

Diagram of Pavlov's findings on conditioned salivary reflex

“We laughed to death”

The phrase perfectly ties the human to the lifeless, as if the most humorous act could have the most serious of consequences. The origins of humour (specifically slapstick) came from new ways of seeing a body that was suddenly being impacted by machines - the comical frustrations of our own awkward bodily limits and the fear or confusion of merging with other objects. Think about the sensation when you sleep on your arm, cutting off the blood supply, and waking to find that your own limb has become a rubber replicant of that former body part; flaccid, lifeless dead meat that is hilarious and horrible at once. We laugh at the confusion and perversity of animation in the inanimate and vice versa - what Henri Bergson calls the comical “illusion of life”. For when bodies become things and objects turn human, slapstick lets us blunder with a smile.

*After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter – Mary Shelley, Frankenstein*

Faking is funny. The celebration of Halloween seamlessly straddles the lines of humour and mortality – an ubiquitous accepted presence of death in all things, combined with spooky novelty food, comedy tragedy gourds, attractive colour palettes and dumb bodily appendages that represent ancient figures of abjection such as the vampire, ghoul or witch.

Around this time of year there is a specific game, with no particular name, that involves tying donuts to a string and dangling them at head height. Participants must eat the donuts without using their hands, while individuals on either end of the string wiggle the donut-line to make mouths chomp helplessly while the donuts dance and thud onto faces, and lumps of jam ooze and splatter.

During this game one Halloween, one string-tied donut fell from the line, making a sugary thwack on the floor. Amidst the madness of gnashing ghouls and the dancing deceased, our family dog took that opportunistic moment to consume the doughy treat. String, dough, jammy chomps formed a pink masticatory mud that proceeded to glob down the gullet merging donut and dog.

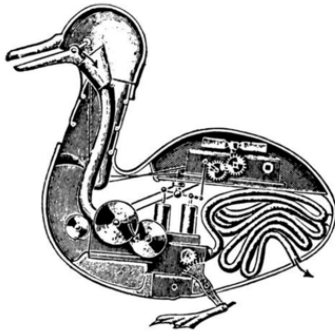
*The physiologist who succeeds in penetrating deeper and deeper into the digestive canal becomes convinced that it consists of a number of chemical laboratories equipped with various mechanical devices. – Ivan Pavlov, Pavlov's Dogs*

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Jacques de Vaucanson  
'Canard Digérateur'

Over the following days, the dog lost her ability to eat, becoming increasingly uncomfortable around matters of the mouth. A compulsory visit to the vets confirmed there was a problem that required further investigations - X-rays that turn object to image, flattening my dog to mere line and surface. Outline and innards from oesophagus to spleen - a series of edges that twist inside each other in compact constellations. The x-ray functions to reveal or deal with collisions between bodies and things - in this case a search for a needle which usually precedes string.

But there it was. A needle-less donut string that had looped around the tongue, anchoring itself to begin a drawing that formed a perfect line, as if drawing out a digestive tract like a cartoon movement of a swallow - a physical and visual diagram from gob to gulp to gut.

*In the world of cartoons, nothing is quite what it seems. Machines have minds of their own, animals are protagonists, gravity is out of whack, pain is fleeting and death is just another gag. - Ruba Katrib, Puddle portal pothole, Sculpture Centre Catalogue*

There are striking similarities between autopsy and excavation. Both are revealing of a subject, and in doing so can simultaneously destroy the former, yet pump new life through knowledge and understanding. The lines between violation and fascination and education are tediously entangled.

*Literature and feelings suggests that the soul resides in the heart, we just don't know. When you see a transplant for the first time and you see that big space in the middle of the body where the heart used to be you just think this is crazy. And then when you put the new heart in and it fills the space and you take the clamp off and the warm blood goes into the coronary artery and into the veins and you get a better rhythm and then it just suddenly starts to beat normally' - BBC Radio 4, 'The Boy Who Gave His Heart Away'*

GUM SOULS presents sliced or lobotomised anatomies in the form of a series of wall and floor based sculptures that are flat but fighting to be three dimensional, straddling the lines of human, toy and machine. Pigmented plaster sections are a fatter form of fresco technique, accentuated by a dependence on the surrounding architecture, like backbone to body, forcing parts together and upright against the walls. These bodies are half human half diagram, based on anatomy and instruction manuals for domestic appliances such as wiring and plumbing manuals.

The works utilise techniques of the caricature, with exaggerated line or proportion, drawing parallels with the medical cortical homunculus - a visual representation of the human body where proportion is linked to sensory function. They are made from pigmented plaster, marble, cement and sculptural materials that are combined with more unusual objects that originate from the dressing up box or toy shop.

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