

A Sudden Urge

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For reasons that have more to do with *habitus* than with the objective analysis of situations and contexts, we generally consider reality to be a set of relatively stable parameters, on the basis of which we size up various states of affairs, actions or statements, and which enable us above all to appreciate whether such and such a gesture or event is out of the ordinary, unusual, abnormal or unlikely. This frame of reference, intended to provide us with regular and more or less stable data, is really nothing more than an excerpt, amongst others, culled from what we call “reality.” This is because what is held to be reality is, to a great extent, the result of a construction and not the ostensibly true arrangement of raw data which crops up, emerges, appears and disappears, as if we had nothing to do with it and were merely its

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and conceptions. Of course, our thought processes and exchanges regarding reality enable us to escape from the pure relativism which would make all actions, sentences or contexts incomprehensible.

One of the principle devices of comedy, humour or just plain goofiness consists not so much in creating situations at the edge of the usual frames of reference of some reality or other, but in enlarging the framework itself in order to make what is supposed to be found within it (reality itself), and what is supposed to be found outside of it, virtually imperceptible. When Julie C. Fortier drove around with a huge boulder on the roof of a car (*Vous avez juste pas pu trop profiter de l'été, quoi*), strapped on like a piece of luggage or a cumbersome holiday souvenir, it is actually not all that materially impossible or morally unlikely. On the contrary, it seems so plausible that our puzzlement concerns less the physical feasibility of transporting a boulder than the purpose of doing so: Why would anyone need such a boulder, and what do they intend to do with it? Questions of this kind accept at face value the fact that boulders can be transported. The nagging question merely remains: What for? One can certainly admire the work of Robert Smithson,

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involuntary onlookers. Yet the illusion which consists in believing that there is, on the one hand, reality (that which really happens), and on the other, abnormal events, remains as tenacious as ever. It apparently occurs to no one that reality, as we conceive of it and share it, is no less artificial in its construction, beginning with how it is transfigured into linguistic form, than any other supposedly unusual, strange or odd phenomenon or event. As Paul Watzlawick has emphasised in his book on “the reality of reality”: “Of all illusions, the most perilous consists in believing that there exists only a single reality. What actually exist are different versions of reality, some of which are contradictory, and which are all the by-products of communication, and not the reflection of objective and eternal realities.”¹ One need only think how different people understand the same words in divergent ways, and interpret the same situations differently leading to confusions, misunderstandings and misconceptions which leave us stranded at the heart of the illusion of reality – the latter appearing in as many forms

1. Paul Watzlawick, *La Réalité de la réalité* (Paris: Seuil, Points, 1978 [1976]), p. 7

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who hauled earth and stones from one place to another and presented them in a gallery, it is difficult to imagine the future use and purpose of this boulder, perhaps ultimately intended for a Japanese Zen garden. Actually seeing the *fait accompli* compels the observer to move from a *normal* state of disbelief with respect to the reality (the impossibility of transporting a boulder, given both its weight and the size of the vehicle) to an *abnormal* state of belief with respect to a non-reality (the boulder is actually a skilfully constructed fake). Like many artists who use the tricks of comedy, Julie C. Fortier reverses the rules concerning the construction of reality, such that we are ready to understand or at least to perceive as *real* some thing or some action having no reality other than our own construction. What is most surprising about the whole thing is coming to realise, thanks to such subterfuges, that we often operate in similar ways in situations of non-artistic reality.

Situated at the borderline of the possible and the improbable, the absurd and the self-evident, Julie C. Fortier’s work makes permanent reference to situations whose artistic character is voluntarily indefinite, or perhaps even made fun of – though to such an extent that the

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ridiculous enhances the plasticity. Digging a hole in the ground until one ends up disappearing into it (*Vanishing Point*) is an entirely gratuitous, banal and purposeless action, whose only reason for being is “the beauty of the gesture.” Aside from parodying Claes Oldenburg’s famous happening (*Hole*, 1967), or Bruce Nauman’s tunnels, this action elicits a degree of curiosity as keen at the first stroke of the shovel as it is thwarted at the last. Nothing of any importance has truly happened. One simply wanted to see how it was all going to end, though our state of disappointment was both foreseeable and foreseen. Still, one watches right to the end, just to be sure. Same thing in *Nicolas, dépêche-toi!*, where the artist, hanging attached somewhat inexplicably to a wall, awaits desperately to be detached by someone by the name of Nicolas, who is a long time coming or is perhaps already there but is little inclined to come to the artist’s rescue and free her from her predicament. The viewer can also patiently await the conclusion of this crazy situation made up of slack time, long periods of nothing happening, and even a hint of boredom – for long periods of time, the artist scarcely moves, giving the impression of a still image. At other times, convinced by the

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And indeed the actions are concrete – at least to a certain point. For the transitions and gradations, ranging from the actual to the probable, are dealt with by Julie C. Fortier in such a way that the situation continuously oscillates not between the true and the false but between a highly fictionalised real and a less fictionalised real, always maintaining the characteristics (or at least including the codes and conventions) of a state of affairs interpreted as real.

The generalised loss, both in the realisation of objects and actions, including the ultimate reception by the viewer, is the essential trait of a certain comic or burlesque style, apparently without rhyme or reason, for its meaning is conceived in deflationary fashion. We encounter no grand statements about existence and art, but on the contrary, the bland, the banal, the commonplace. The effect is all the crazier that the means deployed to bring it about are disproportionate – in the case of the boulder, for instance, or in the case of the door that opens onto an infinite free fall through the clouds, given that the partition which had to be built ultimately turned out to be more complicated than the result of the celestial plunge itself. At least since Buster Keaton, Harold

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artist’s gesticulations and shouting, the viewer feels something is about to occur, that the situation is about to change or shift, that everything will somehow work itself out. But it doesn’t. This is not merely due to the gratuitous nature of the gesture and the action, which have been carried out “for nothing,” which is both exasperating and amusing at the same time, and lead at once to a plasticity of loss, and to focusing the viewer’s attention on a temporality as it trickles away, escapes and disappears. The attention mustered in the process is inversely proportional to the utter *worthlessness* of the situation: neither gain, nor loss, nor action, nor progress, nor regress.

It is essential that the actions carried out by the artist – including carting the boulder around on the roof rack – take place “in a real situation,” in order to sow doubts as to the truthfulness of the situation in the viewer’s mind. For the viewer is easily in a position to separate the artistic act from the non-artistic context, which becomes henceforth part and parcel of the fiction. The artist’s performances truly do take place in real time (we inevitably rediscover the supposedly immutable frames of reference), which should lead to a concreteness of actions.

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Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy, and Droopy and the coyote in *The Road Runner* – not to mention the countless other inventors of everyday stratagems – we know that using heavy artillery to obtain skimpy results is the golden rule if failure is to succeed.

Doing so once again entails making use of believable, probable, concrete objects and actions, which do not, however, lead to the reality that they promised. A door opening onto a void is the very example of a comic of repetition of the cartoon universe (particularly in Tex Avery’s work), where some crazy architect or pursuant has set up the inevitable trap in which the pursued never fails to fall. A commonplace gag for sparking laughter, falling into the void is a device whose very success is due to its failure, a variant on the age-old dream of flying, soaring through thin air, freed of the weight of gravity. Yves Klein’s famous action, where he hurled himself into the void, and other self-staged mythologies of the same order, invariably referred to Gaston Bachelard’s formula, taken from his essay *Air and Dreams*: “At the outset, there is nothing, then there is a profound nothing, then a blue profundity.” In this world of serious reveries about natural elements and matter,

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the contemplation of the heavens, and perhaps its accessibility thanks to flying machines, does not generally take into account the dazzling descent to which climbing skyward necessarily leads. Sooner or later, every metaphysical flight of fancy ends up falling to the ground, the weight of beings and things being far more real than any transcendence or intangibility of the beyond. At any rate, Julie C. Fortier respects the laws of physics, for the boulder has to be securely strapped to the roof rack if it is not to fall, and anyone inclined to cross the threshold of the door will immediately plunge downward. The real is always waiting to catch us up, or rather to give us a push, by simply reminding us of the law of falling bodies. It is worth nothing that digging a hole is the reverse image of rising skyward, although the hole can be perceived as the material follow-up to the fall; turning round and round, literally becoming a top (*Rien ne va plus*) is merely the horizontal form of the vertical dizziness of the fall.

Given that the exhibition combines a flying house and the sky reeling past as we watch, a highly different dream could lead us to the skies in the work of Magritte, painted in “realist” fashion and often littered with

understand it.” The work entitled *Blizzard Blizzard* condenses, in every sense of the word, the dazzling moment when our conceptions of reality are overthrown: her face progressively enveloped in thin layers of ice-cold water vapour, until she is virtually transformed into an ice statue, the artist ends up... sneezing. A single abrupt discharge and everything is back on track, perceived from another viewpoint, its meaning – perhaps even its true meaning – suddenly renewed. The sternutation is the sudden emergence of the unexpected, the uncontrollable, the irrepressible, in what seems to have an order, a place, a form, a meaning. Of course, the shorter and noisier the sneeze, the more serious the situation, and the more powerful the rupture between *true* reality and *false* reality.

The work showing a little girl apparently hiding in shame under the cardboard packing of a refrigerator, because she was not able to hold back from urinating on the floor, is a particularly successful piece in that it is situated, so to speak, on the tenuous threshold of rupture. It is not clear whether it is drawing us into the realm of humour or if we should see it as a revelation of anguish and guilt. The fact is that

incongruous objects (tubas, bells, chairs, people, breads and cubes), or even just clouds alone (*La Malédiction*, 1931). The doors sometimes open directly onto the forest or the sky. Obviously, one cannot avoid drawing parallels with certain works of Julie C. Fortier, when one contemplates different paintings showing immense boulders hanging or flying in the infinite blue or amongst the clouds. In a world where houses fly through the air, it is only logical that doors open onto the sky.

The reversals brought about by Julie C. Fortier with respect to the different versions of reality are not mere parodies, ironies or examples of derision, playing on discrepancies and exaggerations, in order to make fun of certain states of affairs. A merely reactive attitude would prove weak in the face of the difficulties of the said reality that one is challenging or being subjected to. Like many other artists who have grasped the essence of laughter and the comic, Julie C. Fortier’s works lay bare the complex processes thanks to which we embellish or tarnish reality, running away from it or taking pleasure in it, contemplating it with resignation or sympathy. Or perhaps all those processes at once, as the anonymous aphorism suggests: “Life – some love it, others

there is no way of knowing if, in fact, the little girl is not actually in the throes of laughter or just having fun – and that she has peed on the floor on purpose. The all-too-realistic character of the work overall, eliciting as it does an intense reality effect, nudges our reading toward the “uncanny.” For once one is situated in the register of the shameful and thus blameworthy act – her height, her clothes and shoes all indicate that, at her age, such behaviour is not acceptable from well bred, well mannered young girl. The puddle at her feet of course changes the meaning of the work, which could otherwise have been seen as a simple game of hide-and-seek beneath a cardboard box. What is intriguing and troubling is that the little girl is not like the ostrich that hides its head in the sand so as not to be seen; on the contrary, she exposes herself in an intimate and private act. As if making a sort of statement.

Julie C. Fortier’s sketches are not always explicit as to what they seek to refer to, meaning that one is reduced to conjecture. The most immediate conjecture is that they stand out as metaphors for real action – the kind that occurs in real life: leaving people in the lurch (trying

to get down from the wall), driving them crazy (becoming a spinning top), or instrumentalising them (digging holes) are perfect mirrors of the world of fiction. And that fiction serves to unveil the reality which is hidden from us by the boxes that have been put over our heads. That is something to which one can always respond by peeing on the floor.

Translated by Stephen Wright