Laurent John:

The creative process.

It's been mythologized and idealised, and generated thousands of Instagram quotes along the way, but we're still fascinated by that moment of creation because there's something mysterious about it. Something that can't quite be defined.

My name is Laurent John, and I'm the studio's coordinator at Somerset House, a working art centre in the centre of London. As an organisation, we curate large scale exhibitions, but we're also host to a creative community on site: Somerset House Studios, home to all sorts of creatives, from musicians, to visual artists, set designers, to filmmakers.

What's really great about working here is that you get to witness the whole creative process from start to finish and hear the sort of conversations that arise when idea is just taking shape. The sort of things you don't really hear about once it's hanging in a gallery or mixed on an album. That's what the Somerset House podcast is all about, going behind the scenes here to tell the stories being told by our programme and creative community. And in this first series, we're honing in on the ideas that come out of the middle of the creative process. Before it's finished. Each episode, we follow a different artist, as they explore one idea that has emerged from a work in progress, to see where it ends up. Along the way they sit down with a cross section of creative thinkers to help shape what form it might take next. Welcome to The Process. Episode one, breaking the rules.

Andy Holden:

Here I've got a very tacky red and black catapult that came free with one of the Beanos. It was a little bit disappointing. What else have we got in the box?

Laurent John:

I think breaking the rules has to be at the core of the creative process. How can you create something new if you don't try something different? So in this episode of The Process, we go behind the scenes with an artist turned curator, Andy Holden, who curated the exhibition, Beano, the art of breaking the rules, as he considers his next move with the performance artist and provocateur Mark McGowan.

Andy Holden:

Don't really know what that does.

Laurent John:

A quick heads up. There's some strong language in this one.

Andy Holden:

Small cap-pop.

My normal answer would... Is my name is Andy Holden. And that much I know.

Squirt gun.

I'm an artist who makes films and animations and installations. And currently I'm wearing a red and black striped curator's hat and doing an exhibition at Somerset House called the art of breaking the rules, which is about the Beano and its influence on art.

That's the sound of eyeballs falling out of a pair of fake spectacles.

And we're currently, though, in my studio, which is my converted upholstery workshop in suburban Bedford.

I thought there was some more fun [inaudible 00:03:33].

Now I guess we're just going to have to go through on the demo of the wish whoopie cushion, aren't I?

Okay. Yep.

Would I describe myself as a rule breaker? I mean, I'm not sure you set out to be deliberately rebellious, but on the other hand, I don't have a huge amount of regard for the way things are normally done.

I think, yeah. Like I perversely enjoy upending expectation. I think play is important. I mean, there is something about ending and breaking the rules in play in the sense that in play, the rules are kind of... At least tested, you have a structure, but then they can evolve.

The Beano, we kind of know... When you say to people, they sort of know what that spirit is, what that is, which is anarchy-light and a spirit of anti-education or hating school or hating anyone who's pretentious or stuck up or aligns themselves with the world of adults or power. So my question was what would that legacy of that... You know, what does that do?

Saw a good one floating around.

I subscribed to it and was in the fan club and I would buy it every week, and I would draw from it. I'd copy out these characters. That was like a... It was a big part, I guess, in my early development of wanting to be an artist, which is what I wanted to bring to the exhibition, which was this idea that the Beano on comics can be a gateway into art and creativity. Yeah.

This is Calamity James. This would be a Tom Paterson drawings, always there in British culture. And it taps into a certain Britain, British sensibility.

I say, [Carithus 00:05:33], isn't that Calamity James? Easily the least fortunate youth on the face of the globe? That says a man in the ugly mush sport... Spotting club. Then, fast face plastic surgery shop. Maybe your luck would change if you had a face change. Sprout. There's always a pile dynamic at play with those main characters. In any way, it's just, kids versus adults or normal people versus the unruly Maverick characters of Beano. So the woman who's just gone into fast faces is coming out like a very attractive looking lady. And that says, "Wow, I look 150 years younger." Ragged, little jam stained vest, streaming with desire. "I'll give it a try," says Calamity James.

You're told don't do this and be quiet and be home at this time. You realise all these arbitrary rules start to start to enter the world. And the Beano goes up, these kind of whispers to you, "But these are arbitrary. The adults have made these up." And you start to think, oh yes, rules are always made by somebody. Cool. A bit expensive for me, is looking at the prices. Oh, we do have the bargain brunch. So, some sale items, sorted broken noses, double chins, cross eyes, buck teeth.

Very different from superhero comics, which are about upholding the law, and escapism, in the sense that these are really fantastical. But no, with Beano, was offering some kind of weird realism because it's... It's just kids and adults in some never ending battle.

Later. Well, James did get a new face on the cheap, but I don't think his luck has changed. And we see Calamity James walking down the street with a mishmash of an elephant's trunk, large pig's ears, two big eyes. You get the impression it didn't work out well.

I think art means a lot of things to different people and different... At different times. You know, sometimes, for me, I often think about art as a kind of emotional experiment. An experiment isn't necessarily breaking a rule, but it is set to challenge to find a new set to test something. Often, you're... if you just go out the way to break the rules, it doesn't always result in good work. But if you go out to test them, then it's funny.

Speaker 3:

Sadly, he's not a transport planner or a politician. He's a performance artist. So his protest consists of trying to pull a root master a hundred yards using just his big toe.

Andy Holden:

Pull the bus, pull the bus, pull the bus, pull the bus, pull the bus.

Speaker 4:

Finally, to the man who's rolling his way into the record books with an epic 40 mile trick.

Mark McGowan:

Actually I see myself as a great British adventurer. Sir Edmond Hillary and Scott [Leandhart 00:08:05], Dane Melon McCartha.

Speaker 6:

Mark McGowan.

Speaker 7:

He started in London this morning.

Mark McGowan:

I'm mark McGowan. I'm an artist. And my practise has always included performance, public events, pushing onto YouTube videos, but always trying to be quite naughty or raise awareness about political things and sometimes commentating on political stuff, which is what I do now.

Andy Holden:

I've discovered Martin McGowan when I was a student in living in new cross, in the early two thousands. There was stories, would circulate of these artworks or stunts or things that Mark would get up to. I remember hearing about him eating a swan.

Speaker 8:

Now an artist has risked the wrath of monarchists, not to mention breaking the law by eating swan, a privilege only legally available to the queen.

Andy Holden:

But I first heard about him pushing a peanut with his nose from Goldsmiths to the houses of parliament, to protest about student tuition fees. And I remember being... Thinking that was terrific.

Speaker 9:

We mentioned yesterday, this story of a student, an art student, who's pushing a monkey nut with his nose all through London to 10 downing street.

Mark McGowan:

What I wanted to do was get in the news and reclaim the work.

Speaker 9:

Mark, why in earth are you doing this?

Mark McGowan:

I'm doing it just to try and show people how difficult is to start off your career with a 15,000 pound debt.

Speaker 9:

We can see some footage of you now actually nosing that nut along.

Mark McGowan:

Tony Blair was prime minister. I pushed it to there and handed the nut in. It took me two weeks.

And during the drought, I turned a tap on and left it running for, I said for a year, but basically I just turned the tap on. It was in the sink in the space.

Simon Harris:

Surely the responsible thing to do is turn it off. Can I do that? Can I turn it off?

Speaker 11:

You can, but there's a notice up there and it says, "If you find the tap off, you have to turn it back on."

Simon Harris:

Why? Is it still art?

Speaker 11:

Well, the silence.

Simon Harris:

That's still art.

Speaker 11:

Well, I think we better turn it back on now.

Simon Harris:

Or, put another way, a complete and utter waste of water. Simon Harris, London tonight, Peckham.

Mark McGowan:

People were fuming, you know. But it was a really, really big thing. Crawled on my hands and knees from London to Canterbury, 28 boxes of chocolates tied around my wrists and ankles, a rose between my teeth. Put a big sign on my back, which said, "Could you love me?" Catapulted two old ladies in a rocket.

Yeah, I did this where I said, it's in the show downstairs where I keyed 47 cars.

Speaker 12:

Now, next tonight, pitch of the scene, you're walking out to your car. And as you get closer, you notice a little mark on the side and then it dawns on you that some vandal has dragged a key along it, leaving an ugly scratch on your paintwork that will cost an arm and a leg to have repaired.

Speaker 13:

You're not going to be best pleased, are you? But how about if you then found out it was all in the name of art?

Mark McGowan:

Which was pre-internet, so it would absolutely kick off if you said you'd done something like that, but it was... The nature of the thing was, it was to be naughty. It was to get attention, was to get the media, but lots of it wasn't true.

I just thought I'd do one, but it became compulsive obsessive. And I ended up scratching about 30.

And it was looking at how I could create narratives using this medium and then showing in spaces like TV footage.

Andy Holden:

And then I re-encountered him maybe 10 years later as an artist taxi driver, when I was on Twitter. And I think then I worked out, it was the same Mark McGowan.

Mark McGowan:

From page of the Metro this morning, storm in a sleaze cup. George useless, sorry, corruption. It must be a massive, massive, massive, massive fucking teacup.

Andy Holden:

I'd like to ask Mark about performance as a type of protest. You know what, where the performance art has the ability to change things. I'd like to ask him about a text that I know is really dear to him. That's also very dear to me, which is the Claes Oldenburg's "I am for an art." I feel like that is right at the heart of what I love about art. And it's definitely at the heart of what Mark loves about art. So maybe that's the overlap?

Mark McGowan:

I'm for an art that is political, erotical, mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum. I'm for an art that grows up, not knowing if it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero. I'm for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and still comes out on top. I'm for an art. I'm for an art. [crosstalk 00:12:52] imitates the human [crosstalk 00:12:53] tied like pharaohs. [crosstalk 00:12:55] water tanks and speeding clouds [crosstalk 00:12:57] whatever is necessary. I'm for an art [crosstalk 00:13:00] that takes government inspected art. Grade-A art. Regular price art. Yellow ripe art. Extra fancy art. [crosstalk 00:13:07] blunt, ready to eat art [crosstalk 00:13:08] sweet and stupid. Less for less art. [crosstalk 00:13:10] life itself. Ready to cook art. I'm for fully cleaned art. Spendless art. Eat better art. Ham art. Pork art. Chicken art. Tomato art.[crosstalk 00:13:19] banana art, apple art, turkey art, cake art, cookie art.

I'm for an art that's combed down. That's hung from each ear that is laid on the lips and under the eyes, that is shaved from the legs, that is brushed on the teeth, that is fixed on the thigh. That's slipped on the foot. Square, which becomes blobby.

Andy Holden:

What does that piece of writing mean to you?

Mark McGowan:

I always use it whenever I... I was teaching an elective at uni, and I always used to use that because one of my first experiences coming from... I came out of a treatment house, went into uni, and being told that you can do anything that you want. So someone who had a hedonistic or like... and then you, you sort of get clean and you're there and they say, "No, no, you can do whatever you want." That's Claes Oldenberg. And that's what I tried to tell the students, "Look, it's like a rising dog shit. This is, this is a piece of art that you see on the pavement," you know, seven up art. What's he talking about? He just keeps going and says everything is art. But he uses such brilliant sentences. And it means everything. It is everything that you are allowed to create really and be whatever you want to be. I couldn't believe it.

Andy Holden:

I'd say, I mean, I guess it's... It's the ultimate text that tells you there are no rules, right? It says "No, if you see it as art, if you want it to be art, then go for it." And yeah, it's the ultimate motivational speech for artists. It's like the equivalent of you should play it on a loop when you get up in the mornings and salute yourself in the mirror before you go out of the house or something.

Mark McGowan:

That's what Claes Oldenburg represents. Anything is possible, you know what I mean?

Andy Holden:

Yeah. If you can imagine it, you can, yeah.

Then, and I managed to... I met him once and interviewed him for a radio show and he hardly said anything, but he sat there and drew the microphone in front of me and I just watched him just draw this. And it was like, "Oh, you, you can't stop. Can you?"

Mark McGowan:

And what you said there, if you can imagine it, if you can imagine it, it's real. Do you know what I mean? If you can imagine it, it's real, like the real is of no significance to us whatsoever. None of us, the human race. We live in a state of continual and perpetual fantasy. That's Beano, isn't it?

Andy Holden:

Well, this brings us a little bit onto your work, and the idea that if you can imagine it, it becomes real, is a lot of what you did with your work. Right? I mean, so I first encountered your work when I was living in south London in the early two thousands. And then you'd see these things in the paper, or I would see "Artist eats small corgi dog. Artist pushes peanut with nose to houses of parliament. Artist eats swan. Artist keys cars," and be like, it didn't map... that's all you knew, but it seemed real, like the story was strong enough. And so you're like, "Oh, the artists did," you don't even question whether you did it or what happened. It had a reality. And that's what you, I think, worked out that if you put a story like that in the media, it has an automatic reality, which is actually quite pressing in the world we live in now, with fake news, in a way.

Mark McGowan:

Yeah, that's it. What they're doing now in the government, Dominic Cummings said it. If you say, if you say the opposite to what's actually happening, that's real. It's really bizarre as well, because you have this power with words and I wrote all those headlines. So when it was... I wrote the title of the piece, was "Artist eats a small corgi dog." Because I thought that's what the headline would be. So when I send it to the newspapers, they're already like, they got it. Do you know what I mean?

Andy Holden:

Yeah, the story existed before you'd even done it. The story was already real.

Mark McGowan:

So narrative exists before, during, and after the event. The narrative that you say before the event, any announcements, any things, like what you said can be visualised and that narrative can, even if they don't see it happen, they'll remember that years later. "Remember that guy?" And the narrative that exists during the event, sometimes fucking ridiculous. You know what I mean? Because you've got like alcoholics children, and you're crawling along builders. Do you know what I mean? Your worst nightmare for social interaction when you're doing something really stupid.

But quite often to witness it live, the actual performance's quite boring for a lot of people, especially performance arts, it's in a different language, you know what I mean? People don't understand and get scared.

Speaker 14:

That's art. That's funny, because that don't look like art to me.

Speaker 15:

What's it look like to you?

Speaker 14:

Just running on the floor for no reason.

Speaker 16:

He's not just doing the same cap as me. Has he?

Speaker 17:

Art? You call that art on the floor? I think he's a bit of a nutcase, really.

Mark McGowan:

And then the narrative that exists after the event. Wow. I mean, you can say anything. You can construct it, you can embellish it. You can write about it. You know, you can make it, you can make it legend.

So that's from Peggy Felan. She wrote this book called unmarked and she's a performance theorist. And she says the power of performance lies in it not really being there.

Speaker 18:

Do we want to go to the strand? Yeah. We're on the strand. What are you talking about? You idiot.

Mark McGowan:

Just going past number 10 Downing street. We know all sorts of naughty trouble, breaking the rules. They're in parliament today to try and get one of their mates off.

Parliament Square. We're in parliament square now.

There was so much action around here before. You know, one time I came down here and I... And I said that I was going to set myself on fire, like a self immolation in a protest against the Iraq war.

So I came down the night before, told some press, they came down, took pictures of me. I was standing there, right there, on that green right there, holding a green petrol can. And they were taking pictures of me. But when we got down here, there were like 200 police, 50... They all had fire extinguishers and there was a crowd. You never seen anything like it. I swear to God, I asked Andy, there was 500 people down here waiting, waiting for someone to set themselves on fire. And I remember on the night before, they said to me, how are you going to do it? And I said, well, I've been doing a bit of training and I'm going to have someone that's going, an assistant, who's going to have a thing with an extremely long wick.

Andy Holden:

I mean you position your artworks quite a lot of times as an act of protest of some sort, against. If you left the tap on for a year to protest the waste of water, or... And I was trying to think, do you think performance has the ability to change things politically?

Mark McGowan:

Really mad. And that, because we... I was saying this a little while ago about, on the internet, on the Twitter and on the Facebook, when the extinction rebellion was out two years ago, and it was down in Trafalgar square, you had this massive group of them doing this shamanic, Yogi, free, all in outfits, round Trafalgar square. Got 6.3 million, and everyone's going, "oh my God," it has a different language. It's live performance. It's like dance. You go to a dance event or a performative thing. You do that in the street. People get confused. Because they like linear things. You know what I mean? Start and finish. Like you read the book and that's it. These people out there, you don't even know. What are they doing? What are they doing? Look at them. There was screaming, howling, like billion kind of faces with tears dripping out their eyes.

Andy Holden:

It was... I thought it was brilliant, but-

Mark McGowan:

But public reaction, that's it. Isn't it?

Andy Holden:

Yeah. I mean, it's about cultural consciousness, though. Isn't it? The language is seeping and you change the narrative. That's what good image making of protests can do it. Just slightly changes the image.

Mark McGowan:

Oh, oh my God. What about the... That's something to talk about, breaking the rules. insulate Britain.

Andy Holden:

Yeah.

Mark McGowan:

I mean that's serious, isn't it? They're stopping all the traffic and they're going out, talk about that is really naughty, because people are fuming, aren't they?

Andy Holden:

Right.

Mark McGowan:

Did you see that? They, they came along and inked them.

Andy Holden:

I didn't see that.

Mark McGowan:

Oh, it was really awful, despicable. Some guy just walked along and all elderly people, just inked them all. Proper blue ink all across their faces.

Andy Holden:

Yikes.

Mark McGowan:

I looked here and I went "Dennis the Menace." I was like, where's [Nasha 00:22:24]? Oh. But like all those other... What, everyone's trying to break the rules. Aren't they?

Andy Holden:

Yeah.

That what made it most complicated, doing this show. Because I think there's an easy way of romanticising. Also I was making the Beano show at the time of coronavirus, you know? And so... I don't think I've ever thought about rules so much in my life, because like every week it was like a new press conference, rule to six, two metre rule, rule of the mask.

So we had this constant rollout of rules. And then we had this whole new discourse around following the rules for the greater goods, which sound like, felt great for a while. And then you had people who were breaking the rules, were then seen as kind of villains. And I was like...

But often I'd seen people, we're talking about with art, breaking the rules as that being a, I don't know, normal associated with the Avant garde or the left, but now there was this reversal going on, where everyone on the left's going, "I followed the rules, wear a mask," and everyone on the fringe right are being "ah, F the rules," I'm like... So it was a really confusing time to be thinking about Beano and the message of who, but the things I come down to, it's not about whether you break the rules, it's about who makes the rules. I mean, do you think for art to be political, it should break existing rules or taboos?

Mark McGowan:

I mean, now it's different with the internet, because you can get really hammered. You know, if I did keying the cars now, be slaughtered from all sides. It's difficult, because you have to put yourself at risk. Loads of times, I was at risk.

Andy Holden:

So do you think art's more about risk than it is about breaking the rules? Something has to be risked? Something personally has to be offered up?

Mark McGowan:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean it's... I do this thing in... It's one of the sessions I do at uni, it's called deep play, dark play and I had this Portugese guy, and we had this gig in a pub. He came in naked, he came out the gent's toilet. So there's all people, like builders in the yellow jackets, and different people. And he came out naked, and he put... He had a TV and thing and he got on top of the table and the camera was pointed up his bum, and then he sits on the edge and everyone's just going, "oh, fucking, what the fucking hell has this pub turned into?"

So he's got this massive jar and it's honey. And he put it over his shoulder and let it drip. And he put it over his shoulder, there, and it all just tripped down his back, all the honey. He got this pillow and pulled the pillow open and shook all the feathers out, little tiny white feathers. Fuck, it went everywhere, all in the air, in the pub, in the beer, behind the counter. It was just like a... One of those, it was just like a feather bomb thing. And he just slowly got off the table and turned. And he was like an angel because he hadn't got the honey down the middle bit. They were, they were like two wings.

Your starting point shouldn't be material. Or your starting point should be, every time, I'm going to make something absolutely extraordinary. And when people see it, they're going to laugh. They're going to cry. They're going to fall over. You've got to pick them up, but I'm going to make something, because I know when I see something that I really like, how I feel, how can you do that? How can I do that? It's a good thing to tell students as well. It's a good thing for yourself.

Andy Holden:

Tell anybody. I feel like I'm having the best [inaudible 00:25:48] in my life right now. I'm feeling, I'm feeling so motivated.

Mark McGowan:

Now we're coming up to white hall, and they did a protest around here. You know, they actually banned protest back in, what was it? 2004. They banned protests in a two... They made an exclusion zone, and I came down and I did a protest, and I had a t-shirt on, and on the t-shirt, generally it said, "this is not a protest." So when I was there and all the police were coming out, "what are you doing?" I said, "read my t-shirt," and I was walking backwards and they kept walking with me. "Why are you walking backwards? Because you are going to cause... And are you actually doing a protest? Because if you are, under section 40, we can arrest you." I said, "Well, it's going to look stupid, arresting someone that says this is not a protest."

Andy Holden:

There's Heather Phillipson's sculpture.

Mark McGowan:

Oh yeah. That's in the... from the Beano show.

Andy Holden:

Yeah. Looking good.

Speaker 20:

Thank you.

Andy Holden:

Oh Mark. Thank you so much.

Mark McGowan:

Okay guys.

Andy Holden:

See you, Mark.

Oh, I could listen to Mark speak all day, and I mean, he's a great storyteller. So you get... Which is how the work war worked in the first place, that he had a knack for creating images. I mean, when he was talking about just making something extraordinary, it's like... Having just done the Beano show, you have them back, staring at a blank piece of paper again, to have that as a sentence going around your head, try and make something extraordinary is a good way of easing the anxiety of having to start fresh. I mean, that's what you want to do, but it's easy to forget.

Mark McGowan:

I'm for an artist who vanishes, turning up in a white cap, painting signs or hallways. I'm for an art of slightly rotten funeral flowers, hung bloody rabbits, and wrinkly, yellow chickens, bass drums, and tambourines and plastic photographs. I'm for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and it's heavy and coarse, and blunt and sweet, and stupid as life itself. I'm for cool art, seven-up art, Pepsi art, sunshine art, 39 cents art, 15 cents art. Factional art, drop bomb art, them art, methanol art, LNM art, Ex-Lax art, [inaudible 00:28:30] art. Heaven Hill art. Pamerol art. [inaudible 00:28:34] art. Art [inaudible 00:28:36]. 9.99 art. [inaudible 00:28:41]

Laurent John:

Thanks to Andy Holden and Mark McGowan. This series of The Process is produced by Alana Chance, presented by me, Laurent John, and exec produced by Elena Scott for Somerset House. The music is by Car Beard and Harry Murdoch, with special thanks to Equinox for the use of their track in this episode. Next episode will be delving into the world of financial astrology. Yes, that is a thing. With another artist in residence here. Gary Zhexi Zang.