

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Grin & Bear It

cruel humour in art & life

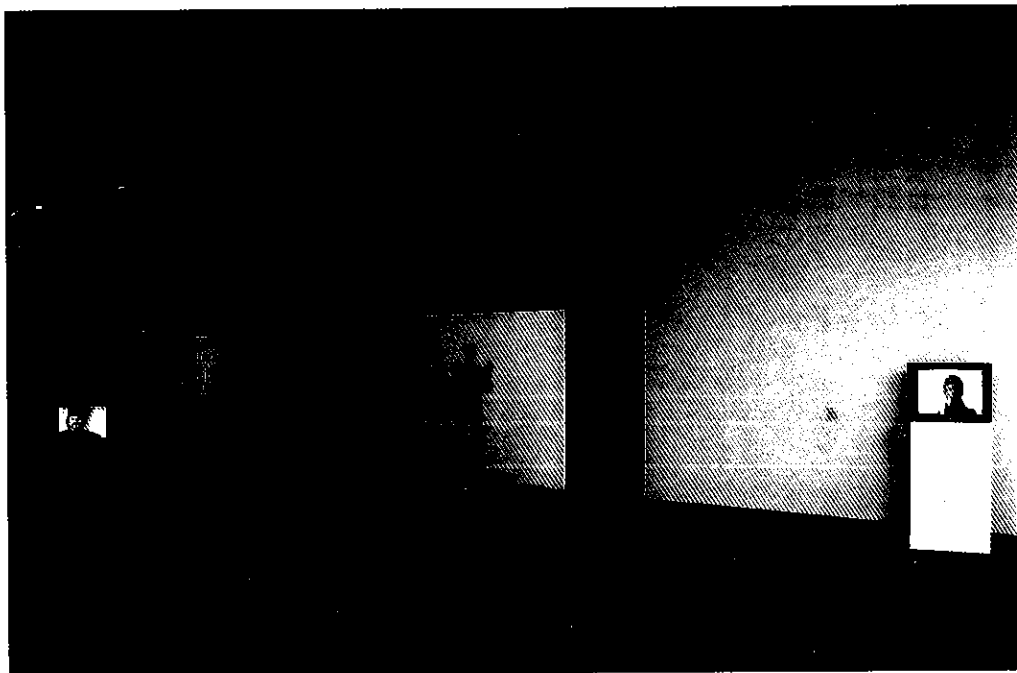
curated by Claire Feeley & Matt Packer

20 March - 5 July 2009

Lewis Glucksman Gallery
University College Cork

After a celebrated career as a painter and caricaturist, **William Hogarth** found himself on the receiving end of malicious public attacks that, according to the artist: 'could not but hurt a feeling mind'. Melancholy and self-doubt dominated the latter years of his life as well as his final works which are exhibited in Gallery 2. *Time Smoking a Picture* shows the figure of Time darkening a painting, a common practice among art dealers of the day to make an image appear older and thus increase its value. The cruelty with which Time cuts through the canvas and the indifference with which he smokes his pipe suggests the valuelessness of attaching financial cost to art. In this work, **Hogarth** approaches the foibles of his own profession with a criticality and venom he had previously reserved for his political satires. Published six months before his death, *Bathos* was **Hogarth's** final work. In it, everything appears at the point of dissolution; the sun is going out, the church is in ruins and the artist's easel lies broken. The word 'bathos' describes the abrupt deflation of the profound and important into the trivial and absurd.

Gallery 2, installation view: (l-r) Common Culture, Stella Capes, Catherine Harty



The cruel camera

All high culture, according to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, comes from the spiritualisation of cruelty insofar as art encourages dispassionate observation. In the work of **Stella Capes**, **Common Culture**, **Henry Coombes** and **Stephen Sutcliffe**, the camera itself becomes a cruel device - capable of exposing personal vulnerabilities for others to witness.

In **Stella Capes'** video work *The Great Darkness*, we see a man (a clown in civilian clothing) perform a dull routine of tricks in an empty room, performing to no-one except the camera. In the 30 minute duration of the video, the camera exasperates the performer's ability to conjure new tricks. The title of the work refers to a script 'The Entertainer' by the playwright John Osborne, where 'the great darkness' describes the performer's relation to the audience; suggesting the audience to occupy an unknowable and intimidating space.

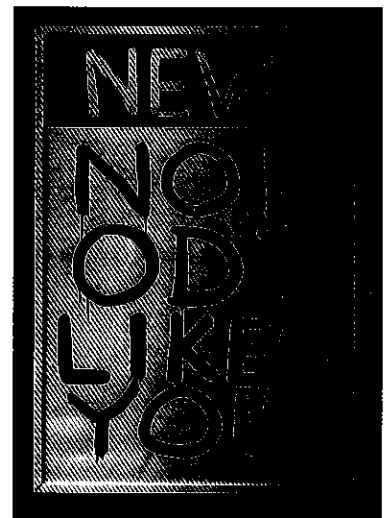
In **Common Culture's** *Routine*, comedians are filmed simultaneously competing against one another. Their acts are determined by prompts given to them by the artists on topics such as the Chinese, the North, erection loss and crappy beards. While everyday observations and shared social experiences make up the vocabulary of stand-up comedy, it is often life's more desperate and frustrating moments that take centre stage. In this way, 'stand-up' expresses a 'situated' articulation of world wide issues beyond the comedian's control.

For **Henry Coombes**, the video camera is a way of situating himself in relation to the world beyond the lens. The video-sketches he presents are not necessarily the result of foresight or planning and feature vignettes of elderly ladies, nite clubs, as well as several of the artist cocooned in his bed-clothes. Each scene is accompanied by an intense narrative provided by the artist that is alternately comic and aggressive. Focusing on people and objects that can't reciprocate or answer back, what emerges is a sense of the camera's cruelty of 'capturing', but also its implicated failure to achieve social connection to those things chosen as subjects.

Stephen Sutcliffe's *Come To The Edge* comprises 'found' video and audio footage that the artist has seamed together to create a haunting montage that speaks clearly of the proximity between humour and cruelty. The footage shows a good-humoured scene in a school common-room, suddenly transformed into something altogether more sinister as the group of schoolboys enacts a ritual humiliation upon a seemingly older, mustachioed boy. The audio track features the poet Christopher Logue speaking in an interview, who then goes on to recite his poem 'Come to The Edge'; a poem that refers to liberty through guided risk-taking.

The sociality of humour

Throughout the exhibition, the ethics of humour are expressed not so much in the artworks but in the audience's relationship to them. The fact that humour resists explanation perhaps attests to this



Detail: David Shrigley, News: Nobody Likes You