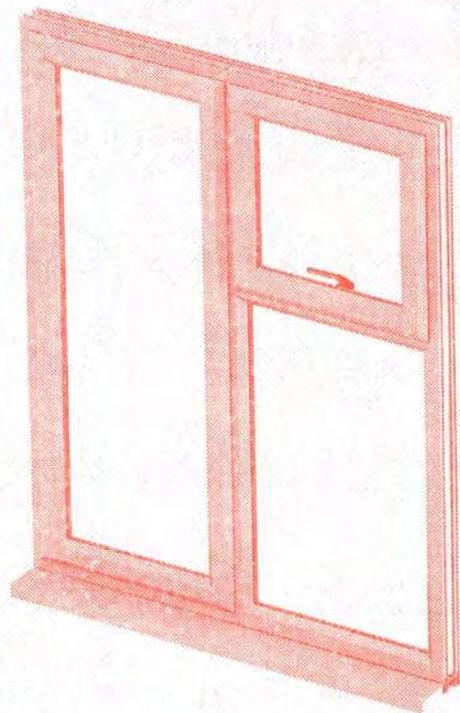


# 'Jumping the shark'

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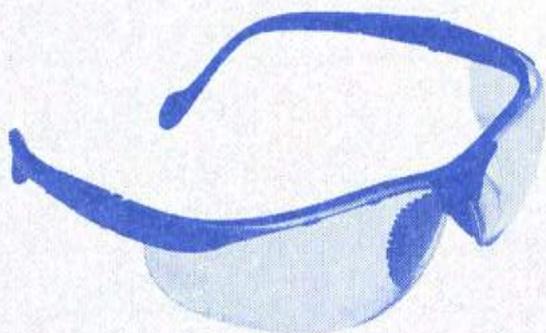
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written by: Vanessa van 't Hoogt & Anna-Rosja Haveman

## 'Jumping the shark'

is an expression commonly used in reference to unsuccessful attempts to regain popularity and attention through outrageous and spectacular overkill. The origin of the saying comes from a 1977 TV episode of the American series *Happy Days* in which the main character Fonzie, wearing his trademark leather jacket, jumps on water skis over a (confined) shark<sup>(1)</sup>.



1. Fonzie after jumping the shark, still from *Happy Days*, episode 3.3, 1977.

Did Het Resort intend in the same way to upscale their entertainment value with their most recent exhibition *Jumping the Shark* at the BIM station? Just as the television series aimed to create a spectacular episode, the three artists-in-residence of Het Resort aspired to make something remarkable. Perhaps Feiko Beckers, Steven Jouwersma and Alban Karsten wanted to impress the city where they once lived and studied with the grand gestures of a wrapped gas station, a car crash and a jump – not over a shark, but through a window.

While the apparent aim of *Happy Days* was obviously to increase audience ratings,

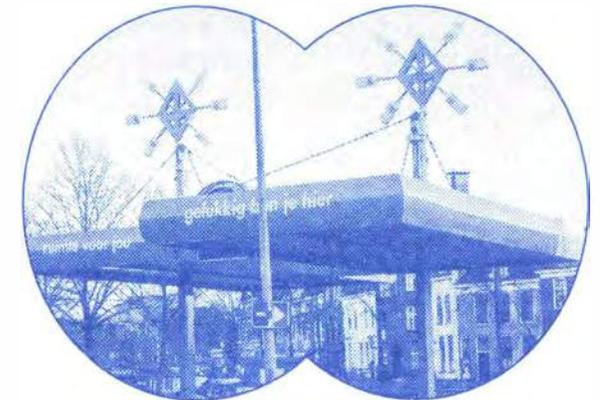
the motives and results of the three artists 'jumping the shark' are neither straightforward nor clear. Was it perhaps a signal that the reputation of Het Resort is in decline and in need of some new relevance? Considering the positive reactions to the exhibition by the public and the municipality, this did not turn out to be the case. Or might the artists have felt the need to upscale their activities and careers to the next level? Since all three artists are past the age of thirty-five, their personal trajectories may have been on their mind during the preparations: no longer qualifying as a 'young talent' or an 'emerging artist' in grant applications, but now having to grapple with being known as a 'mid-career artist' or even 'established talent.' Considering the outcome of the exhibition, *Jumping the Shark* more likely indicates a healthy dose of self-irony, and an interest in finding the subtle, the uncomfortable and the mysterious in something 'spectacular.' The totality of the presentation is more confident than desperate, absurd but with a dark critical edge. Perhaps it is here that the differences between the art world and popular media become clear; what would be labelled as blatantly stupid and nonsensical in a TV show has a different relevance in the context of an experimental artist residency.

The BIM Station (Turfsingel 16) was one of the first public gas stations in the Netherlands<sup>(2)</sup>. Renowned architect Wim Dudok designed the building, now a national her-

itage site, in 1953. After closing its doors in September 2018, the station was repurposed by the city of Groningen as a cultural destination nicknamed 'Dudok aan het Diep.' As a part of the city's renewal program, the station's outside canopy was painted bright magenta, while the building itself retained



2 BIM station, NvdK on 3d warehouse, 2014.



3 The canopy with quotes, photo: Jouswersma, 2018.

its colour scheme<sup>(3)</sup>. With an eye towards increasing its cultural visibility, the municipality recently provided Het Resort with the opportunity to use the location as a temporary exhibition site.

Feiko Beckers, Steven Jouwersma and Alban Karsten each created work in response to the BIM station or the surrounding public space. Using the specific context of the BIM station as a starting point, it became difficult for the artists to ignore the jarring magenta-coloured petrol pumps. In order to solve this problem, Jouwersma turned the magenta into black, while Beckers in the set design for his video referenced the red and white colours of the original BIM station. Karsten's project in turn seamlessly fit into the surroundings: at first sight the car wreck might seem left over from the former gas station.

The total environment created at the BIM station seems both odd and familiar. The video in the window reminds one of the advertisements that used to be installed in the same place, although now unspectacular things are promoted. The blackness of the station is overwhelming, but its presence withdraws at the same time. After the spectacular performance of the opening, the car became a victim of everyday vandalism.



4 Alban Karsten, *Mitigations*, detail: broken window repair with cardboard and tape, 2019.

## The Unspectacular Things

Feiko Beckers (1983)

If you have ever dreamt of living in a large and luxurious palace, Feiko Beckers, using astonishingly simple and rational arguments, knows how to convince you otherwise. Instead of fantasizing over the infinite parties or the paintings that could adorn the walls of such a palace, Beckers is instead most impressed by the housekeeper's ability to keep those rooms clean. In his video *The Unspectacular Things* the artist turns our attention towards those everyday things no one puts on a pedestal <sup>(image booklet 1)</sup>. Yet Beckers does betray some interest in 'jumping the shark' – in this case jumping through a window. While he explains in the video why ordinary things easily impress him, we can catch a glimpse of the glass that the artist is about to jump through. When he puts on safety glasses in order to protect his eyes and calmly runs towards the window we assume that he will make the leap. But we never see a shot of the actual jump. Instead, Beckers focuses on the less exciting, or (if you are convinced by his views) the most impressive act of cleaning the shattered glass afterwards.

After the 'jump', the artist changes from a confident and convincing TED-talk lecturer into a humble and somewhat awkward janitor. His clumsiness is humorous and

uncomfortable at the same time. These are simple actions generally considered by most people to be beneath them, or at least a rather mundane activity. In absence of the spectacle, the unspectacular is painstakingly scrutinised. The simplicity is re-enforced in the video by the lack of fancy edits and ironed clothing. Is this style emblematic for Dutch culture, or even more so, typical for Groningen? Actually Beckers regarded the residency invitation from Het Resort as an opportunity to return to styles he had been working with during the time he studied at the Art Academy Minerva. He graduated in 2006 with short videos in which he worked with slapstick concepts, such as *Thirteen Attempts to Slip Over a Banana Peel* (2005) or *Dropping an Anvil* (2006)<sup>(5,6)</sup>. The results



5. Feiko Beckers, *Thirteen attempts to slip over a banana peel*, 2005, video.

were slapstick tricks executed in such a calm, controlled manner, in which the humorous effect was due more to the absurdity of Beckers' realistic approach than to any sudden surprise element.



6. Feiko Beckers, *Dropping an anvil*, 2006, video.

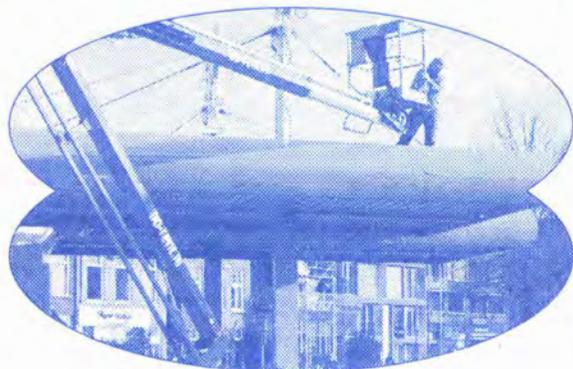
In *The Unspectacular Things* Beckers also plays with contemporary public and media conventions: in this case, the know-it-all who 'goes viral' on television, film or social media. However, the message he conveys is not like that of the average TED-talk full of grand commentary and advice on issues close to everyone's mind. Instead, Beckers takes a different angle, seemingly persuasive in its humility, though you are never quite sure whether he is being honest or tongue-in-cheek. Whether or not he is serious, Beckers reminds us how the underexposed labour of cleaning is involved in almost every aspect of our daily lives.

The presence of fellow artist Alban Karsten's car wreck in a public space unintentionally brought a similar insight to bear. Two days after the performance the police came to check on the car, which according to protocol should have been removed by then. While the authorities subsequently learned that the crashed car was art, the

public itself may not have agreed: the headlights were later stolen and during a cold snowy night a homeless person might have even used it as shelter.

## *Protestant Voodoo* Steven Jouwersma (1982)

The creative process of Steven Jouwersma often starts with an interrogation of the specific context he works in. Those contexts range from foreign countries where he is able to adopt the role of an outsider, to familiar cities like Groningen, where he once lived. In considering the BIM station at Het Resort and in relating to this particular situation, there was one 'elephant in the room' he could not ignore: the magenta canopies of the gas station. Since circumventing its presence was impossible, Jouwersma decided to tackle this issue head on by covering the entire gas station canopy with black plastic, adding a new layer of meaning to the transitory area<sup>(7)</sup>. He not only concealed the abundant

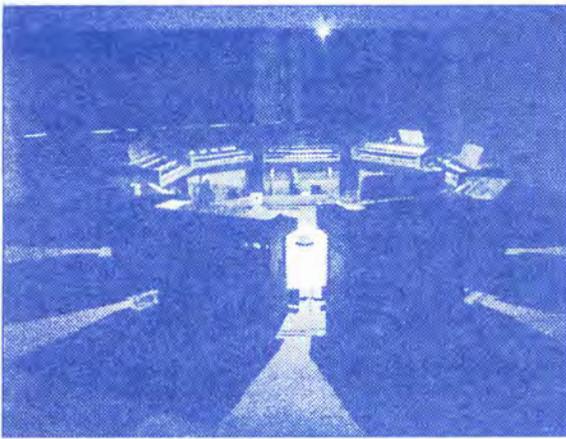


7. Steven Jouwersma, *Protestant Voodoo*, 2018, work process.

pink colour but also the marketing slogans such as: 'Gelukkig dat je er bent' and 'Ruimte voor jou.'<sup>(3)</sup> While pink is more often used in Groningen to demarcate a transitory area, Jouwersma thought black would be a more appropriate colour to represent change. The material allowed for a range of different interpretations; chiefly the connotations with oil and petrol in the BIM station's history. Some of the public even questioned whether the black plastic wrapping was a stunt organised for the occasion of the annual shopping sale known as 'Black Friday.'

*Protestant Voodoo* also added another presence to the spatial composition, that of sound, in this case music (image booklet 2).

Jouwersma attached a hundred-year-old organ to the roof directly above the former petrol pumps. Next to the organ he pasted black silhouettes of poplars, characteristic trees of Groningen's landscape. Second-hand organs have a longer history in the artists oeuvre: Jouwersma graduated from the Frank Mohr Institute in Groningen with the piece *Borgel-Tron* (2007), a generative sound installation made from nine electronic organs<sup>(8)</sup>. For this project he included documentation of conversations with the elderly who were for example trading the organ for a piece of pie. Although he chose this time not to document the process for this project, Jouwersma considers the entire network of possible relations around the site and its history to be



8. Steven Jouwersma, *Borgel-tron*, 2007, installation.

an integral part of the project; here the only reference to this strategy were the poplar tree images.

This elimination of interhuman exchanges and socio-political circumstances allowed him the opportunity to instead create space for a more transcendent experience, orchestrated by subtle spatial and aural arrangements. The monotonous sound of the organ coming from above not only made the casual passer-by look upwards, but more importantly suggested by spatial placement and aural tone a quasi-religious mood, invoked in the title of the work: *Protestant Voodoo*. Here two contrasting tendencies on the religious spectrum are suggested: 'protestant,' associated with the sober side of Dutch culture, and 'voodoo' connected with non-western, superstitious and symbolic meanings. During the opening night the mystic presence could certainly be felt when the organ sound functioned as an obscure soundtrack to the car crash of Karsten. In addition the black packing ma-

terial seemed to absorb all the city lights in order to create a dark stage under the full moon for the opening night. In the remaining weeks of the exhibition *Protestant Voodoo* continued to announce its presence in the public space. The organ kept playing and the wind slowly tore apart the black plastic, creating wind sculptures that revealed the gas station's original underlying magenta canopy.

## Mitigations

Alban Karsten (1983)

On Friday, 23 of November 2018, a crowd of excited students, artists and art lovers from Groningen lined up as if around an imaginary auto racetrack. While enjoying a glass of cava they waited for Alban Karsten's *Mitigations*, the opening act of *Jumping the Shark* (image booklet 3). Some sought comfort and warmth by eating a slice of pizza ordered by the artist at the pizza chain located across the street.<sup>(9)</sup> Once Karsten started the en-



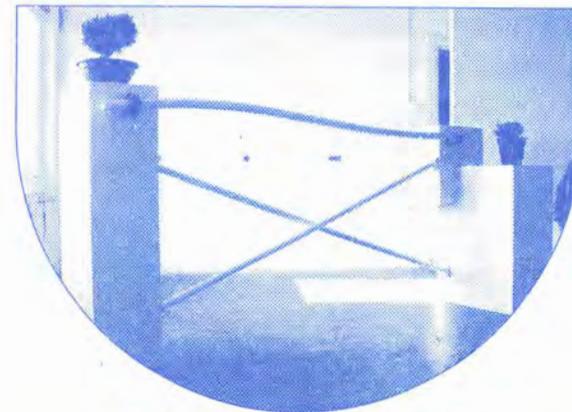
9. Alban Karsten, *Mitigations*, detail, people waiting for the performance, 2018.

gine of the old and rickety car, the suspense rose, further intensified by the monotonous sound of Steven Jouwersma's organ. Suddenly the car accelerated to 40 k/h and crashed into a nearby concrete sculpture.

To the great relief of the tense crowd, the artist stepped unharmed out of the wreck, to immediate praise and celebration. The 'composition' of the collision was afterwards scrutinised by the 'witnesses' drawn to the wreck like a moth to a flame; photographing scattered car components, posing in front of the arrangement for their social media, and even contributing to the composition by placing a champagne glass in front of the bright front headlight.

Why did Alban Karsten feel the need to crash the car at the opening? The key to answering this question lays in the title of the work – *Mitigations*. The word mitigations stems from the generic term 'hostile vehicle mitigations' or measures to protect people from terrorist attacks. Karsten created an artistic version of an anti-terrorist barrier, a blockade designed to withstand a vehicle attack, much like the enormous flower pots placed by the municipality at the border between the gas station and the Turfsingel. In his action employing a broad definition of the verb 'to perform' (Oxford dictionary: carry out, accomplish, or fulfil an action task or function) the artist performed a 'crash-test' of his design.

The subject of public safety in the form of sculpture was an extension of his previous work *Bufferzone* (2018), created together with Kitty Maria<sup>(10)</sup>. One sculpture of this installation resembled an obstacle for show jumping. While this object was a finished



10. Alban Karsten + Kitty Maria. *Bufferzone*. 2018. installation.

sculpture, a similar jumping obstacle was the starting point for *Mitigations*. The solid concrete block anchored in the ground was damaged by Karsten's crash-test. The impact of the collision bent the steel anchorage and knocked over the sculpture, including the plants placed on top and the metal cross between the two barriers. Karsten's performance was not the last human intervention. Since the sculpture is situated in public space, people have interacted with the installation in various ways, ranging from contemplation to vandalism.

The performance and the resulting installation address the subject of safety on several levels: Karsten's 'well-being' and safety in the actual situation as well as in the context of the arts. Karsten fought his instinct of self-preservation by deliberately hurting himself. The next day he had a bad headache and a laceration below his eye from the safety goggles, which he wore as protection against the possibility of a broken windshield. Since Karsten did not have a driver's

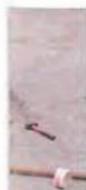
license he set out to acquire the permission to drive a car for the exhibition. Having unfortunately failed the behind-the-wheel examination, he and his performance consequently pushed the limits of the law. Does the art context compensate for the illegality of the action? In the art world, especially during openings the spectacular is almost always something keenly anticipated by the audience. The experience economy turned the amazing into the expected: the majority of visitors witnessed a car-crash for the first time in real life.

While we frequently look at crashes in films and on television, the omnipresent concrete barriers in our public spaces remain generally unnoticed. Crashes are at once impressive and frightening. At the former gas station of Het Resort Karsten enhanced this ambiguity with his performance. Everything however culminated in a happy ending when the artist emerged and cheered in victory after the crash succeeded<sup>(11)</sup>. Just like Fonzie in *Happy Days*, Karsten had managed to 'jump the shark.'



11 left: Fonzie, *Happy Days*, 1977 / right: Karsten, *Mitigations*, 2018.

# 'Jumping the shark'



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images: het resort

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images: feiko beckers

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*Protestant Voodoo*

**Steven Jouwersma**

images: steven jouwersma

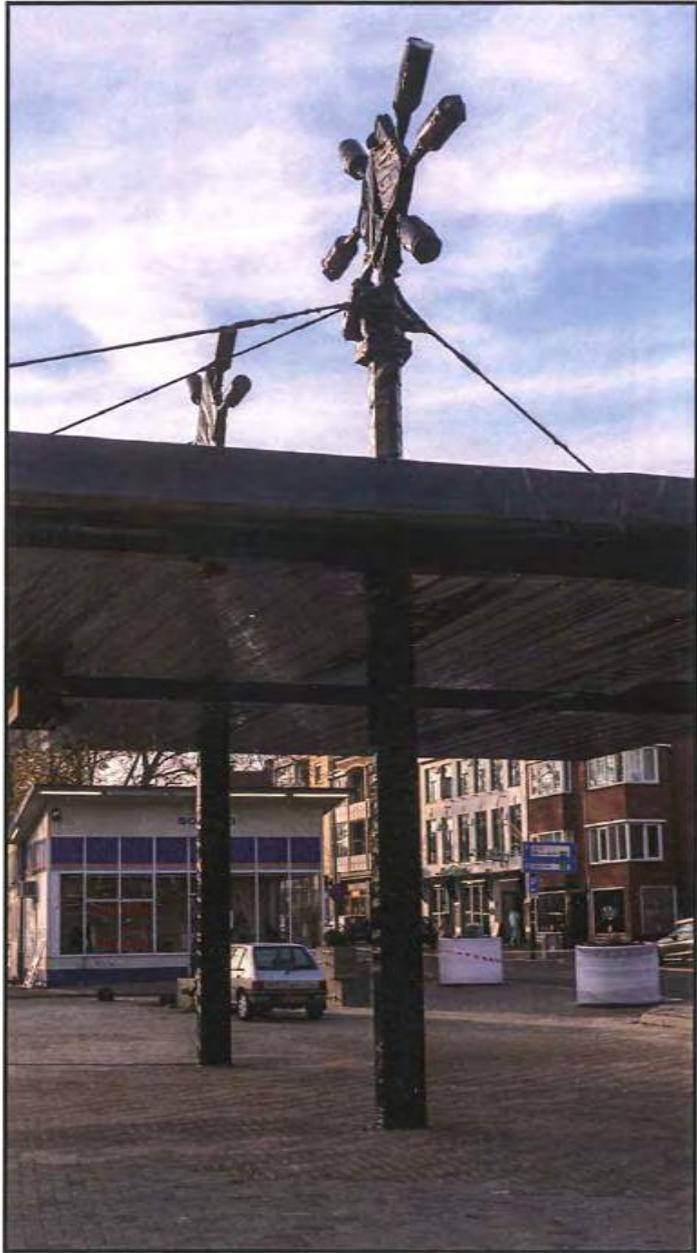
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*Mitigations*

**Alban Karsten**

image left: tom van huisstede  
image right: het resort









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11 left: Fonzie, *Happy Days*.

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