serve to devalue the work. The strength of *Cop Socker* as anecdote lay in its trusted format, a format that I invested in on a regular basis. 'Sharing' on social media had an anecdotal effect although as previously stated, the photograph's propensity to monopolise the event and to propagate a single reading meant that such 'shares' never felt as significant as the knowledge of verbal recitations.

What, then, does kynismus' manifestation as a contemporary art practice mean for art? If habitual movements out of place and an 'overstepping of the *polis*' evidenced by shifts in material constitute contemporary art, then as Filipovic writes, 'you need to recalibrate your reading of art so as to understand it not in terms of objects but in terms of the acts that bring it into being'.¹⁰⁴ Such a recalibration means that traditional viewing spaces for the appreciation of art objects become largely redundant in favour of spaces that are able to accommodate the acts that bring such art objects into being. As practice proved, adopting the urban public space means that not only is an unfiltered audience likely to give an embodied response to embodied concepts (unlike the muted, contemplative, distinctly disembodied response one encounters in a gallery) but the same audience now establishes meaning. No longer the sole prerogative of experts, establishing meaning becomes a social activity.

Challenging, Reconfiguring, and Reconstituting the Production of Knowledge.

Huysen writes, 'Sloterdijk insists that one of the main problems of the Enlightenment was its inability to include the body and its senses in its project of emancipation. He therefore attempts to reconstitute Aufklärung (enlightenment) on the limited basis of what he calls physiognomic thought, embodied thought [...]' The reason that Huysen describes Sloterdijk's attempt as 'limited' is because Sloterdijk's inquiry into how bodily functions might constitute thought is not only brief but is also a purely literary attempt, a characterisation of body parts and somatic functions described in terms of thinking. By enacting Sloterdijk's proposal to revive the tradition of kynismus and by adopting the principle of embodiment this practice-based research makes the body an integral part of its investigation and the focal point of its enquiry. By doing so, an engagement with cynicism in the form of a contemporary art practice attempts to enlighten in a manner that challenges, reconfigures, and goes some way towards reconstituting the production of knowledge. The final task I set myself, therefore, was to understand exactly how.

How knowledge is produced is clearly fundamental to its acceptance. If an Enlightenment-style correction of errors has no effect, then there is little point in creating more knowledge using the same means, at least in terms of tackling cynicism. Furthermore, as Gibbons writes, 'What counts as knowledge is, [...] to a large extent determined by what scientists and technologists say shall count,'¹⁰⁵ a situation that

¹⁰⁴ Filipovic (2017), 70.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Gibbons, et al. *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1994), 31.

clearly serves to devalue 'knowledge'. What an engagement with cynicism demands is not only a change in the methods by which knowledge is produced and the sites of its production, but also in the criteria that establish quality control.

In terms of the first of these shifts – a change in the methods by which knowledge is produced - what *straying* became for this research was a method for not only breaking habit but also enacting and embodying mobility – movements out of place and an 'overstepping of the *polis*'. Being *ápolis* was not to consider myself above the law, but to call *polis*-ing and the regulation of the urban public space into question. The result of *ápolis* activity was not only the creation of a predicament in which authority represented by *polis*-ing became obsolete but also a calling into question of the *polis* surrounding 'knowledge' itself. Both *ápolis* activity and the *playfight* demanded physical involvement. The direct involvement of the body conceived as material as argument meant that any knowledge generated in this manner could be understood *in terms of the body* and not just as disembodied theory. Such a change in method results in a change in the nature of the knowledge produced - and not only this, since *straying* demanded new sites for its production.

Quitting the studio and adopting the urban public space was not a move that was conceived in terms of a field trip, one where I collected data to be processed exclusively within the institution supporting this research. Adopting the urban public space as my primary theatre of activity meant the establishment of a new site for the production of knowledge, just as Export had achieved in *Body Configurations*. Gibbons, again, writes, 'When information is plentiful, perhaps too plentiful, competence does not derive from being able to generate yet more, but from the insight gained by arranging what already exists in novel ways.'¹⁰⁶ What Export achieves in the urban public space is not so much a rearrangement of what already exists as a novel and insightful interaction with existing material, her own version of the *playfight*. In this interplay, the architecture of the city represents material data. Rather than create more material in response, Export's interplay allows a radically new reading of it. Significantly for cynicism, this new insight comes as a direct result of a bodily interaction. What Export has done is not only to produce knowledge relating to patriarchy but also to identify a problem – that the urban public space itself embodies patriarchal values. By identifying how architecture makes patriarchal values concrete, she produces knowledge concerning its function, knowledge that we were previously unaware of, or - more importantly in regard to cynicism – that we already knew but refused to acknowledge.

Moving out into the urban public space made much of what I did a social activity. Best illustrated by *Six Days*, empathy, and a desire to 'tune in' (to adjust one's mindset as one would adjust a musical instrument to a given standard of pitch), seemed to be what motivated those who suspended their own activity to join me at ground level. Whether or not this stemmed from a belief that I was homeless, after an initial conversation that dispelled this perception, those who joined me remained at pavement level to discuss what was now happening having realised the significance of their embodied response. Such embodied responses could often be integrated into the work itself, helping to inform or guide future manifestations. Works created meeting

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 64.

places for discussion, not only in the form of verbal dialogue but also as material banter, in which objects were removed or destroyed, or added to by the public. The audience for these works established not only meaning but also hybrid fora - live exchanges between divergent groups - situations where cynicism as the recruiter (manifested not only as the *playfight* but also as the invitation to join in) began to disarm cynicism through intersubjective activity.

Throughout *Six Days*, what one could consider the results of the activity were communicated to those who participated during that participation. In this way, the transmission of the results (to a primary audience) was accomplished in the process of their production. One got to understand the work as it happened, a 'live' learning process for all those involved. Unlike a performance in the sense that a performance might be pre-planned with a preconceived outcome, my actions were as much a learning experience for me as they were for an audience. In such works, the direct involvement of the body meant that the appropriation of knowledge was, for a primary audience, an integral part of its production, not something that happened after the event. Currently conventional wisdom dictates that discovery must precede application. In the urban public space where shifting materials often meant putting them to use in a different context, application often preceded discovery.

What an engagement with cynicism represents, therefore, is a significant shift in focus for the production of knowledge, a shift in which the body becomes both an integral part of research and the investigation's focus. Even in the absence of the body conceived as material as argument, material as argument acting as its stand-in performs a similar role by evidencing the 'act of daring' that presented it. *Straying*, as a strategy both to break habit and to facilitate ephemeral, flexible, and fluid research, reconstituted a more domesticated practice that had previously taken place within the studio. *Ápolis* activity and repeated attempts to instigate the *playfight* not only resulted in the production of somatic knowledge in the form of muscle memory, intuitive action, and visceral reaction, but also shaped new ways of asking questions. Forms, their environment, and the regulation of this environment all came under a renewed scrutiny, one that allowed radically new readings of existing material.

Shifting the site of this production of knowledge out of the studio and the college and academia and into the urban public space not only made for a more feral practice but also facilitated direct interaction with an unfiltered audience. This same audience not only generated meaning, but on occasion joined me in my activity or participated through sharing it, creating mutual understanding. The result, highly significant in terms of cynicism, as Gibbons et al. note is that '[...] competence – the new skills and perspectives that emerge from these interchanges – is at least as important an outcome of this mode of knowledge production as the problems solved or the artifacts created'.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 163.

Summary of Key Findings

At the very beginning of this research, it was Sloterdijk's Critique of Cynical Reason that seemed to offer the most persuasive strategy in the struggle to resist what commentators such as Obama saw as an endemic cynicism. The proposal to revive the tradition of kynismus as a counterstrategy to cynicism seemed highly pertinent, one that might indeed lift a pervasive sense of political and cultural disillusionment. Gibbons' et al comment that, 'Spoken or written discourse may not be the most appropriate medium for this endeavour, which, in the past four or five decades, has found its most effective manner to convey meaning in the visual arts [...]' ¹⁰⁸ only made the proposal more attractive to me.

Huyssen's perceptive analysis identified several flaws in Sloterdijk's proposal but even Huyssen remained unaware of gaps in knowledge that would only make themselves known through practice. What Sloterdijk was proposing was not an attempt to eradicate cynicism but an attempt to tip the scales in favour of a more cynical outlook. That he should define kynismus in terms of *resistance* yet describe it in terms of 'kynical laughter' (Duchenne laughter), however, seemed paradoxical since how would belly-laughter equate to *resistance*? Furthermore, how did Žižek's analysis of cynicism represent a 'counterstrategy' if he asserted that not only did kynismus result in more cynicism, but that kynismus was cynicism's product, a view echoing Foucault's? What became clear was that the most profound gap in our knowledge lay in an understanding of the nature of the cynic impulse itself.

As previously stated, it was research by Gervais and Wilson into the relationship between Duchenne and non-Duchenne laughter that provided me with a somatic model for the kynismus - cynicism relationship. Seen from this unique perspective not only could kynismus not be the product of cynicism but also an understanding emerged that placed kynismus in a much closer relationship with laughter. Conceived as the *playfight* rather than 'self-embodiment in resistance', a far more positive, even joyous interpretation of kynismus could be conceived, one in which Duchenne laughter played a key role.¹⁰⁹ Equipped with a revised notion of kynismus, practicing cynicism now revealed where Žižek's analysis fell short since not only did kynismus serve to confront a proposal with the situation of its enunciation but also posited a corporeal alternative to it.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁰⁹ Had Sloterdijk taken Crates of Thebes (365 – 285 BC) rather than Diogenes as his Cynic model, a man who '...passed his whole life jesting and laughing, as though on perpetual holiday,' such a problem might never have arisen. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism: from Diogenes to the 6th Century AD*, 43 – 44.

Implementing Sloterdijk's proposal revealed a second void as fundamental as the first, that of a lack of method. By never saying what Kynics actually do, Sloterdijk gave no clues as to how kynismus might be manifested. Initiating Sloterdijk's proposal, therefore, necessitated the development of an original method. Russian Actionists such as Pavlensky provided what seemed like a template. Closer examination, however, revealed it to be a false lead. Fixated on opposition, Actionist works revealed themselves to be inextricably tied to the very thing they wished to overcome, locked in an almost symbiotic relationship with an institutionalized cynicism. Lucas and Hammons' work, (and to a degree, that of Export) provided more fertile ground but it was Beck's *Ecology of Stray Dogs* (1973) that offered the most groundbreaking model. Adopting behaviours described by Beck not only served to break habits and disrupt routine: it also led directly to my occupation of the urban public space, and with it, persistent and highly affective *ápolis* activity. A deliberate mongrel mobility not only forced me to re-evaluate a more static, object-based reading of art: it also meant that whatever I did might manifest itself at any point in the city, and at any time. Comparable to Hammons' 'acts of daring' and Lucas' 'the caper', *straying* not only constituted method but also became a means of elucidating practice. Describing my movements through the city and the opportunities this movement threw up was often the best way of communicating kynicism to those who questioned me.

Furthermore, what Sloterdijk's exclusively literary analysis of kynismus left him unaware of were those themes that were only made evident through practice, including time, mobility or nomadism, and the effects of visibility, or 'public-ness'. Lazzarato¹¹⁰ is able to articulate the significance of time in terms of economics, but it was *straying* that helped me to realise its corporeal significance. Likewise, Filipovic¹¹¹ describes how Hammons uses visibility to his advantage but does so as an observer, with no real insight into what it might mean to be the subject of such observation. Douglas¹¹² too clarifies the cultural meanings of movements 'out of place', but what *straying* achieved was both the integration and the embodiment of all the above, developing a method that in itself represents a unique contribution to knowledge, a distinctly kynic practice.

¹¹⁰ Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*.

¹¹¹ Elena Filipovic, *David Hammons: Bliz-aard Ball Sale*.

¹¹² Mary. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.

Examining the work of Lucas and Hammons not only provided me with leads into kynic method: it also facilitated the development of a framework within which to reassess their practice from a purely kynic perspective. Within such a framework, the shift away from an object-based reading of art towards instead an emphasis on the activity that presents it reveals what both do in a very different light.

What is clear in the case of Lucas is that ‘the caper’ is a game - a ‘job’ that can go ‘tits up’ at any moment.¹¹³ Not only does this statement acknowledge her engagement with risk; it also recognises the significance of play. Conceding the transience of such activity, Lucas knows that the *playfight* needs not only constant rebooting but also a regular change in accomplices or players. The laughter that accompanies this roughhousing is as much method as is stuffing tights or bending cigarettes. Laughter not only sets the tone for what is about to happen: it also facilitates it. Seen in terms of practice value rather than product value, the play preceding the creation of the object is what really matters. ‘Ballsy’ *attitude* and what it achieves shift custom and manners and Lucas at her best turns *attitude* into object. From a kynic perspective, however, *attitude* still has the upper hand.

Hammons also embraces the notion of kynic ‘criminality’.¹¹⁴ Operating on the periphery of multiple economic, social, and political zones, Hammons occupation of the urban public space is highly significant. Enacting his own version of *straying* and working with next to nothing in the way of materials, Hammons blurs the boundaries between street and studio. *Ápolis* activity sees him overstepping not only racial regulation but also regulation imposed by an art market. Deliberately avoiding institutionalisation by refusing offers of retrospectives and declining to cooperate with the promotion of his work, Hammons retains a mongrel mobility that is essential to his practice. ‘The art audience’, he is quoted as saying, ‘[...] is the worst audience in the world. It’s overly educated, it’s conservative, it’s out to criticize and it never has any fun. [...] so, I refuse to deal with that audience, and I’ll play with a street audience.’¹¹⁵ Insistent on an unfiltered audience, laying emphasis on *play*, and emphatic about the need for *fun* within such play, again, seen in terms of practice value Hammons’ impact lies in making art an exercise of existence.

¹¹³ Paraphrased from an unpublished conversation between Shaun Doyle and Sarah Lucas (2019 – 2022), ‘job’ in this instance refers to a robbery as much as employment. The inclusion of phrases such as ‘tits-up’ (slang meaning failure or death) and ‘ballsy’ (slang meaning determined or courageous) reflect Lucas’ own attempts at embodiment and use of vernacular.

¹¹⁴ ‘Hammons is quoted as saying, ‘There were no bad guys here, so I said, “Let me be a bad guy”, or attempt to be a bad guy, or play with bad areas and see what happens.’ Filipovic (2017), 43.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

Critical Reflections.

Throughout much of 2020-21 the country remained in lockdown, with movement limited to combat the spread of COVID-19. As a result, many urban public spaces remained empty. Even when restrictions were lifted such spaces were not immediately repopulated as employees worked from home and leisure activities remained curtailed. During these unprecedented times I continued to use the urban public space, but the lack of a public meant not only was there far less interaction during lockdown periods but also that a relaxing or lessening of the regulation of this space gave me an unprecedented freedom. It remains to be seen how the returning forces of regulation in the form of the amendments to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 will impact kynic practice in the future.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, ápolis activities performed by a white male clearly had an impact relative to my status. The possibility remains that certain actions went unopposed not because they were recognised as 'play' but simply because an audience were too fearful to intervene. Race also, perhaps, played no small part in the fact that my occupation of Regent Street was tolerated without my arrest.

In times when the public were free to utilise the urban public space, however, an appreciation of this space was palpable, recognised as an essential arena for social and cultural activity. During this period and beyond when restrictions were finally lifted, adopting Sloterdijk's proposal to revive the tradition of kynismus allowed the kynic impulse to shape everything I made. What resulted was an un-bankable, funny, ephemeral, and - most importantly - a very public art. A kynic practice and the resultant art objects not only shifted my attitude but also, quite unexpectedly, took others with me in a way that no previous incarnations of gallery-based art had ever done.

¹¹⁶ Introduced by the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 overhauls police, criminal justice, and sentencing legislation. Amendments to laws concerning the right to protest resulted in a riot in Bristol.

What this research has achieved is threefold. First, a completely new understanding of kynismus, one that rejects Sloterdijk's notion of *resistance* in favour of the *playfight*. Second, developing *straying* as method has not only established the legitimacy of the urban public space as a site for the production of knowledge but also shifted the methods by which knowledge is produced. Finally, a deeper understanding of kynismus has led to a complete re-reading of both Lucas's and Hammons' practices, one in which an emphasis on product value has been reversed in favour of practice values.

Turning to the first of these points, what conceiving kynismus as a *playfighting-with* rather than *resistance-against* means is the disarming, disabling, and defusing of cynicism rather than its stimulation, rejuvenation, and legitimation. Rebuffing 'the demand to make the whole of one's life into a tool of a (good old idealistically) planned "praxis"', a *playfighting-with* is something far less *serious*. As Sloterdijk writes, 'But herein lies the weak point of critique. It remains fixated on "serious opponents", and with this attitude it neglects that task of comprehending the ideological template of "unserious", shallow "systems"'.¹¹⁷ No longer conceived as a 'struggle' but instead as something joyous, and indeed fun, an engagement with kynismus now seems not only an attractive proposition but also one that is proven to be effective outside of an intellectual milieu.

Secondly, quitting the studio and the college in favour of a mobile practice (*straying*) that adopts the urban public space as its primary domicile not only encourages the production of knowledge within this space: it also questions the *polis* surrounding 'knowledge' itself. Allowing an unfiltered audience to generate meaning, means that identifying cynical structures becomes as significant as finding answers to them. Participation on multiple levels, including physical intervention, the removal or addition of material, and the sharing of the event as an anecdote or via social media allows for the appropriation and exploitation of that knowledge during its production – making the production of knowledge a 'live' activity.

Finally, a re-reading of Lucas's and Hammons' practice from a purely kynic perspective not only enriches our understanding of their work but also heralds perhaps, an appreciation of art that focusses more on practice values than product value, and where enlightenment resides in understanding (and participating in) the act rather than in the contemplation of the resultant art object.

¹¹⁷ Sloterdijk, *The World Interior of Capital*. 8.

As previously stated, a recalibration of one's reading of art so as to understand it, as Filipovic writes, 'not in terms of objects, but in terms of the acts that bring them into being' means that traditional viewing spaces for the appreciation of art objects become largely redundant in favour of spaces that are able to accommodate the acts that bring such art objects into being. In the light of this, should we also reconsider Hammons' quote, 'I refuse to play with an art audience...' in terms of cynicism? Does this quote suggest that Hammons sees traditional viewing spaces for art and their audiences as being predominantly cynical in nature? It seems certain that this view is endorsed by Robert Doherty, who writes,

An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of twentieth century art; it clarifies itself through a process of historical inevitability usually attached to the art it contains [...] Never was a space, designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle classes, so effectively codified.¹¹⁸

If we admit that not only are traditional spaces for viewing art unable to accommodate the kynic act (and therefore unable to revise our reading of art in favour of practice values) but may also be inclined to enable, facilitate, and legitimise cynicism, then a shift into new spaces (the urban public space being one) is not only desirable but essential.

Where this research now leads me is toward an examination of existing cultural structures (outside of contemporary art) that place a greater emphasis on practice values than on product value, our social engagement with sport being the most immediately obvious. Further study into non-verbal behaviour and communication and research into the relationship between emotion and action will no doubt broaden the kynic vocabulary already established by this project. In terms of further practice-based research, straying beyond the cultural *polis* of British cities and the urban public spaces that provided a focus for this research (London and Stoke-on-Trent) seems a move loaded with potential.

¹¹⁸ Robert Doherty, in Filipovic (2017), 100.

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