

## Fusing the serious and the ridiculous: an interview with Brown Council (Sydney, Australia)

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**Fusing the Serious and the Ridiculous:  
An Interview with Brown Council (Sydney, Australia)**

*Contemporary Theatre Review*

Authors: Dr Jason Price  
Lecturer in Contemporary Theatre and Performance  
School of English  
Arts B346  
University of Sussex  
Brighton BN1 9QN

E-mail: J.Price@sussex.ac.uk

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**Abstract:**

The following is an interview with Australian live art collective Brown Council. Formed in 2007, the group has developed an extensive portfolio of interdisciplinary artworks – including video, live performance, and gallery installations – that fuse high and low art traditions in order to critique arts histories, gender, and feminine identity. The discussion below focuses on the company’s appropriation and re-working of popular culture forms and the critical possibilities this provides for them and their audiences.

**Key words:**

Brown Council, Live Art, Australia, Popular Performance, Performance Art

Brown Council is a Sydney, Australia-based interdisciplinary arts collective formed by Francis Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley and Diana Smith in 2007. The four women first met as art students at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, from which they graduated in 2005. Since forming Brown Council, the young collective has produced a staggering body of work for galleries, stages, and online platforms, developing a following of, in their words, ‘young, intellectual, open-minded, and often arts educated’ audiences.<sup>1</sup> Since 2008, they have shown and/or performed their work at major arts institutions and contemporary arts festivals across Australia, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, the Next Wave Festival in Melbourne, and the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane. While the collective works across artistic media – creating installations, films, as well as live performances – they have developed a distinctive aesthetic which emerges from a

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<sup>1</sup> Brown Council, email with the author, 15 November 2015. It should be noted that the variety of artistic forms the company works in makes it difficult to specify audience viewing figures. For ticketed performances like *Six Minute Soul Mate* and *A Comedy*, audience capacity ranged from 15 to 120. With works like *Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours*, performed at the Country Women’s Association Headquarters in Sydney in 2012, the work was streamed and tweeted live online, meaning that the audience was largely virtual and, subsequently, uncountable.

fusion of high and popular artforms, a conscious recollection (and sometimes critique) of performance art histories, and a critical interest in the nature of spectating and aesthetic participation. Endurance performance and body art practices, such as those by Marina Abramovic and Gina Pane, have held particular appeal for the group and have provided a framework within which they create their own work. As well as live art traditions, the collective's work is equally reliant upon popular forms of culture, including stand up comedy, spectacle, and pantomime, which they consciously appropriate and re-present in their practice. In particular, their work shows a fondness for popular comic modes. As they acknowledge in the following interview, they feel that comedy allows them to 'challenge the well-worn cliché that women, especially feminists, can't be funny and to antagonise the seriousness of 'high' art forms, including early performance art'. Fundamentally, the mixing of 'low' and 'high' art forms is a deliberate strategy to critique artistic traditions that have historically been the domain of male artists and therefore operates as a tool for the group to articulate their feminist politics.

Brown Council's video and live art practice often involves upending, unmaking or outright distorting the performance forms and conventions they draw upon. This is typically realised in performance by experimenting with endurance, duration and repetition. In the video performance *Encore* (2007), for instance, Council members appear on stage in an endless curtain call, transforming an activity that has traditionally been used to acknowledge the successful completion of performative labour into the performance itself. By extending and repeating the action of the curtain call, its traditional function becomes lost and one is left with a hollowed out choreography of (non)achievement; offering both a challenge to traditional expectations of what might constitute performance and a critique of capitalist

societies' preoccupation with success (or *performances of success*). The more accessible *Six Minute Soul Mate* (2008), a live performance commissioned by the Next Wave Festival in Melbourne, took up contemporary romance as its focus. The intimate performance, designed for an audience of 15 people, was structured as a speed-dating event. Over the course of the performance, the performers adopted lonely personalities and attempted to woo the audience. With comically bad wigs, uncomfortable jokes, and awkward attempts at intimacy, the work playfully explored, in Brown Council's words, 'how we attempt to perform intimacy in a society obsessed with speed'.<sup>2</sup> *Six Minute Soul Mate* received positive critical reviews and was awarded the Adelaide Fringe Best Theatre Award in 2009.

The company's fusion of elite and popular culture forms is perhaps best exemplified in *A Comedy*, which first appeared at the Next Wave Festival in 2010.<sup>3</sup> The central exploration of *A Comedy* is laughter – in particular *schadenfreude*, that sinister breed of laughter produced from experiencing pleasure at the misfortune of others. Described by the artists in the following interview as a 'spectacle of endurance', *A Comedy* is both task-based and durational. Over a period of four hours, audiences are asked to select from five classic comic forms or gags for Council members to perform individually: stand up comedy, performing magic tricks, the dancing monkey act, slapstick, and taking a cream pie in the face. The acts themselves are amateurish and, at times, humorously under-whelming, a point which is punctuated by the tall, coloured dunce caps worn atop each performer's head. In the magic act, a performer makes seven bananas 'appear' out of their trousers and disappear by eating them. In the slapstick act, a performer is repeatedly slapped for a

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<sup>2</sup> Brown Council, *Six Minute Soul Mate*, <<http://browncouncil.com/works/six-minute-soul-mate#1>> [accessed January 3, 2015].

<sup>3</sup> *A Comedy* was later performed at Carriageworks in Sydney as part of Performance Space's Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art in 2011.

set period of time. In what is perhaps the most humiliating act, the ‘dancing monkey’, the chosen performer dances for the audience in exchange for donations of pocket change. As each of these simple but exposing acts are repeated and endured by the performers over the four-hour period, the darker aspects of the act, and comedy more generally, are uncovered. One can eat too many bananas and be slapped too many times. What begins as cheerful and good-natured becomes violent and cruel the more times the acts are repeated.

The durational and repetitive elements of the performance are designed to prompt the audience to reflect on their agency and their own role in tolerating, or actively participating in, what effectively constitutes forms of (albeit invited) abuse on the performers. If this was not clear enough, at the end of each hour the performers blindfold themselves and stand in dimmed lights in the middle of the performance space. As Brown Council note in the following interview, many audience members often choose at this moment to pelt the performers with some of the tomatoes that mark out the performance space – without, it should be noted, a verbal invitation to do so. The questionable ethics of spectatorship and the uneven distribution of power in the room at that moment are fully revealed by spectators enacting (further) abuse on the performers through a simulated firing line. For Brown Council, allowing the audience to freely engage with the work in a direct way was important, even if violence and humiliation were the outcomes. Building these choices discreetly into the work alongside other forms of participation (i.e., choosing the acts) a ‘tension’ is produced between the spectacle of entertainment and the spectacle of endurance. In her article for Australian live art journal *Runway*, curator Anneke Jaspers observes: ‘At this point the friction between viewing pleasure and discomfort, and between obedience and empowerment, took a more confronting turn. Even in refusing to act,

viewers were complicit in [the performers'] degradation and in fulfilling the work's critique'.<sup>4</sup> It is Brown Council's hope that this tension will provoke 'audiences to consider the politics of spectatorship and highlight the disparity in how [they] understand and exercise agency'.

In *A Comedy* and, as explained, much of Brown Council's body of work, there is a deliberate subversion of the conventions of popular entertainment forms and the assumptions we hold about the way they are supposed to work. In contrast to the virtuosity and accomplishment required of the forms' 'successful' performance, their re-presentation in these contexts is decidedly unvirtuosic. This strategy is what scholar/practitioner Sara Jane Bailes has referred to as 'radical amateurism',<sup>5</sup> a characteristic she identifies in the work of several contemporary theatre companies, including Forced Entertainment and Elevator Repair Service. This amateurism, or failure to meet an acknowledged 'professional' standard, is not accidental, but a chosen aesthetic strategy in which the forms and their customary logic are reconfigured in an attempt to open up critical spaces for the exploration of alternative political positions. In the case of *A Comedy* – and, indeed, much of Brown Council's work – this exploration is predominantly feminist. I read this particular performance as a *écriture féminine* (cf Cixous),<sup>6</sup> a feminine text designed to contest the phallogocentrism of comic modes. Read in this way, the opportunities provided within the performance for spectator involvement (through the selection of acts and the 'firing line') not only present a challenge to spectator agency in a general sense, but also, and more specifically, to our collective tolerance of misogynist and

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<sup>4</sup> Anneke Jaspers, "Brown Council: Critical Comedy," *Runway*, 18 (2011), 14-17 (p. 16).

<sup>5</sup> Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. K. Cohen and P. Cohen, *Signs*, 1(4) (1976), 875-893.

patriarchal comic modes. The unmaking of familiar comic acts in *A Comedy* is therefore a feminist (and feminine) re-writing intended to reclaim the forms' power and to provoke serious questions about the ownership of humour and our collective tolerance of female oppression.<sup>7</sup>

In the following interview, conducted via email in August 2014, I was keen to get a clearer sense of the influences and working methods of the company. As the questions demonstrate, I was especially interested in why the group appropriate and mix high and low artforms in the ways that they do. What emerges from the interview is a generous and intelligent account of their work, creative processes and politics. Little academic attention has yet been paid to the company, but readers looking to find out more about Brown Council should go to their website, [www.browncouncil.com](http://www.browncouncil.com), which contains videos, images and links to reviews of much of their work.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Jason Price:** *Where did the name Brown Council come from?*

**Brown Council:** We played around with a few names during art school before finally settling on Brown Council in 2007. We thought it would be funny to self-impose an official collective term like council to our group and 'brown' offset the seriousness of 'council' due to its association with toilet humour. We also liked the ambiguity of the name Brown Council, it doesn't suggest anything about what we do, the kind of work we make or our gender.

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<sup>7</sup> Although, as Gerry Harris points out, in practice it is the audience who will ultimately determine an *écriture féminine*'s subversiveness – which means it may only 'work' on those 'predisposed' to be critical of the patriarchy in the first place. Given that their audience profile is, as mentioned, young, open-minded and arts educated, I would suggest there's a strong chance that many who witness the company's work are able to identify the feminist politics within it. See Gerry Harris, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 50.



**JP:** *You work across high and low cultural forms, acknowledging the influences of both visual and performing arts histories and traditions. What artists, performances or other works have you been especially influenced by?*

**BC:** We were inspired to start making performance by Australian collaborations like Gravity Feed, The Sydney Front, Frumpus and the Kingpins. These groups performed in theatrical, visual arts and club contexts and we saw an opportunity for us to collectively create work that continued in this tradition.

In 2009, we began to explore performance beyond the art world and became particularly interested in the relationship between art and entertainment. During this period we made *What do I do? 1970-2009* (2009) *Big Show* (2009) *One Hour Laugh* (2009) and *A Comedy* (2010). We were inspired by comedians who seemed to straddle performance art and comedy including Andy Kaufman, Bill Hicks, Rodney Rude, Neil Hamburger, Sandra Bernhard, Lenny Bruce, Nick Sun and Andrea Dice Clay and examined the way in which context informs the way an audience perceives a performance.

More recently, we have begun to acknowledge and embrace the important role feminism plays in our practice and we're deeply influenced by female artists who were experimenting with performance for the camera in the 60s and 70s including Marina Abramovic, Yoko Ono, Gina Pane, Joan Jonas, Ana Mendieta and Martha Rosler. Our recent body of work about the mythic Australian performance artist, Barbara Cleveland, seeks to symbolically insert Cleveland into the canon of art history, highlighting the absence of female artists in the history books. In the creation of the work, we drew inspiration from the way in which performances were documented from this period and were particularly interested in the way Chris Burden conceptualised the documentation of his work. *This is Barbara Cleveland* seeks to question the role of documentation in performance, who is written in and out of art history, and how narratives are constructed and re-presented.

**JP:** *I'm interested in artists who have worked across 'low' (or popular) and 'high' art forms to make their work. As I'm sure you know, the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century performance is riddled with such experimentation, for varying reasons. For early avant-garde artists like the Futurists the decision to turn to popular performance forms, like variety theatre, slapstick or puppetry was political, designed to challenge and transgress accepted high art standards. For conceptual artists and, later, performance artists in the 1960s and 70s, it was less about transgressing acceptable standards, but to critique, among other things, the gallery as institution and the commodification of art, etc. Do you see *Brown Council* as part of this tradition? Are you consciously appropriating (or 'quoting') popular forms as a political critique or for some other reason?*

**BC:** Yes, we definitely see ourselves as part of this tradition. Quoting historical work is an important part of our practice as it provides us with a framework within which we can address our present – as a group of female artists working in Australia – and our future. We like to combine the very serious, with the ridiculous; fusing a range of performative genres such as endurance performance and body art practice with stand up comedy, pantomime and street performance. For us, fusing high artforms with 'popular' artforms such as standup comedy offers us an opportunity to parody the

stereotype of the ‘male artist genius’ and to open up an alternative space for our own practice to be considered. In *What Do I Do (1970-2009)* (2009), we dress up in hand made pantomime costumes and appropriate two of Vito Acconci’s works for the stage. We present ourselves as garish shadowers of the famous American artist, enacting our own anxieties, fears of failure and dismissal as women artists and as Australians on the world stage.

We use humour as an interventionist strategy to challenge the well-worn cliché that women, especially feminists, can’t be funny and to antagonise the seriousness of ‘high’ artforms including early performance art. In *One Hour Laugh* (2009) our unsettling laughter and ridiculous costumes parody the austerity of performance art documentation through overt theatricality and seemingly senseless enjoyment. The irreverence of some of our work could be seen a uniquely Australian characteristic, as Anne Marsh points out in her book *Performance Ritual Document*. She writes that humour has a long history of provocative acts in Australia dating back to Barry Humphries’ re-enactment of the abduction of a Soviet spy in 1953.<sup>8</sup>

**JP:** *I wonder how your views on these matters are evolving. Reflecting on your practice over the last seven years, how have your views/attitudes to your work/performance-making changed? (Have they?)*

**BC:** I’m not sure they have changed! Or at least they are constantly evolving depending on the project and the context in which we are making work.

**JP:** *I’m intrigued by the way you invert the traditional notion of ‘spectacle’ with regard to the popular, transforming the virtuosity we often associate with popular performers (comic timing, presence, physical abilities, etc.) into the virtuosity of endurance. Could you say a bit about your decision to do this? How about the toll endurance tasks have on your bodies?*

**BC:** We have created two major works that deal with the “spectacle of endurance”: *A Comedy* (2009) and *Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours* (2011). We keep returning to endurance as it is a provocative and engaging way of activating an audience, drawing out concepts of agency, and building a collaborative model where both artist and audience realise the politics of the work. Endurance is a state of mind. The body just follows.

*A Comedy* was a 4-hour “endurance spectacular” which consisted of a series of 5 comedic acts that we performed at the audiences’ request. This work was an enquiry into comedic performance conventions, specifically looking at what, why and how we laugh at material. The work relied on the participation of the audience to shape the content. The ‘endurance’ of the performance was produced by the 4-hour duration, the physically demanding acts and the consistently repeating material.

As Anneke Jaspers says about the work “*A Comedy* created a spectacle par excellence through its fusion of endurance and comedic conventions. It invited viewers to participate in the construction of the work’s meaning while demanding self-awareness

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<sup>8</sup> Anne Marsh, *Performance Ritual Document* (Melbourne: Macmillan Art Publishing, 2014), p. 247.

about the distribution of power in the room. It addressed spectators as both individuals and as part of a collective social body. It equated looking – and looking only – with acting (as opposed to passivity) from an ethical perspective.”<sup>9</sup>

At the end of each hour we stood for 5 minutes listening to a bellowing drumroll blindfolded in front of the audience. It was in these moments – with no instruction from us – that the audience decided to throw tomatoes at us (these tomatoes were part of the installation, delineating the performance space). It was in these moments that direct agency was given to the audience to anonymously humiliate and potentially hurt us or not to participate.

The spectacle of *A Comedy* placed audiences in the familiar position of being ‘at a show’, about to see entertainment. The duration of this work and the structure (premised on participation, repeated acts etc) introduced a hardship, a cruelty and a banality. Through the tension between entertaining spectacle and endurance performance, we provoked audiences to consider the politics of spectatorship and highlighted the disparity in how spectators understand and exercise agency.

*Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours* was an entirely different approach to the notion of ‘spectacle’. *Mass Action* was a performative bake-off and test of endurance between the four members of Brown Council. Within the civic space of the Country Women’s Association (CWA) headquarters in Sydney’s Potts Point, Brown Council baked continuously for 90 hours in an attempt to cook every recipe in the iconic CWA cookbook *Jam Drops and Marble Cake*. The project culminated in a cake-judging tournament, which was judged by certified CWA and Land Cookery judge Alison Mutton. After the cake judging we held an afternoon tea for CWA members and invited guests, where around 200 people came to eat the cakes we had made.

We developed a website for the project: <http://browncouncil.com/massaction/>. This website documents the entire process – where throughout the 90 hours we uploaded images of every baked and failed cake, responsive texts written by Ianto Ware and Jane Howard, audiences could contribute via a tweet feed and comments section. Over the 90-hour performance there was a live video feed that was streamed. This website became an access point for women across Australia to participate and watch the performance. Scheduled at the same time as the performance, the CWA held their national conference in Tasmania. Throughout their conference they watched the progression of the performance on a large screen in their conference hall. It also enabled audiences to watch the progression of the performance outside of the CWA Hall. The website projected the performance into public space, it created a community of viewers and built a relationship between CWA members, the arts community and people interested in baking.

The endurance elements of *Mass Action* enabled us to pay tribute to the CWA (one of Australia’s longest standing organisations dedicated to the empowerment of women), draw out the similar strategies of collective action between the CWA and us, as 4 women working collectively, and to engage with a national audience. In doing so, this monumental feat explored culturally embedded notions of ‘women’s work’ and the importance of intergenerational dialogue.

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<sup>9</sup> Jaspers, p. 17.

**JP:** *How do you work as a collective? In developing your work, are responsibilities shared, or do some of you lead in particular areas?*

**BC:** After almost 10 years of working together, we have developed a unique methodology for creating work that most often starts with a conversation around a table. In 2011, we made a work for the Melbourne Art Fair called *Portrait of Brown Council by Brown Council* in which we put our process on display by sitting around a table for four hours every day of the art fair coming up with ideas for new works.

We are a team of co-devisors, each of us bringing a unique and integral element to the collaboration. In keeping with our feminist politic, Brown Council is a non-hierarchical with each of us making equal contributions. We don't have a regular studio practice, instead, we prefer to make our work in intensive residencies during which we spend every minute with each other. These residencies forge a unique bond between us and allow us to immerse ourselves in a work without distraction. We structure our residencies around brainstorming and task based activities which often involves each of us presenting 'homework' to the group however it's often outside of these allocated times, when we're drinking wine and feeling relaxed, that we come up with our best work.

**JP:** *It would be helpful if you could walk me through your process for making a performance like A Comedy. How was it conceived and constructed?*

**BC:** The process of developing *A Comedy* took many years, but it was initially sparked by an earlier work *Six Minute Soul Mate* (2008). This was a live performance that mirrored the structure of a speed dating night, in which a series of 'characters' attempted to seduce the audience. One of these characters (who we affectingly referred to as Allan) attempted to woo the audience through a stand up comedy routine in which he told terrible, sexist jokes. It didn't go too well. We each performed this character in drag and modelled him off a number of (awful) comedians as well as comedians who play the 'bad comedy' shtick like Neil Hamburger.

After this we became interested in the figure of the stand up comedian and the framework around comedy, in which anything, no matter how offensive, can be said under the guise of it being a joke. We were also interested in exploring this genre, which is typically male dominated and often outwardly sexist. We began our artistic careers performing together in nightclubs cabaret style events, so we learnt pretty early on that humour was a very good device to get the attention of an audience, and that once you have them laughing you can do (almost) anything to them.

We began developing *A Comedy* at the end of 2008 as part of an incubation program for the 2010 Next Wave Festival (held in Melbourne). However, it wasn't until we presented the work in Adelaide in 2012 that it was finally complete. Over this period we went away on a number of intensive residencies in a range of locations from a studio in Beijing to a farmhouse in rural Australia. We undertook improvisations and various performance and writing experiments, participated in comedy and clowning workshops and attended laughter circles and yoga. We also saw a lot of local stand-up comedy and obsessively watched comedians to investigate how they used the comedic

genre to push the constraints and limitations of what an audience finds funny, entertaining, or pleasurable.

We explored the connections between the heroic male performance artist and the male dominated realm of stand up comedy and slapstick. We considered the relationship between the clown, the trickster and the very serious artist and we investigated the clichés of the po-faced feminist and kept coming back to the question of: can women be funny and can performance art be entertaining?

As performance artists investigating comedy, we were interested in how the work of these comedians can be compared to the work of notable performance artists. The genres of comedy and performance art seem so diametrically opposed yet in many cases it is often the context and the audience that separates the two. The 'low brow' comedy audience holds an expectation that they will be entertained, whilst the 'high brow' performance art audience expects to be challenged or provoked in some way.

We began experimenting with different types of humour and laughter and the point at which something stops being funny and becomes uncomfortable. We became particularly interested in the power dynamics involved in laughter and the relationship between performer and audience. We kept coming back to Nietzsche's notion that to "laugh means: to be malicious but with good conscience" and that there is a guiltless pleasure from laughing at the misfortune of others.

This led us to experimenting with the historical figure of the dunce. Throughout history, the dunce (fool, clown, buffoon) has been given a kind of social license to transgress common sense and logic, to invert reason and morality. We wanted to create a performance environment in which anything might be possible, where the audience might do things that they wouldn't normally do, trying to channel Bakhtin's notion of the Carnival and create some kind of social inversion.

**JP:** *What drives you as artists? Why do you make the work you do?*

**BC:** We are driven by an exploration of performance; its history, content and form. We make work as a means to critique and examine the performance of gender, the performance of the self and the performance of the artist. We are interested in challenging preconceived notions of feminine identity and the way women have been represented in the past and are represented in the present.

Using our own bodies to create work is the most effective and relevant way to express the conceptual concerns of our practice. We are drawn to live performance as it offers a direct engagement with an audience with whom we experience chance interactions, messy encounters, failures and triumphs.

In our performances for the camera the focus often centres on the relationship between the performance action and the video or photographic document. We confuse the relationship between what you can see, and what may have actually happened; playing with the audience's perception of time and space. Through editing and invented time-codes, our videos often fake the 'real' in performance and the live moment, highlighting the way in which performance art documentation is constructed.

The conflation of fact and fiction in our work also playfully critiques the history of performance art, and its association with notions of truth and authenticity.

## **Figures**

Figure 1: *A Comedy*. LiveWorks, Performance Space, Sydney, 2010. Image courtesy of Brown Council.