

Make A Face

Interview with Julien Bismuth

by Noam Segal

N Julien Bismuth lived in LA, Paris, Singapore and Tokyo, and is now based in NY. Accordingly, his artistic oeuvre is extensive and varied. It includes, among other media, silkscreen prints, conceptual installations, live performances and creative writing. His multi-faceted work remains inseparable from the research they so require.

J We talked about Julien Bismuth's notable work from 2013, where he worked with two practicing clowns: Christophe Marand and Alan Fairbanks. Alan painted the face of American clown Emmett Kelley's character on Christophe, and Christophe painted that of the 19th century British clown Billy Hayden on Alan. Bismuth explored the conventions of Face Making, while concentrating on the excluded facial representations throughout modernism. The expressivity of the human body and face in relation to physiognomy, and the way in which clowns use makeup to create a new physiognomy, a new face, for themselves. He examined the use of gesture, pantomime, facial expressions or grimaces and the way in which their structure conveys meaning. For him, the uncommon representation of a face

functions as a place of performance, where a revolutionary representation might take place. Julien appropriates these tropes for creating the outcast face, and thus enhances the obscure, rigid representation of facials.

N Julien, you chose to work with two, very dominant clown figures: Emmett Kelley and Billy Hayden. Could you describe their importance?

J I chose these two figures because of their significance. Billy Hayden was one of the first modern clowns, but also, his makeup is representative of the Auguste-style clown makeup that was popular in the 19th century. As for Emmett Kelly, the character he created, Weary Willie, was a composite hobo-clown figure. Like Chaplin's Little Tramp, Willie wore tattered and torn clothing. His clown face was melancholic, sad even, and framed with stubble. Instead of taking the stage for his own act, he would intervene in between other acts, during intermissions, or he would perform in the audience while another act was taking place. His actions were always quiet subtle interventions, such as hanging his laundry on

the ropes of the trapeze, or quietly eating a cabbage leaf on the sidelines... I like the discrete and peripheral nature of his interventions, and the political nature as well of his character because he invented this persona during the Great Depression.

N So to some extent, Weary Willie was actually disturbing to other performances. How does this relationship, as ascribed in modernity, between attention and disturbance, exist in your works?

J I wouldn't say that he was disturbing or interrupting other performances. I've only ever seen his performances on film, but it was less an interruption and more a subtle distraction.

I think a more interesting dynamic for our times is that between attention and distraction. How do we look at art? Or rather, how do we consume art? Much of what happens in exhibitions today is a form of distracted gazing, poking here and there, identifying works by their appearance or aesthetic, evaluating them according to the metrics of the market, or the nebulous contours of rumour and hearsay... In other words, there's very little actual engagement with a work. Very little attention is paid to anything in an art fair, a biennale or any of the massive exhibitions that we have grown so fond of in recent years. Yet, there are different forms of distraction. Daydreaming or reverie for example can be defined as productive modes of

distraction. Unfortunately, we are distracted by a barrage of stimuli that simultaneously hold and release our attention; in a constant movement that leaves us incapable of developing anything like an actual thought or opinion.

N Foucault once said that the actor is the only potential outlaw that remains to the national sovereign state. How do you see the connection between caricature and clowns in the political critical sense and its potentialities?

J Both are vehicles of comedy, and comedy has always played the role of a release for certain tensions, frustrations, or of anger even. As such, comedy inevitably dips into the field of politics and becomes political. This has been historically true of the caricature of course but also of clowning.

What I find fascinating in comedy, the reason I keep coming back to it in my work, is that it's a very complex field. What is laughter? What makes us laugh and why do we laugh at it? Why do we laugh at all? What does laughter communicate or express to those around us other than its own tremor? These are questions that are incredibly difficult to answer and that have actually rarely been addressed in the history of human thought. My aim is not to answer them but to keep addressing them instead: to keep them active in the same way that a comic works and to keep the laughter alive during his act. I don't

think that it's a coincidence that so many of the iconic artworks of our time are actually quite funny. Think of Duchamp's urinal, Manzoni's canned shit, Acconci's street performances, Nauman's early videos ... There's an element of humor in these endeavors. Yet the humor changes, takes on different forms.

>>>Our conversation gravitated towards Walter Benjamin. We specifically talkwed about Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian, who was a caricature collector and eventually had to escape from the Nazi regime because caricatures were conceived as obscene and therefore illegal. His collections were confiscated and he lived in Paris until he died. Walter Benjamin articulates the concept of an open art work, an object that can never be fully attained, unclosed and open ended. Its retrospective gaze changes the past it was created upon and the future we are facing. According to this materialistic point of view, which Benjamin and Fuchs shared, the work of art should be re-appropriated over and over again by each historical Zeitgeist. <<<

N Julien, you have performed various iterations of the clown work: Weary Willie, Willy Nilly, Willy Billy and more. Could you tell us how you see these iterations taking into account the historical and materialistic point of view of Edward Fuchs?

J Well, the iterations serve different purposes. On the one hand — and that's perhaps where it's closest in spirit to the Benjamin text — I was interested in the actual clown characters I referenced. I was interested in the history of clowning as well: how it hits a peak in the 19th and early to mid 20th centuries and then fades.

The series starts with Weary Willie. Two clowns that I had hired came up to me during the opening and proceeded to dress me to look like Weary Willie. They did this in stages, removing one item of clothing, replacing it, and applying the makeup bit by bit; all that while, leading me into the street. So we would alternate between walking with the audience away from the opening, stopping every 200 meters or so and continuing the transformation.

The second work - a video titled Willy Billy (2013) — came from wanting to engage more directly with clown makeup. Every clown has his or her clown face, which is perhaps the most important part of their persona. It's a drawing, which they develop on their own — informed by the codes of its history — and have to reproduce on themselves each time they perform. So I asked two different clowns in Paris to apply two historical clown faces on one another. But before filming as we were rehearsing and trying things out, the clowns literally started to clown around with the

makeup. I had told them to retain a neutral, impassive demeanour: to have their hands be the only active comedic element and to improvise from within that restricted framework. And so they started distorting and shaping one another's faces, using their hands to press, pull and twist their partner's features, making the other's face make faces so to speak. That was something that just happened, but it pulled the whole work in a different direction.

The third work - a performance titled Billy (2016) — was directly inspired by this improvised moment of pantomime. I asked the same two clowns from Willy Billy to basically perform a variation on the action from Willy Billy using me as a canvas. I stood between them as they first manipulated my face with their hands, pulling and pushing my features into a variety of grotesque expressions. They then started to use makeup in the same playful, improvised manner. The performance ended with them cleaning my face and then applying the "Auguste" clown face worn by Billy Hayden.

The last work in the series, Willy Nilly (2016), is a work that I performed on my own. Using the leftover makeup from the previous performances, I developed a series of five gestures. Five simple gestures that I performed in the space. I applied a dab of makeup to a wall. I filled a surgical glove with yellow face powder, blew it up with air and popped it to make

a pigmented cloud. They were small, slight actions that often took their cue from an isolated gesture in one of the previous pieces.

All that developed and grew from their logic. I was no longer thinking directly about clowning or the history, I was thinking of what worked in the previous performance and how to push it further. In the process, I felt as if I actually came closer to the singular logic of clowning and its art as well.

N Your emphasis on comedy and usage of humour tend to provoke a different kind of attention rather than disturbance. In what way does it provoke? Specifically those works informed by behavior articulated under the pressures of socially determined norms.

J Comedy and humour probably do provoke rather than require a different kind of attention. When something is funny and makes you laugh, you're both attentive and somehow radically distracted by what you're seeing. Radically distracted in the sense that your body is somehow possessed or taken over by laughter. One of the first performances I did, The Funniest Sculpture in the World (2008), was intended to communicate laughter through laughter by having a performer lapse into a fit of uncontrollable laughter in front of an audience. The other works I've done that reference comedy are not as explicitly funny.

There are things we think, and there are things we sense or feel. Laughter sits somewhere in between these categories of experience or interaction. When we laugh we are made to feel or sense the absurdity of an often purely psychological situation. We are made to feel this absurdity by means of the absurd reaction it provokes in us, namely laughter. Georges Bataille, in his conferences on "not-knowing" (non-savoir in French), talks about how laughter is often his first reaction to the unknown or the unknowable. Yet, laughter in and of itself is also an unknown or incomprehensible reaction. I like the idea that we respond to an absurd situation by having an equally absurd reaction.

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Much of what we do when we look at an artwork is informed by habits — habits of thought, of looking, of posture even. I think all I've ever tried to do is somehow elude or disorient such habits, and lead the viewer not necessarily elsewhere, but to an awareness of the place and situation they're in. An awareness that may in turn inspire them to go elsewhere or orient themselves differently in that place or situation. Art to me is not a place for inciting, much less dictating or prescribing anything. What it can do is bring about a shift of awareness and perspective; one that can hopefully open up different spaces or possibilities for living, thinking, relating to the world and to others.