

X—TRA

Feature Kim Schoen

Cracking Walnuts: Nonsense and Repetition in Video Art



Brian Bress, *Over and Over*, 2006. Video still. Single-channel SD video, color, sound, 7:10 min. Courtesy of the artist and Philip Martin Gallery.

Nonsense is a shape-shifter. It harnesses many methods and operations that are always dependent on context. Here I will be looking at how nonsense operates in relation to repetition. Repetition can empty meaning out by draining or exhaustion in a Sisyphean sense, carrying forth a core nothingness or pointlessness over and again. Repetition can also reveal a base nonsense: that is, the sense of randomness in the act of assigning meaning itself. Repetition can also enrich and fill: each layering adding import, affect, and intensity to meaning, as in poetry, comedy, and lament.

I will engage the above three movements—away from, beside, and toward meaning—through close readings of contemporary video art, specifically, the works of artists Pilvi Takala, Bani Abidi, Marta Górnicka, Brian Bress, and Mika Rottenberg, while traversing earlier conceptual video works along the way. Discussions on nonsense in the visual arts often default to art historical discussions on Dada, but many artists are currently engaging this vital form of meaning disruption today. In relation to these contemporary works, I will therefore ask: What effects does nonsense have? What kind of sense comes about through non-meaning?

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Bruce Nauman's *Double No* (1987) features Nauman as a stamping, jumping joker both right side up and upside down on two stacked video monitors. He repeatedly yells the word no, reinforcing the no-ness of no to aggravated effect. A 1919 study from the psychology department at Cornell University detailed exactly how meaning drops away after a word is repeated over and again. [1] Participants in the study were subjected to repetitions at different intervals and rates of expression; the more they heard a word, for example, box, heart, storm, or fire, the less familiar the word felt, until it had no familiarity at all. In contrast, Nauman's affective performance drains the meaning of the word no in a different way. Instead of dry reiteration, it is the animation and continuation of no that perpetually contradicts its repeated refusals. Much like in the works of Samuel Beckett, no goes on. In this, Nauman performs a paradox, acting out nonsense.

Repetition produces nonsense by opening the door to the infinite. The more something repeats, the more we can imagine it repeating forever, and what is repeated can lose impact and, eventually, any meaning at all, as it infinitely exceeds the finite dimension where meanings are stabilized. Because we are finite creatures, the infinite can make no sense for us, so we make it a concept by giving it a name, as we do with nonsense—naming what we cannot grasp. In this way, art functions to make the nonsense of the infinite graspable. Sturtevant's video *Finite Infinite* (2010) confronts us with "infinite" repetition in blunt force. The video is only nine seconds in length, but it plays in perpetual loop, projected in an extreme horizontal format 100 feet in width. On screen, a dog races across a grassy field—so fast you feel you can never catch it, even though you're watching it over and over. Its quick pace is reinforced with a thudding metallic soundtrack. The fact that the dog's free and bounding stride sharply cuts and then restarts keeps us in the race. It is the shocking brevity of the clip that encourages new scrutiny in every repetition, as we scan it for difference, feeling that we may have missed something. In seeking variation, we virtually create variation. What initially strikes as machinic and repetitive then opens up into something more wavering, for example, the camera's zoom as it tries to keep up with the running dog, who stretches powerfully across the projection, time and time again. In this video, the idea of the infinite—where all meanings become equivalent and therefore eventually meaningless in their repetition—becomes physically inhabitable. We are given a phenomenal place to think. Watching it, we are able to grasp a sense of the infinite—in its infinite capability for producing variation rather than its devolution into meaninglessness.

In *Real Snow White* (2009), Pilvi Takala sweeps up to the gates of Disneyland Paris, dressed innocently as Snow White. Children gravitate to her, clustering around her golden skirt. Parents take photographs of their children posing with her. She is besieged with requests for autographs, and she graciously signs book after book. This pleasant frisson of activity is interrupted by a plainclothes French Disney guard, who informs her in broken English that she cannot enter the park dressed as Snow White, explaining, "It's about not to mix with the real . . . the real character working here." Takala's open expression while she listens reveals a curious pathos toward the employees, their walkie-talkies toggled by corkscrew cords to their belts, all of them tasked with the dirty work of protecting a brand image. Takala's calm questioning reveals the humor in the serious absorption these employees take in their official roles, as they attempt to guide her toward the public restrooms to change outfits. "I thought the real Snow White is a drawing," Takala says calmly, as they ask her not to enter the park. The more the functionaries try to explain to her why it is not possible to dress as the real Snow White, the more absurd the situation becomes. Repetition again moves in two directions: repeated efforts to reinforce sense lead to repeated effects that empty it. Here, it is not repetitive exhaustion but the repetitive dullness of bureaucratic corporate-speak that does it: "Adults have not the right to be disguised."

The initial nonsense that there is a real Snow White comes about through the assertion that an imagined, fictional character is "real." The assertion happens, we know, not because of a vigorous belief in the imaginary, but because of a vigorous defense of copyright law. But the word real is misplaced; we should

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rather say official or originary, subject to patent. It is the repetition of the assertion of the term real that forms the nonsense, and much of the comedy in Takala's video comes from this substitution. Real Snow White allows us to witness the creation of a quotidian reality, a lifeworld regulated by the coordinates of capital and law.

Takala enacts both excess and lack. On the one hand, she is "not" Snow White; those around her repeatedly assert that "the real" is elsewhere—and so she becomes an evacuated identity, an empty placeholder. On the other hand, she presents an excessive case of identity, a simulacrum, and in this repetition suggests that anybody could be Snow White. Hence identity becomes multiple and simulated. This copresence of both conditions, of extreme lack and supra-abundance, cannot be resolved in an either-or formulation; rather she must be both, at once. She is a paradox.

As we see in the work of Nauman, Sturtevant, and Takala: when repetition—which can appear to drain meaning—is employed intentionally in art, it produces paradox as a residual effect. It is paradox that opens the door to nonsense.

Let us now look at our second condition. In between the movements of draining and compounding meaning lies the stasis between them—the drive to construct meaning in the first place. This condition has been confronted most viscerally in the existential philosophy of the absurd, where meaning must be created from nothing, *ex nihilo*. The absurd confronts us with total lack, a universe without signification, frustrating the human desire for meaning. But if the absurd situates existence as having an originary lack of meaning and poses the problem of how to fill nothing anew, nonsense comes to us with a different principle. Nonsense presupposes meaning and uses it as its raw material. It makes short shrift of "nothing." It makes fun of emptiness because events precede us and exist in multiplicitous fullness even without our interpretations and assignations of significance. [2] In the nonsense operation, the originary nothingness of the absurd becomes ridiculous. All nonsense plays with, destroys, enhances, or mutates meanings and in doing so presents us with the problem of excess. [3] This is where repetition enters the picture. So, in this second section, I will look at artists who play with our repeated failures to make sense, revealing the nonsense inherent in the arbitrariness of what we decide to assign as meaning at all.

John Baldessari's *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* (1972) has an answer to the stark and laughable nothingness of the absurd: to laugh back. A small houseplant sits on a table, as Baldessari verbally coaches it, encouraging language acquisition through repetition. After hearing him repeat the letter A a few times, I begin to laugh. As the repetition increases, I laugh more. If the solution to the existential problem is that there is no inherent meaning, then the answer is that one must create meaning. Since the primordial signifier is language, Baldessari starts at the beginning, with the alphabet. The plant endures his efforts.

In 1920s New York, a form of humor emerged called the Cuckoo School. A layman's form of Dada, it was a synthesis of vaudeville and a newly formed cosmopolitanism, with a penchant for "shaggy" jokes. It produced song titles such as "Yes, We Have No Bananas" and "When It's Night-Time in Italy, It's Wednesday Over Here." [4] I would argue that Baldessari's early videos, such as *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, *I Am Making Art* (1971), and *Baldessari Sings LeWitt* (1972), are a conceptual inheritance of the Cuckoo School and follow a major American tendency to screw things up in good spirits. In the latter video, Baldessari brings Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1968) to a "larger public" through song. Quietly warbling "conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists; they lead to conclusions that logic cannot reach" and "rational judgements repeat rational judgements" in a loose "Tea for Two" melody, Baldessari adds paradox to paradox: LeWitt's original paradoxical meanings get simultaneously reified, through the close listening that repetition allows for, and drained, via the lightness of Baldessari's intent. Playing with deficiencies in signification and the arbitrariness of meaning converts the stark lack

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of the absurd into a melody followed without care. In the lightness of his touch, he changes the sense of the absurd.

If human thought and activity must contend with the meaninglessness of the world, this surely means that one must be able to exist beside nothing, apart from meaning, starting from nothing. Artists often dwell in this state, in confrontation with the ridiculousness of beginnings. [5] To recognize the absurd quest for meaning, with its concomitant failures, is to hold out a tuning fork, waiting for its vibrations.

Bani Abidi's *An Unforeseen Situation* (2015) opens on rows and rows of empty white plastic chairs placed shoulder to shoulder and repeating across the green grass of a large outdoor stadium. In the video, the few people tasked with the effort to remove the empty chairs repetitively stack them into vertical towers that visually contrast with the previous linear arrangement. We learn through subtitling that a mass event to break a world record at Punjab University in Lahore—150,000 people singing the national anthem—has been cancelled.

Abidi then cuts from empty chairs to empty boxes, lined in green satin and labeled “With Compliments—Ministry of Youth Affairs.” One box after the next gets passed through hands that nest marble spheres inside. Each sphere is revealed to be a clock in the shape of an apple, except when, for reasons not explained, a river rock of approximately the same size is occasionally inserted. The clocks were a gift distribution scheme intended to motivate the 150,000 participants to show up, but it was apparently not enough to attract participation from all of them, leading, we presume, to the event's cancellation. We watch as time is returned: a time that never happened, recalling the chairs that were never sat in.

We then cut to another repetition: a hand placing walnuts, one by one, evenly spaced across a wooden table. A subtitle tells us that, among the thousands who were supposed to attend the event, “One disappointed youth decided to start training for his own world record.” The next scene opens on this youth in an apartment doing pushups and arm presses underneath a poster of Pakistani wrestlers. Interrupting this routine, we see him in a corner lightly tapping his forehead against a wall—a repetitive action that makes us feel concerned not so much for its physical effects but for his mental state. Banging one's head against a wall is a common metaphor for futility, and as a literal act it reads as psychological disturbance. However, as the video progresses, we understand that it is not an interruption of his workout routine but a continuation of it. The psychological perturbation is, in fact, preparation. He vigorously rubs the skin on his forehead as if to ward off the coming pain.

This training is for an unusual act: cracking walnuts with one's forehead. Abidi's video cuts to our youth watching a televised event in which a champion-to-be masters his craft in an individuated effort to put his nation on the map. This effort to crack walnuts and world records happens in an indoor stadium in front of an enthusiastic crowd, a camera crew, and a long table upon which the walnuts are placed. Each walnut is smashed in quick succession down the length of the table. There's no time to think whether this is a good idea or not. We are told that the existing record is held by a fellow Pakistani, Mohammed Rashid, who smashed 150 walnuts with his head in under one minute. We eventually learn that this new world record is contested, as the referees performing the oversight were accused of being “bogus representatives.”

Many things are going on in *An Unforeseen Situation*: the belief in linear progress that breaking records spatially marks; national pride, which only comes by gift or bribe; and the desire to individuate ourselves by using repetition as a path to exceptionalism. In this video, even the absurd cannot hold; it is undone by the surplus of nonsense. Abidi's added fictions reverberate back through the event itself. The final fabricated echo is the last subtitle, which states the Lahore High Court was beginning an investigation into the unauthorized use of funds to purchase 150,000 plastic chairs.

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Cracking walnuts, both with or without the satisfaction of getting to occupy an imagined “end to history” via a shattered world record, is indeed a Sisyphean effort. Abidi is attuned to these absurdities and impotencies in our efforts to create meaning, especially those set against bureaucratic efforts on larger scales. Cracking walnuts with one’s head is already confusing. Abidi’s poetic inventions and interventions into these attempts complicate and confuse these realities further. Her work puts us face to face—or brain to brain—with the irrational.

Both Baldessari’s and Abidi’s videos use nonsense to change the sense of the absurd. Rather than replacing absurd meaninglessness with individual meaning that could hold true for all (an impossibility), they use repetition to aggregate and multiply the nonsense in our absurd quests. Abidi uses the visual repetition of objects and the repetition of gesture in her editing to heighten the obsessiveness in our attempts to mean something; Baldessari uses repetition to play with the nonsense that deficiencies in signification create. Both amplify the humor in trying to “mean,” and both tell of the “not nothing” in the absurd.

Our psychological need to emphasize can drive repetition as form. Jokes often need repetition in their structure; lament needs repetition in order to constantly replenish loss. In this need-driven excess, something initially nonsensical may increase in sense the more it is repeated. This brings us to our third condition: repetition that enriches or fills.

Artist and theater director Marta Górnicka mixes multiple musical forms that involve the voice, including the lament. Her video *MAGNIFICAT* (2013), based on a performance of the same title, desecralizes the biblical Cantic of Mary using Górnicka’s additions and mutations, including Bible verses, culinary recipes, texts by Elfriede Jelinek and Adam Mickiewicz, and excerpts from Euripides’s *Bacchae* (405 BC). The work recalls an Ancient Greek chorus but without the rest of the play. The subject is Poland’s obsession with the Holy Virgin Mary. Poland, Górnicka asserts through the piece’s lyrics, is a country “so Catholic that even the atheists here are mostly Catholics.” The chorus is made up of twenty-five women of all ages, clad in comfortable T-shirts and sweatpants in varying hues of blue, perhaps a reference to Mary’s blue cloak, a color symbolizing the Virgin’s purity.

In many oral traditions, both early and modern, the lament has been a genre performed by women. Olivia Dunham argues that, in these songs of mourning, women were “empowered through their pain to address publicly issues of social importance; the most successful performers skillfully [wove] sometimes abrasive, often persuasive, and always highly charged judicial and political language into their lament.” [6] A lament is a passionate expression of grief and anger, and it often takes shape through repetition. In *MAGNIFICAT*, Górnicka uses repetition to a different end: language is broken down by it and then built up again. She fractures sentences into words, syllables, and finally sounds, disarticulating meaning into nonsense. The lyric “for fear of insulting religious feelings the chorus will keep silent” is reduced to a repetition of the single word silent. The chorus is not silent. They sing it. The word then reduces down further into sharp intakes of breath and their exhalations, performed with repetitive vehemence. The breath behind the language is made visible.

Górnicka continues sharpening repetition into a weapon. At another point, the chorus spits out the word amen in thundering unity over and over again. Rather than expressing the word’s “solemn ratification” (so be it), the women reroute this assent toward something other than deference to the word, their deafening repetition lamenting the unvoiced collective experiences that are often buried under it.

A lament is also a complaint—a protestation of personal misfortune, misery, or injustice. “Blah blah blah blah!” this chorus chants in unison, the volume and increasing speed of their repetitions vivifying the inherent violence in the assumption that when women speak, it is nonsense. Their legs are locked and stiff, and they rock back and forth like wooden cradles about to tip as they chant. What is typically

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maternal and soothing about repetition— in rocking and lullabies (themselves often nonsensical, shaped only for sonority)—becomes aggressive, and in this, the empty word blah develops a fullness of meaning through irony and protest.

Almost any text—a liturgy, a grocery list—can be brought into this strange realm through unexpected modulations of the voice and collective vocalizations as erratic as they are forceful. However, this surefire affect is less interesting than the moments that escape it, a surplus to intention via repetition. For example, the repeating voice itself—with its own fullness and excessiveness—makes Górnicka’s ironic intentions of meaning secondary. Sounds made by mouths as intense and ferocious as Beckett’s *Not I* (1972) vibrate into a full-body complaint with electrifying power for viewers. Claire Colebrook asserts that power, viewed positively, should be considered “‘the power to . . .’ actualize certain events, rather than power over, where the self would be nothing other than its force of will.” [7] Religion asserts its power over women’s bodies via repetition—in the repetitions of ritual, liturgy, and the word. Górnicka also uses repetition, not as the power over but as the power to—using sound to shatter and reroute the circular flow of dogma. She uses repetition to break down language into nonsense, both destroying previous meanings and building up new ones.

Bouncing inside a plastic garbage can painted a bilious yellow and wearing nothing more than a matching welder’s mask and swim goggles, artist Brian Bress sings the following refrain throughout his seven-minute-and-ten-second video *Over and Over* (2006): “If you do the same thing over, over and over, people won’t be confused!” After a few repetitions of the full phrase, shorter pieces of it recur in concert. As this chorus builds, the video jumpcuts between shots of Bress chanting inside the can in the front and the back of the room, for no apparent reason. The room is papered with stock photo wallpaper of a bamboo forest.

Bress’s voice mutates throughout the video as he adopts varying cadences for his refrain: bird chirpy, Muppet voice, bass in a barbershop-quartet, diva-impersonator, vaudeville character (possibly Jimmy Durante?), and so on. Occasionally, the single word “Same!” punctuates the air in a high-pitched squeal. The rhythm of the video is infectious, but just as one gets used to the beat, Bress interrupts it with new rhythms, slower whispers, and growled words (“Bad!”); jazz-like improvisatory riffs and fugue-like contrapuntal formations intertwine with the original repetitions.

Being as physically expressive as one can be while stuffed in a trash bin, Bress builds his refrain in a delirious way, over and over again, the way children wear themselves out through the act of repeating a song or a phrase, the pleasure of repetition rubbing against the exhaustion of the voice, lazily mutating from one personage to the next. Mutation is discovered via repetition, the inventiveness of a single moment given rise to by the apparent repetition of the same. Bress’s video of “the same thing” is, in fact, a Deleuzian differentiator of difference in the asymmetries it asserts—inventive play that asserts the non-mechanistic drive of repetition. [8]

In another video, *Being Bamboo* (2006), we’re back in the bamboo thicket. Bress, now out of the trash can, plucks out an actual stick that leans against the shoddily papered wall. He now dons a silver-sequined bomber jacket, a silver life-preserver strapped to his ass, skeleton gloves, and a black face-covering that makes his head a void. Caressing the stick, he says: “You don’t always have to be bamboo. You don’t always have to be bamboo.” From here, Bress riffs on what this stick could be: “It could be a fighting stick . . . it could be . . . some kind of a fighting stick . . . it could be a peg leg . . . it could be a baseball bat . . . a baseball bat . . . it could be a giant pen.” In this video, his voice is elevated in pitch, as if he were a giant child. All possible “beingness” of bamboo is explored for the full length of the piece. More and more meaning is generated through his repetition of what could be. The bamboo forest gets denser and denser.

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Brian Bress, *Being Bamboo*, 2006. Video still. Single-channel SD video, color, sound, 3:37 min. Courtesy of the artist and Philip Martin Gallery.

As in *Over and Over*, the fluidity of repetition gives way to invention. Even though the uses for this stick are not nonsensical, in that they align with our commonsense world and its possibilities, Susan Stewart argues that any play with infinity is inclined to nonsense, where “purpose becomes a continual and pleasurable movement away from itself.” [9] Bress clearly relishes this, as he constantly relinquishes any lasting purpose or stability of meaning in the stick of bamboo. Meaning is fluid and being is fluid. The artist repeats; the pleasure in generative excess flows.

Artist Mika Rottenberg also works to generative excess. Any person or idea with sufficient influence over multiple surfaces and through multiple series can be said to generate an effect (the Kelvin effect, the Trump effect, etc.). [10] The Rottenberg effect is to out-produce capitalism. Myriad repetitive actions and the transformations they generate in her work—whether by extraction, destruction, condensation, secretion, or accretion—intensify a self-perpetuating process with no end. In *Cosmic Generator* (2017), a hand smashes lightbulbs made of colored glass into smaller and smaller bits. Glass is transformed sand, and Rottenberg further transforms it, crushing the shards until they become something else. In her work, something else is always being excessively produced, in a mechanical-biological hybrid where the factory and the body become one and the same.

In Rottenberg’s oeuvre, women use their bodies to perform repetitive tasks that transform matter. In *No Nose Knows* (2015), Bunny Glamazon sneezes out not only colorful sparkling dust but also plates of noodles. Moistened tissues are manufactured with the sweat of Heather Foster, the professional bodybuilder-cum-truck driver in *Tropical Breeze* (2004). And in *Mary’s Cherries* (2004), a woman’s brightly polished red nails are clipped and dropped through sawed holes in floors. During their fall, they

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transform into brined, dyed, and glistening maraschino cherries. Trees excrete sap, sweat drips blush. Rottenberg milks the excess out of things. She reenacts a main tenet of capitalism—resource extraction—with an intensity that produces new expression. New, irrational meanings secrete and accrete.

Capitalism constantly produces itself, using anything at the ready (or not) as a stock or fund to be transformed, and Rottenberg simply intensifies this by harnessing the most personal self-incorporation into the production process. That what is being produced seems nonsensical only reflects back on the avalanche of globally produced goods we currently consume without question. By extracting and repeating what is irrational about capitalism, she points us back to the nonsense in what we have accepted as normal.

Rottenberg brings forth the true nonsense in capitalism—products that are produced to solve problems that don't exist. Her strategies make this material, viscerally placing such ridiculous objects back in our laps. For example, when we encounter her “product” in *Mary Boone with Cube* (2010), a compressed block of rotting lettuce, used blush, and acrylic nails, we must work backwards to construct the meanings that might be inherent in it and then invent the problems that might have led to its creation. The nonsense operation at play here is to repeat a strategy that is already nonsensical but treated as rational. She incorporates the “rational” reality of capitalism into a fictive frame, making the frame part of the picture. In this operation, the boundaries of the “common sense” operations we all participate in (common sense, in that capitalism operates within us as normalized) have now expanded to include what Stewart describes as both the “ingredients for the world and instructions for its manufacture.” [11] We now must operate from within this enlarged frame, and negotiate the making of sense ourselves.

Working from inside capitalist logic also allows Rottenberg to burrow into its subterranean tunnels and physically phantasmagorize its supply chain networks. In *Cosmic Generator* (2017), the tunnels are covered in stalactites and stalagmites. In *Spaghetti Blockchain* (2019), they are hexagonal wooden tubes that glow under neon lighting. In Rottenberg's videos, a tunnel does not merely represent a metaphoric journey, it becomes a highly literalized physical conduit, as products traverse from one location to another. In *Cosmic Generator*, a man dressed as a giant taco crawls through with a corporate executive in a suit trailing behind him. Her looped videos eternally repeat these actions. The nonsense of the infinite always lies at the end of one of Rottenberg's tunnels.

The limitless production of consumer goods may embody a nonsense, but Rottenberg reshapes that nonsense back into her own sense. She extracts and grows what is vital out of the ever-churning, infinite flow of capital—new sense from the vitality of matter in ever-mutating difference. If capitalism has monetized production to repeat ad infinitum, which is arrogantly presented to us as the only sense there is, production can also be put to work for us in favor of a new sense, which in her work grows like an inventive, electric mold on top of the old, mixing into its surface and changing its chemistry.

In addition to this, through her repetitions of what is irrational about our constant need to produce and the pleasures we derive from it, *jouissance* is introduced. Jacques Lacan says that *jouissance* is “backhanded enjoyment” and that it “begins as a tickle and ends with [a] blaze of petrol.” [12] Excess pleasure secretes and accretes in Rottenberg's work—and marks upon its excesses the entrance of pain.

We have been looking at the relations between repetition and nonsense, how repetition creates or dissolves meaning itself, and how, from these creative reiterations, sense can emerge and flow. I've chosen to discuss video art in particular because it is a medium where repetition unfolds its special capacity to both intensify and drain.

In our first condition, paradox opens the door to nonsense, in that repetition can never entirely drain meaning when it comes to art, because the intentional act of draining is an act that always leaves its own

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traces. The work of Nauman, Sturtevant, and Takala all engage this paradox of draining and not draining at once. [13] Second, nonsense tells us that there is never nothing. Nonsense undoes the concept of a lack of meaning by assuming there is always meaning to begin with—even in the most absurd states. The works of Baldessari and Abidi use repetition to reveal the nonsense in the arbitrariness of meaning itself. Lastly, as we have seen in the work of Górnicka, Bress, and Rottenberg, what begins as nonsense may become generative of sense the more it is repeated.

Repetition, in all its movements, brings forth the vitality of nonsense—its contradictory propositions, laughable predicates, and confusion of existing orders. And nonsense, in the game of moving meaning around, in turn harnesses repetition as a strategy to do so. The constant motion of this ouroboros releases the complex concept of sense.

What do we mean by sense? Sense is not simply meaning, as meaning is specifically tied to propositions, while sense is not. For example, the same sense could apply to two propositions with different meanings. [14] The significance of sense is that it is independent of the propositions that express it. Sense is always an expression of multiple factors and remains related to those multiplicities; it is never univocal. One could describe it as a passionate investment in significance in a larger sphere or, perhaps, as an atmosphere. And in this atmosphere of sense, artists are strong weather—rerouting its flows by making artworks that continually select, intensify, and make complex the events we live through.

The relations between sense and nonsense are unique and mutually productive. [15] The excitement of nonsense is that it allows us to constantly produce sense anew. Personally, I find it hopeful that sense must be made. Gilles Deleuze tells us: “It is thus pleasing that there resounds today the news that sense is never a principle or an origin, but that it is produced. It is not something to discover, to restore or to re-employ; it is something to produce by new machinery.” [16]

Nonsense puts meaning in our hands. It can alter what we find meaningful, or urgent, or needless. Nonsense teaches dumb things with the utmost seriousness. Nonsense sings out rational things. It spreads cherry sweat. It cracks walnuts with one’s head.

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Footnotes

1. M. F. Bassett and C. J. Warne, “On the Lapse of Verbal Meaning with Repetition,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 30, no. 4 (October 1919). ↩

2. The discussion here is based on my analysis of Gilles Deleuze’s disagreement with Albert Camus and the differences between the absurd and nonsense, as Deleuze describes in his “Eleventh Series on Nonsense,” in *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 71. Deleuze takes issue with the fact that, in the philosophy of the absurd, “Nonsense is what is opposed to sense in a simple relation with it, so that the absurd is always defined by a deficiency of sense and a lack (there is not enough of it . . .). From the point of view of structure, on the contrary, there is always too much sense: an excess produced and over-produced by nonsense as a lack of itself.” In other words, he is arguing that the nonsense operation is inherently excessive. ↩

3. The problem of excess that nonsense presents us within Deleuzian philosophy is deepened by James Williams: “Deleuze determines events as excessive and as a donation with no prior negativity. The danger in the absurd is the emptiness it leaves us with and then how we might fill it anew; the risk in Deleuze’s higher empiricism is that it might donate too much for us to bear or select within.” James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze’s Logic of Sense: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 73. ↩

4. My discovery of the Cuckoo School is indebted to Rob King, whose chapter “The Cuckoo School: Humor and Metropolitan Culture in 1920s America,” in his book *Hokum!* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), tells tales about Lewis and Dody, an absurdist, postvaudevillian duo who performed “without any apparent interest in their own performance, adding stanza upon stanza in an apparent effort to show, as one reviewer put it, that ‘the limit in the number of extra verses to a song has not yet been reached, before abruptly ending, as flatly as when they started’” (22). “Hello, Hello, Hello! Fish don’t perspire” is just one tantalizing example of their lyrics. Donald Trump screaming, “You’ll have nobody guarding your potatoes!” could be a Lewis and Dody line, if we view his entire presidency as a riff on vaudeville. ↩

5. Albert Camus discusses this idea in relation to the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 11. ↩

6. Olivia Dunham, “Private Speech, Public Pain: The Power of Women’s Laments in Ancient Greek Poetry and Tragedy,” *CrisisCross* 1, no. 1 (2014): 1. ↩

7. Claire Colebrook, “Bourgeois Thermodynamics,” in *Deleuze and Politics*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 125. Colebrook is paraphrasing Paul Patton, “Foucault’s Subject of Power,” in *The Later Foucault: Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Jeremy Moss (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 64–77. ↩

8. For more on the concept *differentiator of difference*, see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). ↩

9. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 209. ↩

10. A larger discussion on surface effects and nonsense can be found in Deleuze, “Eleventh Series of Nonsense,” *The Logic of Sense*. ↩

11. Stewart, *Nonsense*, 112. Stewart describes multiple nonsense operations and how they play out in literature. This quote is from her discussion on how works that dissolve the borders between fictive inventions and reality increase our awareness of the “escape and capture” of meaning. ↩

12. The phrase “backhanded enjoyment” is from Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014). “Blaze of petrol” is from Lacan’s *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007).< ↩

13. Stewart, *Nonsense*, 62–63. Being both something and its opposite is “a paradox of inclusion and exclusion apparent in anything that both ‘is and is not.’” This discussion on “proper nots” is found in “Part II: Making Nonsense.” ↩

14. See Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 12–22. A proposition, in Deleuzian thought, is comprised of the circling of denotation, manifestation, and signification. In “The Third Series on the Proposition,” he argues that the same sense could apply to two propositions with different meanings, therefore delineating sense from meaning. ↩

15. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 68. Deleuze states their interdependence: “The logic of sense is necessarily determined to posit between sense and nonsense an original type of intrinsic relation, a mode of co-presence.” As James Williams puts it in his critical introduction and guide to Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense*, nonsense should not be understood as “the absence of sense but rather the presence of an important kind of sense that can only operate through nonsense” (Williams, *Gilles Deleuze’s Logic of Sense*, 68). ↩

16. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 72. ↩