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## **Playing Tricks**

Anyone who belongs to a sphere of culture that seeks the perfect state  
somewhere in the past  
must feel very queerly indeed when confronted by the figure of the trickster.

C.G. Jung<sup>1</sup>

He dressed up like a clown for them  
With his face paint white and red  
And on his best behavior  
In a dark room on the bed he kissed them all  
He'd kill ten thousand people  
With a sleight of his hand  
Running far, running fast to the dead  
He took off all their clothes for them  
He put a cloth on their lips  
Quiet hands, quiet kiss  
On the mouth

And in my best behavior  
I am really just like him  
Look beneath the floorboards  
For the secrets I have hid

Sufjan Stevens, *John Wayne Gacy, Jr.*<sup>2</sup>

After Kafka, we are all tricksters, evading our doom as best we can.

Harold Bloom<sup>3</sup>

The figures in the pictures are outlandish: their faces are covered in clown make-up that disfigures traits and amplifies features, thus rendering them eerie, if not

disturbing. Many of these images were shot with flash against a black background, imbuing the scene with a sinister atmosphere, stirring up a sense of foreboding. Moreover, this darkness surrounding the protagonists produces a “black box” effect of sorts: they seem to come out of nowhere (our darkest dreams?), and rowdily attack every onlooker, his or her sense of order and propriety, as with Faith No More’s *Gentle Art of Making Enemies*:

Don't Look So Surprised  
 Happy Birthday...Fucker  
 Blow That Candle Out,  
 We're Gonna Kick You, Kick You!<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the clowns seem to belong to some sort of gang – like Alex and his three droogs from Stanley Kubrick’s *Clockwork Orange* (1971), who dress queerly, with bowler hats and white uniforms and groin pads, and are always up for some of the old ultra-violence: “How are thou, thou globby bottle of cheap, stinking chip-oil?” That’s how Alex addresses a spontaneous adversary and unhesitatingly challenges him: “Come and get one in the yarble, if you have any yarbles, you eunuch jelly, thou!” The clown’s violence is serious and playful at once, scary and fun, so that we see their innocuous smile transform into a malevolent grin. Their tracksuits betray certain class aspiration – to be art *workers*, to be hooligans in spite of their bourgeois provenance, and in spite of the fact that in Poland almost everybody is of peasant origins. To prove this, they will fuck you up; they may not mean to, but they will.

This might be one possible meaning of the title of Irena Kalicka’s series of photographs, *What Happened Will Not Unhappen*. Once the horror has started, there is no going back. While looking at Kalicka’s clown images one cannot but think of Pennywise the Dancing Clown from Stephen King’s *It* (I am thinking of the miniseries from 1990; it was



Alex and his droogs (Stanley Kubrick, *Clockwork Orange*, 1971)



recently announced that a remake will be directed by Cary Fukunaga), but here it is as if the roles were reversed and instead of one monster that feeds on children we

now have a gang of young brutes in clown disguises showing their teeth, a pack of laughing Ronald McDonalds roaming the streets, scaring the shit out of children and adults alike. Of course, there is also the Joker from Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* (2008), a profoundly terrifying clown bent on bringing society down on itself, who walks among us wreaking havoc. This is why among the most disturbing images of the series are one where the gang walks down a street in broad daylight as if nothing is happening, and a kind of class portrait done in a sports hall, with all the protagonists lined up neatly in three rows, well-behaved and friendly, a classroom full of *Lost Highway* Mystery Men (and Women).

In all this violence, real or imagined, Kalicka's clowns also have fun together: they dance and pose for the camera, roll on the richly patterned carpets of bourgeois homes, laugh, and take grinning selfies; they piss in public, show off their private parts – both real and symbolic – and hump each other fervently, and, finally, lie together in the grass after all mischief has been done, spent. Everything going on in these pictures has an ex-centric energy to it, questioning the prevailing social and symbolic order, undermining our sense of security while at the same time establishing a sort of sociality – in point of fact they are not one, deviant individual, but a pack, a model mini-society, but of whom and for whom? In spite of all this energy, we will also find a deep sadness in these pictures, even despair – not only in the Weegee-like image of the dead clown, laying on blood-stained tarmac with a hole in his head, but above all in one harrowing portrait that cannot but overwhelm us with a feeling of utter hopelessness.

So, what are we to make of all this? Kalicka's images leave us a bit assaulted, a bit abused, and in the first moment clueless as to what we are supposed to do when faced with their situations and gestures, photographed – as if spontaneously documented – in an amateurish, direct manner. The beholder finds herself unable to discern a unity in the series; neither in style nor in straightforward content. For an art audience the first reassuring moment might come with the recognition of certain echoes, for instance of the famous Wolfgang Tillmanns picture from the cover of his first book. So this is not for real, it is art – we can finally say, relieved.

Then there is Paul McCarthy, echoed above all in the clown figure, but also in all the messiness and murkiness of the setup, in all the awkwardness and humping and

falling over and laughing and crying. Yet this affinity doesn't fully play itself out on this level. What connects the two artists is their interest in the figure of the Trickster: not quite a god and at the same time less than human; a mediator between the realm of man and that of the gods, he keeps playing tricks on both, in the end always bringing disaster upon himself, equally cunning as he is unconscious. Although he is able to change appearances and so is one with the world – among his many incarnations we will find coyote, raven, fox, and cat, but also the jester (all of Kalicka's animals are trickster representations) – he never tires of producing distance between himself and lived reality. His role is to question all truths and to undermine all certitudes. So for example Ananse, the West African spider-trickster, according to Robert Pelton,

is free to modify his own bodily parts and those of others according to whim or need. He can break social rules by maltreating guests or by having sexual relations with a female in-law. He can disregard the requirement that words and deeds be in some sort of rough harmony, just as he can overlook the demands of biology, economics, family loyalty, and even metaphysical possibility. He shows disrespect for sacred powers and beings, including the High God; his tricks reorder their limits.<sup>5</sup>

For Carl Gustav Jung the trickster is a vestige of a more primitive stage in social evolution and has a therapeutic role: "It holds the earlier low intellectual and moral level before the eyes of the more highly developed individual, so that he shall not forget how things looked yesterday"<sup>6</sup> – a moral admonition of sorts. Or, one can put it another way by saying that "trickster stories serve a tension-releasing function in societies."<sup>7</sup> But this seems too simple a conceptualization of the trickster, as in the end his role is anything but primitive, or simply destructive. Victor Turner for his part claimed that it is through the ritual suspension of social order during *rites de passage* that new metaphors



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Suzanne & Lutz, white dress, army skirt, 1993* (source)



From Paul McCarthy, *Painter, 1995* (watch on YouTube)

arise, new possibilities of envisaging our being together as community; the trickster's liminal status allows for exactly such a suspension. In that sense "[l]iminality may perhaps be regarded as the Noy to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense [also] the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise."<sup>8</sup> It is this trait that brings together the figures of trickster, court jester, and clown. But what I find most important here is a recognition by Mary Douglas', namely that ultimately, the trickster's role is to show us the utter conventionality of any given social order. Not in the sense that it is always imposed and should hence be abolished, but that it is never absolute, that it can always be changed.<sup>9</sup>

Understood in this way, the trickster figure ceases to be just another means of social control, of disarming dissent, an apotropaic practice of sorts, and becomes a real condition of the possibility of change. Indeed, in many cultures it is the trickster figure that is responsible for organizing the natural world (What else could that picture with two clowns in front of a cupboard with a skull, mussels, starfish and old prints be about?). Yet outside of creation myths the trickster is rather a type of awkward hero "who is always wandering, who is always hungry, who is not guided by normal conceptions of good or evil, who is either playing tricks on people or having them played on him and who is highly sexed."<sup>10</sup> This sexedness can be light and playful, but also violent and disruptive, but it ultimately serves one goal: to render opaque what culture has made transparent, to focus on what it has repressed. In this way, the trickster brings much pleasure, but also leaves us helplessly confronting drives that we had thought well mastered:

I deserve a reward  
 Cuz I'm the best fuck that you ever had  
 And if I tighten up my hole -  
 You may never see the light again!<sup>11</sup>

On the one hand, the trickster is the creator of the world, on the other he is utterly unselfconscious. All he can offer is an intervention into the horizon of our imagination, a minute transfiguration of the commonplace. We find splinters of the above in all of Irena Kalicka's *What Happened*. Already the first picture of the series, a clown eating mushrooms – a clear sign of a transformation of consciousness –

imposes the structure of ritual on the whole. And because the clothes of at least some of the clowns bear the marks of paint, one might surmise that Kalicka thought of the whole as a clever allegory of the artist as trickster, as somebody who tries to intervene in reality, to change, if not reality itself, then our understanding of it (this is what Klaus Theweleit called “the claim to leadership of art<sup>12</sup>”), but is most of the time bound to fail miserably. And if we were to agree that in modern times art took over the role of religion, the vision of the artist as the high priest is nothing but a fancy projection, or rather – a smoke screen to protect us from the truth. And the truth is that the artist is within this framework much more of a trickster whose practice now and then turns out to be effective, but most of the time exposes him as a fraud, a quack, selling us a placebo, or worse – mere decoration.



In Alex's room. (Stanley Kubrick, *Clockwork Orange*, 1971)

In another *Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, the painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler tries to counter the spiteful criticism of John Ruskin, who tried to expose Whistler's painting as capitalist art; as mere surface, pure commodity. He cites Ruskin's harshest words from his notorious *Fors Clavignera* from July 2, 1877 as prologue to his whole plea:



For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.<sup>13</sup>

Don't we find something of this sort of indictment in our own reaction to Kalicka's work? How is one to deal with that? The artist as melancholic clown, trying to change the world but not being taken seriously, at times even ridiculed and rejected; engaging in cultivated discussions that are in fact all grounded in privilege, a fig leaf for art's contingency. (“No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income,” Clement Greenberg famously claimed. “And in

the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold."<sup>14</sup>) The artist's ultimate horror: to acknowledge that art might in the end turn out to be easily disposable and insignificant, a minor trick. (Think of all the dead tricksters, think of the dead clown.) Is this not reason enough for unmitigated despair and hopelessness? Luckily enough there is always the possibility of distraction.

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## Footnotes

1 Carl Gustav Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," in Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 206.

2 Sufjan Stevens, "John Wayne Gacy, Jr.," from *Come on Feel the Illinoise*, Asthmatic Kitty, 2005, compact disc.

3 Harold Bloom, *Volume Introduction*, in *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Trickster*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing), xvi.

4 Faith No More, "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies", from *King For a Day, Fool For a Lifetime*, Polydor K. K., 1995, compact disc.

5 Robert Pelton, "West African Tricksters: Web of Purpose, Dance of Delight," in William G. Doty, William J. Hynes, eds., *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* (Tuscaloosa & London: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 125.

6 Carl Gustav Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," in Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 207.

7 William G. Doty, William J. Hynes, "Historical Overview of Theoretical Issues: The



Problem of the Trickster," in *Mythical Trickster Figures*, 16.

8 See Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in idem, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Rituals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 97.

9 See Mary Douglas, "The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception," *Man* (n.s.) 3: 365, after "Historical Overview of Theoretical Issues," 21.

10 Paul Radin, *The Trickster*, 155.

11 Faith No More, "The Gentle Art..."

12 See Klaus Theweleit, "Comments on the Ghost of the RAF," trans. Krzysztof Pijarski, *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 3 (2013), *Images of Terror / Visibility of History*, <http://widok.ibl.waw.pl/index.php/one/article/view/71/69>, accessed June 1, 2014.

13 Quoted from: John Abbott McNeill Whistler, *A Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: William Heinemann, 1892), 3, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24650>, accessed June 1, 2014.

14 Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in idem, *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 1. Perceptions and Judgments - 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian (University of Chicago Press, 1986), 10-11.