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Supernormality

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Content

Introduction

Imagine a grey car on a grey asphalt parking lot under a grey sky. Sometimes something is so normal that it becomes strange again. For me this is supernormal, and it tells us more about normality.

This thesis looks at that odd, exaggerated normality; I call this 'supernormality'. I will look at what it is, how it is shown and how it is present in art. I will also look at how it is present in the wider context of mass culture and mass consumption, and how that is different from art. And finally, I will look at how supernormality can be used – in art specifically – as a strategy to look at and showcase normality, to reflect on the constant navigation between on the one hand needing to be normal and on the other wanting to be special.
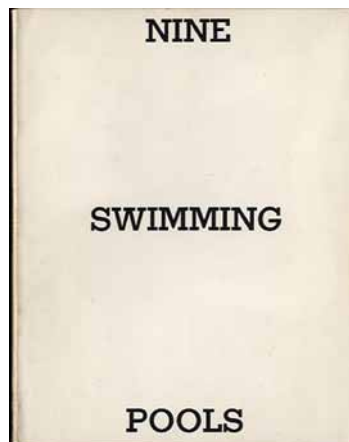
There are three reasons why supernormality interests me. First, I am attracted to works of art and artists that use this supernormality. For me, art concerned with supernormality is strongly connected: it is highly conceptual and political, sneaky and direct. I want to know what it is exactly. Second, I believe supernormality is also an important and growing element of my work. I want to learn how it works and look into how other artists use it. Third, and finally, the relationship between normality and supernormality is something dear to me as it is present in daily life and I want to share my fascination with the reader. In this thesis, I hope to go beyond the highly particular and trust that the reader will find a way to relate to it, to use the exposé, the analysis, when seeing works of art, and to realize how certain works and artists help us navigate between the need to be normal and the desire to be special by employing supernormality.

Similarly, there are three parts to this thesis. The first part consists of four case studies, looking in detail at works from artists Ed Ruscha, Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley, and Aernout Mik. I explore one work of each artist in detail, compare it with their other works, those of other artists, and any outside references such as pop culture at large. There is no claim to be complete, but for the reader there should be already an idea of what I view as supernormality and how it is present in art. In the second part, the look at supernormality is broadened with a view at how it is present in mass culture and mass consumption. There it becomes clear that it is, in fact, largely absent both in mass culture and mass consumption, at least in clearly perceivable form. I then return to art to see what the modalities for supernormality in art are. In the third and final part, I wrap it all up and include a brief look at my own work and how supernormality is present in it.
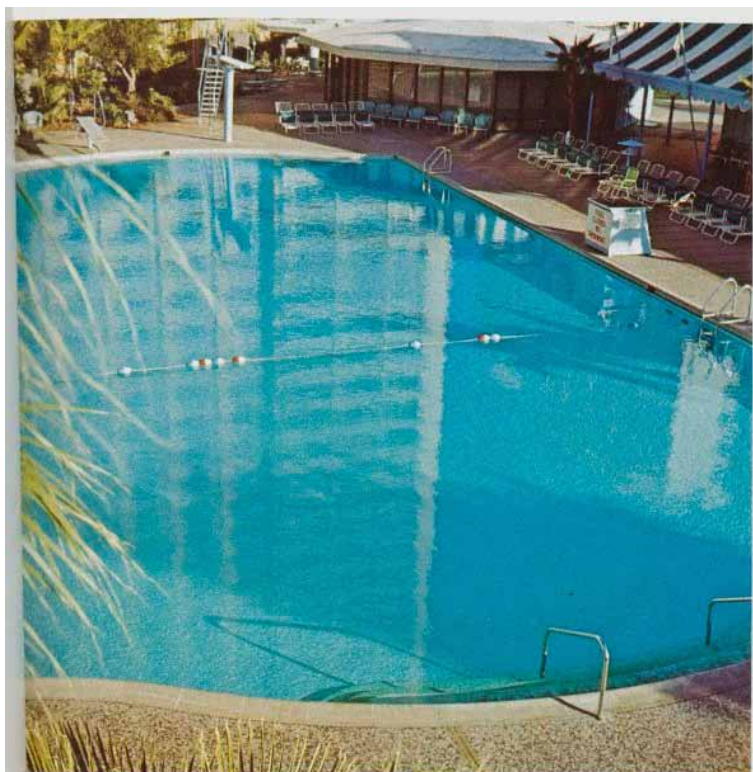
Chapter 1
Case studies

NINE

SWIMMING

POOLS

*Nine Swimming Pools
(and a Broken Glass)
Ed Ruscha
1968
18 x 14 cm*

*Nine Swimming Pools
(and a Broken Glass)
Ed Ruscha
1968
18 x 14 cm*

1.1 – Ed Ruscha & Cataloguing the Ordinary

"If there is any facet of my work that I feel was kissed by angels I'd say it was my books. My other work is definitely tied to a tradition, but I've never followed tradition in my books."
ED RUSCHA, *in an interview with David Bourdon in Art News, April 1972*

NINE SWIMMING POOLS AND A BROKEN GLASS (1968)

A small book, with pictures of nine swimming pools and a broken glass, just as the title page says. And lots of empty pages between the pictures, as if the pictures have been chosen haphazardly or as if the pages could still be filled with more pictures of swimming pools and the artist did not get around to taking them yet.

The book itself is plain white paper, with a clear title on the cover: NINE SWIMMING POOLS. It's about 18 by 13 centimeters, 64 pages. You can hold it in your hand, and it might look like so many other books you have in your library.

At first glance the swimming pools in the pictures look uniform: small pools at apartment complexes, at a small rec club maybe. They are photographed in a straightforward manner: from the side, looking slightly downward, and with nobody in the pools. They are photographed in a very pretty style, yet without distracting props. Sometimes in the midday sun, sometimes during the golden hour in the late afternoon.

The last photograph on the book is of a broken glass, droplets of water still there. It adds an enigmatic flavor to the book, both with formal reference (to the clear, blue and glass-like surface of the pools) and a narrative (who broke the glass and under what circumstances? Clumsiness or drunkenness?).

The pools are detached and isolated from their usual context. So, with nothing else to look at, you start paying attention to the details. There is a gate around one swimming pool. Is it so that kids don't run into the street just beyond the gate? The small round swimming pool, it has a Coke vending machine next to it. Is it for the convenience of the people who live at the complex or is it for the owner to make more money? And then there is also a bigger pool, with a diving board and parlor palms in large pots and if you look closely, villas in the background on the next hill. Are those people really rich?

And you wonder, what is it the artist wants to show? Or better yet, is there even anything the artist wants to show? At one point the photographs are also something stupid to look at, and you feel a little cheated for having spent so much time looking at simple pictures of simple pools, arranged simply.

Cataloguing the Ordinary

Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass is a relatively early work for Ruscha, his sixth book, after *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1962), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on Sunset Strip* (1966), and

Some Los Angeles Apartments
Ed Ruscha
1965
17.8 x 14 cm

Thirty-four Parking Lots (1967), which show exactly what they say, and the more witty *Royal Road Test* (1967) where Ruscha and three friends throw a Royal typewriter out of a driving car and show the resulting debris. Ruscha produced sixteen books in total between 1963 and 1978, mostly understated, some more tongue-in-cheek (*Various Small Fires and Milk*, 1964) or conceptual (*Colored People*, 1972, with color pictures of cacti), but all with these straightforward overviews and snapshots.

For me, showing something that simple – bland almost – in the straightforward and well-presented manner that Ruscha does is very attractive. There is a strange kind of both dedication and detachment at the same time in giving that much attention to something this mundane.

I didn't always perceive Ruscha's work like this. I remember seeing works by him before, but I always thought they were a bit boring, just studies of form or catalogs of empty or dismal places tied to a social agenda. For example, in *Thirty-four Parking Lots* (1967), which consists of empty parking lots photographed from the sky, I saw little more than studies of form or a social comment about the emptiness of a suburban car culture that needs these large parking lots. Perhaps I equated them too much with the products of Bernd and Hilla Becher.

But, having looked at Ruscha's works again this year, I now think that there is no explicit agenda, other than being triggered temporarily by some patterns, some prevalence of a type of mundane (human-placed) artifact (pools, apartment buildings, planted cacti). By using these kind of recognizable, readable and popular references and elevating them by isolating them Ruscha resembles his contemporaries Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, who influenced all three.

But Ruscha does all of this differently than, for example, Warhol, Rauschenberg and Johns. Johns is still very much a painter for me (like David Hockney), Rauschenberg provides more of a story in his assembled works and Warhol elevates everything to star status and wants to show us that we're looking at copies of copies. Ruscha, for me, shows the kind of exasperation in noticing there is so much of the same, so readily there. That everything can demand your attention and is demanding it. Or as the artist Eleanor Antin said in relation to Ruscha's *Twenty-six Gas Stations*, it must have been "boring and tiring" to take the kind of trips where Ruscha photographed these. (Rosenzweig, 2000, 181.)

If there is an implicit agenda, or rather a pattern, it is that this being triggered by whatever is out there was now a sufficient reason to want to catalog something. The art is not in the subject matter itself, but it is in the selection and presentation. In, as Ruscha put it, "taking something that's not subject matter and making it subject matter". (Marshall, 2005, 133.) This elevation is also present in using the form of a book, which, when Ruscha started making them, were not yet seen as being a possible form of high art.

About his subject matter, Ruscha would say that he would choose what was available: "*Pools* came when I was swimming every day and *Parking Lots* when I felt like being aerial." Or still, "It was just a simple, straightforward way of getting the news and bringing it back. I think it's one of the best ways of just laying down the facts of what is out there. I didn't want to be allegorical or mystical or anything like that. It's nothing more than a training manual for people who want to know about things like that." (Bourdon, 1972, 151.)

Still, this is an incomplete statement. First, there is the selection of the subject matter. Like John Baldessari (also active in Los Angeles in the 1960s) Ruscha selected vernacular objects related to his surroundings (swimming pools, a type of apartment block) and added descriptive (and later slogan-like) wording to them that was also determined by where he was. As Ruscha put it: "I take things as I find them. A lot of these things come from the noise of everyday life." (Marshall, 2005, 162.)

Second, there is the repetition and the slight variations. As Rozenweig put it "In Ruscha's books, ordering is a device that increases ambiguity." (Rosenzweig, 2000, 185.) Like in the *Nine Swimming Pools*, where the repetition and variation both suggest the presence of a story and take it away.

For me, both the boredom and ambiguity mentioned in Ruscha's books can be used to invite the viewer to bring their own conceptions to the work. So, when you are looking at a bunch of pictures of pools, what you may be thinking about instead is your ideas of pools: for example, the pursuit of leisure and its status, ideas about having a pool, a bigger pool, and having the time to use it. What is being depicted (the pools) is different from what is being shown (the pursuit of leisure and status, for example). Or, as Ruscha himself put it, in relation to his later works taking monumental mountains as backdrops: "I'm not trying to show beauty, It's more like painting ideas of ideas of mountains." (Marshall, 2005, p 241.) Therefore, the casual or casual-seeming selection of the subject matter, together with the emptiness of the depiction – caused in part by the repetition – allow the viewer to read more, or even too much, into what is being shown. Not only to show there is more, but also to make the viewer realize that they are reading more into what is being shown.

And for me, in the end, that is what Ruscha's books are to me: an exercise in presenting a boring collection of what is in the end ordinary and through that exercise showing and sharing the simultaneous attraction and sadness of both making such a collection and looking at it.

Untitled Film Still #3
Cindy Sherman
1977
18 x 24 cm

Untitled Film Still #9
Cindy Sherman
1978
19.2 x 24 cm

1.2 – Cindy Sherman & Simulating Personas

"We're all products of what we want to project to the world. Even people who don't spend any time, or think they don't, on preparing themselves for the world out there – I think that ultimately they have for their whole lives groomed themselves to be a certain way, to present a face to the world."
CINDY SHERMAN

Untitled Film Stills

Maybe you've seen a work or two by Cindy Sherman already, especially the ones from the early series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) are very recognizable. A photograph of the artist with short blond hair standing at the sink doing the dishes, holding her midriff and looking over her shoulder past the camera with a somewhat distant look (*Untitled Film Still #3*, 1977). The artist on a tanning bed on a sun porch, cluttered with furniture, looking at something happening off-camera, the dunes and the ocean in the background (*Untitled Film Still #9*, 1978). The artist wearing a leopard print, a champagne glass in front of her and a cigarette in her hand, her mascara running from crying, again not looking at the camera but at someone else who could be in the room with her (*Untitled Film Still #27*, 1979).

The *Untitled Film Stills* are strangely familiar, even if you have not seen them before. Perhaps calling them instantly recognizable is a better description. This is because the works, like their title implies, actually look like they could be stills from untitled movies, and the viewer can imagine having seen similar scenes. They all portray female stereotypes, using props and studied looks in simplified settings, both domestic and urban. Women that are confident, tempting, unsure, despondent, or even subservient, always with more than one way of looking. In this sense, the works show something that we think we may have seen, but not seen portrayed this clearly.

This holds true both for the early Untitled Film Still works, which are largely indoors or in close quarters, and the later works, where Sherman puts herself in an anonymous urban setting, leaving a house, going down stairs in a matching twin-set, or walking down the street with a scarf covering her hair. And yet, because so little is actually shown, you can make of it what you want within the confines and parameters set by Sherman.

The Autobiographical and The Common

Sherman disclaimed that her works are autobiographical. This may be true for her herself, whereas she doesn't portray specific settings related to her personal experience, but I believe it is less true where she portrays this feminine normality that we all know, even if it is unacknowledged. In other words, the works are autobiographical, but not tied to Sherman's private experiences.

Untitled #463
Cindy Sherman
2007-08
174.2 x 182.9 cm

Untitled (Worthington Street)
Gregory Crewdson
2006
144.8 x 223.5 cm

The works are also not autobiographical just because she is a woman portraying stereotypes of women. For me, they are autobiographical because they make explicit (for all of us) what is implicit (for all of us) about the assumed roles of women, regardless of whether we are the object or subject.

And Sherman does this in a way – with recreated settings, studied snapshots, focusing on the dress, the look, the setting, the attention to small gestures – that makes Sherman's works slightly uncanny and almost unsettling. They look like snapshots, but what comes across is the exaggerated attention from Sherman and her knowing that she is performing a role. In the end, the works are so ordinary that they are abnormal. The *Untitled Film Stills* bear, as the critic Norman Bryson described it, the traces of dread and danger at the edges (of normal society). (Bryson, 1993, 223.)

Moving Into (Clichés of) the Grotesque

For me, Sherman lost this possibility of simultaneously immediate and unsettling identification in subsequent works, only to regain it later on. In the early 1980s she still used herself as the object (in the *Horizontals / Centerfolds* series looking up, vulnerably). She then start adding color (*Fairy Tales and Disasters*) and clearly fake background images (*Rear Screen Projections*), but still used images that we may recognize from movies, with Sherman playing a role, albeit a more assertive one. Later Sherman adds stronger (chiaroscuro) lighting, dressing up more and more, and also becomes more and more androgynous, more and more grotesque (using fake breasts and other fake body parts).

Untitled #96
Cindy Sherman
1981
61 x 121.9 cm

In the mid 1980s Sherman's works became easier for the viewer to gawk at, to look at the works as portraying the other, and consequently to look at the works in a disengaged manner. In the late 1980s it was destruction and sickness or straight references to genre paintings (like Holbein and Caravaggio in *History Portraits*, 1989-90). Then in the early 1990s sex and its representation, using disassembled and reassembled manikins (cf. the puppets of Hans Belmer). Sherman herself was challenged by this, noting around 1992 that, "I don't want to be purely decorative and make pretty, odd images." This shift by Sherman into more aggressively unpleasant terrain has been described as a reaction, a ploy even, to collectors and the easy consumption of her earlier works.

In recent works, Sherman returned to more easily recognizable, even identifiable subject matter, including wannabe or washed-up actors (*Hollywood/ Hamptons Types*, 2000-2002) and older well-off society women (*Society Portraits*, 2008), although the kind and level of identification depends largely on who is viewing them, and the viewer could be making fun of the other, as also described by Susan Sontag in *On Photography*.

So Real It's Fake

If we take Sherman's early and later work as a start and end point, the interesting question for me is when and how does representing the ordinary start to become unsettling and when does it stop to be so?

This question can be divided into a number of smaller parts. First of all, what is the influence of staging? Then, is it important to be able to identify with the subjects? And finally, do stereotypes add or take away, and does narrative add or take away?

Staging

Sherman's early works share similarities with the works of Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall: clearly fake staging of something that could have happened. But Crewdson always literally suggests tragedy, using common cinematic elements such as dramatic beams of light or clear indicators of tragedy or at least an event, such as detritus in the scene (for example, a gaping hole in a floor). Sherman is over the top, but Crewdson even more so, to the point of distancing the work again.

With Crewdson, it's just stuff that happens to other people, stuff to look at. Too much drama is added, too much drama is literally shown. (Below, we will see that melodrama does not necessarily distance the viewer, if understated.)

With Wall, what distances the viewer is that his pictures are perfect: high-fidelity, in hyper-focus, and everyone in the scene is doing something, if even idling or just sitting about. Like with Crewdson, this makes the work of Wall less easy to identify with for me. It is, again, something to look at. A puzzle almost.

La Notte
Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni.
Perf. Jeanne Moreau, Marcello Mastroianni, Monica Vitti
1961
Film

By contrast, Sherman's works are almost low-fi. A few props, cropped framing. This is exactly what makes them more real again. And Sherman also said that the intention was that her pictures would "seem cheap and trashy … I didn't want them to look like art." (Tomkins, 2000, 78). So, it is not only important what is being shown (the quotidian) but also how it is being shown (in almost quotidian fashion). In other words, it is not the recognizability of the image, but the recognizability of the setting that is confrontational.

Identifiability

By extension, it is not so much about how something is portrayed technically, but about what is being portrayed and with what attitude: the supernormal situations, the little vignettes of daily situations enlarged by either something casual or by taking everything external away. Like Antonioni does in his 'alienation trilogy' about modern bourgeois life in *L'Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L'Eclisse* (1962). In these movies nothing really happens, or the actual story is at least not about what is being shown. And the most poignant moments in these movies – about the inability to communicate – are not

telegraphed, not announced in advance. You almost recognize them despite yourself, with a shock almost, precisely because you thought that what you were looking at was completely ordinary.

A little earlier, Yasujiro Ozu did the same in *Late Spring* (1949), *Early Summer* (1951), and *Tokyo Story* (1953). While more clearly melodramatic, these movies are still very understated, using fixed shots filmed in closed quarters and with little dialogue between the actors. The important moments are when something is left unsaid. For me, this unhurried life-like tempo and vernacular staging allows me to be drawn closer to the story, even if the staging is not of my time or geography.

Tokyo Story
Dir. Yasujirô Ozu.
Perf. Chishu Ryu,
Setsuko Hara
1953
Film

Stereotypes

Sherman portrays stereotypes, more specifically female stereotypes, and she uses her own body to do this. But in doing so, she uses her body as a mere prop also, something to stage the pictures with. In the stereotypes she portrays, she indicates or signals (in look, stance, clothing, setting, etc.) being vulnerable, seductive or powerful, but it always remains latent in some way.

For me Sherman's work is not directly related to identity politics, and Sherman herself has always said that she is not performing any fantasies when staging her pictures. Regardless, I believe that Sherman's works are at their most believable (and therefore, strongest) when as a viewer I can imagine that Sherman (or actually, the person portrayed or the one behind the camera directing) can imagine being the person in the picture.

Sherman is completely serious in her work, and I think it shows in many of her works. In an interview with the altogether more camp director John Waters, when he mentioned she'd been called a practical joker by the press and asking whether she agreed, Sherman said: "No, I don't think so. That sort of implies I'm making fun." (Respini, 2012, 70.)

For Sherman, this also means that she needs to work by herself. In the same interview with Waters, when asked if it would be easier if someone helped her with the work: "It's weird to be in character around other people. Occasionally, if someone happened to see me, I felt like it became a game, even though I was taking it seriously. I'd be working and suddenly. 'Oh look at you; you're so funny, so weird.' " (Respini, 2012, 70.)

So, I believe that when using stereotypes – at least in Sherman's works – the stereotypes work best if they are believably portrayed, if the viewer can believe that the person in that picture can actually be that person. And this is also where humor comes into play. There can be pastiche and absurd humor in the stereotypes, exaggeration even, but not to the point of silliness. Sherman creates a series of dramatic personae, with their own presence, thereby showing

that appearance is all we have to go by, and is also limited and conventional (limited to types) at the same time. In the end, appearances are just that, appearances.

Narrative
Sherman doesn't give titles to her works, but a setting is always provided, however minimal. However, she doesn't go further than that, she doesn't really fill in the details: literally by tight cropping and sometimes crude staging, and figuratively by having just one person there who is not really doing much of anything. If there is a narrative, it is implied.

Above, I mentioned Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall as photographers with whose work Sherman's work shares at least technical similarities. Sherman's work shares perhaps more similarities with the works of Sam Samore, Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, or even Richard Prince, where – like these artists – she takes a 'small' image that allows the viewer to make up the rest. At least in her early (*Untitled Film Stills*) and later (*Hollywood/Hamptons* and *Social Types*) work, Sherman allows the viewer enough leeway to make up their own story, bringing their own conceptions and convictions to the works.

1.3 – Mike Kelley & Subverting Assumptions

"You can say that's just entertainment, and maybe [art] is. But perhaps religion and politics are just entertainment too."
MIKE KELLEY*, in an interview with Eva Meyer-Hermann, November 2011*

Arena #7 (Bears) (1990)

Three stuffed toy bears and two monkeys sit on the ground around a white receiving blanket. Two twin bears sit together on one side, on a small piece of wood as if on a bench. The blanket is big and the animals are all a little far apart. They cannot real talk to each other or else they would have to shout. Of course, this is silly, since stuffed animals do not talk, let alone shout. And yet, the work evokes this kind of feeling. While you may not remember this exact image from your own past, you recognize it as a memorable image, a recognizable setting of a child at play.

But what is it about these animals being so far apart, and so meticulously arranged? And they are color-matched too, all earthly colors: brown, taupe, yellow-gold, with the blanket a creamy white. This is one very precise child playing with his bears. It may be a recognizable setting but it is a strange one at that.

And why the title *Arena* #7, are the toy bears performing, competing? The title gives some direction, but only ambiguously so.

The Familiar and Ambiguity

There are more *Arena* works, more toys on blankets, like *Arena #8 (Leopard)* and *Arena #10 (Dogs)* both also from 1990. They are all recognizable, using familiar elements (stuffed toys and comfort blankets), and all a little strange.

And there is more use of stuffed toys in the work of Kelly as well. Sometimes these are simple combinations on a small scale such as with *Estral Star #3* (1989) and *Manly Craft #2* (1989), sowing or tying two small toys together. Others are on a large scale to the point of removing recognizability and affect, such as with *Brown star* (1991), a cluster of five large bundles of brown fluffy toy animals suspended above the ground by pulleys, or *Pink and Grey* (1991), two large bundles of pink and grey fluffy toy animals respectively, suspended from pulleys and held in balance by a large weight.

Similarly, in almost all of Kelley's work there is a use of either vernacular objects or vernacular references, sometimes small, sometimes large, sometimes compact, sometimes sprawling. For example, very spectacularly in the series

Arena #7 (Bears)
Mike Kelley
1990
Found stuffed animals, blanket
29.2 x 134.6 x 124.5 cm

Arena #10 (Dogs)
Mike Kelley
1990
Stuffed animals on afghan, blanket
29.2 x 312.4 x 81.3 cm

Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstructions (2000-2011), reenacting scenes from found pictures of school plays, ordered in *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* (1991) with more than 100 found craft dolls organized along formal lines (color, construction) and arranged on simple tables, or in his *Kandors* (1999, 2007, 2009, 2011), referencing the world of the comic book character Superman.

But why does Kelley use these materials? These combinations? Why does he present them in the way he does?

With *Estral Star* there is a sexual allusion in the form (two stuffed toy monkeys in what could be a sexual pose) and in the title. The viewer is quick to associate the work with child abuse – and therefore also with the supposed abuse of Kelley. Something similar happens with *Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood and Manipulating Mass Produced Idealized Objects* (1990), with two pictures (one regular black and white, one sepia toned, each slightly different) of two people engaging sexually with stuffed toys and what looks like excrement. Kelley made this work of an invented scatological toy fetish in response to earlier reactions to his works with stuffed toys: "Kelley must be some kind of pervert." There is some inherent shock value in the combination of what is being displayed (toys! naked people! poo! in a cellar!) but in the end it remains much more on a safe level, for example compared to Paul McCarthey. Here, Kelley tries to distance the viewer further than with for example *Estral Star* – or at least make clear that what is in the picture is not real. He does so by using two different prints of the same picture and actually telling the viewer that it is fake and constructed with the title. Still, the reaction to this work was, in the words of Kelley, "another example of how viewers project upon me, the artist, the belief systems they think are being represented in my artworks. The idea that artworks could simply be constructs is somehow impossible for them to accept." (Meyer-Hartmann, 2013, 371.) In that sense, Kelley's work reflects also on how we view the innocent and relate it to the squalid, in the process becoming a kind of collective autobiography.

Manipulating Mass-Produced Idealized Objects
Mike Kelley
1990
35.5 x 28cm

I like Mike Kelley's work, but it is not always easy to read. There is a story in his works (even if it is not his own), but the story is complex. Like with the work of Andreas Slominski, there is something left out and it is up to the viewer to fill it. But in the end, the viewer is wrong with whatever they fill in, and the work becomes a feeling, a feeling of a fetish, chaos, the mad-man collection. As a viewer, you never know if you are reading the work correctly or even if the work can be read at all, or even requires reading. As Welchman put it, Kelley offers a kind of close but 'open reading' that punctures the 'social veneer' and probes underneath his rearrangements of mass culture, and Kelley does so by having his works navigate between 'jokes', 'red herrings', and 'real issues'. (Welchman, 2013, 333.)

So, the use of these materials, these vernacular, at times soft and feminine materials, is not so much dictated by Kelley's own experiences or associations, but by those of the viewer. It enables a play on the viewer, one that creates ambiguity. By using familiar materials in an unfamiliar way Kelley creates an ambiguity that is not easy to dismiss exactly because it uses the familiar. If you find the five bears around a blanket of *Arena* #7 only silly, you find yourself silly. At the same time, because of the connotations that the viewer has brought to the work, the viewer cannot embrace the works entirely at face value either, at least not without consequences. If you read *Arena* #7 as only cute or only depraved, you mark yourself like that. As a viewer, you have to stay in the in-between.

In that sense, Kelley's work is subversive; not because of his subject matter, but in how he plays with the viewer's expectations. It is a sort of punk attitude but more abstract, once removed.
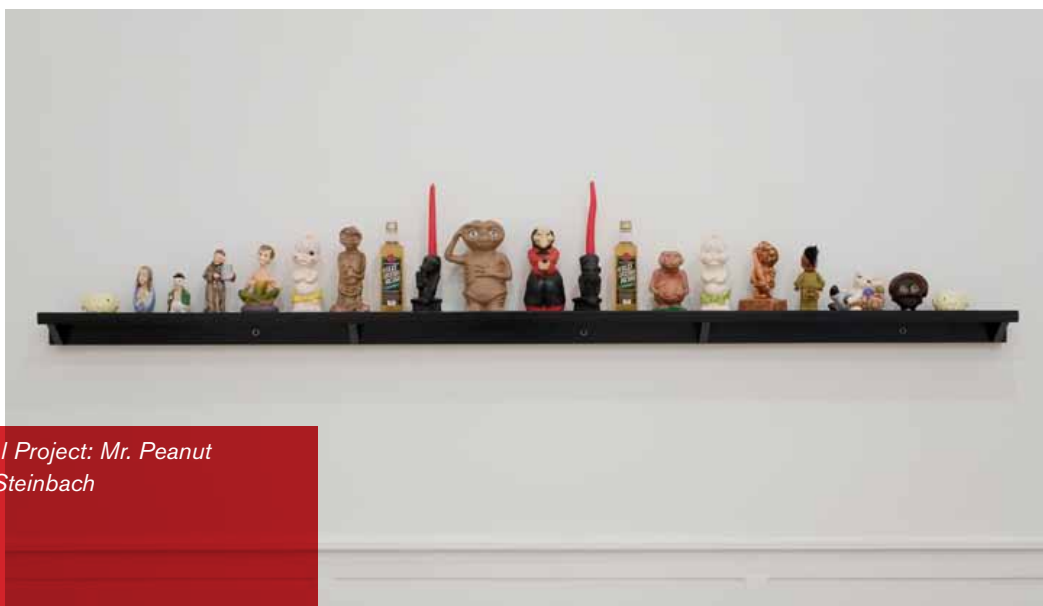
Chaos and Selection

Kelley's works – especially his earlier ones – feel like gonzo works, their aesthetic, their scale sometimes, their reference to craft, to the mundane. At first it all seems a bit haphazard and a bit much, to the point of being overwhelming. In the words of critic Jerry Saltz, they are "a maniacal act of replication and multiplication" or, more succinctly, "clusterfuck aesthetics." (Jerry Saltz, 2005.) Likewise, Kelley's works are frequently attributed as having a blue-collar aesthetic, especially his early drawings that feel like the doodles or drawings of an angry kid or your creepy neighbor (for example in *Reconstructed History* (1989) or *Roth/Mouse/Wolverton Drawing Exercises* (1993)), or when he uses trinkets and bottle caps to make paintings based on color or what looks like a big manatee with a crown (in his series *Memory Ware* (2000-2010)).

As for the blue-collar aesthetic, as Kelley himself put it: "Well, I might come from that [blue-collar background], but I have no love for it." (Kelley, 2004.) I believe Kelley, his aesthetics are not a glorification of anti-aesthetics, as I believe they are the case with for example Erik van Lieshout. Here again, it is as much on the viewer as anything else to label Kelley's works as blue-collar. As for the "clusterfuck", I think that Saltz is simply being dismissive of it at large, also with other artists.

What is then the aesthetic choice of Kelley? Why use these materials abundantly? Why choose these subjects? I believe that Kelley deals with what he sees, what he (and us) are familiar with, interested in. Not in the sense of confronting or psychoanalysis, but more in the sense of exploring; it is his way of dealing with the chaos of what surrounds us.

Everything is fair game but in the end Kelley only uses things, items, themes, artifacts and references that he has been confronted with, in touch with, albeit not necessarily directly. Sex, pop, craft, education, value, youth, institutions, groups and individuals: it is at hand and needs to be dealt with. The subjects are also all very conventional. And yet, it is not simple selection. When dealing with the material at hand, Kelley makes it his own, adding layers of (supposed)

Special Project: Mr. Peanut
Haim Steinbach
2008

Special Project: Mr. Peanut
Haim Steinbach
2008
(detail)

meaning, of ambiguity, combining and reworking in the selection and presentation, distancing the viewer with a title. Like Richard Prince does, using contemporary desires, but with more allusion. The chaos, the clusterfuck aesthetics if you will, makes for works that cannot be read in a quick moment. Ultimately, Kelley creates this ambiguous push-and-pull, identification and distance, the viewer in the in-between.

Also a bit like Richard Prince, Kelly uses many different forms although they are each recognized as art (even if they look at times like outsider art): performance, drawing, painting, sculpture, photography and video, installations, and often with taking a formal approach to each. As Welchman put it, it relates to Baldessari's "organized interruption of code based practices." (Welchman, 2013, 334.)

Here also there is almost a lack of being able to select from the chaos (of available forms) other than by making a broad selection. In that sense, the individual forms are very conventional, but the wide selection is less conventional, perhaps even subversive, in this case against the art world.

Haim Steinbach once made a work of things he picked up in Kelley's home and studio, displaying them in order on the minimalist shelves typical of Steinbach's works: little dolls (Maria, E.T., a chick), two bedsprings, a sea of what looks like little urns, and a Mr. Peanut doll. (*Special Project: Mr. Peanut / Haim Steinbach on Mike Kelley*, 2008.) For me, Steinbach's *Mr. Peanut* work is a good summary of Kelley's works and practice: using collections of pop and daily items to make complicated formal structures and constellations that are recognizable and familiar and yet strange.

Osmosis and Excess
Aernout Mik
2005
video installation,
temporary architecture

1.4 – Aernout Mik & Patterns and Representation

"In my staged pieces I try to come to a point at which moments are suddenly produced that feel closer to documentary than fiction. In that moment, the people are no longer merely acting, but instead an actual event is taking place."
MIK *in an interview on the occasion of a 2013 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam*

Osmosis and Excess

Mik's work *Osmosis and Excess* (2005) begins with a shot of a discount pharmacy, the boxes of pills neatly stacked, a man on the phone. The camera is moving slowly, wandering through the scene, keeping distance. Because of this, and because the image itself is about twice the width of widescreen cinema and projected on a very large screen, there is plenty of time to take in the image. Still, there is not that much happening and little that directly asks your attention. What is there to look at? Was that a fallen ceiling light fixture on the counter? What is the story that the man is telling to his colleagues, being the center of attention?

Did Mik find this scene or make it? Something enters the image and something leaves the image, all of it ever so slowly.

Then, unexpectedly, about three minutes into the film, a man in blue overalls appears, his workman clothes muddy. He and his colleague pick up a piece of wood covered in mud and put it down elsewhere, but it remains unclear what they are working on. All the time, the camera travels slowly around the image, around the scene. When will something happen?

Then, about six minutes into the film, a different scene. An extremely long shot of cars in a meadow on a hill, hundreds of them, haphazardly strewn around, chaos. Parking for a festival maybe? This is something so large that Mik could not have made it, it must exist out there somewhere. The second shot of the scene, it becomes clear that this is a car graveyard, old cars, no longer functional. The camera keeps searching across the scene. After a few minutes, also a couple of steady shots, each very long, about 30 seconds. This is more about something not happening.

About nine minutes into the film, children in school uniform beating a piñata in a meadow. This scene arranged by Mik. Then a second piñata and a third. This one a wide boom shot, the camera again travelling along the scene, again the long takes, and the car graveyard in the far background.

About 11 minutes into the film, a wide shot from far away, with both the graveyard, the children and their piñatas and now also a herd of cows grazing, continuing for about two minutes. After that, we return to the pharmacy. By now, Mik seems to have made his point long ago, and the film turns out to be repetitive, to the point of being boring.

After 15 minutes into the film, we see different (younger) children playing with toy cars in the mud. As it turns out, it is the mud that is in the pharmacy. The pharmacy was constructed by Mik after all then.

After 20 minutes, I give up, but the film continues for another 25 minutes, continuously but slowly changing between the pharmacy, the cars and the children with their piñatas and their toy cars.

The whole work is some 45 minutes long, much too long to watch in fact, there is not that much happening and it all takes a long time to happen. At one point, the constantly wandering camera gets irksome, looking at the work tiring.
I guess it is not really meant to be watched from beginning to end.

There is no clear story to the film, no exposé, no resolution. Prompted by clear images, clear allusions, I can fill the images with my own ideas and preconceptions about it: the pharmacy with some kind of destruction stand for consumerism gone wrong, the car graveyard for more destruction and consumerism, products discarded at a large scale, and the children hitting the bejesus out of piñatas, playing with toy cars in a scene of destruction stand for mimicking violence, learning to throw away, for innocence lost.

Allegorical
For me *Osmosis and Excess* is strongly allegorical. In fact, many of Mik's works are allegorical. Like *Dispersion Room* (2004), with office workers sitting around in desperation, waiting for God knows what. Or *Schoolyard* (2009), which is like a passion play set in a schoolyard, with groups of high school students moving about, different groups forming, other groups looking, a scuffle, flirting, and a student being carried around as if on a bier.

Mik's works are also allegorical because while there may not be a clear story in them there is a clear moral. His works never portray something innocent, they always refer to big issues of today, to political and social themes. Groups, consumerism, control and power, emergence and failure to emerge of fair social systems, justice, democracy, the media.

For example, the early work *Softer Catwalk in Collapsing Rooms* (1999) shows actors walking around in what looks like a destroyed movie set of the inside of a house, with thin walls, and a few props like a bedframe and a toilet. In *Piñata* (1999), people smashing cinder blocks and furniture in an otherwise empty interior. Works that are even more clearly than *Osmosis and Excess* critique of consumerism, more symbolic in a simpler manner, lacking attributes that give it a place, lacking detailed choreography.

The titles of Mik's works, like *Osmosis and Excess*, are political in nature and provide a clear direction for the work. They frame the works with an unambiguous and clear reference to the themes of group, power, emergence, control, decadence, etc. I am not sure that this is required. For example, if the title for *Osmosis and Excess* would have instead been *Pharmacy, Cars, Children,* it would have given less direction to the work, but the work would have been clear regardless. More importantly perhaps, with such a clear title as *Osmosis and Excess* it becomes difficult for the viewer to see the work outside of the given frame, and they are already presented with the solution. An allegory, but not one for the viewer to discover.

Dispersion Room also seems to contain another reference, namely to the Luis Buñuel film *El ángel exterminador* (The Exterminating Angel, 1962), in which a group of bourgeois dinner guests are prevented from leaving the dinner room at the end of the evening by an invisible barrier. They simply do not leave, and at first they still keep up appearances, being polite, but the veneer of civility slowly but surely disappears as they become more desperate. Yet, this seems almost as too much a straight cultural reference for Mik and I wonder if it is intentional.

A common type of intentional reference that is present in Mik's works is that to media tropes. For example in *Plywood Dwelling* (2009), with eight screens showing security-camera like footage from Asian people being holed up in ramshackle plywood housing. A direct reference, if not a straight reenactment, of sweatshop housing situations.

While there is great coherence between the works of Mik, at this level, the politically allegorical, I have difficulty comparing his work to other artists, except maybe Marcel Broodthaers at the level of looking at power, or Philippe Parreno with his work *June 8, 1968* (2009) re-enacting the view from the train carying Robert Kennedy's corpse from New York to Washington on that same day or *Invisible Boy* (2010), a 5-minute film with an illegal immigrant Chinese child in Manhattan and the make-believe monsters that inhabit his imagination.

Staging
The allegorical nature of Mik's work is closely connected to the fact that he stages the settings that he then films. However, the level of staging has not always been the same in Mik's work as it varies.

In an early work for example (*3 Laughing and 4 Crying*, 1998) there are seven people in sports clothing, sitting on the floor doing what the title describes. Staging is almost absent, only present in the clothing. And in the absurdity of the setting. This would never happen in real life.

Later, Mik's works get more elaborate, more people, more props, more set dressing, like with *Osmosis and Excess*. In that sense, this development is comparable to that of Sherman, who also started out relatively simple and then built up to more elaborate settings. Yet, there is a key difference, and that is

The Exterminating Angel
Dir. Luis Buñuel
1962
Film

June 8, 1968
Philippe Parreno
2009

that the elaborate staging of Mik seems to be directed at making the work more believable, a better reference to what can happen in real life, whereas the more and more elaborate staging of Sherman takes a turn to the more fantastical. However, for me, the more elaborate staging of Mik makes what I am watching less real, especially if you are familiar with his work or see more than one at a time.

Heartney, talking about the accident scene staged in *Refraction* (2004), sums up the playing with reality: "Though *Refraction* has all the earmarks of an objective news report of an accident scene, it reminds us that even an 'eyewitness' account can be false." (Heartney, 2008, 128.) Similarly, the handout for a large Mik show in the Stedelijk Museum in 2013 also referred to the artist playing with the real/the fake. The real/fake duality is present in Mik's works, like it is in Cindy Sherman's. However, where Sherman plays with imagined recognizability, the obvious fakeness and sometimes the brief suspension of disbelief is less jarring with Sherman than it is with Mik since with Sherman this fakeness matches the content of Sherman's work, its concept. Sherman's work succeeds at keeping me suspended between the real/fake. With Mik however, I am always looking at something staged, from a little distance, and there is no idea that I am watching something real beyond the real staging. It becomes nothing more than an intellectual exercise for me to complete: "Yes, the media lies, I agree!"

Screen Test:
Dennis Hopper
Andy Warhol
1964
16 mm film, black and
white, silent

One reason for this strong sense of stagedness is that the actors on Mik's work seem to work along a ruleset, they are in a bounding box, restricted by set parameters and rules, acting like AI in a computer game. It is like method acting, but with a ruleset. For example, in *Park* (2002), a group of people are behaving erratically, jumping around, making noises, around a tree with a picture of a young man on it. However, they are not really freaking out, they are only pretending. And even if the pretension, the existence of make-believe, would be the actual subject of the work, there is too much else to focus on and I am looking at a staging of a staging of a staging. Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964-1966), where he films people head-on for seven minutes, with some starting to act, others not, deals with this also, without all the (allegorical) baggage.

Dispersion Room
Aernout Mik
2004
video installation,
temporary architecture
(installation view)

Another reason that Mik's work always keeps a distance is that he sometimes extends the filmed sets into the gallery space, and uses custom constructions as screens. When props from the film are put in the gallery space, like for example office furniture in *Dispersion Room* (2004), the viewer is at the same

time invited to be more part of the film and kept remote exactly because they are reminded that they are watching something staged. This is not necessarily a bad thing – and for example the artists Cardiff and Miller exaggerate this even more when they build small stages for their works such as in *Playhouse* (1997) – but in the case of Mik, it creates a further distance that can be unwanted, unnecessary at best.

Sometimes Mik doesn't stage at all, like when he used unused raw news footage from the Yugoslav civil war in the 1990s to create the same kind of bewildering flow of people moving in *Raw Footage* (2006), but this time very much real. Here, the absurdity and uncanniness of real life comes to the foreground and Mik is very good at selecting it, like when he chooses to show a militia man casually firing a large caliber machine gun all while sitting in a rotan chair or men waiting near a tent, shaded from the sun by a Coca-Cola umbrella. War is supposed to be more organized and serious than this!

But even here Mik chose to play with the setting, whereas in the same year as *Raw Footage* he made *Scapegoats* (2006) in which young men, tired and downtrodden, are being rounded up in a sports complex by the militia. Like in *Raw Footage*, the camera sometimes focuses on something mundane, a moment or place in the scene where the action is not happening. Unlike in *Raw Footage* however, the roles are sometimes turned upside down in *Scapegoats* with the guards becoming the guarded, and the reverse. Here again, either the allegory detracts from the more formal aspects of the staged role reversal and the likes. Or, reversely, everything else detracts from the moral, the allegory.

The separation would have been clearer if Mik had not chosen for a facsimile but for an even more clear staging. For example, by not trying to make the militia men look real or choosing actors that look Central European, but by using the same roles in a different setting with actors less readily identifiable with actual events. Mik said about *Scapegoats* that it shows "how a state of emergency touches upon normality." (Höller, 2013, 139.) For me, *Raw Footage* already shows this low-key chaos of civil war, this ambiguity of friend/foe, and more clearly and with more impact than *Scapegoats*. In this case, real life is strange enough as it is.

In *Tongues and Assistants* (2013) Mik combines both footage from a large pentecostal church in Brazil with a small worship-like setting (with rows of chairs facing the screen) and actors playing museum security guards in a room to the side, looking at the viewers. The footage is very good, because it is actually real. Mik focuses well on the small absorbed movements and the public (auto-staged) displays of ecstasy of those attending. This way, he is able to exaggerate what is happening and draw focus to it, to an extent even control it. As for the staging of the work itself in the museum setting, I don't know how this adds to the work; for me it only makes it less clear.

Stereotypes
As pointed out above, in Mik's works it is almost immediately clear that something is not right, that the scene that you are watching is not real. At a later point there is recognition of the stereotypical scene and the stereotypical roles

portrayed. Perhaps there is also some form of identification with these stereotypes by the viewer. As Osswald put it: "All these scenes [in *Scapegoats*, *Middlemen*, *Osmossis and Excess* and *Refraction*] appear strangely familiar to any viewer schooled in the mass media. Every one of us knows these or similar images from television, newspapers or the Internet. Nevertheless – or perhaps for that very reason – something is always different. Something is not quite right". (Osswald, 2011, 45.)

However, the acting, the acts being filmed are in the end so empty, the acting even less than minimal, that you must conclude that Mik isn't that interested in an actual portrayal apart from the missing story. The movements and roles of each figure are seemingly so random that surely they must follow clear instructions to perform like a certain type of person, within the group on set. The actors are reduced to extras, to stereotypes and clichés.

If we look at the actors in *Middlemen* (2001) for example, Mik makes them so clearly identifiable as stockbrockers that they are all that and there is little ambiguity left to find them sympathetic or even different from one another. And with a title like *Middlemen* strongly framing the work how can you see those portrayed other than a bunch of dunces, guileless peons of capital?

So then, if all the extras in a film are interchangeable, is it more about roles? About how we are each forced to perform certain roles, depending on the situation? Even then, there is little variance in this message. It is again stereotypical, without play, without humor.

For me, all this is a little too strong. Because of Mik's overt use of stereotypes, the didactic message about the potentiality of roles being reversed, the fact that I am being hit over the head with it, I am less willing to go along with him in what exactly he has to say. Identification by me as a viewer is more difficult, it grates. I have to surrender myself too much to Mik's view. I can either agree with Mik's commentary – and how can I disagree, it is a very polite view – and that is the end of that, or I can disagree for it being too simplistic and then that is the end of that too. Mik tells, he doesn't show.

Movement and Repetition
On a more formal level, Mik's work is about the form of telling, not what is being told. The constant searching camera and the long takes mimic our own wandering eye and attention. The elliptical repetition, showing the same over and over again only with slight variations, signify different accounts by different storytellers and the workings of our memory. But why then with such an overt political message? Is the only message of Mik that the media lies? That everything and nothing is real? That social roles are fluid? In that case, he takes a very roundabout way of telling it, almost hiding that message among so many others.

Daniel Birnbaum, in his essay in the book published on the occasion of Mik being awarded the Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for Art in 2002 – at a time that Mik had already made the overtly political *Middlemen* and *Glutinosity* –

Raw Footage
Aernout Mik
2006

Scape Goats
Aernout Mik
2006

relates Mik's work almost exclusively to time and its elasticity (in line with philosophers Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze), to the looping with slight variations, the unclear beginning and end, etc. etc. in the work. (Birnbaum, 2002.) For me, this is overly simplistic. How can works like *Osmosis and Excess*, with children playing in the mud with cars and hitting piñatas, and *Middlemen*, staging a breakdown of alpha-type persons after a stockmarket crash, be only about time? Impossible.

Even then, if we look at *Osmosis and Excess* for example, the possibility of the camera being a wandering eye is so consistently applied, the use of steady shots such a relief, that here also the viewer is hit over the head with it. There is little room for the viewer to discover it.

For me, since Mik's works are so strongly allegorical and so clearly staged they loose most of their ability for ambiguity. So, even though Mik's works share on a formal level elements of supernormality present in the works of Ruscha, Sherman and Kelley, in the end they do not employ supernormality.

Chapter 2 Context and Signifi- cation

Introduction

Sometimes something can be *so* normal, that it becomes more than normal. Like the grey car on a grey parking lot under a grey sky that I asked the reader to imagine in the introduction. With this strange, exagerrated normality that somehow sits above normality comes a possibility of reflection and comment on normality. It is so firmly within the area of normality that it is above and beyond ordinary normality. In the introduction I used the word 'supernormality' for it. But when is something normal *so* normal that it becomes strange? When is it supernormal?

In the previous chapter, I looked at how four different artists use the quotidian, that which surrounds us, to highlight and exaggerate normality, to comment on it. In this chapter I would like to look at how normality – and the exaggeration of it – is a subject in daily life more generally, namely in the domains of mass culture that is produced and in our daily usage of mass consumer products, also contrasted to the domain of art.

Daily Life

Michael Haneke's film *Der siebente Kontinent* (The Seventh Continent, 1989) portrays the slow descent into madness of a middle-class family. After going through the motions for a very long time, they tell the outside world they will leave for Australia. They methodically collect all their belongings (including withdrawing all their savings in cash) and have a final sumptuous delicatessen-bought dinner.

The next morning they get up, close the curtains, methodically destroy every single possession in the house, and flush their money down the toilet. Ultimately, in a final act of rebellion, the family destroys themselves, killing their young daughter before committing suicide with sleeping pills. It seems to be the only logical conclusion to their normal existence.

Der siebente Kontinent
Dir. Michael Hanneke.
Perf. Birgit Doll,
Dieter Berner
1989
Film

Haneke portrays this in a very straightforward manner. The focus is on daily activities: eating breakfast, feeding the fish, dropping off the kids, going to work, going through the car wash, going through the motions. Even the destruction is filmed straightforward, filmed from a certain distance or tightly framed with the heads of the actors cut off. To me, this lack of apparent drama (or histrionics) makes the film altogether highly dramatic.

Supernormality and Modes of Resistance

What do we see in *Der siebente Kontinent*? For me, we see something that is so normal, depicted so normally, that it becomes strange again. And it becomes even more strange than when it would have been something strange

that is depicted, or something that is depicted strangely. At the start, there isn't much of a story, the man goes to work, the wife goes to work, and the daughter is at school. And yet, it is all a little strange: the form foretells that something will happen later in the film.

So, at first, in form, this film is an example of the normal and how it is portrayed, normally or supernormally.

Second, in content, it is about normality and supernormality and how to deal with it in daily life. In this case, how are you forced to act and in what ways can you act when contemporary life is overwhelming, when there is a sense of alienation? The family in *Der siebente Kontinent* acts with violence, albeit violence directed at themselves. Is violence the only way to act or are there other modes of resistance?

Third, it is about the film itself as an artifact and about what it can do itself. Can the film be *that* normal that it is more surreptitious in its message, in what and how it communicates? In other words, how can it act?

In this chapter, I will look at supernormality in form, in content, and as an act, in both mass culture and in mass consumption.

I will first look at some instances of how normality is portrayed in mass culture. How is normality looked at and how is it portrayed, and is there supernormality in mass culture? I will find that while normality is ever-present in mass culture, supernormality is largely absent in it, both in form and content, but most of all in its impossibility to act.

I will continue by looking at how supernormality comes up in the larger sphere of mass consumption. How is supernormality executed, how is it performed, and how does the consumer, the viewer, experience supernormality in their daily life? I will find that while in mass consumption there is more potential for supernormality, it is not always there. When it is there, it is not always recognizable and therefore not performed consciously or perceived at all, limiting its effect.

At the end of this chapter, I will loop back to my analyses in the first chapter and ask myself whether supernormality emerges differently in art, compared to how it does so in mass culture and mass consumption, and if so, how. How does supernormality relate to the work of Ruscha, Sherman, Kelley and Mik, and that of their contemporaries? I will conclude that art can tender a more distant view of normality, and therefore a more reflexive and reflective one, allowing for more supernormality and for the viewer to take a different perspective. I will conclude that while it is mass culture and mass consumption that are the substrate to art in which supernormality is present, it is art that equips for an alternative mode of resistance: that of *becoming* supernormal.

2.1 – Supernormality in Mass Culture

The Everyday and Everyman; the Strange and the Other
In much of mass culture (used here narrowly as popular literature, movies and television) there is a mythology of the everyday and everyman, and of the strange and the other.

As for the everyday and everyman, it is celebrated in narratives by showing the remarkable and by showing the extraordinary. This is most often in the form of normal everyday people performing extraordinary acts or being subjected to extraordinary circumstances, but it can also be reversed, by showing extraordinary people performing normal acts. (Normal here being the predominant group: in Western society this is white, male and middle-class.)

In much of popular culture, from Homer to Hollywood movies, the narrative is about the first form described above, that of normal people overcoming extraordinary odds. The storyline of a typical movie is one where the hero who is down on his luck picks himself up, transforms himself, and is finally reunited with his family. In a reality show the normal is extended to the point of being protracted: the level and amount of attention given to the ordinary seemingly renders it extraordinary. In yet another example, that of gossip magazines, there is a movement between the two opposites of normal stuff happening to extra-normal people (a new dress or holiday for the rich and famous) and extra-normal stuff happening to normal people (septuplets being born). For me, in all these examples, these kind of forms of mass culture, the normal is highlighted in a conventional manner both in form and content: supernormality is absent.

The reverse, namely the mythology of the strange and the other, comes from a need to view the strange and the other as exactly that. The freaks, the exotic, the poor: all need to be estranged, to be separated from the normal. After all, 'they are not like us.' In form this can be achieved by either showing them normally or strangely. For example, in straightforward documentary or using crooked shooting angles, color filters, etc., when portraying drug addicts. But, with either approach the viewer is primed that they will see something strange. With it comes an expectation of the viewer that the strange and the other will provide them with some kind of experience, for example good feelings about (the other) having extraordinary fortitude in bad luck or despair and feeling lucky that they (being not strange) are not in the same situation. Yet, this still only reinforces the normal: the normal is celebrated in a conventional storytelling form, in this case by juxtaposition with the strange and the other. Here too, supernormality is absent.

Absence of Supernormality

Why exactly is supernormality absent? In the examples given above, in fact in most of Western storytelling, the understanding of experience predominantly follows a common pattern: from problem (tension) to solution (resolution) with a kind of transformation or learning experience in between. Normality, the everyday, and the experience of every man, is seen as valuable and is highlighted, including its supremacy over the strange and the other. This normality is something that the viewer can comfortably identify with. Yet, it can only be made special through a classic story arc and by contrast with the abnormal: first something extraordinary has to happen before the ordinary can be celebrated. If only the normal would be told, there would not be much of a story. This game can be played with either the normal or the abnormal as subject matter, but in both cases it is always made very clear through conventional form that it is the normal we are looking at.

To go back to our example of *Der siebente Kontinent*, the foretelling that there is something strange with the family is conventional. In that sense, supernormality is absent in the form. It is however present in the content: the supernormality of their daily life drives the family insane.

Acting Supernormally

In the above examples, indeed in all of mass culture, while the normal is a predominant subject matter and the supernormal is sometimes the subject matter, both are treated by looking at it in conventional ways that are not exaggerated or odd. Normality can be described, pointed out, highlighted even, but it is always taken at face value and treated as if from the outside looking in: the film or tv show describes it, and is conventional in its form, but it is not *like* normality itself, let alone more so. It is what it is. If this would be different – if the film or tv show itself would be supernormal – it would no longer be recognizable as a story by the viewer, as something that is to be looked at.

If we look at the example of *Der siebente Kontinent*, even though the film does have supernormality as its subject matter and it uses supernormality to an extent in its form because it displays the scenes in an exaggeratedly normal form, it also clearly signals that something extraordinary is about to happen or happens. In that sense it does not behave itself supernormally, it does not *act* supernormally.

And yet acting, in the sense of taking action is, in addition to the form and content of the specific mass cultural object, a relevant modality for the reception of supernormality. Acting by cultural objects was described by Alfred Gell in "Art and Agency", where he posits that art is not primarily about meaning and communication, but about doing. Art objects have agency, acting on the people viewing them, who enter into a personal relationship with them and are triggered by them emotionally. (Gell, 1998.)

Why does mass culture not act? Is it perhaps even impossible for mass culture to act this way? This has to do with the fact that mass culture is escapist. In general, a good story can make you dream or confirm norms (such as 'crime

does not pay'), but in the end it is always clearly identifiable as being just a good story. It is distinct from actual life and clearly identifiable as an object of mass culture. It has a beginning and an end. A mass cultural object cannot be supernormal or it would no longer be recognized as an object of cultural production. Otherwise, it would fail to be a mass cultural object. A movie that is supernormal is no longer a movie.

But why should mass culture itself even act? The viewer consuming mass cultural objects will be hardly presented with normality in an inherently self-reflexive or recursive manner, with supernormality. As a spectator of a movie or tv show, I will always be presented an argument, laid out clearly, be it about supernormality or anything else. Mass culture does not succeed in confronting me with supernormality itself, regardless of what my expectations are.

Ultimately then, we are looking at the impossibility of mass culture to be supernormal.

2.2 – Supernormality in Mass Consumption

Whereas mass culture primarily cannot act critically on normality and be supernormal, in mass consumption there is more potential to do so. After all, we take an action each time we consume something (including the products of mass culture, like when we go to the movies) and what we consume acts on us. For example, in *Der siebente Kontinent*, the family going through the car wash takes the normal action of going through the car wash. But can going through the car wash be supernormal? Or more generally, can mass consumption act or be supernormal? For this we need to look at elements of choice in mass consumption, its celebration of individuality and at the need to be different but not too different as a recurring element in consumers' behavior.

Mass Consumption and Choice
I like ice cream. Last year this ice cream store opened in Amsterdam where they make your own individual ice cream. You start with a base (vanilla, cherry, chocolate), choose the chocolate covering (white, milk, dark, and so on) and then the decoration (sprinkles, candy that looks like diamonds, plain, etc.). In the end, it looks like something that you would buy in the store, only better, because you got to make it. And before you can dig in, a picture is taken of the ice cream and displayed for other customers to see and for you to share on Facebook and Twitter.

Food giant Unilever runs the store, eponymous to its hit ice cream brand 'Magnum'. For now, it is the ultimate expression of mass-customization, mass-customization itself being an advanced form of mass consumption that promises possibilities of choice. It is the concept of Starbucks, applied to something that before used to come out of the factory in only three flavors. 'Manufactured' on the spot, there are now infinite choices when before you had no choice. The consumer now gets to express their individuality by choosing a personalized ice cream. There was no similar ice cream before, and there will be no similar ice cream thereafter. Of course, it is only the idea of personal choice, choice within set parameters.

A customized Magnum ice cream

What happens in the Magnum store? At first glance, with the most normal subset of artifacts, you are expected to create the extraordinary merely by choosing it. In fact, you are given the promise that you can assert individuality by making a unique ice cream. Unique ice cream = unique you. In that sense there is the promise that individuality can be expressed by the act of choosing, even though the end result is probably not all that different from what the thousand other people in the store that same day chose. In the end then it is

not the result or its actual uniqueness that is the most important, but the act of choosing. Still, finally, both the choice and the act of choosing are normal and performed in the same way by all customers.

Five minutes away from the Magnum store you will find Van der Linde, a small shop that has been serving the same type of ice cream for over 50 years. Plain vanilla is the only kind they sell, the only choice given in the store to the customer is between a small and a large. Here, my choice as a buyer is expressed in opting for a lack of choice. This is, in the end, not more choice or less choice than going to the Magnum store, just a different kind of regular choice. Here also, the choice and the act of choosing are normal.

How then can you act anything other than normal when consuming anything if by merely choosing what to consume you are already the same as everybody else, and so is your desire to be unique? Individuality is celebrated while plain normality is executed. It is self-defeating to try and be anything else than normal.

Perhaps you cannot be not-normal, at least not in the choice and usage of products or services that you consume. Since all mass consumption, including that which is mass-customized, claims to offer individuality through choice but in the end offers only normality, consumption itself cannot be subversive. Even if you choose *the* combination of elements for a customized Magnum ice cream that nobody else has chosen before. And while normality does not exclude individuality, this individuality is subordinated to normality. In the end, normality is what remains.

So, normality is always present in mass consumption, but can it become supernormal, is there a potential for supernormality? To answer this question, we first need to look at conformity and individuality.

Conformity and Individuality
Conformity and individuality appear to be contrasting desires. After all, how can you be an individual conformist? It's almost an oxymoron. However, it is possible to be both conforming and individual at the same time. In fact, it is required. Sociologist Georg Herbert Meade first described these contrasting needs of individuality and conformity, distinguishing between the individual 'I' and the group 'me'. (Mead, 1934.) You can only be an individual in contrast to the group, but you need the group for contrast. Put differently, you can only be an individual within a group, defined however small or large.

How does this play out in practice? In 'Blue Jeans, the Art of the Ordinary', anthropologists Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward describe a field study in London where they look into why and how people in one particular street wear blue jeans. At one point, they find that their subjects are wearing jeans to appear normal, not to be judged, not to be downgraded, and that by wearing jeans they are simultaneously asserting conformity and individuality. (Miller and Woodward, 2012, 72.) According to Miller and Woodward jeans are simultaneously extremely personal and extremely ubiquitous. (p. 6.) They are both individual and conformist.

However, the line between conformity and individuality is neither strict nor static. As Miller and Woodward point out, there is no clear point of demarcation between individual preference and the influence of others: individual preference is in fact often the internalized authority of others or of social norms more generally. (Miller and Woodward, 2012, 36.) Another example of the 'I' and the 'me'.

Likewise, the opposing needs and the extent in which they are expressed (sometimes more against the grain, sometimes more with it) are dynamic. As Miller and Woodward describe it, it consist of "shifts between periods of conservatism or consolidation and those characterized by rupture and change." (Miller and Woodward, 2012, 23.)

So, there is a dynamic need for individuality in conformity that is addressed with the consumption of mass products. The individuality that is sought is however not individualistic. Mass consumption can fulfill this need for individuality, such as with blue jeans and ice cream. But what does this mean for supernormality? For that, we also need to look at how the need for individuality in conformity is solved in consumption of mass products.

The Ordinary
To stay with the uses of blue jeans, Miller and Woodward mention how simultaneously asserting conformity and individuality is not always an easy thing to achieve, and how people struggle to become ordinary. (Miller and Woodward, 2012, 8.) They talk about "the discovery of the ordinary". Their subjects struggle to find the "right" jeans (that allow them to fit in). Doing so is important because, as Miller and Woodward describe it, "this search is part of a deeper project in life: the achievement of a state people wish to be in most of the time, a state of being in which they are as comfortable as possible with the world around them." Why? Because by doing so, by being comfortable, it is possible to escape from the existential accusation of living in bad faith, as described by Sartre. (Miller and Woodward, 2012, 82-83, referring to Sartre 1969.)

What does the existence of the ordinary and the need to be ordinary mean for being supernormal? For me, it means that supernormality becomes both possible and necessary.

Possible because supernormality requires normality to build on, it cannot exist without normality.

Necessary because supernormality can be a successful strategy of being within the sphere of consumption and by extension within modern life: by being supernormal there is at the same time less struggle with wanting to become ordinary and no longer a need to be ordinary. Namely, by choosing what everybody else has already chosen, and therefore actually not choosing, there is no longer a struggle to be ordinary, you simply are ordinary. You are normal, but because you are so firmly within the area of normality you are above and beyond ordinary normality: you are supernormal.

However, this creates a new problem: how do you discover, recognize and communicate this supernormality if it looks the same as 'ordinary' normality? Blue jeans are blue jeans, a grey car is a grey car.

Recognizing supernormality

Supernormality cannot be recognized by looking at the object of mass consumption itself: blue jeans are blue jeans, whether they are ordinary or superordinary. It cannot be determined by the particularities or the nature of the object alone since, to quote the philosopher Bruno Latour: "we do not know in advance what the world is made of." (Latour, 1988, 10.) It is necessary to look outside of the particular object, at the relations between the object, the person consuming, his surroundings, his choices, etc. What counts are the relations between actors in a network.

So, while supernormality is possibly present in mass consumption, it is nearly impossible to recognize, or at least it is difficult to communicate that a particular instance of consumption is supernormal. In my view, this is because it is difficult to recognize daily actions, to recognize the quotidian as intentional. The philosopher Marshal McLuhan said: "Art is intentional". Let's look at art then.

2.3 – Becoming Supernormal

Above, we saw how mass culture might have supernormality as a subject matter and provide commentary on it, but that itself can almost by definition not be supernormal. It cannot be more than it is.

For mass consumption we saw how it can become supernormal, but that its supernormality depends largely on attitude and that is consequently hard to recognize as such.

To take the example of the grey car on the grey parking lot under the grey sky: it is not theatre. It is what it is, at least by itself. As an object it is normal but it can become supernormal in conjunction with an author and a viewer.

Next I will look at the role of objectship (the role of the object), authorship and viewership in the possibilities of becoming supernormal.

Objectship
In order to be able to become supernormal, an object, an art object (which can also be a picture, a video or a piece of text, etc.) should basically come from the normal, the quotidian. In a way, this holds true for all art – as Jasper Johns put it: "To take an object, do something with it, and then do something else with it" – but I am more specifically referring to quotidian objects, that the viewer readily identifies with without having to read them. As the artist Christian Boltanski put it, when talking about why he uses familiar objects (such as tin cans): "I don't want spectators faced with my work to discover but to recognize, to appropriate" (Fineberg, 1995, 463).

To be clear, it is not a prerequisite to use everyday objects that are not normally used to construct art objects – or what the general public would recognize as art objects – to achieve supernormality. In fact, the (abundant) use of the quotidian in a work is in a way irrelevant, and it can make supernormality impossible because the trained viewer will still see it as art that comments, and the untrained viewer will not see it as art, period. In both cases it is impossible for it to be supernormal.

To give an example of the latter, Erik van Lieshout has a work (*Commission*, 2011) where he decorates an empty store in a shopping mall in a poor neighborhood of Rotterdam, dissimulating that it is art for the immediate viewer (passersby in the mall) and making it a voyeuristic reflection (a comment) on the nature of art for the viewer in the museum.

Another example, one that works in my view, is Mike Kelly (discussed in the previous chapter) taking quotidian objects as a starting point, and navigating between the results being art too clearly and not clearly enough. In other words, his objects are always artful even when most of the times constructed of quotidian (looking) elements.

The Bather
Haim Steinbach
2011
Plastic laminated wood shelf,
rubber dog chew, painted
wood mermaid statue, two
resin wastebaskets
148.6 x 254 x 47.6 cm

Balloon Dog (Orange)
Jeff Koons
1994-2000
High chromium stainless steel
with transparent color coating
307.3 x 363.2 x 114.3 cm

Similarly, it is possible to have exaggeration and pomp in the object itself or its presentation. Even if the object is over-the-top, it can still be supernormal. Haim Steinbach does this in a lesser form, taking new store-bought objects and presenting them in special fashion (for example in *The Bather*, 2011). Or with Jeff Koons displaying four new hoovers in perspex cases lit from the bottom in his work *New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Blue; New Hoover Convertibles, Green, Blue; Double-Decker* (1981-1987) or making larger than life shiny inflatable and balloon figures from stainless steel, for example with *Balloon Dog (Orange)* (1994-2000) and *Elephant* (2003).

Authorship

The maker can engage with supernormality at different levels: at the level of creation, consumption, image and representation, and story-telling.

At the level of creation, we have Andy Warhol, who first embraces the state of affairs and *then* goes over the top. Similar in attitude is Jeff Koons with his theme of exaggerated innocence. (See in this sense also Heartney, 2013, 17.)

At the level of consumption, we again have Warhol and Koons, and also Haim Steinbach for example. Koons has said that there are no hidden meanings in his works nor any critique, but like with Ruscha's statement about his works being what they are, I believe that Koons dissimulates here. (Koons 2008.) After all, if Koons would claim more than he does then it becomes easier to either dismiss his work as not meeting the stated requirements or believe it for the concept alone. In both cases it would fail to be supernormal.

Selecting, ordering, collecting and cataloging by the author can be an important aspect of consumption, as we have seen with both Ed Ruscha and Mike Kelley. This kind of consuming is also represented by Richard Prince, who takes everyday objects and makes them his own by reordering and presenting. For example, in *Untitled (Three Women Looking in the Same Direction)* (1982). These artists simultaneously embrace the state of affairs and reject it through that same embrace. Or, as the critic Fineberg described Prince's practice, it is: "a route into individual authenticity through media rather than against it." (Fineberg, 1995, 468.) Here, I think that this applies to the media, but also for all the other stuff that surrounds us.

Untitled (Three Women Looking in the Same Direction)
Richard Prince
1982
Ektacolor photographs
Ed. 3/10
Each: 50.8 x 61 cm

At the level of image and representation, we have for example Cindy Sherman and Aernout Mik, discussed in the previous chapter, and Vernon Fisher, who joins existing images with found or made-up stories, without apparent connection (for example in *Show and Tell*, 1981). Here also, the artist can deal successfully or unsuccessfully with supernormality.

At the level of story-telling we find Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger with their slogan-like works, and Lorna Simpson with her more poetic works about remembering. For example, there is a work of Barbara Kruger at Schiphol airport consisting of a LED ticker which can be mistaken for an actual rolling ad (*Installation for Schiphol*, 1995).

Viewership

Above, I argued that mass consumption itself can be supernormal, but that it depends on the attitude. Attitude is important for the first actor engaging in the consumption (the author if you will), and it is important for the subsequent actors receiving the information about the consumption (the viewer). Consequently, whether the actor is an author or a viewer is not that relevant, but the viewer does play a role. Likewise for art, where the viewer has to be able to recognize the supernormality, and this also depends on the attitude of the viewer.

What attitude is then required of the viewer, in viewing consumption and in viewing art? This is a difficult one.

Nietzsche opened the modernist era with a self-conscious praise of superficiality, saying that "what is required is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance!" (Nietzsche, 1887, XII.) This statement can be seen as both flippant and ironic, or jaded.

In both cases, this attitude of embrace would mean the viewer fails to perceive the supernormality. On the one hand, the viewer does not necessarily need to be fully engaged in the act of becoming supernormal itself, they don't need to drink the Kool Aid. On the other hand, if the viewer is too disengaged, only viewing from a distance, supernormality is not possible either. In that case everything would become an ironic comment.

What is required then is not a reactionary view, not a romantic one, not a nihilistic take, not a post-modernistic attitude, not an ironic one even, but full head-on embrace. Perhaps this can be called realist. To go back to consumerism, to be supernormal is to buy the most average car, to duly replace your mobile phone every other year along with everyone else, and to watch whatever television dishes out. Not blindly, and without irony.

For the author, it is important to be aware of these dynamics between the viewer seeing everything as true and valuable and seeing nothing as true or valuable. Compare in that sense Mike Kelley's recognition that people are trained to look for art, to expect art. (Kelley, 2008.) If the viewer is sufficiently kept between seeing something as art regardless and not seeing something as art at all then the art can be supernormal.

Does Supernormality Make Sense?

Does supernormality make sense? Is there any value in it?

First, I think that supernormality is important because it allows for doubt. Is something normal or supernormal? And, by extension, is anything fixed? By exaggerating the normal, the artist can show, in a demonstrative (but not explanatory) way that in fact the normal can serve, can be approached, as something new, something personal.

Second, supernormality does not provide for an escape. You cannot be for or against it, you cannot take a gratuitous view towards it, toward something supernormal because of its very nature. When the normal is enlarged, exaggerated without becoming something that can be easily dismissed for being strange, the viewer will identify: "hey, this could be my life." With this identification comes a feeling of comfort: "in the end, I am just like everybody else." Up to here, the experience of every work that takes the normal at face value in both form and content is similar. But, where works exaggerate the normal, they start to diverge. Works that exaggerate the normal, will – if they work – leave the viewer confused, repulsed, thrown-back. Then, at a later point: "this could be my life but there is something strange about it." But at this point you already identified, and you cannot de-identify without negating yourself, your existence.

And this is why supernormality is so relevant for me, both as an artist and as a viewer. Supernormality ambiguously both confirms our daily lives and provides no escape in its confrontation with what it is that is strange and alienating about it. As Warhol said: "People sometimes say the way things happen in movies is unreal, but actually it's the way things happen to you in life that's unreal." (Heartney, 2013, 21.)

Chapter 3 – Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis I asked the reader to imagine a grey car on a grey asphalt parking lot under a grey sky. This as an example of something that is *so* normal that it becomes strange again and tells us something about normality. For this kind of odd and exaggerated normality that reflexively stands above normality itself I introduced the term 'supernormality'.

Supernormality and Art

In Chapter 1 I looked at how this supernormality is present in the works of four different artists: Ed Ruscha, Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley and Aernout Mik, deconstructing one work of each, in relation to their larger body of work and those of their contemporaries. For Ruscha I looked in more detail at *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* from 1968, for Sherman at her *Untitled Film Stills* from 1977-1980, for Kelley at his *Arena #7 (Bears)* from 1990, and for Mik at *Osmosis and Excess* from 2005.

I found that supernormality can be found to exist in many different aspects of the works discussed – and, by extension, in art in general – although I did not always link them back to supernormality or was able to do so. Instead, I talked about modalities such as collecting and ordering, theater, presentation forms, exaggeration, staging, strangeness and oddity, the use of titles and language as a distancing device, using quotidian objects and forms, the use of media language and tropes, and the use of stereotypes.

Supernormality in Context

Next, I looked at how supernormality is present in mass culture (films, television) and mass consumption (what we consume and how).

I found that in mass culture supernormality is mostly absent other than as something that is talked about, as subject matter. The reason I think is that Western mass culture predominantly follows traditional narrative forms. If an object of mass culture were to be supernormal, it would no longer be mass culture. A catch-22 that makes it so that mass culture *itself* cannot be supernormal.

As for supernormality in mass consumption, I found that it can be present when making choices about what to consume (and consequently, how to consume it), but that it is hard to recognize, making its critical 'effectiveness' limited.

Then I returned to art, to see how it can be different from mass culture and mass consumption in its use of supernormality, and found that the art object, the author and the viewer need to work *in conjunction* to act out supernormality. A perfect storm if you will. First, the object needs to have a sense of theater or a level of transformation. Second, the author has to engage with supernormality. This can be at the level of creation, consumption, image and

DON'T BE EMPTY

Don't
Olivier Oosterbaan
2013
slideshow, loop

Don't
Olivier Oosterbaan
2013
slideshow, loop

DON'T REGULATE

representation, or story-telling. Third, the viewer needs to have a certain attitude, something between embrace and rejection.

I concluded that if these three circumstances come together, then supernormality in art can successfully comment on normality and in a way that allows for doubt and ambiguity ("is this art?") and precluding any chance of an easy way out (after all, "hey, this is about me!"). Since supernormality is normality exaggerated it sneaks up on the viewer and does not let go.

Supernormality and Ruscha, Sherman, Kelley and Mik
If we look again at the discussion in Chapter 1 on the works of Ruscha, Sherman, Kelley and Mik we can conclude that supernormality can, for example, be found in: the obsessive seemingly random collecting of Ruscha and Kelley; the presentation that mimics mundane forms in the books of Ruscha and the small size of the *Untitled Film Stills* of Sherman; the repeating of media types and stereotypes of Sherman, and to a lesser extent Mik; the use of quotidian subject matter and materials by Kelley, Ruscha and Sherman; and the playing with the conceptions of the viewer vis-à-vis what is portrayed by Sherman and Kelley.

By contrast, we can also conclude that the mere presence of one or more of these elements does not always lead to supernormality and that if supernormality is present, its 'level' can vary. Supernormality is not an automatic, static or given outcome in the presence of its preconditional elements.

In general, the works of Ruscha and Sherman act more clearly as supernormal, Kelley a little less, and Mik not that much, if at all.

Supernormality and Me
In the introduction, I mentioned that I would also briefly look at my own work in relation to supernormality. I want to touch on three works, all from 2013. For me, in all of these works supernormality is an important element.

The first work is *Don't*, a looping slideshow of empty streets in a rich residential neighborhood, only showing the road and the lush green foliage. Superimposed over the image the following words: DON'T BE ANXIOUS; DON'T BE EMPTY; DON'T FAIL; DON'T FIGHT; DON'T REGULATE; DON'T LOOK AT ME; DON'T BE POOR. Here, I think that supernormality is present in how the images borrow from advertizing language and the way the message is skewed, in the shifting presence of the author in the more or less direct level of address in the sentence fragments, and in the relation that the viewer may have to anxiety, failure, etc., and how that colors their reading of the work.

The second is *STUFF Black*, three low-key photographs on matt paper, on each a common household objects shown life size: a toaster, a cooker, and a coffee machine. All the machines are black, lit beyond the exaggerated manner of product advertizing. Here, supernormality is present in the theatre of the machine being highlighted, the obsessiveness of the author in doing so and in the apparently random selection of the machines in question, and again in the

relation that the viewer may perceive what it is, in this case the fetishisation of consumer objects, possibly also their collective sharing.

The third work is *Not This One – Maybe This One*, using over 100 found pictures of different second hand cars, all somewhat alike, for a slideshow where I comment in quick succession why I do or do not like the car shown in question: "Too old", "too new", "no Audi", "no cabriolet", "a nice grey", "too grey", "I like this one, nice rims", and so on. Supernormality is present in the mundanity and sheer amount of the found photographs, in the veneration and boredom by the author (both wanting and not wanting the cars), and the level of possible identification by the viewer.

Continuity of Supernormality
One last comment on the timeliness of my research. As it turned out, I looked at works from the past five decades, although this was not my intention from the outset. However, I think it shows that supernormality is not only a phenomenon of today but of our time – not to say of the era of late capitalism, although I did not frame my research in Marxist terms. In my view supernormality is a phenomenon that has existed for some time already and that merits greater attention.

Thank you for reading.

Olivier Oosterbaan
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List of Illustrations

All works are by the respective artists, unless otherwise noted.

Estral Star #3, Mike Kelly, photograph by Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts

Arena #7 (Bears) and Arena #10 (Dogs), photographs 2010 by Skarstedt Gallery

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Colophon