

A red-tinted photograph of a city street scene. A large, solid black arrow points from the left towards the right, partially overlapping the street and buildings. The text "I'M WITH STUPID" is printed in large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image. The background shows a multi-story brick building on the left and a street with lane markings and a few small figures in the distance. The entire image has a strong red color cast.

**I'M
WITH
STUPID**

WORKS

JIMMY KUEHNLE

Inflatable Crosswalk 2012 02.03

MARK MCGOWAN

The Artist Taxi Driver series 2010-ongoing
selected videos:

I Know This Man	00.38
Friday Afternoon	00.28
The Workers	03.04
London Looter Given Six Months	
For Shoplifting Argos Catalogues	03.04
Early Monday Morning Drink	01.47
Snapperfest	02.31

CURATED BY AMY MARJORAM

STUPIDITY

by Amy Marjoram

We operate in the area that lies between wise intention and mere fluke. And that lends an unintentionally comic aspect to all our actions. Every action that crosses the threshold of possibility and is realised in the full sense of that word, contains at bottom an element of idiocy.¹

- Matthijs van Boxsel, *The Encyclopaedia of Stupidity*

Jimmy Kuehnle has slithered around a high end Japanese shopping district dressed as a mythical lizard, ridden an invisible bicycle and gone out wearing oversized inflatable sculptures that wedge him against lamp posts and occasionally blow him off his feet. Mark McGowan has dressed up as a ballerina pig to dance outside Scotland Yard, eaten chunks of a corgi dog and ventured around the streets of Lisbon Portugal dressed as a crying human Christmas tree. Smashing through conventional behaviour Kuehnle and McGowan, like sly court jesters, act the idiot in an intelligent way.

Kuehnle's Inflatable Crosswalk, 2012 is a wobbling centipede shaped inflatable that bobbles and sways across the road with vivid weirdness. Failing to offer a substantial physical barrier, its stopping power lies in confusion. Inevitably thinking 'what the...' drivers pull up before the inflatable swaying like a hypnotic zebra eel across the lanes. Once pedestrians have safely crossed, Kuehnle acting like a mental lollipop man whisks the inflatable back to the kerb.

Stupidity goes against the economical use of thinking and logic, instead skipping ahead or lagging behind. It is generally the result of over or under investment, believing too little or too much. In Inflatable Crosswalk Kuehnle's amorphous roadblock raises awareness of the lack of a pedestrian crossing, yet there is a messy convolution of message to this intervention- given the irresponsible aspect of blocking a road with a self-made device. Inflatable Crosswalk seems a prime example of what Matthijs van Boxsel labels 'productive stupidity' explained in a succinct analogy as "a man sets out to shut a door, stumbles, falls against it, and it shuts." van Boxsel suggests "examples of productive stupidity are not marginal phenomena but spectacular variants of a form of folly at work in the centre of what we consider to be our reasonable 'system' of thought."²

¹ Matthijs van Boxsel, *The Encyclopaedia of Stupidity*, Reaktion Books, London, 2004 edition. p.33

² Matthijs van Boxsel, *The Encyclopaedia of Stupidity*, Reaktion Books, London, 2004 edition. p.33

Stupidity lurks with us constantly- breathing down our necks and creating distraction and destruction; yet we are all fugitives from our own stupidity. We fulfill the social responsibility to quash any imbecilic urges, as though stupidity is actually rarefied aberrance not an unavoidable norm. With stupidity viewed principally as maleficent, there appears to be a conflicting split between the permission art gives to be stupid³ and the cultural expectations that art engage in serious, profound dialogue, the "fetishistic attachment to artistic nobility."⁴ Things are further muddled by what Avital Ronnell calls the 'magnetic field of stupor'⁵

Stupidity magnetized acts like a drag net- it highlights other stupidities but it does this well... stupidly. By existing outside of reasoned thinking, when stupidity is witnessed, one feels stupid in trying to identify if the stupidity is in the external stimuli or one's inability to logically interact with it. Here in lies the locus of stupidity's disruptive potential, for something to be stupid it must be identified as such and this identification is inherently problematic. Stupidity has contaminated its own definition.

If I'm with Stupid, what does that say about me? With Kuehnle and McGowan's practices failure to appreciate the stupidity of the work may be stupid, yet appreciating it equally so. Stupidity: we may all be it often but there is nothing worse than really feeling you are it. It is both fun and awful, existing on a knife-edge between whimsy and malice. With Kuehnle and McGowan stupid becomes a medium of self-deprecating qualities yet alongside this is the empowerment that arises from confusion about their degree of intentionality to be stupid. As Flaubert succinctly states "stupidity is something unshakeable. Nothing attacks it without breaking itself against it. It is of the nature of granite, hard and resistant."⁶

McGowan's The Artists Taxi Driver series often delves in to this dynamic of stupid. McGowan uploads his videos to YouTube where natural associations form with well established genres like confessional teen-angst soliloquy and loopy conspiracy-philosopher presentations. The videos play out as a crazy hybrid of gonzo journalism meets spoken word. Like the writing of Hunter S. Thompson, realism chaotically spills in to surreal exaggeration as McGowan's thoughts surge throughout his taxi.

3 Alain Vaillant, 'Stupidity, romantic-style, or : the mourning of intelligence', paper presented at the forum, *L'art et la critique de l'art après Bouvard et Pécuchet de la bêtise*, Les Journées d'Etudes ont eu lieu les 19 et 20 octobre 1998, Montpellier - France unpaginated

4 Jean-Yves Jouannais, 'Idiocy in Art: The anti-Biathanatos' paper presented at the forum, *L'art et la critique de l'art après Bouvard et Pécuchet de la bêtise*, Les Journées d'Etudes ont eu lieu les 19 et 20 octobre 1998, Montpellier - France unpaginated

5 Avital Ronell, *Stupidity*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2003 edition. p.75

6 Flaubert, 'Correspondance', translated and cited by Avital Ronnell, Ronell, 2003, p. 14

Wavering between undeniably astute thinking and the random, ridiculous, petty and boring McGowan tests and strains our empathy. McGowan said last year, "If you are watching this, I've come to the conclusion that if anyone watches my videos, you're just losers."⁷ It is actually this strangely loserish quality of the lo-fi, churned out videos that smack of McGowan's self indulgence that fuels the intrigue and I am fairly certain he knows it.

Jean Yves Jouannais writes "mediocrity is a vibrant, destabilising ingredient."⁸

Jouannais suggests the, "Glorious triumph of stupidity: the lack of material resources, technical skill and production values results in a level of inventiveness and spontaneity unavailable to, and thus absent from, much so called 'serious' contemporary practice. Such endeavours [offer a]...refusal to engage in the same terms or make the same claims."⁹

Jouannais labels this 'the revolt of the mediocrities'¹⁰ involving "artists whose own practices plunder the meager resources of the skills they lack."¹¹ Resulting from the model of the deskilled artist, this self-conscious awareness by artists of the stupidity of their production, leads to them reveling "in their own technical and aesthetic shortcomings."¹² This contributed to many different facets of contemporary practice that are now self-perpetuating, including aggressively cheap production values, thematic emphasis on self-conscious ineptitude and puerility, and the art of lazily minimal intervention to name but a few.

In 'Friday Afternoon' McGowan simply yawns at the camera with gratuitous exaggeration. No matter how many times I watch his clumsy acting I find my own jaws beginning to open like a hippo in that dumb physical reflex where yaawwwnnnn = yaawwwnnnn. Kuehnle similarly works from base interactions up; the double take caused by his weird Inflatable Crosswalk and the hypnotic visuals it produces. These actions become complicated works as the specific stupidity quickly melts in to wider concerns, for we are all with Stupid.

We suffer from but one thing: stupidity. But it is formidable and universal.
- Flaubert¹³

Without stupidity and illusion the world would collapse.
- Matthijs van Boxsel¹⁴

7 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FogR6MDstk&feature=plcp>

8 Jean Yves Jouannais text from *L'Idiotie . Art, Vie, Politique-Methode* paraphrased paraphrased from the original French in Simon Baker, , I'm with stupid (three book's reviewed including Jean Yves Jouannais, *L'Idiotie . Art, Vie, Politique-Methode*, Beaux Arts magazine Livres, Paris, 2003) *Oxford Art Journal*, Published online July 27, 2007 unpaginated.

9 *ibid*

10 *ibid*

11 *ibid*

12 Raphael Rubinstein When bad was good: the art scene of downtown Manhattan ca. 1974-1984 *Art in America*, June-July, 2006

13 Flaubert cited in Didier Malgor, 'From sadness to anger', paper presented at the forum, *L'art et la critique de l'art après Bouvard et Pécuchet de la bêtise*, Les Journées d'Etudes ont eu lieu les 19 et 20 octobre 1998, Montpellier - France. unpaginated

14 van Boxsel, 2003 p. 178

CHRIS POOLMAN INTERVIEWS MARK McGOWAN July 22, 2011 Extract:

CP: How would you go about defining stupidity -generally and in an art specific context?

MM: Well I think its linked to shame -stupidity. So a lot of art is shame based for the reasons that I said before -you're exhibiting stuff. So one of the main mediums in art is performance -because you're using yourself you're really there. You're presence is there -and it's linked to singing, to dancing. So if you're in a group of people, and you say -no ones had a drink -who wants to sing a song? It can be in an enclosed space -there's a shame element attached to that. So you can see there's a shame attached to any type of performance. So if you say dancing, you could be in a nightclub, you could be in a place where people are dancing -and people say do you want a dance? And you go, no no I'm not dancing. Because you have this fear -from when you were younger -that people laughed if you performed, if it didn't go right. So with the idea of trying to define stupidity, you can even link it to doing any art or any performance art. There's an element of stupidity about it because you're actually -see sometimes when its in context and you've got an art audience watching it, it can be OK because the level of expectancy is there. But when you do it in public spaces, then its stupid isn't it?

CP: There's a fear of been judged?

MM: Yes, a lot of people are very quick to say oh that's shit that is. It's a real quick analysis of an art piece. Oh that's shit, without any sort of context or subtext. It's just shit, and of course it's because we'll all sort of so used to codes of delivery of television, of theatre, beginning and end. The whole sort of thing about beginning and end is a whole another thing, because when you're doing performance -right its about to start. I saw this guy once, a German guy, and he had a coin in his hand, and he had no top on, and he was hitting himself like that. And it started to make this red mark -this metal coin he had strapped inside his hand, and it became this circle that blistered, and it took the skin off and it started bleeding, and he did this for about two hours. It's hard to clap that. When he stopped, he just stopped, but how do you stop? At what point do you stop? That whole start and stop -it's a real big thing about performance. Because you go in there, a guy starts drawing some chalk marks around peoples feet on the floor of the gallery, where's this going to end? How's it's going to end? It's a real problem -I always find it when I'm doing it in public spaces. Is it when you reach your goal? Is there a goal? At what point is it OK to stop? Is there an announcement when you stop -or do you just slope off? And its really funny, as soon as you say start and stop it brings in something else which isn't always a good thing. Because everyone looks at you -and you've drawn the circles around everyone's feet with the chalk. What the fucks that? There are no normal codes to reference, it wasn't funny, it wasn't anything good. Its very dry, you know a lot of its very dry, so to a normal person -so this is what I was getting at about defining stupidity -so in an art context that's OK, that's quite normal. But to another audience, you're a fucking idiot. So it ends up been like a definition of what anyone can give about art or anything else. It depends on your take on it, or whether it's stupid or not.



INTERVIEW CONTINUED

CP: Do you think that that's one of the limits of stupidity?

MM: No, I think its quite open because in a way you can get away with doing things and people will see if the intentions there to be.... I don't know, if it's to deliver some prophecy or whether it's to deliver a message about something. And people see into it and it can be really deep, and people don't consider it been stupid... you could get typical 1970s performance art like Marina Abramović, like scrubbing bones, and you think to a normal person, what the fuck are you doing love, get a grip. To the scaffolders who are eating their breakfast, they're not going to get that at all. Other people see it differently, so I don't it limits, I think it is ever expanding -and that's going back to the thing about the people who laugh about your painting, you know you're been an idiot. You're painting stupidly, because you can't paint. You can't dance, you can't sing. I do a second year elective at Camberwell, you've got these people who come from all these different practices -photography, conversation, painting -and you get them in a circle first day and say whose going to sing a song. You've always got one idiot who will do it, because that's why they come on the course. Guaranteed every year you've got one, and the rest just laugh, because they're too scared to do it. But there is actually nothing wrong about singing or shouting or pissing or doing anything.

CP: But that's quite a familiar reaction to someone doing something stupid, because people will just laugh at it. Their not quite sure how else to deal with it?

MM: But it's in the definition then - it's like what we said about someone saying that's shit. It's in that initial definition when someone says you're been stupid. I'm working in a mental hospital, and I was showing them my work, and they just say you're an idiot, you're a fucking idiot. We don't want you here. No, it's quite funny, he's schizophrenic -so he's said it to a few people. But that's OK.



JIMMY KUEHNLE

<http://www.jimmykuehnle.com/>

MARK McGOWAN

<http://www.youtube.com/user/chunkymark/videos>

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I'M WITH STUPID

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