

Bruce Nauman – The Godfather of Modern Art

<u>Time</u>	<u>Character</u>	<u>Event</u>
00:33	Narrator	“Nauman’s constant play with what art can be, has made him a superstar in the art world.”
01:05	D. Hirst	“He just plays around with anything. Anything could be art.”
05:06	Narrator	“He was something of an outsider from the start [...] But Nauman’s early work chimed exactly with the zeitgeist.”
05:26	Narrator	“The 1960’s saw the birth of an art we now take for granted, and the absolute acceptance that everything an artist does, can be art. Even just making a mess on the floor, which Nauman did, with bags of flour.”
06:18	B. Nauman	“I sort of made this arbitrary decision, that whatever I do in the studio is art.”
07:11	P. Kramlich (collector)	“I was really amused, because he has a wonderfully fresh conceptual approach.”
08:51	Narrator	“Nauman played witty word games, revealing his interest in playing with language.”
12:40	T. Oursler	“[...] So as a spectator you are no longer allowed to just operate on auto-pilot, like, yes yes blah bla bla, you have to get in there and reconstruct your reality.”
17:32	Narrator	“The work was intended to turn the gallery experience into something deliberately uncomfortable.”
19:10	R Storr	“These are political pieces in the sense that they refer to places of crisis, but Bruce is not a political artist in the conventional sense of that term, he’s not advocating anything.”
34:42	Narrator	“He never stops thinking about what an artist could and should do.”
36:20	Nauman	“I like it when things are more up in the air... subject to change.”
36:46	Nauman	“Thank you” (x57, excerpt from the piece Thank you Thank You).

There is no such thing as a godfather in Modern Art.

The Jester

The common conception of the jester is that of a versatile entertainer, making jokes and riddles, dancing and playing music to amuse the court, typically the king and queen. For a general conception this fits quite well, though there are many more specific and important aspects of his role. And, yes, it was always a *he*. Most notably the jester would often gain high status and conversely gain a powerful role, 'superseding' the traditional court hierarchy, being one of few with the liberty to criticize the monarch. One different example of the role is the jester of James VI of Scotland, George Buchanan. The king was originally very lazy about reading papers before signing them, and George tricked him with a contract to abdicate in favor of himself for 15 days. James got the point.

The interesting thing here and what has a sort of universal value is how one and the same person maintains several roles simultaneously; both a mere wit-cracker and the most important watchdog. And I would say the two or more sides, somehow amplify each other. –Take the example of the agency related to sarcasm; the greater the wisdom and savvy of the sender, the bigger the impact on the receiver. Or? A person who is able to do nothing but crack jokes loses his edge quickly. Why? Because everything the person lacks will start to shine thru and it becomes crystal clear that the jokes and the sarcasm are often a mere defense mechanism. Survival basically; if you only know how to do *one* thing, you HAVE to do it. Where social hierarchies manifest a structure in which the actions of people around can seem almost predestined, the jester embodies a rupture; another subject that one cannot categorize as above or below, friend or enemy. Not far from the court jester – and in away predecessors – are some of the stock characters from the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*: Clown¹, Harlequin and Pierrot. For many centuries these stereotypes were developed and adjusted as pantomime-theater evolved to fit the zeitgeist of entertainment. The so-called Harlequinade plays included also Columbine and Pantaloon, which were equally important for the plot, but less the source of the actual comedy. Later, at times, also other buffoon characters would appear and sometimes characters would have different names, depending on country and region where these—often traveling—theater troupes would perform. Such 17th and 18th century theater, with little or no dialogues, demanded very distinct characters. And so, the characters on stage performed specific parts in unraveling a plot and morale, with the components good or bad, home or away, greed, love etc. known to be the core of sagas, fables and religious texts for millennia.

There are some particular things of the stock characters I find relevant for indulging in the possibilities of the jester as a persona and discursive departure point in contemporary art. Starting with a bit of an anecdote, I cannot help smiling about the fact that the name slapstick derives from the fact that the *Commedia dell'arte* characters would carry a staff-looking instrument, *the slap-stick*, able to make a loud noise and with the dramatic function of transforming things. The person carrying the slapstick would 'magically' re-arrange the set, while in fact it was the people on stage moving everything around, in a clumsy manner. Hence the name of the later genre.

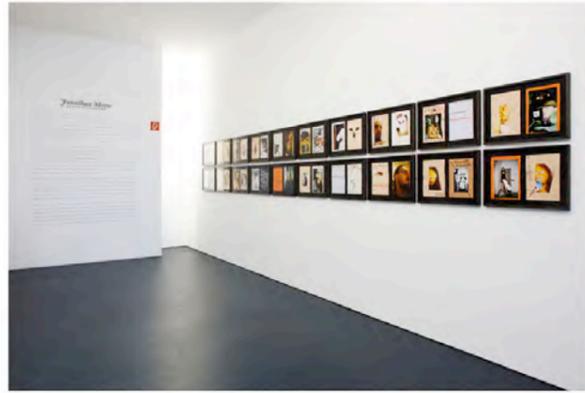
The adaptability of a character is interesting. However, back then the transformation of a theatrical role served the primary goal of these plays, which was delightful entertainment. That is to say, that whatever the level of identification the play would have with aspects of real life (e.g. social hierarchies etc.) they were all vehicles of amusement. Today, this sort of malleable persona is, if not worthless, then at least irrelevant; the sole goal of the artist jester cannot be streamlined light amusement (which is not to say, that she cannot be funny or his works cannot be witty). Rather, and with George Buchanan's wake-up call in mind the changing nature and the mastering of a multitude of skills are *reciprocal* to both the end-results and the notion of direction of desire. It is thus a matter of maintaining a quasi-unpredictable persona, both in terms of itinerary and goal, as opposed to the stock characters, whose goal has always been pre-determined. And yet another layer, if you think more generally about *adaptation*: The way in which a theatrical style spread across Europe caused characters to diffuse, be appropriated, renamed and changed again; only to inspire several other characters in other media and genres as well, from more serious theater to fiction literature and more. So, even if there is obviously a difference in terms of 'pace' – exemplified by the hybrid character of art today where images, beats and ideas are borrowed, spliced and re-introduced – the artistic use of adaptation and appropriation somehow echoes the evolution of the stock characters. As such, both kinds of transformation points to the productive potential of a dynamic and open structure that serves, not the original label, but rather a situational perfection. -The theatrical role evolves, it influences characters from other genres and mediums, and today all the traits in its many forms are continuously re-circulated.

¹-in some instances a distinct character.,

Jonathan Meese

With Jonathan Meese the spectator often has, as Claire Bishop has coined it, an 'absorptive' role. A bit like a sponge, that can do nothing but suck in whatever fluids you pour over it. A bit the same way one can imagine everybody at a royal court would be ridiculed by the jester, without much chance of returning the servings from this cunning master of jokes and small-time harassment. Meese's work is at times submitted to the conforms of traditional gallery display. For instance a series of paintings, hung in a fashion that doesn't deviate and is engaged with a particular subject matter. In Meese's case, works often circle around topics such as Germany's repressed history of the Third Reich. Thus by the very weightiness of its topic, it projects a seriousness and thus engages the spectator in a 'familiar' manner as it claims to be a starting point for discussion and contemplation. Yet, by its formal and technical abjectness, it simultaneously suggests that the artist is laughing at the subject he is thematizing but not least at the spectator who has no chance of returning the load. As a spectator allegedly remarked after watching Meese's infamous performance at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall: "I feel like I have been used as a nappy." When his works involve performance the personae Jonathan Meese – psychotic, eccentric, ridiculous, obscene and narcissistic – is so much at the front of everything that it obstructs the chance of locating one's own 'direction of desire.' His palette of obscenities for performances includes nonsense language, mimicking masturbation, spitting, Nazi-salutes and more. Thus most attempts to bring forth interesting problematics – whether directly or indirectly – are intentionally carried by a counter-productive vehicle. To use an expression from semiotics, 'there is lots of meaning but no sense,' and this is mainly because Jonathan Meese – from his formal language to his persona – is a nonsense vehicle. In a way you could say that he is pointing out important problematics all the while he is obstructing – and in direct conflict with the subject matter – the spectator's access to it. Therefore his real intentions remain guesswork, not unlike a man in a mask, an image we know from both the thief and the entertainer.

(turn page for images)





TRACEY EMIN

My interest in Tracey Emin is grounded in the way she herself tends to be a big part of her artworks. How an artist's personal traits and the knowledge of her/him somehow 'charge' the work in my perception of it. Tracey Emin's persona is evidently difficult to subtract from her works. One of the reasons for this is how many people know more about her from the British tabloids, than from encountering her (works) at galleries and museums. The main reason though is due to an obscure economy of ethics as well as of aesthetics.

In my take on Tracey Emin and her work I will make use of the concept *poncif*.

This concept distinguishes between trademark-*poncif*, representing the artist's reflective subjectivity, and the pattern-*poncif*, representing the formal properties of her artworks. To elaborate on the *poncif* I will also use the artist Cy Twombly as example.

Baudelaire first touched upon the idea of the *poncif* in early Modernity. The word stems from French and the concept springs from its double signification; it means both trademark and pattern. In his essay "The Trademark Tracey Emin"¹ Ulrich Lehmann suggests an understanding of the *poncif* as what you could call a semantic *Kippfigur*. The *Kippfigur* is a rather simple 'toy' that like the *poncif* is marked by its double meaning. Basically it is an illusion drawing that first shows a recognisable image and then reveals a second one when turned upside down. Most famous is perhaps the drawing of a beautiful young lady that turns into the face of a gnarled old woman. The usefulness of the *poncif* – the semantic *Kippfigur* – when approaching Emin is shown in the fact that the *poncif* provides us with at least two readings. As we will also see later in the case of the relationship between Emin's trademark and pattern, not only does the *Kippfigur* have two sides, the flipping from the first image to its counterpart reveals an interesting semantic relationship: When the image is reversed and picture 'B' shows, it creates a sort of heightened perception of 'A', in that it reminds us of the semantic potential unconsciously perceived in 'A'. In the example "young/old woman" this means that when you flick from A to B and back again and consider how things are defined – at least partly – by its opposite, the young woman will 'look' even younger and more beautiful. Needless to say, the old lady will look older if you start with her. But there is more to it than

¹ Ulrich Lehmann, "The Trademark Tracey Emin," in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, eds. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002).

just the fact that one image can amplify the perception of the other; there is a maybe even more important element in the *Kippfigur*: the process of the flipping itself. This becomes evident in the approach to Tracey Emin as one discovers how a contemplation of her, means constantly shifting 'from on leg to the other.' As mentioned in the introduction it is very difficult to separate her persona from the physical works. To explain this further I will give an example of an artist where one can see a more clear distinction between subjectivity and object: Cy Twombly.

Throughout his career he has been occupied by and inspired by the sea. In Twombly's case his choice of subject – the sea – and his subjective interpretations of it (somewhat *before* the materialisation as painting) is his trademark-*poncif*; arbitrary transformations governed by his subjectivity. Meanwhile, the pattern-*poncif* reveals itself when the subjectivity is mediated (materialised) into objects; the recurrence of a recognizable formal trait constructs a serial reference to his subjectivity. As most of Twombly's paintings (A) are definitely not photo-realistic representations of the sea, it can be useful to study his background and back-catalogue (B), in serial way for a heightened perception (of A). – So a sort of reversal of the *Kippfigur*-image to discover complementing elements. By means of consistency and recurring visual traits a pattern shows itself. Thus, regardless of how vague and arbitrary signifiers are, eventually they will appear as coherence by means of repetition and referentiality.

In relation to the *Kippfigur*, what separates the two artists is Emin's substitution of mediation with meditation (yes, the word that usually connotes relaxing with your eyes closed!). – Some even argues that the mediation is just not there in her work.²

The lack of mediation is essential to the reading of her work, since it makes the reader/viewer constantly switch legs and doesn't allow him any stable position. Thus it represents the rather undeterminable *state* in the making of an art piece where both trademark and pattern is at play; still a cognitive operation and already something material. Emin often materialises her subject by the technique of *monoprinting*, and together with the drawing style it has become a pattern-*poncif* of sorts. What then complicates the contemplation on Emin is how she seemingly often tells about herself (her life experiences are her main subject) in an un-interpreted manner. The *content* of the drawings (they also include text), the representation of her subject, is often so concrete, that they seem un-reflected and thus undermines, to a

² NOTE: Emin herself acknowledges that her work is somewhat meditative. Referring to how the source of many of her works is her own miserable life and how art helps her to 'move on,' she has ironically said: 'If I hadn't been in art I would've probably been dead.' (From the documentary: 'The Eye: Tracey Emin').

certain extent, their ability to represent a higher degree of *subjectivity*. As Baudelaire remarked on the *poncif*³ and the original autonomous artwork, the *subjectivity* that embodies the trademark of the artist, is manifested through deliberate artistic strategies and calculated choices (distinguished from the pattern, which is the discernible repetitiveness of the strategy materialized.). In Emin's case, what easily categorizes her work as meditative is how it is seemingly un-processed and un-filtered confessional sentimentality. The application of the *poncif* to Emin reveals interesting perspectives on the economy of mediation and public reception. It discloses how certain awareness of the importance of mediation points to her/the artist's deliberate play on the edge of the seemingly un-deliberate .

When Baudelaire first exclaimed his thoughts about the *poncif* in the midst of the 19th century, the world looked slightly different from today. This is also why the *poncif* for me is not a point of conclusion but a point of departure. First of all, since trademark and pattern are terms related to determining one's relational (and commercial) position in the (art) world, it is important to realise how immensely the character and influence of the media has changed from then till now. For me one of the most significant things of today is that means of communication and access to information make the world seem closer, which in turn generates a seemingly closer connection between artist and artwork. With Emin this is very much the case, and the fact that she is so well known, from TV in particular but also fashion, together with the fact that her work is immensely filled with representations of herself, obscures the distinction between pattern and trademark: The *poncif* parts truly fuse (or dissolves?) as she – her identity – appears as a repeated image and thus almost becomes the very pattern.

The *Kippfigur* is characterized by the element of surprise and conversely by recognizing the ingenious function and its abilities as toy. Its content, the two separate images, are somehow perceived simultaneously. Further on, some images are simply more generative when compared, meaning that they serve better as a vehicle for making you want to flip back and forth. The *Kippfigur* as metaphor reveals structural aspects of language and perception. As such it shows it self as a tool that can link, on one hand the familiar and simple word games by Bruce Nauman and the more complex situations where content is semantically skewered by context, the artist persona and structural deviations.

³ Ulrich Lehmann, *opt. cit.*, 70 and 75.

Communicative Act

In social semiotics the concept of 'speech act' from Linguistics is broadened to include all communicative acts and as realized by a combination of semiotic modes. Speech act: The linguistic utterance seen as a unit of social action with three simultaneous elements; the locutionary act, an act of referring to something that exists or is going on in the world or the mind; the illocutionary act, an act of communicating some kind of interactive intent, such as 'persuading' or 'teaching', and the perlocutionary act, the act of achieving some kind of communicative goal, such as 'convincing' or 'imparting knowledge.'

Semiotic Resource

Semiotic resources are the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes, whether produced physically – for example with our vocal apparatus, the muscles we use to make facial expressions and gestures – or technologically – for example with pen and ink, or computer hardware and software – together with the ways these resources can be organized.

Semiotic resources have a meaning potential, based on their past uses and a set of 'affordances' based on their possible uses, and these will be actualized in concrete social contexts where their use is subject to some kind of 'semiotic regime.'

Semiotic regime

Semiotic regimes are the ways in which semiotic resources are governed in specific contexts. They include 'personal authority,' 'impersonal authority,' 'conformity,' 'role models' and 'expertise.'

Personal authority is a regime in which semiotic practices are governed by the will of one or more powerful people. For instance, in the case of fashion, the decisions of key fashion designers determine what will be in fashion and what will not.

Impersonal authority is a regime in which semiotic practices are governed either by explicit written rules, or by customary law or tradition.

Under the regime of a 'role model' semiotic practices are governed by following the example of admirable people, for instance peer group leaders, or media stars and celebrities.

Conformity; here the practice is governed by conforming to the behavior of other participants in the given communication situation.

Expertise; when one's practice is governed by following the advice of an expert.

Affordance

Affordances are the potential uses of a given object, stemming from the perceivable properties of the object. Because perception is selective, depending on the needs and interest of the perceivers, different perceivers will notice different affordances. But those that remain unnoticed continue to exist objectively, latent in the object, waiting to be discovered.

Modality

The term modality refers to semiotic resources for expressing *as how true* or *as how real* a given representation should be taken. Modality resources allow both 'degrees' and 'kinds' of modality to be expressed.

Language has modality resources for expressing the truth of utterances in terms of 'probability,' 'frequency' and in terms of whether the utterance is subjective or objective.

In visual communication modality can be 'naturalistic,' 'technological,' 'abstract' and 'sensory'. Multi-modality: The combination of different semiotic modes – for example language and music – in a communicative artifact or event.

Martin Kippenberger

Kasper König in an old-fashioned prisoner's suit: "An astonishing number of Kippenberger's pictures are dumb."

One's own position as jester must at times be negated by employing a standpoint. Someone who encourages the negotiation of everything, including one's identity, must accept that one's very existence is equally negotiable.

Martin was a restless person, traveled immensely, and never established a base; neither in the sense of working and living in one single city, nor in terms of personality or character. Some of his destinations served as recreation and to regain strength (officially from working hard, but probably more from the use of alcohol). In a documentary made after his death, his sisters describe an attempt to quit drinking after the birth of his daughter to have been genuine. Nonetheless Kippy picked up the boozing again shortly after returning to his usual environment, and proclaimed that he needed the drinks to be able to cope with people. Perhaps one of the only instances where his direction of desire was unmasked and the course—and even goal—of the *infant terrible* became crystal clear and evident. This example raises for me a question of the last 50 years' possible jesters and especially contemporary ones: The play with media, the intelligent transformations of systems of representation and the skilled and versatile handling of very shifting subject matters, is it merely a form of escapism in a scenario of changes of culturally dictated roles and Western life's vast amount of opportunities; the fear of staying the course on something and perhaps even the lost ability to do it. Moreover, if this is so, what also seems to encourage these manners, is the art scene's lust for drama, the *infant terrible* and the bullshit-charisma surrounding a life with alcohol and drugz. The line is thin between what could be called escapism and the appraised playful subversiveness of an artist such as Kippenberger, with his challenging of identity and the way he mastered transformation way beyond the merely formal.

It was maybe escapism, but surely, Kippy would not contribute much to the more basic necessities of the 'greater good,' and in conjunction with his skills as artist, he reminds us of the ephemeral role of the court jester: chosen and highly regarded, yet only appearing in flashes, and as such one must remember that there can be a court with no jester, but no jester without a court.

The notion of travel within the art scene, with thoughts around globalization, has in the last decades generated ideas of the artist as a nomad. This image seems overly romanticized to me and personally, if any such comparison is to be made, I favor that of a legionary from The French Foreign Legion. With their physical and mental supremacy, fidelity, versatility and the idea that practice can make most men a good soldier, there is something about the devotion, or will power, that it takes to make it.