

A Geometric Farce in Two Acts | Sally O'Reilly

Characters, in order of appearance:	Man 1
	Man A
	A Busby Berkeley chorus line
	Ian White
	Sally O'Reilly
	An artist
	Henri Bergson

ACT I

Interior, day.

An empty white room emits a palpable hum of potential. We sit for a full minute, waiting for something to happen.

Suddenly, dozens of yellow tape measures are extended, appearing to descend the back wall one by one, like a bionic army of graphic abstractions. The wall is gradually filled with yellow stripes.

The clacking noise of the tape measures abates and we are left in silence once more.

A minute later the tape measures snap back into their casings, ascending the wall one by one, until the wall is empty and white again.

Two men enter stage left.

Man 1: Have we missed it again?

Man A: Don't know. Maybe we're too early.

Man 1: Is it on repeat?

Man A: Dunno. What is it about—have you read anything?

Man 1: I don't think it's about anything. It can have meaning without being *about* anything. It might just be concerned with itself.

Man A: That's such a modernist position. It has to relate to the world *somehow*. It can't just be isolated in some idealized space away from the audience's interpretation or cultural impositions. Nothing is autonomous. Isn't there a press release?

Man 1: Don't think so. I agree it can't be autonomous, but what if it is referring only to the language

in which it is made? That's possible, like looking at a finger that is pointing, and not at what it's pointing at.

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Man A: Ah, okay. I get it now. Well, it was quite amusing in its futility, but not what I would call a rib splitter.

Man 1: It's quite Buster Keaton in its impersonal inevitability. And although a tape measure is not inherently funny, when it shirks its function to the point of banality ... that's funny. Like saying a word over and over.

Man A and Man 1: Balls, balls, balls, balls, balls ...

Man A and Man 1 continue saying the word "balls" to the extreme point of banality, at which it ceases to be a word and enters the pure splendor of phonetics. A Busby Berkeley-style choreography of plumed female dancers accompanies the minimalist song, pressing the point home. Man A and Man 1 move about the stage like a pair of seasoned showmen. For the finale, thousands of balls cascade from the ceiling onto the stage, like one of the episodes in Wood and Harrison's earlier piece *Hundredweight* (2003). The white space resounds with the Newtonian noise of falling balls, like the splattering fallout of some unknowable cause with an infallible internal logic.

Once the balls have settled the performers hold their poses, as if arrested in time. Two spectral figures materialize in the impossible yet eternal space between the written description and the staged action, between the script and the play, the representation and the real moment. They are Ian White and Sally O'Reilly.

Ian: It *is* quite Buster Keaton, and a lot of other things too. Like I said in my catalog essay for the last Wood and Harrison monograph, the standard text on their work usually goes something like this:

Abbott and Costello, Bas Jan Ader, Bruce Nauman, Buster Keaton, Carl Andre, Chris Burden, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Edward Lear, Émile Cohl, Fischli and Weiss, Gustave Flaubert / Bouvard and Pécuchet, Frank Spencer, Fred Astaire, Gilbert & George, Georges Méliès, Hope and Crosby, J. G. Ballard, Jackson Pollock, Jacques Tati, John Cage, the Keystone Cops, Kraftwerk, Laurel and Hardy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Monty Python, Morecambe and Wise, Paul Valéry, Robert Morris, Samuel Beckett / Estragon and Vladimir, Sol LeWitt, Stuart Brisley, Richard Serra, The Odd Couple, Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer, Wilbur and Orville Wright, Yves Klein, Yvonne Rainer. The everyman deadpan slapstick double-act.

Sally: Thanks Ian, your intrusion into my current catalog essay is most welcome, I have to say. I

was just wondering how to get the artworks' cultural references out of the way so I could concentrate on their methodologies.

You see, I've been thinking about the bifurcation of the self that Baudelaire describes at the moment of falling, and I was wondering if Wood and Harrison could be thought of in those terms: as a self-duplicated entity that is simultaneously aware of its position of superiority over the inanimate world and its inferiority to the inviolable laws of the universe. I'd say that their staged incidents acknowledge humanity's partial control over the physical world as well as the ultimate victory of gravity and entropy. Their actions and interactions with objects are an absurdist demonstration of their will upon the world, and of the physical world's dumb inability to reciprocate in a social way.

As the Busby Berkeley chorus line files off with a shimmy of tail feathers, Man A and Man 1 seem to thaw and re-enter the flow of time and consciousness.

Man 1: Blimey, talk about putting words in the artists' mouths.

Man A: There's something in what she says though.

Man 1: Nah, that's just a writer's projection onto the work. "Ultimate victory of gravity and entropy"? That's death. No artist makes work about death any more. The grand themes are too cumbersome for contemporary artists—they lack nuance, which artists love like gradations of color. Artists manipulate meaning like paint, mixing up palettes of personal and particular hues, but not the universal primaries. There are no universals anymore anyway.

Sally: Except death.

Man 1: Not necessarily. Death might be different for every one of us. Have you ever asked anyone who has died what it was like and compared it with anyone else's answer?

Man A: There're all those accounts of walking towards a bright white light. Sounds like entering a gallery to me.

Man 1: Right, so now all art is death ...

Sally: I'm not saying their work's *about* death; but they definitely use the morbid methodologies of humor. They use gravity and entropy to create these events, and we can predict their effects with a brand of certainty that is related to the assuredness with which we can say that everyone we have ever met will die, or that in the silent comedy film the ladder will clout the grumpy policeman round the head. Are you saying that these events that Wood and Harrison construct—these incidents of collapse and restoration—are simply exercises in logic, language and aesthetic form?

Man A: That would be outmoded minimalist rubbish. You can't place the artwork beyond the reach of inference. Every image, however abstracted, has art-historical, cultural, and social precedents. When they use balls in a piece, it might dredge up in the viewer's mind past works by the likes of Kusama Yayoi, Jeff Koons, Martin Creed, Vito Acconci ... there's a load of balls in art history.

Sally: And chairs. And shoes. They use a bland class of objects that litter Western artists' studios.

A spotlight comes up on a generic artist's studio stage right. An artist sits looking bereft, as if wondering what artwork to make next, until a realization appears to dawn. She jumps up, grabs the chair and starts trying it in different positions, unconsciously reconstructing Van Gogh's *Chair* (1888), Bruce Nauman's *Shit in Your Hat - Head on a Chair* (1990), Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), and other well-known artworks that feature chairs.

Sally: Some objects are so generic that they move us on only slightly from the realm of geometry and abstraction, of language and structure. It is *almost* possible, with something as basic as a chair, to avoid implying a specific narrative, but it is hardly possible to circumvent the viewer's tendency to take the chair as a metaphor.

Man A: Ah ... but it may be taken as a metaphor for a generic everyman.

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Sally: We create unending, insatiable streams of metaphors in our attempts to understand the universe. Waves provide us with a metaphor by which to conceptualize light; and light provides us with a metaphor for energy; and energy gives us a metaphor by which to articulate our complex biological states; and these sensations provide us with a metaphorical vocabulary with which to communicate our relationships with others; and we use our relationships with others to talk metaphorically of the immensity of the universe; and we refer to the immensity of the universe ...

The curtain drops, cutting off Sally's monologue before it reaches the theological strata.

ACT II

A long white corridor stretches away from us. A photocopier at the front of the stage whirs into action and spews out a pile of A4 paper with a broken phrase printed on each sheet. Man A and Man 1 move towards the machine and divide the sheets between them. They read them out as if each were addressing another person. Their soliloquies seem to make sense both separately and interleaved.

Man A: Like the shadow cast by an object,

Man 1: Jokes operate in language's margins for error.

Man A: an artwork cannot describe a specific reality outside the studio or gallery.
 Man 1: A word or object might smuggle an extraneous or wrong meaning
 Man A: It exists through a reduced set of coordinates in its own terms,
 Man 1: in amongst its baggage.
 Man A: which is exported back out to the real world as analogy.
 Man 1: We find this criminal or absentminded behavior funny.

Henri Bergson stalks onto the stage. He is obviously annoyed by the photocopier's garbled attempt to communicate how jokes work and how art might absorb this into its methodology to demonstrate comic effect rather than merely representing it. He wheels the photocopier off stage, reciting, apparently irrelevantly, from his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900).

Henri: Doubtless a fall is always a fall, but it is one thing to tumble into a well because you were looking anywhere but in front of you, it is quite another thing to fall into it because you were intent upon a star. It was certainly a star at which Don Quixote was gazing. How profound is the comic element in the over-romantic, Utopian bent of mind! And yet, if you reintroduce the idea of absentmindedness, which acts as a go-between, you will see this profound comic element uniting with the most superficial type. Yes, indeed, these whimsical wild enthusiasts, these madmen who are yet so strangely reasonable, excite us to laughter by playing on the same chords within ourselves, by setting in motion the same inner mechanism, as does the victim of a practical joke or the passer-by who slips down in the street. They, too, are runners who fall and simple souls who are being hoaxed—runners after the ideal who stumble over realities, childlike dreamers for whom life delights to lie in wait. But, above all, they are past-masters in absentmindedness, with this superiority over their fellows that their absentmindedness is systematic and organized around one central idea, and that their mishaps are also quite coherent, thanks to the inexorable logic which reality applies to the correction of dreams, so that they kindle in those around them, by a series of cumulative effects, a hilarity capable of unlimited expansion.¹

Man A and Man 1, however, realize the pertinence of Bergson's words, and attempt to demonstrate it to a (by now) rather bored audience. They enter from the very back of the stage—the furthest end of the corridor from the audience. They appear very small as they start clowning around and pulling down a series of screens, like blinds across the corridor, one in front of the other, working along the length of the corridor towards us and growing in size as they approach. A dot is drawn on each screen, decreasing in size on each subsequent screen, so that the effect of perspective makes each dot look the same size as the one that precedes it.

★1..... Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (London: MacMillan and Co., 1911), pp.13-14.

Man 1: Things, it seems, are not what they seem.
 Man A: [As he pulls down another screen] Is this the point?
 Man 1: That is one point ... [As he pulls down another screen] ... and this is another.
 Man A: There is always *this* point.
 Man 1: That is a point like any other of these points. There are no new points.
 Man A: That is the point, it seems.
 Man 1: But things are never quite what they seem. That's the point.

And so on, circularly ...

When all the screens have been pulled down and the length of the corridor is hidden from the audience by the first screen, Man 1 and Man A exit stage right. Shortly afterwards we hear a series of tearing noises that grow steadily louder. Eventually they jump through the final screen, tearing the paper and splitting the final dot asunder. The action is a reference to a performance by the Gutai artist Murakami Saburo, who could be thought of as an art-historical precursor to Wood and Harrison's work, if you consider some of their more durational and action-painterly works. These are exemplified at the Mori Art Museum by a two-channel video²: on the left a pair of shoes, still attached to a pair of feet, is being scoured into dust by an electrical sander; on the right the scattered rubber sole shavings accrue into an abstract image on a white ground, not unlike the smudges of paint applied by Klein's human paintbrushes in his legendary performance *Anthropometries* (1960–61).

Man A and Man 1 tumble off stage left, continuing to caper and bicker over the comic potential of permutation, repetition, illusion, and the video edit before exiting again.

An empty white stage.

The audience is denied the satisfaction of a dramatic resolution, but then that's the nature of experience in the post-Enlightenment universe: there are no natural denouements or narrative framings, other than the ones that we falsify and impose for the sake of tidiness.

Curtain falls.

THE END

Sally O'Reilly (Writer and Critic)

★2..... This work is not exhibited in MAM Project 005 [editor's note].