Ventriloquism: giving objects a voice

“And what happens to them after they go to the charity shop Claire?!”

The question cuts through angered, outraged, retributive. A member of the audience stands meekly on stage with their head hanging down. They’re laughing. In shame? Confusion? Submission? I’m sitting in the audience of a black scuffed theatre watching a pair of jeans shout at a someone wearing, amongst other things, jeans. And at the risk of sounding repetitive, the shouter is the performer and drag thing Jean. They stand authoritatively on stage, face blue, hands blue, eyes a contrasting gleaming greenish white and swathed in so many reams, rolls and rosettes of denim, that they become a stonewashed suffocation by indigo.

“What did you do with your last pair?” Jean demands of the audience member. They admit quietly that yes, they took them to the charity shop when they no longer fit.

“To the charity shop, yes! To the charity shop and then they’re bought and then they’re taken to another charity shop, and another and another and then where do they go?! What happens to them after they go to the charity shop Claire?!” Jean interrogates us, their voice rising angrily, distraught, enraged.

It’s a guilty laughter. A shame mixed with consternation. It’s the laughter that emerges unbidden when a teacher chastises you as a child, it escapes from you. Inappropriate. Perhaps with a twinge of recognition too. Exposing hypocrisy. “Laughter is, above all, a corrective,” writes Bergson. “Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed.”[1]

A painful impression pierces me through my laughter too. The humiliation is absurd, your own clothes berating you on how you treat them. I too could be that audience member and I’m relieved not to be. I’ll admit to considering myself more worthy than the average citizen for thrifting most of my clothes from charity shops and various second-hand apps. My wardrobe becomes a revolving door of garments that make their way from thrift store, to wardrobe, to back again. Along the way these garments, very often fast-fashion items once rejected, wear out, pill, stretch, fray, and stain and once that happens then I too take them to the place of horror that Jean fears, the landfill.

Jean's show is a one hour performance about their character, an "alien creature from a trash planet" who was birthed from an accumulation of so much textile waste that it became alive. Embodied and emboldened, Jean is sent on a quest to Earth to warn the inhabitants about "The Great Recycle" that will take place if humans refuse to reign in their consumption. Jean's advice falls on deaf ears, with the human need to extract and consume proving irrepressible. Jean too proves susceptible to human greed, their arrival making them into a celebrity and inspires them to rebrand as the high priest of the Church of Scientolojean. And that's how we find ourselves on stage with an American super-church pastor pair of pants shouting at us for throwing away our denim. Sensible warning advice falls on deaf ears, but the cultish fervour of religion shames us into a sensibility around our own waste.

Jean is a voice for the materials we carelessly discard around us. They are the overwhelming personification of "peak stuff", a term used by Steve Howard, IKEA's Head of Sustainability to describe western overconsumption. "We talk about peak oil," Howard told a Guardian conference in 2016, "I'd say we've hit peak red meat, peak sugar, peak stuff … peak home furnishings."[2] Undeterred he went on to describe IKEA's (now realised) ambitions of growth for the next ten years with plans to reduce the impact of emissions and increase sustainability. Howard saw no contradiction in the idea of peak stuff and *making* more stuff, only how to go about it. Too much is seemingly not an issue.

Jean then speaks for all the stuff that we've disregarded in our lives, in our headlong attempts to get better, newer, cheaper, more "sustainable" things. The old stuff doesn't go away. Jean is an embodiment of the horror of waste, of use, of the afterlife of objects, of what really takes place when something gets recycled. It's a fate, they remind us in their show, that's coming for us all.

In *Everything is Alive* podcast, created by Ian Chillag, we find a parallel to Jean in William, a leather pair of pants. Like Jean, William's birth, his material manufacture, is an early concern in the episode. "You were a bodysuit for a cow," Chillag kindly explains to him about his origins. William is doubtful "I'm not sure that I believe in past lives, but everyone seems so confident that I had a life before this, where I walked around, but I couldn't be taken off except through death." Today, William is put on and taken off without any fatal results by the wearer. In fact he's worn very little, his owner becoming self conscious about wearing such ostentatious

pants in public. William admits too that these days “we are no longer a good fit, and I don't know what to do about that.”

There’s a tragedy here. As an object, William has no agency—*“I don't know what to do about that”*—and ultimately he’s unable to do anything, inanimate, stuck. “I think that the real pathos of the show is that these things can't make choices,” Chillag explains to me. “[These objects] can reflect and remember and fantasise, but they have no free will. They can't decide to escape the home they live in.” Whilst William knows that something is not right with him and his wearer, he has no power over his eventual fate. Like Jean, William shares a horror of the thrift store: “it's like hell on earth” he tells Chillag in the episode. This lack of autonomy fills the clothes with horror. “It's a place where anyone can take you. Anything can happen. You're surrounded by bric-a-brac.” In the thrift store we find out, there’s always a low-level of screaming. It’s a place where “you lose your mind because you've been abandoned.”

Worse than the thrift store however, is the same eventual fate that Jean manically pushes us to admit to at the climax of their show: the landfill. William goes on to explain just such a fate that occurred to one of their friends, Levi. “He started to get a worn spot right up near the inseam on each thigh…Eventually this became two holes and Levi went right in the garbage, torn open and thrown away. No attempt to repair, even though a simple procedure could have made him good as new. I thought that was so cold because Levi had been around the block, and I mean that literally,” William recounts sadly.

Bergson wrote of Théophile Gautier’s perception of the comic as “the logic of the absurd” and that thus “what makes us laugh is alleged to be the absurd realised in concrete shape, a ‘palpable absurdity’”[3]. Jean, William, these objects concerned with their material birth and horrified at their cold fate, are made palpable to us, their fears about their treatment by us ridiculously logical. These objects make us laugh through their closeness to us, their domesticity and absurdity, but they make us squirm because of their humanity.

If Jean and William are concerned with their material consumption at the hands of humans, what happens when a performer takes the shape of something that is literally meant to be consumed and ingested? I think back to popular philosophy book *The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten* by Julian Baggini. It outlines the scenario of a pig engineered such that "ending up on a human's table was Priscilla's lifetime ambition and she woke up on the day of her slaughter with a keen sense of anticipation."[4] The thought experiment itself is inspired by the cow found in Milliway's in Douglas Adams' *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. Here the cow in question cheerfully gets to the point in an exemplary form of customer service: "A very wise choice, sir, if I may say so ... I'll just nip off and shoot myself."

There are various misdemeanours that take place when we do anything other than eat our food. *Don't play with your food* is an early childhood admonishment, while as adults, food might be introduced into the bedroom as cheerily suggested in women's magazine's back page sex tips (*why not use whipped cream to spice up your sex life?*). Taken to the extreme, misuse of food can become transgressive, with the wish to become food for someone else, such was the apparent desire of Bernd Brandes, the voluntary victim of Armin Meiwes, the Craiglist cannibal in March 2001.

I remember the first time I saw Dairy King, a monochrome slouching drag king with drooping eyes and udder to match. Dairy King is a milkman with udders ready to give, a direct subversion of his role as a milk provider. His act hints at our anxieties and occasional revulsion of milk, the background horror of industrial milk production, the changing makeup of our food workers as seen in the steady decline of the milkman (regardless of gender), and our gut reactions to consuming both human and animal milk. True, Dairy King, who appears as a man, is not really a drag thing, but sits comfortably under the label king, a more classic drag character. His thingness starts to coalesce as we begin to spy his fleshy udders under his hygienic white coat, betraying him not as a man at all, but a cow.

I include Dairy King here because it is this combination, this weird hybridity that makes him thing-like. Through this mishmash of man-cum-cow Dairy King literally becomes the industrial provider, the commercialised source of milk. His name is not "Milkman" but "Dairy", *containing or made from milk*. His name thus comes from the itemised labels you might search for as you walk down the refrigerated isles of a

supermarket. A product line. Dairy King is a frightening reminder and personification of mass-produced milk, which has become sanitised against any hint or suggestion of its natural source.

"I'm frightened of eggs, worse than frightened, they revolt me," Alfred Hitchcock tells the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci in a 1963 interview at Cannes about his recently released film *The Birds*.[5] "That white round thing without any holes … have you ever seen anything more revolting than an egg yolk breaking and spilling its yellow liquid? Blood is jolly, red. But egg yolk is yellow, revolting. I've never tasted it." Growing up I had a cousin who would only eat the yoke of eggs and found the whites unpleasantly gelatinous. Conversely a friend at school would only eat the whites, the yolk for her being too unpleasantly rich and strangely textured either runny or hardboiled. Hitchcock's fear of eggs is ripe for unpicking by the armchair psychoanalyst. His preoccupation with violence in *The Birds* coupled with his harassment and terrorising of Tippi Hedren, the film's leading lady, has symbolic parallels here. Blood a substance resulting from pain, violence, injury, is "jolly" to Hitchcock, but yolk, the rich nutrient that gives life, the golden centre of the female sexual gamete, repulses him.

When people perform as eggs, it's these life-giving possibilities that performers seem to be drawn to. Drag king Greg Mayo and alternative comedian Lucy Pearman both perform regularly as eggs. Although very different in styles, their acts contain parallels. On stage, Mayo, surprised, gives birth to a chicken, whilst early on in her set, Pearman invites up audience members on stage to help her be birthed from a pink fabric vulva held taught by her volunteers. In Pearman's video sketch *Egg Time* (2021) which contains many of the ingredients of her live act, the end of the narrative sees Pearman hatching herself into a chick. As such Mayo and Pearman's acts could be said to be literal puns or pastiches on *what comes first the chicken or the egg*? For both, the ovulating possibilities of the egg, the ability to change and transform, are ripe for exploration and play.