

WWW.ABSURDISTCLOSETDRAMA.COM

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Sam Brown is the faux artist name for the creator of and sole artist for www.explodingdog.com, a website that takes text submissions from visitors of the website. Sam Brown responds to these with a drawing. “The idea is that someone emails me a title and I turn it into a picture. A very simple form of interaction” (Interview with Baldwin). For the past six years www.explodingdog.com has used this system of submit/respond to create/inspire/assault or otherwise affect his drawings, the submitted texts, or both. His images are simple. They are of stick figures in a similarly sketched environment. Sam Brown is a live performance artist who uses improvisation and narrative to construct an environment in which the audience experiences a new form of absurdist theatre that is firmly rooted in closet drama.

Over time, the work of Philip Auslander and other theorists has challenged the conception of performance as temporally and spatially related. Film, television, radio, and the internet have increased the number of methods in which performers can present their craft to an audience. This has generated further confusion about what is live and what is performance. In his article “Sound and Vision: Record of the Past or Performance in the Present,” Auslander examines the phenomenon of experiencing an audio only musical recording as a live performance, but experiencing an audiovisual recording as a past performance. This phenomenon is due to the audiovisual recording containing visual elements such as the presence of an audience, certain clothing, and hair styles, any or all of which situate the performance “in a specific historical moment and situation” (“Sound” 7). There are three questions to be considered regarding the visual element’s effect on live performance. If it is the visual component which removes the experience of a performance as live, how can Sam Brown’s images be live performance? Does a live performance in an

electronic medium prohibit the presence of an audience? Can stick figure drawings be “in a specific historical moment and situation” (“Sound” 7)?

While Auslander argues that the visual elements are what prevent the live experience of a musical recording, the drawings of Sam Brown are visual in their entirety. His drawings contain no auditory component. Elsewhere, Auslander examines the performative nature of performance documentation. He asserts that performance photographs of performance art, whether the performance actually took place or not, create a live performance experience for viewers of those photographs (“Performativity”). In the case of Sam Brown, his images *are* the performance. The drawing is at once the documentation and the performance in a more profound way than a photograph of the performance is a performance.

Can Sam Brown’s stick figure images be “in a specific historical moment and situation?” Auslander speaks of prevailing styles of the past indicating when a performance is not live. He also cites the presence of an audience as problematic because they visually signify a particular era, rather than the present, in a performance recording. The images of Sam Brown do not clearly convey any historical moment or situation. The submitted titles are likewise devoid of concrete signifiers (with the possible exceptions of “legalize it right now we wanna blaze one,” and references to skate and surfboards). In comparison with the vast majority of his titles (“love her but she is six hundred miles away,” “I might have bad luck,” “I promise i will go to sleep now,” “but then again, it might have been a dream,” “maybe we could get together,” “I can't make you do anything,” “guess its not all about you, huh,” “what did you learn,” “I am wasting my life,” “you guys make me happy,” “i need direction,” “you are there,” “I stop lying NOW,”

“good luck, i hope it helps,” “I think its worth it,” “i was dead at the time,” “i’m not that hungry,” “will i be alone forever?,” “this place is forever,” “don't be picky,” “I am really not doing any thing,”) we see a preference for submissions that are vague at best and dictate no known era in and of themselves other than the present. His characters are stick figures whose images are far from reality, as are the locations. Similarly, there is no physical audience depicted in the drawings. In fact, one of the specific reasons an audio recording is experienced as live for Auslander is its “isolation of the listener, including cases in which groups of people (families, friends) listen to the same material at the same time...” (“Sound” 5). This “. . . social yet individualized listening” (5) is important to the experience of the audio recording as live. While the internet is certainly a communal space, it is at the same time solitary. To amend the above statement, the internet is “. . . social yet individualized listening [and viewing]” (5). In this way, Sam Brown can be viewed as a live performance artist. His artwork is both the performance and the performance documentation which is experienced as live to his socially solitary audience through the internet.

However, each day’s new images are headlined by a date of publication on the website. Doesn’t this clearly represent these images as being a product of the past and not of the present? One might note the inclusion of a copyright date on any type of music one could listen to as an answer to this question. The more compelling answer, however, is in www.explodingdog.com’s constant movement towards the present. The public, who live in and experience the world, submit texts to Brown in the present. “Sometimes people e-mail me and say exactly what they want to be drawn: Like, ‘I want a guy with a blue shirt standing in this corner, give me this.’ They never get their stuff done” (Interview

with Fitzgerald). Brown takes these public submissions of statements (not requests), and through his current state of being in relation to the world around him, filters those text submissions through his understanding of the present. “Monsters, super heroes and talking animals only seem childish when viewed from one dimension. Throughout my day most people I deal with are robots, talking fish and monsters” (Interview with Baldwin). These submissions come out as images, and reflect our lives in the present. The image is intrinsically related to the present, and the viewer’s experience of the images is in the present despite the presence of a date as a heading.

Brown also employs improvisation, which is apparent in his use of submitted texts to be in dialogue with his drawings. The dialogue takes place by structural design of the website. The audience must read the title of the drawing before seeing the image itself. There are two relevant theories to apply here. The first is Erving Goffman’s frame analysis, which presents the idea of a primary context being applied to most human interactions. The second is a phenomenon articulated by Roland Barthes, which noted that a caption attached to a photograph limits the understanding of the photograph itself. In other words, if the photo were to stand alone the viewer could have several perceptions of the photograph, but when accompanied by a caption the image is forced into a category, a frame, and a limited way of understanding (Auslander, “Sound” 4). The very nature of Sam Brown’s website predisposes the visitor to form a certain context for the image by forcing the caption (the title) to precede the photograph (image) that will be presented. “I like to think of this as more than a title and a picture. But I like to think about it as a title, the picture, and the space between them so they make more of a story. Does that make sense? The story happens in your head” (Brown: “Comic Art”). The very

structure of the website increases the performativity of the images in relation to, and in dialogue with, the textual title which it accompanies.

If Sam Brown is an improvisational, live performance artist, one might still ask where the story is. His website seems to be a collection of terrible drawings based on innocuous phrases submitted by imbecile website visitors. The answer is complicated because of the changing definition of narration.

In her book *Avatars of Story*, Marie-Laure Ryan examines the history of narrative theory and lays out a checklist for what constitutes a narrative: A) “Narrative must be about a world populated by individualized existents”; B) “The world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations”; C) “The transformation must be caused by non-habitual physical events”; D) “Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world”; E) “Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, motivated by identifiable goals and plans”; F) “The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure”; G) “The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the story world”; and H) “The story must communicate something meaningful to the recipient” (Ryan 8).

The characters that permeate Sam Brown’s world at www.explodingdog.com are (A) individuals (B) who live in an ever changing world (C) caused by the actions of other individuals (E) who act purposefully (D) and cause other individual characters to react emotionally to the changing state of the world at present which often manifests new events causing further reaction (G) and these occurrences are factual within that world. Requirement F is being challenged within the context of digital media and requirement H

is still debatable as an issue of importance (Ryan 8). Sam Brown, however, is communicating a very specific and meaningful message to his audience.

Sam Brown's artwork functions on two separate levels. The first function is the relationship between text and image. A user visits his website, reads the text, and then clicks on the text (a hyperlink) which directs the user to another webpage where an image appears that is in some way related to, or in dialogue with, the clicked text. The text is the title of the image and is always associated with the same image. This singular artwork is but one of many artworks on the website. The entire collection of drawings and texts on the website is the second function, one which clarifies the depicted world and its characters. There are now six years of images on Brown's website. Over time, these images created recurring characters, both in their structural form (something akin to different races) and also in signifying props (such as capes, crowns, remote controls, and rockets) which help to distinguish individual characters and groups of characters within his drawings. They live in a world of chaos caused by each other. In the beginning, the drawings lacked relationship beyond that demonstrated between the single text and the image. However, just one month after the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the United States, Sam Brown used the caption "oh, fuck it" and posted the image below.

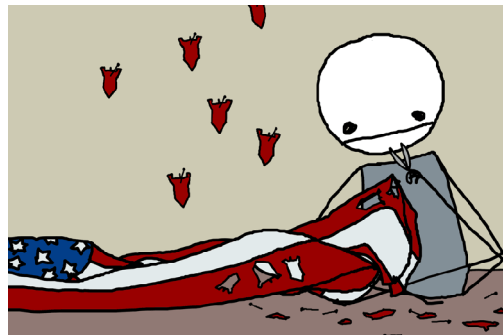


Fig. 1. Brown, Sam. "oh, fuck it." Cartoon. [Explodingdog.com](http://www.explodingdog.com) 21 Oct. 2001. 7 Nov. 2006. <<http://www.explodingdog.com/august6/fuckit.html>>.

Previously, Brown's violent drawings had been small scale in their idiotic destruction. He would have images of one individual about to press a button which would switch off dynamite that was strapped onto another individual's body with a playful title indicating sophomoric behavior by cartoon characters who could not be harmed. Similarly, before the "oh, fuck it" drawing appeared, Brown's image of a red rocket was only associated with having an origin from afar, such as playful aliens from outer space, having a destination somewhere else, or it was used as a vehicle to transport his characters to outer space. The "oh, fuck it" image marks a breaking point for www.explodingdog.com, and its artist, Sam Brown. The red rocket being cut from the fabric of the American flag and symbolically falling down upon it depicts an internal attack or civil war. The red rockets no longer have an ambiguous origin but stem from directly within the society they attack. It is also at this breaking point that the characters within the world become capable of dying and a clear social structure begins to emerge. The characters are now socially relevant. We can trace their path from sophomoric behavior in a world without death to their grasp for power in the world, and their torturous actions to hold onto that power in a mortal world. As the absolute power begins to corrupt the society at large we have an exodus of characters from the cities that are being attacked. Idiotic behavior with explosives and knives is no longer comedic because there are now consequences in this world.

Requirement F, "The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure," still merits discussion (Ryan 8). There is no particular order in which a visitor to www.explodingdog.com experiences Sam Brown's story. The images are categorized by

day of their appearance, within their year of appearance, on the website. However, the order of the story is completely segmented within each of those categories. There is no way to move through the site from top to bottom, most recent to least recent, or vice versa, and have viewed a narrative which occurred in order. However, Aristotelian ideas of a fixed sequence, beginning and ending, magnitude, and unity are being challenged due to technological changes, mainly the computer (Ryan xv). The primary interactive narrative structure being employed by Sam Brown is a Maze. “The user wanders across this topography. . . a special narrative with several endings” (106). These numerous texts and images are reordered and constructed by the viewer into the form of a narrative. Playwright David Mamet has also noted the reordering of events into a narrative. However, Mamet goes one step further by stating that human beings are incapable of randomness in the first place.

That’s the way our minds work. The human mind cannot create a progression of random numbers. Years ago computer programs were designed to do so; recently it has been discovered that they were flawed – the numbers were not truly random. Our intelligence was incapable of creating a random progression and therefore of programming a computer to do so. We do not perceive randomness. In the absence of phenomena made significant by being directed toward itself, the infant will order unrelated events into a dramatic whole (a whole comprehensible under the rules of drama). . . . (74)

The visitors to www.explodingdog.com who view numerous text/image combinations are subjected to a seemingly orderless chaos that their minds will force into a narrative

format. This intrinsic ordering of the random is the human beings “. . . special adaptive device” (Mamet 75). However, since Brown is one person choosing the texts and producing the images for www.explodingdog.com, he is incapable of pure randomness in the first place.

The narrative requirement H, the stipulation for a meaningful communication from the artwork to the audience, is heavily linked with the absurdist quality of the artwork. “The Theatre of the Absurd merely communicates one poet’s most intimate and personal intuition of the human situation, his own *sense of being*, his individual vision of the world” (Esslin 402-03). Martin Esslin goes on to note that, “The endeavor to communicate a total sense of being is an attempt to present a truer picture of reality itself, reality as apprehended by an individual” (404). This heightened truth is presented through Brown’s images as well as his method of delivery. Marie-Laure Ryan observes that, “History is always in the making, there is no such thing as natural boundaries, climaxes, denouements, and narrative closure” (49). Martin Esslin observes that the Theatre of the Absurd, “. . . is a theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in sequence, and therefore it uses a language based on patterns of concrete images rather than argument and discursive speech” (403). Since history is always in the making, Sam Brown’s ongoing project involving input from a real community in the present, and his response to those comments (mixed with *his* experience of the present) creates a set of images depicting situations (as opposed to sequential events) representing a truer “history in the making” (the present) than more formal narrative types as the artwork has no closure, boundaries, or apparent climaxes.

The images are the primary component on www.explodingdog.com. They often subvert, devalue, or poetically deepen and alter the meaning of the text they are attached to. Martin Esslin states that:

By putting the language of a scene in contrast to the action, by reducing it to meaningless patter, or by abandoning discursive logic for the poetic logic of association or assonance, the Theatre of the Absurd has opened up a new dimension of the stage. (406)

Sam Brown creates a meaningful patter by giving a frightening context to the nature of innocuous words spoken by real people to each other in passing in the everyday world.

This new dimension of the stage, this contrasting of traditional forms is what Martin Puchner discusses in his book Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama. “These diverse writers seem to agree on one thing: the theater’s reliance on human actors is its greatest liability, and a modernist theatre can arise only out of an attack on them” (6). This attack is never more clearly visible than within the complete absence of the actor in performance, the stick figure drawing.

Sam Brown has established a new theatre, one without the confines of spatial or temporal relation. The modern closet drama uses “... implicit and explicit stage directions [to] conjure a mimetic theatrical space only in order to disassemble it entirely” (26). So why use the stage at all? The internet, with its ability to concoct increasingly complicated narrative structures, has provided a perfect space for this new theatre. “It is this language of stage images that embody a truth beyond the power of mere discursive thought which the Theatre of the Absurd places at the center of its endeavour to build a new dramatic

convention, subordinating all other elements of stagecraft to it” including the stage itself (Esslin 418).

It is clear from the titles of the drawings on his website that Sam Brown has not simply chosen to devalue language in order to increase the presence of his images. Like many authors of the Theatre of the Absurd, Sam Brown is using language in a very specific way. Language, removed from context, is meaningless. Brown’s titles are often sentence fragments, without context, and without complete thought. When reading through his titles the impression is one of absurdity. However, Brown’s images in relation to the titles are able to give meaning otherwise lost in a sea of contextless sentence fragments.

In his chapter on Gertrude Stein, Puchner says the following about her play: “*What Happened, A Play* does not ‘tell’ what happened (diegesis) but instead aspires to represent ‘the essence of what happened’ in a mimetic manner: ‘A play was to express. . . without telling what happened’ (106). Sam Brown has regarded his work similarly. “When you simplify, you don’t get caught up in details, which take away from an overall impression. There’s a certain universality in the simple” (Brown: “Court Artist”). This simplification aspires towards a universal meaning. The expression of truth is more important than the detailed facts.

Similarly, the closet dramatists Puchner discusses in his book were revolting against the very community they wished to improve: theatre. In the spirit of the closet dramatists, Sam Brown is leading his own revolt. “I was fed up with art school. Everything was so precious, and it was such junk” (Brown: “Comic Art”). While the closet dramatists Puchner examines (Gertrude Stein, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Samuel Beckett to

name a few) tried to use language to subvert the stage Sam Brown has already usurped the stage for the internet. Brown takes diminished language and gives it meaning through the new contexts found in his images. The images are the real story, and meaning is given to the titles (thus adding meaning to the story) by those images.

By removing himself from the stage, and thus human actors, Sam Brown has truly created a space where the audience is in control of the flow of information, the order in which they receive that information, and he has dethroned language in favor of the image, as many absurdist dramatists have attempted to do.

Puchner argues, and rightfully so, that anti-theatricality in the shape of closet drama did not, in the end, compete against the theatre. Instead, it improved and altered it to allow the absurdist dramatists to experiment with new forms which benefited the theatre as a whole. From closet drama, Puchner argues that we received the great benefit of authors like Samuel Beckett, the inclusion of stage directions, and absurdist theatre.

It is important to note that Sam Brown is not alone in his use of submission based artwork creation over the internet. There are several sites that have modified his approach. One website requests that visitors submit pictures and the artist supplies the text. Another website responds to text with music instead of image. "Kings used to be the ones who commissioned good art. Now, any average Joe with an Internet connection can inspire elegant, quality work" (Brown: "Court Artist").

It is my hope that a reevaluation of theatre will again take place in light of www.explodingdog.com, and that the theatre will benefit from the new ideas presented by a silent drama of momentary images created through a communal effort and displayed over the internet. Your participation in this new theatre is now formally requested.

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