

**4 poems, 11 scripts, 5 essays, 2 lectures, 1 interview,  
and 1 afterword**

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GRAMMAR & NOT-GRAMMAR is an anthology containing four poems, eleven scripts, five essays, two lectures, one interview, and one afterword. This is the foreword.

There are nineteen chapters in this anthology. This means that some chapters may be poems, but they also may be scripts. And that at least two of the scripts are lectures, or translate to print in such a way as to appear to be essays. Other scripts that literally don't adhere to a lecture format do involve researchers, perhaps a scientist or another variety of academic, whose assignment may be to arrive at a conclusive and cohesive argument but who gets waylaid by some fascinating detours along the way. At least one of the poems could also be described as an essay, and at least one of the lectures focuses on an example of emotionally resonant poetry. One lecture is literally a *Grammar Lesson* (2003), and the other takes the form of an ultimately absurd but not essentially impractical argument. Many of the scripts are themselves essays, and the essays are structured upon sustained, and often performative, arguments. All of the scripts are very "writerly" – the words exist independently of the images, although they congeal formally and therefore successfully. A trust in language and a suspicion (not rejection) of images is central to Kibbins' body of work.

Grammar, referring to either correct or incorrect grammar or syntax, is most definitely a controlling system and an indicator of class status and other significant stations. But, as Matias Viegner points out in his thoughtfully perceptive afterword, "Speculative Grammar" (2005), language is never static and grammarians thus divide into prescribers and descriptarians. "Bad" grammar indeed becomes accepted in specific contexts and even institutionalized. Witness the current tag team who grant themselves the privilege of speaking on behalf of the "free world." The current president of the United States is deemed "authentic" by many cynical pundits: courtesy of his mangled syntax, he is not an effete liberal intellectual. Meanwhile, the same "observers" consider the current British prime minister to be a serious statesman, simply because he speaks in lengthy but consistently complete sentences.

*Grammar & Not-Grammar* is not a complete documentation of Gary Kibbins' scripts and essays. It doesn't include his earliest videotapes, which make greater use of synchronized dialogue and "actors" than most of his later work. It omits Kibbins' video *The Long Take* (1988),<sup>1</sup> a pivotal work in his career that achieves an intelligence well beyond the sum of its individual components and indeed beyond the intelligence of its "author." Special mention also must be made of the seventy-minute film *Finagnon* (1996), as its script would not translate to the page independently of its extremely dense montage of images. *Finagnon* is, nevertheless, a stunningly ambitious film, conceived and executed in audacious defiance of art world and film festival tendencies towards "communication" models and work that must be "about" something.

Kibbins' considerable body of essays is part and parcel of his ongoing research into, and observation of, experimenting and experimentalism. The essays are "generally motivated by two things: that contemporary work continues to derive justification from modernist axioms (including many political ones) whose relevance is either weak or expired, and that art in general is in danger of becoming a specialized branch of the entertainment industry."<sup>2</sup> This may sound rather grim, but it is not. Kibbins' essays are often as succinctly humorous as his scripts and poems.



The many scripts published in this volume are stylistically varied, and this is reflected in their heterogeneous reproductions. As none of these scripts were originally intended for publication, they have generally been transcribed and annotated as relatively straightforward texts, with minimal attention paid to scenic and other dramatic details. The poetic scripts *Carl Andre's Overalls*, *April 1967*, and *If Horses Had Gods* exist parallel to their corresponding images and not within those images; therefore, they translate to print without requiring visually oriented explanations – montage is present in the texts to a much greater extent than within the images. *Limbic Moments* is formatted as an essay in thirteen sections for similar reasons, and *P & Not-P* is also transcribed independently of images, while identifying the different speakers who break up the dominant voice-over. *The Alien Seaman's* monologue voice-over may be sporadically interrupted by audio dispatches emanating from the film's archival sources, but it is still a sustaining monologue. *Mead Lake* bears the closest resemblance to a dramatic script treatment, as its two principals walk through very specific landscapes and examples of constructed “nature” as they go about their intellectual one-upmanship. Of all the scripts within *Grammar & Not-Grammar*, it is the most recently completed *Brain Worm* that contains a higher degree of “heterogeneous collage,” requiring transcription that reflects this density of montage and collage.

Central to Kibbins' arguments throughout many of the media works, and also the essays, is the absurdist concept of 'pataphysics<sup>3</sup> – a term coined by French writer Alfred Jarry, which he later defined as “the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.”<sup>4</sup> 'Pataphysics parodies, albeit with perverse respect, the theories and methods of modern science. It often deploys nonsensical language – nonsense of course being a form of sense. Although Gary Kibbins does not label himself a 'pataphysicist, he most certainly does exhibit 'pataphysical tendencies.

'Pataphysics has also been defined as a philosophy dedicated to studying what lies beyond the realm of metaphysics. Writer Raymond



Queneau, a charter member of the Collège de 'Pataphysique,<sup>5</sup> has defined this philosophy as resting “on the truth of contradictions and exceptions.” The influence and practice of 'pataphysics has spread well beyond its initial French literary base, and 'pataphysical strategies have often been used as a conceptual principle within various fine art forms as well as musical composition. Marcel Duchamp and John Cage have made creative use of 'pataphysical principles. It is notable that in the late 1960s the Paris-based Situationist International declared 'pataphysics to be a new religion.

Religion (or belief) is a recurring trope throughout Kibbins' body of work. Religion is irrational, notoriously impossible to argue against. Religion is also fundamental to grammar, despite the latter's insistence of logic or rationality. As Kibbins quotes Friedrich Nietzsche in *If Horses Had Gods*, “How can we hope to get rid of God, as long as we insist on believing in grammar?” Yet perhaps, for many, God isn't anything other than a word. The first script in this volume, *52 Gods*, repeats the word “god” fifty-two times, once for every week of the year, perhaps, and in a wide variety of accents. But no matter the inflection, this word remains The Word. *If Horses Had Gods* sculpts concrete poetry from syllogisms and aphorisms, many of them religious in either origin or character. As Kibbins explains to Steve Reinke in the interview contained in this volume, “I was trying to relocate religious belief, which I think is irrational, into the domain of nonsense, which is rational....” The considerable creativity that so many institutions and occasionally inspired artists have put into religion can be preserved in the domain of nonsense, and belief can therefore be jettisoned. Kibbins is wary of all those trafficking in belief, especially belief structures that can no longer sustain arguments that may once have been audacious but are now cumbersome and bordering on the absurd.

The scripts and essays in this anthology blur together because Kibbins' scripts are so frequently essayistic and because the essays here are concerned with images and their languages. The works included in this volume are not routinely arranged chronologically—that would imply



dubious suggestions of “progress” and ignore the time-travel possibilities already present in several of the scripts. No, the essays and scripts of *Grammar & Not-Grammar* are sequenced according to that simultaneously logical and nonsensical system of ordering: the alphabet.

Why the alphabet? Well, why not? The alphabet, a fundamental element of grammar itself, is certainly a controlling system – it is so obviously linear that it is transparent. But its literalness permits some rather surprising sequences or montages. “There is nothing so nonsensical as the dictionary, the telephone book, or the encyclopedia, all of them texts that arrange the word within the hermetic surface of an arbitrary convention...”<sup>6</sup> John Cage had a lot of fun with the proximity of the words mushroom and music in his personal Oxford dictionary.

*52 Gods* (2003) repeats The Word fifty-two times, one word with many different accents and inflections. *The alien seaman* (1998) is a man of many words, and he has a mission. Although he is already dead and frozen in ice, he believes that, if he could travel back through time to the year 1917, he could prevent the Halifax Explosion. That explosion was a major disaster, but 1917 was also the year of other major historical events and creations (like the Russian Revolution and Marcel Duchamp’s *Bottlerack*). *The Alien Seaman* combines a Beckettian interior monologue with a dense montage of restaged and archival footage, and this montage is itself steeped in the possibilities of time travel.

The poem *April 1967* (2004) also hinges on time travel, and also stasis and freezing. Fifty years after 1917, the optimism of Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome us Pavilion at Expo 67 exists parallel to the stupid atrocities of the Vietnam War. Today, almost another forty years later, the picture hasn’t changed. The poem, montaged text laid over iconic sci-fi-like images, becomes nonsensical due to its almost free-fall cut-ups rather than its linear absurdity. *April 1967*’s text literally ends with a comma, closure remaining an impossibility.

*Ass Bowl Comedy: Nonsense and Experimental Film* (2005), the first of the essays published in this volume, finds Kibbins outlining histories of nonsense theory, and then ruffling a few sacred feathers. He takes issue





with Elizabeth Sewell's insistence that nonsense cannot be applied to the visual domain, and then argues for a reading of Hollis Frampton's legendarily impenetrable film *Zorns Lemma* as being a work of systematically inspired nonsense. This film's reputation for being "difficult" has been compounded by the filmmaker's refusal to indicate his sources, but Kibbins sees this refusal as indicative of Frampton's identification with the impudent student rather than the authoritarian teacher. Frampton's affection for Gertrude Stein's "Tender Buttons" is not the only clue that the film might be considered a work of rigorous nonsense. Frampton's sequences of alphabetical montaging employ the twenty-four-letter Roman alphabet, parallel to the film's twenty-four frames per second ratio. Again, the alphabet offers wonderfully nonsensical opportunities. Ass, Bowl, Comedy indeed!

The essay that comes next, *Be Nice or Die: Dinosaur and the Evolutionary Imperative* (2002), might appear, at least on the surface, to have nothing to do with either committed experimentalism or nonsense. Kibbins places a Walt Disney animation feature under the microscope, and critiques both hard-line biological determinists and absolute social constructionists or "culturists" (not to mention "Intelligent Designers"). But critiquing the representation of evolutionary traits in a Disney feature, while rigorously applying evolutionary theory, is a rather 'pataphysical exercise. The ridiculously spectacular can indeed co-exist with the insightful.

*Bear Assumptions: Notes on Experimentalism* (2002) was written in response to a conference on "experimentalism" that Kibbins co-organized in fall of 2001, immediately after 9/11.<sup>7</sup> At a historical moment when many of the panellists were debating what might be an appropriate practice in the context of the bombings and their various fallouts, let alone whether there was any point in continuing to practice, Kibbins focuses on contradictory definitions of experimental and experimentalist. High modernists with manifestos and serious programs have long become either anachronisms or else nostalgic figures in a context of relativist pluralism and informal postmodernism where self-reflexivity has degenerated into



self-conscious smarminess. Kibbins argues for combining research and playfulness, and for not insisting that a large animal suddenly entering a frame must be explained by futile attempts at symbolism and “meaning.”

*Brain Worm* (2005) references and then inverts science-fiction paranoia. A team of linguistic experts, led by the Spock-like “Mr. Aych” (and including a rather avant-garde musician) must decode a paragraph of text concerning the reproductive cycle of an obscure parasite named the Trematode. Negotiating a trajectory through a maelstrom of archival film stocks and nearly cacophonous voice-overs (plus the Russian alphabet and the realization that twice twelve tones equals twenty-four), their *Mission Impossible* becomes a *Mission Anything’s Possible*. An altruistic reading may be extracted from the script’s paragraph of evolutionary theory, which might disqualify *Brain Worm* from being pure and unadulterated nonsense. However, the concluding visual and audio tableau is sublime, with three naked male hockey players being cerebrally accompanied by the gorgeously modernist Trematode Parasite aria.

*Carl Andre’s Overalls* (2000) is also structured around the number twelve. This poem, which takes its rhyming and rhythm from Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark*, features a female voice-over reading pronouncements on art and labour by twelve rather famous men. Throughout this tape, the camera tends to remain overhead in a factory, in a surveillance position. The arch-modernist sculptor, Carl Andre, is a ghost presence here, something of a thirteenth-floor elevator. Andre considered himself to be in solidarity with the working class because he was never seen wearing anything other than overalls.

*Flaming Creatures: New Tendencies in Canadian Video* is the title of an exhibition Kibbins curated in 1997. His curator’s essay examines the then-current exhibition situation of single-channel video art (installation having become *au courant* among institutions) and pronounces the medium as healthy as ever, due to an emerging counter-cynicism, an admission that shock tactics have long outlived their ability to shock, and a commitment by many younger and older video artists to a subtle and often structurally inset humour. The exhibition and essay’s titles are cour-



tesy of queer icon and provocateur Jack Smith's notorious film, a forty-three-minute work characterized by a complete absence of montage and also by fantastically costumed transvestitism.

*Grammar Lesson* (2003) paraphrases an ESL lesson, with the deadpan instructor itemizing the lyrics of Judy Garland's classically utopian anthem, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." It's not only the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that the class must learn to identify—there are also the determiners and quantifiers and whatnots. The sequence of designations of course forms its own nonsense poem, while the transcendent aura of the song derives from the singer's performance and not the lyrics, whose banal romanticism is contrasted with a mind-numbing example of moral relativism.

*If Horses Had Gods* (2003) is a two-channel installation, combining concrete poetry on the right channel with a "Churches and Tourists" projection on the left. Various players essential to religious spectacle—patiently obedient believers and incense-swinging priests—are observed waiting in a public space outside of exquisite Spanish cathedrals. In the poems, "pairs of homilies and quotations are subjected to systematic substitution and transmogrification in a display of iterative nonsense-making."<sup>8</sup> While religious pronouncements and observations are transposed into a nonsensical domain, Kibbins collages these sayings with quotations from sources as varied as Beckett, Einstein, Judy Garland, former us secretary of state Madeleine Albright, and, of course, Nietzsche.

The gently displaced believers surveyed in *If Horses Had Gods* inhabit a completely different universe than the wild children observed in *Limbic Moments* (2002). This film, which visually engages in dialogue between experimental and ethnographic film practices, is influenced by Walter Benjamin's essay "The Destructive Character." Destructive characters thrive on "surplus of freedom," open spaces, and an utter indifference to being understood. Children take on this destructive character as part of their growing process, and many maintain aspects of the destructive character throughout their adult lives. Some of these children even "grow up"



to become artists or scientists, and possibly even grammarians.

*Mead Lake* (1992) follows a male and a female linguist through constructed sites such as Lake Mead, the Hoover Dam, and their favourite swimming pool—all commodified bodies of water. The couple grammatically and rhetorically dissect a Toronto *Globe and Mail* article that praises the World Bank and its attitudes to international development. Their identified high-grammatical devices form their own nonsense-poem within Kibbins' argumentative script. Their discourses are periodically interrupted by voice-overs in "foreign" accents, as the two walking-heads preserve an uneasy detachment from the immediate landscape as well as its citizens.

*P & Not-P* (1994) undertakes a 'pataphysical experiment involving perceptions of fantasy and reality. For the child riding a broomstick as if it were a horse, then, of course, it is a horse. Kibbins cites Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong, who argued that something can have characteristics even if that something doesn't exist. The grey-eyed goddess Athena still has her gray eyes. And how about round squares? Meinong calls them "homeless objects," as they cannot be contained within existing categories of thought. Invented characters such as P become highly useful to scientists, especially when pain and suffering are involved. Homeless objects exist and don't exist—perception is, after all, subjective. People see only what they want to, which also means that they can deny seeing what they'd rather not.

*Reflections on Art and Politics at Decade's End* (1999) was written when "critical" art still had art world currency, while "political" had become almost completely forbidden. Kibbins examines why "critical" art has been relatively easy to create, exhibit, and even sell, while "political" art has not. Postmodernism, corporate sponsorships, the institutionalization of art and artists, and the relative rarity of politicized art criticism—these factors have combined to create a zeitgeist in which the "political" too frequently lacks critical acumen and the "critical" can signify political "knowledge," but little more. It is now five years into the twenty-first century. Has the critical room temperature increased significantly?





*Reinke Interviewing Kibbins* (2005) is exactly that. Renowned artist, teacher, and bibliophile Steve Reinke posits a series of penetrating questions to Gary Kibbins, referencing Kibbins' methods of production, his trust of language and parallel suspicion of images, his thoughts on the effects of institutions on artists and their practices, and many other intriguingly left-field observations.

*A Short History of Water* (1989) is the final Gary Kibbins script or essay printed in *Grammar & Not-Grammar*. This is appropriate as it is the earliest of the included works. This rather 'pataphysical lecture postulates that, in a universal liberal (non-hierarchical) world, water and not money should be the pre-eminent medium of exchange. Water is of extremely high use-value and a very low exchange value, making it converse to money. Water is fluid, while money is strictly material. A female voice-over reads Kibbins' "lecture," which draws on sources including Greek philosophy and classic nineteenth-century economics. *A Short History of Water* is composed entirely of still images—some from a makeshift classroom and the remainder from a wide variety of sources.

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Ideals of fluid exchange and non-hierarchical worlds have of course informed modernist ideologies and systems and underpin utopian words such as "freedom." "Fluidity" suggests possibilities beyond a pluralism that permits freedom only to a relative degree, that enforces checkpoint networks and creates a uniformity masked by surface, and superficial, differences. Kibbins opines that in an age of Pluralism where Anything is so often just Any Old Thing, "it is important to distinguish between useful freedoms and unuseful ones." This is not as direly utilitarian as it sounds. For Kibbins, "useful" here refers to a commitment to productivity— "useful" freedom is when artists use the license they have as artists to play with material outside their own areas of competence but still "remain within an area of productivity."

Kibbins, in keeping with many other artists and writers who believe in experimenting with process, thrives on that paradox by which a cogent formal structure can make seemingly random or unconnected concepts coherently attractive. Artists enjoy the freedom to explore materials and,



for that matter, theories that they may not fully comprehend; but nevertheless it is important that the artists appear to know what they are doing. Gary Kibbins, as a committed artist and educator, takes his responsibility to encourage research and playfulness very seriously, in tandem with a wonderfully idiosyncratic sense of humour. He understands the paradox, not as Orwellian double-speak, but as practically logical nonsense, that following sets of rules can effect intellectual and artistic emancipation, which can in turn offer viewers and readers rich, aesthetic, and politically productive experiences.

## NOTES

1. The script of *The Long Take* is published in *By the Skin of Our Tongues*, ed. Steve Reinke and Nelson Henricks (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1997).
2. Gary Kibbins, artist's proposal to YYZ Artists' Outlet, 2003.
3. Jarry insisted that the word's orthography demanded the apostrophe preceding the letters of the word, in order to avoid a simple pun. Alfred Jarry, "Guignol," *L'Echo de Paris littéraire illustré*, April 28, 1893.
4. Alfred Jarry, *Gestes et opinions du Docteur Faustroll, 'pataphysicien* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1911), II, vii.
5. The College de 'pataphysique was founded on May 11, 1948, by a group of artists and writers interested in the philosophy of 'pataphysics.
6. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 198.
7. *Blowing Trumpets to the Tulips: An Exchange on Experimental Media*, presented by Public Access at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, October 19–21, 2001.
8. Jan Allen, "Expository Nonsense or 'ever little trembling clause'" in *Gary Kibbins, Grammar Horses*, Agnes Etherington Art Centre (Kingston: Queen's University, 2003), 14.

