Gymnasureum: ‘Pimping’ of Body and Machine

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Abstract

This thesis is based on my PhD studio project, Gymnauseum, which uses chindogu, a Japanese creative form for intentionally producing absurd and useless design objects (Kawakami, 1995), as a starting point. Gymnauseum is a pseudo-gym in which visitors can ride absurd and nonsensical fitness machines that question the obsession with obtaining (and retaining) an ‘ideal body’. The fitness machine sculptures in Gymnauseum are also, in a sense, ‘ideal bodies’: long, lean, and shiny, they are based on customised 1960s’ ‘low-rider’ bikes with ridiculously extended front forks. These mid-life-crisis ‘Harleyesque’ exercycles reinforce the notion that that exercising on the spot on treadmills, steppers and bikes going nowhere is a metaphor for perpetually trying to make up lost ground in an effort to recapture the body of one’s youth.

In this thesis, I engage with the work of relevant critical theorists who explore how power and control are exercised over the body. For example, Michel Foucault’s notion of the docile body is pivotal for understanding how the discipline of repetitive exercise and loss of personal autonomy are linked (Foucault 1979). His analysis of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon prison system can also be applied to the contemporary gymnasium, whereby the possibility of constant surveillance by other gym users and personal trainers creates a self-regulating system of discipline (Frew and McGillivray 2005). I present absurd ‘fitness equipment’ within a mirrored pseudo gym environment to discuss how power and control over the ‘docile body’ is also perpetuated through our relationship with the machine.

I also invoke Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories surrounding the carnivalesque (Bakhtin [1965] 1984), whereby traditional power structures can be temporarily overturned to allow minority voices to emerge. In today’s gyms, social hierarchies are obliterated as all involved are brought low in their endeavour to make docile the grotesque body in order to lose weight. Traditionally carnival was a short time in which the peasant population could relax before the deprivations of Lent, and then return to their daily lives of hard toil. I argue that in developed Western countries today, we live in a situation of perpetual carnival, whereby we indulge in excessive amounts of alcohol, fattening food and constant entertainment. Thus, in Gymnauseum the notion of the gym as a Lenten site is expressed in darkly humorous works, such as spike-laden punch bags and weights that echo the notion of self-flagellation and repentance in exercise. Gymnauseum critiques the notion of the ‘ideal body’ as a commodity (Bourdieu 1984; Bordo 1993) within a system that has “broken free from the chains of usefulness” (Kawakami 1995, 8).
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed: Jane Venis
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Work published in the Course of Research
Included in this thesis are papers in Chapters 2 and 5 for which I am the sole author. The bibliographic details for these papers are:


Both of these articles are included in the body of the thesis. I hold the copyright for both articles.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview
This chapter introduces the Gymnaseum project, outlining the research question and its associated areas of investigation. I present a survey of theorists, artists, and philosophers so as to contextualise my central research methodology of critical theory and to address other relevant positions that provide some tension in my project.

As a great deal of research has also taken place in the studio and through a trial exhibition, I discuss how studio and theoretical research processes inform each other. In my search for a studio research methodology that adequately encapsulates my experience of this process, I outline some ambiguities that surround the terms “practice-led” and “practice-based” research. This exploration had led me to embrace Graeme Sullivan’s notion of transcognition (Sullivan, 2005) as underpinning my holistic studio and theoretical research process.

1.2 Research Question
How can principles of chindogu, a Japanese art form for intentionally producing absurd and useless design objects (Kawakami 1995), be employed in Western art to comment on the construction of the ‘ideal body’ through the use of contemporary gym equipment within a culture that is obsessed with exercise?

The above question opens up the following areas for investigation:

- How can the contemporary gymnasium, as the site for obsessive exercise needed to maintain the docile (Foucault 1979) or ‘ideal’ body be represented visually within a carnivalesque context (Bakhtin [1965]1984)?
- Can chindogu (Kawakami, 1995) be related to the pataphysical object (Jarry [1911] 1996) when considering its dissonance between purpose and practicality?
• Can the proposed installation *Gymnäuseum* embody discussion around these questions?

1.3 Thesis: Structure and Voice

This thesis uses two specific approaches. First, I acknowledge the validity of a diachronic approach to reflect an understanding of the interconnectedness between events (historical and current) and the development of critical thinking and creative expression. This perspective recognises that the development of ideas is related to events specific to their own time and place, thus ideas change and develop over a span of time. In articulating the development of my project, I intend to reflect this understanding. However, I take a second and rather playful approach in the two smaller *Eureka Salon* interjections, in which I take the liberty of constructing an imaginary dialogue between various philosophers and artists from different eras. In these sections (clearly delineated by a change of text colour) I present their ideas synchronically, as I purposefully pit various thinkers against each other in the setting of my local pub.

I am not an historian and therefore the development of the *Eureka Salon* idea comes from my experience as an artist when researching within the synchronic space of the Internet. Thus, when reading snippets of various ideas from a range of thinkers (alive and long since dead) I considered the idea of bringing them together in collapsed time and space to take part in an imaginary dialogue unconstrained by the predominant conventions of my main text. The Eureka Café is my ‘local’ pub, the setting of many productive verbal tussles with colleagues, students and friends; hence the name Eureka Salon. Although the pub is very aptly named, the aim of the conversation is not to necessarily ‘leave’ the salon with definitive answers to the philosophical debate. Instead, the aim is to open up an imaginary dialogue and see what further possibilities may be explored within my project.

I use two voices in this thesis, an academic voice in the third person and a more informal voice that tends toward the jocular and colloquial at times. Both these
voices are threaded throughout the writing and are not differentiated by the Eureka Salon sections.

This thesis is informed by a broad spectrum of critical theoretical approaches, ranging from Marxist to post-structuralist perspectives, which I use to negotiate the terrain of the Gymnäuseum project. In doing so, the thesis becomes a network of connections that creates a field in which to position and discuss my studio work. At times I will pierce the surface of this field and examine some key concepts in depth, as noted below. What follows is a chapter by chapter breakdown of the text, which introduces the theories and ideas that will make up the content of the thesis.

I begin Chapter 2 by introducing and defining the concept of chindogu, which translates into English as “weird tool” (Kawakami 1995). It was created by Kenji Kawakami when he was the editor of a Japanese mail-order catalogue for new inventions. Bemused by the absurd inventions that received patents and were purported to be for real use, he conceived the idea of creating purposefully illogical and circuitous solutions to not-so-pressing problems. The resultant chindogu are purposefully designed ‘products’ that are essentially useless.

Many of Kawakami’s chindogu address the issue of the inordinate amount of time involved in maintaining an acceptable appearance. Others address the petty irritations of daily life. Kawakami’s objects appear at first glance to be light and humorous one-liners that belie the underlying notion of a critique of the overproduction of unnecessary consumer goods.

I employ Kawakami’s Ten Tenets of Chindogu (Kawakami 1995) as a starting point to introduce the concept of chindogu as a creative device that can be used to discuss the object in terms of production and consumption, use, uselessness and the ‘unuseless’ (Kawakami 1995). The differing perspectives of Kawakami, Marx, Jean Baudrillard and design theorist Maurizio Vitta, among others, add to this discussion via the literary device of the Eureka Salon. I also discuss how chindogu can be linked to various modernist anarchic art movements, such as Surrealism and Dada, using
some pivotal examples, including Meret Oppenheim’s *Breakfast in Fur* (1936) and Man Ray’s *Gift* (1921).

From here, the chapter moves to the concept of pataphysics. As I will show, this pseudo-science is appropriate to discuss the paradox of unwieldy or absurd contraptions designed to perform unnecessary or profoundly simple tasks. Pataphysics first appeared in an article by French playwright Alfred Jarry in 1893 (Grossman 1967). He further developed the notion of pataphysics in his posthumously published 1911 novel *Exploits and Opinions of Dr Faustroll, Pataphysician* (first written in 1893). Pataphysics is underpinned by an absurdist philosophy that parodies the theory and methods of science and is expressed in nonsensical language. It is fatalist in essence, showing that any understanding of the known universe is bound to fail, highlighting the futility of existence. I compare and contrast the philosophies of chindogu and the pseudo-science of pataphysics to consider how the latter can be used as a somewhat cynical appraisal of ‘the consumer science’ of fitness products.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the work of two key philosophers, Bakhtin and Foucault, to provide a foundation from which to explore the manner in which the ‘ideal body’ has become a product that is constructed in the setting of the contemporary gymnasium. I recognise how the life experiences of both these theorists has had a fundamental impact on the way they thought and wrote about power over the body, the power of institutions, and the possibilities for change.

In *Rabelais and his World* ([1965]1984), Bakhtin focuses on the picaresque writing of subversive French monk François Rabelais (1494–1553) to discuss the power of Renaissance carnival as a tool for dislocating power structures by satirising and/or mocking authority figures. Bakhtin termed the (temporary) process of overturning power hierarchies in favour of the underdog as the ‘carnivalesque’ (Bakhtin [1965]1984).
Some of Bakhtin’s theories surrounding the carnivalesque are very relevant in a discussion of gym environment. For example, the notion of the communal ‘grotesque body’ is pivotal in situating public exercise in gymnasiums and reality television weight-loss programs within a theoretical perspective. I also explore his notion of carnival ambivalence as a useful framework through which to discuss the work of performance artists Tony Schwennson and Nao Bustamante who appear to mock the unruly grotesque body in order to highlight society’s unrealistic expectations of bodily perfection.

I investigate the link between the carnivalesque grotesque body, repeatedly coded by Bakhtin as female (Chedgzoy 1993), and sexist societal attitudes that code all fat as essentially female; its physical manifestation attributed to a lack of self-control. The constant pressure for women to maintain the ‘ideal body’ was a theme of Susie Orbach’s 1978 polemic Fat Is a Feminist Issue. I move this discussion into the present timeframe, using the positions of some contemporary feminist theorists including Susan Bordo, Kirsten Bell and Darlene McNaughton to consider whether fat remains a feminist issue.

Foucault’s studies of the body as a site for political control also make him an important theorist when considering the construction of the ‘ideal body’ within the contemporary gymnasium. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault’s notion of the docile body is pivotal to understanding how the discipline of repetitive exercise prescriptions and loss of personal autonomy are linked (Foucault 1979). I also employ his analysis of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon prison system (designed in 1791) as a vital addition to the discussion surrounding the body as a site where power dynamics are played out. The panopticon features a high circular tower that is centrally located within a circle of surrounding cells. Those under surveillance are disciplined to behave well as there is a perpetual uncertainty about when surveillance is taking place. I use the panopticon as a model to discuss how docile bodies under the threat of constant surveillance are disciplined to perform in the gym.
Foucault used the model of the panopticon to discuss how the hidden power of the gaze can be used to subjugate or control groups and individuals. However, the notion of the gaze has broader applications and histories, which I’ll briefly mention here before returning to the chapter outlines. Jean Paul Sartre’s notion of the gaze was brought into common psychoanalytical usage and further developed over a number of years by Jacques Lacan. Unlike Sartre, Lacan considered the gaze itself to be an ‘object’ that existed in its own right (Lacan 1979).

The process of the gaze can be divided into three stages. The first (which is the most commonly held notion of the gaze) relates to a feeling of anxiety engendered in a person when they become aware that they are being viewed as an object (Lacan 1979). This relates to Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage (Lacan 1953), whereby a small child realises that she or he is an individual with their own separate body, when looking into a mirror for the first time. However, Lacan developed this idea further to discuss the voyeuristic situation when the object of the gaze realises they are being observed and returns the gaze back to the subject. The third stage is when the subject may imagine being caught out, thus, as Lacan (1979, 84) says, “a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other”.

Thus, the difference between Foucault’s application of the gaze within the panopticon and the Lacanian perspective is that, for Lacan, both the viewer and the viewed modify their behaviour. Not so for film theorist Laura Mulvey. In her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, she developed the term “the male gaze.” She claimed that women in film become the objects of the male gaze as the controlling force of the filming, and therefore the gaze through the eye of the camera was under male direction. This led to the premise that heterosexual males were then, by default, the primary audience. This idea from a contemporary standpoint is clearly both heterosexist and sexist, as camera operators and film directors may well be women or gay (or both); however, it was the historical starting point of an ongoing dialogue about the male gaze from a feminist perspective.
From a feminist viewpoint, whether in film, in the gym or on the street, women are disciplined to look good and behave in an acceptably feminine way because of the expectations of the male gaze, irrespective of whether it is openly appraising or unobserved (Orbach 1978; Bordo 1993).

Lacan’s theories relating to the gaze are relevant when considering how the gaze is an all-pervasive part of the gym experience. The ways in which the gaze is activated and perceived by gym clients is the subject of a 1999 research project entitled “Interaction Order and Beyond: A Field Analysis of Body Culture within Fitness Gyms”, undertaken by sports theorist Roberta Sassatelli. Some of her findings, in conjunction with Foucault’s discussion surrounding the panopticon, have informed various mirrored studio works as part of Gymnaseum.

Mathew Frew and David McGillivray are also key sports theorists whom I cite in this project. They use the notion of physical capital (Bourdieu 1984) to discuss how the gym environment, in particular, the attitudes of some personal trainers towards their clients, can create an environment of perpetual embodied dissatisfaction (Frew and McGillivray 2005).

In Chapter 4, I employ various strategies to develop my understanding of ‘the machine’ from a contemporary perspective, and discuss how this understanding is manifested in my studio exploration. I trace the lineage of current viewpoints through the historical and philosophical perspectives of Marx, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Gerard Raunig to develop work that performs an understanding of the machine as a social system. Threaded through this discussion are examples of works from artists, film makers and designers who make machines that critique the very purpose of machines themselves.

Traditionally, the machine has been linked with the imbalance of power, and portrayed as a symbol of dystopia in popular culture, literature, film and art. Within this trope there are memorable examples of the black humour of absurd machines and disintegrating machinic dystopias, such as Charlie Chaplain’s Modern Times
Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) and Jean Tinguely’s *Homage to New York* (1960).

N. Katherine Hayles’s (1999) theory of the post-human whereby she envisages a seamless intelligent interface between machine and human is relevant to both notions of dystopia and the contemporary gym. An example of this lies in the relationship between various data-collecting gym machines and their users, which raises the perennial question of how much power we invest in the machine. Of relevance here is Australian performance artist Stelarc’s position with regard to the integration of technology into the body, whereby he proposes that, ultimately, the body may become obsolete.

In this project I apply contemporary thinking surrounding the machine within the carnivalesque setting of the gym in order to consider how the perspectives of chindogu and pataphysics can be used in the creation of the interactive *Gymnauemum* installation.

Two secondary explorations relating to the body, the machine and the gym, challenge my post-structuralist approach—namely, autopoiesis and phenomenology. Autopoiesis, a concept whereby some systems are self-perpetuating, originated in the study of cell biology (Maturana, Uribe and Varella 1974), and could be applied to the notion of the gym as a self-sustaining factory (which perpetuates more machines, trainers, users, and so on). However, the idea of a completely self-sustaining system working as a ‘sealed unit’ (particularly when applied to a social setting) is problematic when viewed from the position(s) of critical theory in which there is an implicit understanding that no system works in isolation. As part of this discussion, I introduce the kinetic sculptures of Arthur Gansen, such as *Machine with Oil* (1990).

Pure phenomenology presents lived bodily experience from a first-person perception as an ultimate truth that is insulated from social, cultural or historical perspectives. It has been criticised by critical theorists, including those of the Frankfurt School, for its
ahistorical treatment of society by using fixed criteria to establish how existence is experienced by individuals, and its adherence to absolute foundations (Bronner 2011).

However, the interactive quality of Gymnàuseum has impelled me to investigate how the experience of riding and interacting with various works in Gymnàuseum could be viewed from a phenomenological perspective. In particular, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty interests me because he acknowledges that some understanding of bodily experience can be objective:

> underneath the *objective and detached* [my emphasis] knowledge of the body is that other knowledge which we have of it by virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 206)

As Taylor Carman observes in “The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty”:

> Merleau-Ponty never doubts or denies the existence of mental phenomena, of course, but he insists, for example, that thought and sensation as such occur only against a background of perceptual activity that we always already understand in bodily terms, by engaging in it. (1999, 206)

This notion is particularly relevant to me when considering, for example, how a deeper understanding of my project is enhanced by bodily experience. For example, the theoretical understanding of the docile body (Foucault 1979) may be enhanced by the physical act of engaging with sculptures in Gymnàuseum.

Sports theorists Hockey and Allen-Collinson discuss this notion when evaluating Merleau-Ponty’s position from a sports perspective:

> The body is not so much an instrument nor an object, but rather the subject of perception, socially and indeed sub-culturally mediated though that perception may be. For us, we know the world through the body, just as that body produces the world for us. (2007, 117)
Although phenomenology is not one of the key areas I explore in depth, it is a useful perspective in discussing the lived experience of interacting with my sculptural fitness machines. Therefore, phenomenology is a position I can’t ignore even though it is in contrast to critical theory as the core of my central methodological position. I harness the notion of phenomenology in a very specific way, that is, to discuss the bodily experience of interacting with specific sculptures in the Gymnaseum installation. This concept is addressed in Chapter 5 when I discuss physical interaction with specific works. In this chapter I describe the Gymnaseum installation in detail and contextualise it within contemporary practice. I compare and contrast the works of several key artists I consider to be particularly relevant to my project, including Mona Hatoum, the collaborative duo of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, and Arthur Wicks. I have chosen these particular artists because, like me, they create objects that appear to subvert their own usefulness or highlight their own impotence in order to discuss deeper political or social concerns.

I conclude the chapter by critically examining the trial Gymnaseum exhibition held in 2011. Here, and in the conclusion (Chapter 6), I evaluate whether this body of sculptural work in conjunction with the theoretical discourse can embody answers to the research question.

1.4 Terminology

To clarify the key areas of discussion surrounding the research question, I will outline some key terms that I use throughout the thesis. The first grouping below briefly introduces some art definitions relevant to the discussion of Gymnaseum and related practices. I also clarify the terms 'critique' and 'representation' and introduce ways that I engage with these concepts in my project.

“Installation” refers to the activation of a space to create an experience for the visitor. I avoid the word “viewer” intentionally, as it implies a passive experience. In Installation Art: A Critical History, Claire Bishop talks of installation as “the type of art into which the viewer enters and which is often described as ‘theatrical’, ‘immersive’, or ‘experiential’” (2011, 6).
I am aware that the term “installation” has become debased through overuse. It is often used quite indiscriminately to describe almost any exhibition, whether or not it activates the whole space or creates an experience for the viewer to enter (Bishop 2011). When using the term “installation” to discuss my project I am referring to an experiential, and occasionally theatrical, experience for the visitor. However, my work is not immersive, as it is not all-encompassing or enveloping. Even though I activate the whole space, the visitor may choose to engage with individual objects within the wider installation as they so choose.

“Interactive” works of art require the visitor to apply some degree of physical effort to activate the work for the meaning to be revealed, or to gain a deeper understanding of the work (Huhtamo 2004). When engaging with interactive artworks, the viewer does not take a passive role and is asked to “realise or complete the work that would not exist without his/her actions” (Huhtamo 2004, 1).

“Formalism” is concerned with the notion that the quality or artistic value of an artwork rests in its formal compositional characteristics, such as line, texture, mass, colour and the compositional relationships between these elements. Although all works of art contain forms and use compositional relationships, subject matter was traditionally an integral part of the work until the advent of modernist abstract art (Walker 1992). Leading formalist critic Clement Greenberg and his later followers, such as Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried, embraced close formal analyses of works rather than expressive interpretations and descriptions (Walker 1992).

The Oxford Dictionaries Online defines the verb “critique” as “[to] evaluate (a theory or practice) in a detailed and analytical way” (Oxford 2013). I use a variety of strategies to critique theories, artworks, creative practices, and popular culture, such as reality television, fitness culture and products. Some ways that I practice critique in this project are:
• Evaluating how various theoretical perspectives can be negotiated to position my project;
• Comparing and contrasting artworks, art practices, theories or movements;
• Discussing and evaluating the formal properties of a work or series of works;
• Using humour, including satire, parody and irony;
• Using combinations of the above, for example: closely analysing a social issue, such as negative body image, and responding to it through an interactive satirical work.

“Satire” is defined by the Oxford Dictionaries Online as: “The use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues” (Oxford 2013). Within the Gymnæuseum interactive installation, I use satire as a critical tool to expose the ‘topical issue’ of bodily dissatisfaction and the presentation of the ‘ideal body’ as a ‘must have’ consumer accessory.

“Irony” refers to “the use of language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect” (Oxford 2013). For example, I use a combination of irony and parody in Absolution (2011), a satirical infomercial presented as part of Gymnæuseum. “Parody” is “an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect” (Oxford 2013). I parody the style of television infomercials by using deliberate exaggeration. However, parody on its own can be a somewhat blunt instrument unless there is an element of irony too. I achieve this by highlighting the dissonance between an absurd script and deadpan delivery.

When discussing or creating works that are designed to comment on society, such as the sculptural gym machines in Gymnæuseum, it can be a challenge to delineate the
difference between “representation” and “critique”, particularly when the work contains elements of both. The Oxford Dictionaries Online defines “representation” as “The description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way” (Oxford 2013). Representation appears to be less objective than critique—for example, one’s prejudices can affect how something or someone is represented, as evidenced on a daily basis in the media.

However, “over-representation” can be used for critique. Performance artist Nao Bustamante describes this notion as “cracking stereotypes by embodying them” (Bustamante n.d.). I also use the notion of over-representation by creating absurd exercise machines. My machines critique the consumerist notion that the latest technology is the one you cannot do without; it will give you an even more ‘ripped’ and toned body in even less minutes per day than its predecessors.

The last term in this section is “fetish,” a concept that underlies my choices of materials for the Gymnausemum installation. The Oxford Dictionaries Online defines fetish in the following manner:

- A form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, item of clothing, part of the body
- An excessive and irrational devotion or commitment to a particular thing
- An inanimate object worshipped for its supposed magical powers or because it is considered to be inhabited by a spirit (Oxford 2013).

It is clear from the definition above that the term fetish can relate to both objects and practices. The Gymnausemum body of work focuses on the “excessive and irrational devotion” (Oxford 2013) required to obtain and maintain the ideal body. In doing so, the work also references relevant earlier examples of seemingly “excessive and irrational devotion” (Oxford 2013) such as self-flagellation, which in some cases may also be linked to sexual gratification. In medieval times some extreme orders of Catholic monks were self-flagellating for the purpose of connecting emotionally and physically with the pain of Christ (Bordo 1993). The notion that repentance may be
achieved by physical pain is of particular relevance to the Gymnauemum project, where gym users receive ‘Absolution’ through excessive and often painful exercise. This practice (and flagellation by others) is also linked with the sexual practices of bondage and discipline (‘B and D’) or sadism and masochism (‘S and M’). These particular practices have their own histories and aesthetic influences with regard to clothing and other accoutrements of the ‘discipline’. Leather, straps, chains, spikes, fur, lace, rubber, rings and piercings and wet-look materials are all materialities associated with the notion of fetish. It is this aesthetic that I have bought to the fitness equipment sculptures in Gymnauemum to evoke notions of pain, pleasure and repentance.

1.5 Research Methodology
My theoretical research methodology falls under the broad category of critical theory. Critical theory is in fact a range of critical theories, a tradition of critical analysis that can trace its roots from Marxism (Sim and Van Loon 2001). It emerged in the 1920s from the work of a group of German Jewish intellectuals at a University of Frankfurt research institute known as The Frankfurt School; key figures, including Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, focused on possible alternatives to what they considered the ills of society, in particular capitalism and fascism (Bronner 2011).

1.5.1 Contemporary Critical Theory
In its narrowest sense, critical theory is still associated with the line of philosophers of the Frankfurt School. However, a contemporary approach is much broader, reflecting the rise of interdisciplinary practices in the social sciences in recent decades (Macey 2000). Critical theory now encompasses a myriad of theoretical schools, including post-structuralism, post-colonial studies, queer theory and second-wave feminism to name a few (Sim and Van Loon 2001). This is a growing field that has burgeoned since the late 1960s.

When considering research methodologies that would be useful in developing a practice-based research project, I read Graeme Sullivan’s Art Practice as Research (Sullivan 2005). Within that text, I was drawn to Joe Kinchloe and Peter McLaren’s
comprehensive clarification of critical theory. I instantly recognised a parallel between their definition and my artistic practice.

We are defining a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions: that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and subconscious awareness); that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privilege may vary widely, the oppression that characterises contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on one at the expense of others (e.g. class oppression versus racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and, finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, though most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression (Kinchloe and McLaren cited in Sullivan, 2005, 55).

Before continuing, it is worth defining some other key concepts that underpin critical theory and are vital to an understanding of my project.

1.5.2 Marxism

While Karl Marx (1818–83) undertook his initial training as a philosopher, he is better known for his critique of the expansion of capitalism and his revolutionary approach to social change. In his early work The 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx notes “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point however is to change it” ([Marx 1845] n.d.) and change it he did. From the mid-to-late nineteenth century he worked with fellow philosopher Friedrich Engels to produce a body of work on politics and economics; an oeuvre that became the foundation and guiding light of class struggles that motivated the establishment of many twentieth-century communist and socialist governments (Wolff 2011). Marxism has been a
constant work in progress since its inception and has proliferated into many radically different forms.

Marx’s scrutiny and analysis of the capitalist system are founded on his labour theory of value, whereby the labour required to produce a certain commodity is related to the value of that commodity. He contended that profit is created when the ‘surplus value’ is extracted from the exploited proletariat (Wolff 2011). Marx saw the collapse of capitalism and the utopian dream of a communist society as not only achievable but inevitable (Wolff 2011). This “fatalistic belief in the inevitable triumph of socialism” (Bronner 2011, 2) was dismissed by critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. This was one of several points of departure between early critical theorists and their Marxist roots (Bronner 2011).

I find Marx’s theories about the nature of the commodity and his notion of the use-value of objects as found in Das Capital (Marx [1867] n.d.) a useful perspective in the discussion of chindogu, objects that are inherently useless.

1.5.3 Structuralism
Structuralism was an immensely influential twentieth-century philosophy. It originated in Ferdinand de Saussure’s development of structural linguistics. Order and contrast were key features in a system that primarily functioned using binary oppositions (concepts that stand in constant opposition to each other) for the analysis and understanding of human culture and behaviour (Macey 2000).

Another key figure in the development of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss extended its application into anthropology, the arts, and literature from the late 1950s. “Structuralism can be defined in very broad terms as an attempt to unify the human sciences by applying a single methodology” (Macey 2000, 365), and, during the 1960s, it was used as a conceptual tool in a range of cultural and social sciences (Macey 2000).

Many ideologies, philosophies and political systems can be viewed through the structuralist lens, particularly those with a single methodology or meta-narrative. For
example, Marxism is considered to be a structuralist system in which class antagonisms and inequalities can be highlighted as binary oppositions (for example, the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat). Within the Marxist notion of dialectical materialism lays the premise that a clear and reasoned argument will demonstrate that the inequalities of the capitalist system are historically based and will not prevail.

1.5.4 Post-structuralism

Towards the end of the 1960s, the notion of a ‘one size fits all’ or meta-narrative methodology was increasingly questioned. Post-structuralism “emerged just as structuralism reached its zenith” (Macey 2000, 309). During this time, several key figures in the structuralist movement, including Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, embraced a post-structuralist approach. Post-structuralism rejects meta-narratives, denies the authority of the author, and refuses to accept the results and ideas generated by scientific research and social enquiry as ‘ultimate truths’. Despite its Marxist origins, the roots of post-structuralism were already evident within the Frankfurt School as its members “condemned the preoccupation with absolute foundations, analytic categories and fixed criteria for verifying truth claims” (Bronner 2011, 4). Within post-structuralism there exists a healthy suspicion of systems;

Systems can only explain everything by frequent recourse to suppression or omission of rogue elements. Whatever doesn’t fit the system is either discarded as irrelevant or recoded to force it to fit. (Sim and Van Loon 2001, 87)

Post-structuralism values ‘rogue elements’; small particularities are traced and explored. French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s concept of deconstruction, which is arguably a process rather than a theory, became fundamental to the political application of post-structuralism (Sim and Van Loon 2001).

The purpose of deconstruction is to dislocate binary oppositions, which, in turn, diffuses the authority traditionally bestowed on the dominant term. The process of deconstruction requires close reading of material that focuses on the text itself
rather than “introducing external evaluative criteria” (Macey 2000, 86). As meanings are deferred, unstable and unfixed, fringe ideas no longer have to fit into rigid ideologies; power structures become decentred, which offers more opportunities for oppressed groups to gain agency.

The fitness industry thrives on the power of binaries. This highlights the relevance of a post-structuralist approach to my project. For example: fit/fat, slim/fat, muscular/scrawny and ripped/flabby. These are all ‘loaded’ binary oppositions that can be dislocated by my critique of products that offer promises of instant slimming success while reinforcing the prevalent Western notion that the overweight body is shameful.

1.6 Studio Research Methodology

When working in the studio, I use a wide range of techniques, processes, materials and critical thinking. The list below provides an indication but is no means an exhaustive list:

- Observing and exercising in gymnasiums and using home gym equipment;
- Drawing in many forms; for example, fantasy gym machines, plans, diagrams, ideas and mind maps;
- Brainstorming;
- Regularly visiting scrap metal yards, junk shops and rubbish dumps to forage for materials (which can be a catalyst for new approaches);
- Keeping a visual diary for ideas, working process and drawing;
- Reading relevant critical theory and investigating the work of artists and designers relevant to the project;
- Visualising and imagining the finished works;
- Studio experimentation with processes and materials;
- Developing various ‘prototypes’ leading to the final gym machines;
- Developing digital and multimedia possibilities, for example: games, videos and animations as part of the project;
• Holding an exhibition of works in the public domain prior to submission, to consider public and critical response, and to consider issues of interactivity in the gallery space as part of the project;
• Filming and watching people interacting with my works;
• Using ideas from the trial exhibition to develop for final presentation;
• Writing journal articles relevant to this project during the time of candidature to help develop critical thinking;
• Receiving peer feedback in formal and non-formal situations, for example: exhibition reviews, studio critiques, feedback from colleagues and other artists.

I hesitate to describe my research project as either practice-based or practice-led because these terms are the subject of an on-going debate; at times they appear to be almost interchangeable. For example, in Practice Based Research: A Guide, Linda Candy provides the following definition whereby:

practice-based research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly [my emphasis] by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice ... Whilst the significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcomes. (2006, 1)

She differentiates this process from practice-led research in which “the primary focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice” (2006, 1). She goes on to clarify that: “In a doctoral thesis, the results of practice-led research may be fully described in text form without the inclusion of a creative outcome” (2006, 1). At first glance, Candy’s definition of practice-based research appears to be an appropriate methodology to describe my working process because, although the development of my argument may be understood in part without reference to the studio, full engagement in this project requires a discussion of the studio works. A deeper engagement with my
project would be further enhanced by physical interaction with the Gymnaseum
installation of absurd ‘fitness products’.

However, the parameters of practice-led and practice-based research appear to be
less clear cut than Candy suggests. For example, Paul Stapleton (2006) discusses how
practice-led researchers typically chart their projects via trails of documentation that
track their working process from the development of the research question to the
production of the finished artwork.

We are left with no doubt that Stapleton considers that the outcome of artwork is a
vital part of practice-led research. This is in contrast to Candy, who purports that the
result of practice-led research “may be fully described in text form” (2006, 1). As
Lelia Green states, “practice-led research is a notoriously difficult concept to define”
(2007, 1). Green, agreeing with Stapleton, also considers that studio engagement is
an essential part of practice-led research. She also proposes that the intent of the
artist is vital in helping differentiate between practice-led research and other forms
of art practice, whereby making may not be part of a “conscious research process”
(2007, 2).

For Green, the research question (and, by implication, the theoretical base that
underpins it) is the starting point in practice-led research whereby:

The definition and process of research implies a prolonged engagement
with a specific research question, or a suite of inter-connected questions.
Typically, the question might arise first and then the progress of the
research project—and the art work—would be dictated thereafter by the
refinement and exploration of the question and its related issues through
practice. (2007, 2)

Although my project is a “prolonged engagement with a specific research question”
(Green 2007, 2), I have come to realise that neither terms “practice-led” nor
“practice-based” research adequately describe how extended engagement takes
place within my project. Therefore, I have decided to embrace neither term in favour
of a third approach. Graeme Sullivan speaks of transcognition to indicate how the
relationship between practice and theory is interwoven (Sullivan 2005). This notion attracts me because my studio work is as much informed by theory as by the processes of making. At times, the theory leads the practice and on other occasions the studio work stimulates further theoretical explorations during or after making. Sullivan discusses this process:

As new visual arts research is undertaken, it can be located and critiqued within dimensions of theory and domains of inquiry so as to ascertain how practice informs theory and theory informs practice. (2005, 99)

Accordingly, I think of my studio working process as transcognitive rather than either practice-based or practice-led. Mostly, my theoretical research takes its cues from the studio practice, while the studio-making is informed by the theoretical methodology. However, it is also important to acknowledge the importance of studio practice as research. Sometimes, the studio is the primary site where research problems are identified, raised and solved (Gray and Mallins 2004). Sullivan also discusses the importance of claiming art practice as a legitimate and significant form of research in its own right.

To continue to borrow research methods from other fields denies the intellectual maturity of art practice as a plausible basis for raising significant life questions and as a viable site for exploring important cultural and educational ideas. (2005, 95)

The notion of studio research, “as a viable site for exploring important cultural and educational ideas,” (2005, 95) is also explored by Gray and Malins, who talk of “immersion in the context where possible questions lie” (2004, 69–71). This is very relevant to my immersion in (and observation of) the gym environment to help facilitate an understanding of both the culture and the equipment. Immersion in the studio is relevant here too, as some questions and answers lie in the exploration of materials and processes.

Context and cultural ideas are undoubtedly important in the creation of the Gymnäum installation; however, I also pay attention to formal sculptural attributes when creating both the individual sculptures and the installation as a
whole. I intend for this to be evident in the clean flowing lines of the sculptural gym machines, a reduced palette of black and silver, and the attention to the balance of the various elements in the layout of the installation.

My intention is to present a pseudo-gym whereby viewers can ride nonsensical fitness machines that question the obsession with obtaining (and retaining) an ‘ideal body’. The fitness machine sculptures in *Gymnauseum* (2011, figure 1) are also in a sense ‘ideal bodies’; long, lean and shiny, and based on ‘pimped out’ 1960s ‘Low-rider’ bikes with absurdly extended front forks. Not only does the 1960s retro aesthetic reference the baby-boomer demographic (who are possibly in need of a gym experience) but these ‘must have’ shiny custom machines are also a lure to encourage viewer interaction of all ages.

The colloquial expressions ‘pimped out’ or ‘pimping’ refers to excessive customisation to the point of obsession. In the case of *Gymnauseum*, this means
excessive use of chrome and mirrors and attention to customised detailing and accessories, such as multiple spikes. However, my use of the term ‘pimping’ to discuss obsessive customisation of the low rider exercycles can equally be applied to ‘customisation’ of the body. It appears, for example, that in contemporary Western society ‘six pack abs’ have become a ‘must have’ body accessory. The title of my project, Gymnacuseum: ‘Pimping’ of Body and Machine reflects this perspective.
Chapter 2: ‘Unuseless’ Objects

2.1 Introduction

Chindogu is a collective noun for objects that are entirely impractical but could be seen as (almost) useful (Kawakami 1995). They are akin to British cartoonist Heath Robinson’s drawings of absurdly complex contrivances designed to perform profoundly simple tasks. However chindogu—unlike ‘Heath Robinson contraptions,’ with their inherent complexity—are simple yet ridiculous solutions for trivial problems.

In 101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions, Kawakami describes chindogu in terms of ten tenets that, in effect, form a manifesto for makers and consumers of chindogu. I begin this chapter with an introduction to The Ten Tenets of Chindogu (Kawakami 1995) and provide an initial response to each of them. Some of these responses will become a provocation for further key areas of discussion, which will not only be addressed within this chapter, but also form a framework for further discussion throughout the thesis and in the studio. Of particular interest is how chindogu can be used to discuss the status of objects with regard to notions of use, uselessness and the ‘unuseless’ (Kawakami 1995).

I will also discuss how chindogu could be positioned with regard to other movements and genres, in particular modernist movements such as Dada and Surrealism, and the absurdist pseudo-science of pataphysics. Lastly in this chapter I will argue why I consider contemporary gym equipment (and through its use, the construction of the ‘ideal’ body) to be suited to critique through chindogu.

2.2 The Ten Tenets of Chindogu

Tenet One

A chindogu cannot be for real use. It is fundamental to the spirit of chindogu that inventions claiming chindogu status must be, from a practical point of view, (almost) completely useless. If you invent something which turns out to be so handy that you use it all the time
Design is often seen as the production of a useful object or system. Maurizio Vitta and Juliette Nelles talk of “use-objects” to describe “material objects, multiplied by industrial production and spread through the capillary system of mass consumption” (1985, 3). Marx proposed the notion of use-value to describe objects of utility (Marx [1867] n.d.). However, chindogu subverts the very notion of usefulness, as chindogu objects should specifically not have ‘real’ use-value in the same way that artworks may be seen not to have ‘real’ use-value.

Chindogu are designed to solve a problem by an unconventional route, but are they design objects if they are designed to be useless? Perhaps the answer lies in the question “what is a chindogu object for?” Chindogu appear at first glance to be humorous one-liners, however a deeper investigation of the tenets reveal that chindogu can be used as a system to engender debate about the very purpose of objects themselves. The tenets themselves are a designed (albeit, tongue-in-cheek) system.

It is important to make the distinction between chindogu, purposefully designed useless objects, and ‘involuntary chindogu’—my term for a product so badly designed that it becomes useless by default.

**Tenet Two**

A chindogu must exist. You are not allowed to use a chindogu, but it must be made. You have to be able to hold it in your hand and think: “I can actually imagine someone using this, almost.” In order to be useless, it must first be. (Kawakami 1995, 8)

To discuss this further, the object has to be made and still has to exist in the material world. “A central feature of art practice is that it embodies ideas that are given form in the process of making artworks” (Sullivan 2006, 1). In *Material Thinking*, Paul Carter (2004) also discusses how ideas are turned into objects that, in turn, can lead to considerations of production and consumption, of use, and use-value (as
discussed in relation to tenet one), and can thus critique the ontological status of objects (Baudrillard [1966] 2005).

In *The Meaning of Design*, Vitta and Nelles discuss Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacra, first proposed in *The System of Objects* in 1966 (and discussed in depth in *Simulations*, 1983). They revisit his discussion regarding the endless replication of images and the resultant loss of their original identity, and discuss this concept in relation to design objects. Products can also lose their functional identity and instead become ‘empty forms’ (Vitta and Nelles 1985, 4), signified by the consumer, so “that it is not the image of the consumed object that predominates, but that of the consuming subject” (Vitta and Nelles 1985, 4).

For example, in Kawakami’s *Detachable Tooth Covers* (1995, figure 2), the sheer absurdity of the relationship between the consuming subject and the consumed object gives rise to the notion that it is not only the object being critiqued but also the gullibility of the consumer. Thus, chindogu objects critique not only the objects themselves but our relationships with them.
Tenet number three extends the notion of chindogu as a system of gentle and humorous critique to one of potential challenge and action and is also useful to situate chindogu objects within a Western art historical context.

**Tenet Three**
Inherent in every chindogu is the spirit of anarchy. Chindogu are man-made objects that have broken free from the chains of usefulness. They represent freedom of thought and action: the freedom to challenge the suffocating historical dominance of conservative utility; the freedom to be (almost) useless. (Kawakami 1995, 8)

The spirit of anarchy that prevails in chindogu comes from a Japanese context. However, the spirit of anarchy has had a long history in a Western context, manifested in the writings of anarchic philosophers, such as Michael Bakunin, and in the practices of Dada, Surrealist, and subsequent art and design movements (Richter 1965); in design, objects are made to become rapidly obsolete as in some computer technology (Mann 2009). The contradiction between purpose and practicality inherent in every chindogu is not the only conundrum; consider the concept of an anarchic movement adhering to tenets. This rather delightful inconsistency is also shared by the Futurist, Dada, and subsequent art movements with their written manifestos. I will discuss some relevant examples later in this chapter.

**Tenet Four**
Chindogu are tools for everyday life. Chindogu are a form of non-verbal communication understandable to everyone, everywhere. Specialised or technical inventions, like a three-handed sprocket loosener for drainpipes centred between two under-the-sink cabinet doors (the uselessness of which will only be appreciated by plumbers), do not count. (Kawakami 1995, 8)

Tools for everyday life do not include the usefulness of specialised or technical inventions, but are rather invitations for thinking about our being in the world through designed objects and artworks. This idea is reflected in my art practice whereby I use chindogu to critique popular culture and contemporary social issues.
Tenet Five
Chindogu are not for sale. Chindogu are not tradable commodities. If you accept money for one you surrender your purity. They must not even be sold as a joke. (Kawakami 1995, 9)

While designed objects are usually produced for sale, the chindogu object can be the opposite of a ‘work’ for purchase and rather be a ‘text’ for play, as in the thinking of post-structuralist literary theorist Roland Barthes. In his article From Work to Text ([1971] 2006) Barthes proposes that writing may be discussed as “work” or “text”. Barthes’s notion of “text” is multi-stranded or plural, this allows for multiple readings and many possible interpretations as dialogue remains open. “Text” allows for play and invites the reader to become part of the process. Conversely, he positions “work” as something that is far less fluid in which the meaning is static and more accessible (Barthes [1971] 2006). These positions are not in opposition to each other but fulfil different functions when analysing a written work. I apply this notion to visual arts, whereby making is a problem-solving activity that does not necessarily end in a solution, but rather as a provocation inviting further response from an audience. This response may well be one of humour. The connection between chindogu and humour is the common link between the next three tenets.

Tenet Six
Humour must not be the sole reason for creating a chindogu. The creation of chindogu is fundamentally a problem-solving activity. Humour is simply the by-product of finding an elaborate or unconventional solution to a problem that may not have been that pressing to begin with.

Tenet Seven
Chindogu are not propaganda. Chindogu are innocent. They are made to be used, even though they cannot be used. They should not be created as a perverse or ironic comment on the sorry state of mankind.

Tenet Eight
Chindogu are never taboo. The international chindogu society has established certain standards of social decency. Cheap sexual innuendo, humour of a vulgar nature, and sick or cruel jokes that debase the sanctity of living things are not allowed. (Kawakami 1995, 9)
Once again we are confronted by the conundrum of an anarchistic movement prescribing stringent rules for humour. The wording of each tenet is a conundrum in itself, being so earnestly stated yet wryly articulated, giving the reader a feeling that it is almost tongue-in-cheek.

Simona Levescu discusses how an element of play comes into being when art engages humorously with a ‘problem’ that is unsolvable and wasn’t pressing to start with (Levescu 2003). Artists have long used humour as an initial way of engaging an audience in order to confront them with less palatable issues on deeper inspection of the work. Deeper and more pressing problems can also be considered through engagement with chindogu. The process of making (or engaging with) the almost useless object opens up questions about the continual proliferation of cheap consumer goods on a planet with diminishing resources. Chindogu achieves this in an outwardly playful spirit of innocence.

**Tenet Nine**
Chindogu cannot be patented. Chindogu are offerings to the rest of the world, they are not therefore ideas to be copyrighted, patented, collected and owned. As they say in Spain, “mi chindogu es tu chindogu”.

(Kawakami 1995, 9)

Artworks cannot be patented and, in fact, critique the very notion of patents and their consumer-driven existence. The work of art can be signed and has an author, but, as Foucault famously postulated, the author becomes a guest once the work has been made and is in the public domain (Foucault 1991a). Design objects can be patented but there are also some designs that may resist production-consumer outcomes, for example, in the case of some craft objects or where individual embodied interaction with an object in a performance cannot be replicated (Lycouris, Billing, Cordingley, and Breedon 2007).

**Tenet Ten**
Chindogu are without prejudice. Chindogu must never favour one race or religion over another. Young and old, male and female, rich and poor, all
Both art and design disciplines have to answer to questions about how they engage with the values of equality and non-prejudice. In the twenty-first century, a raft of ethical considerations has been added to the contemporary discourse concerning both art and design. Issues of environmental sustainability, cultural intellectual property, fair trade and so forth are now part of the obligations of artists and designers.

It appears that the Ten Tenets of Chindogu can be used critically to situate chindogu between art and design. They suggest that chindogu overlaps with the field of art in its critical function and circuitous creative process. However, it also overlaps with the field of design through its context as problem-solving towards an apparent solution. Chindogu can be used a useful lens to critique the proliferation of an endless stream of unnecessary consumer goods.

**Chindogu and Pataphysics**

Pataphysics is underpinned by an absurdist philosophy that parodies the theory and methods of science and is expressed in nonsensical language. It is fatalist in essence, showing that any understanding of the known universe is bound to fail, highlighting the futility of existence.

I compare and contrast the philosophies of chindogu and the pseudo-science of pataphysics to consider how the latter can be used as a somewhat cynical appraisal of ‘the consumer science’ of fitness products. The work of many artists, theorists and makers of absurd machines could be viewed through a pataphysical lens, including Duchamp, Baudrillard, Wym Delvoye and Arthur Ganson.

The term “pataphysics” first appeared in French playwright Alfred Jarry’s article “Guignol” in the 28 April 1893 issue of L’Echo de Paris. Jarry later described it as “the science of imaginary solutions which symbolically attributes the properties of
objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments” (cited in Grossman 1967, 475). Raymond Queneau, a French author of a pataphysical bent, described pataphysics as “resting on the truth of contradictions and exceptions” (cited in Kibbins 2005, 12).

There appear to be strong links between the tenets of pataphysics and the theatre of the absurd, which are discussed by Martin Esslin in his book The Theatre of the Absurd. He describes Jarry’s Ubu plays as a forerunner to a burgeoning lineage of plays that have an absurdist philosophy, which have become increasingly popular in contemporary theatre (Esslin 1961). Leonard Pronko, an authority on French experimental theatre, makes an even more direct link between the work of Jarry and the theatre of the absurd: “The apprehensive laughter which Ubu elicits is the same laughter which explodes today in theatres where Waiting for Godot and The Lesson are performed” (cited in Grossman 1967, 473).

Richard Coe, in his study of French contemporary playwright Eugene Ionesco, also links pataphysics with the underlying philosophy of the absurd, as within pataphysics “all things are equal” (cited in Grossman 1967, 475). He argues that within Ionesco’s work “the ‘scientific’ and the ‘nonsensical’ weigh alike in the scale of eternity since both are arbitrary, both are absurd” (cited in Grossman 1967, 475).

It is a mistake to conclude that Jarry’s interest in science is purely to ridicule. Pataphysics is ambivalent in perspective(s) and vigorously performs alternatives to quantitative scientific enquiry. In “Baudrillard Pataphysician”, David Teh states “Jarry defies not science, but the exclusivity of scientific discourses” (2006). Coe had a similar approach, whereby his observation that [for pataphysics] “all things are equal” (cited in Grossman 1967, 475), could be read in two ways. First, as an absurdist comment on the futility of valuing any ideas above others, or second, as an invitation to consider that there are many options for enquiry and we shouldn’t be shackled by the limitations of science. With regard to science, as Teh argues, “pataphysics also extends their concepts into new contexts” (2006). Baudrillard was also fond of ‘borrowing’ scientific principles and, according to Teh, the influence of
Jarry on his oeuvre has been underestimated. The ambivalence expressed in pataphysics also underpins much of Baudrillard’s works:

....a current of ambivalence [runs] throughout Baudrillard’s oeuvre, affecting it politically, aesthetically and philosophically. It expresses a pataphysical relativism that underpins Baudrillard’s writing, and that demands a pataphysical reading. (Teh 2006)

To give Baudrillard a pataphysical reading, as Teh suggests, highlights his absurdist approach with regard to our relationship with consumer goods; products that, in effect, act as signs that signify senselessness and the shallowness of the human condition. In the theatre of the absurd, the senselessness of the human condition is accepted as an unalterable fact and the distinction between comedy and tragedy is broken down, as comic techniques serve serious aims (and vice versa). Chindogu also work in this way. The humour of the unuseless object (Kawakami 1995) initially attracts the viewer who may be drawn into deeper concerns evoked by the work. I am drawn to create pseudo gym machines that perform both the humour of chindogu and the futility of pataphysics.

In his article “Machines and Art”, Jasia Reichardt argues that "Pataphysical machines would be difficult to reconstruct since nobody knows precisely how they do what they do, or what that is anyway" (1987, 368). Reichardt may have not been aware of mathematician Claude Shannon’s automaton The Ultimate Machine (2009, figure 3) when he made that assertion as this machine could be considered as an iconic pataphysical object. Rather unassuming in appearance, the small rectangular plain box has only one control, a simple switch on the top. As soon as the user turns on the switch, a hatch in the box opens and a mechanical hand extends and turns the switch off again. It is no accident that Shannon was working with early computer systems when he became side-tracked with his automaton (Crow 2001). The Ultimate Machine is the ultimate expression of the binary system; it’s either on or off.
I consider that the instant when the user realises that the object or product they are engaging with is “(almost) useless” (Kawakami 1995, 8) as being a ‘chindogu moment’. The Ultimate Machine is a beautifully simple and absurd device that epitomises the power of the machine and the futility of existence. With the flick of a switch, the user is confronted with a ‘chindogu moment’ of overwhelming pointlessness.

Pointlessness also lies at the heart of chindogu. Kawakami’s concept that chindogu are ‘products’ designed to solve problems that aren’t essentially very pressing is echoed in Jarry’s concept of pataphysics as a “science of imaginary solutions” (Grossman 1967, 475). A science of imaginary solutions is equally well equipped to solve the ‘not so pressing’ or imaginary problems posed by chindogu. Yet less pressing or imaginary problems still require a solution (albeit an imaginary one). Canadian pataphysician Steve McCaffrey suggests

that the problem is a pseudo-problem in no way nullifies the pursuit of a solution for the pursuit in itself will evince the problematic nature of both ‘problem’ and ‘solution’. (1986, 189)
This idea also echoes the notion that when creating a chindogu, the ‘solution’ in effect creates more problems. However, McCaffrey also validates the process (as one would expect from a pataphysician). There is a fundamental difference between the approaches of chindogu and pataphysics for ‘problem’ solving. Imaginary pataphysical solutions (and hence the imaginary problems that provoke them) do not need to be solved in a tangible way. Conversely, chindogu solve the imaginary problem with pointless offerings of palpable, yet useless, objects.

When contrasting objects with a pataphysical character to chindogu, the black humour of absurdism inherent in pataphysics is replaced by a cheerful (albeit tongue-in-cheek) optimism in chindogu (refer to Tenet 7). Both my work and Shannon’s exist within the tension between these two approaches. I am exploring the possibilities of using pataphysics to disrupt the ‘consumer science’ in the fitness industry, an industry that sports theorists Frew and McGillivray propose has scant regard for its consumers’ satisfaction:

Evidence of significant public health improvements emanating from the growth in the (fitness) industry remain scant. In a world of consumer consciousness it is worth considering the sustainability of an industry that appears to continually dissatisfy its consumer’s desires. (2005, 161)

It is at this point that I consider that both pataphysics and chindogu could be applied to discuss the absurdity of systems as well as objects.

I conclude this section on chindogu and pataphysical objects with the first in my Eureka Salon series of imaginary conversations. I use this device to clarify some key terms and positions pertinent to chindogu and pataphysical objects raised in the last two sections. The aim is to open up an imaginary dialogue and see what further possibilities may be explored within my project.
2.3 The First Eureka Salon: Use, Usefulness and the ‘Unuseless’

At last, I’m sitting over an imaginary pint of Emerson’s Pilsner with Marx, Kawakami, Baudrillard, Vitta, Jarry, and Guy Debord. The conversation develops for the most part, by using their own words (in italicised text) gleaned from various publications. Clearly, the constraints of linear time, location, language (and the fact that not all the participants are still living) is of little concern in a virtual conversation. I use this device to allow them to debate notions of the commodity, use-objects, use, uselessness and the unuseless.

**Marx:** *To begin with, a commodity, in the language of the English economists, is “anything necessary, useful or pleasant in life”, an object of human wants, a means of existence in the widest sense of the term* (Marx [1859] n.d.).

**Kawakami:** I totally agree, Karl, which is why I insist that chindogu, as *man-made objects that have broken free from the chains of usefulness are not tradable commodities*—see tenets three and five (Kawakami 1995, 8-9).

**Marx:** It appears that, according to your tenets, Kenji, chindogu cannot be utilised, so therefore, have no use-value. As I state in my own manifesto *Das Kapital*, *the utility of a thing makes it a use-value. But this utility is not a thing of air. Being limited by the physical properties of the commodity, it has no existence apart from that commodity* (Marx 1867). In other words, *use-value as an aspect of the commodity coincides with the physical palpable existence of the commodity* (Marx [1859] n.d.).

**Kawakami:** Therefore, a chindogu appears to be truly useless because, as stated in tenet two a *chindogu must exist. You are not allowed to use a chindogu, but it must be made* (Kawakami 1995, 8) and to borrow your phrase, it clearly has a “physical palpable existence” (Marx [1859] n.d.).

**Vitta:** *The physical existence of the commodity is no longer the issue, Kenji. Objects, multiplying beyond measure, have lost all of their functional identity and are*
transformed into simulacra of themselves. These are reduced to empty forms, deprived of their original meaning. They become mere informative instruments that constitute the language through which the social mechanism that produces them is expressed. Even more, the situation has reached a point—thanks also to the pressure of advertising, which is a primary factor in this mechanism—such that it is not the image of the consumed object that predominates, but that of the consuming subject (Vita and Nelles 1985, 4).

**Baudrillard:** I couldn’t have put it better myself.

**Vitta:** You most probably have Jean, but having familiarised myself with several of your texts pertaining to this subject including *The System of Objects* and *Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, I took the liberty of presenting a somewhat condensed argument.

**Baudrillard:** A fine synopsis indeed, *consumption is not linked to use-value of things nor their abundance, but from use-value to sign value* (Baudrillard 2007, 59).

**Marx:** An argument that I think can trace its lineage in part to my notion of the *fetishistic character of commodities* whereby that which for men takes on the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things is only the already determined social relations which exist between the same men (Marx [1867] 1998).

**Vitta:** Ultimately leading to a loss of identity for the individual who is submerged on one side in an avalanche of goods whose continual exchange becomes obsessive; on the other side, he or she is constrained to use these goods not for their functionality but as images of himself or herself to be projected toward the outside world as the sole contact with others (Vita and Nelles 1985, 5).

**Jane:** A paradoxical situation, certainly; if it wasn’t for the money changing hands it could be described as a fine example of a chindogu system. Imagine an avalanche of objects unable to be used and that exist purely for the purposes of advertising themselves. What do you think, Kenji?
**Kawakami:** Although in Tenet Seven I state: *they* [chindogu] *are made to be used, even though they cannot be used,* I think this situation is even too cynical for a chindogu approach. Sadly I'm somewhat constrained by the rest of Tenet Seven, which goes on to say: *They should not be created as a perverse or ironic comment on the sorry state of mankind* (Kawakami 1995, 9).

**Jarry:** Mankind is in a sorry state, everything is totally pointless, particularly pataphysics.

**Kawakami:** What does pataphysics have to say about the object, Alfred?

**Jarry:** Pataphysics is *the science of imaginary solutions which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments* (cited in Grossman 1967, 475).

**Jane:** It appears you are measuring something that doesn’t exist.

**Baudrillard:** *The function(ality) of forms, of objects, becomes more incomprehensible, illegible, incalculable, every day,* (Baudrillard 1981, 196).

**Jarry:** Nothing exists, everything is absurd.

**Baudrillard:** You are a man before your time. Are you like myself, suggesting that there is no reality?

**Kawakami:** This is not entirely true. Clearly the chindogu object exists; please refer to Tenet Two, which states *in order to be useless, it must first be* (Kawakami 1995, 8).

**Jane:** And as it is profoundly useless, it clearly must exist, pointing at least, to the existence of useless things.
Jarry: At this point I rest my case.

Kawakami: May I add one last salient point regarding the existence of the chindogu object? You have to be able to hold it in your hand and think: “I can actually imagine someone using this, almost” (Kawakami 1995, 8).

Jane: The power of chindogu is couched within its apparent impotence; I think that you, Kenji, enjoy playing with ambivalence. You define chindogu as unuseless, pointing to the possibility of their use. In fact, the power of their unuselessness lies in their ability to engender debate, essentially making them useful.

Marx: But they still have no use-value. Even though debate is surely necessary, useful or pleasant in life (Marx [1859] n.d.), and clearly I have enjoyed a long life in constant deliberation; it is still a thing of air as it doesn’t contain the physical properties of the commodity (Marx [1867] n.d.).

Debord: As the mass of commodities becomes more and more absurd, absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right (Debord 1995, 43–44).

Marx: Better late than never, Guy, and spectacular timing as usual. You’ve spurred me on to suggest a new term to be used in this instance, ‘unuseless-value’.

Duchamp: Oh no! I hope I haven’t arrived too late to add a small coda to this conversation. While at the bar I couldn’t help overhearing your debate about unuselessness and was itching to get involved. I’d just like to add that Fountain, my 1917 ‘readymade’, exemplifies the notion of unuseless-value. For what other purpose would I place a urinal in a gallery setting, other than to provoke? Viva the unuseless object!

Baudrillard “Ce n’est pas le ridicule. C’est une inflation” (Baudrillard 2002, 13).
2.4 Chindogu: Historical Lineage

Duchamp’s *Fountain* is one of several key works that exemplifies the spirit of both playfulness and anarchy evident in Dada and Surrealism and some subsequent modern art movements. *Fountain* remains a pivotal object in the discussion of how and where the placement of an object affects its reading as an artwork. It is particularly relevant to the Gymnäumuseum project when considering how off-the-shelf contemporary exercise equipment placed in a gallery setting could already be read as chindogu; for example, consider an exercycle as a bicycle that goes nowhere or a rowing machine placed on dry land.

Surrealist objects are also of particular relevance to the notion of chindogu, and in this section I will address some pivotal examples that I consider could receive a retrospective reading as such. The first of these is Meret Oppenheim’s *Breakfast in Fur* (1936, figure 4). Oppenheim conceived this work in a playful moment at the Parisian Café Flore, when having a conversation with Picasso and Dora Maar. As they discussed the fur-lined jewelry she was making for Schiaparelli, the conversation moved to how anything could be covered in fur (Kachur 2001):

“Even this saucer and that cup....” And [Oppenheim] jokingly asks the waiter for a bit of fur, “un peu de fourrure garcon!” because her tea has cooled off. (cited in Meyer-Thoss 1996, 29)

The inference is that perhaps this object could actually be used, a possibility that one could consider for a fleetingly absurd moment. However, a mouthful of soggy tea-soaked Chinese gazelle fur would be unpleasant, whether or not it kept the tea warm. This is an ultimate chindogu moment.
Although the Oppenheim resisted labels associating her with any specific movement, *Breakfast in Fur* has been regarded as “one of surrealism’s signature fetishes” (Kachur 2001, 80). It became an iconic surrealist object imbued with sexual overtones.

Oppenheim’s apparent indifference to the symbolic significance of her work raises the issue of where the meaning or significance of an art work actually originates, in the artist or in the public. (Foljambe 2010)

This comment echoes both Barthes’s and Foucault’s position regarding the authorship of a work once it is in the public domain. This object conceived in a lighthearted moment has been overlaid with a sexual significance that perhaps was not its original intention.

A comparison of Oppenheim’s *Breakfast in Fur* with Kawakami’s *Detachable Tooth Covers* shows some similarities in intent but a difference in aesthetic sensibility. Both objects are playful and contain visual puns, and both use materials that elicit absurd
readings. Yet, *Breakfast in Fur* is an elegant object that speaks of its origins in fashion, while *Detachable Tooth Covers* is resolutely ugly, which is an integral part of its charm. Within both chindogu and Surrealism is the notion of the domestic object rendered useless.

Many other Surrealist objects could be considered part of chindogu’s art historical lineage. For example, Man Ray’s darkly humorous fetish object *Gift* (1922, figure 5), a flat iron with embedded spikes, is, in effect, a transformed readymade. The addition of the spikes subverts the iron’s original function and transforms a familiar domestic article of the time into an ironic fetish object. I saw this work in 2011 at the *Surrealism* exhibition held at Brisbane’s Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA). I was unprepared for the impact of finally apprehending the object after many years of seeing it in two-dimensional form. As soon as I saw *Gift* I realised that I was looking at an object that could not only tear cloth, but also pierce flesh. I realised that *Gift* was potentially an object of torture. When confronted with the object ‘in the flesh’, I realised that in the past I had predominantly focused on the work’s humour, which somewhat leavened its masochistic reading.

Not long before visiting the *Surrealism* exhibition, I completed a spiked dumbbell *Pumping Iron: Homage to Man Ray* (2011, figure 6) in response to images of *Gift*. This satirical work encapsulated the paradox of pain and pleasure through exercise, in particular the notion of repentance through physical pain. Ironically, when I returned to Dunedin I reworked *Pumping Iron* by replacing sharpened screws with more vicious looking steel spikes.
Oscar Dominguez’s quilted *Wheelbarrow* (1937, figure 7), with its plush fuchsia satin lining, is another surrealist object that offers a ‘chindogu moment’ for the viewer. It disrupts the traditional image and purpose of the wheelbarrow as a tool to be used for ‘grubby’ outside tasks. The ‘honest workhorse’ designed for carrying garden waste or building supplies has been transformed into a piece of designer furniture. This work dislocates notions about the usefulness of familiar objects through the employment of unexpected materials. In effect, this makes the object unable to be used, as any traditional modes of use will destroy it. The lush lining would become stained and torn in the first moment of its deployment. This work can be given a reading as chindogu since absurd objects such as these “are man-made objects that have broken free from the chains of usefulness” (Kawakami 1995, 8).
Figure 7
Oscar Dominguez Wheelbarrow 1931.

Figure 8
Man Ray Oscar Dominguez’s Wheelbarrow 1937, photograph.
This work was exhibited as part of the *Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design* exhibition in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2007. The traditional context of the wheelbarrow was further subverted by being displayed ...next to Man Ray's better known fashion photograph of it, complete with a reclining fashion model in a Lucien Lelong evening dress to make the link yet again between surrealist objects and the parallel worlds of glamour and fashion. (Evans 2007, 239)

There are other examples of works that could be considered as part of a pre-chindogu lineage, for example, the kinetic machines of Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely. His works are far more visually complex than surrealist objects such as *Wheelbarrow*. Their purpose is akin to Shannon's *Ultimate Machine* as they are mechanical devices that have been designed specifically to comment on their own futility and frailty. Like chindogu, Tinguely’s works also comment on industrialisation and consumerism.

### 2.4.1 Involuntary Chindogu

A chapter on chindogu is not complete without reference to ‘involuntary chindogu’. This is my term for badly designed objects that either do not work, are unwieldy to use, or present an overwhelming visual absurdity (or irony) that appears lost to the sensibility of the designer. Experiencing decades of such useless objects (un)designed to be truly annoying provided Kawakami with the initial impetus to create chindogu.

One of my favourite involuntary chindogu is “poses”, the strapless and backless adhesive bra didn’t take the fashion world by storm in 1949 when it was (un)designed by and released to an unsuspecting public by Charles Langs (*Life* 1949). In figure 9, a selection of the single cloth cups is appraised (rather skeptically) by Langs’s wife.

My notion of ‘the chindogu moment’ as when the user realises the object is truly useless, can be applied equally well to involuntary chindogu. Imagine the self-adhesive strip on the poses melting in hot humid weather or under the stress of
exercise. I note that Mrs. Langs appears to be well upholstered in the traditional ‘over the shoulder’ dual-cup fashion.

2.5 Chindogu and Fitness Equipment
The Ten Tenets of Chindogu appear to be a useful lens through which to observe and discuss the relationship between art and design objects. They are the starting point in my visual art installation project that critiques the use of contemporary exercise equipment to construct the ‘ideal’ body. Any number of mass-produced consumer goods could be used to discuss this process, but I have chosen exercise equipment for several reasons.

Whether the product is the gym membership with your own personal trainer or the latest piece of home gym equipment, the fit and toned ‘ideal’ body is a product that is very heavily and strategically marketed. Our need for the perfect body plays on one of our greatest fears, that of growing old, overweight and unattractive. Issues of production and consumption, combined with the politics of advertising and body
image make this a fertile ground for exploration. There are a myriad of quick-fix solutions to weight control, fitness and beauty issues, many of which could be critiqued using chindogu objects. For example, *Detachable Tooth Covers* (1995, figure 2) is an example of chindogu that questions the time and energy taken to maintain an acceptable appearance.

In New Zealand advertorials for home-gym equipment are screened on all channels simultaneously in the mornings and late at night. This allows no choice for viewers who want to be entertained with an alternative, unless they can afford cable television. Some of the potential consumers who are at home in the mornings fall into groups who can ill-afford these extraneous goods; for example, young mothers, the elderly retired and those at home because of sickness, injury or unemployment. The seductive payment plans and the hope of a fitter and more glamorous body may be hard to resist.

Presenters with bodies honed to perfection demonstrate the latest generation of a series of machines that all promise to be the *only machine*, which exercises all major muscle groups while expending a minimum of energy. Sometimes the design solutions involve creating machines that force the user into a series of movements that are truly hilarious. The *Ab Circle Pro* is a current favourite of mine for this reason. It is yet another machine purported to solve the not so pressing problem (Kawakami 1995) of creating perfect abdominal muscles in under five minutes a day. Many of these machines once purchased on a whim (or the good intention of a New Year resolution) become obsolete ‘involuntary chindogu’ that spend their lives stored under the bed.

More complex exercise machines are set up as part of professional gymnasiums/health clubs. While these don’t offer such absurdly quick-fix solutions as home-gym machines, they are part of a system that offers technologies for body transformation which create the desire for an increasingly distant goal of an ‘ideal’ toned and trim body "which serves both to capitalize on and perpetuate cycles of embodied dissatisfaction" (Frew and McGillivray 2005, 161).
**Chapter 3: The Gym**

**3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I discuss how the ‘the ideal’ body is presented and constructed in the setting of the contemporary gymnasium. I approach this by discussing the work of several critical theorists and performance artists who tackle issues surrounding the politics of the body.

Both Foucault and Bakhtin, who are key figures in this chapter, theorise about how issues of power and control are played out in society. In his notions surrounding the carnivalesque, Bakhtin’s perspective is that hierarchies can be overturned temporarily so that minority voices can emerge. I position this and other pivotal carnivalesque concepts within the site of the contemporary gymnasium. Bakhtin’s concept of the communal grotesque body is useful in situating ‘public exercise’ in gymnasiums (and reality-television weight-loss programs) within a theoretical perspective. I also explore his notions of the grotesque body and carnival ambivalence as useful lenses through which to view the practices of performance artists Nao Bustamante and Tony Schwennson.

Foucault’s approach to the politics of the body differs from Bakhtin. He is more interested in how centres of power are gained and perpetuated. His focus is on how political power over the body has been influenced by particular historical events within specific timeframes that have caused the marginalisation of various groups and individuals within society.

Foucault’s notion of the docile body is pivotal in understanding how the discipline of repetitive exercise prescriptions and loss of personal autonomy are linked. I also discuss his analysis of Bentham’s panopticon and consider how bodies under the threat of constant surveillance are self-disciplined to perform in the gym. Themes of the gaze and surveillance are explored by sports theorist Roberta Sassatelli and also by Frew and McGillivray whose qualitative research project regarding the perceptions of clients’ body image held by their personal trainers are somewhat
revelatory. I review their findings to support my notion of the gym as a system that has “broken free from the chains of usefulness” (Kawakami 1995, 8).

I also explore the issue of the ideal body from a feminist viewpoint. I discuss the research of contemporary feminist theorists Fikkan and Rothblum to consider whether fat is still a feminist issue. This question is problematised in current social theory that suggests the pressure of body image now has equally disabling effects on men.

The chapter concludes by returning to the Eureka Salon, this time with guests who wrangle with issues surrounding the construction of the ‘ideal body’.

3.2 Mikhail Bakhtin

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, born in 1895 near Moscow, was only 22 at the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution in which the peasant population deposed the Czar and installed the Bolsheviks in power. After an ensuing civil war, the Soviet Union was formally established in 1922.

In 1929 during the time of Stalin’s control, Bakhtin was arrested in the mass raids against intellectuals and sentenced to 10 years in the Solovetsky islands, a region widely regarded as a death camp. This exile was eventually commuted to six years exile in Kazakhstan, where he wrote Rabelias and his World (Morson and Emmerson 1990).

In this work, Bakhtin focuses on the picaresque writing of subversive French monk François Rabelais (1494–1553) to discuss the power of Renaissance carnival as a tool for dislocating power structures by satirising and/or mocking authority figures. Bakhtin termed the (albeit, temporary) process of overturning power hierarchies in favour of the underdog as the ‘carnivalesque’ (Bakhtin [1965]1984).
Perhaps this work was stimulated by his first-hand experience of living through a successful peasant revolt and its subsequent painful and disappointing aftermath, as the Soviet government exerted more and more excessive power over its citizens.

Bakhtin, an intellectual relegated to the post of farm clerk while in exile, could only dream of the luxury of mocking those in authority. Even when his ideas were undertaken in the guise of Rabelais, his work (intended as his PhD thesis) was still greeted with governmental and academic disapproval. He was eventually awarded a master’s degree for *Rabelais and his World*. The work was not released for publication until the 1960s to belated acclaim (Morson and Emmerson 1990).

Bakhtin’s concepts about the carnivalesque are useful when discussing performance in which taming the ‘grotesque body’ (Bakhtin, [1965]1984) is attempted. His analysis of the carnival in the era from the late Middle Ages to the early Renaissance is now famous. He used Rabelais’s writing as a starting point, as it provides a worm’s eye view of the world, the view of the picaro, who from the lower rank and file, looks into the very arsehole of the higher orders.

In this realm, accepted social hierarchies are suspended, parodied, upended—the bottom becomes top; the higher orders become objects of derision, of howling laughter (Bakhtin [1965]1984). This inverted world-view or a ‘World Upside Down’ (WUD) is at the very heart of the concept of carnival.

Bringing Bakhtin’s thinking into the present, Pam Morris discusses his notion of grotesque realism and its central image, the grotesque body (Morris 1994). The grotesque body is a communal body, an exaggerated human form that emphasises bodily protuberances, eating and excrement. This grotesque body is a vital aspect of the communal carnivalesque body (Stewart 1993).

The grotesque body is not individualised; it is the undying body of all the people, comically debased so that it may be festively reborn. For this reason all the elements of folk humour are deeply ambivalent;
ridicule and abuse are always the other side of praise and celebration. (Morris 1994, 195)

The ambivalent nature of carnival humour is very relevant to the works of performance artists who appear to ridicule the unruly grotesque body in order to highlight society’s unrealistic expectations of achieving bodily perfection.

3.3 Performance and the Carnivalesque
Performance artists have been addressing issues of body image for several decades. Cindy Sherman, Orlan, Annie Sprinkle, Jill Orr, Nao Bustamante, Coco Fusco, Stelarc, Tony Schwennson and the collaborative duo of Allora and Caldzadilla are among many artists who have worked in performative ways with issues surrounding the body. For example, in the 1998 performance America the Beautiful (figures 10 and 11), Nao Bustamante blended the paradoxical elements of seriousness and absurdity into a performance that highlighted the ridiculous lengths and discomfort American women will go to in order to look beautiful. In an effort to contain the borders of her unruly body she taped herself with screeches of adhesive tape and then trussed into virtual immobility, she proceeded with shaky deliberation to climb and balance on top of a ladder. In this work, Bustamante used her body as a sculptural object to satirise the effects of living within confines of ‘acceptable’ standards of beauty. This was a pivotal performance work that addressed construction of the ideal body. Kawakami’s Detachable Tooth Covers addresses similar issues. It is also a performative work in the sense that without the use of the model with her deadpan expression, the object would have little meaning.

Ambivalence plays a part in Bustamante’s performance practice, whereby she enjoys “cracking stereotypes by embodying them” (Bustamante n.d.). I used this same example from Bustamante in the introduction to discuss my notion of over-representation. These concepts overlap in America the Beautiful, in which a performance that could be viewed through the lens of carnival ambivalence is created through intentional over-representation to produce a satirical critique of the beauty industry.
Images removed

Figures 10 and 11
Nao Bustamante *America the Beautiful* 1998, performance video-stills.
Ambivalence is also reflected in my response to *America the Beautiful*, whereby I alternated between states of hysterical laughter, shame and extreme embarrassment while watching the video.

Bringing the unruly body under control is not only an issue for women; men are also under increasing pressure to tone up. This is an issue Australian performance artist Tony Schwennson examines with irony in *Prime Beef Export Quality* (2009, figure 12), a work presented “against the backdrop of body obsessed gym culture in the late 90’s” (Slack-Smith 2008, 201). I saw this work in *Optimism: Contemporary Australia* at the GoMA in Brisbane in 2009.

Schwennson, in full ‘Ocker’ mode (a caricature of the working-class ‘Australian bloke’), proudly displaying his flabby belly and short shorts could also be perceived as "cracking stereotypes by embodying them" (Bustamante, n.d.). As in *America the Beautiful*, this work can be viewed through the lens of carnival ambivalence. However, I didn’t experience the palpable pathos in Schwennson’s performance that Bustamante’s work evoked.

Image removed
Concepts within the carnivalesque, which are useful to discuss body image within a performance art context, can also be applied to performance within a sporting context.

3.5 Fitness and the Carnivalesque
Looking at bodies engaged in activities within the latter-day gymnasium we see how social hierarchies are obliterated as all involved are brought low in their endeavour to make docile the grotesque body to lose weight (or in the case of the body-building community, over-develop the body to gain muscle weight). Even the wealthy and the famous are in need of such exertions and they are the ones who can afford going to the gym. In her article “Interaction Order and Beyond”, sports theorist Roberta Sassatelli discusses how the gym functions as a relatively separate reality from everyday life where:

people who occupy very different social roles overtly care for their bodies and forcibly display postures and movements which would normally be conceived of and felt as weird, if not indecent, outside them. (Sassatelli 1999, 229)

The gymnasium becomes its own hierarchy of the fit and the trim, subsuming other hierarchies within itself. Thus it constitutes a carnivalesque context particular to our era.

The subsuming of other hierarchies within the gym (or in any context where the carnivalesque can be seen in action) is a temporary condition and when the participants return to normal life the old orders are resumed. One of the criticisms of the carnivalesque is that the temporary release from traditional power dynamics acts purely as a ‘safety valve’ to allow the oppressed masses to ‘let off steam’. This in effect maintains the status quo and is therefore not the way forward for a lasting change in power dynamics. The notion of carnival functioning as a ‘safety valve’ is not new. Russian philosopher, government minister (and later, Soviet critic) Lunacharsky proposed the ‘safety valve’ notion in a 1931 address on the importance of satire and carnival (Holquist 1983).
Traditionally, carnival was a short time for the peasant population to relax before the deprivations of Lent and then the return to their daily lives of long hours of hard work. It could be argued that today’s developed Western countries are now in a situation of perpetual carnival, indulging in excessive amounts of alcohol, fattening food, and constant entertainment. In contemporary society, the traditional timeframes of carnival appear to have been reversed and the period of Lent could be seen to correlate with shorter harsh periods of strict dieting and tough exercise programs for the penitent in their endeavour to make docile the grotesque body to lose weight.

In gym programs, such as “Only Six Weeks to a New You”, and workplace initiatives such as “Spring 2 It” (currently offered at my workplace), the status quo of the ‘ideal bodies’ forming a healthy fit population is the message being promoted by health officials, employers and governments as they fight the much touted obesity epidemic. “In the current environment, dieticians and nutritionists have taken up socially sanctioned roles as international ‘fat police’” (Bell and McNaughton 2007, 126). The cultural hysteria over obesity (Campos 2004) is reflected by the new term ‘globesity’, coined by the World Health Organisation (Bell and McNaughton, 2007 126). The reality of starving populations in much of the developing world is a clear indicator that the notion of global, implicit in globesity, does not apply to them, and in fact means industrialised Western nations with access to an overabundance of food.

The media hype regarding obesity has ensured that the fitness industry has a never-ending supply of grotesque bodies to be made docile. The notion of the grotesque carnival body expressed as a binary opposite of the classical ‘ideal’ was proposed by Michael Featherstone in 1991. This concept has been recently re-contextualised within a gym setting by sports theorists Frew and McGillivray in a quantitative research project undertaken in Scottish health clubs, in which they discuss how the classical ideal body is a form of physical capital, as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu in 1984 (Frew and McGillivray 2005).
The obese or overweight ‘underdog’ may briefly obtain ‘physical capital’ (Bourdieu 1984) by achieving an ideal body in the masochistic setting of the gym or by using home gym equipment. However, the ideal body is virtually impossible to maintain when the lure of the carnival is so pervasive. Unsurprisingly, a return to the undisciplined carnival body (Featherstone 1991) is virtually inevitable for many people (Frew and McGillivray 2005).

It could be argued that by watching reality-television programs about the morbidly obese—where an extreme lack of physical capital is displayed—may have the effect of increasing the (perceived) relative physical capital of the viewer. This is possibly why some of these programs are so popular; the growing self-esteem of the viewer rests on degradation of the other. In “Subversive Pleasures”, cited in Elizabeth Birmingham’s “Fearing the Freak”, Robert Stram refers to two distinct types of carnival contexts: “bottom up carnival” the topsy-turvy world of inverted hierarchies (found in Medieval and Renaissance carnivals) and “degraded carnival” which is “an insertion into hierarchy rather than a liberation from it” (Birmingham 2000, 225).

Makeover weight-loss programs such as The Biggest Loser are an example of degraded carnival whereby dramatic weight loss and a focus on violent exercise by very unfit people create a curiously compelling spectator sport. Implicit within this type of programming is the promotion given to the gym environment and machinery, which is endorsed at every humiliating weigh-in.

Within reality-television (as in the carnivals of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance), the disaffected also appear to have a voice. Lunacharsky’s concept regarding the limitations of carnival as a tool for subversion because it functions as a societal ‘safety valve’ (Holquist 1993) can also be applied in this setting. This is reflected by the way conservative values tend to be upheld by both the voting public and other contestants to reinforce the status quo, while maintaining the appearance of freedom of expression for the contestants. Meanwhile the viewer indulges in the solitary and voyeuristic pleasure of watching reality television.
Recently, a (hitherto discerning) friend asked me quite seriously, “have you been watching the fat family on Thursday nights?” Now that we are in the era of the *Fat Family*, will stories of individual fat people still hold our attention? Each successive ‘reality’ series featuring the sad lives of the morbidly obese shows more extreme cases, for example, the man who had to be airlifted out of his house to hospital because he couldn’t fit through the door; or the mother who couldn’t stop feeding her obese son enormous meals even though it was killing him. The vicarious pleasures of watching the fat are now extended to watching a whole family. This appears to be a particularly bizarre form of consumerism. How much fat is enough for our viewing satiation?

The above are examples of an endless proliferation of programs that I think of as “Fatty TV”. As with consuming fatty foods, it feels good at the time but afterwards leaves you feeling queasy and bad about yourself. When watching Fatty TV, the viewer vicariously watches morbidly obese people on the screen who are stranded on couches eating fatty foods, while watching TV. Why would we watch television to see on the screen, other people watching the screen (Foley 2010)? It could be construed as a bleakly humorous expression of the simulacra (Baudrillard 1983) that could only be happening in this currently fat-obsessed era. In April 2011, TVNZ started screening the show *The Big Fat Family Challenge* (figure 13) with the description “the Chawners, labelled Britain's fattest and laziest family” (Wade 2011).

Image removed

**Figure 13**
TV NZ *The Great Big Fat Family Challenge* 2011.
The Big Fat Family Challenge has the flavour of a farce set in a hall of mirrors whereby the inevitable and absurd conclusion would be if the Fat Family's television was tuned into one of their own episodes. Arguably, some reality-television programs have now entered the world of chindogu.

Early in 2011, I worked with a group of students who were designing and making chindogu for potential entry into the Dunedin Fringe Festival chindogu exhibition and awards. A notable creation was a particularly engaging dachshund on wheels, with a body created from a real (and particularly long) frankfurter. Tensile strength was maintained by the insertion of No 8 fencing wire into the frankfurter which was then used as a modelling agent for the creation of the chest, head, tail and legs. I encountered the student 'walking' the 'dog' around campus, whereby they were invariably greeted with amusement. Many people expressed how cute they found the dog and would even bend to pat it and say hello, which was just the type of response the creator was looking for, as his darkly humorous concept was “to help people with eating disorders have a better relationship with food”. Although some people found this very funny, many did not and he felt he couldn’t enter it in the chindogu awards because of fear of upsetting those with eating disorders, in particular those with anorexia.

There seems to be no such qualms displayed about upsetting overweight people, who are endlessly ridiculed. Is there a perception that the excessively thin will ‘snap under pressure’? A sensitivity that possibly makes them immune from the type of sensationalist programming dedicated to overweight people. If there was an anorexic version of the biggest loser devoted to fattening up the contestants each week, berating them publicly to consume vast numbers of calories and then culminating in a semi-naked public weigh-in, it’s very likely a barrage of complaints would ensue.

There are programs that address the issue of anorexia but they appear to be less humiliating than competitive weight-loss programs that gain viewer ratings through the humiliation of their contestants. Programming related to anorexia tends to be
more sympathetic even though viewers do watch painfully thin people being cajoled to eat. The ‘supported flatting’ environments whereby teams of support staff offer counselling and guidance, appears to be a more therapeutic environment than the ‘weight loss boot-camps’ favoured by programs such as The Biggest Loser.

Degraded carnival (Birmingham 2000) in the form of reality-television is becoming increasingly socially acceptable as prime-time entertainment, as voyeurism and obsession with other people’s less fortunate lives appears to have become the norm. Anything approaching satire, however patently ridiculous and painfully cruel, would be hard-pressed to supersede the next generation of standard reality-television fare. Unsurprisingly it has become ever more difficult to satirise this form of popular culture (Foley 2010). Each new series is eagerly gobbled up by insatiable and apparently undiscriminating viewers who regard it as the new normal.

Weight-loss programs are not the only form of reality television programming dedicated to promoting the ideal body. Weight loss by more extreme methods in the form of stomach stapling and liposuction are presented in documentaries which are extraordinarily graphic and ‘hard to stomach.’ This obsessive communal cleansing and repackaging of the grotesque body appears to be another example of degraded carnival as described by Birmingham. In programs like Xtreme Makeover, the degraded grotesque body (Bakhtin [1965]1984) joyously exhibits its scars, proudly presents its excessive protuberances to be ritually sliced off and bares its blubbery tummy to be nipped, tucked and ‘liposucked’. For centuries, the grotesque body happily overflowed its boundaries; we laughed with it, at it and from inside it, but to what extent were gender and sexuality inscribed on it?

In “Impudent Women”, Kate Chedgzoy argues that Bakhtin has a tendency to talk about ‘the body’ in a non gender-specific way, yet “his descriptions of the grotesque body are replete with characteristics which have traditionally been coded as feminine” (Chedzoy 1993, 11). She gives examples from Rabelais and his World of the terracotta figurines excavated in Kersh (Ukraine) that represented senile,
pregnant hags, described by Bakhtin ([1965]1984) as “...strongly expressed grotesque”. Bakhtin describes these ambivalent figures as

..embodying pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. ([1965]1984, 26)

The female grotesque body, presented for repackaging in endlessly recurring makeover programs, is in a state of perpetual becoming (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Like the Kerch figures described by Bakhtin as combining “senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life” (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 26), the grotesque body will always be in a state of perpetual makeover because it will never be stable or contained. There will always be the ambivalence of the newly nipped and tucked flesh juxtaposed with decaying flesh. The newly ‘made-over’ grotesque body will always burst its boundaries, display messy leakages and re-grow all its protuberances, which will be operated on once again. This inevitable return to the carnival body (Featherstone 1991) is the same process as discussed by Frew and McGillivray (2005) in the setting of health and fitness clubs and performed so evocatively by Nao Bustamante in America the Beautiful.

To feel good about body image in contemporary Western society could be increasingly viewed as a conundrum. The availability and easy access to ‘Fatty TV’ and constant entertainment, information and purchasing online is resulting in an increasingly sedentary lifestyle for many. (Gl)obesity rates are purportedly rising, while images of the ideal body (portrayed as the norm in media), fuel an unrequited desire for bodily perfection. “Television and cinema screens overflow with these fantasy bodies, perfectly maintained whilst (apparently) enjoying the consumptive excesses of celebrity lifestyles” (Frew and McGillivray 2005, 171). In other words, classical bodies are behaving as carnival bodies do, without any visually harmful effects, which give false hope to viewers that ‘they can have it all’.

Increasingly, children are exercising their digits on a variety of keyboards, rather than their bodies in the outside world. Through exposure to media (in particular,
gendered toys developed from cartoon television heroes), children are disciplined to desire the ideal male or female body from an early age. Barbie dolls and male action figures have long been criticised for conditioning children to believe that the impossibly trim or over-muscled body shape, as found in these toys, is normal. John F. Morgan notes the increasing emphasis on the production of muscular-looking male toys.

The makers of Barbie responded responsibly in 1998 by giving her less make-up and changing her body shape, with a smaller bust and mouth, thicker waist, and more proportionate hips. Meanwhile studies of action toys show that the physique of the characters grows ever more muscular. (2000, 173)

Morgan is rather generous when describing the change to Barbie as responsible. The modicum of restraint exhibited in the 1998 remodelling of Barbie’s somewhat alarming proportions is negligible. It is hard to believe that this is a toy with a ‘thicker waist’ (figure 14).

Image removed

Figure 14
Mattel Barbie with the ‘new thicker waist,’ 2000.
In her 1978 polemic Fat Is a Feminist Issue (the title of which Morgan appropriated for his article), Orbach discusses the issue of body weight in women from a feminist perspective. Within this book—a combination of feminist philosophy and self-help manual for compulsive eaters—Orbach addresses the notion that some women use fat as a tool, or system of protection, to avoid being marketed or perceived as the ‘ideal woman’ (Orbach 1978).

Meanwhile, Barbie has not only been training young girls to become ‘ideal women’ for decades but she has also influenced young boys to view the long-legged pert-breasted toys of their sisters as normal. Training the ‘male gaze’ starts at a young age through toys such as Barbie. However, it is expressed even more overtly in Japanese manga and anime in the form of hyper-feminine sexually charged characters that are now entrenched in Western popular youth culture.

Morgan’s analysis of increasing muscularity in toys marketed to boys unfortunately appears to be correct. Since 2000 when his article was published, toys for young males appear to have become even more grotesquely muscled. Morgan contends that fat has now moved beyond the territory of feminist discourse. Men in contemporary society are very conscious of body image and are now conditioned from an early age, through exposure to (the not so subtle) manipulation of overtly muscled action toys, to desire the ideal body (Morgan 2000).

The desire to achieve the ideal body appears to have gone beyond notions of the ‘classical ideal’ as expressed by Featherstone (1991) when using Michelangelo’s David as an exemplar. There is a growing trend for men to become increasingly overtly muscled. This phenomenon can be discussed using the grotesque carnival body as a tool of critique (Bakhtin [1965]1984). Traditionally, female corpulence appears to be the primary outward expression of the communal grotesque body (Bakhtin [1965]1984), however the rising incidence of ‘bigorexia’ or muscle dysmorphia leads to a secondary interpretation, that of the grotesque muscled body. ‘Bigorexia’ is a condition in male athletes whereby there is a compulsion to become ever larger and more muscled. This is a condition that is appearing more regularly in
gym settings as a result of the increasing pressure for men to tone up, as discussed by Leone, Sedory and Gray in the article “Recognition and Treatment of Muscle Dysmorphia and Related Body Image Disorders” (2005).

Societal pressures ranging from media advertisement campaigns to sports icons often dictate the way an “ideal” body should look. For several decades, much of the focus on body image disorders has centred on women. In American society, the feminine ideal is to appear thin. Males, however, are encouraged to be muscular and “ripped.” We have witnessed a gradual shift in how males perceive their bodies and a growing trend toward a condition called reverse anorexia or bigorexia. Dysmorphia or dysmorphism is defined as an anatomical malformation. As attention grows in this area of psychopathology, the clinically appropriate term of muscle dysmorphia (MDM) has come into usage. In cases of reverse anorexia, bigorexia, or muscle dysmorphia, the primary focus is not on how thin a person can get but rather on how large and muscular. (Leone, Sedory and Gray 2005, 352)

Bell and McNaughten also challenge traditional feminist thinking that suggests that, historically, fat is predominantly been an issue for women.

We have suggested that many men are concerned about fat and weight loss and that this is not merely a recent development. While it may have become more acute in recent decades, fatness has long had threatening implications for men, given the ways it potentially undermines normative forms of masculinity. (2007, 127)

They discuss at length how many men see fat as feminising and fear it greatly, particularly fat deposits in areas perceived as feminine such as the hips and chest. They note that the incidence of flabby pectoral muscles or gynecomastia is not only linked to corpulence but can also be a result of steroid use (Bell and McNaughton 2007, 124). This is a rather unfortunate paradox (or, to be less generous, divine retribution) for men who are already trying to over-assert their masculinity with steroid use, to receive the thing they most fear—‘man boobs.’ Discussing John Marsden’s documentary Sports Junkies (2005), Bell and McNaughton note how this fear of exhibiting breast growth is manifested in some extreme cases: “Indeed, surgeons treating gynecomastia comment that some men also develop Body
Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) and will return several times for more surgery, believing that they can still see breasts (2007, 126).”

However, it appears that fat is acceptable in some parts of the body; for example, in working-class men in particular, a well-developed beer gut (as long as it is teemed with good strong arms and chest) can be a badge of honour, a sign of being ‘one of the boys’; a good hard-drinking mate. This is the type of ‘Ocker’ character so skilfully satirised by Schwennson in the aforementioned *Prime Beef Export Quality* (figure 4).

There appears to be a compelling argument that suggests there are increasing pressures on men to achieve the unrealistic goal of a toned, taut and ever more muscular ‘ideal body’. However, despite this trend, recent research from Fikkan and Rothblum (2011) indicates that overweight women still experience far more prejudice than overweight males.

\[\text{Across numerous settings, fat women fare worse than thinner women and worse than men, whether the men are fat or thin. Women experience multiple deleterious outcomes as a result of weight bias that have a significant impact on health, quality of life, and socioeconomic outcomes. Because of this gender disparity, we argue that feminist scholars need to devote as much attention to the lived experiences of fat women as they have to the “fear of fat” experienced by thin women. (Fikkan and Rothblum 2011)}\]

It appears that fat is still a feminist issue and can be seen in the lived experiences of women who experience weight bias as a disabling factor in their lives. I propose that the reasons for this bias are linked to how sexism affects the body image of both women and men, fat and thin. The fear of feminising fat experienced by overweight men is an overt expression of sexism because, to be seen as soft ‘like a woman’, as opposed to hard and masculine, is considered to be an insult. Women are still seen to be physically and emotionally ‘less than’, weaker, softer, and yielding.

Interestingly, this is a position left unacknowledged by both Bell and McNaughton and Fikkan and Rothblum.
Secondly, if sexism is at the root of the negative gendering of fat as female, then this is also linked to the greater weight bias experienced by overweight women, who exhibit the embodiment of unwanted excess. In other words, they ‘carry the weight’ of both sexes. There is also a third interconnecting issue that adds to the negative power of weight bias towards women: fat on men is seen as ‘feminising’ but not so on women, who, when carrying excess fat, are seen to be lacking femininity. Bakhtin is not alone in his implicit assumption that the communal grotesque body is essentially female (Chedgzoy 1993), as there appears to be a deeply ingrained elemental fear within the psyche of both men and women of displaying signs of the (female) grotesque body.

3.6 Foucault: The Body as a Site for Political Control
The link between weight bias and sexism discussed using the perspective of the carnivalesque grotesque body is an example of how the body is a politically contested site. There are many other examples, as political control of the body has a long history. In medieval times, some extreme orders of Catholic monks were self-flagellating for the purpose of connecting emotionally and physically with the pain of Christ (Bordo 1993). The notion that repentance may be achieved by physical pain is of particular relevance to the Gymnaseum project, where gym users receive ‘Absolution’ through excessive and often painful exercise.

Foucault is widely acknowledged for his analysis of the body as a site for political control, particularly through his exploration of the historical changes in institutions that wielded power through the ‘treatment’ and subsequent categorising of those in their ‘care’. Some of these power plays can also be observed in the institution of the gymnasium. This is the site where we can observe how two of Foucault’s concepts can be seen to intersect. Power over the ‘docile body’ implicit within the quasi-military setting of the workout room (complete with the trainer and trainees) is further enhanced by the self-disciplining power of the panopticon.

Foucault was born in 1926 in the historic town of Poitiers, home to the second-oldest university in the country. The value and significance of both academia and history
were possibly ingrained at an early age as was the will to rebel, as Foucault did not follow his doctor father’s wishes to also enter the medical profession (Oliver 2010).

He attended university at the Ecole Normale in Paris where he gained the reputation as both a brilliant student and a somewhat difficult personality. He was prone to bouts of depression, which culminated in a suicide attempt in 1948 just half-way through his four-year degree. A psychiatric assessment followed (though not hospitalisation), after which Foucault slowly regained his mental health (Oliver 2010). During the time at university Foucault also “began to take part in the gay sub-culture of Paris” (Oliver 2010, 4). It is uncertain whether his growing awareness and expression of his homosexuality contributed to his depression, but, given the 1950s was not a liberal time with regards to sexual difference, one could assume it may have contributed to his feeling of isolation.

What does seem apparent is that Foucault’s focus on the history and analysis of power within psychiatric (and penal institutions) and his interest in the medicalisation and categorisation of sexuality were directly influenced by his own experiences. Foucault is widely acknowledged as a key post-structuralist philosopher and social theorist.

In “Docile Bodies”, Foucault ([1979] 1991b) discusses how political control of the body can be achieved by the discipline of repetitive exercise. Although he acknowledges that examples are found in both classical Greek society and from ascetic Christian practices of the Middle Ages, he proposes that the time of the classical age was when the body truly became the “object and target of power” (Foucault [1979] 1991b, 180).

Foucault begins “Docile Bodies” by introducing the example of the ideal soldier, who, in the early part of the seventeenth century, bore his natural aptitude for the role through his alert bearing, strength and courage. However, by the late-eighteenth century, a soldier was considered to be “something that can be made; out of formless clay, an inept body, the machine required can be constructed” (Foucault
Through gradual training, the posture of the peasant slowly developed into the soldier, repetitive actions and movements become silently ingrained, as the soldier, ready at a moment’s notice became an “automatism of habit” ([1979]1991b, 179).

Although, as discussed earlier, the eighteenth century was not the first time political control was exerted on the body, neither was the change sudden as the seeds had been present in:

....a multiplicity of often minor processes, of different origin, and scattered location, which overlap, repeat and support one another, distinguish themselves from one another according to their domain of application, converge and gradually produce a blueprint of a general method. ([1979]1991b, 182)

Thus, the same subtle forces that were seen in relation to the army were also happening in factories, education and hospitals. Foucault does not generalise about power. Rather, he gives specific examples to illustrate how processes were adopted according to particular needs; for example, a specific mechanical or industrial or military innovation may require a specialised workforce of docile bodies to operate it (Foucault 1979). However, initially there was no wholesale training of “the body en masse” to accept a new state of docility; rather there was a subtle coercion using “movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity, an infinitesimal power over the active body” ([1979]1991b, 181).

The process of disciplined docility by undergoing repetitive series of exercises in a military setting is the basis for exercise prescriptions in the contemporary gymnasium (Frew and McGillivray 2005). In typical gym training regimes, clients undertake a series of “reps” (single body movements) using machines or weights. Series of reps are built into sets. More demanding sets are then added to the workout schedule. Therefore, the gym uses several of the disciplinary forces discussed by Foucault (1979) in *Discipline and Punish*. For example we see the partitioning of space by the use of separate machines or areas for training,
repetitions of gestures to train the body and the sets of exercises scheduled into a timetable (Foucault 1979).

There are also many other instances of military style training in contemporary fitness contexts. For example, in Bikram Yoga, an extreme form of high-energy yoga, the participants train in an over-heated room and are constantly yelled at by the instructor to keep up and train harder. This type of training is also reminiscent of the ‘boot camp’ mentality of reality-television weight-loss programs.

*Discipline and Punish* also features Foucault’s analysis of Bentham’s panopticon prison system, designed in 1791, which adds to the discussion surrounding the body as a political site where power dynamics are played out. The panopticon features a high circular tower that is centrally located within a circle of surrounding cells. Those under surveillance are disciplined to behave well as there is a perpetual uncertainty about when surveillance is taking place. The power of the panopticon is so effective because subjects are potentially being viewed at all times but remain uncertain if it is happening at any given time (Foucault 1979). This model highlights how the disciplinary power of surveillance can be both subtle and menacing; a power that subjugates the ‘gazee’ while presenting an outward appearance of their collusion. In *The Eye of Power*, Foucault discusses how the panopticon harnesses the insidious power of the gaze to create a situation of fear induced self-policing.

> There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. (1980, 155)

The notion of panopticism can be applied to the contemporary gymnasium whereby the possibility of constant surveillance by other gym users and personal trainers creates a self-regulating system of discipline (Frew and McGillivray 2005).
3.7 The Panopticon of the Gym

The ever-present mirrors in the gym also augment the effect of the panopticon and add another layer of complexity to the manner in which the gaze is conducted. I previously discussed Nao Bustamante’s performance *America the Beautiful* from a carnivalesque perspective. It could equally be given a Foucaultian reading, as she could be seen as reinforcing social norms by rigorous self-policing of her own body.

In her analysis of Italian gym culture, Sassatelli discusses how the gaze in some specific sporting situations works as a prescribed gaze. The negotiation of who can look at whom, when, where, and for how long is based on a complex and subtle set of social rules. These rules help negotiate the users’ ongoing comfort within the gym. She also notes that unsurprisingly, there is a large difference in levels of comfort clients experience when viewing their own bodies while exercising (Sassatelli 1999).

Contemporary gyms and other sports complexes are now often glass-fronted so their users’ bodies are on continual display to the outside world. In effect, the clients of the facility now have to contend with the gaze from both within and without the gym while exercising. The use of the ‘glass curtain’ in so much public and private contemporary architecture appears to reflect society’s changing attitudes to privacy, both within the home and in social and workplace settings.

Michael Foley, in *The Age of Absurdity*, contends that the increase in attention seeking behaviour in Western society is the new normal. He proposes that the need to be seen is linked to “an inner emptiness requiring identity conferred from without: I am seen therefore I am” (2010, 32). There appears to be a link between this behaviour and the increasing use of transparent building materials and open plan design of public places to facilitate people-watching (Foley 2010). The need to be seen has now reached absurd proportions whereby people are now paying to be stalked as discussed by Foley below.

These services are increasingly popular because they give their customers a unique sense of significance. As the founder of one such service puts it, “We’ve had clients who say they wear nicer underwear or
start taking better care of themselves simply knowing they’re being observed”. (2010, 32)

The notion of putting oneself under paid surveillance to feel better (inside and out) is truly ludicrous. This is a service whereby chindogu and surveillance intersect. The ‘viewee’ becomes a willing participant in a panopticon of their own making, knowing that they will enjoy an ever-present frisson of excitement as they wonder if their personal ‘stalker’ is covertly watching them.

The fitness machine has, in effect, also become the stalker, as surveillance capacity is now embedded in ever more sophisticated generations of gym equipment. Most contemporary gym machines can calculate every calorie burned, measure the user’s heart rate, body mass index (BMI) and recovery rate after exercise. The machine knows more about the user’s body than they do themselves. This creates a culture of implicit trust whereby ‘the machine knows best’. I critique this notion in Gymnauseum whereby my fitness machines display ludicrous ‘personal data’. A critique of machinic dystopias will be developed and discussed with relationship to the gym machine in the next chapter.

The panopticon of the gym is so effective in creating an environment of self-regulation because the pressure to obtain the ideal body is so pervasive. In “Health Clubs and Body Politics: Aesthetics and the Quest for Physical Capital”, Frew and McGillivray discuss their findings from research conducted through focus groups of Scottish gym clients and personal trainers. Participants openly discussed their attitudes about their own quest for physical capital (Bourdieu 1984). The clients self-regulate and are self-disciplined by the constant exposure to ‘ideal bodies’ surrounding them and by their own perceived lack of physical capital:

You’re always looking. As soon as you’ve got a flat stomach you see someone else and say, hey, they are better than me. Then you think I want to look like that. (Linda, health and fitness club member, focus group, May 2000, cited in Frew and McGillivray 2005, 168)
Many of the personal trainers openly showed distaste for the lack of physical capital or the grotesque ‘carnival bodies’ (Featherstone 1991) displayed by the users of their establishments. It is hard to imagine that their clients would be unaware of such negative attitudes.

I mean, I never actually say to them “you’re fat” but I make sure they (customers) know they are. You can’t hide the folds. [Callum, personal trainer, interview, May 2000] ... Listen, by the time I’m finished with them (at induction) they’re whimpering to join-u You get them to focus on how they look and how long it took to get that way. Then you put it to them how they’ll look in six months if they don’t do something now. (Hazel, personal trainer, interview, March 2000, cited in Frew and McGilivray 2005, 168)

It appears that some of the personal trainers in this study use the fear of obesity as a motivating force for training. They are also particularly scathing of the many gym users who couldn’t break through the pain barrier to achieve an improvement in their physique, or manage to maintain the constant discipline over time that is required to achieve and retain the ‘ideal body’.

I keep telling them it’s not pain they feel only discomfort. But they don’t want to hear that. They want the body but they just can’t handle what it takes to get it. (Hazel, personal trainer, interview, March 2000, cited in Frew and McGilivray 2005, 170)

Given the real struggles that many go through and the hours of painful training required to make lasting physical changes to the body, it is not surprising that there is a burgeoning market for quick fix solutions. The emergence in the last decade of ‘six-pack abs’ as a ‘must-have’ body accessory has stimulated the incessant drive to market ‘ab machines’ that claim to give the user ‘ripped’ and well-defined abdominal muscles in increasingly shorter timeframes. The promise that ‘just three minutes a day’ is enough exercise to achieve your dream body is patently absurd. This type of marketing is the basis for AbSolution my instant ab machine exhibited as part of the Gymnouseum body of work, which I will discuss in depth in Chapter 5.
Chindogu can be said to be at work within contemporary fitness machines. At a time when the baby-boomer generation is ageing, an obsession with fitness and weight loss has resulted in a proliferation of machines designed to trim the body. Millions of people worldwide attend gymnasium in their efforts to balance an over-extended diet with obsessive fitness regimes in the face of worldwide poverty in developing countries. The gym works as a prime site for producing the docile body because the dual effects of repetitive exercise combined with panopticism ensures rigorous ‘training’ to not give up on achieving the (unlikely) outcome of the ‘ideal body’. This entails a new version of the governmentality of the docile body, a version particular to our context today.

3.8 The Second Eureka Salon: Challenging the ‘Ideal Body’

It’s been a long chapter and I’m looking forward to chewing the fat over a pint of Emerson’s Pilsner at the ‘local,’ with Donna Harraway, Susan Bordo, Stelarc, Bustamante, Mary Woolstonecraft, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Bakhtin. Although some of my guests haven’t featured in the ‘body’ of this chapter, they have repeatedly hinted that they would welcome an invitation to the pub tonight, particularly those who felt a feminist perspective was sadly lacking in the previous Eureka Salon.

All believe there could be options, however bizarre, for avoiding collusion with the prevailing consumerist construction of the docile ‘ideal body’. Foucault is unable to come but suggests that whether or not he is physically present, no discussion regarding the docile body will take place without his influence anyway. Kawakami and Jarry are there by default as they haven’t yet gone home from the last session. They are still finding links between their philosophies, particularly since Jarry started drinking sake. It is unlikely we will get much sense from them.

All direct quotes are in italic script.
Jane: Welcome to the second Eureka Salon, let’s start the evening by asking a question. Do you think that it is possible to discuss the notion of the docile body from a phenomenological approach, that is, ‘a lived experience’ of the body?  

Bordo: What, after all, is more personal than the life of the body?  
(Bordo 1993, 11)  

Merleau-Ponty: Underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body is that other knowledge which we have of it by virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 206)  

Bordo: ...and for women, associated with the body and largely confined to a life centred on the body, (both the beautification of one’s own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others), culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life. As early as 1792, Mary Woolstonecraft had provided a classic statement of this theme. As a privileged woman, she focuses on the social construction of femininity as delicacy and domesticity. (Bordo 1993, 11)  

Jane: So it appears that robust societal critique can take place when the personal ‘lived experience’ is conveyed with an understanding of the politics or ‘culture’s grip’ that mediate that experience.  

Woolstonecraft: Genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection, women are everywhere in this deplorable state. Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison. (Woolstonecraft 1792, cited in Bordo 1993, 11)  

Bordo: This is as clear an example of the production of a socially trained, "docile body as Foucault ever articulated". (Bordo 1993, 11)
Harraway: If the mind shapes itself to the body, ditch the body! Let the mind roam free. The body is totally overrated! Embracing the new technology offers a potential freedom, a way out of ‘the gilt cage’ to use your term Mary. Sadly this era is coming too late for you. I’m not interested in the lived-in experience of the body. The body is past its ‘use by date.’ To have a body means to negotiate gender and gender imbalance. My theorising of the cyborg is an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender (Harraway 1991, 150). If Stelarc is still hanging around, we could ask him to add something here.

Stelarc: I agree, Donna, the body is well on the way to becoming obsolete. The desire to locate the self simply within a particular biological body is no longer meaningful. (Atzori and Woolford 1995)

Jane: Well, Stelarc, it’s great to see that you are using your time well by exploring every inch of it before the final abandonment.

Harraway: I would expect nothing less, as the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. (Harraway 1991, 150)

Jarry: The cyborg appears to be a creature of ambivalence and seems somewhat pataphysical. You seem to be subverting the sciences of human biology and psychology and sociology. Moreover, as in the pataphysical solution, salvation also lies in a theoretical approach.

Jane: Surely, there are other solutions to the ‘prison’ of the docile body other than complete abandonment. Humour and irony appear to be possible responses.

Bakhtin: And satire and ridicule. The peasant populations of Europe in the Middle Ages were also trapped within docile bodies, bodies that performed a series of
repetitive tasks when working in the fields with little time for rest. The only opportunity to escape this system was within carnival, a time of temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men . . . and of the prohibitions of usual life (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 15). This was a time of socially sanctioned ridicule of those in authority; ridicule from behind the safety of the mask and using the power of the body, albeit within the prescribed timeframes.

**Bustamante:** I agree; if we are to confront the forced docility of the body we have to meet the challenge head on. *Using the body as a source of image, narrative and emotion, my performances communicate on the level of subconscious language, taking the spectator on a bizarre journey, cracking stereotypes by embodying them. I disarm the audience with a sense of vulnerability, only to confront them with a startling wake-up call* (Bustamante n.d.).

**Kawakami:** This tactic is akin to my performative approach with chindogu; they are not just an idea, which is where I differ from my new friend Jarry. *A chindogu must exist. You are not allowed to use a chindogu, but it must be made* (Kawakami 1995, 8). However they also require the body to perform their overwhelming pointlessness (and to borrow your words, Nao), chindogu can be used for *cracking stereotypes by embodying them* and taking them to their absurd extreme.

**Jane:** In other words, when using chindogu, the body in tandem with the useleles object performs the notion of unuseless-value. Without the body, the critique is lifeless, which essentially is why the Gymnaseum installation is interactive.
**Chapter 4: The Machine**

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the notion of ‘the machine’ from historical and philosophical perspectives. The machine in its most undemanding reading can be considered as an extension of the tool. However, a contemporary interpretation of the machine is that it functions as a social system. I trace the lineage of this contemporary viewpoint through the perspectives of Marx, Deleuze and Guattari, and Raunig.

The machine has been historically linked with the imbalance of power and portrayed as a symbol of dystopia in popular culture, literature, film and art. Within this trope, there are memorable examples of the black humour of absurd machines and disintegrating machinic dystopias. Conversely, as discussed briefly in the Second Eureka Salon, technology has been embraced as a freedom by theorists such as Haraway, who explores notions of the cyborg from a feminist perspective.

It is apt that the cyborg, a creature of blurred boundaries—featured in a discussion surrounding the body in the previous Eureka Salon—will now appear in this chapter relating to the machine. In this chapter I unpack the notion of the cyborg and consider how it relates to the interface between gym machines and their users. Of relevance here is N. Katherine Hayles’s theory of the post-human, and Stelarc’s position with regard to the integration of technology into the body.

Threaded through this chapter are examples of works from artists, film makers and designers who make machines that serve to critique the very purpose of machines themselves. Lastly, I consider how contemporary thinking surrounding the machine can be allied to the gym and discussed through the related perspectives of chindogu and pataphysics.

### 4.2 Theorising the Machine

For Marx, the machine is purely a means to produce surplus-value; “in other words certainly not intended to reduce the labour effort of the workers, but rather to
optimize their exploitation” (Raunig 2005, 2). Although Marx conceives of the machine as an extension of the tool, he sees “its relationship to the worker as one in which the useful, labour-saving properties of the tool were replaced by the emergence of machinic enslavement” (Elliot 2010). This is an arrangement that benefits the capitalist structure and sweeps up the workers into a system of control.

The worker's activity, reduced to a mere abstraction of activity, is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite. The science which compels the inanimate limbs of the machinery, by their construction, to act purposefully, as an automaton, does not exist in the worker's consciousness, but rather acts upon him through the machine as an alien power, as the power of the machine itself. (Marx [1857] n.d., 693)

This perspective is echoed in many dystopic science fiction books and films that focus on the potential of the dark power of the machine to subjugate the workers and ‘destroy society’. It is a process whereby:

...the workers' relationships with the machinery that they operated (but which came to operate them), was paralleled with the manner in which they were enslaved to the workings of the state apparatus. (Elliot 2010)

The idea that workers’ activity was being controlled “through the machine as an alien power” (Marx [1857] n.d.,693) was a theme explored in Fritz Lang’s 1927 film Metropolis. Set in a futuristic dystopian city, the film is replete with metaphors deployed to discuss the inequities of a classist society. Its workers are an underclass of prisoners who live and work in the bowels of the factory.

A clear link exists between the industrialisation of the nineteenth Century and the development of fitness machines. Since the Industrial Revolution, physical activity has declined dramatically as automation in the workplace has replaced many of the physically demanding daily tasks. In her article “The Origins of Cybex Space”, Carolyn De La Pena discusses how this period of burgeoning expansion and manufacture of machinery produced the first exercise machines (De La Pena 2008). For example, in the late-nineteenth century, Swedish physician Gustav Zander developed a series of
exercise machines that included a mechanical horse (a forerunner of the stepper) and a punching machine that delivered blows to the stomach using padded discs (De La Pena 2008). This early example of the ab-machine was surprisingly termed a ‘massager’ (figure 15). However, the boredom of a sedentary life on the factory floor was not to be solved by machines such as the punching machine. Zander’s market was in the ‘white collar’ sector who could presumably afford access to devices such as these (De La Pena 2008).

Figure 15
Gustav Zander Circle Belly Massager, manufactured by AB Göranssons Mechanical Workshop, n.d.
The lack of physical activity and boredom of those working in increasingly mechanised workplaces was addressed in the 1936 Charlie Chaplin film *Modern Times*. Chaplin satirised the robotic movements of exhausted production-line factory workers. As a new worker on the conveyor belt, his performance escalated from mechanical robotic movements to a frenzied manic dance as he was driven increasingly mad with boredom.

*Modern Times* evoked working-class conditions in factories of the time, whereby ‘efficiency’ took precedence over healthy working conditions. The limited space available in which to move—leading to small, repetitive actions—combined with the speed required to keep up with the machine was (and still is) a reality for many workers whose “docile bodies” (Foucault 1979) are disciplined to behave as semi-living automatons.

*Modern Times* also reflects a connection to chindogu. For example, a humorous machine designed to ‘increase efficiency’ by feeding assembly workers their lunch while they continued working used a contraption of rotating spoons that predictably got out of control. The concept of hugely complex machinery being employed to perform the most simple of tasks in the most convoluted way can also be given a reading as chindogu. This highlights the role of chindogu “to challenge the suffocating historical dominance of conservative utility” (Kawakami 1995, 8).

The notion that the machine is not just a single object comprising a closed system of connected mechanical parts was first conceived by Marx. He proposed that the machine is comprised of a series of assemblages, in effect connected machines comprised of both human and mechanical parts. This notion hailed the beginning of new ways to theorise the machine. Marx discusses this concept in *A Fragment on Machines:*

> But, once adopted into the production process of capital, the means of labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the *machine*, or rather, an *automatic system of machinery* set in motion by an automaton, a moving power that moves itself; this automaton
consisting of numerous mechanical and intellectual organs, so that the
workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages. (Marx

A scene in Modern Times in which Chaplin, the maintenance man, gets caught
in the cogs of a giant clock is a literal visual interpretation of this notion (1936,
figure 16). Marx’s 1857 interpretation of the machine was developed further
by Deleuze and Guattari, who have been largely attributed as having conceived
the notion of the machine as a social system. However, in “A Few Fragments
on Machines”, Gerard Raunig states that “the reinterpretation of the machine
concept is not so new and radical as to be attributed solely to the French
poststructuralists”. He notes “a clear movement in the direction of Guattari’s
extended machine concepts can be found in Karl Marx’s Grundrisse der Kritik
der politischen Ökonomie, drafted in 1857/58, in the ‘Fragment on Machines’”
(Raunig 2005).

Figure 16
Charlie Chaplin (dir)
Modern Times 1936, film-
still.

Image removed
However, the difference in interpretation between the machinic models of Marx and Deleuze and Guattari lies in the notion of agency. What Marx describes as a machine, Guattari considers to be a tool. “Guattari stressed the difference between tool and machine as being grounded in the possibility of exchange” (Elliot 2010). The machine, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is a process of exchange, a flow between machine and human (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The function of the tool however, “is already decided, delimited, and closed” (Elliot 2010).

The bicycle is a good example of a machine as understood by Deleuze and Guattari: on its own it is of little or no use, but once coupled with a human body, it becomes a machine. It’s not just the previously inert bicycle that is brought to fruition by this coupling; the human too is changed in the process, becoming a “cyclist”, something it could not have been prior to the interaction with the bicycle. It is the proto-machinic in the human as much as in the bicycle that allows the functionality of the cyclist to emerge. (Elliot 2010)

A machine formed from the symbiotic relationship between bicycle and rider is an accessible starting point to understand more complex sets of machinic dynamics that can be used to theorise various social, economic and political situations. Clearly, the relationship between machines and their human components is rarely as uncomplicated and un-politicised as the example of the bicycle.

However, the bicycle is the perfect starting point to discuss gym machines and the gym as a machine. The first exercycles were bicycles located in a simple stand to raise the rear wheel and stop its forward propulsion. This simple device has been the prototype of generations of ever more complex exercycles and striders. As soon as the bicycle is reconfigured to become an exercycle and located in the setting of the gymnasium (or even in the home gym), a more complex set of machinic dynamics come into play. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of machinic enslavement may be useful to help make this distinction:

There is an enslavement when human beings themselves are constituent pieces of a machine that they compose among themselves and with
other things (animals, tools) under the direction of a higher unity. (1987, 456)

This idea echoes Marx’s dystopic view of the machine whereby “the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages” (Marx [1857] n.d., 692). So what is the “higher unity” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), that, for example, directs the rider of an exercycle? What is the difference between a ride in a country lane as opposed to in a busy gym? Is it naïve to suggest that in one situation there is a more equal process of machinic exchange because it happens in the (arguably) less mediated world of ‘the great outdoors’? The bicycle, like any consumer product, is embedded in the histories of its materials, through the people who mined, created, designed and assembled it, and the exchanges that took place in its construction. Within the gym setting there is yet another layer of complexity that could arguably constitute machinic enslavement—the “higher unity”—which, in this case, I perceive to be societal pressure to achieve physical capital (Bourdieu 1984). This pressure takes place within a system that perpetuates the ideal body by example; a process for creating a ‘standardised factory product’ that passes the scrutiny of other members of the ‘factory floor’—the workers, trainers, and the most rigorous of foremen or supervisors, the self.

“Under the direction of a higher unity” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 456), such as the gymnasium machine, individual components—such as excercycles, treadmills, and steppers—are connected to users through their physical effort. Effort that in turn activates surveillance devices that record, measure and deliver results that rarely satisfy ‘quality control’; a process that keeps “the treadmills physically and economically turning” (Frew and McGillivray 2005, 174).

Historically, the treadmill was a machine of torture. Labour-camp prisoners were made to walk for hours on treadmills, which were used for the grinding of wheat and other grains; at other times they were used purely for punishment (Morehouse 2012). The contemporary treadmill machine shares the aspect of constant laborious repetition with its unpleasant predecessor (figure 17).
It wasn’t until the early 1950s that Dr Robert Bruce conceived of the idea that the treadmill could be used as a fitness device (Morehouse 2012). There are also other links between torture devices and gym equipment, such as the rack. This horrendous torture device from the Middle Ages has resurfaced in a much more benign form in a variety of gym machines that ‘extend’ the legs and ‘expand’ the chest and arms. Machines such as these are designed for repeated actions or movements; the numbers of reps are logged and increased; thus, in this way, the gym machine is implicit in the creation of the docile ‘ideal body’.

4.3 Autopoiesis

If I consider that the gym machine is a factory for producing a standardised human product, issues of consumption and production arise, whereby the gym users could be seen as the raw material and the product in a self-sustaining system.

Image removed

Figure 17
Gym Treadmills n.d.
As Frew and McGilivray write,

Consumers displaying a lack of physical capital, who willingly locate themselves within the health and fitness club, in repentant acknowledgement of their sins and dreaming of physical transformation, provide the essential substance of physical capital. (2005, 174)

The concept of autopoiesis (Maturana et al. 1974), whereby some systems are self-perpetuating, originated in the study of cell biology and could be applied to the notion of the gym as a self-sustaining factory (which perpetuates more machines, trainers, users and so on) in an endless cycle of unfulfilled desire for the perfect body.

The process of autopoiesis is reflected in the work of various artists who work within the genre of kinetic sculpture. For example, Arthur Ganson’s kinetic sculpture *Machine with Oil* (1990, figure 18) could be given an autopoietic reading as it is a device that slowly yet elegantly achieves a constant cycle of repeating movements for the sole purpose of oiling itself. This is no ordinary ‘lube job’, no precision is evidenced in the application of the oil, vast quantities of which are scooped from the underlying drip tray and ladled over the whole mechanism, covering it in a viscous coating. To complete the cycle, the oil slowly drips from the machine back into the tray. The cycle is repeated long before the machine has recovered from its last generous dowsing. In this work, Ganson appears to have been influenced by the work of Swiss kinetic sculptor Jean Tinguely, also a maker of absurd and pointless machines. *Machine with Oil* is also reminiscent of the previously discussed pataphysical *Ultimate Machine* by Claude Shannon.
The process of autopoiesis is not unlike Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of desiring machines, whereby desire is never fulfilled and therefore creates a climate that perpetuates ever more desire (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). In *Autopoiesis Culture and Society*, Humberto Marrioti discusses the diverse applications of this concept:

> The concept of autopoiesis has long surpassed the realm of biology. It has been used in areas so diverse as sociology, psychotherapy, management, anthropology, organizational culture, and many others. (1996)

One can imagine Deleuze and Guattari taking issue with the idea that autopoiesis could possibly be linked to their post-structuralist reading of the machine. The idea of a completely self-sustaining system working as a ‘sealed unit’ (particularly when applied to a social setting) is problematic when viewed from the post-structuralist position(s) of critical theory, a perspective whereby no system works in isolation. However, the contemporary gym could be seen as a microcosm of the Deleuzian
system of ‘desiring machines’; a locus where desire for the product is both unashamedly exhibited and produced within an arguably autopoietic system.

4.4 Posthuman Perspectives

Deleuze and Guattari are not the only contemporary theorists who are relevant to the discussion of the gym as a machine, a concatenation of mechanical and biological components. N. Katherine Hayles’s concept of the posthuman (Hayles 1999) may also be used to discuss the loss of distinction between human and machine. In How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics, she proposes a new condition for humanity in which we share a frictionless coupling with sentient machines. She makes no distinctions between the biological and the mechanical, or between physical and simulated existence (Hayles 1999).

In a practice situated in the territory of the posthuman, Australian performance artist Stelarc embraces self-designed cyborgian add-ons, such as his mechanised ‘third hand’ (1981-94, figure 19) and ‘Xray eyes’, and is, in effect, “translating theoretical and narrative models of the posthuman into performative parameters of corporeal actualization” (Farnell 1999, 129). Stelarc’s performance practice is situated in the ‘disputed ground’ between a posthuman future and the rapidly disappearing and ‘safer’ past where humans and machines were perceived as separate entities.

While portrayed by some as an exemplary proponent of our putatively optimistic posthuman future, many see Stelarc’s work as being indicative of the apocalyptic dangers of untheorized approaches to incorporating technology into the body. (Farnell 1999, 129)

Stelarc, however, contests that “...technology is what defines being human, it's not an antagonistic alien sort of object, it's part of our human nature” (cited in Atzori and Woolford 1995). The cyborg is part of the lineage of a posthuman vision. A creature of blurred boundaries originating from a background of sci-fi movies, it was one of the earliest manifestations of human and machine using
elements of both (Harraway 1993). The construction of the cyborg is useful when considering the relationship between exercise machines and their users.

Image removed

Figure 19

The complexity of immediately available data for users of contemporary exercise machines—for example, weight, BMI, calories being burned and rates of recovering while using the machine—gives rise to the following notions: Are we handing over more and more responsibility to the machine, a machine with a greater knowledge of our bodies than we have at any given moment? Does the machine know best? Are we ‘temporary cyborgs’ when we are connected to the machine? If the gym is a factory, is the machine growing ever richer, stronger and healthier by riding us and exploiting us for every last calorie? Is responsibility and trust handed to the machine in an era in which it is considered passé to consider machinic dystopias as a real threat?

The inevitable conclusion to this B-grade sci-fi-movie scenario would be that instead of setting your alarm for 6am to go to the gym, the gym machine would burst through your bedroom door and come for you, exercising you until all readings are
satisfactory—giving you a horror movie wake-up call in the vein of *Metropolis* meets *Modern Times*.

Humans have long had a fascination for machines that appear to demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the body. There is a long history relating to technologies that were specifically designed to discuss the notion of the body as (but separate from) the machine. The highly complex automaton Vaucanson’s *Digesting Duck* of 1739 (figure 20) is a particularly apt example from the period of the Enlightenment. This was an era when Cartesian thinking fostered the production of didactic adult ‘robotic’ toys that illustrated the inner workings of the body.

![Image removed]

*Figure 20 Hommage à Vaucanson (Replica of Vaucanson’s Digesting Duck), n.d.*

The duck automaton was designed with a clear body to show the inner workings of its digestive system. It could be ‘fed’ grain, appear to digest it and then, obligingly defecate. The digestive process was in fact a hoax as the ‘faeces’ were not produced.
by mechanical digestion but were in fact stored in a container near the tail, waiting to be released soon after the duck ‘ate’ the grain (Riskin 2003). Hoax or not, the defecating duck was intricately engineered, for example, the wings could flap and were articulated with over four hundred separate moving parts (Riskin 2003). While the digesting duck is an example of an automaton that presents the notion of the body as machine, a recent contemporary installation work by Belgian conceptual artist Wim Delvoye offers us the possibility of the machine as body.

Cloaca (2000, figure 21) is a machine that not only defecates, but neatly parcels up and presents the viewer with a numbered edition of its ‘product’. This work appears to be a contemporary expression of the defecating duck. The machine is ‘fed’ two restaurant meals per day and bares its digestive system, a succession of clear bottles containing a series of stomach enzymes, to close public scrutiny. However, Cloaca appears to be a truly pointless (rather than a didactic) machine, since the wonders of digestion are no longer considered a mystery. This is evidenced by Cloaca’s very human complaint of ‘indigestion’ that occasionally causes unpleasant odors to emanate throughout the gallery.

As with the practice of Stelarc, in Cloaca Delvoye also evokes the disputed ground between of body and machine. However, Delvoye goes a step further than Stelarc, for, as demonstrated by Cloaca, the body is essentially made redundant, in practice as well as theory.

Cloaca could be viewed as chindogu by virtue of its profound uselessness, but also, like chindogu, and unlike the digesting duck, it could be seen as a critical system that makes a comment on hunger, consumption and sustainability. I consider this to be a work that embraces my notion of ‘unuseless-value’ except, that rather surprisingly, its end product is a tradable commodity. As Kawakami states, “chindogu are not for sale ... they must not even be sold as a joke” (Kawakami 1995, 9).

With Cloaca this is clearly not the case, as “the machine daily delivered turds that were signed and sold for $1,000 each” (Fiers 2001); this appears to be a particularly
expensive ‘chindogu moment’. *Cloaca* functions on many levels and its purpose remains somewhat of an enigma as the artist has made little comment on any specific meaning surrounding the work. However, one can’t help thinking Delvoye must be ‘laughing up his sleeve’ at the gullible members of the public lining up to purchase excrement for a seemingly exorbitant amount; excrement that has the same chemical makeup as their own and is therefore essentially the real thing.

*Cloaca* may be non-human but it is an expression of the grotesque body; a belching, farting, gurgling and crapping machine of carnivalesque ambivalence; it simultaneously pays homage to and dishonours the body and the machine, as well as severely testing the credulity of the audience. Delvoye’s project also provides a ‘living’ example of how contemporary theorising about the machine (in particular, related to the posthuman condition) can be taken to its logical conclusion. It makes no clear-cut distinctions between the biological and the mechanical or the biological and the chemical.

Figure 21
Wyn Delvoye *Cloaca* 2000.
Chapter 5: The Work

5.1 Introduction
In this chapter I discuss the Gymnasurem exhibition as a whole and discuss some specific works in depth. To situate my work within the context of contemporary art practice, I also investigate the work of several key artists I consider to be particularly relevant to my practice, who include the collaborative duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Mona Hatoum, and Arthur Wicks. I also argue how key theoretical concerns of the Gymnasurem project, in particular, the political control of the body and the power of the machine are also addressed in varying degrees by these artists. I compare and contrast their approaches with mine.

5.2 Allora and Calzadilla
Allora and Calzadilla are high-profile interdisciplinary artists based in Puerto Rico who have worked collaboratively since 1995. Their extensive body of work encompasses installation, video works, sound, sculpture and performance. Their working practice is centered on site-specific social interventions in which they respond to historical and current socio-political situations (Motta, 2009). They have become increasingly visible through well-publicised interventions, performances and exhibitions in many high profile venues, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the 2005 and 2011 Venice Biennales, the latter as representatives in the USA Pavilion.

A number of Allora and Calzadilla’s social interventions have taken place in the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. From 1950, part of the island was commandeered by the United States Government as storage for munitions and as a location for bomb testing. Over many years, displaced locals demonstrated aggressively in a fruitless bid to regain the land (Risse 2007). Eventually, in 2003, the United States military ceased bomb testing and turned the land into a wildlife reserve. Sanctuary status enabled them to avoid cleaning up toxic waste from the site (Risse 2007).
In Allora and Calzadilla’s video work *Returning a Sound* (2004, figure 22), Homar, a local fisherman, rode a motorcycle along parts of the island, a homeland he was no longer exiled from (Risse 2007). The motorcycle exhaust was fitted with a trumpet as a “triumphant riposte to years of bomb sirens” (Rosenberg 2011).

In a 2009 interview with Carlos Motta, Allora & Calzadilla discuss *Returning a Sound*:

> The noise-reducing device is diverted from its original purpose and instead produces a resounding call to attention. It becomes a counter-instrument whose emissions follow not from a preconceived score, but from the jolts of the road and the discontinuous acceleration of the bike’s engine as Homar acoustically reterritorializes areas of the island formerly exposed to sonic blasts. (Motta 2009)
When first looking at Allora and Calzadilla’s work, I found several links to my own practice. The most obvious connection to the Gymnaseum body of work is Gloria, their 2011 Venice Biennale installation that incorporated Olympic athletes, a treadmill-operated tank and choreographed exercise routines. I will discuss Gloria later in this section. However, in viewing Returning to Sound I also see a link to some of my earlier chindogu-inspired works.

My work Blasterboard (2006/9, figure 23) is a mini skateboard with a wind instrument-like ‘exhaust pipe’ that is essentially a bugle. It was shown in my 2006 carnivalesque installation Freakquent Viewing and reworked for the 2009 Dunedin Fringe Festival. Both my work and those of Allora and Calzadilla display a similar visual absurdity, although Returning to Sound has serious political overtones where Blasterboard is a light-hearted chindogu, intended for the niche market of skateboarding bugle players.
Allora and Calzadilla’s description of the trumpet exhaust as a “counter instrument” (Motta 2009) resonates with another of my repurposed instruments. *Ear Full* (2008, figure 24) is a chindogu brass instrument designed for playing in the privacy of your own ear (to avoid annoying the neighbours). However, an underlying reading highlights the ever-increasing use of ‘personal’ stereos, earphones and iPods and in particular, how they reduce the user’s sense of being present in the world.

Only a short blast on the *Ear Full* is enough to facilitate an instant return to the ‘hear’ and now. The difference in the “resounding call to attention” (Motta 2009) displayed by Allora and Calzadilla’s motorcycle trumpet and *Ear Full* is the scale of the problem being addressed. Both works deal with communication but *Returning to Sound* evokes both celebration and pathos as it acknowledges the return of the (albeit) ravaged landscape to a displaced people. It is a call for the belated attention of the world to the oppression of a tiny nation by a greater military power. By contrast, *Ear Full* is more irreverent; it references communication (or lack of it) on a personal level. Trying to talk to someone wearing ear buds is very frustrating but hardly life-threatening.

![Ear Full](image)

*Figure 24*

Jane Venis *Ear Full* 2008.
Assemblage is also a common (material) link between my works and those of Allora and Calzadilla. Recognisable objects that retain their history are repurposed by their connection to each other. For example, in *Ear Full* the use of a brass instrument bell and a copper plumbing ‘U bend’ is a purposeful marriage that suggests that if you are playing ‘crap’, please do it in your own ear. Similarly, the use of a brass instrument as an exhaust pipe in *Returning to Sound* also has a clear role; in this case it signals the link between brass music and military occupation.

*Returning to Sound* is one of several of their works that examines the links between military music, nationalism and oppression. Also of note is *Clamor* (2006), a multi-media work that employs combinations of sound, performance and sculpture. *Clamor* features a band that plays a cacophony of military tunes, muffled from within a large, bunker-like structure. The shelter has been constructed in a myriad of architectural styles that relate to various military bunkers from around the globe.

Nationalism is again a focus in Allora and Cazadilla’s 2011 Venice Biennale offering *Gloria*. The pair was a somewhat unexpected choice when considering that much of their practice has centred on open disapproval of American Military practices (Rosenberg 2011). However, their disproval takes on the guise of cynical humour in this recent work.

Outside the USA pavilion, a monumental upturned tank filled most of the available space. *Track and Field* was one of five works that formed *Gloria*. Atop the tank was a treadmill exercise machine connected to a mechanism that turned the treads and was powered by one member of a team of United States’ Olympic athletes who featured in this and other performances as part of *Gloria*. Once the athlete started jogging on the treadmill, the tank treads turned slowly and very noisily. This clunky machine was at odds with the buff appearance of the athlete. This was a site-specific work that cleverly juxtaposed the nationalism of a major sporting event with that of the Venice Biennale, suggesting to the public that they were viewing the Olympics of the art world (Rosenberg 2011).
Track and Field deployed a coupling of objects and athletes that created an absurd image evoking a cynicism about power, not only over the body of the athlete caught up in ‘the machine’ of the Olympics (and, by inference, the Biennale), but also of the power that feeds and is fed by nationalistic fervour at competitive events. The tank treadmill is somewhat chindoguesque as it requires a great effort to work and then ultimately disappoints with its labouredly clanking and squeaking mechanism. However, unlike the pseudo gym machines in Gymnäuseum, this is a work of monumental proportions. This is not an exercise machine to store neatly under the bed (2011, figure 25).

Track and Field is a work replete with metaphors. One shouldn’t be fooled by the image of the upturned tank and the athlete in charge on top. The tables can be turned in a moment as tanks never lie down for long. I sense an underlying notion that, because of the sheer size of the tank, the machine at any moment could start
riding the athlete. The power of the machine is a concept that also lies at the heart of the Gymnaseum. An example of this is succinctly expressed in my work *Lower than Low Rider* (2011, figures 26 & 27), an exercycle that allows the rider to respond digitally to absurd questions about their physical fitness. Unsatisfactory answers elicit the on-screen message: DON'T LIE TO THE MACHINE.
A further connection between Gloria and Gymnaseum is their humorous focus on blatant consumerism. In the case of Gloria, this theme was aurally and visually communicated within the pavilion. The centrepiece, Algorithm, was an absurd ATM incorporated into well-crafted wooden housing and connected to a shiny set of traditional cathedral organ pipes. This ATM loudly broadcasts its success at the beginning of each transaction by emitting an individual musical fanfare as account information is retrieved from the user’s card. This work neatly skews the usual furtive nature of using an ATM whereby the customer quickly stows cash and card for a quick getaway. Conversely, Algorithm loudly proclaims the bank as the true winner in every financial transaction. This is a chindogu-like ATM machine that can’t hide its glee.

Armed Freedom Lying on a Sunbed, also from the Gloria suite, is an altered bronze reproduction of the sculpture that caps the United States Congress building in Washington DC. The bronze, which looks in little need of an all over tan, is
nonetheless occupying a tanning bed, another must-have accoutrement of the modern gym. This work makes architectural links between the United States pavilion and the country’s capital (Rosenberg 2011) and, as Rosenberg wryly suggests, this work “may also bring to mind certain politicians with perma-tans” (Rosenberg 2011).

Other works in the *Gloria* suite also share the theme of consumerism. In *Body in Flight* (2011, figure 28) a business-class airline seat, essentially a readymade, is transformed into a hybrid of the beam and pommel horse through performances by top United States gymnasts. Allora describes the business class seat as “an advanced form of industrial design, the ultimate commodity fetish” (Rosenberg 2011).

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*Figure 28*

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla
*Body in Flight* (at 2011 Venice Biennale)
2011.
Implicit in the *Body in Flight* gymnastic performance is that the ‘commodity fetish’ of the biennale as likened to a spectator sport for the well-heeled. Similarly, within *Gymnaseum*, the shiny ‘pimped up’ exercycles refer to the ‘ideal body’ as a commodity fetish. However, in *Gloria*, interaction between the user and ‘gym equipment’ takes place in the form of a choreographed performance, in contrast to *Gymnaseum*, which is completely interactive. In my work, the performances come from spontaneous audience participation.

5.3 Mona Hatoum

Mona Hatoum is a British-based Palestinian sculptor, performance and installation artist of international acclaim. She has shown in many major international galleries including the Tate Modern (London), the Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney), Darat Al Funun (Jordan) and the Pompidou (Paris). She was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1995, and has participated in two Venice Biennales (1995 and 2005) and the Biennale of Sydney in 2006.

Hatoum works with a wide range of materials. Although she is arguably best known for her large-scale installations of re-scaled domestic objects that employ combinations of steel, wire and glass, she has also worked with resources of much more humble origin, such as her own hair.

Hatoum’s practice has been greatly influenced by a life disrupted by exile. Although she was born in Lebanon, her parents (like many Palestinian refugees) were unable to obtain Lebanese identity documents. Instead, the family became British citizens while living in a state of transit in Lebanon (Archer, Brett and de Zegher 1977). Hatoum ended up studying art in London almost by default. A short holiday to Great Britain in 1975 became permanent when the civil war in Lebanon escalated and she was unable to return home (Archer, Brett and de Zegher 1977). In effect, this situation made her an exile for the second time. While ‘trapped’ in London she attended a foundation course at the Byam Shaw School of Art and furthered her art
education at the Slade, “absorbing in her training the disjunctive humor of surrealism as well as the streamlined composure of minimalism” (Ohlin 2007).

However, her early work was neither minimal nor composed. It focused on raw performance that required energy and endurance. Hatoum was intent on using her body to highlight what she perceived as a disjunction between mind and body when first coming to the West.

When I first came to England it became immediately apparent to me that people were quite divorced from their bodies and very caught up in their heads, like disembodied intellectuals. So I was always very insistent on the physical in my work. (cited in Archer, Brett and de Zegher 1977, 59–60)

For example, in Position Suspended at the Laing Gallery in Newcastle in 1986, Hatoum presented a physically exacting performance that lasted throughout the day. She occupied a small crude shelter in which hung an array of rusty hand tools. The cell, partially walled with chicken wire, allowed visual access to her mud-covered body as she continually paced the floor. As the day progressed, her process was marked by the buildup of mud transferred to the tools as she scraped by. This performance, which referenced poverty, exile and incarceration, was presented with “considerable physical dignity” (Archer, Brett and de Zegher 1977, 47).

Although her body is no longer the focus of her practice, a sense of the physical is retained in all of Hatoum’s works. Her objects are imbued with a feeling of both threat and fragility. In The Eye: Mona Hatoum, a documentary filmed at the Tate in 2000, Hatoum talks about the relationship between her early performance works and her later installations. She discusses the continued significance of the body when making large-scale installations, whereby “the viewer’s body became implicated in the work … the work is still about the body, its presence implied by its absence” (Illuminations 2001).
In *Untitled* (1998, figure 29), we can see an almost palpable body slumped in a cold and unwelcoming stainless steel wheelchair. In keeping with its stark demeanor, the work is untitled, which aptly befits the notion of the institution as a place where names are rarely used or remembered. When apprehending Hatoum’s objects, the viewer is exposed to a feeling of danger on an almost visceral level. In disjunction with the functional body of the object, sharp chef’s carving knives form the handgrips. This is a work of almost despairing black humour that suggests there is a futility and danger in trying to help others; in offering comfort, there will ultimately be pain. This is one of her many works that speaks of unspecific hurts and distress.
In *The Eye: Mona Hatoum*, the artist talks in detail about the relationship between her culture and her practice. She refutes the notion that her work is about specific political instances and actions:

> People often ask me what is it from my culture that I bring into the work and I say it’s nothing very specific, it’s just a kind of instability and restlessness when someone moved from one culture to another has to, if you like, reassess everything around them. (Illuminations 2001)

Her inspiration contrasts with Allora and Calzadilla whose work often relates very specifically to political events in particular locations. However, Hatoum does acknowledge that her work references “institutional structures that imprison, constrict, or regiment the body in some way” (Illuminations 2001). Although not named as such, this comment clearly evokes the notion of the docile body (Foucault 1979) and is a point of commonality in the works of Hatoum, Allora and Calzadilla and my own.

Hatoum’s wheelchair is one of many works that suggests institutional violence and despair. Also of note are *Light Sentence* and *Short Sentence*, two of a series of assemblages that employ the use of wire-wove bed bases to suggest cells or cages. Wire-wove is a cheap bedding material that is commonly used in hospitals, prisons and transit camps (Illuminations 2001).

The bed, usually associated with warmth, comfort and safety, is a place of contradictions for Hatoum. She makes cribs, rugs and beds of painful and dangerous materials, such as glass, pins and giant-sized graters. These works suggest that it is not possible to relax or become comfortable in the one place we should be able to trust. For example, *Silence*, a fragile glass crib on spindly legs that is both delicate and dangerous, projects the dread of putting a baby to sleep in a place that at any moment “implies its own destruction into fragments” (Roberts 2007, 157). The glass tubing redolent of hospital medical equipment (Roberts 2007) implies that urgent medical intervention would be sorely needed should an infant be left in such a fragile cot. *Silence* is one of many works that evokes dread as a response to one’s inability
to protect our fragile loved ones and, by implication, our own fragile selves (1994, figure 30).

Hatoum has revisited the notion of the bed as metaphor several times in the last two decades. Fourteen years after making *Silence*, she created *Daybed* (2008, figure 31), a faithful steel replica of a kitchen grater up-scaled to bed-sized proportions. This is another work that references restlessness, discomfort and pain.

Figure 30
Mona Hatoum
A vegetable grater also appears in my work *A Grate Act* (2010, figure 32), an absurd playable ‘vege-grating ukulele.’ Although I have not used scale to imply threat in this object, the placement of a vegetable grater over the sound hole is an invitation to shred the player’s fingers once the safety of the vegetable ‘pick’ has been grated.
away. In both *Daybed* and *A Grate Act*, the grater has the power to evoke unwelcome visual memories of kitchen accidents and the promise of even worse damage should these objects be used. Although *A Grate Act* is not part of *Gymnäuseum*, it was created within the same timeframe.

*Daybed* is one of many works in which Hatoum uses scale to imbue simple domestic objects with the possibility of impending threat or danger. By creating domestic utensils of human-sized proportions, the implication is that these are objects that can potentially slice, dice and grate the human form in much more damaging ways than their more docile (and yet still dangerous) normal-sized selves. *Slicer* (1999, figure 33) brings to mind the slicing injuries caused by shrapnel. However, to be confronted by that possibility in an oversized kitchen utensil somehow makes the reality all the more unnerving. For Hatoum, the kitchen is no safer than the bedroom.

Image removed
In the installation *The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (2000) at the Tate London, a giant hand-operated vegetable shredder of the kind found in a 1950s kitchen had shed its discs on the floor of the gallery. In *The Eye* interview, Hatoum describes this work, whereby a harmless kitchen utensil “becomes an infernal machine….which has a feeling of threat but is also quite humorous” (*Illuminations* 2001). A recurring theme in Hatoum’s *oeuvre* is to question the ontological status of objects:

> I like taking a harmless everyday object and turn it into something uncanny and give it a different status, which makes you question the status of all objects around you. (*Illuminations* 2001)

To question the status of objects is one of the fundamental purposes of chindogu. This is a key commonality shared with the work of Hatoum, Kawakami and mine. However, both Kawakami and I question the status of objects to discuss the power of consumerism, whereas Hatoum uses her objects to evoke “a feeling of instability and restless” (*Illuminations* 2001).

Not all of Hatoum’s works that reference the domestic are installations of scaled-up fabricated objects. Some works made during the mid-1990s; for example, *Recollections*, a whimsical and seemingly ephemeral work using rolled up balls of Hatoum’s own hair, is one of her more intangible and less narrative works of this period (Ohlin 2007).

Hatoum has made much of her recent work while undertaking various residencies, which informs her practice “with a uniquely global perspective” (Ohlin 2007). She utilises unexpected sources of inspiration. For example, in *The Quiet of the Land*—a residency undertaken at a tiny Shaker community of only seven members in 1996—she worked making monoprints and rubbings from Shaker kitchen utensils and furniture (Archer, Brett and de Zegher 1997). In an interview with Janine Antoni, Hatoum talked of the warmth of this experience and how she experienced it as a time of contentment which contrasted to her usual nomadic lifestyle (Antoni 1998).
The Shaker experience also contrasted with a residency in Jerusalem in the same year where she started to develop a series of chindogu-like utensils. The first was No Way, a spoon with holes plugged with nuts and bolts. This work, reminiscent of a weapon, relates to the military roadblocks and restricted passage of Palestinian people in their occupied homeland (Archer, Brett and de Zegher 1997). Plugged colanders No Way ii and No Way iii (1996, figure 34) were developed from this concept. Once again, Hatoum rendered the domestic object unusable in a series of works that visually echo the surrealistic dark humour of Man Ray’s Gift.

The notion of the domestic object rendered useless—a recurring theme in Hatoum’s practice—is not only found in Surrealism but also in chindogu. For example, an early work such as Silence can be given a partial reading as chindogu because it is an object that, if used, will sabotage any semblance of functionality it has. However, chindogu are designed to solve a problem (albeit trivial), while creating a new and even more annoying one. In Hatoum’s work, any pretense to solve a problem seems futile because the uncertainty, loss of freedom and pain engendered by exile is essentially unsolvable.
However, the difficulties of exile not only pertain to restricted freedom but also to the reconstruction of home with whatever materials lie at hand. In *No Way iii*, the colander becomes a potentially dangerous conduit for operating a light bulb through the help of the supplied ‘wiring diagram’ (figure 35). This work appears to echo the dangerous home-wired electrical jobs that are familiar to those creating temporary housing out of scavenged materials. In *How to Turn Your Ordinary Kitchen Utensils into Modern Electrical Appliances*, an extract from *Surviving in the 90’s* below, Hatoum presents a cynical pseudo instruction manual for the ‘users’ of *No Way iii*.

Easy to follow step by step instructions:

- Take your favourite steel colander.
- Take a 2-meter length of dual electrical wire for a light bulb.
- Separate the cords of the electrical wire for a length of about 50 cm down the middle part.
- Cut one of the cords at centre point and connect one end of the cut cord to one handle of your steel colander. Connect the other end to the opposite handle (see diagram).
- Fit an electrical plug to one end of the wire and a light fitting and bulb to the other end of the wire. The purpose of the light bulb is to indicate when your appliance is on.
- Plug in and enjoy!

(Hatoum 1996)

The absurdity of this device, whereby a dangerous electrical charge is run through a metal appliance to operate a light, which shows that the non-working appliance is ‘on’, is extremely ludicrous. It has the absurdist pataphysical humour present in Arthur Ganson’s *Machine with Oil* and Claude Shannon’s *The Ultimate Machine*. 
The notion of presenting pseudo instructions in the style of a cheap mail order catalogue is a device also used by Kawakami to accompany his chindogu images. I also use this concept in my pseudo-scientific advertorial video *Absolution* shown as part of *Gymnæuseum*.

Hatoum pays a lot of attention to detail in her works, which are often simple objects but beautifully made. This is the quality that I aspire to in the materiality of objects in *Gymnæuseum*.

**5.4 Arthur Wicks**

In contrast to Hatoum and Allora and Calzadilla, Arthur Wicks works with a wider variety of media, including performance, video, printmaking and (of particular, relevance to my project) human-powered machine sculptures. Although his profile is not as high as these artists, his multimedia practice is well known within Australia where he has exhibited and performed extensively in public galleries and events.
during the last four decades. Highlights include the 1990 Biennale of Sydney and the Australia Sculpture triennial. He has also achieved international recognition through residencies, exhibitions and performances throughout Europe. Although the early machines of Wicks were powered by his own effort, as he has become older, he has focused more on electronically activated kinetic sculptures, which range in size from small works designed for galleries to monumental works located in outdoor settings.

One of Wicks’s best-known machine projects took the form of an endurance performance in which he manoeuvred the ridiculously cumbersome pedal-powered Peace Car throughout Germany and Holland just after the collapse of the Berlin wall in the early 1990s (figures 36 & 37). In his review, At the Edge of Time: The ‘Peace Car’ of Arthur Wicks in Berlin (1991), German art critic Thomas Wulffen highlighted some of the many ironies encapsulated in this work:

Mechanisation is perceived only as an irony. The functions are maintained solely by fake. Symbols, like a sort of rocket, are moving around without creating any real threat. The armoury is a dummy. The motion always comes to a stop because the machine, the car, seems to be programmed to become non-functioning. The artist moves the machine, but one can guess the exhausting effort needed to do that. He is at the one time the mover and the moved. (Wulffen 1991)
The notion that “mechanisation is perceived only as an irony” (Wulffen 1991) is also articulated by one of my pseudo gym machines *Lower than Low Rider and a Sidecar Named Desire*. In this work, pedalling the low-rider exercycle achieves nothing, as friction required for any sort of workout is entirely absent. The sidecar, a vehicle equipped for the comfort of a long ride, goes nowhere. In contrast, the burdensome *Peace Car* appeared to be exhausting to pedal but nonetheless did move slowly. Yet another irony of this work (particularly when viewed in conjunction with *Gymnausemum*) is that it functioned unwittingly as an exercise machine.

The clunky *Helicopter* (2009–10, figure 38), which has the cobbled-together appearance of an early flying machine, is another pedal-operated vehicle shown as part of a retrospective exhibition of Wicks’s work in Wagga Wagga Public Gallery in 2010. Within this work, Wicks appears to have solved the problem of fatigue when propelling a heavy and unwieldy object. The exhibition catalogue details how the machine seemed to be operated by an exhausted Wicks, slumped over the controls. However, closer inspection revealed a cast body-double whose pedalling legs (and copter rotor) were operated by the same electric motor, and so the artist is “just
another element of the apparatus” who is “caught in his own machine” (Payne 2009).

In his profile statement on Linkedin, Wicks discusses his use of “humanoid substitutes” (Wicks 2012) as a foil for the ageing performance artist:

> Having used my body in performance & [sic] performative works for the period 1972 to the late '90s, I now find that it is not as responsive as I would like it to be. However the humanoid substitutes (based on casts from a more youthful Arthur Wicks) can be controlled more or less exactly as I would wish them to behave. Placed into situations of my choosing they can be programmed to perform 24/7, without complaint, with no sick leave or long service leave and needing minimum TLC and maintenance. (Wicks 2012)

The artist’s practice of reworking earlier projects is not limited to ‘manning’ his machine sculptures with Wicks-like ‘humanoids’. For example, *Two Antipodeans Marking Out Their Territory* (1991/2002, figure 39), one of his kinetic works of monumental proportions, underwent a ‘technological make-over’ after a period of eleven years. The first version was shown in the Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition *Machina Persona* in 1991. This was a huge kinetic sculpture whereby the two giant X-shaped ‘antipodeans’ were designed to move along railway tracks in the gallery. Unfortunately, they were constantly derailing, perhaps in a bid to mark out further territories. Wicks cites lack of pre-installation trialling as a learning curve with this work (Wicks 2008).
The re-vamped *Two Antipodeans Marking Out Their Territory* re-emerged at Werribee park in Melbourne for the Lempriere Sculpture Exhibition in 2002 (figure 39). This time, in a bid to keep the antipodeans ‘on track’, various computerised electronic components were introduced, including a programmable logical controller with a locking system and a pulse width modulator (Wicks 2008).

This is a work in which complex technologies are employed to interface with and control a really clunky object so that it can move forwards or backward only a few metres. Once again, mechanisation (and, in this case, computerisation) is an irony. The work’s charm lies in the dissonance between the use of high-tech componentry and the rather humdrum result of its utilisation. There are some commonalities between this work and *Peace Car* as both works are extremely cumbersome and ungainly and—whether by physical or digital means—require great effort to manoeuvre a short distance.

![Figure 39](image)

*Figure 39*
Arthur Wicks
Recent installations also feature kinetic objects; however, these are produced on a much smaller scale. His 2012 *Ship of Fools* (figure 40) features one of Wicks’s primary recurring motifs, the rowing boat. In common with the ‘antipodeans’, this work also features an electronically controlled motorised vehicle, in this case, propelled along rails to and from a miniature ‘boathouse’ installed in the gallery. The vessel is crewed by a hapless gaggle of bronze ‘humanoids’ who are randomly programmed to ‘row’ in and out of sync with each other, resulting in an ungainly passage along the track. This work references the Medieval writer Sebastian Brant’s allegorical tale *Ship of Fools*, an aimless journey undertaken by a boat full of inept and sorry characters. His tale was the catalyst for the more sinister Hieronymus Bosch painting (c1490–1500) of the same name (Rossiter 1973).

Wicks’s *Ship of Fools* appears to be developed from an earlier kinetic ‘rowing machine’, *The Boatman’s Unscheduled Crossing* (2002–08), in which a lone ‘boatman’ appeared to propel a small craft along rails set high in the gallery (Wicks 2008).

![Image removed](image-url)
I select Wicks as my third key artist because of the particular connection his absurd machine sculptures have to the body. In some of his works, a huge amount of physical energy is required to move an ungainly object a small distance. Conversely, in others it is the machine that propels the hapless user, a concept very relevant to my perception of the relationship between gym users and exercise machinery in the contemporary gym.

5.5 The Gymnausem Installation

My work is multi-disciplinary, drawing from the terrains of sculpture and multi-media installation practice. Gymnausem is composed of sculptural objects and video that form an interactive installation; however, my intention is that they also work as individual pieces. The installation opened in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery on 14 October 2011 and will be reconfigured in the Dunedin School of Art Gallery in July 2013.

On entering Gymnausem, the viewer is invited into a pseudo gym, a world of gleaming chrome retro-styled sculptural gym machines, weights and punch bags. These are glossy fitness-machine equivalents of mid-life-crisis Harleys, inviting their overweight riders to obtain the bodies of their lost youth. The finished sculptures are sleekly seductive by the use of chrome, shiny black wet-look vinyl and mirrors. They are lustrous fetish objects that invite the gaze, echoing the hopes of their riders for an equally buff appearance. In contrast, the black humour of vicious spike-laden punch bags and weights echoes the notion of self-flagellation and repentance in exercise.

As discussed in Chapter 3, self-flagellation has a history through flagellants of the Catholic Church. The practice (and flagellation by others) is also linked with the sexual practices of bondage and discipline (‘B and D’) or sadism and masochism (‘S and M’). These particular practices have their own histories and aesthetic influences with regard to clothing and other accoutrements of the ‘discipline’, such as whips, masks, and chains.
Leather, straps, chains, spikes, fur, lace, rubber, rings and piercings and wet-look materials are all materalities associated with the notion of fetish. The term ‘fetish’, “a form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, item of clothing, part of the body” (Oxford 2013), can also refer to ‘relics’ of spiritual significance.

American Photographer Robert Mapplethorpe introduced images of gay B and D practice that highlighted fetishistic clothing into the public arena through a series of works during the 1970s and 80s.

Image removed
Figure 42
Jane Venis Job from Gymnáuseum 2011.

Figure 43
Jane Venis Job (detail) from Gymnáuseum 2011.
As part of the *Gymnasureum* installation, I have created fetish-inspired objects, including *Jab*, a black spiky punch bag (figures 42 & 43), and the spiked weight *Pumping Iron: Homage to Man Ray*, to reflect the cynical notion of the gym as a Lenten site for penance and self-flagellation.

The black humour evident in the finger-shredding ukulele *A Grate Act* (discussed earlier with reference to Hatoum) is also evoked by *Jab*. Like many of Hatoum’s objects, this work employs the “disjunctive humour of surrealism” (Ohlin 2007). *Jab* looks like an instrument of torture. Implicit in this object is the threat of pain, should the viewer choose to use it. This work repels yet invites audience contact, which is in keeping with the interactivity of all *Gymnasureum* works. Like Hatoum’s *Daybed* and the untitled wheelchair, *Jab* also references political control of the body. However, *Jab* suggests that the ongoing success of power over the docile body is because it is self-regulating (Foucault 1979); that to withstand the pain and torture of exercise in the gym is to be part of ‘the no-pain, no-gain’ culture of physical fitness. Thus, to engage with *Jab* is to be ‘one of the boys’. Conversely, there is nothing self-inflicted about the reality of pain or torture implied in the works of Hatoum such as *Daybed*.

The materials I chose for *Jab* are reminiscent of a B and D aesthetic and also reflect my attention to detail in both the making of my works and the materials I choose. *Jab* is crafted out of shiny black wet-look vinyl, inserted with 400 stainless steel spikes, and then strung up with shiny chrome chains. Chrome is an aesthetic choice that is echoed throughout the installation from details such as shiny silver signage to my ‘Harleyesque’ glittering chrome exercycles. I have maintained an attention to detail throughout; chromed spikes are added to wheels, on handlebars and are part of the tailpiece of my exercycle sidecar. Fun fur seats on the low riders and sidecar may also give them a reading as fetish objects.

Obsession is an ongoing focus within my studio research. This is reflected in both the compulsive need for repentant exercise (sometimes to the point of physical illness; hence ‘Gymnasureum’) and in the ‘pimping’ of the equipment, described above, also to the point of obsession. In *Gymnasureum*, classic low-rider bikes have a makeover
and become highly ‘pimped’ exercycles. The practice of ‘pimping’ low rider bikes with numerous rear vision mirrors began in Southern California in the early 1990s, reflecting an earlier craze developed by scooter riding British ‘Mods’ in the 1960s (figure 44). This was the visual catalyst for having multiple mirrors on my exercycles. The mirrors can be focused on specific muscle groups, which allows the rider a prescribed gaze on themselves and others while exercising, and also reference the panopticon and issues of surveillance.

Image removed

Figure 44
*Mexican Pride, pimped low rider show bike, n.d.*
I also pay attention to formal sculptural attributes when creating both the individual sculptures and the installation as a whole. I intend for this to be evident in the clean flowing lines of the sculptural gym machines, the reduced palette of black and silver, and the attention to the balance of the various elements in the layout of the installation.

The naming of my works is also very important to me and is often connected with theories or histories underpinning my work. For example, A Sidecar Named Desire (figures 45 & 46) refers to the gym as a locus for unrequited desire as expressed through the desiring machines of Deleuze and Guattari (as discussed in Chapter 4) and also refers to the title of Tennessee Williams’s play A Streetcar Named Desire.
Figure 46
Jane Venis Low Fat Low Rider and a Sidecar Named Desire (detail) from Gymnäuseum 2011.
My sculptures are combinations of found objects engaging with fabricated forms. I consider this process to be ‘crafted assemblage’ whereby found objects are re-worked in conjunction with constructed forms to create a hybrid that allows the history of the found object to remain evident. When creating works using these combinations, formal sculptural elements are clearly apparent in the lines and form. For example, in *A Sidecar Named Desire* the low rider exercycle to which the side-car is attached (a re-worked 1969 Raleigh Rodeo) provides flowing lines that are echoed in the creation of the sidecar frame. However, my objects are not only about flowing lines and a retro ‘60s aesthetic; their central modus operandi is playfulness. Visual humour is a feature of my work and is either apparent when first apprehending an object (for example, one as pointless as an exercycle with a sidecar), or it may not become clear until the object is used.

Also in keeping with the 1960s aesthetic of the low rider is the highly polished beehive hairdryer, which forms a curved sculptural ‘tail’ for the sidecar. There is a pleasurable irony in using a 1960s beauty salon icon as a feature of an (un)machine that questions the value of a lifetime quest for bodily perfection. Objects such as this would have been familiar to the now ageing baby boomers, a key group of gym users who refuse to accept ageing ‘lying down’. As the boomers continue to age, statements like ‘sixty is the new forty’ give way to the inevitable ‘seventy is the new fifty’. However, unsurprisingly, dead is still the old dead. Staving off the inevitable decline with exhausting workouts on endless new generations of smart machines sounds like hell compared with a comfy chair in the sun and a cold beer to wash down your meds. *A Sidecar Named Desire* embraces this principle by providing a place of comfort to watch others raise a sweat.

I also reference *Breakfast in Fur* by lining my cup-shaped *Sidecar Named Desire* with faux fur. The use of fur suggests that my sidecar may be seen as a fetish object while the use of faux (rather than real) fur also references Oppenheim’s denial, in the face of vocal critical opinion, that *Breakfast in Fur* was not conceived as such.
A feature of the Sidecar Named Desire is a mini DVD screen set into the cockpit that constantly loops my satirical AbSolution infomercial. The infomercial is a visual prompt to encourage interaction with the accompanying AbSolution ‘machine’ placed nearby (figure 47).

A selection below from the AbSolution infomercial script (See Appendix i) discusses the body transformation process using AbSolution:

Two weighted stands support flexible bungy strapping that houses the AbSolution ab support system. This system is comprised of six hollow cells that support the flabby stomach and allow flesh to be squeezed through them in an ab-like pattern. The flabby user steps firmly into the AbSolution and their body is instantly transformed as the flab is gently squeezed through the cells. (Venis 2011)
Some sports theorists have been re-evaluating the use of a phenomenological methodology in sports research and consider that an understanding of embodied experience needs to be reinstated into sport and fitness research (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007). In their article “Grasping the Phenomenology of Sporting Bodies”, they cite Wainwright and Turner (2006) who consider the experience of the individual has been overshadowed by theorising about society:

Research on the body has been chastised for privileging theorizing, of bracketing out the individual, and for ignoring the practical experiences of embodiment. (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007, 238)

The “practical experience of embodiment” (2007, 238) cannot be ignored when interacting with the sculptural gym equipment in Gymnäuseum. Physical interaction with these works addresses the physical experience of trying to obtain the ‘ideal body’ and is therefore relevant in addressing the research question.

The moment when I used the AbSolution machine for the first time, I physically felt my fat pushing through the cells. This was the moment of truth; the “practical experience of embodiment” (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007, 238) that generated an instant feeling of shame at the extent of my excess ‘blubber’.

However, I also loved the absurdity of my ‘instant abs’; I was both proud and regretful they were not really muscle. This work, like Delvoye’s Cloaca and Bustamante’s America the Beautiful, performs the notion of carnival ambivalence. AbSolution offers a ludicrous option for those who not only wish to retain their carnival body (Featherstone 1991) but also to use their flesh as ‘sculptural material’ for the creation of quasi muscle. This is also a pataphysical solution that rests “on the truth of contradictions and exceptions” (Kibbins 2005, 12), whereby I use the pseudo-science of pataphysics to subvert the ‘consumer science’ of the fitness industry.
Absolution (figure 48) offers critique of infomercials and home-gym solutions by using irony and satire; for example, a ‘medical expert’ discusses how the flab once pushed through the cells “mimics actual muscle cells and fools it to behave like muscle does, taut solid and lean” (Venis 2011).

This is the first time I have made interactive work that involves energetic physical engagement with the objects, as opposed to previous interactive installations where interactivity was limited to pushing buttons. Unexpectedly, I had to come to terms with my response to the audience as they made sticky fingerprint contact with my highly polished and finished works. GymnAusium: The Morning After or a Short Review of the Audience (Appendix ii) is my initial response in the form of a satirical pseudo-review of audience behaviour.

Once I became used to the brutal level of audience interaction, I realised that GymnAusium creates a carnivalesque space, a fairground, a place to play; the installation functions as a series of sideshow booths that offer interaction tinged with black humour. It also functions on many levels; for example, children, in particular, enjoy playing with the ‘gym equipment’ but, clearly, engaging with the work at the level of social critique is not their focus (figures 49–52).
Figure 49
Kaleb building his abs, installation shot from Gymnaseum 2011.

Figure 50
Zadie lifting the Weightless Weight, installation shot from Gymnaseum 2011.

Figure 51
Zadie punches Jab, installation shot from Gymnaseum 2011.
In Gymnasurem the complexity of current gym equipment, bristling with digital screens that give up-to-the-minute performance and calorie burning data is critiqued by the creation of nonsensical chindogu-inspired fitness machines. For example, Low Fat Low Rider, a sparkling chrome ‘exercycle’ with hugely elongated front forks, houses a digital screen that offers an interactive invitation to access ludicrous personal ‘data’, such as random weight, BMI, GST and stomach contents. The on-screen fitness ‘readouts’ exude a smug satisfaction that the machine knows best.

Home gym machines that purportedly make major changes in just a few minutes a day offer a ray of hope to busy people who crave the benefits of “physical capital” (Bourdieu 1984). Physical capital brings honour and respect and is essentially an “ideal product” (Frew & McGillivray 2005, 170), a product that engenders unfulfilled desire. This is where chindogu and pataphysics are useful visual and theoretical guides in the creation of the Gymnasurem installation of absurd gym equipment that includes works such as AbSolution, a gym machine that offers ‘instant repentance’ for sins of the flesh.
To conclude, in writing about the *Gymnaseum* interactive installation I have identified Allora and Caldzilla, Hatoum and Wicks as artist exemplars, because as in my practice, they create objects that appear to subvert their own usefulness, or highlight their own impotence. Their works also act as an invitation to discuss deeper political or social concerns. I have not only compared and contrasted *Gymnaseum* (and a few of my relevant earlier pieces) with the works of this particular group of artists, but also highlighted possible chindogu, pataphysical and (in the case of Hatoum), surrealist readings of their work. This discussion was vital in situating *Gymnaseum* within contemporary practice.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The theoretical arguments developed throughout this document and contextualised through the physical experience of engaging with the interactive Gymnasurem installation inform my response to the primary research question and associated areas of investigation.

I began by addressing the primary research question:

How can principles of chindogu, a Japanese art form for intentionally producing absurd and useless design objects (Kawakami 1995), be employed in Western art to comment on the construction of the ‘ideal body’ through the use of contemporary gym equipment within a culture of obsessive exercise?

Discussion and conclusions arising from this question cannot be answered in isolation, and therefore intersect with the three underlying areas of investigation, which, to repeat, are:

- How can the contemporary gymnasium, as the site for obsessive exercise needed to maintain the docile (Foucault 1979) or ‘ideal’ body, be represented visually within a carnivalesque context (Bakhtin [1965] 1984)?
- Can chindogu (Kawakami 1995) be related to the pataphysical object (Jarry [1911] 1996) when considering its dissonance between purpose and practicality?
- Can the proposed installation Gymnasurem embody discussion around these questions?

In order to engage with the research question and associated areas of interest, I needed to articulate my primary research methodology of critical theory, with a particular focus on post-structuralism. I achieved this not only by engaging with relevant theoretical texts, but also in actively demonstrating my understanding of
their relevance through the interactive Gymnasureum works. It is this process that connects my theoretical base of critical theory with my studio research methodology.

Therefore, Sullivan's concept of “transcognition”, which indicates how the relationship between practice and theory is interwoven, is manifest. Thus:

As new visual arts research is undertaken, it can be located and critiqued within dimensions of theory and domains of inquiry so as to ascertain how practice informs theory and theory informs practice. (Sullivan 1995, 99)

Through the Gymnasureum project I have engaged with and contextualised within my practice the work of relevant critical theorists who explore how issues of power and control are played out in society against a backdrop of specific historical events. For example, Foucault’s notion of the docile body is pivotal for understanding how the discipline of repetitive exercise prescriptions and loss of personal autonomy are linked. I also discussed his analysis of Bentham’s panopticon and considered how bodies under the threat of constant surveillance are self-disciplined to perform in the gym. I use my absurd ‘fitness equipment’ and mirrored pseudo gym environment to discuss how power and control over the ‘docile body’ are also perpetuated through our relationship with the machine.

Bakthin’s concepts of the carnivalesque, whereby hierarchies are temporarily overturned so that minority voices can emerge, was the starting point in creating my carnivalesque gym, an environment where the visitor can experience and question an alternative to the status quo of the trim and fit ‘ideal body’. I position this and other pivotal carnivalesque concepts within the site of the Gymnasureum installation.

The term chindogu has only been in use since the mid-1990s; however the concept of purposefully creating absurd or useless objects has a much longer history in a Western art context. This was discussed in Chapter 2 with regard to the link with surrealist objects, such as Oppenheim’s Breakfast in Fur, Ray’s Gift and Duchamp’s
Fountain. I overtly reference this part of chindogu ‘pre-history’ within the Gymnaseum installation through my homage to Gift as part of the work Pumping Iron. In a more subtle manner, I also reference Breakfast in Fur by lining my cup-shaped Sidecar Named Desire with faux fur.

Although my sculptural gym equipment is not pure chindogu, I use the notion of the chindogu or ‘unuseless’ object as a starting point rather than a sole influence. I believe that chindogu can be used to comment on the construction of the ‘ideal body’ in the context of contemporary Western art.

Most importantly, I see the role of chindogu or chindogu-like objects as supporting a key function of Western contemporary art, which is to provoke debate. I have used the term ‘unuseless value’ throughout the thesis to discuss this. The term references Marx’s notion of use-value (Marx [1859] n.d.) and was developed through ‘discussions’ between philosophers in the first of the two Eureka salons. This notion is exemplified by the work of artists discussed in this thesis, such as Mona Hatoum, Allora and Caldzilla, Wym Delvoye and in some of the Surrealist and Dada artists who were forerunners of contemporary practice.

Pataphysics is a chindogu-like practice underpinned by an absurdist philosophy that parodies the theory and methods of science expressed in nonsensical language. It is fatalist in essence, showing that any understanding of the known universe is bound to fail, highlighting the futility of existence.

Pointlessness also lies at the heart of chindogu. Kawakami’s concept that chindogu are ‘products’ designed to solve non-pressing problems is echoed in Jarry’s concept of pataphysics as a “science of imaginary solutions” (Grossman 1967, 475). A science of imaginary solutions is equally well equipped to solve the ‘not so pressing’ or imaginary problems of achieving the ‘ideal body’.

As discussed in the introduction, the fitness industry thrives on the power of binaries to reinforce the notion of the ‘ideal body’ as the dominant term. The purpose of
some of my exercise machines is to offer a critique of the status quo by physically overturning entrenched binary concepts, such as fit/fat ripped /flabby by offering engagement with ‘chindoguesque’ exercise machines.

The physical dislocation of the binaries happens the moment that the user physically engages with the work. For example, in my Absolution machine, the moment that the user’s fat is turned into ‘quasi-muscle’ by being forced through the plastic cells is both a ‘chindogu moment’ and the moment in the process of deconstruction that offers a ‘new whole’, an absurd solution whereby the flab in that moment becomes more desirable. In this way, Gymnæum performs the notion of my predominantly post-structuralist approach. For, in the moment of interactivity and engagement with the machine, there is no dominant term, only a new and rather absurd solution.

The gym is a site whereby we can observe how two of Foucault’s concepts can be seen to intersect. Power over the ‘docile body’ implicit within the quasi-military setting of the workout room (complete with the trainer and trainees) is further enhanced by the self-disciplining effect of the panopticon.

At first glance, Gymnæum looks as if it might discipline the docile body; indeed, it is set up to give that impression, but in effect, it is really a sham. The technology is purely absurd. Spiky, vicious looking punch bags look menacing but the spikes on contact don’t harm. The weights invite you to work out yet they are feather light; the slick and complex exercycles have no traction as they just spin the rider about. The mirrors on the machines and wall form a panopticon, which allows the ‘trainees’ to watch themselves and each other to (un)exercise. This is in fact a carnivalesque space, a fairground, a place to play; the installation functions as a series of sideshow booths that offer interaction tinged with black humour.

My sculptures in Gymnæum can also be considered from a position of carnival ambivalence. For example, in the moment of interaction with the Absolution machine, the user, when comprehending their ‘new abs’, becomes proud of their definition and yet is regretful they are not the real thing. This work, like Delvoye’s
*Cloaca* and Bustamante’s *America the Beautiful* exemplifies the notion of carnival ambivalence.

In *Gymnæuseum* I utilise the tenets of chindogu and the absurdist black humour of pataphysics to provide ‘chindogu moments’ that serve to critique the absurdity of both individual gym machines and the gym as a machine; that is, the process of exchange between the machinic and the human (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

The contemporary gym is a microcosm of the Deleuzian system of ‘desiring machines’—a system where unrequited desire creates the impetus for further engagement with the very system that withholds (yet promises) fulfilment (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). In this way, the desiring machine of the gymnasium is as deeply ambivalent as the ‘chindoguesque’ object I use in its critique.

Exercising on treadmills, steppers and bikes going nowhere is a metaphor for perpetually trying to make up for lost ground in the quest for physical capital (Bourdieu 1984). In my exploration of the machine from contemporary perspectives through works that echo the futility of chindogu and pataphysics and the ambivalence of the carnivalesque, *Gymnæuseum* critiques the notion of the ‘ideal body’ as a commodity (Bourdieu 1984; Bordo 1993) within a system that promotes “distinction for the few.....and aesthetic frustration and dissatisfaction for the many” (Frew and McGillivray 2005, 172).

It is appropriate that the conundrum of trying to obtain the unobtainable body of one’s youth, is (un)solved by the use of chindogu and its associated genres. In attempting to turn the ageing and sagging body into an ideal that we can never achieve, are we in fact becoming chindogu ourselves?
Bibliography


http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/allora-and-calzadilla/


Appendix i: AbSolution Script

Jane: How do you think it would feel to instantly transform your spongy body
Into a vibrant energy packed ball of muscle?

At last! The ab machine that you have been waiting for; an exercise free, diet free,
guilt free solution that turns your flabby tummy into that six pack of your dreams,
and, what’s more, it happens instantly.
Let’s take a look at AbSolution now to see how it works:

Two weighted stands support flexible bungy strapping that houses the AbSolution ab
support system. This system is comprised of six hollow cells that support the flabby
stomach and allow flesh to be squeezed through them in an ab like pattern. The
flabby user runs into the AbSolution and body is instantly transformed as the flab is
gently squeezed through the cells. I am now going to introduce you to Ian who will
demonstrate the AbSolution here in the studio, so you can see this transformation
for yourselves.

Jane: Hi Ian, it’s good to have you on board.

Ian: Hi Jane, it’s great to be on the show.

Jane: Well this is the moment our viewers have been waiting for please step into the
‘ab pad’ Ian. Wow! Looking good! That’s some transformation! How does that feel,
Ian?

Ian: It feels fantastic to look so ripped and, what’s more, it’s totally stress free.

Jane: So tell us - How easy is it to use AbSolution?
Ian: With *AbSolution* you’ll have no punishing 3-minute daily work outs that other systems require, you can keep on eating and drinking whatever you want. In fact, it’s better to grow fatter because the more flab the bigger the ab.

Jane: Thanks, Ian. I’m now going to introduce you to Dr Judy McGee who led the team of scientists who developed the ‘ab pad’. Welcome, Judy.

Judy: Thanks for inviting me on the show.

Jane: Judy, could you tell us a little about how the technology works?

Judy: The secret of *AbSolution* is the ‘ab pad’, which uses the patented power extruder system that literally turns ugly flabby fat into potent muscle as it’s forced through the cells in the ‘ab pad’. As the fat is extruded, a chemical change results in the cells. The fat cells start mimicking actual muscle cells and fooling these cells to act and behave as muscle does—taut, solid and lean.

**Play animated graphic**

Jane: A question we are frequently asked is, “If the fat being pushed through the ‘ab pad’ is a temporary measure why not use it 24/7? Why go back to your old body in between?” Well, according to our many users it all comes down to pressure. What’s been your experience, Ian?

Ian [stepping into the *AbSolution*]: Having a taut muscular body is a huge responsibility; people expect far more of you. They expect you to have more energy, commitment and be better in bed.

Jane: I agree; this kind of pressure can have a negative effect on your health.

Judy: Yes, research shows that looking good in small manageable bursts when it really counts is scientifically proven to be more beneficial.
Jane: Thank you so much Judy and Ian [audience applause]  
Jane: Our last guests have come straight from rugby practice to talk about their experience with AbSolution. These days it’s not only the guys who want that firm, toned six pack. Bridget and Sacha are front row forwards and they know the importance of looking solid where it counts. First let’s see you step into the the ‘ab pad’, girls. Who would like to go first? [Sacha runs first into the AbSolution]  
Jane: I notice that you actually ran into the AbSolution; can you tell our viewers why?  
Sacha: The greater the speed the better the definition!  
Bridget: I agree; just stepping forward is for wimps—hurl yourself at the ‘ab pad’! [runs into AbSolution]  
Jane: Bridget, you’re not only a rugby player, you’re also an artist; tell us why you find AbSolution so creative.  
Bridget: Think of your fat as a sculptural material and you can choose when and where you want to mould it into muscle. The AbSolution gives you that flexibility.  
Jane: Great! Thank you both.  
Well, you’ve all seen for yourselves the incredible AbSolution and how it can instantly transform your body into a powerful ball of muscle. AbSolution is a commanding machine that takes its own space; it does not fold up and store easily under the bed where it will become tangled up with less successful pieces of exercise equipment.  
Today we have a very special offer for our viewers. Call in the next 30 minutes and receive the absolution for a risk-free 30-day trial. Don’t worry about the cost because we will never reveal the price of this product during the advertisement.
And that’s not all; if you purchase AbSolution today you will the Absolution Doorflex, a portable ‘ab pad’, which is perfect to string across any doorway. This is a particularly useful for the front door or office door when you are hoping to impress visitors with your firm physique for that so-important first impression. Step towards others with confidence. Call [Graphic 0800 AbSolution].

Graphic: This infomercial was brought to you from the Gymnaseum range of products.
Appendix ii

Gymnasiaum: The Morning After or A Short Review of the Audience

Oh no! There’s a fingerprint on my chrome. What are the gallery staff doing? Why aren’t they running around busily polishing up my work after every sticky-fingered child has pawed it, and grubby adults have smeared the mirrors while touching up their lippy? Surely there should be standards; it is a gallery after all, the kind of place where there is usually someone hovering over you every moment in case you inadvertently breathe on an art work. Why aren’t there 25 armed guards (all with spray and wipe) supervising the use of my work?

Gallery viewers have had generations of training to behave themselves in the Gallery—years of DO NOT TOUCH THE WORK signs and little yellow lines to keep behind. Surely you would think they might react a little tentatively, but no, they’re strangling the work, smacking and thumping the hell out of it. A happy father is now giving his small son a ride on one of the punch bags, using it like a tyre swing and pushing the child. There are two children in the sidecar and one sitting on the tail picking at the fun fur. Good grief.

I should be thrilled the public are having such fun. This after all, is what I wanted.

Jane Venis, 15 October 2011