

Thought Experiment 2026/7 Launchpad

MA Contemporary Dialogues

Lectures take place Fridays at 11.00am - 12.30pm in Alex Reading Room

A climate of uncertainty is fertile for thinking differently.

The Thought Experiment

This challenge removes all the certainties we rely on.

It's okay to feel unsure.

Jeopardy inspires creativity.

You will discover the potential of divergent thinking.

There is no theory, there is no set of principles to follow.

You will have to take a chance.

So how the hell are we going to get outa here?

Introduction

We begin by embarking on a journey where we leave behind everything that is familiar to us.

It is imperative that you disengage from your medium-specific comfort zone for this module.

Say goodbye.

Why?

The Thought Experiment is an opportunity to discover new research methodologies.

It allows for the acquisition of experiential as well as cognitive knowledge.

This is knowledge gained through experience and observation, as opposed to the mental process of just thinking and reading to acquire new knowledge.

This is why it is a 'Thought Experiment'.

The Thought Experiment put very simply ...

If you have an idea in response to your selected task, ...

do it, ...

then think about it, ...

then simply use that to inspire your next idea.

Just make sure you document everything and submit it.

Your approach

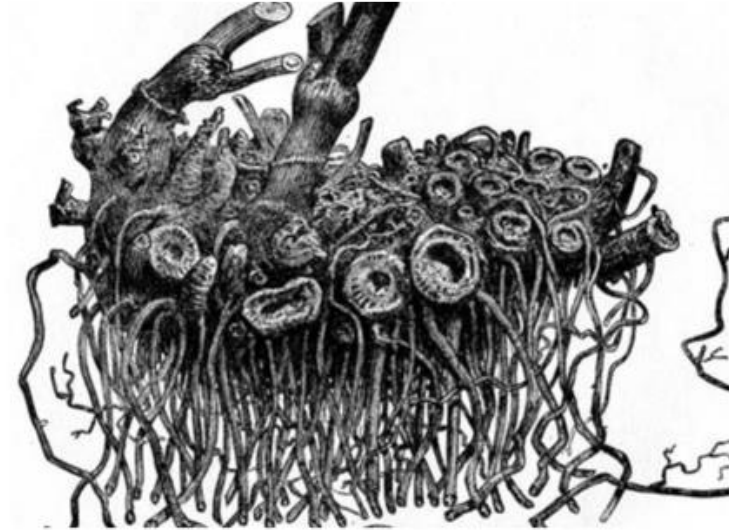
Aim to be rhizomatic (mass of roots) not arborescent (tree-like) in your thinking.

The term rhizome refers to concepts or ideas with no fixed start or end point.

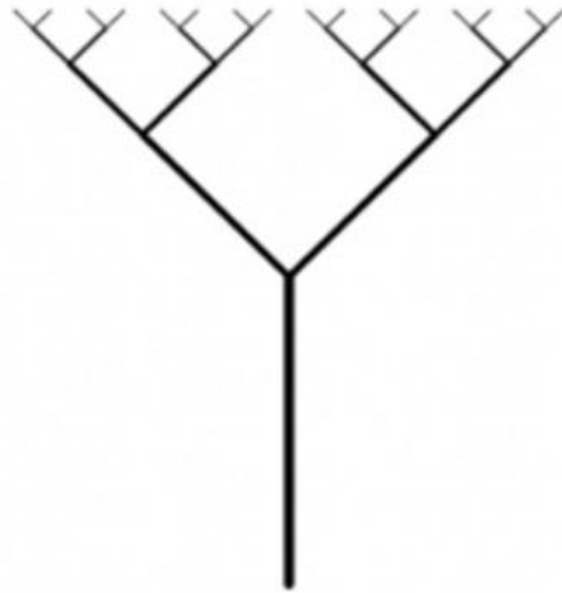
They allow for endless developments and outcomes in any direction.



Tree (botany)



Rhizome (botany)



Arborescent (tree-like) system



Rhizomatic system

‘Deleuze and Guattari (1987) differentiate between two ways of conceptualizing phenomena and knowledge: the arborescent model and the rhizome. The arborescent model is hierarchical, has a center and peripheries, has a beginning, middle, and end, and has a strong spinal axis of theory and organization. In contrast, the rhizome is anti-hierarchical, grows in a lateral manner with no center or periphery, has no beginning, middle, or end, and has no privileged viewpoint.’

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 2007. *Becoming Animal*. In Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald (eds.), *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classical and Contemporary Writings*, 37-50. Oxford, UK: Berg.

(Summarized by Jessica Bell, Animal Studies Program, Michigan State University)

A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia

Deleuze and Guattari state that a rhizome has “no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” and “connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature”

A Thousand Plateaus, p.26, p.21.

Independence of thought

“The history of ideas should never be continuous; it should be wary of resemblances, but also descents or filiations; it should be content to mark the thresholds through which an idea passes, the journeys it takes that change its nature or object.”

A Thousand Plateaus, p.275.

Why are we doing this?

The Thought Experiment is undertaken in order to promote discovery. It is designed to widen creative potential, to generate dialogues across critical practices, and to explore and test the range of research methods available to practitioners in the visual arts, independent of individual creative practice.

Research methodology is integral to postgraduate study.

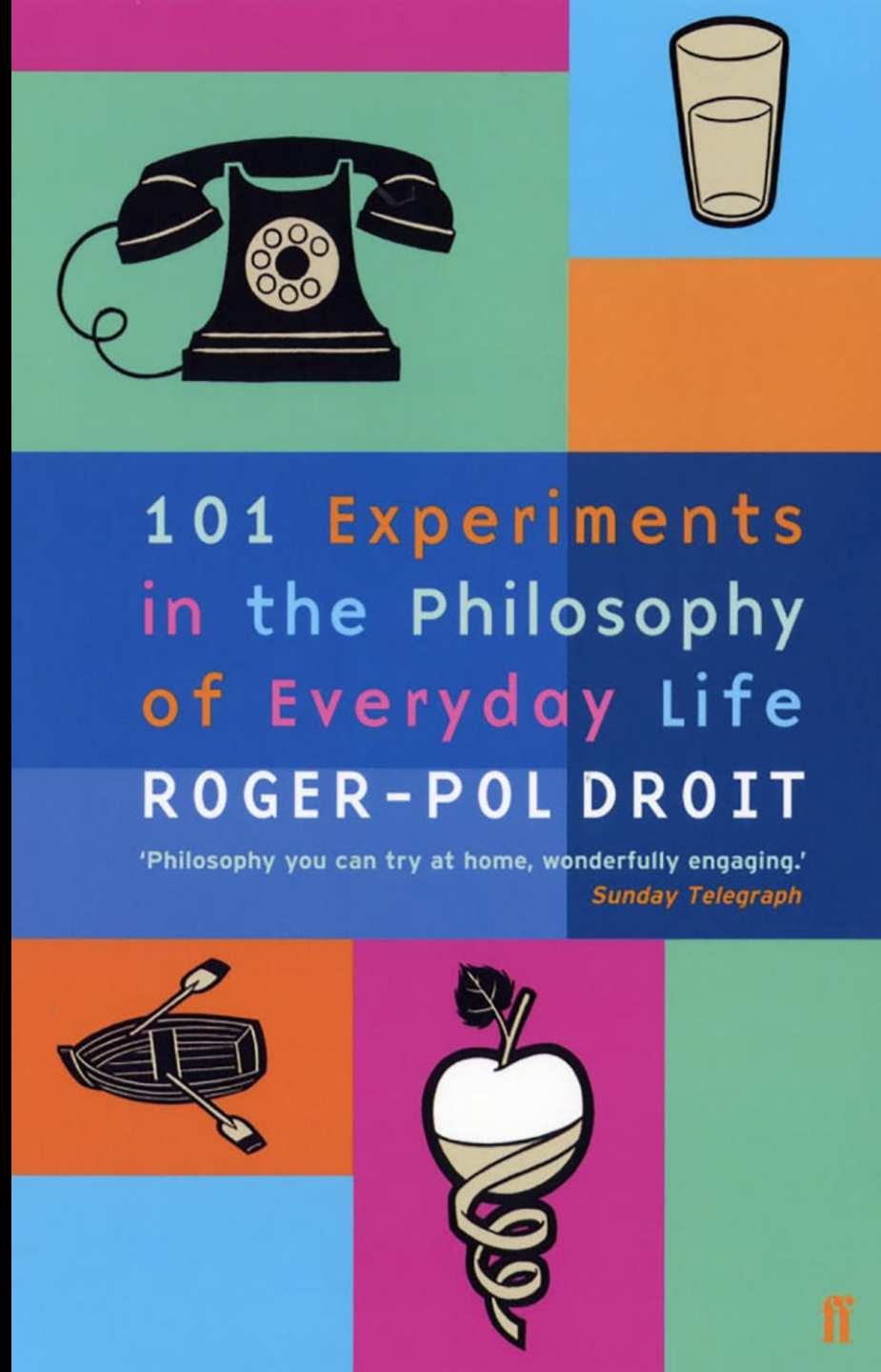
- Descriptive — survey, historical, content analysis, qualitative (ethnographic, narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, and case study)
- Associational — correlational, causal-comparative.
- **Intervention** — experimental, quasi-experimental, action research.

What are the experiments?

Roger-Pol Droit's (2002) illuminating book *101 Experiments in the Philosophy of Everyday Life*.

Short, esoteric, yet instructive experiments.

Each student makes a blind selection and then starts their own personal investigation.



Creative not scientific

As Droit (2002: ix-x) states “The idea is to provoke tiny moments of awareness. Invent things to do, to say, to dream, that produce astonishment or the unease generated by certain questions. It’s about fabricating microscopic starter devices, minimal impulses. Playing on the level of objects.”

Introduction

Everyday adventures

‘But you must really apply yourself if you are to feel the unsettling of reality that they seek to produce. For that has always been the end in view, since philosophy began: a systematic discrepancy, a step to one side, a change of viewpoint – perhaps a very slight one to begin with – which can reveal the landscape under quite a different angle.’

Droit (2002: ix-x)

The journey has been started

‘If the entertainment proves useful, it’s because it offers such points of departure. Deliberately strange. Even crazy, if need be. But intended always to shake a certainty we had taken for granted: our own identity, say, or the stability of the outside world, or even the meaning of words. What happens afterwards will be different for each individual. Different conclusions will be reached. And so much the better. It is enough that the journey has been started.’

Droit (2002: ix-x)

The aim

The Thought Experiment sets the tone for further study.

By breaking the dependency of the student on the tried and tested ways of working brought with them from undergraduate study or past experience, the Thought Experiment asks the student to look at everyday life through new eyes or a different lens, and to take an imaginative leap into the void.

This is done in a fun, friendly and safe environment, and it also acts as an ice-breaker and a catalyst for the new group dynamic.



Yves Klein

Leap into the Void. 1960.

Gelatin silver print.

Photographed by Harry Shunk and Jean Kender

25.9 x 20 cm | 10 3/16 x 7 7/8 inch

Leap into the Void (1960)

Leap into the Void (1960) was unprecedented in photography. It creates the impression of freedom and abandon through a highly contrived process.

While photographers like Robert Frank and Henri Cartier-Bresson used conventional photography to seek emotional truths, Yves Klein harnessed the inherent malleability of the medium's veracity. This is something that is very easy to construct today, the image is made up of two negatives, but this was before the advent of digital technology and AI.

“Convincing to the eye if not to the mind, Klein’s *Leap* symbolically enacts the leap of faith we make in accepting the truth of any photograph, ...”

(artsy.net 2020)

Where do you begin?

You've picked a number (from 1 to 101).

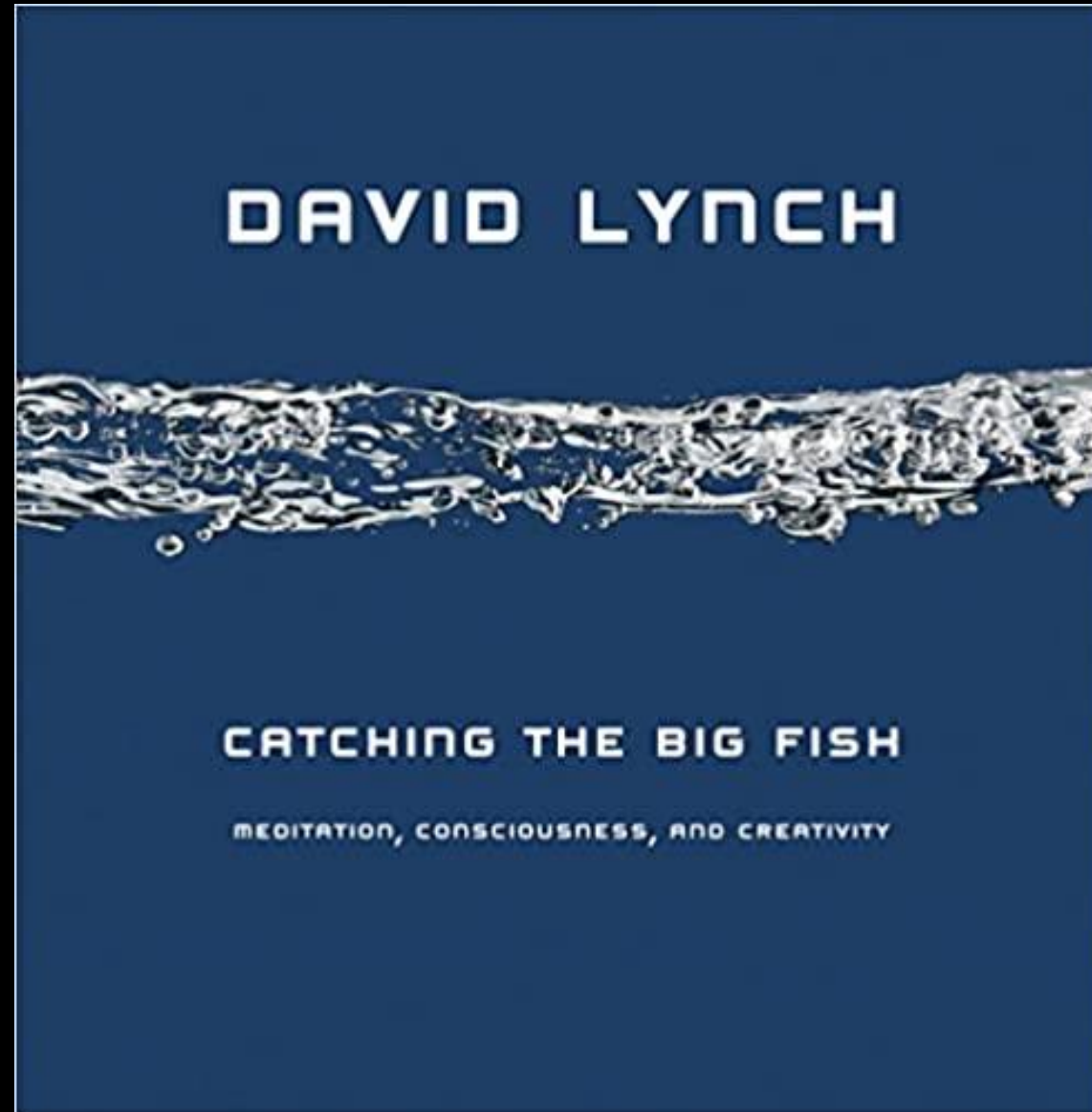
Familiarise yourself with your experiment.

You should have started. If not, why not?

Now keep moving.

More speed, less haste. (sic)

Get uncomfortable and think beyond conventional parameters.



Lynch, D. (2006)
*Catching the Big Fish:
Meditation, Consciousness
and Creativity.*
New York: Penguin.

INTRODUCTION

Ideas are like fish.

If you want to catch little fish, you can stay in the shallow water. But if you want to catch the big fish, you've got to go deeper.

Down deep, the fish are more powerful and more pure. They're huge and abstract. And they're very beautiful.

I look for a certain kind of fish that is important to me, one that can translate to cinema. But there are all kinds of fish swimming down there. There are fish for business, fish for sports. There are fish for everything.

Everything, anything that is a thing, comes up from the deepest level. Modern physics calls that level the Unified Field. The more your consciousness—your awareness—is expanded, the deeper you go toward this source, and the bigger the fish you can catch.

Lynch references the 'unified field'.

This is often referred to as the 'Theory of Everything':

'the long-sought means of tying together all known phenomena to explain the nature and behaviour of all matter and energy in existence.'

'A unified field theory would reconcile seemingly incompatible aspects of various field theories [e.g. gravity, electricity, etc.] to create a single comprehensive set of equations. Such a theory could potentially unlock all the secrets of nature and make a myriad of wonders possible, including such benefits as time travel and an inexhaustible source of clean energy, among many others.'

(Rouse, 2005)

In essence, the theory is not important at this stage, it's the possibility.

The approach

You should aim to develop an empirical approach.

One that is based on,
concerned with,
or verifiable by,
observation and experience,
rather than theory or pure logic.

The power of imagination

Philosopher Emmanuel Kant considers the imagination as an omnipresent faculty that contributes to all aspects of our lives that operates on empirical (experienced) and transcendental (presupposed) levels.

‘The imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely, very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it’

Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804)

The imagination embellishes the truth.

It seems we make it up as we go along. This however can be problematic.



The Guardian
Points of View TVC
1986
28 secs.

This 1986 *Guardian* TV commercial '*Points of View*', relies on our suppositions around presentation, intention, impression, implication, observation, experience, bias, perspective, evaluation, context, sociology and culture.

The writer Frank Budgen and director Paul Weiland exploit this human tendency to make a powerful point.

It reminds us to beware of habitual thinking.

Philosophy helps us question what we know

‘Philosophy offers you a chance to explore fundamental questions and to see what thinkers in different periods have had to say about them. This in itself is valuable, because it frees you from being limited by the unquestioned assumptions of those around you.’

(Thompson, 2003)

This is why we should read philosophy.
It can remove us from the contemporary condition.

And this is Roger-Pol Droit’s (2002) intention with *101 Experiments in the Philosophy of Everyday Life*.

Think different

The willingness and ability to think differently, experimentally, courageously and uniquely, has been the foundation of many thought-provoking artefacts, artworks objects and concepts by artists, designers, filmmakers, photographers, image makers, writers and musicians.

Here are some examples ...

Derek Jarman (1942 – 1994)

In 1993 filmmaker and artist Derek Jarman completed *Blue*, four months prior to his death from AIDS related complications. A narration and soundtrack make up the 79 minute film which displays a static blue screen throughout.

Originally conceived as a film about Yves Klein paintings and his underlying philosophies, it became 'the admirable austerity of the void' (Jarman and Sutherland quoted in Peake 1999, p.477).

'to produce an atmosphere of calm and joy. A world to which refugees from that dark space may journey.' (Derek Jarman, 'proposal for *Blue*', August 1987, quoted in Peake 1999, p.398.)

Derek Jarman
Blue 1993
79 mins.

Suffering from partial blindness caused by the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), the film is an audible and transfixing evocation of Jarman's day-to-day life.

A daring and brave statement that not only challenges cinematic expression to its' core, it also encapsulates an artistic expression founded on authentic experience.

‘... by fleeing what the film calls "the pandemonium of the image" *Blue* raises questions of visibility and invisibility, of sound and vision, which are central not only to AIDS and homosexuality [in the late 20th century], but to cinema itself ...

Switching between politics and metaphysics, *Blue* serves as a vital link between activism and abstraction. With his cinema of love, his cinema of limits, Jarman's triumph is to have projected this vision with uncompromising clarity and brilliance."

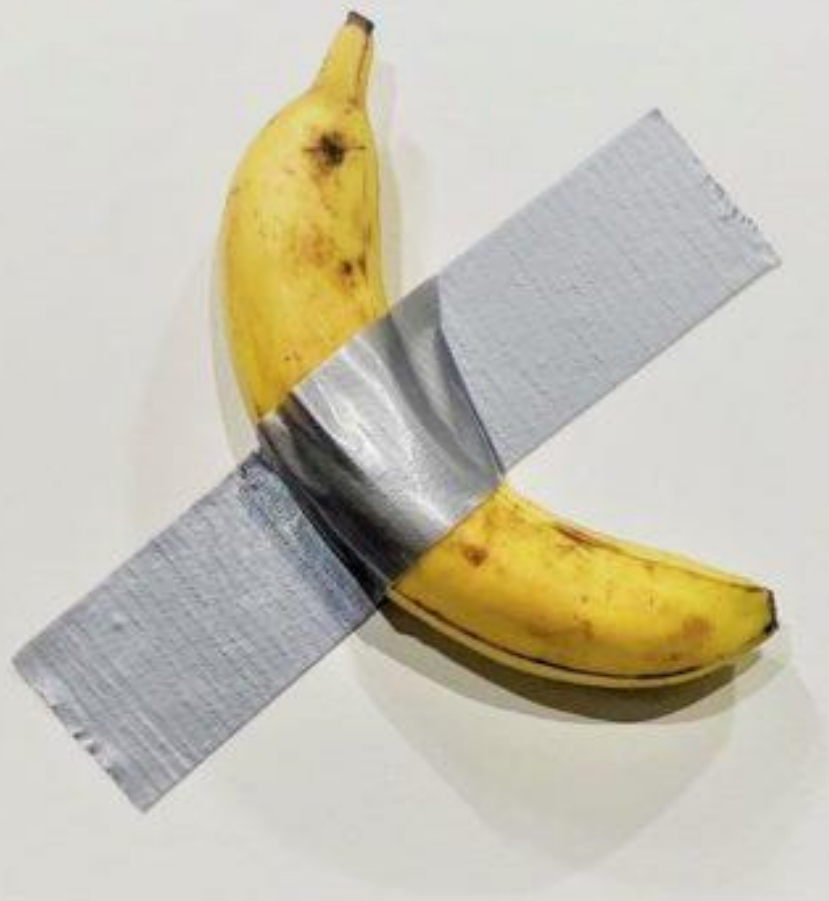
(Smith, 2019)

Maurizio Cattelan (born 1960)

Provocative, humorous, defiant and sometimes morbid, his gestures, materials and objects that make up his artworks defy art and its' institutions by continually challenging the nature and value of the art itself.

Hitler, JFK, Pope John Paul II, pigeons, horses, a suicidal squirrel, have all featured in his artworks. His transformations have been observed as a contemporary expression of Marcel Duchamp's subversive practice.

“My aim is to be as open and as incomprehensible as possible, ...”



Maurizio Cattelan
Comedian 2019
Banana, duct tape.

Comedian (2019) debuted at Art Basel Miami Beach in the first week of December. For many, *Comedian* is an object lesson in the excesses of the art world, the absurdity of the art market, and the gaping wealth inequalities that now define the global economy.

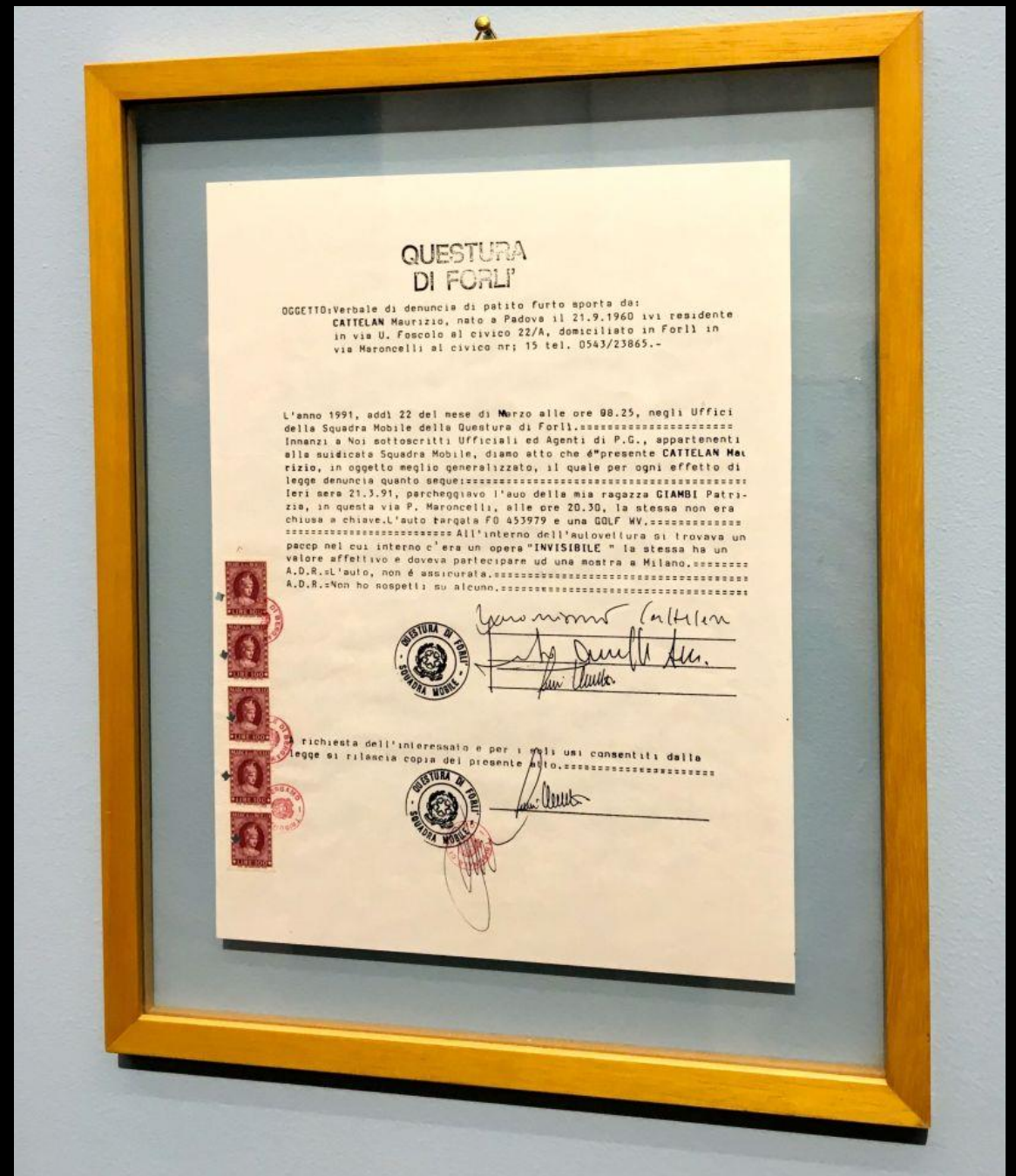
Any criticism you throw at the banana sticks: it's lazy, it's cynical, and it's not even very original (whatever that means).

The artist Maurizio Cattelan who pinned the fruit to the wall with gray duct tape sold the artwork three times at Art Basel Miami, for \$120,000 to \$150,000 each time. (artnews.com 2020)



Maurizio Cattelan
America 2016
18-karat gold.

Maurizio Cattelan
Untitled, 1991
Police report of stolen invisible artwork
29.2 x 21 cm | 11 x 8 1/4 inch

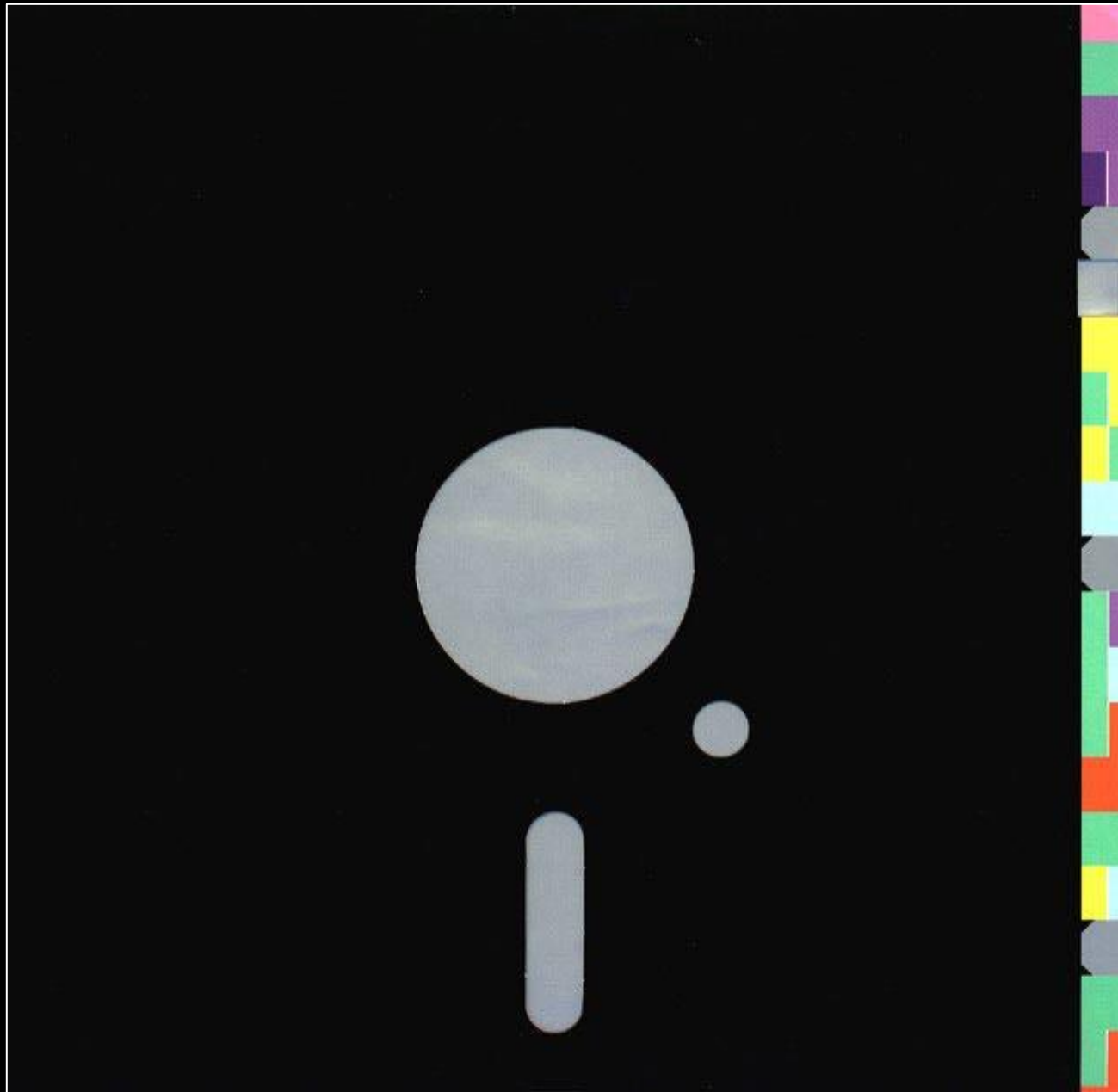


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Blue Monday: how the New Order hit 'broke every single law' of record sleeve design – and changed music forever

[Save](#) [26](#)

'No-one expected it to sell': New Order, the band behind Blue Monday



Peter Saville
New Order, Blue Monday, 1983
12" Vinyl Cover artwork
30 x 30 cm | 12 x 12 inch

Blue Monday, released in 1983, has artwork resembling an 8" floppy disc. Infamously, the sleeve for 'Blue Monday' was so expensive to produce that Factory Records made a loss on every copy sold.

Peter Saville (1955) was primarily interested in juxtapositions: historical and modern, technological and natural, and in a wider sense, how history is perceived when seen through contemporary eyes. His colour code was a way of juxtaposing as he said "the hieroglyphics of technology with historical classicism".



MEET GRAHAM

THE ONLY PERSON DESIGNED TO SURVIVE ON OUR ROADS

As much as we like to think we're invincible, we're not. But what if we were to change? What if our bodies were built to survive a low impact crash? What might we look like? The result of these questions is Graham, a reminder of just how vulnerable our bodies really are.

TELL ME MORE



VIEW GRAHAM IN 360°



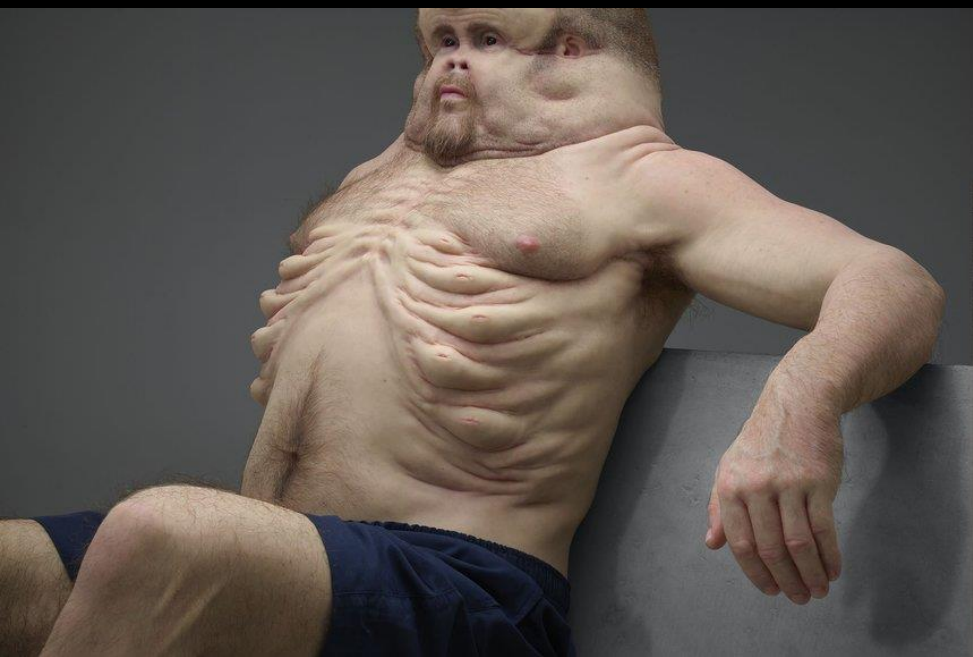
Meet Graham campaign

Meet Graham is a road safety campaign and website for Victoria Australia. A catalyst for conversation and an educational tool. They created a monster!

As much as we like to think we're invincible, we're not. The human body can only withstand certain amounts of force in a car accident. In fact, the impact forces of just 30km/hr are enough to be fatal.

But what if we were to change physically? What if our bodies could cope with the impact of such a trauma? What might we look like?

Graham and reminds us of how vulnerable our bodies really are by showing what we might look like if we were built to survive a RTA.



Graham's effectiveness (and affectiveness) lies with grotesque. (see *Rabelais and His World* by 20th century Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin)

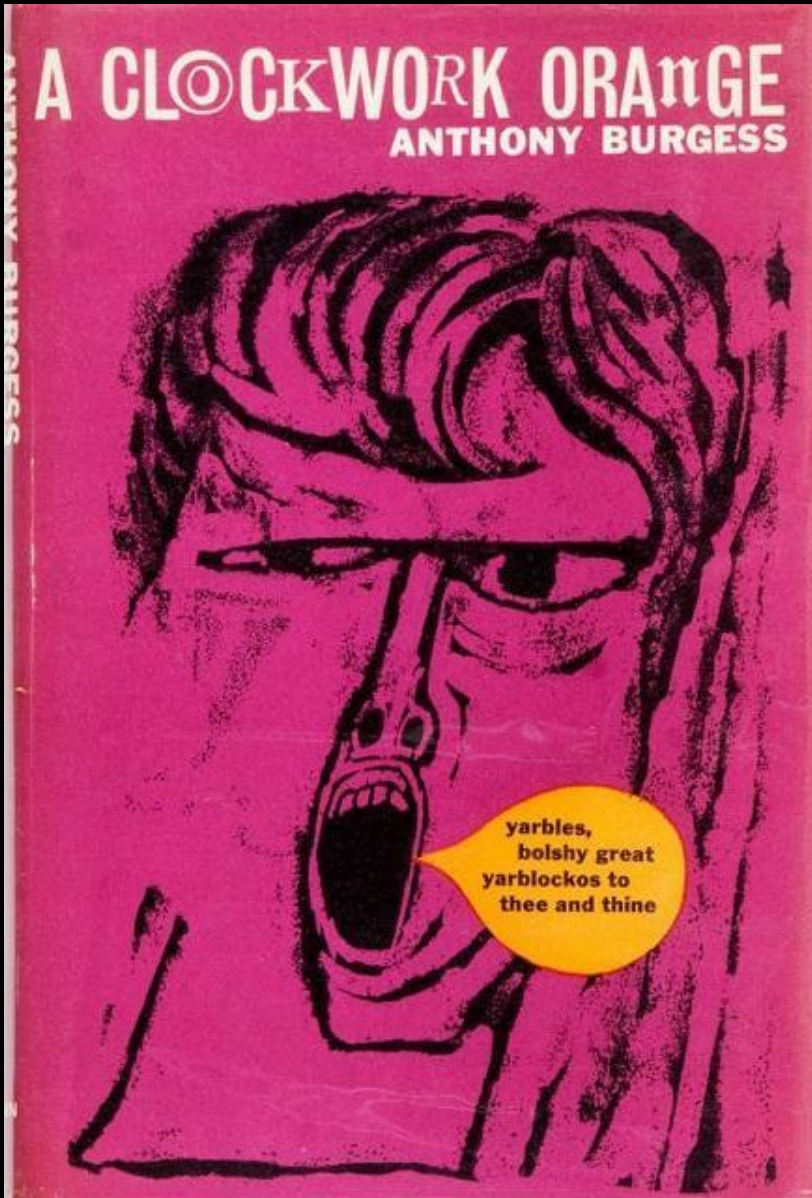
His visual appearance is central to the audience encounter. It is the other-worldliness of his appearance that makes the campaign memorable and emphasises the fragility of the human form.

The effigy was created by contemporary visual artist Patricia Piccinini, who was chosen for her evocative and unsettling sculptural mutations.

The talisman for the campaign 'Graham' is equally at home in a gallery as it is on the road safety website.



Anthony Burgess (1917 – 1993)



Nadsat

A Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess is a milestone of literary, musical and visual culture. It is concerned with the individuals' relationship with the state. Crime, punishment, redemption and determinism are central themes, and amongst many things, it is the linguistic content that makes it memorable and remarkable.

The central protagonist, Alex, communicates through Nadsat - a vernacular argot (slang). Burgess partly created it to future proof his novel by using a timeless linguistic approach that could not be identified as coming from a particular era or place. The novel is written in a retrospective, first person, subjective narrative.

The novel begins in the Korova Milkbar, Alex tells us:

‘They had no license for selling liquor, yet there was no law yet against prodding some of the new veshches which they used to put into the old moloko, so you could peet it with vellocet or sythemesc or drenchrom or one or two other veshches which would give you a nice quiet horrorshow fifteen minutes admiring Bog And All His Holy Angels And Saints in your left shoe with lights bursting all over your mozg. Or you could peet milk with knives in it, as we used to say, and this would sharpen you up and make you ready for a bit of dirty twenty-to-one, and that was what we were peeting this evening I’m starting of the story with.’

(Burgess, 1962)

[Here read by Burgess](#)

The language of *A Clockwork Orange*

‘In a letter to Heinemann, the first publishers of *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess claimed that “it will take the reader no more than fifteen pages to master and revel in the expressive language of ‘Nadsat’” (Biswell, personal communication, 2016).

It is clear Nadsat was designed to be intelligible to a reader within a short period of encountering it without the need for further help. Burgess (1972, 1990) also said that his intention was for the reader to be in some sense ‘brainwashed’ in this process of acquiring the Russian elements of Nadsat.

(Vincent et al, 2017)

Burgess' work highlights the uncertainty and suggestibility of language, and how quickly our terms or reference can be adopted, modified, influenced or skewered. It highlights the fragility of language.

This in turn should inspire us to question all known truths.

It may be useful to consider this as the the function of the Thought Experiment.

Challenge the logical and follow your intuition.

There is no right answer

‘What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and; anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions - they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.’

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900)

From 1873 essay: *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*.

Your final outcome

There is no final outcome.

You present where you are, not where you think you are going to be.

Droit (2002: ix-x) concludes:

‘Where are you headed? – Wherever you get to!’

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Next lecture:

The Encounter