

## **The Uncanny, the abject and the incongruity theory of humour**

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Susannah Gent

# **The uncanny, the abject & the incongruity theory of humour**

# The route to the uncanny

A women's film festival in Dortmund  
1997 in which I had 3 films selected;

**MELVYN'S PENCILS** (1995 BBC2 '10X10')

**BLUE MOVIE** (1996 Regional Arts Board)

**BUN** (1997 National Lottery)  
Collaboration with performance artist  
Lisa Watts



# Taxidermy sculptures



Unusually mounted taxidermy & things with eyeballs

# Exhibitions research



Suspension of Disbelief : Steve Bishop 2007

UNHELMILICH 2008 Leeds Met Gallery / Matt Roberts Arts

Self Portrait as a Matryoshka part 2 : Wendy Mayer  
2007

Removed from the Eyes of Strangers 2010  
MRA Project Space



# The Uncanny: Background

- 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' Ernst Jentsch 1908  
"...doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might be, in fact, animate"  
Introduced the idea of 'intellectual ambiguity'.
- 'Das Unheimlich' Sigmund Freud 1919  
The uncanny sensation occurs when repressed material of the psyche resurfaces.  
(primarily attributed to the Oedipus Complex & the Castration Complex)

Something familiar made strange through repression

- Cognitive Dissonance: uncomfortable feeling produced when holding two conflicting ideas.
- Intellectual uncertainty (Jentsch 1908) & familiar yet strange (Freud 1919)



# Taxidermy

The rabbits were obtained from Sheaf market. I ate them as well as skinned them. (They make good curry.)

I found a book in the city library (ref required) which gave details of the chemical process.

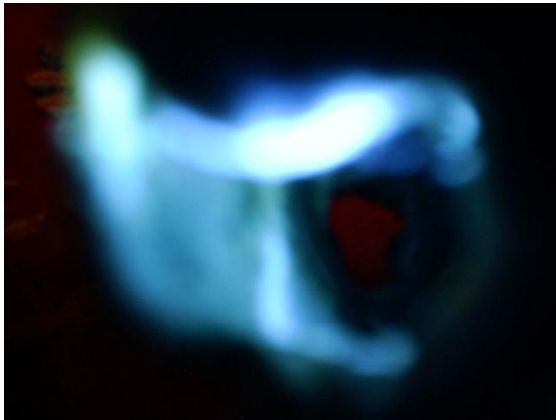
I used this process (see below) which was quite an old fashioned technique and although it worked, it made the skins set to the consistency of bark. I was therefore able to shape them when wet and they would hold their form when dry and require no actual stuffing.

During the skinning process I realised I had to work with the material rather than use the material to shape an idea.

I decided to 'play' with the skins I'd preserved and see what happened.



# Experiment



Several experimental photographic session including putting LEDs inside the skins, making funereal arrangements, dressing them up in baby clothes (not shown) and creating shadows. The shadow work returned recently for a re-working.



# Rabbit Sofa (Sentimental Rabbit Suicide)

I settled on using an old sofa which had belonged to my Grandparents.

The work finally came together quite quickly.

The sofa with the rabbits for me carried connotations of preservation and history, artefacts, memories and the generational ladder.

The work carried the ideas I had started out with but they were more generalised and not so specifically about very early parenthood.



I have undertaken a critical reflection on this piece of work in the light of my research into the uncanny.

The work conveys a sense of the uncanny for me personally but also from talking to people when it was exhibited and the contents of the exhibition comments book, many viewers share my interpretation but possibly for different reasons. The work would also stand a reflection in the light of theories on 'Abjection', primarily due to the real presence of death in the work through the use of taxidermy.

I believe the work is more impactful in this way than traditional taxidermy. Is this simply due to exposure?

# Open Up 2008



To complete the research & development program undertaken with a 'Grant for the Arts' ACE, I staged an exhibition in my house as part of OPEN UP 2008.

The rabbit sofa SENTIMENTAL RABBIT SUICIDE was installed in the cellar, with purpose lighting and audio track.



The top image was taken by OPEN UP official photographer David Shapiro using studio lights. The lower image, although less clear, gives a better impression of how the work looked in situ.

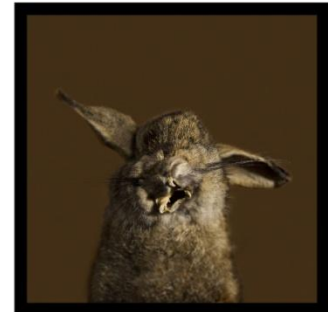
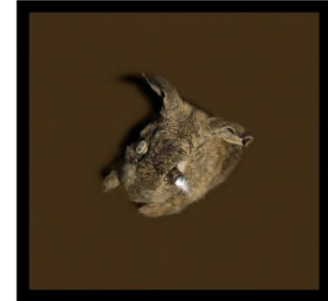
# Details



A total of 30 rabbits were used, many were used in two halves. The sofa was designed for 360 degree viewing and had mirrors at the back to show all views from a front position.

A photographic triptych was taken from details of three of the rabbits and exhibited in the house on the main staircase.

The event was covered by the local press and was reasonably well attended over the 3 days it was open.



# Rabbit Shadow

This work was inspired by the 'rubbish shadow' work of Tim Nobles & Sue Webster although it was only afterwards that I remembered this work.





# 'X is very useful'

X is very useful  
if your name is  
Nixie Knox.  
It also  
comes in handy  
spelling axe  
and extra fox.



Framed picture on wall  
from Dr Seuss 'ABC' with  
floor standing sculpture  
made from two foxes and  
a child's brick trolley.



The fox pushing the trolley is hollow. The fox in the trolley has high quality glass eyes. It's legs are detached but are in the trolley along with an axe.



# Abjection

- Julia Kristeva 'The Powers of Horror' (1982 Columbia University Press)
- Post Freudian analysis of the threat to identity posed by the abject.
- Blood, faeces, hair, vomit, corpses etc
- Whereas UNCANNY described as resurfacing of personally repressed material, ABJECT described as resurfacing of culturally repressed

# Taxidermy sculptures



Several small taxidermy 'sculptures' were also on display at the OPEN UP 2008 exhibition.

The work was decorative and inspired by Portuguese cemeteries.

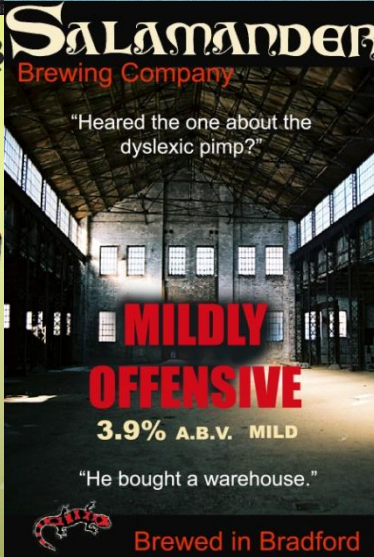
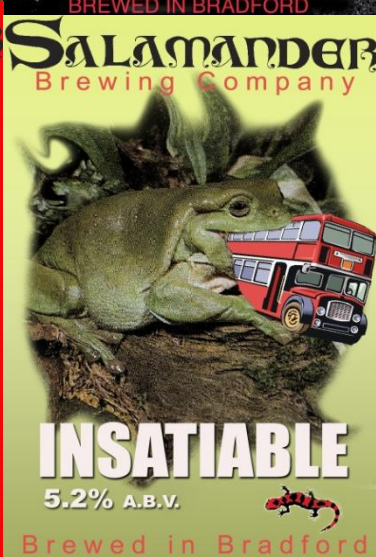
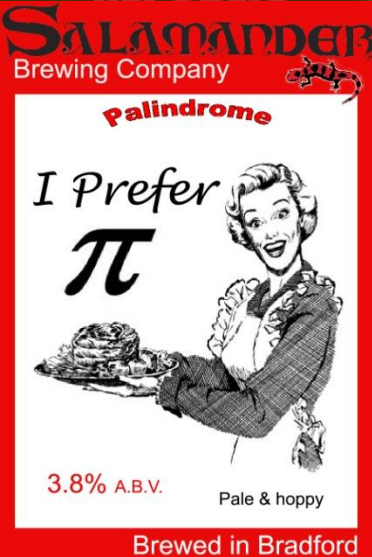
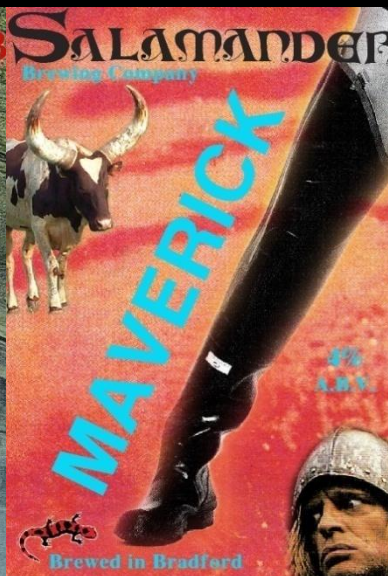
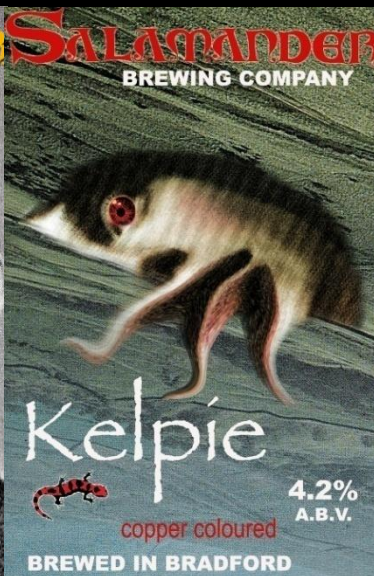
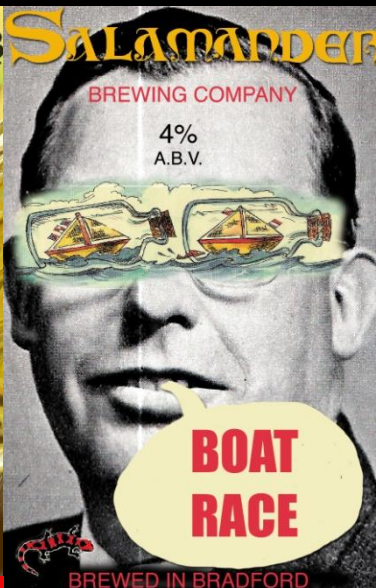
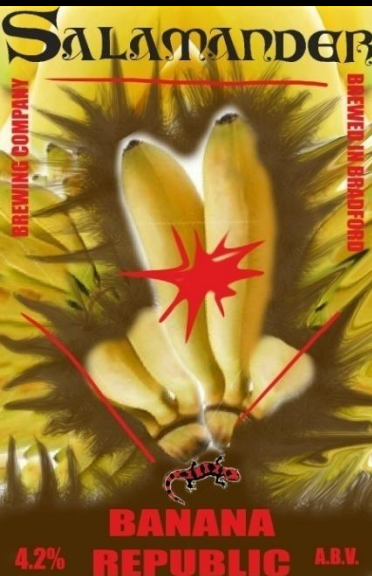


# The Reynard Diary

- This became an experiment in editing where I was interested in the boundaries of comprehension. How fragmented can a story get before you lose the gist of it. And what constitutes a 'gist'? Another piece has been made in this style with a similar effect, entitled 'Taxidermy Tea party' it forms one of the pieces at the Sheffield Poetry Festival performance.



# Pump clips for the Salamander Brewing Company



# Humour — 3 main types

There are a great many theories of humour and they are not generally mutually exclusive.

- **Superiority theory of humour** — Aristotle, Plato
- **The Relief theory of humour** - Freud
- **The incongruity theory of humour** — Aristotle (rhetoric), Kant, Descartes



# Incongruity theory of humour

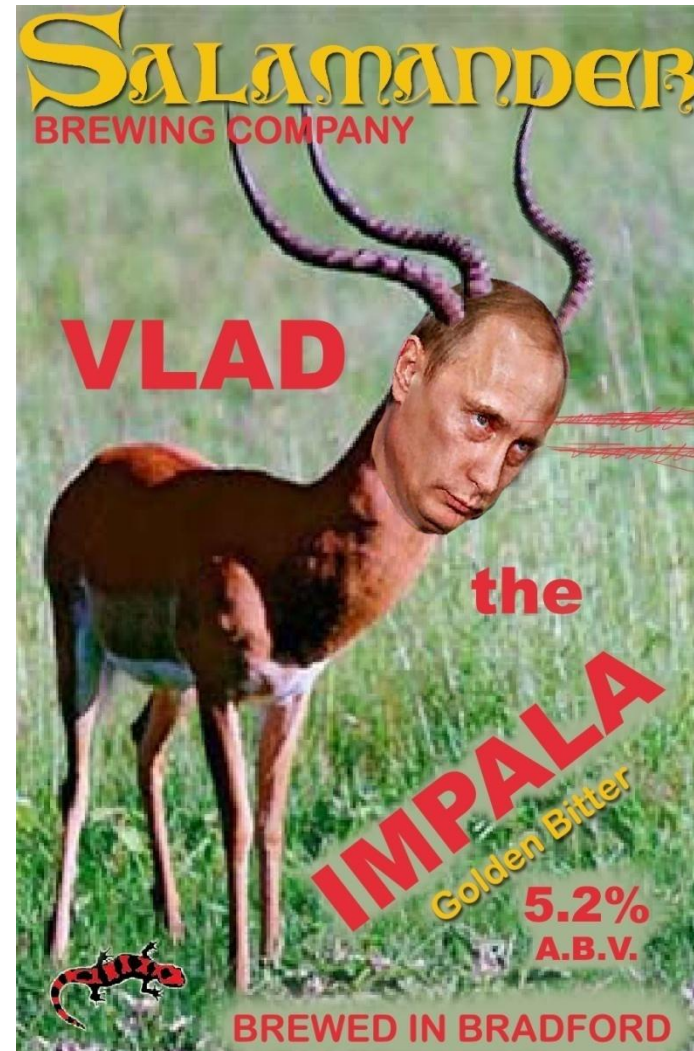
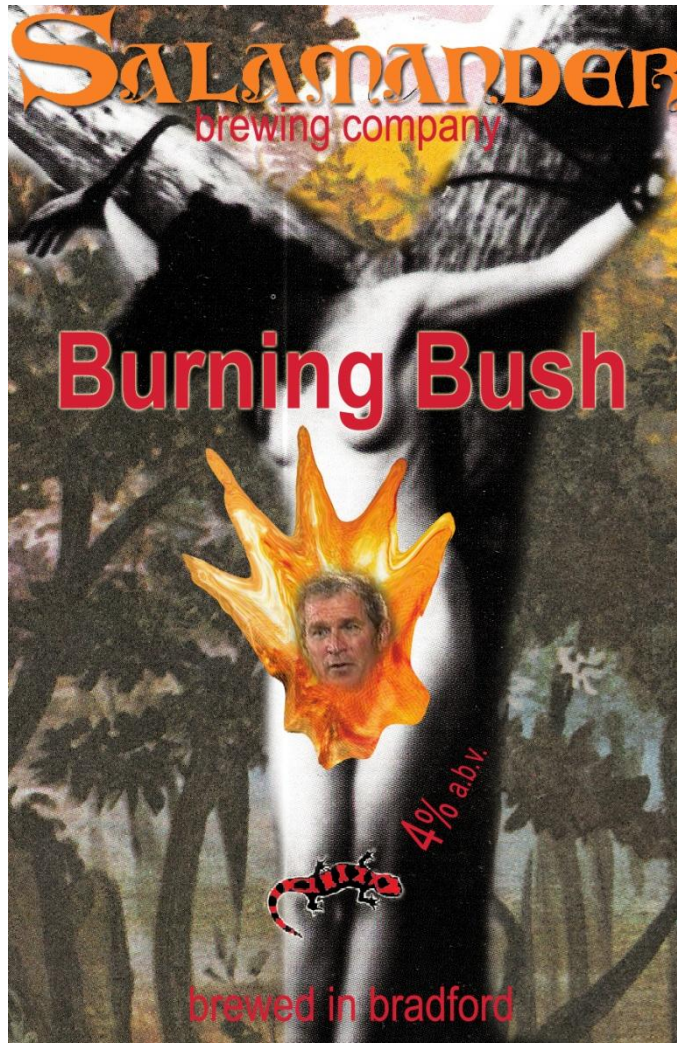
Humour is perceived at the moment of realisation of incongruity between a concept involved in a situation and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept

Humour involves an incongruous relationship between human intelligence and habitual or mechanical behaviours

Henri Bergson 'Laughter' (1980)

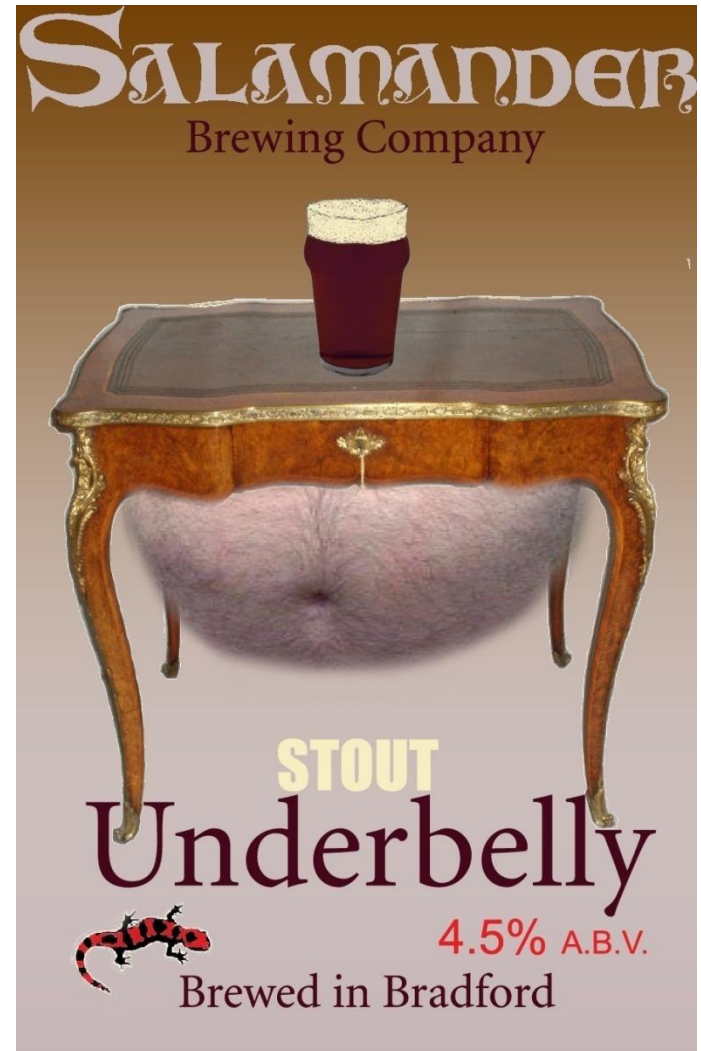
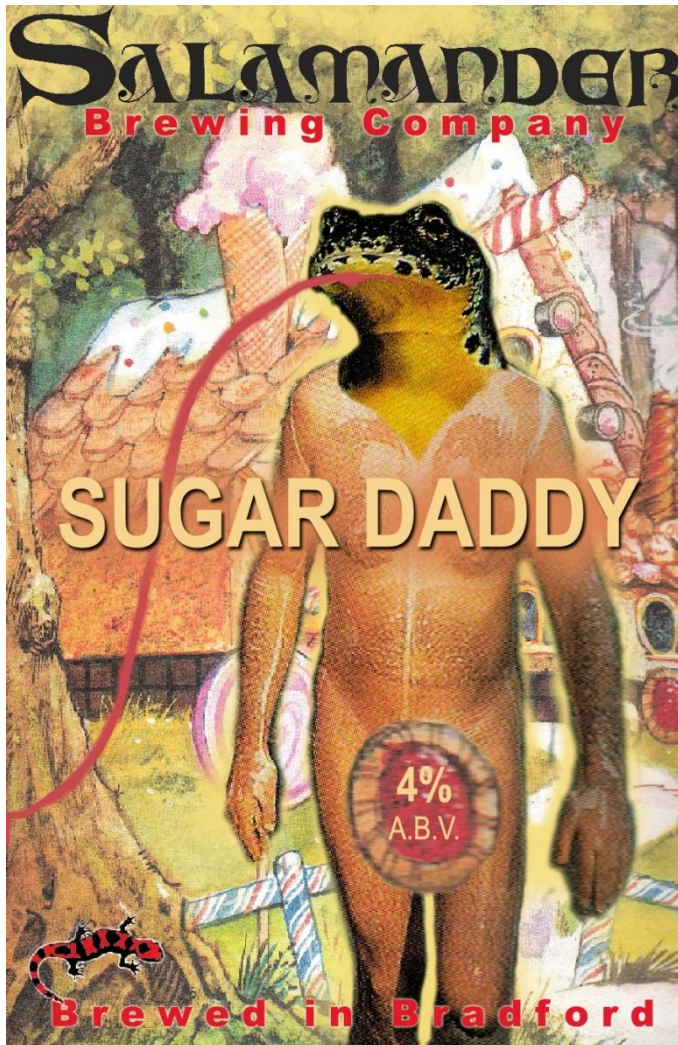
Scatological humour is incongruous as it 'unmasks' people and reminds them of their animal nature

# Pump clips (2)





# Pump clips (3)



# Bank Street Residency



The residency at Bank St Arts, Sheffield, ran from summer 2009 – 2010. The first part of the residency was essentially conceptual, that is I worked from home with a final exhibition pencilled in for the following summer

The new body of work undertaken focused on trophy heads. I produced a series of 12 cast heads in the style of taxidermy trophies but not made from deer.

# 12 Heads (1)



The heads were intended as a light hearted investigation into people's responses to materials. Some of the heads carried deliberate and conscious attempts to present the uncanny such as the use of human glass eyes.





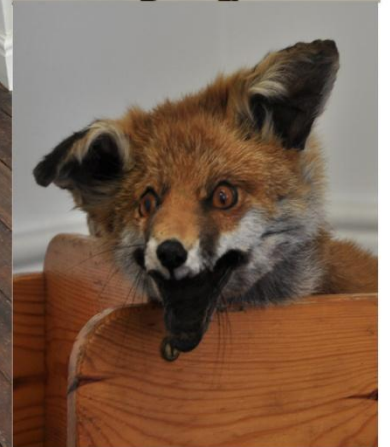
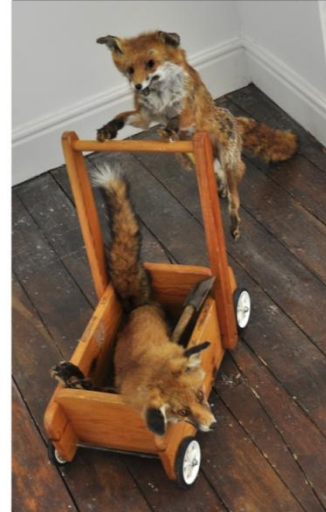
# 12 Heads (2)



The use of natural materials, animal remains of other types such as shells was intended to invite viewers to consider their response to preserved mammalian tissue



# Sculptures (continued)



I have continued to explore taxidermy, working with road kill as they come my way. The fox piece is a by-product of a video work which was created from footage taken when the animal was skinned.

# Goat Boy



'Goat Boy' was made in response to the Sheffield 2010 city wide art exhibition using various elements from several of the shows, combined with a preserved red deer head . The deer head was one of three acquired from a local abattoir, originally shown as part of a group show at Burngreve Chapel 2009. This installation was in the second Bank St cellar during the residency .

A group of poets also resident at BSA at the same time made some work from the installations, one of which, entitled 'Goat Boy' by Fay Musselwhite was the starting point for a new collaboration. Fay & I devised a show consisting of 5 films with live poetry for Sheffield Poetry Festival at BSA\*. The show is booked for 'Off the Shelf' this October with a new collaborative component from Linda Lee Welch and the Only Michael.

# Sheffield Poetry Festival

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## 'Goat Boy & Other Journies'

- Collaboration with Fay Musselwhite, poet  
Bank Street Arts April 2011.
- Off the Shelf – October 2011 in collaboration  
with Linda Lee Welch & the Only Michael

# Taxidermy Tea party

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- Experimental documentary with Fay Musselwhite & Eleanor Watts (March 2011)



# REF outputs 2008 - 2011

- |                                 |                         |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| ■ Jelly Dolly distribution 2008 | feature film            |
| ■ ACE R&D grant 2007/8          | installation / artefact |
| ■ Open up 2008                  | exhibition              |
| ■ Burngreve Chapel 2009         | exhibition / artefact   |
| ■ AXIS on-line                  | ?                       |
| ■ Nexus 2009                    | exhibition              |
| ■ BSA residency 2010 / 11       | exhibition (opening)    |
|                                 | exhibition (closing)    |
|                                 | short film              |
|                                 | artworks / artefact     |
| ■ BLOC projects 2010            | exhibition              |
| ■ Sheffield Poetry Fest 2011    | performance             |
| ■ Off the Shelf 2011 (Oct)      | performance             |