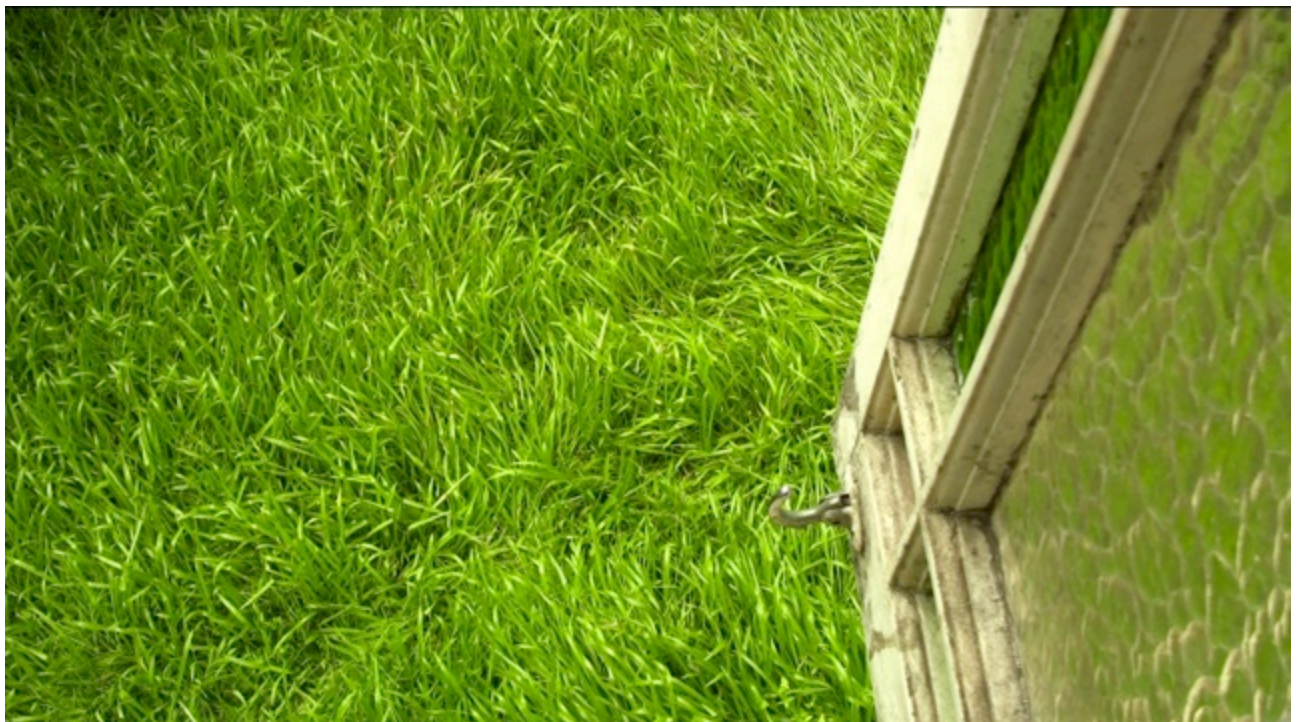


# The Body, the Absurd and the Quotidian in Contemporary Visual Art.

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This exegesis is submitted as part of the requirement of the degree, Bachelor of Fine Arts  
(Visual Arts) Honours at Queensland University of Technology, 2011.

Melissa Anne Ryke  
QUT Creative Industries Faculty  
Supervisor: Grant Stevens

## Acknowledgements

Thanks Mark. Thanks Grant. Thanks Danielle. Thanks Daniel. Thanks Ian, Jake. Thanks Sue, Sean and Kath. Thanks Pirrin. Thanks Hayley. Thanks Brianne and Anastasia. Thanks Sally. Thanks Michael. Thanks Mum, Dad, Ivan and Joseph. Thanks Léo. Thanks Leah, Lucia and Jen. Thanks. Thanks. Thanks.

Key Words: Art, time, embodied experience, repetition, the quotidian, the everyday, time-based media, absurd, space, Fluxus, Jeroen Kooijmans, Aernout Mik, Walter De Maria, Ben Vautier, Elizabeth Grosz, Henri Lefebvre

## Abstract

The relationship between art and life has been a recurring site of inquiry since early Modernity. Fluxus artists in the 1960s used repetition, humour and time-based performance to disrupt assumptions about the continuity between art and 'everyday' experience. These questions and strategies continue in much contemporary art, and are crucial paradigms that inform my creative practice. This research project explores how representations of the 'everyday' can be manipulated through time-based media, and further problematized through embodied reception. By doing so, the project offers new ways of understanding quotidian experiences, and contributes to an ongoing discourse on the legacy of Fluxus practices in contemporary art.

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## Statement of Originality

The work in this exegesis has not previously been submitted to any other higher education institution or for any awards. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this exegesis does not contain materials that have been published formally, or written by another person, except where due reference is made.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Introduction

I am very interested in the way that chance occurrences emerge through the habits of everyday life. This research project explores the various ways that I investigate and exploit these accidental moments and use them to make artworks. In what is largely a process based art practice I treat time as a malleable material. I isolate, collect, edit, refine, loop and repeat mediated observations of the quotidian to create absurd versions of the 'everyday'. More specifically, I use the repetitious, cyclical and durational potentials of time-based media to draw attention to experiences that might normally be overlooked in everyday life. The non-linear possibilities opened up by editing this media provide important formal and conceptual strategies because they allow me to critically and playfully engage with my understandings and experiences of the world around me.

This is a practice-led research project that accentuates the emergent nature of creative practice. Its central concerns and methodologies emerge from the formal, technical and conceptual processes of my art practice. These strategies of making are framed and reframed through an ongoing dialogue with theoretical research and relationships to other art practices. The research outcomes are a body of creative work, evidenced through a final exhibition and folio of visual documentation (66%), and exegesis (33%). The exegesis aims to contextualise, reflect on and articulate the creative process and outcomes of the project.

This project is critically and creatively informed by the legacy of Fluxus artists. It is further contextualised through contemporary artists Jeroen Kooijmans and Aernout Mik. The key approaches and strategies for making art focus on exploring how notions of time and space can be played with using digital media and employing humour as a way to examine experiences of the everyday. In this way it will build on Fluxus' questioning of art and everyday experience and Kooijmans and Mik's engagement with time as a medium for making art. Elizabeth Grosz's writing provides the conceptual field that I use to introduce and examine 'embodied experience' as problematizing the relationship between time, space and everyday life. These discussions about art's ability to disrupt and play with assumptions about the everyday are drawn from Henri Lefebvre's work on the quotidian. I am very interested in his complex understanding of the quotidian as malleable, cyclic, simultaneously inside and outside of us: as a force that forms habitual behaviours and shapes our identity, thoughts and social politics.

## 1. Methodology

“Serendipity and intuition that direct attention to unanticipated possibilities has long been a valued part of experimental enquiry” (Dean and Smith 2009, 48)

This practice-led project is emergent. This means that my theoretical research takes its lead from the creative practice. The process of making is the primary site of research, discovery, experimentation, and articulation. A key approach to this process includes intuitively recording aspects of my everyday environment and life. I am fascinated by the serendipitous and unexpected events that occur as I engage with the habitual and often mundane aspects of my day-to-day life. In this sense I am quite interested in how I can bring these experiences into the contexts of art that I also inhabit. This is where the artists cited are important for developing my own methodology because they provide a foundation of similar interests to extend on. Consequently I use strategies of play and ritual in an attempt to generate new and open-ended processes for discovering ‘art’ in my daily experiences. And I primarily use digital, time-based media because I am particularly compelled by the non-linear possibilities that these media present. Both approaches to practice combine to allow for chance and randomness to contribute to the collecting and documenting of material, and then a more considered and critical exploration of that material through playing with the editing process.

As I previously discussed I generate work by isolating, collecting and editing fragments of the everyday through digital media. I then process these via post-production editing using loops, cuts, and time lapses. Doing this enables me to reflect on and creatively develop the conceptual and formal outcomes of the play that occurs across the physical and digital environments. It also allows me to engage in a dialogue with other approaches to art practice and the key ideas that inform the making process.

This dialogue with other art and ideas is complimented by the collaborative activities that I also engage with. This has become quite an important strategy for making work. I have collaborated with fellow artists Pirrin Francis, Hayley Brandon and Léo Pacquelet over the last couple of years and found this process also provides new and unexpected insights into my thinking and approaches to making. I find that through these collaborative efforts, the self becomes ‘de-centred’ –as in the ideas and processes move

in and out of myself and someone else. This 'de-centering' is also fragmentary and cyclical, similar to my approach to practice. And in the space of the collaboration, ideas are given more room to develop through discussion, humour and play. These processes of making focus on moments of discontinuity, of disruption and humour because these offer me different ways of experiencing and understanding the world around me.

As I previously outlined, research into certain philosophical and theoretical texts helps generate an important dialogue between theory and art practice for me to establish a deeper understanding of knowledge around the concepts that arise out of my creative practice. This research is important for developing the methodology because it provides ideas and strategies for me to use and reuse in my creative processes. And finally this process-based methodology I am developing is extended through the installation of the work, because this is the site where particular detail is taken to generate a space that can potentially offer up the disorientating, absurd or embodied experiences I want for the viewer.



## 2. Contextual Review

### 2.1 The Quotidian, Fluxus and the Absurd

The quotidian has been an important, ongoing site for artistic inquiry since early Modernity. This discourse is not only a primary context in which I practice, but it is also a key stimulus. Henri Lefebvre's theoretical work on the everyday is an important framework through which to understand this complex discourse of 'art and life'. Lefebvre discusses the quotidian as a framework through which we can view, filter and understand the world around us. He implies that everyday life is not a pre-given, but rather, it can maintain a constant tension between both possibilities and their unfulfilled potentials. In this context, Lefebvre further defines the quotidian as both inside and outside of us (Johnstone 2008, 26). Through this the everyday can be understood as changeable and as a level of mediation where ideas, lifestyles, pleasures and exceptional activities can be confirmed (Johnstone 2008, 31). In this sense, I understand the quotidian as a praxis in which art making can take place, as a way of re-mediating, reworking, reorganising the everyday and therefore creating new ways of understanding that break the assumptions around everyday life's continuity. Lefebvre discusses the everyday as filled with rhythms, and being cyclic with repetitions of time scales, such as; minutes, hours, days, weeks, and seasons (Johnstone 2008, 26). And these rhythms and cycles are the thing that I am drawn to creatively play with in the practice in order to find new ways to experience them. And I also think these ideas are important for how they resonate with the experience of the everyday that many of the Fluxus artists dealt with.

This complex relationship between art and the everyday was an integral discourse and site of experimentation in Fluxus art. In fact, the legacy of Fluxus is often characterised as an attempt to break down the boundaries between art and life. Fluxus sought to reconnect art with everyday experiences by providing active engagements with the world, the everyday and lived experience. To this end, Fluxus art was often 'intermedia', highlighting "a dynamic interstitial space between media forms and between art and life structures" "to privilege primary experience" (Higgins 2002, 97). Through expanding lived experiences Fluxus artists treated the everyday as a malleable medium, a site for critical examination of their social, cultural and political contexts through artistic play.

And this is where their approach to discovering the creative potential of lived experiences can be seen as similar to Lefebvre's ideas on the everyday through maintaining a constant tension between both possibilities and their unfulfilled potentials.

The Fluxus artist Walter De Maria, in particular, expands on these ideas and strategies. His notion of meaningless work has been an influential strategy for me to make art. It makes me consider how humour and the absurdity of repetition can be re-addressed in my practice and the field of contemporary art. De Maria describes meaningless work as "work that does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose" and that has anti-institutional or anti-commodifying values (De Maria 1960). I like how this idea raises questions around the politics of the everyday, and suggests that individual experience is to be valued rather than mindlessly compliant to social conventions. In this project, repetitive action through meaningless work is one approach I use to make art, because although repetitive actions often refer to work, they also provide a meditative space for me to creatively think from. By acting out an absurd repetitive task, the conventional understanding of work becomes disrupted: it becomes a play with, and reorganisation of, the everyday.



[1] Ben Vautier *Living Sculpture* 1962

Fluxus artists often used humour and wit to disrupt the assumed seriousness of art. I understand this disruption as a tactic used to challenge institutional power structures,

as in De Maria's idea of "meaningless work". I am particularly interested in the use of humour because it values play in artistic practice as an aesthetic habit in which to abandon reason (Higgie 2007, 55). In Fluxus practices, this abandonment of reason in favour of seemingly mischievous forms of nonsense is an important strategy to engage audiences in alternative, often humorous ways of understanding how art and life intersect. In my project humour is also used as a strategy to activate the absurd through the process of repetition and postproduction editing.

This emphasis on nonsense and humour can be seen in Ben Vautier's work, *Living Sculpture* from 1962 (George Maciunas Foundation Inc. 2011), in which he lived in a shopfront window of a gallery space for a week (Higgie 2007, 55). I am interested particularly in the way that this work presented Vautier "as the absolute aesthetic object for contemplation" (Higgie 2007, 55) amongst everyday objects. By taking the everyday as the context for his work, he was playing with assumptions about art and its generative ability to make 'objects for contemplation'. His work purposively confuses/ conflates art and the everyday so that it becomes even more difficult to find the boundary between either. This process of conflating the spaces of art and life so that everyday actions and objects can be displaced and re-framed has become a key strategy in making my own work.

## **2.2 Time in Contemporary Visual Arts Practice: Jeroen Kooijmans**

The relationship between 'time' and the 'everyday' is also an important nexus for this research project. Ideas relating to time such as the rhythms and cycles, as earlier defined by Lefebvre, provide one of the key contexts in which the everyday can be situated. Through processes of editing and postproduction, I use time as a malleable material to be manipulated and redeployed as a non-linear making process. These processes suggests that experience is made up of multiple times occurring simultaneously. By understanding this, 'present time' can be described as mixing with memory and the senses, not as seamless or continuous, but rather, as multi-faceted and non-linear. Time can also be considered in close relation to the body and embodied experience, as a phenomenological engagement of time, as a condition where memory and sensations are intangible and subjective (see chapter 2.3). In this sense, a phenomenological awareness of time can be understood in this project as a key framework in which non-

linear recording techniques can explore the rhythms and cycles of the everyday.

The artist Jeroen Kooijmans works with time as key medium to explore and manipulate fragments of the quotidian. In his book *It's About Time*, Kooijmans (2002, 28) discusses time as a medium that can explore the potential of the infinite or the cyclical through editing and repetition to potentially create an unobtainable or unreal space. Through the use of time-based media, ones perception of real time can be changed (Kooijmans 2002, 30). In this sense, I consider that time can also become displaced from a perspective of reality and made into an imaginary space in which the everyday becomes absurd.



[2] Jeroen Kooijmans *Pilot* 1998



[3] Jeroen Kooijmans *Delhi Express* 1997

Kooijmans is an important example here because he uses editing processes to show how different orientations of time can be experienced in his video works. For example, his work *Pilot* (1998) uses the formal possibilities of video production to make a plane appear to do an impossible flip (Kooijmans 2011). In the video *Delhi Express* (1997), the editing process appears to make the shadow of a man float absurdly on a continually moving surface (Kooijmans 2011). I am particularly interested in the way that Kooijmans uses loops in these works to create absurd realities and dislocate familiar assumptions about time, space and everyday experiences. For me the experience of viewing Kooijmans videos is dreamlike. His work highlights the slippages of the everyday and art through mediating realities, and playfully evoking simple, fantastical and poetic interpretations of the quotidian. This interest in the interruption of the everyday by isolating small sections is similar to my fascination in Grosz's notions of the frame to isolate sensation. The frame, understood as both the video and the context of art, is comprehended as a mediated site in which the quotidian becomes absurd through

its dislocation from the real. I am interested in exploring this idea as a strategy to generate work that problematizes an understanding of how the rhythms and cycles of time operate in daily life.

### **2.3 Embodied Experience: Elizabeth Grosz and Aernout Mik**

Fluxus, Kooijmans and Elizabeth Grosz all use notions of 'framing' to reinterpret lived experience. In *Chaos, Territory and Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (2008, 15), Grosz suggests that art produces "sensations, affects, [and] intensities". Grosz locates art's critical potential in its phenomenological, or embodied, experience. This state of being can be defined by the sensations we may remember, feel or become aware of through experience in actual time and space. These experiences can be manipulated through the frame of the video, or the contexts of art. Grosz also discusses art as the construction or 'fabrication of the frame' (Grosz 2008, 19), and describes these experiences of art as micro-territories, or spaces in which sensations or worldviews can be framed, focused, altered and re-contextualised. In this way the 'frame' becomes an important concept for this project, as it provides a way to understand the role of art and its location in time and space, gallery or installation as a structure through which to isolate and recontextualise the 'everyday'. As Grosz suggests,

"art is linked not to some intrinsic relation to one's own body but to the processes of distancing and ... abstracts sensation from the body. The emergence of the 'frame' is the condition of all the arts and ... It is the frame that constitutes painting and cinema just as readily as architecture. The frame is what establishes territory from out of the chaos that is the earth." (Grosz 2008, 19)

The frame is also a tool in which the potential of art is explored through its separation from 'reality', from "the chaos that is the earth". The terms 'territory' and 'frame' thus provide important ways of articulating how embodied sensations are highlighted and manipulated in art practices to explore phenomenological experiences. They allow new embodied experiences to be generated through art that can be different to day-to-day experiences. These ideas are creatively explored in my practice through the manipulation of video and sound. What I am interested in doing is to create an experience of physical and perceptual disorientation in the installation space, through

the use of video and sound, of light, colour, movement, and scale that multi media works allow.

I am interested in Aernout Mik's video installations because these works also explore the ideas around embodied experience that I have been discussing. I am particularly fascinated by the how the intensity and physicality of his video installations can inform how I think about embodied experiences in my practice. I am interested in the effect that video installations can have on an individual in relation to the architecture and objects that share the immediate site with them. To use Grosz's terms, the 'frame' and 'sensation' can be focused and abstracted. This use of installation to produce sensation can be seen in Mik's work *Pulverous* (2003) (which was recently installed at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2011). This work depicts the nonsensical destruction of a supermarket by a group of apparently disinterested people. This work uses simple formal techniques to disorient our experience of engaging with it. The work is installed so that the projection begins at the floor and the image engulfs your body in the architecture of the screen - the screen is deliberately human scale and intimate rather than recalling a more distanced cinematic experience. This means the performers/actors have their feet planted on the same plane as the viewer in the gallery. The camera moves slowly and methodically zooming-in and out as it pans left-to-right, and then right-to-left. These motions act to perceptually and to an extent physically distort the space you are encountering. In this way the installation creates a site where you become aware of your physical presence through the scale and placement of the screen: it becomes an embodied experience.



[4] Aernout Mik *Pulverous* 2003

This work also plays with our sense of real space in real time through a lack of edits, as the work appears as a continuous shot. And for me these continuous motions and the absurd destruction repeated in the video links back to De Maria's notion of meaningless work. The repetitive actions can be further seen in relation to Fluxus strategies to disrupt conventional understandings of the quotidian. I also think of this work in relation to Grosz's notion of bodily awareness of space, because the body both inhabits and participates in the 'frame' of the projection and responds to the space of the installation in relation to the movements of the screen, the sounds coming from it, the architecture it occupies and other viewers in the space. By doing these things it establishes a sensorial, immersive experience. It is this generative, bodily experience and heightened sensation of time through the use of video and sound that I aim to achieve with my own work.

### 3. Creative Practice

#### 3.1 Understanding My Creative Practice: Repetition, Repetition, and Repetition

The creative and theoretical models that form the contextual field of the project provide important reference points for my practice, and include: repetition and play as conceptual and creative processes, time as a material to play with, an attentiveness to the rituals of daily life, and the potential for installation to present embodied experiences. By understanding this I have come to recognise repetition as a key formal and conceptual strategy in my practice. It allows me to generate work across a variety of concepts and becomes a strategy for making because I can reflect on the various affects and themes that arise in my practice. I use it both through physical actions, including drawing and performative videos, and through editing video and sound. It has also led me to be aware of time as a medium, and to be particularly aware of how one's understandings or experiences might change over time. Through looping and manipulating time-based media I isolate and reconfigure everyday moments through embracing chance and the incidental in this process. To demonstrate how this process affects the development of work over the course of the project I want to elaborate on how one incidental activity from playing with my direct environment developed into several works: *Wash, Rinse and Repeat*, *I could carry you home*, and *The grass is greener on the other side*.

This engagement with the everyday starts with the video work *Wash, Rinse and Repeat* (2011) where very long grass in a suburban yard is being cut methodically with scissors. This specific activity of cutting and collecting grass in this domestic site engages in an expansive dialogue with Fluxus strategies of making art, particularly De Maria's notion of meaningless work, and the more subtle poetic gestures found in the video works previously discussed. The grass cutting is done slowly and appears somewhat odd or anachronistic being done this way in a domestic site. The repetitive, laborious actions provide no insight to the purpose of the physical labour being portrayed other than it might be 'meaningless work' – because why not use a lawn mower? Because we wanted to have some materials to make art with, and the grass was abundant, visually interesting and it was in our backyard, so we decided to play in it and collect it. The act of doing that became a performative gesture towards fluxus events, and we used time based media and postproduction editing to further play with the formal and temporal



possibilities of documenting this process.

The final edit of this recorded activity includes three active video frames in a single channel video. A visual dialogue is generated between the three frames in which subtle actions such as the breeze in the trees and grass, and shadows link the frames together. I think about Grosz's notion of the 'territory' and 'frame' in relation to the process of creating and experiencing this work where a separation from reality takes place – through the action, frame and edit of the video and the context of art. Through postproduction editing no reference point to the time is articulated in which the actions have taken place. The highlighting of time in this way links to Kooijmans use of time as a medium and helps me unpack this work through the notion that the manipulation of time can provide an imaginary space in which the everyday becomes absurd.



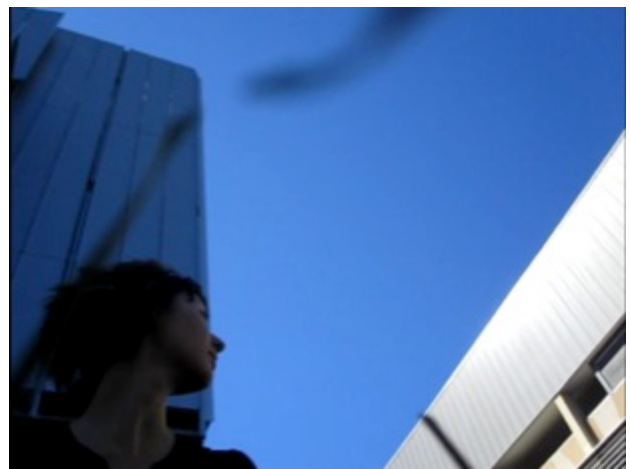
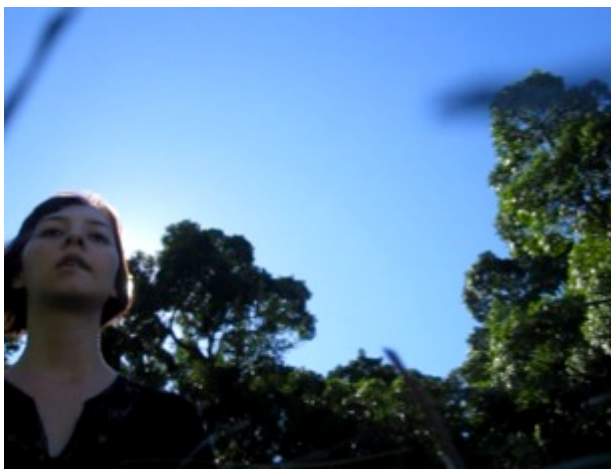
[5] *Wash, Rinse and Repeat* 2011 [in collaboration with Léo Pacquelet]

Out of this event, the work *I could carry you home* (2011) came about. This work consists of a wheelbarrow filled with the accumulated cuttings from the grass-cutting event. *I could carry you home* exists now as an extension of the event as well as other works in themselves. I am very interested to also allow works to evolve and develop other possibilities in the practice, and to have them change over time. So the grass cuttings became an object based work, part of an installation, and then a photographic/

projection work. The object itself had quite a strong smell of fresh grass and I hoped the pungent smell would stimulate the audience's memory, because I was interested in how individual interpretations can develop, complicate and add to the work. The wheelbarrow in the gallery space became an ambiguous, slightly absurd yet also potentially poetic object. And as the wheelbarrow is an object that always carries contents from one point to another, I decided that this is what I should make a work of, its function, so I filmed the journey of returning it home after the exhibition finished. And when I looked at the documentation of the show, I realised that the image of the wheelbarrow full of grass was quite engaging formally and conceptually when considered as it was: isolated in an interior, as a kind of a still life, a suburban *nature morte*:



[6] *I could carry you home* 2010



[7] & [8] *The Grass is Greener on the Other Side* 2011

The incidental as a strategy of making revolves around an open playful experimentation with media and interactions with my everyday environments. Often it involves utilizing the remaining objects or media from previous work, seeing potential in these and embracing their naturally occurring processes as part of the work. These can also be developed further by isolating, editing and reworking them. As *Wash, Rinse and Repeat* fed into *I could carry you home, I could carry you home* provided a chance for me to make *The grass is greener on the other side*. This video was made by placing the camera on the wheelbarrow of grass, and recording the journey of carrying it back home from the gallery space. The movement of the walking generates a cyclic rhythm and pace for the work. This pace of the work can be examined as contingent to the actions enabled by the wheelbarrow. In this video there are moments when no trees or buildings pass and this pace is continued with just the blue of the sky, in these moments the journey seems unmoving, surreal and unreal. The silence allows this work to slip further into a surreal perspective of the everyday and adapts to the ambient sounds of the installation/viewing space. The silence also allows the imagery to be removed from its urban site. Allowing the work to be flexible and change over time through the various approaches to making has become another important process for extending my practice.

## Conclusion

By using chance, humour and time-based media this practice-led project explored multiple strategies in which to disrupt assumptions about the continuity between art and 'everyday' experiences. These strategies evolved as crucial paradigms that inform my creative practice and were contextualised by the artists Jeroen Kooijmans, Aernout Mik and Ben Vautier, and the ideas of Elizabeth Grosz, Walter De Maria and Henri Lefebvre. By using these artists and conceptual frameworks as emergent strategies for making, the everyday is problematized and expanded through the context of art. In this way my project offers new understandings of quotidian experiences and contributes to an ongoing dialogue between art and life in contemporary practices.

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## Image Credits

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- [7] Ryke, Melissa. 2011. "The grass is greener on the other side".
- [8] Ryke, Melissa. 2011. "The grass is greener on the other side".

## Appendix

### ***Please find support material on the disc provided***

#### DVD 1:

##### MRyke\_2011.pdf:

1. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *I could carry you home*. Photograph of installation, wheelbarrow and grass.
2. Melissa Ryke & Léo Pacquelet, 2011, *Wash, Rinse and Repeat*. Screen capture of video, single channel, 16:9, 8:49mins
3. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *Slow Cut*. Screen capture of video, single channel, 16:9, 1:51mins looped
4. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *How to brush your teeth with an avocado*. Screen capture of video, single channel, 16:9, 1:41mins looped
5. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *likelikelike*. Photograph of installation, stereo sound, 2:18mins looped
6. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *Pickin'*. Screen capture of video, 16:9, 10:31mins
7. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *The grass is greener on the other side*. Four screen captures of video, single channel, 4:3, 8:31mins
8. Melissa Ryke & Léo Pacquelet, 2010, *Fan Project: Don't be sick in my house*. Screen capture of video, single channel, 4:3, 7:31mins
9. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *Squishy Burger*. Screen capture of video, single channel, 4:3, 0:26mins looped
10. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *Spunk*. Digital photograph
11. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *You spin me right round, baby*. Screen capture of video, single channel, 16:9, 2:15mins

##### MRyke\_videofolio.mov:

1. Melissa Ryke & Léo Pacquelet, 2011, *Wash, Rinse and Repeat*. Excerpt from video, single channel, 16:9, 8:49mins
2. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *Squishy Burger*. Single channel, 4:3, 0:26mins looped
3. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *Clippings*. Single channel, 16:9, 0:29mins
4. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *How to brush your teeth with an avocado*. Single channel, 16:9, 1:41mins
5. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *The grass is greener on the other side*. Excerpt from video, single channel, 4:3, 8:31mins
6. Melissa Ryke & Hayley Brandon, 2011, *Fan Project: Don't be sick in my house (room three)*. Excerpt from video, single channel, 16:9, 22:19mins
7. Melissa Ryke, 2010, *likelikelike*. Excerpt from sound, stereo sound, 2:18mins looped
8. Melissa Ryke, 2011, *You spin me right round, baby*. Single channel, 16:9, 2:15mins

\*Notes: Please copy 'MRyke\_videofolio.mov' onto the desktop of your computer and play the .mov file with the program VLC or QuickTime Player and with headphones on. Thank you.