

stuffedpigfollies

Hassan Khan, 2007

Automation and Hysteria

Somewhere between the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate, it is possible that there exists a gap within which the two states overlap and become interchangeable. It is inside this space that, as in dreams, one speaks to oneself using the voice of another, and speaking and listening—subjectivity and objectivity—either fuse together or collapse entirely.

Hassan Khan's stuffedpigfollies is a series of six 20 x 25 cm Inkjet prints on Canson paper. Both an independent work and a component of his installation KOMPRESSOR (2006-2007), the six prints each feature a single hand-drawn cartoon rendering of a pig, isolated over a jaundiced yellow background. Each pig appears to be in some form of distress, with sweat or tears flying from each of their heads—cartoon language for fear, anxiety, confusion, trauma. Under each sits a line of text written in strange, squashed script similar to a form of handwriting, but with the consistency of a computer font. Phrases such as 'this illogical barrier borrowed from somewhere else' and 'which witch?' serve as cryptic captioning for the already confused pigs' predicaments.

Khan has described these pigs as signs of possession—generic forms borrowed from a history of unassumingly submissive, pudgy reflections of human endearment. They stand on two feet and gesticulate with their hooves like humans, communicating their anxieties in clear English. But 'possession' takes on a double meaning in this case, as the pigs are similarly, on each count, struggling with a strange force offstage that threatens to overtake them completely.

In his essay entitled *The Uncanny*, Freud describes the uncanny as a sensation of something frightening in its familiarity, citing the German word for uncanny: *unheimlich* ('not homely'), as well as for haunted house: *ein unheimliches haus* (literally 'an unhomely home'). For Freud, the sense of dread to be found in the familiar arises from a malfunction in the everyday projection of self-like characteristics upon the world outside, resulting in a total reversal. What is a haunted house, after all, but the aberration of a hearth coming to life and turning against its loving owner? Likewise with a dog, a teddy bear, a mirror image (the *doppelgänger*), the sensation of the uncanny becomes a moment in which consciousness fails to possess its context and, in a narcissistic turn, projects its image in an 'un-homely' way, becoming 'possessed' or haunted by its own unfamiliarity.

Just as the sensation of the uncanny speaks to a rupture in the projection of consciousness upon the inanimate, so do Khan's cartoon pigs, as anthropomorphic impossibilities, signify the only space where they may exist as viable forms: that of the living nonliving, the space of projection and cyclic deferral, of dreaming. In fact, these pigs had their beginnings in actual dreams Khan has had, and they stand as a kind of reflection on their own roles in Khan's intricate web of psychic deferral. The piglets of stuffedpigfollies in fact appear painfully aware of their position as carriers,

and perhaps this accounts for their traumatic states. As if witnessing their own cartoon experience of the uncanny—or, as is more likely, as vessels of Khan's own experience of it—they recoil from their roles as 'possessed' creatures. One turns away from his own image: 'I hesitate when I meet my living face' while another cannot pull himself away: 'I can only see one thing'.

Khan has said of stuffedpigfollies in an interview "We steer dangerously close to metaphysics and psychoanalysis here—dangerously close especially if we speak of animating forces. What interests me is a form of bare metaphysics. We borrow the language of psychoanalysis to speak about something else—but what is that?" In general, Khan's work has always had at its center an interest in problems surrounding social consciousness and the mediation between a socially shaped self and an autonomous self. His KOMPRESSOR installation, however, marked a formal break from his previous work with the introduction of an almost mystical view towards the construction of identity in the social sphere. Subtitled "An exhibition based on translating sets of dreams into different forms by the dreamer," KOMPRESSOR featured a constellation of works revolving around a kind of paranoid, lucidly structuralist sublime. One work, entitled *The Alphabet Book*, paired gigantic letters of the alphabet with similarly bold, iconic images, mingling the irreducible elements of language (and pedagogy) with the dimensionality of the image. A submissive railing with the ominous appearance of prison bars stretched through the exhibition space. Nearly invisible, this simple object engineering circulation through the space had something in its shape that threatened to fold into its double to restrict the same circulation. KOMPRESSOR, as a whole, reads like an introduction to a haunting world of otherworldly cross-signification. This is a place where the representation of the social sphere itself has migrated completely into that of consciousness, and didactic formulations of oppression, power, exchange, and consensus are encountered through mystical testament. This is not a picture of identity construction by mandate, but rather of an invisible, flowing web of consensus.

As Guy Debord regards spectacle as 'the autonomous movement of the nonliving', the anthropomorphic pigs of stuffedpigfollies are the pudgy ambassadors of a similarly animated nonliving, where consciousness animates the world not with life, but with automation. But where Debord's spectacle describes a moment when multiple subjectivities merge into a public space of consensual agreement, stuffedpigfollies inhabits a private space where subjectivity confronts itself through an interior play of totemized public forms. It is an invisible psychic reflex made visible only when it ruptures, and in this rupture—this sensation of the uncanny—the illusion of subjectivity re-emerges as performative gesture.

Brian Kuan Wood

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“Story-time with Lyrebird”

Malak Helmy (with Simeon Ross), 2013

Sound installation

For “Story-time with Lyrebird” (2013), Malak Helmy collaborated with Simeon Ross, a voice actor/social scientist/raconteur based in Michigan.

The male lyrebird is a songbird known for his remarkable mimicry skills. He absorbs and regurgitates his acoustic environment, perfectly imitating what he hears, and embodies it as his song—to become the sound of another bird’s song, an electric car key, water gurgling, a chain saw, a flute, a baby crying and even human speech. The species and its features became widely known with the documentary “Birds” in which famed narrator Sir David Attenborough stands hidden in the bird’s habitat, observing and narrating as quietly as he can to an audience watching eagerly at home. Story-time with Lyrebird is an audio narrated work in which we listen to a solitary lyrebird psychically pacing back and forth and performing methods of narration in a spaceless habitat about the size of the space of his mind. Given the missing resonant properties of his environment the bird begins to perform his own feedback and resonance. He makes notes on these performances, reflects back on them, performs them and their echoes. He is perturbed by a new term he has learnt from a book by Timothy Morton titled “Ecology

without Nature”: ecomimesis or nature writing is the act of mimicking and expressing the nature of space, sounds and characters in writing but not truly being it. He tries to find ways to understand this term and to express—honestly, formally, truly—the phenomenon of his skills of ‘nature writing’, concerned perhaps that he is not fully embodying what he narrates and truly expressing his environment. Reading the book as a manual for self-betterment, he encounters a desire to heal fractured subjectivity by submitting oneself through voice and language to a fidelity of space; he then becomes a series of splintered waves bouncing back lost information; he gets seasick; he finds himself in the instructions of another artwork on birds, voice and madness; he gets on a boat and is a pirate maneuvering lost at sea; he becomes a radio host playing songs about the ‘weather’. He notices Sir David Attenborough is there observing him all the time, hidden, quietly whispering his concerns with the unhinging of the lyrebird’s skills and mind in the contraction of his space-less habitat. They both pretend they do not see each other, and attempt an act of simple hypnosis: only you, only here, in this place, and anything but that and no-where else, like this in every way? The non-nature-writing lyre-bird was originally conceived for the habitat of an online radio island in 2011.

From Behind the Monument

Jasmina Metwaly, 2013

Video, 15”

Metwaly began conceiving “From Behind the Monument” (2013) while on a residency in Torino, Italy in 2012. The film is based on footage that she recorded during street clashes in Cairo in 2011, shot from a balcony using night vision. The imagery serves as a backdrop projection, situated in Castello di Rivoli where it is surrounded by masterly frescos and reliefs, when a visitor, a young girl, walks into the room and inspects the museum object. She watches the film for a while, then stops and moves closer to the screen itself, observing its different textures: the pixels of the film, the surface of the screen, its frame, the floor, the walls, every de-

tail. Metwaly’s film speaks of reproduction that becomes illustration, a failed mimicry and thus by default, a failed attempt to speak of the event itself. The bodily tissue of revolt is composed of human behaviors that are in constant motion. There are no strict definitions that comprise these behaviors as they manifest themselves within individual actions as well as in those that multiply, turning resistance into a collective momentum. Such momentum occurs once in a while, in time and space that cannot be predetermined. Spectacles capture reality in ways that can compromise the intention of an event itself. From Behind the Monument documents a third spectacle in an attempt to disintegrate what constitutes the representation of an event.

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Mada Masr, 2013

Born out of crisis and inevitability, Mada Masr, a Cairo-based news website attempts to secure a house for a dislocated practice of journalism that did not survive in mainstream organisations and their associated political and economic conditions. At its nascent stage, Mada Masr attempts to carve a space for progressive voices at a deep moment of political polarisation and media concentration, while it also interrogates the haunting question of institutional survival. “The Day After”, a series of conversations with

journalists covering chaos and violence, a one-off newsprint of a publication that cannot (yet) exist in print form interrogates notions of “making sense”. In the realm of news production, layers of consciousness unfold between the breaking of an event, witnessing it, writing about it and analysing it. In this exceptional newsprint, we reverse the process of coverage and try to stop at the moment when distortion happens.