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Humour at the Crab Museum: Funniness, Ethics and Political Activism

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Abstract

This article considers the importance of humour in the Crab Museum, Margate, UK. This unconventional cultural space describes itself as a small, independent science museum and a baffling tourist attraction. It uses joking to educate, engage debate on urgent environmental issues and entertain.

We use original research interviews with the museum's creators, analysis of comedy within the museum's exhibits and activities, and ethical theorising to explore the functions that humour serves within the museum. We begin by drawing out key functions of humour identified in interviews with the museum's directors: 1) humour as a means to increase engagement with the museum, especially by building community; 2) humour as a means to communicate distasteful truths, and, 3) humour as a means to engage critical thinking and disrupt habits of thought around existing hierarchies of knowledge. We apply theory on comedy as critique and comic licence to discern the social and political significance of these activities. Finally, we use ethical theorising, exploring the meta-ethics of the crab museum's joking. We conclude that joking can, itself, form a practice of ethics.

Keywords: comic licence, ethics, joking, Crab Museum, environmentalism.

1. Introduction

This article analyses the use of humour at the Crab Museum, a small, independent museum notable for its use of political joking. We analyse the museum's offerings with reference to original research interviews with its creators in order to illustrate the functions that joking performs within the museum. These findings are developed with reference to the known social and political functions of joking. We then demonstrate that meta-ethical analysis can help us to

understand the political impact of the Crab Museum's activities, using ethical reasoning to argue that comic practices can, themselves, function as ethical practices. The Crab Museum's use of comedy enables its audiences to understand what will constitute 'good' ways of living, and how to achieve them.

The Crab Museum lies behind a small door on an unassuming side-street in the English sea-side town of Margate. Occupying just two rooms above an art gallery, it is run by three directors: Chase Coley (Chase), Bertie Suesat-Williams (Bertie) and Rachada Suesat-Williams (Ned).[1] Nonetheless, it has achieved striking popularity and notoriety, gaining national and international press and media coverage (see, for example, Addley, 2024; BBC, 2024; Marshal, 2023), winning prestigious awards[2] and engaging the affectionate support of a wide fan base. Rather than offering encounters with actual crabs, it takes an artistic approach. The walls are adorned with information boards in which facts about crabs are interspersed with philosophical and political commentary. Environmentalism and equitable rights for non-human species are key themes. There are art works, such as a diorama depicting crabs as suffragettes, and multimedia exhibits, including a video of a man physically testing carcinologist Judith Weiss' theory that the effort required for a crab to moult its shell is comparable to a human crawling out of a suit of armour backwards without using their hands. A gift shop sells books and ethically-sourced memorabilia such as Crab Museum branded notebooks and t-shirts, and visitors are encouraged to engage in conversation with museum personnel at the magnification station, where crab anatomy and behaviour can be demonstrated in microscopic detail. Beyond the daily operation of the museum, talks are offered for schools and other groups, and there are occasional public events which sometimes merge informative talks with performance or live music. Across all of its exhibits and activities, the museum embeds humour and fun.

The directors are the museum's creators, sharing joint responsibility for the information that it distributes, and the tactics used to do this. Their expertise is in creating artistically satisfying, fun and funny experiences. They do not pretend to be experts on crabs, although running a crab museum has necessarily required rapid learning about the subject. The result is a museum that offers facts about crabs alongside – and often intertwined with - opportunities for more philosophical or political refection, and for humour.

2. Situating the research and methodology

Each of the Crab Museum's directors emphasises that the museum has always been, first and foremost, a creative endeavour. When asked to describe the process of its creation, they each began by talking about the desire to work together on a fun and satisfying project, and depicted it developing through an organic process. The group worked through various ideas about what the project might be, with funniness always an innate and fundamental feature. Chase explained, "it did start as a joke… None of us were crab people or scientists or museum people. But… we were into doing lots of silly projects together… This is the final form of… that joke." This idea is echoed in Bertie's statement that "if it wasn't funny, we wouldn't have

[1] As two directors share a surname (they are brothers), all three are referred to by first name in order to preserve clarity. All quotations attributed to a director are taken from personal interviews.
[2] The museum won the Being Social award at the Digital Culture Awards in 2023.

wanted to do it in the first place" and Ned's that, "our background is in making people laugh. And being stupid."

The directors continue to see their museum as, in Bertie's words, "a bit of an outsider museum." Chase explains that it was only latterly that they came to understand how much they share with the rest of the museum sector. He recalls "chatting to the association of independent museums, and [saying], 'we're gonna do this museum that's kind of a bit radical', but they [said], 'you've just described a…bread-and-butter museum'." The directors' approach is certainly distinctive, but their concerns and priorities are shared by many other museums and reflected in the literature on museum studies. For example, they highlight the importance of re-examining colonial narratives about our collective past in order to shape a better future (Garner and Rossmanith 2021), and of designing practices that create meaningful interactions for tourists, the local community (Grek 2009), and children, who are treated as a key audience across much of the sector (Martorell and Bifang Primary School Children, 2024). There is some anxiety in the sector regarding whether such rarified environments as museums and galleries give audiences the freedom to enjoy funny artefacts (Tate 2020). The Crab Museum's comedy-led practices have arguably enabled it to form very good answers to these questions: as we will argue, its funniness is key to creating enthusiastic and authentic engagement by audiences of all ages, to opening up space for the critique and revision of dominant narratives and to creating a fun, community atmosphere. On the whole, though, this article approaches the Crab Museum in a way that reflects the processes of its creators, positioning itself not in Museum Studies but within the study of comedy practices and their impacts. Our key question is not what the Crab Museum contributes to the museum sector, but rather what it can tell us about the functions and importance of comedy within political thought and social action.

We achieve this by positioning the research within two areas of literature: comedy as critique and the analysis of meta-ethics. In order to better understand the methods employed to make comedy, and to turn this into social and political action, we undertook original research interviews with each of the directors. We chose a semi-structured interview format as the most suitable way of gaining a deep understanding of the directors' practices while also enabling our interviewees to propose unexpected information and themes. Thematic analysis, following the method laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyse the data. Common themes were identified within the interviews: those that were foregrounded within all three interviews, were exemplified in textual analysis of the museum's exhibits and resonated with theoretical sources pertinent to the study, were chosen for inclusion in our own theory-building.

Interview data was supported by three site visits conducted in the spring and summer of 2023. These enabled us to see the museum operating in a range of conditions. We observed how visitors interacted with exhibits, and how museum personnel interact with visitors, during regular opening hours. Site visits included one of the museum's special events: the Crabination of King Claude III, a mock coronation of a crab held the night before the real coronation of King Charles III of the United Kingdom. Exhibits were photographed while the museum was closed in order to enable close textual analysis of the information displayed. The researchers also monitored the museum's social media and online reviews over the course of the study to provide further information and context for its live activities. Some comments from reviews are replicated in this article: these are given as examples of public responses and should not be taken as the product of any statistical or netnographic study. It is live encounters within the museum that have been the primary focus of our research.

The first section of the article deals with the functions of humour within the museum that were raised by the directors themselves. Three key themes emerged: 1) humour as a means to increase engagement with the museum, especially by building community; 2) humour as a means to communicate distasteful truths, and, 3) humour as a means to engage critical thinking and disrupt hierarchies of knowledge. The second section of the article reads beyond the directors' own description of their practices. We utilise interview data and analysis of the museum's exhibits and activities to draw out a more subtle theme that emerged from our investigation: how political joking in this context is *itself* the ethics of the museum, rather than a means to communicate or carry the ethics of its creators.

We have followed a genealogical approach in our analysis of ethics to adequately account for the diffuse nature of the discourses present within the museum's use of political joking. To make the latent ethical content of the joking manifest, it is necessary to understand the output of our analysis as, in Foucault's (1972, p. 38) terms, a "regularity"; the "objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices" present. For the purposes of this research this is interpreted as the jokes, the contexts they are placed within, the audience of these jokes, and the impacts that they have. Foucault develops his methodology to deconstruct truth and this, then, presents itself as an appropriate means to explore how the museum arrives at its position on truth, or where its ethics come from. We use a meta-ethical lens to examine the source of the ethics and how joking forms the ethical process itself.

Finally, it should be noted that, as we are approaching these avenues in a genealogical form, we are not claiming to produce an objective truth or universal position on the ethics of political joking in institutions of this type. Rather, we are tracing an interesting and evocative example of how political joking is mobilised in order to better understand the conceptual functioning and philosophical underpinnings of the form.

3. Functions of humour: directors' perspectives

3.1. Enhancing engagement and building communities

The first significant theme to emerge from the interview data related to humour as a way of engaging and educating audiences. Bertie explained that the museum's funniness means that "people stay there longer, [it] increases engagement with the museum, and it makes the concepts more readily understood." For example, "we can talk about crab bums and we talk about wee and poo and things which the kids like and they're at the microscope and the parents are happy." "The microscope" refers to the magnification station where museum personnel give live demonstrations and engage visitors of all ages in conversation about crabs and wider ecological concerns. Such rich and tailored learning experiences keep "the parents… happy," but Bertie cites the use of 'low' and scatological humour as important in making children into enthusiastic, voluntary learners. As Chase says, "we didn't want a place you drag your kids around." Nor is this strategy only applicable to children. Ned is referring to visitors of all ages when he says, "if you want people to get around and read things, you need to keep them entertained."

The next theme built upon this idea of engagement, demonstrating the power of humour to build communities. The museum has created notable enthusiasm and loyalty in its fans. The bond created by a shared sense of humour seems decisive in establishing this enthusiastic and affectionate engagement. As Andy Medhurst (2007) argues, "laughing together is one of the most swift, charged and effective routes to a feeling of belonging

together. Comedy is a short cut to community," which issues "invitations to belong" (pp. 21-22). Rebecca Krefting (2014) develops this thought: "comedy is one way of facilitating community, of reminding us that we matter somehow, somewhere" (p. 16). The opportunity that the Crab Museum offers for feelings of belonging may be enhanced and supported by boundary-drawing, with the participant's feelings of inclusion arising not only from the recognition that they are participating with likeminded individuals, but also from recognition that this separates them from others. As Medhurst (2007, p. 29) argues, comedy's power to create feelings of belonging rests partly on its ability to "firm up the lines that separate" the jokers from "those perceived as occupying contrasting or challenging identities."

In the Crab Museum, this sense of belonging is achieved not only through a shared sense of humour but also through shared political attitudes and ideology. Just as the museum was always destined to be humorous, the directors describe engagement with politics as an inevitable consequence of both their own interests and their subject matter. Bertie explains: "In a climate crisis, caring about animals is a political act… Being interested in crabs… wanting to understand more about nature that is being attacked by human politics, that is a form of political action." Chase refers to instances where visitors have criticised the museum for "being political." Part of the difficulty is that scientific information about ecology has become the site of polarising political debate: to report scientific consensus around an issue like climate change, and humankind's influence on climate change, is interpreted as political and controversial by some individuals.

This polarised environment offers opportunities for both humorous and political boundary-drawing. An information board dedicated to Member of Parliament (MP) Stephen Crabb outlines Crabb's questionable use of MPs' expenses and scandals involving alleged sexual harassment, gives some examples of regressive and un-environmentally-friendly votes he has made in parliament, and concludes with a picture of Crabb next to the text, "Here are some whiteboard markers which you can use to draw things on Stephen Crabb's face. Feel free to tweet your drawing to him at @SCrabbPembs." The picture has been thoroughly, and unflatteringly, graffitied by visitors who have seized upon this opportunity to express their general distaste for all that Crabb represents. Some contributions borrow conventional and comic methods of defacement, such as moustaches. Other visitors have graffitied Crabb's image with clear political statements or judgements, ranging from "did not vote for free school meals" to, simply, "BOOOO."

The exhibit criticises abuse of power and privilege by a political class that has failed to protect the environment; graffitists may also have been expressing anger at the government in which Crabb served, right-wing politics in general or the Conservative Party, to which Crabb belongs, in particular. For those who agree with the political affiliations and antagonisms implied in this exhibit, its jokes critique the incumbent power, offering those who oppose that power an "[invitation] to belong" (Medhurst, 2007 p.22), and a reminder "that [they] matter somehow, somewhere" (Krefting, 2014, p.16) This effect is strengthened by the fact that this exhibit is clearly intended to be distasteful to Crabb himself, and to others who disagree with the exhibit's political standpoint. That the directors are comforable with these antagonistic tactics is illustrated in Ned's statement: "we like pissing off Tories" (in UK parlance "Tories" is a slang term for the Conservative party; it can also be used as a moniker for anyone perceived to have a right-wing mindset). The museum's use of humour encourages engagement and gives sympathetic visitors feelings of inclusion and community: this inclusion operates in tandem with humour's ability to emphasise the separation between this audience and their perceived political opposition.

3.2. Communicating distasteful truths

The next theme to emerge from the directors' interviews related to the importance of humour in communicating frightening and unpalatable information. The directors valued the freedom of expression that humour offered them. For example, Bertie admits that he feels the Stephen Crabb exhibit "is definitely on the line" of acceptability. He also expresses pride at being able to operate differently to cultural institutions who "always play it safe." The museum's use of humour enables it to draw upon comic licence, creating a space in which normal rules around what can and cannot be said are suspended, or at least destabilised.

John Morreall (2005) offers a useful model in breaking comic licence down into two component parts: practical disengagement, where we allow lapses in common standards of kindness and decency, and cognitive disengagement, where we allow subversion of our usual standards around truthfulness. The Stephen Crabb exhibit is clearly unkind to Crabb, and is unapologetically one-sided in its presentation of both his parliamentary voting record and his personal integrity. A museum that was "play[ing] it safe" would avoid such an approach. By contrast, the Crab Museum claims licence to use these comedic strategies to highlight the ways in which those in power have failed in their responsibilities to the environment and society, and to do it through comedically cruel treatment of Crabb.

Some of the museum's most confronting political content deals with human behaviour and its consequences. For example, a wall-mounted box bearing the legend "Danger!! Truth inside do not open!," opens to reveal a display board titled "Capitalism Caused Climate Change." The board argues, "now that the air is poison and the sea is on fire we should all at least ask ourselves... *What if capitalism can't save the world? Is it time to try something else yet?"* (italics and ellipsis in original). The other side of this board is titled, "But What has This Got to Do With Crabs?," and states, "if you want to make the world liveable for yourself, your children or your grandchildren, we need to keep it liveable for all living things…" Nearby, a bank note from the Cayman Islands is framed next to a board which briefly outlines the British colonialist seizure and exploitation of the Cayman Islands; the use of this territory to enter the transatlantic slave trade; the survival of British colonialism in the concept of the Commonwealth, and the present-day use of the Cayman Islands as a tax haven by big businesses, before concluding, "Oh yeah, also the note has a crab on it."

Crabs are the primary subject of the museum, but they are also a launching pad for the discussion of wider issues concerning environmental crisis, and the critique of dominant narratives around the colonialist exploitation of the world's resources. Indeed, the way that the Cayman Islands bank note exhibit invests significant wordage in discussion of British colonialism, before articulating the fact that the note "has a crab on it" as an excuse for displaying this information, exemplifies the centrality of this tactic within the museum's ethos. As Bertie says:

> What we do really is educate about crabs but…whilst doing that, [use it] as a tool to start bigger conversations about all sorts of different things…That can go off in…a political direction or a historical one. Or it can encourage people to think about, you know, what it is to be a human, even.

The content presented, and the conversations that happen, within the museum routinely touch on some of the biggest and most threatening issues facing humankind. Chase explains, "while

you're here to tell them about crabs…you're only…a few sentences away from, say…an existential crisis." The directors acknowledge that this is unsettling. Ned says, "one of our most recent bad reviews said that we hate humans, which is not true. But it does speak to… maybe humans feeling victimised for having the blame put at our door." It should be noted that the museum's negative reviews are far outweighed by positive ones, suggesting that only a small minority of visitors react in this way. However, Ned's comment reflects the fact that some visitors have found the museum's approach challenging, or outright distasteful. He elaborates:

> I'm not so afraid [of] the downfall of capitalism, but I think a lot of people are… We want things to change… And we want people to lose money, including ourselves… we want the status quo to be changed. And also, we want people to confront our own history… And to try to be a little bit reflexive, I think that can be… scary… It can also be a bit scary to talk about environmental decay, and environmental damage…

Kate Fox (2018) argues that "the ambiguity which results from blending the comic and serious modes can help connect audiences with public speakers" (p. 83). This blend of comic and serious, which Fox calls "humitas," can enable the speaker to reach and "fuse" with audiences who are otherwise alienated. For Fox, humour proffers powerful opportunities when it is used to approach important, complex and fraught political issues: "Those who are skilled in their use of the comic and serious modes together...can speak to the public's alienation from traditional politics and put humour to work in expressing the ambiguity and multiplicity of a diverse and agonistic public sphere" (p. 96). Bertie elaborated on the important role that humour plays in achieving this:

> It makes it easier for us to talk to the public, specifically children, but also adults as well. It puts them at ease. We can talk about quite heavy things like colonialism or, you know, capitalism and… the end of the world a little bit. But we [can] talk in a way that's not gonna scare people… I'm not saying [climate change is] not scary, but… there's a difference between an issue being scary and… making people scared… Once people are actually scared, then they're just gonna shut down.

When communicating messages that may be difficult to hear, the directors see something like Fox's humitas at play: humour is able to alleviate feelings of fear, detachment and boredom, giving the museum a way to communicate about difficult political topics. Through humour, visitors confront important, distasteful information in a way that is palatable and meaningful to them. The directors themselves feel that this is one of the most important functions of the museum.

3.3. Encouraging critical thinking, challenging established narratives

The final theme which the directors highlighted was the power of humour to engage critical thinking, and especially to disrupt habits of thought around existing hierarchies of knowledge. The complex communication strategies involved in humorous discourse are a key route to achieving this aim. This is exemplified in a series of exhibits that tell the story of the giant

Margate Crab, caught locally in 1862. There is a video of a woman in a large and obviously false beard, which is labelled as an interview with the great granddaughter of a bearded lady who appears in the Margate Crab's story. The image of a 2014 front page taken from the British tabloid The Daily Star contains the sensational headline "Crabzilla" and features an image of a 50ft giant crab by the harbour in the nearby town of Whitstable. It is captioned: "An example of quality journalism." There is a giant crab's claw in a case, next to a diagram showing that the corresponding crab would be approximately waist height to an adult human. The display mimics the conventions used to display and educate about artefacts in many museums.

These exhibits force visitors' interpretative abilities, merging the conventions through which museums report official and authorised information with satire. Humour is used, here, as a means to question authority and the mechanisms through which our society creates and reinforces its established 'truths'. The bearded lady is overtly fictional; if nothing else, the comedically fake beard demonstrates that the whole story is a joke. The Daily Star front page is, though, a real news source: the image of the Whitstable "Crabzilla" went viral in 2014 and was reported by The Daily Star (14 October) among several other news sources (most of which treated it as a quirky hoax). The presentation of the Daily Star's reportage in this context causes the visitor to engage critically with the question of whether it really does constitute an example of "quality journalism," and to consider the implications of such sensational reporting for the health of public discourse.

The giant crab claw encourages visitors to apply a similar critique to the museum sector. Bertie and Chase each refer to a problem prevalent in museums, where facts are inevitably selected and presented through the biases, narratives, prejudices and beliefs of the curators, such that observable fact is conflated with material which, Bertie says, is essentially "imaginary." The Philosophy Crab - a character that can be found on many of the museum's display boards - appears under The Daily Star front page and poses "Impossible questions to ask grown-ups," including: "Is truth always the same? Or does it change?," and "Is there a difference between saying '1+1=2' and 'crabs are better than lobsters?'." This pushes visitors to think more broadly about how the nature of truth is determined: a humorous exhibit which purposefully adopts the visual cues that museums use to communicate information with authority, while also signalling its own dubiousness, may encourage visitors to question the role that museums play in determining and presenting truth.

Dieter Declercq (2018) identifies that satire has both strengths and weaknesses in teaching truth. Satire can make reductive, partial or unapologetically biased representations, which can be satisfying enough to encourage audiences to accept assertions without deeper critical engagement. The Crab Museum engages in some of this kind of satirising: for example, the Stephen Crabb exhibit does not proffer any information on the rationale underpinning his voting record or use of MPs' expenses. This is not the purpose of the exercise: the Crabb exhibit consciously uses what Declercq describes as "quick and dirty" (pp. 53-54) thinking to raise awareness of the influence that parliament has on the environment and social justice, in the context of exhibits that draw broader links between power and environmental and social justice. Nonetheless, it invites meaningful acts of political protest: graffitiing the image is presented as a form of angry revenge against Crabb and all that he stands for.

By contrast, the Margate Crab exhibit aligns with Declercq's "careful cognitivism about satire"; a position which "admits that good satire can teach non-trivial truths but highlights that satirical truth is best understood as an introduction to an issue which requires

further investigation or a particular take which needs to be nuanced" (p. 45). It presents information in a way that makes "quick and dirty" thinking impossible. The exhibit is in a museum, and is presented using the educational conventions of a museum, alongside much information about crabs that is clearly framed as true and authoritative. Yet it frustrates any attempt at this interpretation by simultaneously highlighting its own absurdity. The dissonance created leaves the visitor no option but to engage in deeper thought about the exhibit, and to question what it means when a museum chooses to present a humorous, tall tale through such official-looking conventions. Considering the nature of truth – and particularly questioning the validity of an established, venerable and seemingly-unbiased authority like the museum sector – could be as confronting and distasteful as questioning capitalism or climate change, but humour enables these topics to be tackled in safety.

4. Humour as ethics

In this section we will outline how ethical theory can help us to understand what is happening 'beneath the surface' of the museum's use of political joking. The Crab Museum deploys political joking as an ethical practice. It demonstrates that ethics are not only present within humour, but forms of political joking *themselves* can be considered an ethical practice. Analysing the museum through a "meta-ethical" lens further illustrates that the museum does not demonstrate truth in the way that we expect from educational institutions. The deployment of a practice-based ethics is made both possible and effective through the use of humour. Indeed, joking has been cited as an important practice by a range of scholars of ethics, from Jacques Lacan (2013, p. 303) to Simon Critchley (2013, p. 85) via Benjamin Franks (2019) and Duane Rousselle (2012, p. 139).

Ethics can be understood, in their most basic form, as a view or statement of what is considered right or wrong. This can encompass good or bad characteristics, overarching principles, or statements on what one ought to do, or ought not to do. The Crab Museum appears to have a very clear set of political commitments, using a humorous depiction of the life of crabs to make assertions about how we *ought* to act towards the wider environment. What we propose here, following John Mackie (1990), is to look at the second-order ethics of the museum in order to analyse and evaluate its first-order ethics. The distinction between first and second order ethics can be understood as our visible ethical positions (first order), and how we arrive at our ethics (second order). Mackie tells us that, "in our ordinary experience we first encounter first order statements about particular actions; in discussing these, we may go on to frame, or dispute, more general first order principles; and only after that are we likely to reflect on second order issues" (p. 9). If the first-order position of the museum is that we ought to respect the environment, the second-order enquiry brings us to the fundamental questions of why and how. We explore how political joking is operationalised by the museum and how the directors make use of their visitors' taste, both assumed and realised, in order to achieve this.

Rousselle (2012) provides us with a taxonomy to better understand and analyse the function of second-order ethics. This can alternatively be described as "meta-ethics": literately the ethics of ethics. He breaks this second-order enquiry down into two bases from which we can analyse the meta-ethics of a given position. The ontological dimension is that which shows us where our ethics come from, what he describes as the "place" of meta-ethics (p. 43). We might best understand this as the source of our ethics. The "process" of our ethics is found in epistemology (p. 51). If the place is the source of our ethics, then the process is what we do in order to arrive at our first-order ethical positions.

To provide a clearer picture of what is happening in the museum, we can look at instances where visitors' assumptions about its ethics have resulted in conflict. In one example, a visitor to the museum took offense at what they perceived as an abuse of power. Bertie tells us that the visitor complained that the directors were members of the London elite, bewildering the uneducated members of the local population with their complex approach to disseminating information (in fact the directors are locals, not Londoners). In online reviews for the museum, negative comments are rare but those that exist include criticisms such as: "If you enjoy listening to insufferable, nihilistic & spoilt rich kids moan about all the problems of the world from capitalism to colonialism & everything in between, then this is the place for you" (Vallance, 2023) and that its political humour is "unrelated really to what this museum is about" (C T, 2023).

These commentators demonstrate misunderstanding of the ethico-political tactics employed by the museum through its use of humour. They assume that a museum space is one in which we expect to be told the singular truth, often in a serious fashion. This is not the Crab Museum's approach. The museum creates an opaque and shifting space where many competing truth-claims operate concurrently. For example, exhibits about the giant Margate Crab demonstrate an intentional denial of objective truth. This is explicit in the Philosophy Crab's "Impossible questions to ask grown-ups", discussed above. These help us to see the ethics present within the work, making visible the way in which these wider ethical questions themselves become ethical-practices. In posing such questions, the Philosophy Crab creates a space for potentially uncomfortable discussion. It is both funny and innately political for a museum to encourage children to ask their responsible adults about the fundamental nature of truth. In the negative comments cited above, the individual issuing the complaint assumes that all museums should present their visitors with clear and undisputed information, narrowly focused on a precisely-defined topic. The museum adopts a different ethical standpoint, requiring audiences to encounter information that is multifaceted, and to decide for themselves where 'truth' lies.

By denying the concept of universal truth, the exhibit attempts to unseat a form of ethics which claims certainty, instead positing ambivalence. Comic licence complicates our interpretation of 'truth' and further muddies our ability to discern a moral position. This creates uncertainty in a space usually associated with certainty. A small number of visitors appear to find this distasteful precisely because it embodies a different ethical approach to that which we traditionally expect from a museum. The museum's supporters, though, necessarily invest in the museum's ethical position: valuing uncertainty over certainty.

It is also important to consider the process, or epistemological foundations, of the museum's ethical tactics. This refers to what we *do* to decide on our ethical position. The museum demonstrates a desire to co-create this position with its visitors. Chase tells us that he understands a "museum" as a place to "come together and muse, and talk about big ideas." This is underpinned by a pedagogical process in which "we're not here to educate you, you're here to learn, and here are all of these avenues we're giving you to make you learn." The directors cite examples of positive conflict, where they have engaged in meaningful conversation with people who do not agree with the museum's politics or tactics. They value these interactions. For Chase, negative feedback is most frustrating when it is received online with limited opportunities to respond. He feels that some negative reviews really come from individuals who "had their ideas challenged." He adds, "I'd love to talk to them about that. Like, I would love to find out why… Why is pointing up facts about slavery like really, really annoying to you?… We just talk about things, I think, matter-of-factly. And that… is a bit shocking for some people." Ned tells us that they want people to "confront our own history…

where we've come from, and where we've gotten to, and why we're here and who's lost out by us being here," and that the museum provides a "place for people to have difficult conversations." The museum aims to create a space for co-learning and conversation. Cues for this co-learning include, for example, the magnification station where visitors are engaged in discussion, events like the Crabination, which bring together a mixed audience to explore ideas, and the frequent appearances by the Philosophy Crab on the museum's information displays.

Within this, we can identify the presence of a virtue ethics or, more precisely, a practice-based ethics. In practice-based accounts, practices create moral structures within themselves and contribute to the creation of "the good". The "good" as defined by Alasdair Macintyre is the way of directing life in order to promote the common good for all members of a community (Knight, 1998, pp. 239-241). In practice-based accounts this "common good" is not a fixed target, but rather is constantly co-created through the enactment of ethical practices themselves. This is an iterative process; as Franks (2019) illustrates, these structures and practices "respond to changing circumstances, and, in doing so produce new values" (p. 77).

The directors describe themselves as working as part of a community; the discussions they promote address core ethical concerns, such as Macintyre's "what place should the goods of each of the practices *we* are engaged in have in *our* common life?" or "what is the best way of life for *our* community?" (Knight, 1998, p. 240). In one of the museum's early social media campaigns, they took aim at the Malle Mile, a motorcycle race on the local beach in Margate which the museum considered damaging to the beach's biodiversity. Ned describes how the museum gained vocal support from the local community and as a result the following year's race was cancelled.[3] He comments that "by being radical, we are promoting the public good".

The use of political humour is a form of practice ethics, forming the basis for the museum's efficacy in these areas. The desire to shape societal goods is a fundamental part of the museum's mission, and humour enables this. Through political joking the museum's ethics are co-constructed with the audience, rather than existing solely in the way it constructs its exhibits, or in its audiences' minds. This co-construction is one reason why humour holds a special place in ethical thought. Joking is an inherently intersubjective practice, serving a specific ethical function by affirming the nature of ethical practices themselves.

5. Conclusion

In this article we have demonstrated how the museum uses political humour in a number of important and, at times, unexpected ways. We have analysed the deployment of humour as a political tactic and this has led us to postulate the ethical commitments of the museum. This, in turn, has told us something broader about the ethical nature of joking itself.

Our analysis reveals how the museum creates feelings of inclusion and community by mobilising humour and comic licence alongside political affiliation. The museum makes use of the ambiguities and complexities of humorous communication to engage its audience in meaningful thought and discussion about topics that may often alienate the public, such as colonialism and climate crisis, and to engage critical thinking on profound issues. We have

[3] It is worth noting that even though the event did take place again in 2023, the focus of organiser's promotion was on the bio-diversity of the beach and the minimalization of the race's impact.

shown that political joking in this context serves as a practice of ethics itself, offering visions of the 'good'. Ultimately, the museum's use of humour challenges the notion of universal truths and anchors its ethics outside of the expectations we hold of educational institutions.

In describing the ways in which humour functions within the museum, the directors illustrate the value of comedy within political communication. Indeed, the museum's humorous approach arguably enables it to address problems of authentic engagement, and the need to query established 'truths', that are shared across the museum sector. Furthermore, the museum's approach gives us an opportunity to better understand the ethics of political joking. Joking is an active and social process for both teller and hearer, and so the museum's jokes become the location of its ethics. This means that the museum's impact is not restricted to the realm of thought or intention: it continuously creates ethical interactions, in every encounter with its visitors.

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