

# Critical Acts

## “It Don’t Gitmo Better”

### Scenes from the Coney Island Waterboarding Thrill Ride

Sara Brady

Smack in the middle of the Coney Island Arcade, SpongeBob lies face up on a table. His nemesis, Squidward, stands over him, wearing a mean face and holding a watering can—ready to pour. In a speech bubble SpongeBob exclaims, “IT DONT GITMO BETTER.” Welcome to the *Waterboarding Thrill Ride*.

But SpongeBob is only the teaser. He’s painted on a wall of a “jail cell” housing the

*Thrill Ride*. Riders need to climb three steps to peer through a small opening protected by rusty bars to see what’s inside. What they find is not that exciting: a small, dark room with a dirty sink and two mannequins, one in an orange jumpsuit and one in a black hooded sweatshirt. If they follow the directions placed on the outside wall and insert a dollar into a slot, riders will get the full effect: the



Figure 1. A view from across the street of Steve Powers’s *Waterboarding Thrill Ride*, which occupies a former photo booth on 12th Street in Coney Island, 2008. (Photo by David B. Smith, courtesy of Creative Time)

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Figure 2. Behind this painted storefront, animatrons “perform” waterboarding when a dollar is inserted into a slot. The Waterboarding Thrill Ride by Steve Powers, Coney Island, 2008. (Photo by David B. Smith, courtesy of Creative Time)

mannequins start to move; music starts to play (music inspired by the tunes played in detainee cells and during interrogations at Guantánamo Bay [Powers 2008]); lights come on; the back wall is lit to reveal the message “Don’t Worry It’s Only a Dream”; and for 15 seconds, the two mannequins reveal their true nature—animatrons. The orange-clad “detainee” convulses as the black-sweatshirted interrogator pours water over the detainee’s cloth-covered face.

This is waterboarding, folks. Made available to all: “It’s about time,” says Steve Powers, who designed the installation for the public art presenter Creative Time, “that this uniquely American ritual of intense water horror, a practice long reserved for New England witches and Al-Qaida brass, was made available to the people” (in Creative Time 2008:2). Step right up.

As I stood across the street, trying to get a good photo of the storefront, I had to wait for a few artsy-types to move on. They loitered in front of SpongeBob for some minutes (I finally found a good side-angle), conversing about art, Creative Time, commissions, “so interesting,” and such talk. By the time I got rid of them and had the ride to myself, I was met by two British tourists, male, cameras in tow. They, unlike the previous guests but much like most of the people I saw at the *Ride*, happened upon the

project: passersby. Powers later told me that any 15 minutes around the former photo booth yields a sampling of locals and tourists, New Yorkers and internationals, progressing through their very own waterboarding education. The Brits had a sense right away that this was art and it had a point. They faithfully inserted a dollar (“most people only put in one” [Powers 2008]) and stuck their heads through the cell bars to witness torture. A quarter of a minute later, they stepped off the small concrete platform looking a bit worse for wear.

Soon a group of teenage girls disrupted the Brits’ pensive state with their loud exclamations of laughter and high-pitched yelps (the first at the sight of SpongeBob, the second at the word “waterboard”—that’s my guess, anyway, confirmed by Powers’s experience at the site). They dared each other to go up the steps—one started to read the informational diagram Powers had created and posted next to the barred window (see fig. 3). Words like “ew!” and “oh my god!” were flung into the air. Powers explained to me later how surprised he was to realize, after believing that the subject of waterboarding would seem old hat by the time the installation opened, that so many locals had no idea what waterboarding was before coming across the *Ride*—and that the piece therefore had an unexpected educational aspect.

Powers, however, seems OK with the education he’s offering some spectators. It’s in tune with his overall objectives: “The point of the project was to investigate what waterboarding was about” (Powers 2008). Using dark humor within the context of the sideshow, the *Waterboarding Thrill Ride* strives to make a larger sociopolitical point and open up the troubling debate over the practice using “the inherent spectacle of Coney Island” (Creative Time 2008:1). In an interview, Powers

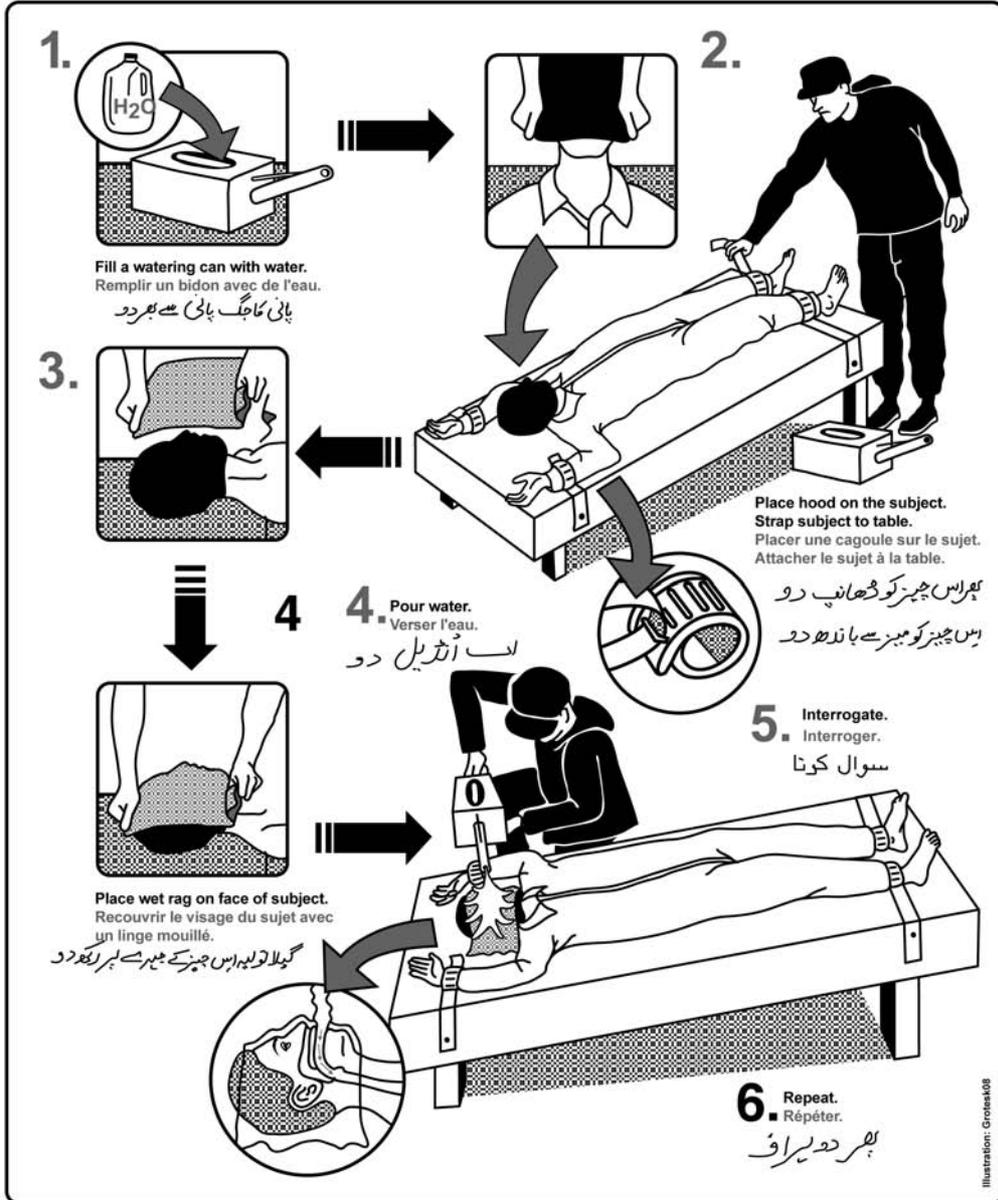


Figure 3. This instructional diagram is posted next to the prisonlike viewing window at the Waterboarding Thrill Ride by Steve Powers, Coney Island, 2008. (Courtesy of Steve Powers and Creative Time)



Figure 4. Inside the Waterboarding Thrill Ride viewers see one animatron pour water over the face of another. The Waterboarding Thrill Ride by Steve Powers, Coney Island, 2008. (Photo by David B. Smith, courtesy of Creative Time)

explained the corresponding spectacle of waterboarding: “It’s primal, it’s using this essential thing—water, this really basic need—in a violent way. Water becomes weaponized” (2008). Water participates in a spectacle of pain: in between an active body and an incapacitated body, water performs. Presented as part of the larger Democracy in America project curated by Creative Time, the *Thrill Ride* embodies the Kafkaesque fascination the US has with the “water torture.”

But wait—let’s go back a few years here. Lest we forget, we are living in an annually renewed state of emergency.<sup>1</sup> Terror is all around us, and we are better off waterboarding the bastards in Guantánamo than dying in a Manhattan explosion. Or so the story goes.

Giorgio Agamben has analyzed the circumstances of such a “state of exception” in his 2003 book of the same name ([2003] 2005), in which he continues his response to German legal scholar Carl Schmitt’s theorization of the sovereign, initiated in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* ([1995] 1998). In the current US “state of exception,” executive power has quashed checks and balances, allowing the president to issue orders limiting the rights of both citizens and noncitizens.

One of the most important of these actions is the 13 November 2001 “Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism” military order, through which the White House cast a wide net, justifying the detention of noncitizen individuals who have “engaged in, aided or abetted, or conspired to commit, acts of international terrorism,” among other qualifications (White House 2001). Key to the document is George W. Bush’s claim of exemption from “the principles of law and the rules of evidence generally recognized in the trial of criminal cases in the United States district courts,” relying instead on military tribunals.

The November 2001 order set the stage for the rounding up and transporting around the world of those who have become known as “enemy combatants,” a term used in the US in the past but specially applied since 9/11 to those suspected of having Al-Qaida or Taliban connections. These measures exemplify how, as José Muñoz describes, “The state stages the state of exception to naturalize and justify unchecked and abusive manifestations of power amid a general scene of savage social asymmetry” (2008:137). Within this state, in which supremeexecutivepoweris “naturalized,” detainees—as the media has spectacularly revealed since the release of the Abu Ghraib photos—have not, as the November 2001 order assures, been “treated humanely.” Instead—at least in the cases of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Zubaydah, and Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri—they have been subjected to (among other methods) the technique known as the “water torture,” “the water cure,” “the waterfall,” “the barrel,”

1. The 14 September 2001 Declaration of National Emergency by Reason of Certain Terrorist Attacks has been extended every year since President George W. Bush issued the proclamation (White House 2007).

and, of course, “waterboarding” (see Democracy Now 2008 and Tran 2008).

Although used as a form of torture for centuries, from the Spanish Inquisition to the US invasion of the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century, to World War II and Vietnam, waterboarding has resurfaced as a contested subject in the US “War on Terror” rhetoric. Waterboarding, or the process during which an interrogator pours water directly onto the covered (usually by cloth) face of a detainee, is justified and facilitated by the actual and imagined post-9/11 state of emergency. The people—the bodies—subjected to waterboarding are the “bare life”; they are, as Jill Lane writes, “those whose suffering—and sometimes death—articulates the juridical, social, or political boundaries of the state itself” (2006). Further, as Powers’s piece demonstrates, the technique has inspired a sort of fascination among military personnel, journalists, politicians, and even artists.

The November 2001 order, according to Agamben, “radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being” ([2003] 2005:3). Detainees therefore become homo sacer: “Neither prisoners nor persons accused, but simply ‘detainees,’ they are the object of a pure de facto rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from judicial oversight” (3–4). Agamben credits Judith Butler’s analysis in *Precarious Life*, in which she shows that “in the detainee at Guantánamo, bare life reaches its maximum indeterminacy” (4; see Butler 2004:50–100). The detainees—“those who are held in waiting, those for whom waiting may well be without end” (Butler 2004:64)—are in-between; they are “living dead,” or, as Slavoj Žižek described Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, “creature[s] legally dead while biologically still alive” (2007). “The very body of homo sacer is,” as Agamben writes,



Figure 5. Visitors look through prison bars to see what’s inside. *The Waterboarding Thrill Ride* by Steve Powers, Coney Island, 2008. (Photo by David B. Smith, courtesy of Creative Time)

“in its capacity to be killed but not sacrificed, a living pledge to his subjection to a power of death” ([1995] 1998:99).

In its capacity to bring a life to the brink of death and back in a very short period of time, waterboarding provides what seems, ironically, an appropriate action upon the homo sacer: it creates a physical manifestation of the “living dead,” forcing the detainee to exist, quite literally, if momentarily, in-between life and death. Waterboarding produces a body that is in-between legitimacy and exception. It is, therefore, an action that performs the in-between-ness that characterizes the homo sacer. Described by some as “simulated drowning” (see Johnston and Shane 2007), waterboarding’s recent notoriety hinges precisely on its collapse between what is “real” and what is “simulated.” Like Baudrillard’s simulated illness, the performance of waterboarding “produces ‘true’ symptoms” (1988) that will always ultimately lead to actual death. As described by Malcolm Nance, who “personally led, witnessed and supervised waterboarding of hundreds of people” at the US Navy’s SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) school in San Diego, during waterboarding “the lungs are actually filling with water”; rather than any kind of simulation, the technique involves “slow-motion suffocation with enough time to contemplate the inevitability of blackout and expiration. When done right, it is controlled death” (in Doyle 2007).



Figure 6. The back wall of Steve Powers's Waterboarding Thrill Ride, Coney Island, 2008. (Photo by David B. Smith, courtesy of Creative Time)

The “mock death” produced by waterboarding has driven some to simulate the process in order to debunk the idea that it is a simulation. Dan Levin, formerly acting assistant attorney general, “became so concerned about the controversial interrogation technique of waterboarding that he decided to experience it firsthand,” in a controlled environment on a military base outside of Washington, DC, in 2004 (Crawford Greenburg and de Vogue 2007). On 5 November 2007, just days before the confirmation of Attorney General Michael Mukasey, Iranian-American activist Maboud Ebrahimzadeh allowed fellow protestors to act out a scene of interrogation and, upon Ebrahimzadeh’s staged resistance, pour water over his plastic- and cloth-covered face as he lay with his head angled below his feet (see Democracy Now 2007).<sup>2</sup> One of the most recent and most visible experiments, however, was the journalist Christopher Hitchens’s jaunt to North Carolina to experience firsthand what all the fuss was about (2008:70). He quickly discarded the “simulated drowning” idea, concluding: “The ‘board’ is the instrument, not the method. You are not being boarded. You are being watered” (71).

As installed, the *Waterboarding Thrill Ride* isn’t about a simulation of waterboarding. It’s

about the spectator becoming a participant. As she rises to peer through the prison bars, she must decide: put in a dollar or not? Powers says of the payment: “The dollar creates a contract; a conscious decision to see what this is about. It’s an important part of Coney Island” (2008). Once the money is in, the jarring music (I heard the *Sesame Street* theme song) reminds the spectator that she’s no longer part of an audience, but a participant in the spectacle; she made the animatrons move; she, in a certain way, poured the water. The dollar, and the “ride,” exemplified for me the state we live in. Always complicit in a very indirect way.

From the inception of the project, though, Powers always imagined going a bit further. So, on 15 August 2008, for an audience of about 20, he and three volunteer lawyers underwent waterboarding in controlled conditions at an “undisclosed location in Coney Island.” Powers paid former military interrogator Mike Ritz<sup>3</sup> to carry out the procedure. In preparation for the event, Steve Powers said: “Now actual waterboard riders will reveal, in their own words, exactly what a taste of death by water feels like”—playing with the tension between “rider” as spectator and “rider” as participant (in Creative Time 2008:2). He explained to me that there would be only a little visual documentation of the event: “There are so many examples [of waterboarding] on YouTube that there’s little point in showing another one” (2008). Powers is happy to allow his public “example” to remain, where, for a dollar, you don’t have to be waterboarded to participate, to be complicit, or to get the point.

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## Not Your Father's Poor Theatre

### Dominika Bennacer

Midway through his life's journey, Krum—the title character of Israeli playwright Hanoch Levin's 1975 play—returns home empty-handed after a long and futile journey abroad. What ensues is not so much his descent into hell, but rather a degenerative spiral into the

boredom and poverty at once inextricably bound and binding to the place he calls home. Krum, in consonance with his English-language homophone, is a man of unremarkable character: a common little speck barely significant enough to stain the landscape of mediocrity

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he inhabits. The bleak banality of Krum's road through life sharply contrasts with the flames of Dante's *Inferno*, yet to the "shit-hole" Krum calls home the same infernal epithet applies: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Contrary to expectations conjured by a vision of a world of inescapable ennui and debilitating tedium, TR Warszawa's exhilarating production of *Krum*, directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski, is a sublime comedy. *Krum* premiered in March 2005 in Warsaw and then toured Germany, Italy, France, Spain, and Russia before landing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the fall of 2007 as part of BAM's Next Wave Festival.

Whatever illusions Krum (Jacek Poniedziałek) may still nourish, the excitement of an émigré returning home is not among them. Arriving at a nondescript airport, Krum's first words to his eager mother (Małgorzata Rożniatowska) reveal that his stay abroad had not been successful. He didn't get rich; he isn't



Figure 1. Dupa and Truda teeter on the brink of despair. From left: Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik and Maja Ostaszewska in TR Warszawa's performance of *Krum*. TR Warszawa, Warsaw, 2005. (Photo by Stefan Okolowicz)

happy. He has not gotten married, engaged, or met anyone. He had no fun. He bought nothing while abroad. His suitcase is full of dirty laundry.

Krum's prospects at home are not more promising than the opportunities he squandered abroad. Upon his return, he finds himself still entangled in the stagnant web of relations from which he had struggled to escape. For it is

into the bed of his ex-lover Truda (Magdalena Cielecka at BAM) that he capriciously slips when he has nowhere else to go. Truda's engagement to the self-effacing and apologetic Takhtikh (Marek Kalita) is only a superficial impediment to Krum's sporadic advances. Takhtikh is so accommodating that he hands his fiancée over to Krum without so much as being asked. This compliance does not stem from a lack of devotion to Truda, but rather from an impulse rooted somewhere between pure selflessness and utter worthlessness. Takhtikh's emasculation is gradual, initiated by a subtle effeminization, which slowly progresses to cross-dressing and culminates in a full-blown drag serenade at the play's finale.

Dysfunctionality and exchangeability of relationships mark other pairings of characters surrounding Krum. The hypochondriac Tugati (Redbad Klijnstra) is preoccupied with whether it is better to exercise in the morning or at

night; he attributes his failing health to his inability to decipher this riddle. While Krum has little patience and offers no assistance in solving his friend's conundrum, Truda intercedes by setting Tugati up with her attractive-only-at-first-glance friend Dupa (Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik).

Krum's neighbors do little more than consume the food offered at the banquets of an endless cycle of weddings and funerals. The only person who appears to escape the banality Krum would so desperately like to get away from is Cica (Danuta Stenka)—a woman he faintly remembers from childhood. Cica eluded the commonplace of Krum's world by virtue of moving

to its periphery, the suburbs. The marginal status of her residence, periodically alleviated by frequent trips abroad with a collection of foreign lovers, now affords Cica a condescending view of her former home.

The locale is a derelict hall: a large rectangular space with Tàpies-peeling-paint walls, the aesthetic doubled by the paint-stripped walls of the BAM Harvey Theater. The soundscape, by Paweł Mykietyń, seeps through the cracks in

the walls and is at times reminiscent of Angelo Badalamenti's *Twin Peaks* ambiance. Sometimes one hears only the repetitive sound of a gramophone needle on a vinyl album that has run its course. The walls of Małgorzata Szczęśniak's set are extended by two rooms on either side of the proscenium. It is through one of the Plexiglas windows of these vestibules that an onanistic voyeur is intermittently exposed, namely the Italian sex addict Bertoldo (Adam Nawojczyk). It is through these very windows that the audience's interpellation into voyeurism is multiplied as they watch Truda writhe under Krum's groping embrace: "Stop, stop playing with my tits and don't ruin my life." Seduction stage left, masturbation stage right.

The stage properties are sparse: a table and chairs, three sofa beds, and several rows of theatre seats. The polyvalent use of space and stage properties allows for an economic, versatile transformation from interior domestic spaces to an interchangeable wedding and funeral hall, a discothèque, a talk show turned peep show, a movie theatre where the gaze is



Figure 2. Krum pushes Tugati to the sandy sunset of his life. Redbad Klijnstra (Tugati) and Jacek Poniedziałek (Krum) in TR Warszawa's production of Krum. TR Warszawa, Warsaw, 2005. (Photo by Stefan Okolowicz)

inverted and the audience is being watched, a beach at the sunset of Tugati's life—in short, the various waiting rooms of life.

*Dupa*, Polish for "ass," is often used pejoratively to designate a female. It synecdochically converts a woman into a piece of ass and vice versa. *Dupa*, clad in neo-punk black leather dress and jacket, staggers ever so cautiously onto the stage. She adjusts the black leather handbag on her shoulder, and in a drunken stupor at once vacant and hopelessly endearing she begins:

DUPA: Beautiful, I am not. At first glance, there is something charming about me. But if you look closely, all the ugliness comes out. Truda, what can you do so that there are only furtive glances, and no long gazing?

TRUDA: I have a big ass and that's a problem.

DUPA: You're only saying that because you're more attractive than I am. You have Krum, you had Takhtikh before him and before him again you had Krum.

TRUDA: One is worse than the other. Krum appears and disappears, appears and disappears.

DUPA: I can't even get one to look at me. I am cheerful, I like to have fun, and still I have no one. I have everything pent up inside. I am about to explode. I have so much to give to a man. Love, devotion. And I have no one. But I'm cheerful.

TRUDA: You're drying up.

DUPA: That's just because of my nerves. But I am cheerful.

All the while Truda titters precariously on her shapely legs, nervously masticating peanuts.

Poniedziałek's successful translation into Polish of Levin's Hebrew text, coupled with exceptional performances, captures something of what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls the "immobility of a coalescence" (2003:xiv) referring to the inimitable quality of being there. But where are we exactly? Particular province unspecified, we are definitively in the state of provinciality. The vernacular is Polish, no doubt, but tinged with a meticulous



Figure 3. Jacek Poniedziałek (Krum) in TR Warszawa's production of *Krum*. TR Warszawa, Warsaw, 2005. (Photo by Stefan Okolowicz)

specificity of hopeless torpor steeped in irony. From time to time, above the live action, film images by Paweł Łoziński indexing Israeli street scenes are projected onto a large screen. This procedure functions as a portal adding another layer to the palimpsest of diasporic departures, alluding to Levin's connection to Poland through his parents who in 1935 emigrated to Israel from Łódź. Complex histories are hinted

at but the correlations are oblique and unspoken, never directly addressed.

On a parquet floor, three sofa beds sit perpendicular to the audience and parallel to one another. *Wersalka*, Polish for sofa bed, also commonly referred to as *amerykanka*, is a long upholstered seat usually with arms and a back, easily converted into a bed at night while hiding linens in its bowels by day. The luxurious efficiency of this item doubtlessly is a key to its etymological roots: Versailles and America, respectively. *Wersalka*'s utility made it indispensable during Poland's frequent housing shortages during the Cold War when most rooms doubled as bedrooms for the benefit of extended or multiple families.

Stage right, next to her *wersalka*, Krum's mother is getting ready to go to sleep. Dupa approaches the second sofa where she finds Tugati, surprised to see her again after their abortive first date. Stage left, Truda rubs lotion onto her ass with a manic passion available only to the obsessive-compulsive. Next to her and beside himself is Taktikh, whose fierce admiration of Truda, cellulite and all, animates

Figure 4. Discordant conversations harmonize as the couples prepare their sofa beds in TR Warszawa's production of *Krum*. From left: Stanisława Celińska (Mother in Warsaw production), Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik (Dupa), Redbad Klijnstra (Tugati), Maja Ostaszewska (Truda), Marek Kalita (Taktikh); in the background Jacek Poniedziałek (Krum). TR Warszawa, Warsaw, 2005. (Photo by Stefan Okolowicz)





Figure 5. Each sofa couches a couple. From left: Malgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik, Reddbad Klijnstra, Maja Ostaszewska, and Jacek Poniedzialek. Projected on the screen: Danuta Stenka and Adam Nawojczyk in TR Warszawa's production of Krum. TR Warszawa, Warsaw, 2005. (Photo by Stefan Okolowicz)

and contorts him. Behind them, seated at a table, is Krum. He speaks to his mother, and their call and response intersects with exchanges between Dupa and Tugati. These conversations, which overlap and blend with one another, are accompanied by percussive slaps that Truda wages against her buttocks.

Krum is preoccupied with the dialectic between what is available to him in his immediate surroundings—all he sees is monotony, boredom, a paucity of love objects—and the unattainable allure of something foreign and beyond his reach. Although his fruitless wanderings ought to have dispelled all such illusions, he cannot free himself from the fantasy of being seduced by a foreign temptress. Cica, although not a foreigner, has not only traveled abroad, but more importantly has successfully captured the mythologized essence of *Ameryka*, which now wafts behind her seductive gait. Condensing the unattainable into a fragrance is a delicate alchemical procedure, and the allure of Cica's scent is a mobility, a proximity to what heretofore has been inaccessible. But the invitation is flawed:

it is an opaque and blind mobility that is being proffered.

Cica's scent, which so intoxicates Krum, is actually the product of her proximity to her exotic lover, Bertoldo. Imported and local secretions intermingle and coalesce on that little island of foreignness contained by native Polish soil, an embassy of occidental glamour: the Hilton.

The three sofas are now arranged in a horseshoe, each couch a couple. Cica and Bertoldo sit with their backs to the audience, their faces projected on the large screen above the stage that magnifies their nuanced expressions. The action unfolds languidly. There is no place to go, hence no need to hurry. The three couples just lounge. There is nothing to talk about; even small talk is forced and listless. The extended durational quality of the piece allows the audience to steep in the boredom of Krum's existence.

Warlikowski's direction is deliberate, measured. Leaving Poland in 1983, he studied at the Sorbonne before his yearlong

apprenticeship with Peter Brook. Returning home, Warlikowski blazed trails in the Polish theatre by offering productions dealing with homosexuality and AIDS. In tandem with TR Warszawa executive and artistic director Grzegorz Jarzyna, Warlikowski brought contemporary international plays to the Polish stage. He also established himself as a director of the classics, staging ancient Greek and Shakespearean drama as well as opera. More recently, Warlikowski has directed contemporary works, including Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (1998) and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992).

Warlikowski wields all of the accruelements of modern theatre with mastery. In this sense, his theatre sharply contrasts with Jerzy Grotowski's *via-negativa*. The poverty of *Krum* lies in the emotional dearth of the internal lives of its

characters. While marking the traces of a palimpsest of departures, migrations, and homecomings, *Krum* distills a fundamentally inescapable void that, despite fervent tussles, cannot be dislodged through spatial dislocations. Yet the performance of ennui orchestrated by Warlikowski and his creative team is so utterly enthralling that it creates an uncanny disjunction between the tedium it represents and the richness of detail deployed in its expression.

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## Fashioning Hybridity

### Rhonda Garelick

*The stage should be invaded by these chairs—this crowd of present absences [...] After a certain point the chairs no longer represent fixed characters [...] They take on their own life.*

—Eugène Ionesco, "Notes on The Chairs"  
([1952] 1997:59)

In his absurdist play *The Chairs*, Ionesco uses empty chairs to conjure a crowd of spectral characters we never see but with whom his two protagonists, played by actual actors, converse throughout the play. The chairs stand in dramatically for bodies, existing as purely theatrical characters, devoid of actors and costumes. The play forces spectators to acknowledge their own agency in the construction of performed identities, to see that

identities exist dialogically through language and social interaction. By the end, we lose our certainty of which characters exist in the flesh and which have been projected into existence by our desires and imagination.

In *Suture, Hybridization, Recycling*, ORLAN seems to tip her hat to Ionesco, building her exhibition partially upon a circle of empty chairs, in a large-scale theatrical installation interrogating the parameters of selfhood. The exhibition—at Espacio AV in Murcia, Spain, in July 2008—raises some of the same questions investigated by Ionesco: How is identity performed? What renders us recognizable? Where or how, beneath our many layers of culturally tailored roles, do we exist? For over 40 years, ORLAN has dared us to rethink our

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most basic assumptions about beauty, religion, art history, sexuality, and, ultimately, about the stability of the self. “Il faut toujours se méfier de la personne qu’on était” (One must always mistrust the person one was), she has said (ORLAN 2006)—an apt credo for an artist who has spent a lifetime redesigning her persona, as well as years refashioning her actual physical being. With *Suture*, *Hybridization*, *Recycling* she now investigates even more deeply the frontier between self and other.

Situating her art in multiple genres, ORLAN sees her work as “rhizomatic,” borrowing the Deleuzian term; and the present exhibition powerfully demonstrates this quality. Here, in a highly collaborative endeavor, ORLAN literally and figuratively weaves together strands borrowed from biogenetics, fashion, interior design, philosophy, photography, and Renaissance performance history—specifically the commedia dell’arte tradition, from which she borrows the “Harlequin’s coat,” a multicolored, patch-



Figure 1. ORLAN + Davidelfin, *Suture*, *Hybridization*, *Recycling*, installation, *Espacio AV*, Murcia, Spain, 2008. (Courtesy of ORLAN)

work costume that provides a motif at once visual and metaphorical.

This is not the first time that ORLAN has turned to the commedia dell’arte’s Harlequin character for inspiration. In *Omniprésences* (1993), the seventh and last of her surgery-performances, the artist kept a tubular Harlequin hat perched atop her head throughout her procedure, while the medical team wore matching outfits of the same colorful pattern, designed by Issey Miyake. During that surgery, furthermore, ORLAN read aloud from a short text, “Laïcité,” the introduction to Michel Serres’s *Le Tiers-Instruit* (1991; translated as “Secularism” in the 1997 English translation, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*), something of a philosophical prose poem in which Serres posits the Harlequin as an avatar of human freedom and radical otherness, as a figure of profound epistemological daring. In Serres’s text, the Harlequin is a grave yet fanciful figure, a performer whose being conjures the possibility of infinite identities coexisting. A futuristic, nearly science-fiction character, Serres’s Harlequin (“Emperor of the Moon,” he is just back from “the inspection of his lunar lands”) also evokes the ancient, hybrid creatures of Greek mythology: “Monster? A sphinx, beast and girl; centaur, male and horse; unicorn, chimera; composite and mixed body” (1997: xvi). “Laïcité” is a favorite text of ORLAN’s, and while it will not be read aloud this time, its title can be found imprinted within the colored Harlequin lozenges of the linoleum; and its spirit infuses the entire exhibition.

In her 2007 installation, *Le Manteau de l’Arlequin*, ORLAN returned to the Harlequin motif, this time extending the patchwork or collage concept of his costume from the level of textile to that of the biological cell, recalling the science-fiction resonance of Serres’s protagonist. Working with the scientists of Symbiotica—the art and science collaborative research laboratory at the University of Western Australia in Perth—ORLAN succeeded in creating a Harlequin coat composed partly of tissue from her own biopsied skin cells (excised in a diamond-shaped lozenge from her groin during a videotaped procedure, displayed as part of this exhibition), cultured in a bioreactor along with cells from diverse other organisms, including



Figure 2. ORLAN + Davidelfin, *Suture, Hybridization, Recycling*, installation, Espacio AV, Murcia, Spain, 2008. (Courtesy of ORLAN)

an aborted fetus of African origin, a marsupial, and a lactating human breast. Petri dishes containing these co-cultured cells were then embedded within the diamond-patterned Perspex acrylic material of the Harlequin costume, while the entirety was lit by filmically projected images of living and dead cells. The coat is here again on display, standing up in its transparent case.

An artwork partially born in a laboratory, the Harlequin's coat, with its co-cultured cells, represents the product of an alternative, artificial version of cellular interaction, even while some of its constitutive elements evoke the components of more "natural" biological processes: ORLAN's groin-area skin cells and the lactating breast and fetal cells all gesture toward the sites and products of human conception and pregnancy, for example. The marsupial cells (from a fat-tailed dunnart) introduce the presence of these rare animals whose females carry offspring inside their own bodies (in their pouches) even after giving

birth, in a kind of inversion of gestation in which the inside becomes the outside.

These once-living cells, conjoined in a latter-day Ovidian process at Perth, now form but one layer of the current exhibition. They serve as a biogenetic translation of the patchwork motifs visible—designed by ORLAN—on the gallery floor and walls, in the hybridized garments that fuse ORLAN's personal wardrobe with new creations by Spanish couturier Davidelfin, and in the transparent plastic Louis Ghost chairs of designer Philippe Starck, which have been upholstered with cushions constructed of these hybrid garments (some of the chairs also have "limbs" covered with the Harlequin pattern). In other words, the entire exhibition is "Harlequinized"; that is, ORLAN has designed it so that each individual object displays hybridity, and each element of the hybridity can in turn be further dismantled into its own composite, collagelike elements, in a harlequinesque *mise-en-abîme*.<sup>1</sup> Like the Russian *Matryoshka* dolls, whose bodies open

1. This sequential, auto-regressive structure resembles Lacan's concept of the constantly sliding signifying chain, which he describes as "rings in a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings" (*anneaux dont le collier se scelle dans*

to reveal ever-smaller versions of themselves nesting within, this exhibition, for all its apparent diversity of media and reference, retains the powerful running motif of harlequinized, multivalent entities at every level from the tiniest cells (invisible to our eyes) to the fabrics and chairs sewn and upholstered into ORLAN'S Duchampian readymades.

Such a strong, recognizable signature motif is in keeping with the original spirit of the Harlequin, the comic theatrical figure born of the commedia dell'arte tradition of the 16th century. The genre of the commedia relied upon a series of stock characters with known, exaggerated personalities (Pantalone, the old man; il Dottore, the charlatan; il Capitano, the ladies' man; etc.), which could be endlessly recombined into different, improvised plot lines. While the actors varied and the stories changed, the characters—and their costumes—did not. Within the commedia dell'arte, then, the fictional characters remained the stable point of reference, irrespective of which actors played the parts. Theatrical identity and costumes determined the identities perceived by the audience, not the “real” individuals who inhabited them. Of all the consistent, yet fictional characters, Harlequin, or “Arllecchino,” was the most beloved and has enjoyed the greatest cultural longevity, for reasons quite pertinent to this exhibition.

According to the commedia's ongoing narrative, Harlequin worked (in most versions) for Dottore, a man so miserly that he obliged his servant to wear a coat of humble rags sewn together in patchwork fashion—this was the origin of the distinctive costume that later grew more refined and stylized. The Harlequin figured among the first clowns in the commedia and eventually rose to become the chief character of its stable of “zanni” or comic servant roles. Beginning as a simple buffoon, Harlequin developed into a clever and acrobatic leading player around whom entire sketches were built. He owed his popularity to the complexity of his

character, for Harlequin was at once a light-hearted clown who danced and joked, and a sly, cunning trickster known for his wit, philosophy, and for the aura of disturbing magic that seemed to surround him.

In addition to his colorful suit, in his earliest incarnation the Harlequin wore a chinstrap of coarse black hair and a black half-mask that covered his eyes and gave him a slightly demonic mien. These accoutrements hinted at the Harlequin's connection to the supernatural, as well as to his mixed-race identity, for the character was originally meant to suggest a black African man—an association that, at the time, connoted dangerous, even deadly powers. While he eventually lost the mask and facial hair, lessening his apparent racial difference, the Harlequin's basic costume remained consistent, as did his association with the underworld and its attendant mystical forces.<sup>2</sup> For over 400 years, this suggestion of magic has intrigued artists of every stripe who continue to reinterpret the Harlequin motif. Modernists in particular were drawn to this trickster hero: Degas, Cézanne, and Picasso all painted versions of the Harlequin; Apollinaire devoted poems to him; and Meyerhold saw in him a progenitor of his own superhuman, biomechanical stage creatures: “Harlequin is a foolish simpleton, a sly servant yet seeming always to be a joker. But look, what is hidden behind his mask? Harlequin the all powerful magician, the enchanter, the wizard. Harlequin, the representative of infernal forces” (in Moody 1975:866).

Harlequin then embodies contradictions: He incarnates a supremely recognizable, almost trademarklike identity, retaining his look and appeal over centuries. But this identity relies upon multiple, shifting personae. In his landmark study, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque*, Jean Starobinski teases out this very paradox:

The harlequins [...are] neither male nor female [...] Hybrid beasts, [they] possess

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*l'anneau d'un autre collier fait d'anneaux*; 1966:259). The foregrounding of upholstery here furthers this exhibition's Lacanian underpinnings by calling to mind Lacan's metaphor of the “*points de capiton*”—the anchoring points or “upholstery buttons” representing attachment points between signifiers, moments that halt the otherwise constant sliding movement (*glissement*) of signification, giving the illusion of stable meaning.

2. “[I]t must be repeated that fundamentally Harlequin remained the same [...] and that he is recognizable in all his guises” (Nicoll 1963:70; see also Henke 2002).



Figure 3. American Indian Self-Hybridization, no. 1. Painting portrait of No-No-Mun-Ya with ORLAN's photographic portrait, 2005. (Courtesy of ORLAN)

the awareness of the half-gods of Egypt [...T]he Harlequin's supernatural power derives from his familiarity with the realm of death [...D]rawing heaven nearer to earth, Harlequin supernaturally unites that which nature has separated [...] All true clowns come from another space, another universe: his entrance must be a crossing of the limits of the real [...H]e must appear to us as a ghost [*un revenant*]. ([1970] 2004:100–01)

ORLAN has chosen to share the paradox of the Harlequin. Like him, she performs her identity via a mutating series of varied racial, sexual, and historical sources. As is particularly clear in her *Re-figuration/Self-Hybridization* photographic series (in which she digitally melds her own features with those of pre-

Columbian, Native American, and African sculptures), ORLAN's recognizability, like the Harlequin's, resides in her theatrical persona, and not within any kind of "authentic" flesh-and-blood self lying beneath it. When we contemplate ORLAN's myriad hybrid photographs of herself, we see the assortment of borrowed features and racially varied physiognomies, to be sure. Sometimes, we see an ambiguity of gender. But just as clearly, we see ORLAN, or rather the character of ORLAN, as she continually redesigns it over time.

Someone who crosses this many boundaries necessarily dismantles, even rips apart, our most reassuring assumptions about identity.<sup>3</sup> Such a process can be very unsettling, as Starobinski suggests when he likens the Harlequin to a ghost or *revenant*, a creature both alive and dead, present and absent. In this exhibition, the Harlequin coat, standing upright yet bodiless, has a ghostly quality. Presiding silently over the gallery, the coat delineates a human figure but, like a ghost, lacks all bodily substance. The Philippe Starck "ghost" chairs, grouped conversationally around the coat, share its curious immateriality.

Starck's chairs telegraph equally their historical and contemporary resonances. Their silhouettes replicate that of their 18th-century ancestors, but their transparent plastic construction is unmistakably modern. These chairs are revenants, time travelers from the court of Louis XV, colorless shadows of their former ornate selves. Like the Harlequin, whose identity resides in his costume, not what lies beneath, the chairs acquire their colorful depth from the exterior, from their cushions, and, implicitly, from the several signatures that they bear. As furniture-ghosts, they are "signed" historically by their association with the Baroque.<sup>4</sup> They bear equally the signature of Starck, their famous designer, whose name

3. In her performance installation at her 2007 retrospective at St. Etienne's Museum of Modern Art, ORLAN literalized her motif of ripping apart assumptions. She appeared onstage with her face and body completely encased in a vast black cocoonlike garment that she proceeded to cut open with scissors, finally tearing apart the fabric with her hands and stepping out from it dressed in a multicolored patchwork garment, thereby staging her own autochthonous rebirth.
4. ORLAN's oeuvre has long been in dialogue with the Baroque period, as we see in her *Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN* series, which reinterprets the classically draped figures of Bernini, particularly his *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*.

has itself become a famous brand connoting luxury, newness, and the glamorous international hotels whose posh interiors he has designed.<sup>5</sup> And the chairs now sport two additional signatures: ORLAN's and that of celebrated couturier Davidelfin, who here merges his own designs with elements of ORLAN's wardrobe, creating the hybridized, recycled clothing-upholstery covering.



Figure 4. ORLAN + Davidelfin, *Suture, Hybridization, Recycling, installation, Espacio AV, Murcia, Spain, 2008*. (Courtesy of ORLAN)

When we sit upon these reupholstered “ghost” chairs, we sign the chairs again—with our bodies, impressing ourselves temporarily upon the fabric. The process is reciprocal: the chairs sign us as well; we merge with these objects just as our feet—in the borrowed Harlequin slippers we receive at the door—merge with the patterned floor beneath them. Our limbs mingle with those harlequin-patterned, prosthesis-like limbs that emerge from the clothing upholstery. We are now hybrid creatures too, subsumed for a time by the multilayered process set in motion by the exhibition. ORLAN insists upon this communality, upon the social, welcoming nature of the experience, reminding us that we pull up a chair in order to “talk, communicate, exchange, and meet.” She points out that the hybridized garments attenuate the hard plastic of the ghost chairs, making them softer and more

welcoming: “the cushions caress the body, offer pleasure, relaxation, easy conversation” (2008b:10).

Yet as we enjoy the social, vibrant, even democratic contact implied by the chairs, we cannot escape their connotation of lack, of absence, even death. The first absence of course resides in the chair's self-declared “spectrality,” their resistance to their own materiality, their

association with ghosts—spirits of the departed. Even the garment-cushions have a slightly uncanny quality: seated there in different positions, granted three-dimensionality by the foam stuffing within, they are lifeless, headless bodies, vestiges perhaps of interlocutors past. The protruding harlequin-patterned limbs suggest a fragmented Harlequin body beneath the cushions, a layer of costume beneath the costume. This uncanniness finds its echo in the frieze of photographs circling the gallery's upper walls. In this series, a woman turns away from us, denying us her face, the typical marker of identity, while displaying a collection of

hybridized garments—or perhaps replacing her personal identity with that of the clothes—yet another move that recalls the Harlequin, the purely theatrical being who lives only in the realm of costume and attitude, never personal biography. This mysterious fashion model, who seems to fly around the perimeter of the gallery ceiling, evokes a surrealist frisson familiar from the works of Magritte, for example, who often painted figures of deliberately obscured identity, figures seen only from behind or with faces veiled.

Looking at the many relationships here, we see a series of gaps never fully closed: between the cushions and the chairs, at the seams of the various garments sewn together, between the Perspex coat and the Petri dishes embedded within, and between the very cells within these dishes. There remains perpetually a distance to be bridged. We recall the first

5. These include the Royalton in New York, the Mondrian in Los Angeles, the Delano in Miami Beach, the Saint Martins Lane in London, and Le Meurice in Paris.



Figure 5. ORLAN + Davidelfin, *Suture, Hybridization, Recycling, installation, Espacio AV, Murcia, Spain, 2008.* (Courtesy of ORLAN)

word of this exhibition's title, "suture," the Lacanian concept that, as Jacques-Alain Miller has explained, "names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse [...figuring] there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in" ([1966] 1977:25–26). For Lacan, the subject's passage into the symbolic order effects a disruption, a gap, or a lack that subtends the constitution of the self in and through language. As Joan Copjec has written of suturing in relation to representation: "The failure of representation produces rather than disrupts identity. That missing part which representation [...] cuts off is the absence around which the subject weaves its fantasies" (1989:242). As Copjec makes clear, such suturing of a void or wound is necessarily a creative, productive act in the face of absence. ORLAN has created a large-scale performance *of* and *as* this productive suturing, via the cushions that lend color and depth to the "ghost" chairs, through the garments sewn and the cells co-cultured. ORLAN's own multivalent, multiply sutured (in the surgical sense) image remains unseen here. While her face (or various permutations of it) often figures prominently in her work, in this case ORLAN has chosen to subsume her image entirely into the enchaind, signifying processes, into the collaborative works on display. She is visible only as one signature among many. "We are all

playing together [...] There are no great heroes here" (2008a).

The final gap that ORLAN negotiates here may be the most daunting, that between the animate and inanimate worlds. Through her creation of the slightly macabre chair assemblages ("modified readymades") and the stitched-together Harlequin's coat, ORLAN has made inanimate objects—chairs and clothing—seem to come alive. She has dramatized a series of oscillations, a *va-et-vient* between biology and design, between science and fashion; and she has given us a role, too. We enter this space and for a time we meld into our surroundings. In their Harlequin slippers, our feet disappear into the Harlequin floor; our bodies mingle with these human-shaped cushions. It's a luxurious feeling; we are touched by the glamorous aura that attends the contributions of Davidelfin and Philippe Starck. But let us recall that the Harlequin's coat was once just a meager garment, composed of rags stitched together. It was only over time, as his character gained power and magical connotations, that the coat too metamorphosed into something sleeker and more finished. The Harlequin's coat then owes something of its dazzling colors and clean lines to the character's transformative magic.

Such magic persists today. The commercial seductions of haute couture and upscale design

find their roots in ancient magic, in the world of the supernatural where everyday objects can acquire unusual powers. As Pierre Bourdieu has written, “What makes the value, the magic of the designer label [*la griffe*] is the collusion of all the agents of the system of production of sacred goods. This collusion is, of course, perfectly unconscious” ([1984] 1993:138).

It is fitting to end with Bourdieu’s reminder of the connection between sacred objects and luxury products; as I have noted, this exhibition draws inspiration from Michel Serres’s text “Laïcité,” the introduction to his treatise on secular education, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*. The word “laïcité” explicitly raises the question of religion only to countermand it, a move that ORLAN frequently makes in her own work. In her recasting of herself as Saint ORLAN, for example, in her reinterpretations of sacred objects such as crucifixes or the shrouds of saints, or in her fabrication of reliquaries containing her surgically removed flesh or tissue, she has repeatedly borrowed and subverted the rituals and lexicon of the Catholic Church for her own feminist, critical, and highly secular ends.

The sacred objects here are not overtly religious; they find their provenance in the commercial realm of luxury goods—the realm Bourdieu so clearly links to ancient magic and religion. Harlequin-like, ORLAN has made a patchwork of these objects, unsettling and hybridizing their functional identities, and by extension, the identities of those who visit the installation and sit temporarily upon these chairs. One might recall here the ancient rituals conducted in worship of Dionysus, in which participants sought to achieve trancelike ecstasy, subsuming their individual identities in order to merge with and through the god (Halpern 2008). Here, from within the arena of the modern sacred—the art gallery and the world of luxury goods—ORLAN has staged a large-scale, theatrical ritual that dares to resemble a Dionysian ritual, only in this case the central figure is the Harlequin who has no divine status (and inspires none of the bloodlust or cannibalism associated with Dionysus). ORLAN’s staging of ecstatic merging is entirely secular and rigorously egalitarian. As we put on the Harlequin slippers and sit in the Harlequin chairs, we are not worshippers

(“no great heroes here”) but active participants. We enter the Harlequin’s permeable character and he enters us, and we are haunted by the void or lack that underlies all attempts to define one’s self. We’re faced with the impossibility of fixed identities. While disturbing, however, this impossibility comes to us in a playful, mischievous way, via the spirit of the Harlequin, the mysterious clown who roams yet among us.

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