



Finger nail stuck
onto the tip of
my nose with tape.

Believe It or Not

The Californian LeRoy Ripley, an illustrator and aspiring professional baseballer, began a regular newspaper cartoon of unusual sporting feats titled *Champs & Chumps* in 1918. By 1930, he was travelling the world on the wallet of one William Randolph Hearst, collecting unlikely and strange bits of what he called 'factoids' for the cartoon strip that was by then widely known as *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, with the claim that he could "prove every statement" he made. Ripley passed away in May 1949, but the title had become an institution in itself, with popular print, radio, and a newly started TV series that continues to this day. The *Believe It or Not!* cartoon printed on December 28, 1949, featured Rotherham resident Edith Barlow, who at the age of twenty-one was reported to have reached a height of twenty-two inches. The cartoon, in a black and white photo-realistic style, portrays Barlow in a dress looking bemusedly at the reader, while holding a cigarette that is larger than any of her tiny fingers. A towering gentleman stretches a measuring tape vertically alongside her; the markings on the tape become clear only in the area level to her head, enabling us to see that she is, in fact, twenty-two inches tall. The caption underneath assures us that "the other fifteen members of her family are all normal size".

The Ripley's drawings present themselves as a documentation of unadorned reality, supplementing the claims of their images with dates, statistics and place names. Though the exoticism of European Enlightenment agendas lingers in *Believe It or Not!* strips, a similar fascinated documentation takes place in the work of David Sherry. In his drawings, we encounter people even smaller than Edith Barlow, some able to fit in a miniature city that occupies a chair seat. In one drawing, a small display case holds a tiny animal. The scientist standing beside the case tells us authoritatively, "this elephant was miniaturised in Africa and, as you can see, it is happy here in the Natural History Museum none the wiser". Sherry's drawings, however, do not subscribe to conventional methods of proving to the reader that he is presenting factual information. These look like sketches – outlines hurriedly done on pieces of notepaper, text scrawled in the available margins. Several drawings use numbers to support their statements: in *Two For One Explained* (all works 2007), he presents us with the logical statement that Jaffa Cakes cost only 2 pence to produce; as such, selling two for 99 pence only decreases profit by 1 pence. In *Rubbish*, beneath a colour photo of abandoned refrigerators stretching into the distance, he states, "30% of all Electrical waists, works. 95% of all rubbish is two days old. 53% think things aren't looking too good. 10% think there's no point." Here, after a quick check of your maths and spelling, you might begin to doubt the legitimacy of his claims.

But then you see *Monster Sign*, where a 'Stop' sign and its post have been transplanted as the elongated neck and hexagonal head of a stout black body. You might notice standing directly behind you the sculpture *High-pitched screaming ahead*, the monster from the drawing fleshed out in three dimensions, brought into being with the point of its head resting on the ground, the same hands held up in an attempt to instil fright with its humorously grotesque form – it would seem that the drawing is the starting point from which the monster came to life. In another drawing, *Bottle Growths*, is a small group of seven people with their heads all connected by thick



David Sherry performance, opening night



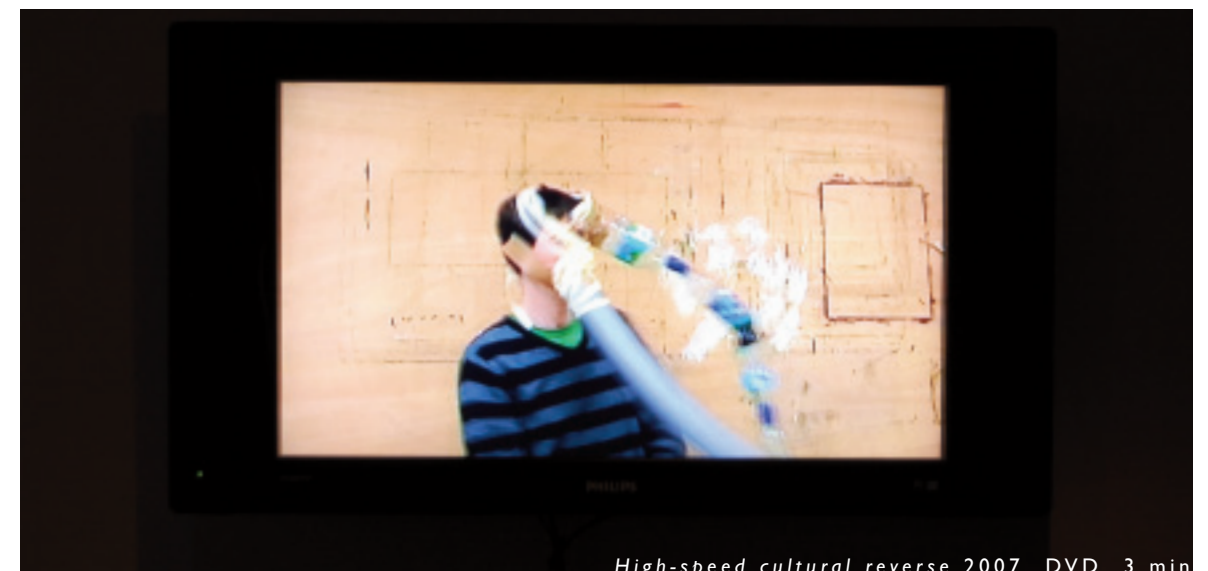
Installation view. Drawings and *High-pitched screaming ahead* 2007
Papier-mâché, black paint, wire mesh, polystyrene, variable dimensions

tubes, accompanied by the description, 'people who's heads have been stuck together by growths of plastic bottles'. In the video work *High-speed cultural reverse*, one section includes Sherry with an elephant-like appendage of plastic bottles attached to his face, seemingly testing its practical uses. The drawing *Regulations for irrational procedures* depicts a large disembodied nose with a thin, crescent shape protruding from it. The caption reads, 'Finger nail stuck onto the tip of my nose with Tape.' In a documented performance accompanying the exhibition, Sherry went about his normal social activities with just that. You come to the conclusion that his drawings are not just the offhand doodles of an overactive imagination. These drawings seem to be one step in Sherry's process of realisation, functioning more as a series of documents, plans and blueprints. This lends an unnerving weight to the drawing that contains an arrangement of yellow circles and squares that is both captioned and titled *A field of cheese*.

Sherry also presents us with texts describing two illogical actions he performed in public.

Great meals I never had and *No Rolo* both set out to complete a *Mission Impossible*-type operation, carefully planned to exact timing, but with decidedly redundant end results. *Great Meals...* details Sherry's plot to take a seat at a recently vacated restaurant table, declare his delight for the meal, and request the bill. After one perceptive waiter foils his first attempt, he succeeds in paying £10.50 for the fish: "I'd paid for nothing, and it felt good." In 'espionage confectionary thriller', *No Rolo*, the text this time supplemented with colour photographs of the supposed target, Sherry buys all the 'Rolo' sweets he can find in one store. Exiting the shop, he gives the signal to an accomplice who immediately goes in to try and buy Rolos. "As he disappeared into the shop a bead of sweat rolled off my nose. Had we gone over the sting in enough detail? A few moments later Simon returned. It had been an ordeal but he had triumphed and had a dramatic story to tell. He stood and looked into my face, a man utterly Rololess." These missions double-cross themselves, revealing in his nervousness and pleasure their ultimate purpose in the promotion of a humorously enquiring social perversity. Their first-person testimony, making sure to mention the exact cost of everything and the names of the venues he sets up as the false fall guy, are all we have to go on that these actually took place. The deliberate pointlessness of his textual performances court incredulity, but they are set in play with an acute awareness of that: once again, if you turn around, you find an enlarged photo of the infamous eighteen packets of Rolos purchased from the shop.

Instead of earning him an ASBO, what takes place in Sherry's work is practically a reversal of roles in the hierarchy of the staunch relationship between reality and imagination. While his drawings and texts start to function as documents in themselves, his corresponding actions and performances retain a temporary, provisional quality as if sketches from an alternative reality. Their sincere intrusions and uninhibited probing recall the work of Andy Kaufman, where there was no discernible difference between his role and actions as a comedian and his everyday life, granting an unsettling aura that may give rise to the question, 'Is this guy for real?', but reels back even further to ask why it might be disturbing in the first place.



Levitational Masters.

David	Prolonged extraction.
Carsten	Reified jeans and shoes.
Zoë	Spontaneity and atmospheric pressure.
Eggy	Transduction and Prog-rock.
Juergen	In therapy.
Elke	Earthquakes and church towers.
Kevin	Not everyone can comprehend it.

All of the mediums of Sherry's work are granted this same authority. The balance of traditional modes of documentation and verification of 'fact' with seemingly whimsical creative acts opens the performative site of his practice, an encompassing arena of belief. When one drawing simply shows a copy of a printed receipt for £28.83 spent on cheese from a Glasgow supermarket, you don't doubt the veracity of the title, *All the Cheddar in Somerfield*. A wavering line drawing captioned 'fryed egg carefully draped' shows a high-heeled shoe, the egg hanging limp off the back, and you feel certain that this is more a captured still-life from the Sherry household than a passing fanciful dabble with a pen. Listening to the earnest speakers in the sound work *Levitational Masters* give accounts of their personal experiences and practice of self-levitation – including the artist himself – you enter into a realm where you consider this distinctly possible. Eight speakers with 'levitation issues' candidly and conversationally discuss everything from their first time to the effects of hangovers and atmospheric pressure on their floating, as if it were a perfectly ordinary aspect of their lives.

Imbuing thought with its own skewed practicality and facts with their own shaky improbability, David Sherry's world is one that buzzes with factoids armed with faery wings. The offhand absurdity of his work is an honest and open-ended questioning into the reality and realisation of our imaginations, claiming that substance and impulse are never mutually exclusive. And why shouldn't we believe him? Just as Kaufman once ardently insisted, straight-faced, "I never told a joke in my life," Sherry avers in *Great Meals...*, "I'm a confident and honest person."

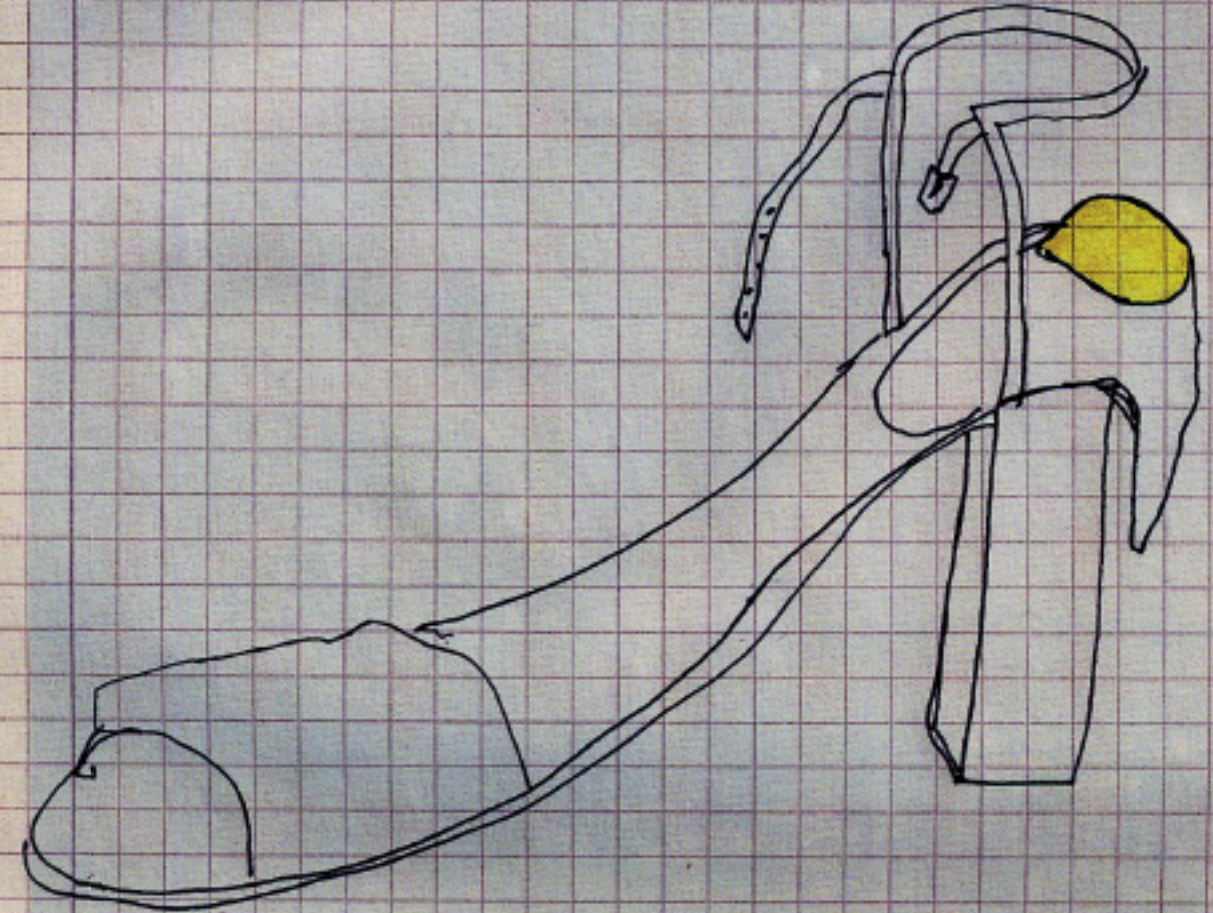


On the 11th of July 2006 I went shopping at the multipurpose store in the centre of Bamberg called 'Honer'. I wanted to buy every packet of Rolo in 'Honer'. I collected all the packets of Rolo from their display. The sweets filled both my hands.

As I was being served the cashier looked at what I had and quickly scanned one packet, then counted out the other eighteen. The total bill for the Rolos was €10.62. The cashier offered me a small bag and helped me fill it. On the way out I felt like an actor in an espionage confectionary thriller.

I had asked Simon to help me with 'No Rolo'. His part was to go into the store immediately after I had made my purchase, and ask earnestly for a packet of Rolo. Simon was waiting outside. I could see he was focused on buying Rolos from 'Honer'. He looked at me for the signal and I gave him a wink. He went into the store knowing full well that the Rolo section was completely empty. As he disappeared into the shop a bead of sweat rolled off my nose. Had we gone over the sting in enough detail?

After a few moments Simon returned. It had been an ordeal but he had triumphed and had a dramatic story to tell. He stood and looked into my face, a man utterly Rololess.



Fried egg carefully draped.