A Tricky Business: On the role of mimesis, tricksters, and context in our practice.

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“Mimesis aims at influence, appropriation, change, repetition, or the new interpretation of existing worlds.”¹

This thesis seeks to give voice to the process of thinking and making that informed the body of work to be presented at the end of this year. From the outset, it must be stated that the work presented is the result of an ongoing collaboration between myself and Emily Cloete, a fellow student at the Elam School of Fine Arts. The works, which form the material aspect of this, are thus synthetic remainders or traces. My approach to this essay is to begin highlighting several works made last year, in relation to key texts from this year, and how their respective ideas have continued to shape both my Honours project and working relationship with Emily Cloete in 2017. While there are a number of different ideas and processes at play, I have chosen to speak from the position of a trickster.

The trickster has been depicted as both a mythical figure and an archetype. In the field of anthropology, the trickster is described as “prank-playing” and “deceitful” on the one hand, and a “transformer” or “culture-hero” on the other.² Robert S. Ellwood, writing in the context of world religions and folklore, notes how the trickster of mythology holds the potential to “change a chaotic myth-world into an ordered creation.”³ In the chapter “On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure” by psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, the trickster is described as a masterful and disruptive force for psychological change, one who sits as the forerunner of the saviour.⁴ For the context of this argument, I liken the notion of a saviour not in the sense of a messianic figure, but the emergence of something new or different in a structure or system that has grown staid.

In the context of Jung, the trickster is treated as a precursor to the saviour because of their self-sacrifice; in a motif of unconscious agony, the trickster eats their own intestines⁵ to become less riddled by lust and hunger once these organs of appetite are whittled away.⁶ By Jung’s own words, “only out of disaster can the longing for the saviour arise.”⁷ The trickster by Jung’s understanding is connected to a larger theory on the collective unconscious, a class of ideas “that people at first find strange but soon come to possess and use as familiar conceptions.”⁸ For the purpose of my argument, I am less interested in how the trickster archetype relates in the sense of a collective unconscious, but

¹ Christoph Wulf and Gunter Gebauer, “Mimesis.” In *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Robert S. Ellwood, “A Japanese Mythic Trickster Figure: Susa-no-o,” in *Mythical Trickster Figures*, ed. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 142.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Carl Gustav Jung, “On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure,” in *Four Archetypes: Mother/Rebirth/Spirit/Trickster*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 136.

⁵ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008), 30n.

⁶ Ibid., 30n, 31.

⁷ Jung, 151.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

more so as a persona or idea of where one can disturb, re-contextualise, and “open the road to new possible worlds.”⁹

With the trickster as a sort of catalyst or facilitator, their role lies in working within an existing context and playfully disrupting their struts. The existing context here might be the content of an artwork, the art historical canon, or institutions such as museums or art schools like Elam. And so the persona of the trickster is one that in fact encourages the drawing out of new potentials and possibilities; they are not, in the end, seeking to completely destroy. As noted by Ellwood, the chaos instigated by the trickster is done so as a way of an ordered creation to emerge.¹⁰ When the trickster is inserted into an existing structure, they have the potential to disrupt and violate the “principles of social and natural order,”¹¹ and subsequently re-establish them on a new basis.¹²

Reading these texts by both Ellwood and Jung have enabled me to view my work from last year in a different light: the trickster seems like a useful strategy/persona to occupy in a situation where the notion of an original idea seems silly - four years at art school have offered a hard schooling of disenchantment regarding the genius artist. If everything has already been said and done, then pretending that my work does not engage in a wider art historical dialogue seemed ignorant and naive. Rather, it would be better to be conscious of this and make work that actively engaged with things that already existed, attempting to twist or bring about something different in the process. My 2016 studio brief used the idea of *tūhura* as a central concept, that is, to discover, disclose, and investigate in relation to one’s own context. In light of this, it seemed that one key resource available to me to explore this notion of context was comparing myself in relation to existing artists and their artworks via mimesis and mimicry - as deployed by the trickster.

I make use here of Christoph Wulf and Gunter Gebauer’s overview on mimesis and its various established understandings. The two understandings of mimesis that resonate with me the most here are attributed to Plato and Aristotle. For Plato, his critique of mimesis is put in relation to poetry and its models. According to Plato, young people, specifically students, “in their attempts to emulate models ... strive to achieve similarity,”¹³ but in the sense of imitation falls short for it lacks “the capacity for producing the things themselves...only their images.”¹⁴ The argument here is that the illusion presented by mimesis is “deceptive, defective, and thus inferior”¹⁵ to the real thing that is being mimicked.

On the other hand, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle’s understanding of mimesis is described as not only a recreation of existing objects, but the possibility to change them, to try and “beautify, improve, and

⁹ Hyde, 13.

¹⁰ Ellwood, 142.

¹¹ Paul Mattick, “Hotfoots of the Gods,” *The New York Times*, last modified February 15, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/15/reviews/980215.15mattict.html>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Wulf and Gebauer.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

universalise [their] individual qualities.”¹⁶ This is an interesting consideration in relation to the trickster whom, in close proximity to the saviour, brings about a way to re-establish these principles on a new basis through their transgressive behaviour. I see the saviour in the same light as Aristotle’s concept, where the role of the trickster is to act as a *prima causa* of something new to emerge.¹⁷ My selection of theories in relation to mimesis here is thus defined by my understanding of the trickster. It is Aristotle’s understanding of mimesis that is most compelling as it suggests the possibility of a creative change, of potentially taking something out of context and creating new interpretations in the process. His theory speaks to a greater human experience of art where one is not duped into believing the artworks as reality a la Plato,¹⁸ but that features of their own experience of the world, their own context, can be felt within the work.¹⁸

Of the other theories discussed by Wulf and Gebauer, I find that Jacques Derrida’s understanding also resonates in a similar manner to Aristotle. Derrida’s understanding sits in the realm of texts, but deals with mimesis in the sense of where “existing worlds are appropriated, changed, and re-interpreted.”¹⁹ Tricksters hold the capacity for creating new associations by taking things out of context and seeing them in a different light, often through bawdy parody and mimicry of something or someone that already exists.²⁰ For trickster-creators in general, one of the new things to emerge is the possibility of a remake to cross-pollinate into the original, to the extent that a figure like a trickster becomes so present that they cannot be unseen. I will speak more on this later, but this is where the notion of a trickster lives and breathes for me creatively. In these things emerging, the work of art constantly shifts with different possibilities and holds the potential to breathe new life by disrupting the status quo. Walking along the same metaphorical path, the ideas presented by Aristotle and the trickster figure work hand-in-hand.

Artists Gilbert and George are a collaborative duo whose work we first based our mimicry on. While looking for something I wanted, I came across a photograph of theirs, *George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit* (1969) [fig. 1].²¹ This photograph was ideal and already had promise because it featured two people, and so remaking this meant that Emily Cloete and I could be in the photograph together. There was a carefree spirit with this photograph and with the practice of Gilbert and George as a whole, that perhaps made it more attractive to recreate as opposed to other artistic collaborative duos. According to

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ What I mean to say here by *prima causa* is that the trickster is the facilitator of the saviour or change to come; they trigger it but are not the change in themselves. Just like my treatment of the word saviour, I see the trickster as the catalyst for change.

¹⁸ Michelle Puetz, “Mimesis,” *The University of Chicago*, accessed October 25, 2017, <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/mimesis.htm>.

¹⁹ Wulf and Gebauer.

²⁰ Hyde, 294.

Many trickster stories, particularly those of the coyote, can be read as parodies of shamanism. For example, a shaman in a trance is said to have the power to fly, whereas a trickster attempts to fly with the birds but crashes into the earth instead.

²¹ From what I can understand, much of Gilbert and George’s work consists of photographic images that include them as central subjects and performers.

Daisy Silver of the University of Edinburgh, Gilbert and George created this image and called themselves Cunt and Shit in “a preemptive attempt to deter criticism against their unusual art practice...”²² By attacking themselves in this way, and maintaining an “unrelenting dedication to and personal investment in living as an artistic duo all the time,”²³ perhaps this was the motivation that encouraged a comparison to these artists.

Cunt and Shit (2016) [fig. 2] became the first photographic reproduction of a work that we began to work with. I would like to stress here the distinction between the original work and that of the reproduction. A photographic reproduction is, by my estimation, a photographed copy of the original work, but this in itself is a difficult relationship to establish. The photographic reproduction is the transactional medium between the real thing and my experience of art; I see the photographic reproduction to see a work that I might not have physical access to. However, the only clear difference that I can identify here is one of context; a photographic reproduction of an art photograph is not shifting the medium at all. Where the image is situated, on a wall in a museum or printed inside a catalogue in a library, is one that speaks to a difference in context. The visual distance between the two is indistinguishable, if there is even a distance to speak of here at all. While figures such as Martha Buskirk might assert the notion that “the photos after [the] photographic reproductions therefore comment on the importance of reproductions as intermediaries that mediate and structure our understanding of works of art,”²⁴ I would argue that these reproductions, these small images found in catalogues and on the Internet, are in themselves the actual artwork because it is situated in my immediate context. As far as I was concerned, this reproduction of *George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit* was not the bridge between two things, but the actual work itself.

Trying to remake *George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit* was an exhaustive process, and despite multiple shoots and several hours spent on each photograph, this remake was starkly different to the version by Gilbert and George. As an added parameter, the focus of this 2016 *Cunt and Shit* project was set on the *content* of the reproduction and what is visually represented, rather than an investigation into the concept of the work. The clothes in this remake were different, as was the setting, the hair, the lighting, the posture, among many other differences. This was despite the fact that Daisy Silver’s *Tate* article on *George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit* detailed this work with a good amount of information, on how it was made and the context of its creation. To use the words of Wulf and Gebauer, this process of mimicry was one of a “new interpretation of an existing world”²⁵; in striving to create an image that captured some likeness of the reproduction, it was also important to be aware of the differences that would arise. By difference, I mean in the sense that the remake looked nothing like the reproduction in the artist’s book. These images were already situated in my domain, but by remaking them, twisting

²² Daisy Silver, “George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit,” *Tate*, accessed 7 October, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gilbert-george-george-the-cunt-and-gilbert-the-shit-ar00170>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 65.

²⁵ Wulf and Gebauer

them with a trickster sensibility, the result was a work that spoke directly to my immediate context by means of comparison to these artists. This was a logical approach, given that the outline of the *tūhura* brief in 2016 had been to critically examine one's practice in relation to a local and global context.

I liken the practice of Yasumasa Morimura as an example of an appropriation artist that could be defined as a trickster figure of art history, one whose work exaggerates, disrupts, or imagines the differences that emerge out of mimicking another artist's work by shifting it into his own context.²⁶ This shift is often achieved in playing with his Japanese ethnicity and male gender.²⁷ *In Praise of Velázquez: Distinguished Ones in Confinement* (2013) [fig. 3] is a work by Morimura made in close relation to Diego Velázquez' *Las Meninas* (1656). With careful attention and consideration of both a photographic reproduction and the original work housed in the Museo Nacional del Prado, Spain,²⁸ Morimura has rendered Velázquez' two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional space, closely mimicking its composition and details but allowing for differences to emerge. For example, Morimura replaces each human face with his own, regardless of their gender. He is the Infanta Margarita, her entourage of servants, the dwarf King Philip IV of Austria and his wife, and then Velázquez himself.²⁹

It could be argued that a work such as *In Praise of Velázquez* is an example of the trickster that cannot be unseen. If a viewer saw Morimura's image first, then they might still be able to see him within Velázquez' work, but this metaphorical path travels in both directions. Once the two images become intertwined, one cannot be seen without the other in mind; Morimura and Velázquez cross-pollinate. The element of the trickster here might also lie in the initiative of inserting yourself into the structure of someone else, but then the changes that arise out of this are done in the same vein as Aristotle's concept of mimesis. In any case, Morimura's derisive attitude to complicate what was already there or what wasn't there at all, to act like a trickster, might be the catalysing force for one's own context to be read in relation to someone else's work.

Photographic reproductions have been absolutely crucial to my understanding of art. By Buskirk's argument, someone in my context who relies on the reproduction can thus allow for "the original to meet the beholder halfway," where they would otherwise "be out of reach for the original itself."³⁰ However, what I am arguing here is that these reproductions are no different from the original works; these images exist in my context, and so my relationship to them is that they are the real thing. I would say that this is the case even with reproductions of works that are not photographs but of paintings or even sculptures. What or where this real, original, authentic work is, and whatever the notion of real here might mean, the original as hinted by Buskirk lies outside of my context and is thus foreign to me.

²⁶ Donald Kuspit and Yasumasa Morimura, *Daughter of Art History: Photographs by Yasumasa Morimura* (New York: Aperture, 2003), 7.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "Las Meninas," *Museo Nacional del Prado*, accessed October 7, 2017, <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/las-meninas/9fdc7800-9ade-48b0-ab8b-edee94ea877f>

²⁹ Karen Rosenberg, "Yasumasa Morimura," *The New York Times*, last modified January 15, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/arts/design/yasumasa-morimura.html>.

A catalogue of Gilbert and George's work functions, by Andre Malraux's thinking, as my "imaginary museum" which can "carry infinitely farther that limited revelation of the work of art which the real museums offer us within their walls."³¹ I used to think that, by looking at these artists, I was looking outside of my context for inspiration. While this holds some truth, I cannot ignore the fact that my experience with art, through looking at these books, has occurred within my own domain. Within the context of the Fine Arts Library at Elam, these books have become my true museums.

While Douglas Crimp has deemed Malraux's treatment of the catalogue reproduction as an object in itself as a "fatal error,"³² I cannot help but side with the latter here. Earlier this year, I saw a work by Gilbert and George at the Pompidou Centre in Paris.³³ It was the first experience I had of seeing work by these artists, not in one of their catalogues and websites, but within the context of a museum. Their work was exhibited alongside other famous works by artists such as Jeff Koons, Sherrie Levine, Robert Gober, and so on. My experience with these works was premeditated; I had seen many of their photographic reproductions in books or on the Internet. Perhaps as a result of this, coupled with the fact that these works existed outside of my context, they did not excite me to the same degree as the catalogue images. With works that I had not seen prior this was not always the case, but the difference in context was still applicable here. It did not matter to me that these works had a greater material presence than the photographic reproduction; a photograph by Gilbert and George, housed as a catalogue reproduction in the Fine Arts Library, had instilled a greater effect on me than this elegantly framed and glassed version that sat in the Pompidou Centre. The reproduction in the book *was* the real thing, or as real as it could be. In my eyes, this is not a fatal error at all on Malraux's part, for his theory touches on the very paradox of the photographic reproduction; it serves a dual role as both reproduction to document original works of art, while also standing as a form of art in itself.³⁴

My experience of art has been fed through a culture that is predominantly made up of these catalogue and Internet reproductions. Despite their small material presence, often printed at a lower quality resolution to the original in the museum, I felt that this did not leave me at such a disadvantage as compared to someone who had access to these museum versions. If anything, this gave me greater opportunity to interpret and reimagine these images within my own context. From this low-resolution print, ambiguous details could emerge that play upon the existing features of the image much like Morimura. The trickster-creator holds the keys to re-contextualise, and in doing so the Aristotelian notion of mimesis can rise out of this. To perform and disrupt within my context, in both a physical and metaphorical sense, has been vital to both making work last year and also for this Honours project.

³⁰ Buskirk, 65-6.

³¹ Ibid., 72.

³² Ibid., 74.

³³ I am referring to an exhibition of the Westreich Wagner Collection at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, France from June 10th, 2016 - March 27th, 2017.

https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/ressource.action?param.id=FR_R-111657cc5c87798bd86171c2898bea8¶m.idSource=FR_E-111657cc5c87798bd86171c2898bea8.

³⁴ Buskirk, 74.

This trickster metaphor, one that involves taking things out of context and allowing things to emerge out of their disruption, has informed much of the work created for this 2017 postgraduate research project. Just as *George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit* was brought even closer to my context through mimicry, this line of thinking can be applied to my own immediate environment. The driver in creating work has thus shifted from mimesis to a greater focus on the re-contextualisation of existing objects, structures, and materials that I have access to. This has involved working with things housed within Elam, taking them out of their normal context through an action or gesture. This strategy, one arguably akin to the trickster, has helped to give rise to the *Hand-towel* series (2017), a body of work that has utilised the blue and white striped hand-towels found in all of the bathrooms across campus. In one series of videos titled *Unravel/ravel* (2017) [fig. 5], the towel is taken for a walk; two performers unravel and ravel the towel across different passageways behind the main school building. In each clip, the composition is framed in relation to the architecture, where something like the walls of a stairwell are positioned in parallel to the frame of the video. Organised into a beginning, middle, and end, I move through in and out of these different scenes, entering and leaving the frame of both the screen and the architecture. This simple process was repeated on multiple occasions, with the towel growing dirty and worn as it is rolled through the school. The movement of the performers makes up one whole loop in these videos, to where a clip connects from one to the other regardless of the chronological order, and hold the capacity to continue indefinitely.

The trickster sensibility is unchanged from the 2016 recreations; there is still an element of *tūhura* in the approach to this year's project, only now there is a greater emphasis on the play of objects and materials. No longer is it a case of relying within the architecture of the artist's book, that of Malraux's imaginary museum. Rather, it is now a matter of responding to the literal, physical architecture of the school. There is no need to consult with photographic reproductions of any kind here; I can act and work with the materials housed in this context. It is no longer dealing with the tension of mimesis and working with a reproduction; *Unravel/ravel* has been made with the original material but re-contextualised to open up a new perspective on how a hand-towel might be treated.

I argue that the treatment of this towel in *Unravel/ravel* is transgressive, for the action does nothing to change the material of object physically, yet how the towel is used in these videos runs contrary to the standard practice of how it is normally used. This towel roll has been unhinged from its dispenser and is now being unraveled and re-raveled along the ground, picking up the dust, rubbish, and other detritus of Elam along the way. The towel has not necessarily been deprived of its function as something that can clean or absorb; the action performed still sees to this. Rather, it is the manner in which this is carried out that has transformed my perception of the towel.

Despite the simplicity and mundane nature of these towel videos, they were physically challenging and backbreaking to create. This is no different to the projects from 2016; it might not be immediately evident, but these works involved extensive labour in their creation. The action of unraveling then raveling means the gesture ultimately cancels itself out in each video, nullifying the effort invested in making the work happen. One person labours to lay out this towel along a passageway, only for

someone to undo this gesture shortly afterwards. These walks are thus temporary gestures, and for such a simple and mundane action to be framed as art perhaps runs comparably to the artist Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking* (1967) [fig. 6]. In this photograph, Long has created a straight line by walking along a field repeatedly. The photograph becomes a measurement of time and space as it hints at the ephemeral nature of the gesture; over time, the line will erode and disappear back into nature. *Unravel/ravel* also draws a line, only it is eroded in the process of its creation; the video shows the towels exit just as swiftly as its entrance.

I believe that it is vital for the object or material to remain recognisable as a university hand-towel in this video, so that the process of re-contextualisation is evident. This re-contextualisation, as performed by the trickster-creator, dislodges the hand-towel from its usual place in culture, but its edifice needed to remain intact for this shift to be effective. Out of this disruption, one could imagine alternative ways of recognising the significance of this towel as both a material and an object. Marcel Duchamp's decision to take a ready-made object such as a urinal, title it as *Fountain* (1917), and place it within the context of a museum is a testament to this.³⁵ Such an action does not necessarily change the actual object itself, but it is a play with context; the urinal is disruptively placed in a setting outside of its usual place in culture, resulting in a re-evaluation of how it might be read in the world. By Buskirk's own words, "a retroactive process of re-contextualization and remaking was by necessity part of Duchamp's production..."³⁶, partly due to his original ready-mades being lost and needing to be replaced.³⁷

Perhaps this is why the trickster is regarded as a culture hero by many. I argue they hold the potential to improve or beautify something, leading to a revitalised understanding of a thing as silly and mundane as a hand-towel which might otherwise be taken for granted, and keep our everyday world from becoming stale. And so the disruption here is not just one out of humour or fooling around; it is an attempt to take my context into greater consideration. Just as I could appreciate the artist catalogues from the Fine Arts Library as being my imaginary museums, the position of a trickster-creator has given me a greater understanding of these hand-towels.

The scholar and cultural critic Lewis Hyde eloquently sums up this argument in the following quotation:

³⁵ Sophie Howarth, "Fountain," *Tate*, accessed October 20, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>.

³⁶ Buskirk, 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

“Trickster the culture hero is always present; his [sic] seemingly asocial actions continue to keep our world lively and give it the flexibility to endure [...] the origins, liveliness and durability of cultures require that there be a space for the [trickster] figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on.”³⁸

By examining my own context in relation to the existing practice of Gilbert and George, and to the objects and materials situated within Elam, I can allow my practice the flexibility to endure different situations and surroundings. To interpret, unhinge and play with the world like a trickster, whether this occurs in the imaginary museum of a library book or an art school bathroom, feels like an exciting mode of being; the working process can continue to shift and change with the multiplicity of life.³⁹ It is in this play of shifting contexts and interpretation of existing worlds where the art sits at its most ambiguous.

³⁸ Hyde, 9.

³⁹ Franchot Ballinger, “Ambigere: The Euro-American Picaro and the Native American Trickster,” *MELUS* 17, no. 1 (1991-1992): 21.

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Fig. 1.
Gilbert and
George, *Cunt and
Shit* (photograph,
1970)

Fig. 2.
Emily and Tom,
Cunt and Shit
(photograph,
2016)

Fig. 3.
Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* (oil on
canvas, 1656)

Fig. 4.
Yasumasa Morimura,
In Praise of Velazquez: Distinguished Ones in Confinement (photograph, 2013)

Fig. 5.
Emily and Tom,
Unravel/ravel
(still from video,
2017)

Fig. 6.
Richard Long, *A Line Made by
Walking* (photograph, 1967)