

An Awkward Conjunction of Barely-related Pasts

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The small sculpture known to its makers as *Think Thingamajig* sits encased atop a plinth in an art gallery in Switzerland, through whose large but sealed windows a garden and the mountains beyond are blurrily visible. Facing it, a small, rough ceramic pyramid, one of the three forms that made up the installation *Resurrection with three forms*, seems to have escaped from this captivity and is pictured half-lost in long grass, out in the wild. But on the very next page there's a disruption to this neat interpretation, a reproduction of a photograph of a framed photograph of the gallery in which *Think Thingamajig* is displayed. It's a sudden stepping backwards, a deliberate alienation device placed there to remind you that in this book, in which the processes of representation and the making of meaning are both the subject and the object, nothing is as simple as it appears to be, and also to remind you that this book is, in this respect, like all books.

Think Thingamajig is one of many works by Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan in which a motif is repeated again and again in different forms. Its replication and transformation – at several sites from galleries in Cardiff and in Glarus in the Swiss Alps to an Aberdeenshire clifftop, and in diverse materials, from porcelain or painted wood to a series of pencil drawings by Simon Manfield – refers to the way in which, as demonstrated in this book, certain processes of reproduction are also processes of transformation. To consider a work of art in the age of the possibility of its mechanical reproduction is to consider the process of its re-representation and, perhaps, to attempt to gain control of its re-representation, even in the face of the certain knowledge that this attempt will fail.

In this case, as in many others, it is meaningless to talk about the meaning of the work in itself. But the form of *Think Thingamajig* is deliberately, particularly resistant to interpretation, its language drawn from an overlay of allusions so diverse and historically and culturally separated that they cannot be correlated without an effort that absurdly exceeds the significance of any potential conclusion.

But, still, something is gained in this effort to multiply, to re-represent and transform the work. The work, the *Think Thingamajig*, becomes, self-consciously, something more than an object to be looked at. It becomes something that is used, a thing in the world, if not in the wild, even in some of Manfield's drawings a costume, worn by a figure who is similarly conjured from an awkward conjunction of barely-related pasts. It begins to circulate within the artists' scheme, and so to acquire meaning in the way that an unknown word spoken in an unfamiliar context acquires meaning as we piece together an understanding of that context.

Turning the pages, we see a version of the *Think Thingamajig* being held up by a life-size stick-man seated on a paint-spattered chair, one of three who apparently share a white-walled room with a small black pyramid. One stick figure is on all fours, another performs a handstand against the wall, and all three wear schematic top hats. On another page, a large black pyramid with a face cut into it stands on waste ground in front of a derelict building, the pyramid itself battered and scuffed in a way that suggests it has been employed for something other than aesthetic contemplation.

In one image the sculptures of the stick-men have become actors and have been given the *Think Thingamajig* as a prop. In the other, the pyramid, whose carved face marks it out for a character role, has been turned into scenery, adopted as both stage set and shelter by unknown denizens of Cardiff Bay.

Tatham and O'Sullivan's work is rooted in the phenomenological explorations of canonical conceptual art and the expansion of those explorations in the more explicitly politically-engaged wave of performance and institutional critique that immediately followed. But it is far from a repetition of those forms and strategies, even when it takes the form of a repetition of those strategies. True to the lessons that this strand of art practice learned in the sixties and seventies, Tatham and O'Sullivan perform a situated investigation as much as an investigation of the situation. They are working in the light of the success of the avant-garde in claiming more or less any available human action for the sphere of art, and its failure, despite this, to substantially alter the wider terms on which art operates or is administered. They are working with the residue of radical forms,

and from within the reality of the return to formalism, to the gallery, the museum and the production of marketable objects that paralleled the reentrenchment of Western capitalist power.

Restaging and reconfiguring works from the sixties or early seventies, they have shown how short the collective memory really is, and how quickly a determined radical meaning evaporates in the absence of the cultural conditions that supported it. Making conceptual art in the form of sculpture or performance, they have also synthesised an absurdist parody of the self-consuming circuit of artworld fashion and taste with a search for an alternative, lost heritage and the historically-connected language that might describe it and make it live. This heritage, and this language, cannot be openly or uncomplicatedly used within the existing artworld framework, but its possibility can be staged in the form of a series of carefully directed questions about what, and more importantly how, things mean, under current artworld conditions.

The collaborative nature of Tatham and O'Sullivan's practice is part of the staging of this possibility. In keeping with well-rehearsed arguments about the nature of authorship and the construction of the figure of the artist, their choice of a joint identity deflects the idea of direct individual expression into the necessity that discussion and, very possibly, argument, forms part of their working process and means that that process is already, at least in a certain sense, social. Tatham and O'Sullivan's particular understanding of collaboration is wider than this. It encompasses the self-conscious relationship to, and re-use of, the existing imagery and strategies of past artworks and also an often close and certainly considered relationship with the many other collaborators who have been involved in the manifestation of their work.

But this is still collaboration rather than collectivism. However careful the artists are to make visible and acknowledge the conditions of the work's making, the pragmatic decisions, emotional affinities and networks both formal and informal that combine to make a particular artwork exist, they remain concerned with the production of the work and its immediate context, rather than with the creation of a new collective structure or paradigm for that production.

This is, perhaps, because they are trying to examine the process of representation in a controlled environment, whose parameters are to some extent known and understood, but also because they are trying to talk about certain possibilities for expression or the making of meaning that have no clear place in society other than under the sign of art, but which have been denied even that resting place by the processes of specialisation and commodification that have narrowed its social scope and redefined its function.

In this book, a black and white photograph of a group of central European farm buildings is reproduced twice on facing pages. In the foreground, a cast-iron pump spouts water into a trough. There's a neatly stacked pile of wood against one wall, leafless trees silhouetted against the skyline on the hill behind. These elements, as well as the hard lines of monochromatic sunlight and shadow, the chaotic arrangement of lines and planes, suggest an early 20th century vision, the technological eye of the avant-garde camera turned on a rural scene. But half-hidden in the shadow of what might be the entrance to a barn is a naive, but carefully executed, painting of the sun, and this detail serves to turn around the reading of the photograph. A painting of the sun in the shadows, a painting presumably executed by a farmer, perhaps to amuse his or her children, perhaps just in idle times, but inescapably readable as an idol or a fetish. Later in the book, another pair of identical black and white photographs shows an arrangement of giant stone slabs marking a neolithic burial.

The doubling of these images serves to clarify their purpose, to suggest at least that they should not be mistaken for an attempted invocation of imaginary lost power, but considered as an examination of the relationship between two different systems – between a kind of generic but well-founded idea of a pre-modern belief system in which painting and sculpture are meaningful social practices that conduct the discourse of a society and its relationship with nature, and the system of conceptual art, in which painting and sculpture cannot meaningfully speak.

HK is Tatham and O'Sullivan's starkest and most direct attempt to stage the dislocation between language and its meanings, between obvious form and supposed content. If conceptual art paradigmatically approached this dislocation by means of tautology (Kosuth's early neon piece *A Four Color Sentence*, 1966, for example) or contradiction (Baldessari's *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, 1971), *HK* tries to use both those strategies at once. The physical manifestation and absurd magnification of the slogan 'HEROIN KILLS' dramatises both the authoritarian mode of address and its failure. The process of interpretation, of making meaning, is always

one of association, of substitution. *HK* closes down this possibility to the point at which its value as language, its meaning, cannot be either accepted or refuted, because its access to any debate outside of itself has been cut off. The comparable scale of, for example, Tatlin's proposed Monument, or Michael Jackson's statue of himself floated down the Thames (both examples used by the artists as precursors to *HK*), can possibly be accounted for only by the vast, totalitarian communities, who it is hoped could all be relied upon to make the same connection, to combine and, in some sense, substitute their mass for the physical mass of the real object. *HK* is, of course, intended as an attack on the rhetorical certainties of political discourse, but also as an allegory for the situation of the work of art under modernist conditions. It is a critique of interpretation but one that is opposed to, for example, that proposed by Susan Sontag in her well-known essay *Against Interpretation*. Sontag argued (and this may be violently paraphrased but is nonetheless not entirely inaccurate) that critics should leave works of art alone in order to let them just be what they are, to mean what they clearly mean. *HK* shows that without the possibility of interpretation or critique we are left with nothing – abandoned in a space of presumed submission to the empty sign of power.

At almost, but not quite, the diametrical opposite to the form of address that *HK* appropriates from both conceptual art and propaganda, lies the historical traditional form of the mumming play. It is characteristic of the scope of Tatham and O'Sullivan's practice, and the controlled absurdity that runs through it, that such an alien disjunction must be considered – and it is likewise characteristic that its consideration is productive. The ultimate roots of the mummers' act are lost and much discussed, but certain things are known. The form, which is that of a play performed by a small cast whose plot and characterisation are to a large extent determined and unvarying, existed in England in the 18th century. It is presumed to draw upon both the folk plays and earlier festival traditions of the medieval mummers, and the influence of Italian Commedia dell'Arte that came to Britain in the early 1700s. The central element of the drama is death and resurrection, a Christian theme treated without reverence or ritual but played out between a quack Doctor and a hapless Hero or an equally hapless Fool, who fight to the death. The band of players were often, though by no means always, itinerants, but the performance invariably took place outside of a theatrical setting. In fact, the setting is one of the mumming play's most interesting aspects. The players would, if invited, come into a house and perform, expecting, in return, to be fed and supplied with beer.

Tatham and O'Sullivan's reworked mumming play, *The Slapstick Mystics with Sticks*, undoubtedly points to this lost interaction. In a society without television, without an accessible established theatre, the relationship between performer and audience was fundamentally different; direct, often unplanned, unspectacular and mutual. *The Slapstick Mystics with Sticks* also plays games with the resurrected tradition and the idea of that resurrection. The conventional speeches of the characters are replaced by rhyming quotations from the texts of modern psychoanalysis, or adaptations from feminist performance art, that dramatise the process of socialisation, the relationship between the individual and society, and the transmission of tradition. The Hero, who is also the Fool, fights for his identity and loses because he does not understand what he is fighting for as anything outside himself. Brought back to life by the quack Doctor, who applies certain abstract concepts of beauty as an interim tonic and almost by this method brings about a false accommodation between the battling parties, the Hero is prepared for his victory in the final battle by the words of the Suffragette, who tells him that the oppressed must expect to win nothing other than themselves, but makes it clear that this is nonetheless a fight on behalf of all.

Of course, the sight of the performers of *The Slapstick Mystics with Sticks*, an all-female troupe all wearing unignorable red strap-on dildoes, bursting into the central concourse of the Frieze Art Fair in London to the sound of a bugle, only staged the idea of disruption in an arena where the supposedly free actions of artists constituted the predetermined fabric of the event. But this performance, along with its forerunner in Glasgow realised in less strictly artworld circumstances, broke certain expectations not only of the form of a conceptual art practice but of its mode of connection to the history of art.

This is not a dramatic foregrounding of the existing relationship between audience and artwork in order to challenge its assumptions about that relationship. It is rather the exploitation of the assumptions of that relationship in order to present what is not in fact a question but the dramatisation of a potential answer, an interruption to the artworld discourse from the outside whose message is that an outside – a history and a real context

that is personal, political and social – not only exists, but is the terrain on which any meaningful dialog ultimately must take place.

In much of Tatham and O'Sullivan's practice, a motif is repeated in different forms and contexts. Sometimes the motif is taken from what, in the case of *The Glamour* for example, can only be called the dominant discourse of Western art history, and returned to that discourse to examine the effect of history itself. Sometimes, with *The Slapstick Mystics with Sticks*, it is a combination of historical forms and ideas that are recovered from what is, from an artworld perspective, obscurity. Sometimes, as with the *Think Thingamajig*, the motif itself is obscure and it is only its use that can hope to give it meaning.

These motifs develop to the point at which they take on a life outside of any particular context, or rather develop into their own context, and begin to be able to make meaning as a conjunction of ideas. Arguments about the process of making meaning that might have been developed in a specific artworld situation begin to connect into a system of propositions that no longer depend upon that situation alone. Still, the dusty sculptures of stick-men, the pyramids with stupid faces that banally look back at the viewer without content, or the ridiculous 'Rhetoric Objects', deliberately refuse to easily circulate in the value system of contemporary art and avoid reaffirming any expectation that could be predicted, including, importantly, that of easy nihilistic denial of meaning or worth.

Of course, Tatham and O'Sullivan's body of work relies entirely on the history and contemporary context of the artworld for its effects, but within that context it proposes a reversed and self-conscious theatrical model for the relationship between the work and the audience, a properly post-modern model that in its most utopian formulation still falls far short of suggesting an outcome, but offers a productive way to think through the process.

In this moment in which we cannot easily situate ourselves, these things that have been playing the role of artworks suddenly become the audience (they were certainly ready, with their inscrutable faces, their awkward silences), and so we must be the players. A curtain we hadn't noticed, and that perhaps was not even there when we entered, rises, the lights come up and we're caught, unprepared, struggling to find our motivation to inhabit our roles and make them live, to conjure something into existence out of the bare, disconnected lines and gestures we've been handed; unsure whether this is an invocation or just another rehearsal, another part of the endless rehearsal for the endlessly-deferred performance of our own becoming. We are, at least, forced to self-consciously improvise our walk offstage.