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Ridiculous Creatures

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In his 1975 manifesto for the Ridiculous Theatre, Charles Ludlam wrote, "If one is not a living mockery of one's own ideals, one has set one's ideals too low."[1] This alliance between nihilism and faith, characteristic of New York's queer theater of the 1960s, can be read alongside a concurrent concept of painting that was neither autonomous à la modernism nor dead. The outrageously self-confident Ridiculous Theatre, in equal measure and with cheerful maliciousness, laid waste to both convention and its own subculture, by exposing art's parameters and artificiality while maintaining a frame of reference in the form of a tottering and twisted faith in art as both a provider of symbolic meaning and a field of possible liberation and self-assertion.

From Jack Smith's film-and-slide presentations and theater productions to Ronald Tavel's Play-House of the Ridiculous and Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, the Ridiculous Theatre that emerged in the mid-1960s exaggerated and upstaged the performances of their predecessors in the existential absurd theater of the 1950s. When Ludlam in drag as the Lady of the Camellias in *Camille* (1973) instructed his maid—before a largely queer audience—in a brooding, emotional tone, "I'm cold . . . throw another faggot on the fire!," received her reply, "There are no more faggots in the house, Madam," and looked into the audience and said, "No faggots in the house? . . . See if there are any in the street,"[2] the boundary between life and art was no longer drawn along the edge of the stage, the so-called fourth wall. The line of demarcation instead ran through the bodies of the actors and the audience—that is, along the division between individual persona and public face.

The actors recognized themselves and their audience —with explicit drama—as "faggots," a vacillating identification that followed along with the word's double meaning: a derogatory term for homosexuals and a bundle of sticks to be burned. At the same time, the theater claimed a capacity to act in and against this socially coded and regulated objectification through a form of alienness; that is, the actors' characteristically absurd performances and self-aware asides to the audience enabled the queer appropriation of a classic text like *The Lady of the Camellias*, which went far beyond a literal adaptation in which actors strictly attempted to identify with their given characters.[3] The Ridiculous Theatre thereby revealed that the dividing line between freedom and lack of freedom is one of ambivalence, which in the theater's enactment encompassed self-sufficiency *and* dependence, artificiality *and* authenticity, as well as an impure autonomy. The basic principle of the Ridiculous Theatre was to see itself as ridiculous since, despite all socially prescriptive imperatives, it strived to remain indeterminate. The points of departure for the ridiculous production of art are based in a dubiously ideal subjectivity and autonomy, not in the sole affirmation or deconstruction of those categories. This enables the proclamation of subjectivity against all odds in the form of a lovable, eccentrically egomaniacal figure: the ridiculous creature.

Ed Paschke in his studio preparing the set for Godzilla Rainbow Troupe's play *Turds in Hell* at Kingston Mines Theater, Chicago, 1972

In 1972, three years before Ludlam penned his manifesto, Chicago-based painter Ed Paschke designed the stage and costumes for a production of Ludlam and Bill Vehr's play *Turds in Hell*, performed by the Godzilla Rainbow Troupe, an offshoot of Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company. For each act of the play, Paschke projected slides that covered the stage with his paintings of heads, figures, and masks floating in lagoons, deserts, and game-show sets. The bodies of the actors, extravagantly made up and costumed, were thus set in direct interaction with the painted figures and surreal landscapes, dramatizing the tensions between artificial, ephemeral, and real bodies.[4] This theme continued in a series of portraits of underworld figures that Paschke produced from 1973 onward. The canvases, which are personalized by first names serving as titles, depict nightclub employees covered in tattooed patterns, their contours exaggerated to the point of deformation through bizarre haircuts and clothing. (See, for example, *Jeanine* [1973], p. 146.) The paintings with their garish colors, applied in a shimmering divisionist manner, mix figure and ground in much the same way as the actors were superimposed and juxtaposed with the projected paintings in *Turds in Hell*. The relationship between figure and ground dissolves psychedelically, causing the subject to merge with the physical object of the painting. As a result, the behavior of the paintings and their figures oscillates between coquetry and passive objecthood. As ridiculous subjects, these picture-bodies are located in an in-between space of active being and speechless object; they pose.[5]

Michael Krebber takes ridiculous subjectivity even further in his so-called Baselitz painting, *Untitled* (1978/1990, p. 220). By appropriating the motif of an upside-down figure, the visual insignia of his mentor and teacher Georg Baselitz, Krebber aligns his own dependent subjectivity with the painted object and problematizes the singularity of his creativity and expressive potential. By letting his personality and his painting collide in a ridiculous picture-body, he opens up a discussion regarding painterly expression and the related model of subjectivity found in Neo-Expressionism—of which Baselitz was a prime representative in the late 1970s in Germany. Krebber's too thinly applied paint, too hastily painted planes, and too condensed, overly small brushstrokes preserve the signpost dilemmas of classic Neo-Expressionism. The rhetoric around the Neo-Expressive mark claimed an unbroken articulation of an autonomous subject just at the moment when the essential foundation of subjectivity seemed lost for good and the psychosocial limitations of its postmodern understanding became ubiquitous. Krebber's pictorial form and gestures are trapped in their dependence on Baselitz's existential pomp and in their Neo-Expressive interpellation, yet with a confident authority they parody not only these claims but also their own impotence. Seemingly identifying with Baselitz's

Ed Paschke, poster for Godzilla Rainbow Troupe's play *Turds in Hell*, 1972. Offset lithograph on wove paperboard, 24 x 18 inches (61 x 45.7 cm)

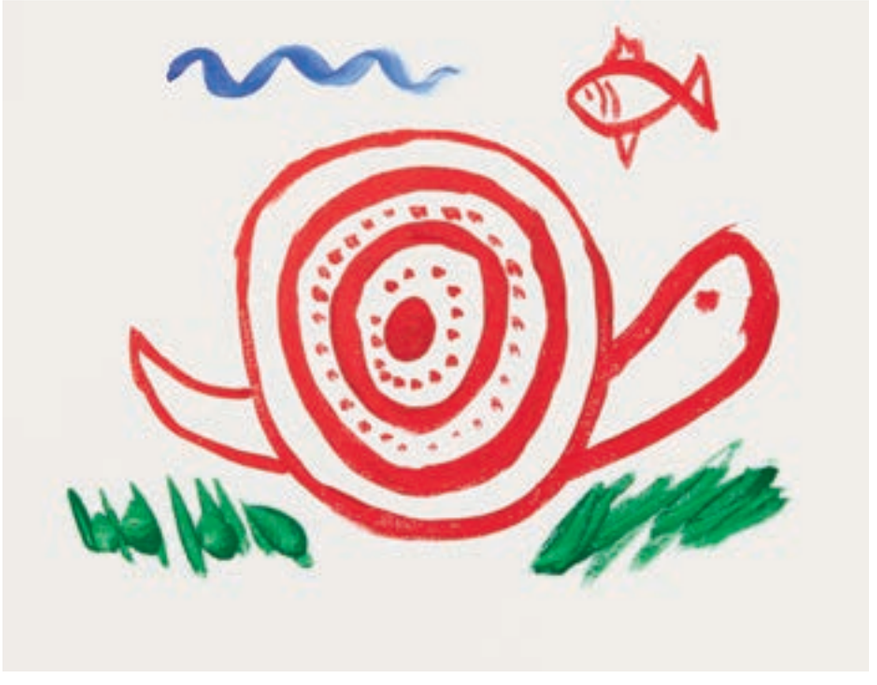
Ed Paschke, works made for Godzilla Rainbow Troupe's play *Turds in Hell*, c. 1972

accomplishments, Krebber's imitation is inhibited; he executes his copy only to the limit of his capabilities. This restaging of Baselitz's grand gestures allows Krebber to arrive at a ridiculous mode of painting. *Untitled* is a humorous self-assertion in opposition to a father figure, his indisputable authority, and the own imaginary infantile impotence. This ridiculous image is a narcissistic triumph; its lack of an independent language does not constrain it but joyfully bases its articulation on that very shortfall.[6]

Krebber was able to confront the Neo-Expressionist dilemma by way of a "tolerance for tension"—that is, through his ambivalent self-recognition as a painter who cannot inhabit the exalted role of the painter, one who calls that role fundamentally into question and yet strongly clings to it.[7] He takes painting's pathos of virility seriously but shatters it in the face of his own incapacity, which allows him to remain operatively "free" in the midst of painting's bathos. To put it bluntly, in the context of the "new spirit of capitalism," digital networking, and its socio-cultural effects, the Neo-Expressionist interpellation has grown from an artistic into a social imperative.[8] Painting's entanglement in these shifting conditions can be witnessed, on the one hand, in the fact that the blank canvas is no longer so filled with the anxiety of influence but rather is filled, even before the first brushstroke, with anxieties about visibility, about the work's connectivity to fashions and trends, and about standing out in a adequately interesting way in the marketplace of creative subjects. In short, the central questions regarding being an artist are reduced to basic human issues of self-worth, fear of failure, and fear of looking stupid.[9] In the wake of this shift, critical painterly practices and their attendant theories have picked up on Krebber's wavering assertions of residual subjectivity and agency. His floundering, unresolved gestures have become emblematic of so-called strategic painting and of a creative worker on strike.[10] Often misunderstood as winking ironies, they have nevertheless become models for a generation of artists living in the feedback loops of social networks who find themselves under pressure to be self-reflexive and daring in the expanding void in which subjectivity resides. In their hands, the potentially operative "freedom" of Krebber's vacillitating gestures congealed into formal ciphers of criticality.

Krebber's restaging of a painting by the Duchess of Cambridge—aka Kate Middleton—might be considered against this backdrop as a "ridiculing" of his already ridiculous vocabulary. A photograph of Middleton at work on her painting, made when visiting a nonprofit art school for underprivileged children in Los Angeles and consisting of a snail rendered with a few red strokes and dots against a succinctly structured green plane, was widely circulated on- and offline.[11] Krebber's series—*Ridiculized Snails* (2011)—can be read on first glance as a parody of painting's stance as a critical and socially engaged practice in

Michael Krebber, *Here Comes the Sons 2*, 2011.
Acrylic on canvas, 14 x 18 inches (35.56 x 45.72 cm).
Courtesy Real Fine Arts and Greene Naftali Gallery



a networked society; he appropriates Middleton's snail as a sign of a banal yet successfully distributed form of socially committed art in the digital public sphere. But by identifying himself in the same instance with Middleton as an elusive celebrity who can generate media attention out of almost nothing, he—as an au courant variable in art-world visibility and authority—includes himself in the snail's shell called parody. He ridicules not only his own teaching activity at an art school (by relating it to a charity visit by painting royals) but also his "critically" encoded vocabulary as a painter. The cheerfully virtuosic application of paint, the playful variation of the motif (one snail finding itself suddenly underwater simply by the addition of one blue line and a red fish), and the impish referentiality of the snail series stage a coup at the cost of his own achievements as a painter.[12]

Now that the struggle with the role of painting is a critical norm, the *Ridiculized Snails* deftly claim the freedom to act despite socially coded and self-created limitations. This claim is not to be found in this or that form of expression but only in a ridiculous farce that can maintain such a claim and act out its ambivalence. The snail—delightfully sliding slowly through the world, more sensing than seeing, on its own layer of slime, self-confident in the possibility of retreating into its shell of autonomy—celebrates its ridiculous subjectivity.

NOTES

1. Charles Ludlam, "Manifesto: Ridiculous Theatre, Scourge of Human Folly," in *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly*, ed. Steven Samuels (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), 157.
2. Charles Ludlam, Camille, in *The Complete Plays of Charles Ludlam* (New York: Perennial, 1989), 246.
3. On alienness in political theater, see Juliane Rebentisch, *Die Kunst der Freiheit: zur Dialektik demokratischer Existenz* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 366, 368.
4. Dennis Adrian, "The Drawings of Ed Paschke," in *Ed Paschke: Drawings from Chicago Collections*, ed. Douglas W. Druick and Kevin Sharp (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1990), 5–9, esp. 8–9.
5. Craig Owens compares posing to the voice between the active ("making") and the passive ("being made"): the middle voice ("making oneself") that exists in ancient Greek, among other languages. See Craig Owens, "Posing," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 201–17.
6. See Sigmund Freud, "Der Humor," in *Sigmund Freud: Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, and James Strachey (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1970), 278.
7. The psychoanalyst Wolfgang Trauth distinguishes between two qualitatively different forms of ambivalence. The ridiculousness proposed by the Ridiculous Theatre would correspond to a tension-tolerant, polar form of ambivalence between supposed contradictions, such as individualism and self-dissolution, seriousness and cynicism, freedom to act and limitation. Contrasting with that are split-polar forms of ambivalence in which one pole of these antithetical terms is understood to be impossible to integrate and is outsourced. See Wolfgang Trauth and Helmut Draxler, "Becoming Existent in the Bio-Psycho-Social Field," *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 68 (December 2007): 116–22.
8. The call for the individual to be a self-reliant authority appeals to increasingly larger parts of the society. The postdemocratic shift of responsibility from the government to the governed takes place under the guise of subjectivist freedom and motivating pleasures of individual challenges. One is praised for creative self-realization in order to conceal the merciless struggle for survival of "a people fighting for themselves." See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, "The Test of the Artistic Critique," in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), 419–82; Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 124.
9. Antek Walczak, "Why Paint?," *Spike*, no. 44 (Summer 2015): http://spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/qa-antek-walczak.
10. This is a kind of painting that tries to pull itself up by its own bootstraps out of the quagmire of the working conditions and pictorial forms associated with it. See John Kelsey, "Stop Painting Painting," *Artforum* 44, no. 2 (October 2005): 222–25, esp. 222 and 224.
11. See, for example, http://dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2013228/Kate-Middleton-races-ahead-painting-Inner-City-Arts-campus.html.
12. The snail as metaphor and the visual proximity of its shell to a target can be scaled up to Leo Steinberg's experiences of inhumanity and indifference when faced with Jasper Johns's *Target with Faces* (1955). Steinberg recalled a lasting depression and feelings of loss as his first experiences in front of Johns's painting. See Leo Steinberg, "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public," in *Other Criteria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3–16, esp. 10–15.