

Title: Artist as Fool
By Larry Caveney

It's 5am and Scotty rolls over to look at the glowing clock radio and the face of his lover next to him. He gets up, scratches his ass, and stretches his huge frame of a body. It's still dark, but Scotty uses the flashing street sign outside to make coffee and get ready for his day.

After coffee, Scotty grooms himself in his too-small bathroom and too-small mirror. Scotty is about 6'5" and weighs 305 lbs. He shaves his head with a straight razor in the dim light of that New York morning. Moving over the scars of past miscalculations, he smiles at himself with mischievous satisfaction. Clean, propped up, and shaven, Scotty opens his closet and pulls out a huge worn bunny costume. He squeezes himself into the jacket of the outfit and zips it up. The sleeves extend themselves into rabbit paws that he can poke his fingers out of. The bottom half of the outfit is fuzzy lavender bikini briefs, with a mid-size pom-pom for a tail.

Scotty sits on the bed and pulls fishnet stockings over his large shapely legs. His lover wakes and asks, "Are you doing community work today?" "Yes, go back to sleep," Scotty replies. After the stockings, Scotty slips into his 5-inch heels that make him almost 7 feet tall. At loss to where his headdress could be, Scotty has a flashback moment and looks under the bed. Scotty pulls his rabbit ears out from under the bed and crowns himself with the final touch of his bunny fantasy.

Scotty checks himself in the mirror and beholds the magic lavender fool he has become; the fool as performance artist that he has spent years creating.

Scotty, when dressed in the bunny costume, becomes a porthole for a surrealistic break in linear time. His intentions on this day are to interact with people on the street, his way of giving the public something to laugh about as well as creating a myth for them to share. Scotty moves from the world of vaudeville for one particular audience to the streets to a more interactive exchange with audience.

Scotty the Blue Bunny sacrifices his own body for the prospect of humor and dark kindness. He is just one of the artists in this survey that use the fool figure in his performance art. Other artists that use the notion of the fool are Leigh Bowery, Reverend Billy, and William Pope L.

In this paper, I will define how these four artists are using post-modern interpretations of the fool for social intervention, just as the court jester did in medieval times.

To define the term "fool" becomes a very expansive endeavor. According to Beatrice Otto, the author of *Fools Everywhere*, the term fool has multiple meanings.

The term "fool" has a broad range of synonyms: clown and harlequin, jester and joker, buffoon, trickster, vice, even devil and demon. But these words do not offer consistent qualitative or quantitative differences that might separate fool types from one another. Etymologies of these terms are similarly overlapping and general. The implicit meanings most common in the late twentieth century identify jesters as verbally witty, buffoons as stupid, clowns as common circus

figures providing visual foolery, and fools as dupes or fops. Finally, motivation for their actions distinguishes self-serving tricksters as mischievous, vices as malicious, and devils/demons as evil. Yet because the differentiations associated with these terms are hazy and even subjective, we will not use them to delineate types and will use the term "fool" to represent the entire group.¹

Initially, the role of the jester was to entertain royalty. The fool or jester found favor with the king or queen through humor. There are accounting logs that show which jesters were awarded the most gifts. Both the terms jester and fool are interchangeable for the royal subject that holds this social position of court entertainer. For the most part, the jester was a nomad who was always struggling to maintain a place a role in his community.

Apart from providing a balance to the royal hubris, the primary function of the court jester is to provide comic relief from the everyday stresses inherent to the throne. Max Gluckman reminds us that the jester for Queen Elizabeth "did her more good than the medicines of all her physicians, and the sermons of her chaplains"²

Humor allowed the fool to be the messenger of bad news to the king. The jester was always seeking favor from the king in order to sustain a position in the court. William Somers was a favorite jester of King Henry VIII. He is believed to have had the most stable position in the history of the court. William was a natural; he humored his way into the heart of the king.

¹ Vicki K. Janik, Emmanuel S. Nelson; Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History Greenwood Press, 1998. 2

² Ibid 34

Somers was, in Tudor parlance, an "artificial" rather than a "natural" fool: that is, he was not what his contemporaries would have labeled a "simpleton" nor a "madman" nor a "freak," but rather, he was a talented performer. His specialty was verbal wit more than physical antics, though he could mug funny faces and bizarre gestures. In centering his humor on clever play with language and extemporaneous versifying, he can be considered at the very least the first notable comedian of the English Renaissance, a jokester for the humanist age. He was also the first whose fame greatly outlasted his own lifetime.³

At first William dressed in the traditional jester's costume, but later he became more fashionable often dressing in finery usually only afforded the king. William was so popular that he was included in a group portrait with the king. Williams carved his way into a position of respect.

We now tend to picture the court fool – the traditional jester in cap and bells- as belonging in a special way to the middle Ages and to western European culture. But his origins, though hidden in unrecorded antiquity, may be as old as kingship itself. For wherever forceful and ambitious men or women have attained a position of auto power over others, there is often at their side an insignificant person of obscure origins who, whether given the formal title of 'fool' or not is seen to fulfill equivalent function.⁴

Two of the major categories associated with the jester are the innocent fool and the clever or artificial fool. The innocent fool is usually mentally handicapped and is used for the purpose of humoring the king. The innocent fool came from mythical place in the minds of those who witnessed his lunacy.

³ Ibid 406

⁴ South, John. Fools and Jesters At The English Court Alan Sutton Publishing, Ltd.; (July 1, 1998)2

From the earliest times, natural fools, of whom the madman represents an extreme in his near-total loss or abandonment of reason, have provoked a strangely mixed set of responses comprising (in carrying proportions) fear, pity, contempt, laughter, and awe. In certain cultures, the madman is thought to be in communication with a world of spirits and is attributed with powers of clairvoyance and prophecy.⁵

The artificial or clever fool is conscious of his foolery and uses it for his entertainment and survival. The clever fool had more social mobility than the innocent fool did. The clever fool would use his relationship with the king for his personal benefit.

The clever fool understands only too well the risks he is taking in the communications of hard truths, and is obliged to adopt more subtle approaches. He is most effective (and funny) when he contrives to hold a mirror to the king in which his patron can see a magnified image of his own attitudes and decisions, and recognize for himself the folly in them.⁶

Subjects that were born with dwarfism were used in court as jesters. Dwarf jesters could be either artificial or innocent. Dwarfs were in big demand in the court during the 1500s. The queen would pay handsomely for the services of a dwarf. Families would experiment with dwarfing their children in order to make a profit from the queen. Little documentation is given about the dwarf jester, mostly represented by royal ledgers or paintings, prints.

The earliest known to us is the Negro dwarf jester in the court of Pharaoh Pepi. This jester could “dance the God” and in an appeal to the pilot who should bring the boat with the soul of the king to the islands of Osiris. The Pharaoh claims

⁵ Ibid. 154

⁶ South, John. Fools and Jestors At The English Court Alan Sutton Publishing, Ltd.; (July 1, 1998) pg. 8

identity with his jester and hopes that it will ensure his soul a fair voyage and a welcome reception in the other world.⁷

The role of the jester within the royal court came to an end during the Elizabethan period. Jesters moved on to sideshows, the theater, or they became street entertainers. When the jester was finally liberated from royal patronage, he found freedom within his own expression. Jesters found community in sideshows, the streets, and the theater. The freedoms exercised today by contemporary artists such as Scotty the Blue Bunny, the late Leigh Bowery, and the Reverend Billy come from past village idiots that had the courage to act out their fantasies. All five post-modern fools profiled in this paper could be described as the artificial type.

Scotty the Blue Bunny embodies the idea of the jester as the humorist. Scotty does not have a king to answer to; therefore he takes his refuge on stage or in the streets. Progressing from being the king's entertainer and sometime advisor, the jester moved from the court into the public domain about the latter part of the 17th century.

Scotty is a good example of the fool as artist because he plays out his fantasies in the street. He does this by projecting his created persona and attracting attention. Scotty's massive body in his blue bunny suit, complete with Speedos, aids his fool as jester representation by using humor to get what he needs. The jester as fool understands that humor is a social lubricant. Humor allows the fool

⁷ Willeford, William. The Fool And His Scepter. Northwestern Univ Pr; (June 1, 1969) pg.154

not to take issues too seriously by objectifying the reverent symbols of culture.



Scotty the Blue Bunny

This special trust leads to the principal hallmark of the court jester -- his license, widely and explicitly acknowledged, to speak freely, to challenge, question, provoke, tease and mock, even on sensitive points or matters of policy. Jesters were not revolutionaries seeking to topple the king, which is partly why they were allowed such latitude, and their words were often heeded by their so-called superiors. They were usually the king's ally, while also being on the side of the people -- like a good friend who tells you what you may not want to hear, but which other people might only say behind your back. In this way, they would intercede on behalf of victims in individual cases of injustice and also on behalf of the populace as a whole -- the reduction or removal of unfair tax being a frequent target (one particularly well documented in China).⁸

The following interview is an interview with Scotty The Blue Bunny by Larry Caveney on the role of the jester in contemporary times.

⁸ Otto, Beatrice K. "Fools Are Everywhere." *History Today* June 2001: 33. Questia. 10 Oct. 2004 <<http://www.questia.com/>>.

The Jester was the one who had the King's ear...Social intervention through humor. Where do you fit within this description?

In that sense, I would have to say, that maybe I play the role of the people's jester - I report to the audience at the "king's" expense. The humor of my image lies in its juxtaposition from the normal. I offer myself as a focal point for which the audience can see their own exceptionality, and gain some immunity from the status quo. By giving people permission to laugh at me, we enter into an allegiance, which is ultimately an opportunity for me to be suggestive, provocative, and to enact social intervention.

What the difference between performing on stage verses the streets?

Performing on stage is completely different from working on the streets, mainly because of time. On stage, I get to set the pace and finesse issues and techniques of performance. I can communicate through lighting, music and imagery, where as on the streets, it is fleeting and instantaneous. The stage is where I get to be an artist in the fullest sense of the word - all my skills are brought into play - sewing, choreography, prop building, etc. On the streets is where I get to be a Personality.

Where did you get the idea of the bunny?

As far as where I got the idea to use the bunny motif - I am at a loss to explain my own phenomenology, or to rationalize the creative process. The real question is not why I am a bunny, but why did the Bunny choose me. I had a dream and followed my heart -- a muse is a muse is a muse.

Is ritual involved in your process in becoming the bunny?

There is no particular ritual I perform in order to get into my character, as this is not something I do, but rather who I am; I do not consider the Bunny an alter-ego, but rather a hyper-identity - it makes me MORE of who I am, not completely different, or emphasize a sublimated aspect. There are things I do in order to perform, i.e.: rehearse, warm up my voice, deep breathing, etc, but that stuff comes AFTER I'm in character, backstage. As a matter of fact, I don't think I would even use the term in character, in my case it's "in costume."

I know that the bunny is the part of you that plays the sacrifice or fool to the public. Which part of you is the straight guy? Where's the contrast that helps define your image?

The contrast that defines my image is the juxtaposition with the audience. However, it is not an either/or situation, it's more of a both/and situation. I am different from them, yet the same, or of them, and I let them know. I speak in a collective sense, using words like "our" or "we" - I give them permission to participate. My fantastic reality doesn't alienate me, it endears me. There is no fourth wall -- I turn being looked at into an aggressive act -- it's completely interactive.

**Are you constantly the bunny? What's typical day for you like?
AM-PM?**

A typical day for me is one of fluid identities -- I may identify myself as Scotty the Blue Bunny on the phone, but I really only dress as such at performances/appearances. Otherwise, I talk to my friends on the phone, negotiate performance opportunities, go to the supermarket, and forget to buy toilet paper. I'm an independent artist, so I pretty much do everything myself, from working on the website to sewing my costumes, to making my lunch.

The late performance artist Leigh Bowery is the next example of the artist as fool. Bowery defined the jester as fool when he used his body as a means of sacrifice. The jester, as sacrifice, is the fool who uses his body as a mirror for others to project their fantasies and fears upon. The fool is the placement of matter that threatens reality. At the same time, the fool sacrifices himself while defining the difference between the concepts of right and wrong by acting as the fool. It's a device that functions as a pressure release within the context of a "civilized" community.



Leigh Bowery, <http://www.leighbowery.com.br/xtravaganza/imagegallery/>

Leigh Bowery is remembered as an artist who used his body as a medium for expression. Bowery would wear costumes that contorted his body out of its natural alignment. In a 1992 interview, Bowery states:

Bowery chose to ignore the facts of his own gender and the construction of the male body, to use an organ formed for the expulsion of faecal matter as stand-in for an organ of procreation. That his work was about contradiction, outrage, challenging the idea of the normal, surely stemmed from this fundamental and original conflict. Like many other homosexuals, Bowery turned to fashion early in his career and this allowed him to play with cloaking the facts of his maleness with fantasy femaleness, a second and removable skin of fabric, feathers, glitter and extreme coloration. Given how loudly Bowery's masculinity broadcast itself even from his younger days, those early attempts at dressing up must have looked ridiculous, even absurd, leaving him the choice of either accepting his gender unvarnished, or to deny it through costume and makeup. Being an essentially honest man, as I believe he was, Bowery chose to shout out loud his homosexuality, and out of this he made a life and a body of work that could never belong to any other period than the 1980s and any other place than London. Those inspired by his example, such as the late Peter Tully of Sydney, simply appeared somewhat

tragic by comparison. Leigh Bowery was the groundbreaker and sole true owner of the Leigh Bowery tradition.⁹

Like Leigh Bowery, William Pope L uses his body as a cultural projection. Unlike Bowery, William Pope L acts out and puts his body through rough conditions for the purpose of social dialogue. In 2001, he began his Broadway Crawl, a 22-mile journey up the spine of Manhattan that took five years.



Like Bowery, William Pope L also uses costumes as a device of the familiar. Costumes bring humor to William Pope L's message. Pope uses his body, sometimes dressed as Superman, to make social commentary. His work often addresses social issues, such as his Eating the Wall Street Journal performance, in which he sat on a stack of the newspapers in a Boston financial district, downing pages and drinking milk in what has been called a "performative burlesque of contemporary consumptive modes [in which] "consumption is

⁹ McCormick, Carlo. HotWired Review. 1992
<http://www.geocities.com/leighbowery/article1.htm>

unnatural and food is anti-nutrition," states Pope. Barbara Pollack, journalist from the Village Voice, makes the following commentary on Pope.

Attention has come gradually to Pope.L, who has often worked just beyond the star-making machinery of the gallery system. One early work, "How Much Is That Nigger in the Window?" required the artist to stand on street corners or sit in performance spaces doused in mayonnaise. In another, "ATM Piece," he stood before a Chase Manhattan branch dressed only in a skirt made of \$1 bills, which passersby were free to grab. In 1998, "My Niagara," his first installation in Harlem's the Project transformed the artist's body into a disturbing spectacle: splayed out on a rack, naked except for an orange ski cap and heavy yellow boots. "Eating *The Wall Street Journal*," performed most recently at Sculpture Center in 2000, skewers our reliance on the "bible of financial news," with Pope.L literally digesting the newspaper while sitting on a toilet mounted 10 feet in the air. These Fluxus-inspired performances combine influences as diverse as Joseph Beuys and Paul McCarthy with African *bocio* rituals and Richard Pryor routines¹⁰

The creation of the actor Bill Talen, Reverend Billy began preaching the anti consumerist gospel in the Times Square Disney store three years ago. Wearing a white dinner jacket over a black T-shirt and a priest's collar, and flashing a salesman's smarmiest smile, he confronted shoppers with the ugly news that Bambi had been built in sweatshops, and lamented the corporate monoculture that has conquered Times Square.



¹⁰ Barbara Pollack, Superman Enters the Culture Wars
Village Voice. January 9 - 15, 2002

The Reverend Billy plays the role of the trickster as jester as he costumes himself with familiar attire (a preacher) and then uses that attire to seduce people into thinking that he is a preacher. This role allows him to voice his message of capitalism going out of control within our society. Billy is shown in the photo above performing an exorcism on a Starbucks cash register. On the street corner out side of Starbucks Reverend Billy bellows: "If enough New Yorkers wanted to protect our city from this company's assembly-line fake Bohemianism we could leave these cappuccino machines hissing alone." Billy preaches against corporate evil and its abuses of power. "We are against the large transitional corporations that try to defeat the individual, the ones that attempt to replace freedom of expression with their products," Billy declares. Billy, like the trickster snares the audience in a familiar setting and then reveals his true objectives like when he preached against the Patriot act with his congregation on the site of ground zero in New York City. Based on Lewis Hyde's observations of the trickster, he states.

The trickster is very much the joker. Humor trips the trap of culture as well, by giving culture a surreal event that makes culture stop and notice. Trickster walks the middle ground in life. Humor allows the trickster to not take issues too seriously. The Trickster uses humor to objectify the reverent symbols of culture. The Trickster learns through his own initial mistakes and uses that information to trick others. Whether or not it is right to say that this story's sequence of events describes trickster learning something, it is right, I think, to say that the story portrays a character living on the cusp of reflective consciousness. Trickster embodies reflection coming into being; in him we see both the need for reflective consciousness (without it he suffers) and the rewards of that consciousness (with it he exploits the world) ¹¹.

¹¹ Hyde, Lewis. Trickster Makes this World: Mischief, Myth and Art. North Press: January 1999. .56

Reverend Billy uses audience plants or actors for effect. He will hire actors to act out certain situations within a Starbucks setting, such as planting two convicts on parole and having them discuss the quality of coffee at Starbucks verses what they would get in prison. Billy as the trickster is based on the idea of the medieval artificial fool. The artificial fool pretends to be someone he isn't in order to lure the audience into his game of illusion.

If William Pope L was left without the costuming or the humor, could his works be as effective? The humor within all the work of Leigh Bowery, William Pope L and Reverend Billy provide a familiar to their language. Without the humor in their work and the familiarity of their created persona, the assault of their message would be too confrontational and the audience could dismiss the majority of what is preached. What is the seduction of foolery? The Reverend Billy shows courage in the face of humiliation and jail. Why have these artists chosen humor as a means of intervention or expression? Perhaps they are "acting out" like children. Perhaps a child is more in touch with their natural instincts? The message and how it is relayed to the particular audience is a major factor in how the jester operates. The jester moves in and out of madness or idiocy to create new realities. This movement gives the jester an excuse to dance within the sublime and touch the face of the abyss.

"The grotesque jester," according to William Willeford, "is like other kinds of fools, is a mascot who maintains a relationship between the ordered world and

the chaos excluded by it".¹³ The jester finds his own court in the open terrain of the public using their presence to speak out on issues of injustice, to define or to redirect socially isolated environments, and to sustain humor in this idealized culture of America.

In this paper I have defined how Scotty the Blue Bunny, Leigh Bowery, the Reverend Billy and William Pope L are using some of the ancient devices of the fool for social intervention today, just as the court jester did in medieval times. These four artists all have a natural courage that allows them to seem foolish, and with that notion perhaps that is really how we should define the term natural fool. The natural fool as jester isn't necessary the fool that is mentally stunted, but one that has a need to reveal his true nature so that others might join in. The fool as a subject of the court is obsolete; therefore he must make his own way in society. The sovereign artist as fool works within the periphery of our world using social and political interactions to maintain dialogue with the archaic self.

¹³ Ibid 15

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