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## Burlesque, Parody, Idiocy, Zaniness: Let's be Serious

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Translator: Simon Pleasance

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## REFERENCES

Jouannais, Jean-Yves. *L'Idiotie : art, vie, politique — méthode*, Paris : Beaux-Arts Magazine, 2003

Labelle-Rojoux, Arnaud. *L'Art parodique' : essai excentrique*, Cadeilhan : Zulma, 2003

*Le Burlesque : une aventure moderne*, Art Press, numéro spécial 24, coordonné par Christophe Kihm et Patrice Blouin, décembre 2003

*Figures du loufoque à la fin du XXe siècle : arts et littératures*, (sous la dir. de Jean-Pierre Mourey, Jean-Bernard Vray), Saint-Etienne : Publications de l'université, 2003, (Arts)

- 1 Among subjects in which art criticism finds itself ill-equipped (as, incidentally, do most areas of positive learning), we find the droll, the comic, the grotesque, and the farcical... and this list alone indicates how, even where vocabulary is concerned, there is something here that seems to elude discursive authority, by way of resistance or impotence. Legacy of muses, scale of genres, success of the spirit of geometry and reductionism of the logo, everything conspires to render problematic the means of description and analysis of what is included on the flipside of the serious, on the side of the liberating power of irony, the tongue in cheek, the funny, or, more seriously doubtless, of humour and wit, varied chords in a hypothesis that has no steady name. However, a whole swathe of modernity is marked by it—and contemporary art work in particular. One or two recent publications are aimed at adding their two cents' worth to it.
- 2 Word by word, then: zaniness for the conference minutes and proceedings published at the University of Saint-Etienne press under the title *Figures du Loufoque à la fin du XXe siècle*; the burlesque for the special issue of *Art Press* with the same title, which appeared

in late 2003; and *L'Idiotie* with Jean-Yves Jouannais (Beaux-Arts Magazine Books) and *L'Art Parodic'* by Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, reissued by Zulma. Word by word since each one actually contributes to its area and aim with its word.<sup>1</sup>

- 3 The two collective volumes use an overall term to cover broad areas. The university publication of the CIEREC, subtitled “arts and literatures”, fails, nevertheless, to trace an historical, and even less so a conceptual outline for what the idea of zaniness tries to unify. Ranging from literature to film, and comic strip to cooking, presenting Erik Dietman and Glen Baxter, Marcel Duchamp and Martin Kippenberger, among others, for the area of visual arts, the volume plays on the undefinedness of its point of departure to make its way through the various areas, without managing to bring out any unifying proposition. Pierre Jourde referring to “zaniness as an exercise in exhaustion” is the person closest to opening up a broadened theoretical prospect, one, in other words, weakened but making of its weakness a key to its object, of those forms of an art “which does not assert itself [, which] plays grating, clownish music, the acoustic excess in which determination grows tired” (p. 166). There are however quite a lot of welcome avenues and references in these thirty or so communications.
- 4 The special issue of *Art Press*, for its part, features a category associated with the field of film. Under the title *Le Burlesque*, the magazine right away questions the conceptual and definitional shortfall with regard to what is neither solely genre, representational manner, or form of discourse, and opts for the comic aspect of gesture as the central motif. Whence, needless to say, the place occupied by cinema and cinematography in the contributions—alongside dance and the visual arts. By taking part in the identification of principles, if not systems, peculiar to the cinema, such as the mechanization of behaviour, the effect of exaggeration and surfeit, fragmentation, duplication, contrast, repetition, deception... the authors try to define and discern the figures of the burlesque. It is nevertheless when these try to broaden the cinematographic paradigm beyond the legacy of a genre that the publication becomes its most interesting, reflecting on the human figure in its plasticity often experienced in the burlesque, returning to one or two personalities in the visual arts who are as different from each other as artists like Bruce Nauman and Saverio Lucariello, to the figure of an artist like Salvador Dalí, or to the principle of the duo which the Blumes share with Laurel and Hardy. Above all, by traversing the history of the cinema, it is a perspective on the whole of modernity that is traced out in these pages, with a wish for historicization which, in its turn, J-Y. Jouannais's book will develop even more systematically. Bailing out by select and relevant references, at the price of a broadening of the field in which it sheds none of its theoretical ambition, the *a priori* flimsy or tired notion of idiocy. J-Y. Jouannais is caught in a strategy of defence and illustration, not to say claim and demand which marks his approach: and marks it roundly, in what it gives to the whole of the book, including reproduced works—a wholesome eloquence when the talk is of art. Less roundly when it asserts itself as “the only possible viewpoint” for expressing modernity, at the risk of depriving anyone defending it of the dialectic freedom of idiocy as they pinpoint it often with great success (thus when he contrasts the *amour* of a person like Vaché with the fierce conceptual determination peculiar to philosophical competition, p. 206). There remains plenty of generosity, nevertheless, in these pages,
- 5 So with A. Labelle-Rojoux there is also the project of endowing with a genealogy what he designates by the coined term: parodic' art—with the apostrophe being no less essential than the one in *'Pataphysique*. The word proposes a conceptualization which is, in the end

of the day, as convincing as you can get, beyond highly conscious offhandedness, but never clumsy in argumentation. The rather happy interplay of writing helps to get across an endeavour with a dual, even ambiguous status, between theoretical essay and artist's self-legitimization. The desire for "reversal" or "inversion" of values has to do with the spirit of the avant-gardes, or in any event with a desire for affirmation responding to the position of the author as essayist-cum-artist, which enables him to reaffirm parodic art as stemming not "from regression or abandonment", but, on the contrary, from "a combative hyper-morality, even in the most derisory derision, in the affirmation of error, in the quest for malaise". The option leads almost to the password, in particular when A. Labelle-Rojoux sets his personal artistic production within an aesthetic quasi-tradition: he follows its path from Charles Baudelaire to Henri Bergson, by way of Alfred Jarry and Alphonse Allais, enacting something surpassing the division between good taste and all the rest in contemporary production. Until, as an artist, a programme is laid down for art to come.

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## NOTES

1. Other scarcely earlier publications have taken other paths to deal with a similar object: thus the collective volume *Le Witz : figures de l'esprit et forme de l'art* published by La Lettre volée (2002, see notice 121 in *Critique d'Art*, # 21, p. 77), and a chapter such as *Figures V* ("Laughing until Crying") by Gérard Genette (Le Seuil, 2002, see notice 036 in *Critique d'art*, # 20, p. 48).