Article

Oops, I Did It Again! The Humour of Incongruity, Risk-Taking and Creativity in Art Practice and Everyday Life

Philip Welding

Leeds Arts University, Leeds LS2 9AQ, UK; philip.welding@leeds-art.ac.uk

Abstract: This article explores the incongruous results of creativity and risk-taking within art practice and everyday life as encountered through the photographic image. The impetus for this study was a humorous experience that took place during health and safety training that raised questions about the role of humour within everyday life. Research was conducted into two forms of visual media, including pamphlets and guides from the British Safety Council (BSC) archives and viral images that demonstrate accidents (tagged with an 'epic fail' hashtag). This led to a practice-based approach to research involving the production of photographic works for an exhibition that tested the role of risk-taking and improvisation within the creative process. This article uses humour theory including superiority, incongruity and relief theory in relation to Louise Peacock's model for the analysis of slapstick, to analyse these different types of photographs and draws comparisons between the risk-taking creative behaviours of both employees and artists. These creative approaches are considered in relation to Michel de Certeau's notion of tactics within everyday life. Ordinary thinking and improvisational tactics are present within both art and work, and improvisation heightens the potential for risk-taking. This may lead to incongruities represented through a photograph which can impact the viewer's engagement through humour, fascination or self-reflexivity. It is proposed that the viewer response to images containing risk is made up of a balance between an embodied understanding of the dangers and an awareness of the artifice, which can shift depending on the conditions of the photograph's production and display. The peculiarities of the photograph are seen as conducive to a humour response because of the photograph's ambiguous relationship with the reality that it represents.

Keywords: risk; creativity; humour; improvisation; failure; epic fail; health and safety; photography

1. Introduction

The impetus for this investigation was an experience I had in the workplace. Many years ago, I worked for the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency (VOSA) in the UK as a temporary worker (temps). The role of the temporary worker is an inherently transitory one, with an often ephemeral and precarious connection to workplace structures and procedures. In an effort to bring the temps 'up to speed', VOSA organised some health and safety training. The purpose of this training was to show us how to pick up a box safely. My memory of this may have exaggerated the details over the years, but to the best of my recollection, there were about 16 employees standing in an oval formation, in a fairly small room, facing into the centre. The trainer stood in the middle, with all eyes on him. He demonstrated how to safely pick up a box using the only box in the room. Then it was our turn. However, we had to use imaginary boxes. Imagine 16 employees, bobbing up and down in an unsyncopated fashion, picking up imaginary boxes. This memory has stuck with me for over 15 years because of its surreal absurdity and performative nature, reminiscent of slapstick films or Monty Python sketches. It has led me to explore health and safety from the perspective of an artist, to observe this as a performative and humorous subject.

The aim of this training was, of course, to make sure that all employees behaved in an approved manner for the good of their health and for company productivity. However, as Michael de Certeau (1984) has observed in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, people do not always behave in a way that is expected of them by institutions. In fact, people will find their own tactics that can sit outside of company expectations. People often seek to cut corners, using creative cunning to accomplish something more quickly. These actions often involve a certain amount of risk in the process. Cutting corners involves breaking with convention to find novel or innovative ways of doing things. It may not be the most advisable course of action and therefore has the potential of failure, but it could yield more successful results that sit outside of given frameworks. The failed outcomes are often incongruous and can be of interest to a wider audience (for example, artists and social media users); they can have humorous value beyond their intended purpose. These innovative creative approaches found in everyday life and in the workplace find parallels with the practice of the artist, for which risk is an inherent part of their process. This may include aesthetic or conceptual risks; however, it may also be a physical risk in the production process.

When Britney Spears sang 'Oops, I did it again!' it was not meant to prompt thoughts of a comedic accident. However, as a piece of pop culture it has memetic qualities that transcend beyond its origins. Its use in the title is a joke. We are, after all, talking about humour. Some of the photographs in this study similarly exist in a viral, meme-like space. Others do not. However, finding them funny is to seek humour in places where it was not always intended. The purpose of this study is to explore the process of creativity and risk-taking in both art and everyday life and how this leads to photographic outcomes that could be perceived as humorous, surprising or engaging. To contextualise this analysis, this article will introduce insights into areas of academic research, comprising creativity, risk, humour theory and humour in photography. The article will first outline research into creativity, using Weisberg's writing about ordinary thinking and incremental decisions, Peter Buse's ideas about improvisation and Michel de Certeau's tactics of everyday life and application of the term bricolage. Then, it makes a connection between creativity and risk through consideration of artworks, Todd Dewett's concept of WTR (willingness to take risks) and the risk-propensity scale. Humour theory, such as superiority, incongruity and relief theory, is outlined and connected to Louise Peacock's model for analysing slapstick performance and pain. Consideration of the peculiarities of the still photographic image are then explored, with reference to the writing of Roland Barthes, Esther Leslie, Heather Diack, Victor Burgin, David Bate, Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans, Mieke Bleyen and Liesbeth Decan. This is followed by an analysis of photographs from the British Safety Council Archive and Epic Fail images. Then, the practice-based research is analysed in terms of process and outcome.

Whilst there have been connections made previously between creativity and risk in the workplace and in art practice, this article aims to connect these factors to humour theory, to reflect on how the perception of creativity and risk may influence the audience reaction.

2. Materials

The research materials used for this study include the British Safety Council (BSC) Online Archive, which includes documents and historical campaign materials dating from 1957 [1]. This archive is freely accessible online and provides a fascinating insight into the activities of the BSC. Also referenced are examples of 'epic fail' images, which are vernacular photographs, often disseminated via social network sites, demonstrating hazardous actions performed by others. These are viral images that can be found in many different contexts across the internet and social media by searching for hashtags such as '#epicfail'. The third set of images are my own photographs, produced for an exhibition at FORMAT International Photography Festival 2019 on the subject of health and safety.

3. Methodology

The method is aligned with practice-based research because the creative photographic process and outcomes were used as a point of reflection and for the generation of new knowledge [2]. The creative process was conducted in response to an archive, which informed the development of the photographic outcomes. This use of the archive material as a stimulus fits within an identified 'archival turn' in the arts and seeks to ask questions of the content, reimagining it to reveal 'significant aesthetic, relational, social and political potencies' [3]. The subject of this research is in part the creative process itself, of artists, workers and everyday users of photography. The practice-based methodology allows for reflection on the creative decision-making and improvisation that was applied during the process of making and for comparisons to be made to the other research material. The photographs from the archive, the epic fail images and the results of my practice then provide a basis for an exploration and comparative analysis of how these images function in their various contexts with regard to creativity, risk and humour. This approach to practice-based research in and through practice, where action leads to reflection, reflection leads to action, enable wider connections to be made with a range of research materials and lived experience [4].

4. Theoretical Contexts

4.1. Creativity

Creativity is synonymous with an artist's practice, but it is also essential within everyday tasks in both domestic and work spaces. To understand how creativity relates to the spheres of art, everyday life and work, we must first define it. A definition of creativity is generally agreed upon as the ability to produce something novel and appropriate or useful [5]. An artist is creative within their practice, which results in a final artwork, something that is novel and appropriate or useful. Through encounters with an artwork, the audience is able to discern, or at least make assumptions, about the creative decisions that the artist made. In the workplace, creativity has traditionally been hidden from public view. However, changes in technology and the networked image have made acts of creativity visible for scrutiny by a wider audience [6]. This enables the results of creativity in both spheres to be scrutinised on an even plane. Can an artist's creativity equate to that of an office worker? Weisberg (2020) argues against the difference between genius and everyday creativity because they are both based on 'ordinary thinking' [5]. Based on this assertion, he states that 'the distinction between creative and non-creative people is an artificial one' [5]. He applies this thinking to the production of *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso, which, on the face of it, appears to be a work of genius. Through analysis, he breaks down the steps of production, tests, experiments, all based on 40 years of experience, to show incremental decisions based on ordinary thinking. He proposes that all thinking is in fact 'inside-the-box', green and incremental thinking, rather than creative leaps forward [5]. By this thinking, we could compare a creative decision made by Picasso as part of the production process and an office worker's decision to balance a ladder precariously on a couple of buckets. The difference is in the intention behind the creative decision, and how it fits within a continuity of other decisions to achieve a larger goal.

So, clearly intentionality is an essential factor in creative choices. In defining what creativity is, Weisberg (2020) also states that a creative accomplishment must be produced intentionally [5]. Happy accidents are a common part of photographic practice in which the technical process can lead to unexpected chance results, meaning that photographers will sometimes realise the potential of their images only after they were taken. Even this decision-making is intentional and creative. What about the average office worker, absent-mindedly doodling in a meeting or folding a piece of paper? It may be of interest to me as a subject for my art practice, but is the action in itself creative? In 1933, the surrealist publication *Minotaure* published a series of photographs by Brassaï with captions by Salvador Dali, titled 'Involuntary Sculptures'. Photographs of rolled-up bus tickets, chewing gum, a blob of toothpaste amongst other everyday items make up a series of

'automatic' sculptural configurations [7]. Here, the title 'involuntary' makes us assume that the objects were not produced creatively. Instead, they were chewed, ripped and rolled as part of everyday life. In these images, it could be said that it is Brassaï and Dali that are being creative with the detritus of the everyday by selecting and photographing them, rather than the original owner of the object. It is therefore the interpretation by the discoverer that is a creative choice. In his project *Making Do and Getting By*, Richard Wentworth has spent years photographing objects that he has discovered being used inventively in everyday environment and describes the relationship he has with the creators, or 'unwitting participants', as a kind of collaboration [8]. This raises interesting questions around authorship and where the creativity resides between the artist and the everyday participant. I have spent years photographing the strange and incongruous things found at work as evidence of worker creativity. This approach could draw comparisons to that of the involuntary sculptures, whereby creativity is simply imposed on the subject by the artist. However, the reason the results of creative acts in the workplace are interesting is *because* the originator was creative in the first place. We can perceive their creativity through the photograph and make assumptions about their decision-making, which can be amusing if their approach is particularly strange or foolhardy. Their creativity is certainly not involuntary, making these photographs more akin to Wentworth's collaboration than 'involuntary sculpture'. Following on from Weisberg's thinking, there are similarities between the incremental decisions and ordinary thinking of a worker and that of an artist. Some creative decisions at work are made to further productivity for the company by getting things done more quickly. Of course, it is only quicker if the plan is successful. Otherwise, an accident could result in an extended period of time off work. Some creative decisions, however, are instead made for the workers' own pleasure or for the purposes of 'skiving off'.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michael De Certeau writes about the everyday tactics through which people operate and describes them as '...clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of "discipline"' [9]. When thinking about worker behaviour, I am drawn to the creative ways that they will 'work around' the frameworks that have been established within what de Certeau describes as the 'nets of discipline'. de Certeau differentiates between tactics and strategies, which is fundamentally a power relation, where the 'strategy', as De Certeau describes, has an established position of power in relation to other external competitors, a locus and, therefore, a certain strength to define parameters. In this case, the strategy could be the company that has the power and establishes the frameworks within which the workers function. The tactics arise in direct relation to the strategic, from a weaker position, but one that requires a certain artfulness, wit and cunning. This results in small acts of resistance or defiance whereby workers will find their own way of completing something or avoiding doing something entirely. Relating this to the accepted definitions of creativity, the process involves novel or new ideas (i.e., new ways of doing something that resists established structures) and it has a purpose, i.e., it is useful (at least to the employee, perhaps not to the employer).

As an example of a tactic, de Certeau (1984) discusses the concept of *la perruque*, in which a worker uses work equipment on work time for their own purposes [9].

> *La perruque grafts itself onto the system of the industrial assembly line (its counterpoint, in the same place), as the variant of the activity which, outside of the factory, (in another place), takes the form of bricolage [9].*

De Certeau (1984) describes 'bricolage' as 'artisan-like inventiveness' [9] and identifies a connection between the type of creativity enacted during leisure time and during work time. A worker engaging in la perruque is not acting to further productivity for the company (although they may be developing skills pertinent to the role as a by-product). However, the notion of bricolage, when applied to the solving of work problems, through co-opting materials for alternative functions, makes an interesting connection to the ordinary thinking used in problem-solving by artists as part of their practice. This problem-solving 'in the

moment' can be based on a process of improvisation with the available materials and environments, through a creative participation in the world. Montuori (2003) makes a connection between participation, creativity and improvisation, which involves incremental decisions to be made in dialogue with the environment [10]. The results of this may evolve beyond established guidelines to produce surprising results through risk-taking behaviour. You can see this behaviour in the assemblages made by Wentworth's 'unwitting participants', who show a creative inventiveness through improvisation. It is clearly also evident in the process of artists. The making of things in the workplace using available materials shares some of the creative decision-making found in art practice, whether it is a Blu Tack sculpture, an elaborately staged office prank or an absent-minded doodle, albeit with a different intention. To experiment and to take risks lies at the heart of an art practice and is also evident in the actions of employees. The hazards being highlighted in the health and safety literature and imagery are evidence of [the potential of] failing at something. These failures are often caused by experimental tactics and creative ways of working.

In the workplace, management encourages certain kinds of creative acts to further productivity. Forward-thinking managers are even embracing the ideas of artists through 'enculturalization' [11]. In an article called 'Understanding Creativity: the Manager as Artist', Reckhenrich et al. (2009) analyse the thinking of artist Joseph Beuys, claiming that his approach can provide insights into 'boosting creativity for individuals and organizations' [12]. While managers encourage creativity through schemes like 'dress-down Friday' or 'fun Friday', this type of managed creativity does not seem aligned with artistic creativity. It is a managed creativity that is performed in the name of productivity, whereas an artistic practice has the appearance at least of aiming to break rules and conventions. The more resistant, tactical form of creativity described by de Certeau that pushes against convention therefore seems more akin to a critical art practice.

4.2. Risk and Creativity

Fischli and Weiss are an artist duo who work across a wide range of media including photography and sculpture. Between 1984 and 1987, they produced a series of photographs for which they precariously balanced a range of everyday objects as a subject. These were published in a photobook called *Equilibres* [13]. Chairs are balanced precariously on each other and propped with other items. In other images, bottles, kitchen utensils and even food are skilfully stacked to achieve a certain balance, whilst also suggesting a potential catastrophe. Through the photograph, we are seeing a moment of equilibrium, but what we do not see are the failed attempts that lead to this result [14]. In a workplace, this kind of structure would clearly not pass a risk assessment. Did Fischli and Weiss consider a risk assessment as part of the process? As a viewer of the work, I like to think not, because there is often something anarchic and non-conforming about the creative process that is unconstrained by these frameworks. Also, the joy of these photographs, for me at least, can be found in the potential that the objects could fall at any moment. There is a perception that the actions of the artist involved the taking of risks, in a way that feels anarchic, perilous and exciting.

The structures put in place in the workplace, such as risk management and health and safety protocols, guided by The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (HASWA) [15], are there to minimise risk. This clearly has an important function in the workplace and has improved working conditions for workers in many areas. This article is not attempting to criticise the function and effectiveness of such legislation. However, it does make the connection between artistic creativity and everyday creativity, highlighting that the type of improvised, risk-taking creativity evident in the *Equilibres* project is also present in our everyday engagement with the world.

The relationship that people have with risk-taking will vary, and some people will be more risk-averse than others. Measures such as the Risk Propensity Scale [16] provide a measure for everyday risk-taking and show that it can distinguish risk-takers from risk-avoiders. The relationship between risk and creativity has also been explored previously

in relation to employee creativity, from an employer perspective, and therefore in the interests of productivity. Todd Dewett (2006) introduces WTR (the willingness to take risks), defined as 'a willingness to engage potential risks at work in an effort to produce positive organizationally relevant outcomes such that one is open to the possibility of negative personal outcomes as a result' [17]. Dewett's hypothesis is that the willingness to take risks (WTR) will be positively associated with employee creativity, along with the level of autonomy enabled within the work environment and risk propensity. The risks referred to by Dewett are professional and intellectual rather than the everyday physical risks that health and safety training focuses on. Are Dewett's risk-takers also dangling from light fittings trying to change light bulbs, picking up boxes incorrectly or balancing ladders on buckets? Employees may take physical risks to more quickly complete a task, with the aim of producing positive and organisationally relevant outcomes. These incremental decisions can be seen as ordinary thinking within a framework of productivity for an employer. These risks are taken despite health and safety guidance or encouragement from the employer, but in the moment, may seem like a more creative and direct way of achieving something, particularly to an employee with a higher risk propensity. There is clearly a connection between creativity and risk, as they share common elements. To try a new creative approach that has not been proven to be reliable has an inherent risk of failure within it. This is also clearly evident within art practice.

Art practice and risk have a long-shared history, where elements of chance and danger have played a role in the production of artworks. The 2015 exhibition entitled *Risk* [18] shown at Turner Contemporary in Margate explored this connection between art and risk through the display of artworks that involved risk conceptually and physically. For example, 'Rest Energy' (1980) is a film with a duration of 4 min and 7 s in which Marina Abramovic and Ulay hold a bow and arrow between them, using the weight of their bodies to hold it primed and ready to shoot, with the arrow pointed at Abramovic's heart. Risk is central to this work, which is heightened for the audience by the fact that for the duration of the performance, the artists had small microphones placed on their chests to amplify the sound of their hearts beating increasingly quickly. The risks taken in this work by the artist are intentional and make the viewer consider notions of risk, danger, trust and mortality. The perception of danger by the viewer is significant in terms of the audience engagement with the work, because they are able to visualise the potential outcome, provoking a visceral response. Also featured was Duchamp's '3 Standard Stoppages' (1913–1914). Duchamp referred to this work as 'a joke about the meter' [19] and was one of the first artworks to use chance conceptually and as an integral part of the production process. Metre-long pieces of thread were dropped onto a horizontal plane, their fallen position left to chance. The application of chance inevitably leads to potential risk, albeit often a risk of artistic failure rather than potential physical harm. The exhibition statement invited audiences 'to consider risk as a positive and creative aspect of their everyday lives' [20]. This sentiment is applicable to daily life, but what about the workplace? How does this statement fit within the framework of a workplace health and safety policy? Is it applicable to a worker who balances on a chair to get something from a high shelf or props a door with a fire extinguisher?

An inevitable outcome of creative actions and risk-taking is failure. Failure is an essential part of a creative practice, whether within the arts, science or other spheres of intellectual or physical production. Failure is inherently connected with creativity and risk, as inevitably, many creative endeavours involving elements of risk will fail. The results of such failure are often inherently funny: surprising, unexpected and therefore, incongruous. Failure is celebrated in Erik Kessel's book *Failed it!: How to turn mistakes into ideas and other advice for successfully screwing up*, which aims to 'celebrate the power of mistakes and shows how they can enrich the creative process' [21]. This visual language of failure is unexpected and incongruous. For example, objects used for purposes other than they were intended, as observed in the photographic work of Richard Wentworth, are interesting because they are incongruous within their surroundings and separated from their original function. The

realisation that the objects have been used inventively is then rewarding to the viewer. A fold in a photograph that makes new relationships between elements of the photograph, as in the project 'The Levitators' by Ruth Van Beek, may seem accidental at first glance. It may have originally stemmed from a mistake, a failure or improvisation with materials. What is evident is that artists intentionally use the visual enticement of incongruity and failure as an aesthetic and conceptual tool.

4.3. Humour

In the introduction to their book *Photography Performing Humor*, Mieke Bleyen and Liesbeth Decan make the connection between falling and failing as sites of both humour and creativity [22]. Firstly, the fall is considered by many to be the archetypal comedic act [23] that has the potential to cause a humorous response. This response could be analysed through the superiority theory of humour, where the viewer has feelings of superiority towards the protagonist of the photograph. Thomas Hobbes built on ideas originally proposed by Aristotle that humour is found in 'defects, deformity, or ugliness' [24], developing into what has come to be known as the Hobbesian superiority theory. He talks of a feeling of 'sudden glory' caused by 'the apprehension of some deformed thing or another, by comparison whereof they applaud themselves' [25]. It has remained an important concept of humour, of which Patricia Keith-Spiegel said that 'mockery, ridicule and laughter at the foolish actions of others are central to the humour experience' [25]. However, weaknesses have been found in this idea by a number of theorists due to the fact that the connection between a feeling of superiority and a humour response is not consistent [26]. Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans (2019) sees the necessity for a certain self-reflexivity and consideration of one's own mortality within a critique of humour, the result of which is a darker form of humour [27]. In her photobook *Falling*, photographer Gabby Laurent explores what it means to fall and in the statement describes this act as 'a fall from grace, falling asleep, falling pregnant, falling in-line or falling apart: falling is an act both comic and tragic, full of loss and wilful abandon, an act repeated throughout our lives' [28]. The photographs in the book show repeated instances of Laurent falling, staged for the camera, drawing on the language of feminist visual art and performative practices. As acknowledged in the book statement, these staged photographs in fact convey moments of control rather than the lack of. Whilst as a viewer we are able to perceive the fact that the images are staged, self-reflexivity may encourage the viewer to react by wincing and even physically holding the body part that could be injured in the photograph. The response, then, has a level of self-reflexivity, where the viewer makes comparisons between themselves and the protagonist in the photograph.

Louise Peacock (2010) developed a model for the analysis of audience reactions to slapstick performances involving pain [29]. This was developed based on Jennifer Hay's model for analysing humour response. The model includes four stages: recognition, embodied understanding, evaluation of pain and appreciation. As a viewer of slapstick comedy, our understanding of and relationship to the material quickly forms: do we recognise signs that it is intended as comedy? How does my body relate to that of the performers, i.e., can or would it do what the performer is doing? (This involves a level of empathy.) What is the nature of the pain? How do we assess its performativity? If real, would it have caused serious harm, if not death? Or was it a near-miss? The context or purpose of the photograph/video is, therefore, important in establishing a recognition of the work as comedic. The embodied understanding and evaluation of pain are important in our consideration of an audience's response to a stimulus. The level of empathy the viewer feels, such as an 'over-identification', can negatively influence a humour response. Clearly, within a slapstick performance, a balance between perceived risk and the underlying knowledge that the scene is in fact safe is necessary for humour to take place.

Within humour studies, the incongruity and incongruity-resolution theories address a humorous response to something out-of-kilter with everyday life. This is something that artistic production does very well. An incongruity can be defined as 'a lack of harmony

between what we expect (on the basis of past experience) and what we see or actually happens' [30]. Shultz (1972) proposed the concept of 'incongruity-resolution' as a contributing factor towards a humorous response [31]. He suggests that a joke will involve an initial incongruity, then a resolution that 'renders incongruity meaningful or appropriate by resolving or explaining it' [31]. In response to incongruity theory, philosopher Herbert Spencer developed the relief theory of humour, which proposes that humorous laughter is 'a manifestation of the release of nervous excitement or emotional tension' [26]. This notion that laughter is a response to nervous tension finds connections with the perception of risk within a photograph, video or slapstick performance.

Heather Diack (2015) uses the concepts of gravity and levity to critique humour in contemporary art. She observes that light, playful or ephemeral subjects have often been considered problematic within art, and therefore, ignored. She says that:

'Humour is a critical conceptual tool in part because it demands a disarming step away from the ordinary so as to take account of the ordinary in its absurdity, in its strictures, in its illogical suspension of disbelief' [32].

The idea of levity as a counterpoint to the gravity of conceptual art acts as what Diack describes as a kind of short circuit [32]. The critique of health and safety and risk management through art practice is to take a 'disarming step' away from it, to recognise the absurdity within it. A short circuit takes place. This short circuit is caused by an absurdity or an incongruity within everyday life, which in turn is often found in the result of failure, or the potential of failure, as a result of the risks present in creative acts.

4.4. Photography and Its Relationship to Humour

Photography is central to the examples within this article, so it is important to reflect on how photographs function in terms of their relationship to humour. Roland Barthes (1977) said that

The single photograph, contrary to the drawing, is very rarely (that is, only with much difficulty) comic; the comic requires movement, which is to say movement (easy in film) or typification (possible in drawing), both these 'connotations' being prohibited to the photograph [33].

It seems an odd thing to assert when photographs seem to effortlessly act as vessels for humour, particularly in the age of meme culture and the networked image. A moving image provides the opportunity for an incongruity to be set up to be followed by a resolution, which clearly relates to established humour theory. The stillness of a photograph does something different. In the chapter titled 'Photography and Laughter's Shattered Articulation', Esther Leslie (2019) begins with Walter Benjamin's description of laughter as a 'shattered articulation' [34]. The very act of laughter is an interruption: to speech, to conversation, to physical activity even. Leslie makes the connection between this definition of laughter and how photography can be seen 'as a disarticulation or interruption of time, of action, of space' [34]. A performance, such as a slapstick film, is durational. A photograph is a single moment. This connects the act of photography to the idea of a short-circuit proposed by Diack. Leslie (2019) observes the inherent humour in freeze-framing, something intrinsic to the photographic image [34]. This creates the opportunity to see moments and subjects for an extended period of time in a manner that is simply not possible in the real world. This shattered articulation creates incongruities and absurdities that may ordinarily pass us by in everyday life. The photograph's 'shattered articulation' lends itself to humour for a number of reasons. A photograph can act in a similar manner to a joke, as Leslie states: 'photography and humor alike depend on time, or on timing. The joke's punchline and the shutter must be detonated at just the right moment, producing a heightened instant' [34]. This type of joke structure within a photograph can also be analysed through both superiority and incongruity-resolution theories of humour. Something in the photograph is puzzling, but then on further examination it becomes clear, causing a humorous response. However, photographs, as fragments of the world, are often

more open-ended and abstracted, providing no clear answers. A photograph depicting an unsafe moment may only illustrate the danger, not the consequence, or the other way round. The 'performance' or movement that it depicts is durational, i.e., it continues beyond the moment of capture. A still image, as opposed to a moving image, is limited to the fragment that the photographer or institution has selected to best illustrate the issue at hand. In his essay 'Diderot, Barthes, Vertigo' [35]. Victor Burgin (1986) contemplates the representation of moments through various methods such as photographs, film stills and tableaux, the meanings that derive from them and the psycho-analytic analysis of these scenarios. Peripeteia, or the pregnant moment, stems from the writing of Aristotle and has echoes through art history in reference to painting and performance. The moment of peripeteia is 'that instance in the course of an action when all hangs in the balance' [35]. He discusses Diderot's (and formerly Lord Shaftbury's) writings around tableaux and the desire to communicate meaning 'at a glance'. Whilst photography has the potential to be ambiguous about what happened before and after the shutter was released, it is possible for the viewer to perceive a wider timeline that sits outside of the fraction-of-a-second exposure. David Bate (2009) connects the 'decisive moment'—a concept that Burgin likens to photography's adoption of the pregnant moment—with the notion of peripeteia. In talking about Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous photograph 'Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare' (1932), Bates says that:

The viewer of the picture can run their imagination back and forth across the time before and after the depicted action to imagine the sequence of events constituting the story, which a single picture can only imply [36].

In this particular image, the outcome is only a split second from coming to fruition and the outcome can be clearly predicted by the viewer. However, if thinking of photographs depicting hazardous situations, as Bates asserts, we can visualise the comedic elements of the movement through the suggestion of the photograph. In the case of Cartier-Bresson's image, it appears that the person is about to land in a puddle and through lived experience we are able to visualise this outcome. So, a still photograph can cause a humorous response in a number of ways. It can highlight an incongruity for an unnaturally extended period. It can act as a shattered articulation. It can also provoke the viewer to visualise potential outcomes that are humorous, exciting, alarming and so on. It is the absence of a resolution that can be a potent space for a humorous or engaged response.

However, to think of a photograph as a singular entity is to ignore its place within a networked culture. The prevalent mode of academic discussion of networked photography centres around the performative and the 'enactment' for a perceived audience [37]. The expanded platform for the sharing of photographic images online has increased exponentially the potential audience for a vernacular photograph, and the representation of the performance has moved from the private to the public sphere [38]. An interesting example is the internet phenomenon of planking, in which a person lies face down, often on top of everyday objects or furniture (often in the workplace), in a corpse-like pose, for the production of a photograph. David Bate describes these photographs as 'witty statements' [39] and makes the connection between the performance of planking and the networked photograph that makes the performance visible [39]. The performance is carried out solely for the photograph to be made, with an audience in mind. In the case of office pranks in the workplace, I have argued previously that increasingly, these actions are performed and photographed for a networked audience, often increasing their scale and ambition [6]. This link between subject and audience is not so evident with the epic fail images explored in this article, in which the creative act is seemingly unconnected to the production of the photograph. The role of the photograph appears to simply cast a critical eye over the blunders of others. However, the role of the photographic act should not be underestimated in terms of influence over the unfolding events. Peter Buse (2021) reflects on the 'death by selfie' Wikipedia page, which provides examples of people who have died through the act of taking selfies. He states that these amateurs 'seek out risk entirely motivated by the photographic act' [40]. In 2011, an Australian man died when planking,

by falling from a seventh-floor balcony, whilst having his photograph taken [41]. It is clearly possible that the actions of people represented in photographs engaged in planking, pranking or taking risks are doing so in an exaggerated fashion due to the presence of the camera and the knowledge of an extended audience for their actions. Photographs of dangerous situations, such as precarious working practices, have become viral and are widely shared online, being continually reshared and recontextualised [42].

4.4.1. Review

These insights into the links between creativity, risk and improvisation depicted through photographs show that there is a complex relationship between them that leads to the potential for a humour response in the viewer. The key points from this research are listed below to support the analysis of the examples in the following section:

4.4.2. Creativity

- There are clear connections between artistic creativity and everyday creativity, through what Weisberg calls 'ordinary thinking'.
- There needs to be intention for an act to be creative. The audience perception of intention and the creative actions of others can impact the humour response.
- For the purposes of this study, creativity is of interest where risks have been taken that run counter to established guidelines, considered through de Certeau's notion of tactics and la perruque. This is as opposed to ratified creativity in the name of productivity.
- There is a clear, established link between a propensity for risk-taking behaviour and creativity.

4.4.3. Creative Risk-Taking and Failure

- The results of creative risk-taking can often lead to failure or the potential for failure.
- Failure can lead to incongruous results, something of aesthetic interest to artists.
- Incongruity and incongruity-resolution theory are relevant to the results of failure, which are often incongruous, surprising or unexpected.
- Improvisation and bricolage (in the workplace and art practice) are closely connected to creativity and incremental decisions and encourage risk-taking.

4.4.4. Audience Responses

- The relief theory connects laughter with a nervous energy, which relates to the perception of risk.
- There is a level of self-reflexivity involved in a humorous response to risk, where one's own mortality is considered.
- The recognition of context and an embodied understanding of pain is significant to audience interpretation and can be explored through Louise Peacock's model for analysing slapstick performance of pain.

4.4.5. The Photograph

- Photography can act as a shattered articulation of reality, a rupture or short circuit.
- A photograph, unlike a video, has a level of ambiguity, only showing a fragment of a scene and therefore, open to interpretation.
- Through the concept of peripeteia, we can consider the potential for a photograph to communicate the before and after of the narrative beyond what is depicted.
- The audience can visualise the outcomes and respond to this hidden potential of the photographic image.
- An awareness of the presence of the camera and a perceived audience can have an impact on the behaviour of the subject in the photograph.

4.5. Analysis

4.5.1. The British Safety Council Archive

The British Safety Council Archive documents historical campaign materials dating from 1957 that were, until recently, thought to be lost. That is, until boxes of materials were found that revealed 'a treasure trove of stories and characters reflecting the shifts in the British way of life since 1957′ [1]. The archive is indeed fascinating and contains iconic posters, photographs, magazines and press, which include strange sights such as 'Geoff Capes in a safety harness' (a famous UK strongman) or 'Margaret Thatcher sweeping'. Fascinating as these were, I was instead drawn to the visual depictions of ordinary people and scenes in leaflets and newsletters. The 'everydayness' of these locations and people and the often snapshot aesthetic are visually appealing. These visual representations have become commonly experienced visual tropes for many people through their perpetuation in the workplace and beyond. On viewing the archive, it becomes apparent that these messages are reinforced through continual repetition. The 'Safety Attitude Guide: Manual Handling' (1996) uses photography to show the right way to pick up a box, echoing my memorable training experience as a temporary worker. This pose is found to be repeated throughout the archive as a way to reinforce the correct way of doing things. These poses have become part of the visual language of risk [20] that we have become accustomed to seeing. The messages conveyed in the archive fall into two distinct categories: 'safe practices'; which exemplify the right way to do something, and 'hazards', which depict the hazard as an example.

The images in Figure 1 are taken from various visual guides in the British Council Archive over a 10-year period. In relation to stage 1 of Peacock's analysis model [29], 'recognition', the context of the photographs is not intended to be comedic or humorous, so there are no clear prompts for the viewer. The photographs show 'safe practices' that the British Safety Council want to reinforce. Through repeated exposure, the audience then develops an embodied understanding of the poses and makes connections between themselves and the protagonists. As the photographs are intended as a guide to picking up the box safely, this embodied understanding may be an important step in internalising the lesson in correct procedure. My previous workplace clearly thought that a photograph was not enough and instead attempted to instil this embodiment through performance. Rather than an everyday tactic employed to complete a task more quickly, these photographs demonstrate what the strategy (the organisation) expects the employee to do for the benefit of productivity (due to the avoidance of sick days). No risks are present within the photographs; they feel particularly ordinary at first glance and their instructional nature shows nothing immediately unusual. However, there is something about the pose that suggests they are staged. The awkwardness of the pose makes it feels like the subject was static for longer than the duration of the shutter opening, rather than the photograph having frozen the action. This is reminiscent of artist Erwin Wurm's 'one-minute sculptures', in which the artist gives instructions to anonymous participants requiring them to interact with everyday objects in an often absurd, humorous and performative manner. The participants of Wurm's one-minute sculptures are required to hold the pose for 60 s. When thinking of these photographs from the archive as a kind of vernacular one-minute sculpture, they too take on a performative quality and the poses begin to seem absurd. The perpetual stillness of the photographic image adds to this feeling. The photograph is supposed to represent the complete movement, but instead represents a static figure performing like a tableau vivant. In terms of embodied understanding, the viewer could be led to imagining this static pose rather than the complete movement, which has an absurd quality. This subtle absurdity acts as the short-circuit that makes us take a disarming step away and see the everyday differently. This absurdity is also present in the subtle contradiction between the everyday qualities of the images and this perception of staging, like a performance within the everyday. These photographs operate very differently to a joke with an incongruity and a resolution. We are not rewarded with a punchline. However, the incongruity is established by this relationship between still photograph and repeated static pose. An

incongruity, as a rupture from what we expect to see, has the potential to cause a humour response. However, these photographs are in fact very mundane, depicting everyday scenes that we are accustomed to seeing. Without an aesthetic or conceptual interest, would people find them funny or engaging, or just write them off as banal? Does my cultural stock of knowledge, including my life experience in H&S training and an awareness of Erwin Wurm's one-minute sculptures, slapstick comedy and other such reference points open these images up to a certain humorous interpretation? In finding these images aesthetically appealing and recognising their artistic value, I am reminded of the process of Dali and Brassaï. Are these images 'involuntary performances? As an artist, am I finding value in the images beyond their use-function? The intention behind the production of the images was to convey information, so the humour I find in the performance and staging is at odds with their intended purpose.

Figure 1. The right way to lift an object (repeated instructions). British Safety Council Archive.

The photographs in Figure 2 have a similar aesthetic to the previous images, but they are taken from pamphlets showing potential 'slip, trip and fall' hazards, their purpose to make us more aware and able to spot them in the workplace. Unlike the previous images, we can consider them through the notion of peripeteia; they are 'pregnant' with the potential accident and therefore the narrative of the accident is suggested and plays out in the viewer's mind. They act like a tableau. For example, the spilled milk on the floor plays a similar role to the comedic banana skin on the floor. We imagine someone slipping on the spillage, which, as we have discussed, is an inherently funny act. All of these images have that potential and therefore, actively engage the viewer in make-believe about an incident or failure that might come next. This puts the viewer in a position of superiority, and as Ruchel-Stockmans (2019) suggested, may also evoke self-reflexive thinking. In the response is therefore a duality of humour and a reflection of one's own mortality. The light and shade of humour are important in these photographs, as there is a perception of risk and the potential of injury. We can analyse these images through the second and third stages of Louise Peacock's model, the embodied understanding and the evaluation of pain. The viewer sees the hazard and visualises the accident playing out. The connection to the self is

an embodied understanding of the potential result. This mental exercise of identifying risk through embodied understanding can have an almost bodily impact. Whether looking at art images or vernacular photographs, could this visceral response in fact be an effective warning against the depicted hazard? However, the perception of risk in these images is one of a knowing artifice. The scenes, whilst photographed in a snapshot manner, feel staged. This may also influence the potential for a humour response. My feeling is that these images, in their original context, may not be particularly funny. Their potential for humour is amplified when they are removed from their context and placed next to each other in repetition.

Figure 2. Potential 'slip, trip and fall' hazards. British Safety Council Archive.

Some of the hazards depicted appear to be the result of improvisation within the environment. A worker may have made decisions about how to plug something in based on their desire to complete a task quickly. This may be true; however, the likelihood is that the creativity actually lies with the photographer assigned to make these images for the pamphlet. They have (presumably) deliberately spilled a drink for the camera, much like a photographic artist would stage something as part of their creative practice. The risk is therefore a manufactured one. As a viewer, we are not seeing what we might perceive as a real risk, but rather an artifice, staged for us to learn from.

The problem with these photographs is that their very banality and the continual repetition of certain tropes may reduce their potency as warnings against hazards. Technological progression has led to the networked image, meaning that the way audiences engage with photographs has shifted. What does this mean for the language of risk and its dissemination?

4.5.2. 'Epic Fail' Images

The archive represents a time before the internet, where the distribution of these images was limited to the physical publication of magazines, posters, flyers and leaflets as represented in the archive. Gomez Cruz and Meyer (2012) analysed the history of photography in terms of the role that photographic and distribution technologies play through five distinct 'moments' defined through technological developments [43]. They proposed that with the invention of the iPhone, we entered a 'fifth moment' where for

the first time the capability for 'making, processing, and distribution of images' reside in the same device [43]. The environment for photographic images has changed from one of individual and localised scrutiny to one of the continual stream or mediation of photographic images. Now, the capability to create, edit and manipulate is in the hands of the producer. Joanna Zylinska says that 'photographs function less as individual objects or as media content to be looked at and more as data flows to be dipped or cut into occasionally' [44].

The 'epic fail' is a term and hashtag that has become popular on social media. In fact, a search of the hashtag on Instagram (as of 7th Jan 2023) revealed 1,409,488 examples. However, the results show a very broad interpretation of the term, showing to what extent it has become part of everyday vocabulary. Searching more specifically, there are many epic fails depicting accidents that have happened at work. The term epic fail refers to something that has gone dramatically wrong and, due to the vast number of phones with cameras out there, the potential of these accidents being filmed is significantly increased. One popular YouTube channel is 'FailArmy' [45], which, as of July 2023, has 16.6 million subscribers. As an example, a compilation of epic fail videos called 'Total Idiots At Work | Funniest Office Fails' [46] has 4.5 million views (July 2023). When searching epic fails, one can find evidence of a range of scenarios in which people are willing to take risks for the sake of having fun at work or simply as a by-product of careless behaviour. Whilst the video is the predominant form of epic fail, I am interested in the less-common, single-image representations of these hazards. The video format is more popular because the narrative plays out in front of the viewer, making it a more direct form of communication. We see the potential peril; our expectations are aroused. Then, the payoff occurs in the form of the accident. Again, the incongruity-resolution theory applies here. My interest in the still photographic image is bound into the specific properties inherent within it that make the articulation of a humorous, surreal or incongruous moment more ambiguous and complex. The vernacular, snapshot style of these photographs and the way they are presented suggests that the situations we are observing are real. However, as observed by Buse [40], the presence of a camera can influence the behaviour of the subjects, meaning that the scenarios could be exaggerated or even staged entirely for the purpose of gaining likes. The photographs shown in Figures 3 and 4 exemplify the viral nature of this type of image. A reverse image search reveals hundreds of locations for the image, making them a form of viral mass entertainment.

Figure 3. Epic fail example (Metro newspaper article, 'When Health and Safety Went Out of the Window') [47].

Figure 4. Viral epic fail example (Bored Panda) [48].

In relation to stage 1 of Louise Peacock's model, 'recognition', these photographs are often found in a context that enables the viewer to recognise that they should respond in a humorous manner [29]. For example, Figure 4 features in many lists with humorous titles, including '47 reasons why women live longer than men' (Bored Panda) and '10 boneheaded installation fails' (Security Sales & Integration). In the examples in Figures 3 and 4, which are still photographs, we can see the hazards clearly. We can also make assumptions about the protagonist's creative decision-making. To avoid the effort of erecting scaffolding, they have opted for a more dangerous approach. This demonstrates creative innovation and a willingness to take unnecessary risks. These decisions are based on 'ordinary thinking', often incremental choices based on improvisation in the moment. There is a similarity to the improvisation that often makes up part of an artist's practice through experimentation. The photograph is frozen at this moment before an accident takes place, so there is an ambiguity in terms of what happens next. Unlike the video, where the narrative plays out in front of the viewer, we are left to wonder. The fact that this narrative, including the potential repercussions, plays out in the viewer's mind has an impact on how it is responded to. The perception of risk brings with it an internalisation of the potential accident. Like the archive images in Figure 2, the viewer is placed in a position of superiority combined with self-reflexivity. However, in this case, the perception is that the scenario is real. These photographs feel more authentic because of their context (social media), as if they have been caught in the act by an eye-witness with an iPhone. This additional impression of authenticity changes the viewers' relationship with the perceived risk and elevates their position of superiority. This relates to the embodied understanding and evaluation of pain, which in these cases is heightened. Relating to relief theory, laughter may also stem from nervousness about the outcome.

The photographs highlight the human inventiveness demonstrated. They could be said to be using tactics that go against the established frameworks (i.e., health and safety protocols) and taking risks to boost productivity. Clearly, in these cases, the risks are considerable. As we have discussed previously, actions that sit outside of given frameworks, that take risks, have the potential to produce results that look out-of-kilter with our expectations. The photograph in Figure 4 is the result of someone cutting corners, being inventive (and foolhardy). The proper approach would have been to use a ladder, but through an improvisational approach, another solution was arrived at. The result—a pair of legs disappearing into a hole, propped against a door—is unexpected. It contra-

dicts our expectations of the world, is like a shattered articulation and is therefore absurd, incongruous and potentially funny.

There is a visual language in these photographs that is reminiscent of slapstick movies by Harold Lloyd or Charlie Chaplin. The photograph of the employee standing on a door could easily have featured in a film like *Safety Last!* by Harold Lloyd, where dangerous yet comedic stunts are performed for the audience. The language of these slapstick performances is part of many peoples' cultural stock of knowledge, making it an easy connection to make. The risks in Harold Lloyd's performances were not all illusionary. In fact, he lost two fingers to an accidental explosion whilst on a film set, leading to him wearing prosthetic fingers. Courtney Andree (2021) noted that Harold Lloyd hid this disability from the audience to maintain their engagement without 'an excess of pity or sympathy' and to not 'disrupt the comic narrative' [49]. This desire to avoid the audience feeling too much is suggestive that within audience responses a balance is necessary between a suspension of disbelief and belief. When watching the scene in *Safety Last!* where Lloyd scales the building and teeters on the edge, I experienced a kind of 'heart in mouth' moment where I felt genuine anxiety that something bad might happen. It is my faith in the construct of the slapstick performance that enables me to laugh. This is the feeling I also get from watching certain epic fail videos. However, the context creates a humorous state of arousal in which I am able to laugh, albeit rather nervously. This type of material is also present in contemporary art, such as Peter Land's 1995 moving image piece *Step Ladder Blues*, in which a painter falls off a ladder every time he tries to climb it. The statement about the work refers to the influence of the slapstick comedy of Harold Lloyd and Laurel and Hardy, also acknowledging the often-Sisyphean tasks they undertake, such as pulling a piano up a flight of stairs [50]. Figures 3 and 4 are also reminiscent of Erwin Wurm's subtle performative images of people depicted in unusual positions, where the pose is a rupture to the 'everydayness' otherwise present.

Photographs with people as protagonists invite a performative reading, so what about the absence of 'actors' within the frame? In Figure 5, the ladders are positioned in a manner that communicates a number of things: unsafe practices, a creative approach to solving a problem, the taking of unnecessary risks. The image is a stage without actors, but as viewers, we are left to imagine the consequences, which means the humour (if it occurs) takes place in our heads. The image is also reminiscent of sculptural photographic works such as the *Equilibres* series mentioned previously by artist duo Fischli and Weiss, because of the way that everyday objects are suspended/balanced. This image takes on the role of peripeteia, the point where all hangs in the balance, in this case literally. The creative decisions and the skills needed to create this set up are not dissimilar to those employed by Fischli and Weiss as part of their creative process; however, the intention is clearly different. The rupture that it creates in the fabric of everyday experience is similar to the shattered articulation and the short circuit provided by humorous work to the contemporary art world. We do not know the photographer's intention when taking the photograph. It is likely to have been to highlight how unsafe the structure is. Can these photographs also be seen as 'involuntary sculptures'? The creator did not have the intention of producing something 'artistic'. We may presume that neither did the photographer. Again, it is me making the comparison to sculpture and performance. The artistic value is being observed a step removed from the production of the photographic image. What is clear is that the creator was in fact being creative to solve a problem by cutting corners and taking risks. These creative decisions relate to de Certeau's notion of bricolage, through the co-opting of materials and using improvisational tactics to solve problems, like similar decisions made by artists. The result is surprising because it is incongruous and goes against expectations or 'the right way' of doing things. The surprising form can be viewed aesthetically, like a Fischli and Weiss sculpture, to those so inclined. It is the product of risky behaviour; it communicates a potential failure. These factors somehow make the work pleasing to look at. It is out-of-kilter with its environment. It tells a story (in the viewers' mind) of potential

disaster. The photograph has also been made visible across the network and distributed widely, reaching an international audience.

Figure 5. Viral epic fail example (health and safety fails from around the globe) [51].

In making a comparison to the British Safety Council archive photographs, the comic potential in these epic fail images is heightened due to a number of factors. The context in which they are displayed suggests a comic reading. Also, the actions of the protagonists are performative, the narrative more obvious and extreme. There is a connection between the level of extremity displayed here and the demands of a social media audience, where everything becomes amplified. Perhaps the images from the archive have become less potent when applied to an audience that is used to more immediate engagement and entertainment? Do audiences need to see the extremes of risk to get the message? Whilst not within the scope of this research, there is room to investigate the type of image used by the BSC and private health and safety training companies, taking into consideration the effectiveness of memetic viral images for a social media-savvy audience.

4.5.3. Risk in Contemporary Art Photography: Photographs from the Project *Cutting Corners* by Philip Welding

My initial research into the BSC archive and the epic fail images led to the production of a photographic project called *Cutting Corners*, which was produced for FORMAT International Photography Festival in 2019. The work proposed to '*perform a fictional health and safety assessment of the festival*'. To do this, scenes that represented potential safety hazards were staged in the exhibition space, photographed and subsequently dismantled. The photographs were taken in an art venue in Derby, to which I was allowed access to make the work prior to the festival. The photographs were then exhibited in the same space a few weeks later as framed prints and vinyl images adhered to the walls. Audience members were invited to consider the depicted health hazards that had been present in the exhibition space in which they were standing, putting them in the position of both a viewer of an art exhibition and a health and safety inspector. The display of the work as an exhibition as opposed to an instructional leaflet enables a recognition in the viewer that this is 'art' and therefore potentially not intended to be viewed as information. However, nor does this context communicate a humorous intent for the work. The work was based on an artifice. Although the scenes were meant to represent 'hazards', the process was essentially managed in terms of risk. They are photographed in such a way as to communicate some precarity, but this is ostensibly a fiction. This use of staging or artifice to provide the illusion of risk or danger can be found in many examples of art practice. Yves Klein did not in fact 'Leap into the Void' when leaping from a building for the sake of a photograph (though there were risks still present), just like in the world of slapstick comedy, Harold Lloyd did

not stand on the edge of a tall building (at least, not in the way that was conveyed in *Safety Last!*). The photographs from *Cutting Corners* are often not dependent on the shutter being pressed at a decisive moment. Like the archive photographs showing the correct way to pick up a box, the artifice is such that the object(s) or person depicted is in fact static in front of the camera before, during and after the photograph was taken. The objects are not in the process of falling, although the potential can be felt by an audience because they are pregnant with that possibility.

However, it would be reductive to think of the artist's process behind the artifice to be perfectly managed and risk-free. In making the work, I was mimicking some of the visual language gleaned from the BSC archive and the epic fail images. This mimicry implies a level of control, planning and considered assemblage. This does not allow for the nuances of the creative process. I was improvising with available everyday objects, the things that were 'to hand', to produce the scenes to be photographed. In the excitement of the creative process, where improvisation is the driving force, it can be challenging to work to a plan that also conforms to a pre-determined risk assessment. Like de Certeau's worker, the tactics used in the production process may not have fitted into an accepted framework. Comparisons could be made to the worker, who, in the heat of the moment, decides to balance a ladder precariously because they are driven to achieve a goal. The creative urge in the production process (for me anyway) is to physically test boundaries, to see what is at the limit of equilibrium. There is an irony in the fact that in a sense I was, like the subject of my research, cutting corners in my exuberance to achieve an image or a certain aesthetic. Figure 6 shows the result of a heightened state of creativity and improvisation that, like Fischli and Weiss' photographs, was the success from a series of failures. As a final project it may look considered and resolved, but it is made up of multiple smaller creative choices that, as Weisberg observed, are based on incremental decisions and 'ordinary thinking'. Will this chair balance on this bench? Can this cup hold the weight? Sometimes, the answer would simply be 'no' and things would fall. These decisions are identical to those taken by workers balancing ladders on buckets. If we think about an artist's relationship to risk-taking, can the creative process itself lead to a 'willingness to take risks'? In a heightened creative state and whilst engaged in improvisation, I was spurred on by the desire to balance things more precariously, to see what was possible. My decision-making became more instinctual, which led to a propensity to take more risks. The process did in fact lead to failure. On reflection, however, this heightened creative state resulted in more engaging outcomes. The yellow chair balanced on two brushes looks very precarious. The viewer can sense the potential that it might fall.

In connecting the creativity and risk that are present within these photographs to humour, there may be a problem. These photographs are (probably) not laugh-out-loud funny. However, they do set up an incongruity in the suspension of a moment. They are a rupture in our expectations of everyday objects within everyday spaces. The absurdity of this misuse of everyday materials and the perception of an almost illicit creativity and risk-taking provoke a sense of something anarchic going on. This differs from the incongruity-resolution model of understanding a joke. However, there is also potential for humour in the visualisation of the outcome, i.e., the object falling. Laughter could therefore stem from the incongruity itself or a nervous energy through the perception of risk or a visualisation of the resolution. The purpose of these photographs differs from those in the BSC archive or the epic fail images. The former aims to inform, to educate, so needs to communicate a lasting impression. The latter exist for entertainment on social media, necessitating a more direct communication. The photographs from *Cutting Corners* are not beholden to the whims of a fickle social media audience. Neither are they trying to inform. Rather, they aim to amplify the absurdity found within everyday life. This gives the images the space to provoke questions rather than to provide answers. The incongruity is at the forefront, whereas the punchline is withheld.
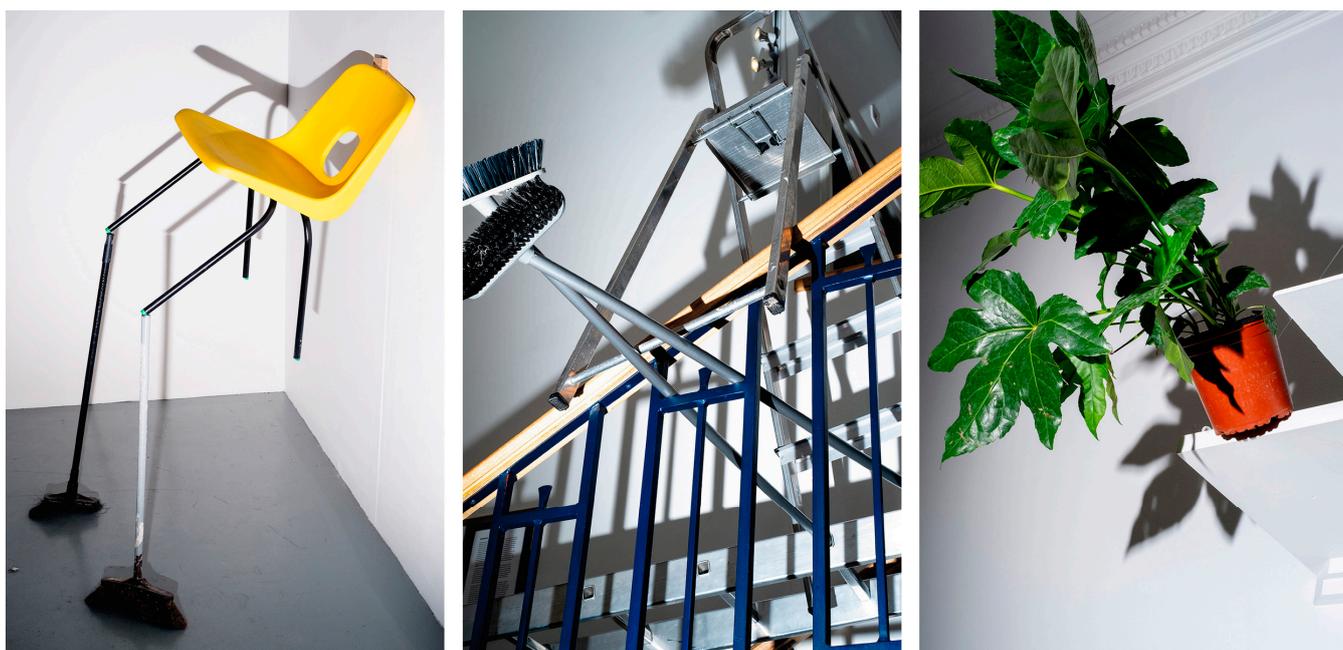
Figure 6. Untitled from *Cutting Corners* by Philip Welding.

5. Conclusions

There are clear comparisons between the creative process of an artist and that of a worker when examined closely. The behaviours described by de Certeau as tactics and la perruque are key to this connection because the creative decisions are resistant and critical, rather than managed by the strategy (the company, management, etc.). Weisberg's (2020) notion of 'ordinary thinking' is important here, because whatever the intention of the creator, or the framework within which the creative act is being carried out (the workplace/the artistic process), evident is a process of decision-making and problem-solving requiring immediate and incremental decisions to be made. An artist, whilst having a vision for the production of artworks, will engage in improvisation and incremental decision-making or bricolage as part of the process. The result may be the taking of unnecessary risks in the heat of the moment to achieve the desired outcome. I certainly found this to be true whilst making fictional health and safety scenarios. Todd Dewett identifies clear links between creativity and risk-taking behaviour in the workplace and the 'willingness to take risks' (WTR) and the risk propensity scale highlights that some people have a higher risk propensity. In the practice-based research, there was a level of control in the production process; however, improvisation increased the potential for risks to be taken and introduced a heightened state in which to do so. Those engaged in bricolage, improvising with their environment to solve problems, would be required to make creative decisions of which risk-taking could be a response. Those with a higher risk propensity are likely to make the choice to complete the task more quickly. The outcomes of risky behaviour and improvisation are often something unexpected. The 'correct' way of doing things will more likely produce something that conforms to our expectations, which is of less interest to everyday or art audiences. Therefore, there is a clear connection between the taking of risks, a creative approach that sits outside of established frameworks, and outcomes that are incongruous, unexpected and therefore, more engaging.

Whether these photographs are funny or intriguing to an audience is dependent on a number of factors. The humour response is sometimes simply connected to what is present within the photograph. This is often when an incongruity is created, through a failed outcome, for example. A humour response can also stem from an awareness of the foolhardy decisions of the protagonist of the photograph. The perception of risk can provoke a humorous response because we are able to visualise an incongruous outcome

(although we have to feel safe enough in the context of the work to engage in laughter). Audience responses can be analysed through the superiority, incongruity and relief theories of humour, which are particularly pertinent to perceptions of risk and accidents. Louise Peacock's model for analysing slapstick performance of pain was useful in thinking about the viewer's connection to the risk depicted. The context in which the photograph is encountered sets the scene for comedy. The viewer's embodied understanding is particularly relevant, which aligns with Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockman's (2019) idea that humour must also involve awareness and self-reflexivity. As viewers, we empathise *just enough* that we feel the risk viscerally; however, we are enabled to laugh through the knowledge that the protagonist will ultimately be fine. The relief theory becomes relevant here, as laughter could act as a release of nervous energy. This increases when the balance between awareness of risk and of artifice shifts towards the former. The audience perception of intention plays a role in the humour response. We may laugh at the misguided creative intention of the subject of the photograph. However, we may also laugh at the unintentional and involuntary.

The photograph seems to be a perfect incubator for these ruptures in the everyday because we are able to observe things going wrong within familiar environments. A photograph provides a recognisable version of reality, but will highlight an incongruous subject for our extended contemplation in a way that is uncomfortable, humorous or absurd. As suggested by Leslie, photography can act as a shattered articulation of reality. This also relates to Diack's notion of a short circuit or disarming step away from reality. The photograph, therefore, unlike a video, has a level of ambiguity, only showing a fragment of a scene and therefore open to interpretation. This is in fact conducive to a humorous response because the photograph suspends the scene and therefore, interrupts the 'durational performance' of reality. The idea of peripeteia allows us to consider the potential for a photograph to communicate the before and after of the narrative beyond what is depicted. This prompts the viewer to engage in visualisation of the potential outcomes, which could lead to mirth, anxiety or a combination of the two. The epic fail images manage to balance these responses, which creates a conducive environment for a heightened and engaged humour response. Multiple wires trailing on the floor or a spillage, such as those in the BSC Archive, are incongruous in their location and therefore become of interest, surprising and potentially humorous. These photographs are meant to point out incongruencies in the everyday environment, so that we may be more able to observe and avoid them in real life. Art photographs, such as the ones I created, have a more ambiguous relationship with reality. They play with the aesthetic of failure. My photographs operate in a very similar way to the instructional box photographs from the archive, in which the subject of the photograph appears to be static before, during and after the photograph was taken rather than the photograph(er) controlling the moment. This creates a subtle incongruity in itself, where the images have a feeling of artifice. In the photographs from the project *Cutting Corners* the balance between the anxiety of risk and awareness of artifice shifts toward the latter.

Artists, myself included, are often drawn to subjects that are incongruous or out-of-kilter, as they provide a stimulating visual presence that sits outside of established frameworks. The aesthetics of failure becomes part of an artist's toolkit; things juxtaposed, ruptured, degraded and glitched is a common visual parlance in the art world. What seems to be the product of risk-taking behaviour can in fact be carefully controlled. Artists such as Fischli and Weiss or Gabby Laurent make effective use of this visual language of risk, which is engaging because it raises questions about the situation at hand. What I seem to be arguing for here is a shared language of failure and risk-taking that is appreciated by the art world and the everyday population. Incongruous mismatches, mistakes, bricolages. Errors, accidents, slip-ups, trips, falls. Breakages and ruptures. As audiences, we want to observe them for a variety of reasons: because they make us feel superior, because they make us laugh, because they are a shattered articulation or a critique of the everyday world. Also, I am arguing for the importance of risk-taking as part of a creative art practice, as a device

for realising heightened moments that connect with a viewer through a visual language that has an energy of anarchy, failure and potential imbued within it. Whether or not these photographs are funny is not the point. These photographs have the building blocks of humour present in their incongruity, their unending stare at the failed moment and their transformation of everyday life. Whether they are presented to audiences for entertainment, information or critique, they have the power to make us chuckle. Beyond the comedic, however, this research proposes new ways of thinking about the role of improvisation and risk in creative practice and everyday life to create a balance that enables the desired messages to be communicated. Artists and institutions can both harness strategies to engage audiences for the desired impact, taking into account the balance between the perception of risk, the context of presentation and the awareness of artifice.

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