

Mark Wallinger

Somewhere there is a storehouse of the possible, containing that which has not yet made it into the realm of the real. This is because all that is real is possible, but not all that is possible is real.

On the top floor of Kunsternes Hus Mark Wallinger re-establishes this Platonic model: in one gallery a pair of traffic lights permanently on green presides over the dominion of the unconscious, dream life, the imaginary and the image; in the other, lights stuck on red signal the real, the conscious, the objectivised and the object. Wallinger's use of authoritative apparatus – standard traffic lights whose task it is to banish chaos from the roads – is an amusingly literal and off-beam means by which to administrate such an abstract bifurcation. Although in the green gallery things are wall-bound and two-dimensional, and in the red gallery stuff occupies the floor in full three dimensions, if we're honest, both sides of the gallery are as full of objects and images as one another. Perhaps the questionability of a precise dividing line, and Wallinger's self-consciously hubristic attempt to locate it, is the critical lesson here.

A commandant overseeing the categorisation of the real and the imaginary could be a character in a dystopian novel, where the slop and drift of everyday experience is dammed and filtered into the permissible and the shameful; or a utopian one, where the distinction demarcates the free and the fettered. Maybe such segregation is necessary to prevent the objectivisation of ideas and the idealisation of objects – a category slippage too far for the Platonist, for whom ideas are distinct from the world of things. The Classical storehouse of ideas is immutable; it may be glimpsed through the real, but only the potency of pure thought can resurrect it. According to this model, then, green, indicates the rarified stratum of the intellect, marking us from the lowly beasts; and red is the domain of the corporeal, of earthbound objects, gravity and, ultimately, mortality.

If we were to place these formulations of red and green in a hierarchy of associative values, we would probably say, that green – go, yes, positivity – is better. But then again,

there are pragmatists, positivists and sensualists who would rate the red higher. And even in workaday reality meaning is equivocal, as a red light can be interpreted not simply as obstructive, but as insuring safety or harbouring a state of potential and spurring expectation, while we might look on green as symptomatic of an unreflective, progress-obsessed society.

This irresolution of the object/image–stop/go polarity is most evident in Wallinger's ongoing series of self-portraits, where the self is represented by the letter 'I', painted in a variety of styles and typefaces. Wallinger places these paintings in the red room, maybe to better evoke the embodied self. But our sense of self is profoundly fluid, non-objectivised and suffused with subconscious inflections. 'I' is the point at which subjective interiority and objective exteriority meet and overlap. While science tells us we submit to the laws of physics and are prone to the same biological imperatives as any animal, we nonetheless suspect we are different: driven by will and not dragged by gravity, freethinking like the gods and not penned in with the beasts.

These polarities, which seem solidly pitched against one another in language, start to dissolve into ambiguous spectrums and muddied admixtures in experience. We are neither god nor beast, both self-willed and compelled by external forces. Another of the perennial polarities – good and evil – while generally rendered distinct in literature, film, oral histories and mythology, are murkily intertwined in practice. We are often morally conflicted, not necessarily wanting to do the right thing. And it is the portion of badness in us all that enables us to empathise with, or at least recognise the forces behind, most wickedness. At the top of the stairs, between the red and the green galleries, Wallinger's *Ferry* makes the face-off between good and evil unstable and untenable. Two sets of signs designate the two sides of a ferry, which runs between Manhattan and Governor's Island, as 'goats' and 'sheep'. The boat's portside, or left – in latin *sinestre*, from which the word sinister derives – on the outward trip is elected 'goats', while on the return this side, now the starboard, becomes 'sheep'. In Christian iconography and rhetoric, then, diabolic goats are reformed into members of the Lord's flock. We are reminded of Charon, the ferryman who transported the deceased across the river Styx, which separates

the living from the dead. Passengers may be oblivious to or nonchalant about their categorisation as damned or blessed, and there may be nothing *actually* at stake, but as an image it rolls back the façade to reveal the eternal stories and archetypes that persist within everyday life.

In *According to Mark*, in the red gallery, the artist casts aside such lordly potency in a puzzle of ownership and subservience. One hundred chairs, each different but neatly arranged ensemble, have been marker panned with the word 'MARK' and each has been tied with a length of string that converges at a single point on the wall opposite. The implied scenario is wilfully ambiguous: do all these chairs belong to Mark or are they where people called Mark must sit or is this simply literalism – the chairs being marked with the word that best describes that mark? Visually the effect is of a Dürer-esque exercise in perspective or, conversely, a moment of radiation, the emanating lines terminating at ciphers for absent individuals. The chairs become a congregation in thrall to the high vanishing/radiating point but, rather than performing complete transcendence, they keep two feet in the secular realm of material possession, the naming of things and product design.

Oslo Steiner is more grounding still. A thousand stones have been numbered by hand with a white pen. We can immediately empathise with such labour in a world of mechanised laser printing, where even the dehumanising rubber stamp seems a hand-hewn alternative and handwriting has become an anomalous method of indulgent nostalgia or a symptom of lack. These numbered stones, with their inherent contrast of human labour and the monumental timescale of geology, catalyse thoughts of mortality, of catalogues of the vanished and anonymous. This is a very 20th century reading, brought about by associations of holocaust memorials and the attendant horror of individuals disappearing amongst statistics, and in harnessing these associations Wallinger instigates a sense of unease that might be further explained by psychoanalysis – another major cultural descriptor of the last century. The drive for legacy and individuation is determined by both id and ego, it is primal and structured, biological and

intellectual. Once more, we are in the red zone but our thoughts wander off into the green.

Apparently firmly back in the green room, a photographic work titled *The Unconscious* cues expectations of Freudian psychoanalysis or a feast of Surrealist imagery. What is delivered, however, are banal pictures of people asleep on public transport. Like evidence of a contingent tribe of zombies infiltrating the transport system, the photographs have been gleaned from websites dedicated to the genre, popular by dint of the widespread nature of the phenomenon and its implicit *schadenfreude*. Sleep is ultimately a vulnerable and intimate state and distribution of these photographs as a currency of ridicule creates unease tinged with the horror of colonised tribes who feared the camera would capture their souls. The images lack the solidity of high-resolution photographs, as if their subjects are partially leaking away from the callous world of public transport, drifts of interference encroaching protectively from the dimension of sleep.

The sense of vulnerability of the sleeper can be attributed to animal defencelessness, but it also has a socio-political basis: the lack of composure of the unconscious face is a far cry from the idealised image we would like to present to the world. This is funny because, as Henri Bergson writes of comic facial expressions: ‘One would say that the person’s whole moral life has crystallised into this particular cast of features. This is the reason why a face is all the more comic, the more nearly it suggests to us the idea of some simple mechanical action in which its personality would for ever be absorbed. [...] Automatism, *inelasticity*, habit that has been contracted and maintained, are clearly the causes why a face makes us laugh.’¹ For Bergson laughter is a social corrective intended to upbraid those who do not accommodate the flux of social contexts. The fixed expression is a sign of self-orientation that must be administered to for the social good.

This idea of the social corrective is extended to those who come a cropper in full physical flight in *Landscape with Fall of Icarus*. Five monitors showcase the mishaps of anonymous sporting adventurers; but there is a binding theme here, as game protagonists

¹ *Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic*

teeter on or tumble from, get caught up in, are pulled along or jerked about by various strings, ropes and cables. Slowed down to one tenth of the natural speed, these interactions between bodies and inanimate matter take on symbolic gravitas – the death slider is baptised, the kite flyer toyed with by a wrathful demigod. The video then runs backwards so that the protagonist is absolved, only to fall foul again, over and over. Marx noted that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce. Here we scarcely need repetition to raise a laugh, though, as the brute comedy of slapstick instantly captivates.

Virtuosity can be thought of as the perfect alignment of an individual's capacity with the instruments, materials or conditions deployed and slapstick is produced by its mismatch, producing mirth in the audience and embarrassment in the unvirtuous. Essentially, embarrassment is produced by the realisation that the gap we perceive between our authentic and projected selves has been noticed by others. As the writer William Hazlitt (1778–1830) observed, 'Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be.' Hope is the process through which we desire a match between the possible with the real-to-come. Hope in its secular form replaces the religious aspiration for deliverance, with the worldly aspirant hoping for returns within his or her own lifetime rather than for generations to come – and preferably in the next few weeks, if you please. This may explain the dwindling of grand ideologies extant in the world, but the upside is that the gap between how things are and how we feel they should be is narrower and easier to bridge or plug.

Double Still Life comprises two identical vases of bouquets that, on inspection, turn out to be made up of fake flowers. The piece neatly signifies the ricochet of emotions, of joy, grief and disenchantment, while asking us why we are so disappointed. The aesthetic impact of fake flowers is the same as real ones, but why do we value them differently? While art is premised on artifice, we still have expectations of nature that adhere to classical notions of purity and authenticity. We are a bundle of contradictions. What is more, the limits between what we find acceptable and that which we consider monstrous can be both mobile and entrenched, and in both cases this is often premised on arbitrary

cultural norms that we have long-since ceased to interrogate. If art has a role, then perhaps this is it: to look squarely at these sutures between belief, habit and reason.

It is here, in the interstitial seams where doubt, ambivalence and ambiguity thrive, that images and ideas become formally malleable and politically charged, and it is where Wallinger's practice has been lurking and stalking for some time. Margins and ambiguities have gained in status, as the shattering effect of the holocaust and the atomic bomb choked modernism's engine of canonical progress, while the godless universes of absurdists, existentialists, secularists and scientists were restructured to expunge outmoded myths and hegemonies. History as a causal series of events has been reformulated to encompass the radiating effects of rupture, revolution, reprisal and fragmentation.

Historically, British culture is particularly prone to canonical structuring, the weight of convention, the draw of tradition and the governance of institutions; and Wallinger has repeatedly examined, contested and lampooned this throughout his practice, at times demanding we justify our assumptions, at others gambolling in the swell of aesthetics and ideas that they have produced. In *Word* it is the sheer mass and continuity of cultural output that is pivotal, with every poem in *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250–1918* printed as wallpaper covering the vast end wall of the green gallery. The first text is a lyric of the earliest known sung round, 'Sumer is icumen in' – a pagan-infused celebration of singing cuckoos and farting bucks – and from this origin the book flows, piloted by the venerable Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, through centuries of verse produced in the English language. It is the Osmium of literature – the densest collation of verse – and Wallinger compacts it further, removing titles and authors' names, line breaks, punctuation and spaces to produce what is, ostensibly, one word containing centuries of linguistic and aesthetic evolution.

The video piece *The Magic of Things* similarly runs things together, this time in a deluge of images. The US television sitcom *Bewitched*, which ran from 1964 until 1972, related the daily travails of a witch married to a mortal man in suburbia. Each episode generally

revolves around the witch/wife, Tabitha, attempting to hide her own supernatural powers and those of her relatives, who visit regularly and, in disapproval of the cross-creed marriage, attempt to sabotage the equilibrium of the home. Wallinger has reedited every episode from all eight series, in chronological order, removing the agent of transformation from the scene to isolate the effect from its cause. Floating teacups, self-mending mirrors and a car that arrives from the afterlife through the living room wall all acquire a level of super-supernaturalism as even the internal rationale of the fiction is removed. In contrast to Bergson's formulation of the comic, these objects seem to possess super-elasticity, in that they inexplicably conquer the laws of physics.

Bewitched may be dismissed as populist or mainstream, but then again, the same could be said of the Greek myths in their own era. And whereas the candy-coloured aesthetic of *Bewitched* is tied to its contemporaneous technology, the choice of objects subject to these magical transformations are stereotypes, timeless representations of the very *idea* of a teacup or a car. They inhabit our collective imagination through repeated viewing, the backstory of history in this case providing us with familiar, bog-standard domesticity to better foreground the moment of transformation. Traditionally an artwork comprises quotidian, inanimate material that has been animated by the cherished ideas and peerless skill of the now-absent artist, and this has been identified as its 'aura'. There is an awkward parity here between *The Magic of Things* and contemporary art's exorcism of this aura. The video's blunt edits between scenes pricks any illusory bubble, foregrounding the trickery of film editing and, through focussing on these implausible events, amplifying the idiotic jerks and jolts of hidden strings. And yet we are far from disenchanted.

Similarly, while we no longer believe in the genius of the artist, as viewers take part of the credit for understanding and generating meaning, this does not mean that art loses its epiphanic potency. *One Dimensional Sculpture*, comprising various pieces of rough and discarded timber, plasterboards and twigs each numbered with its length in centimetres, seems to trample the delicacies of the artistic act. Its literalism tethers our thoughts to the objective fact of matter, venerably arrayed for our scrutiny like a shelf of great literature.

But although the wings of any flight of fancy are clipped by such an earthbound procedure, the base urge to measure becomes comically poetic; like the doings of an idiot savant, the dumb act throws a spotlight on to something primary, mathematical and teleological.

Throughout the exhibition Wallinger characteristically intertwines profundity and levity. *I Am Innocent*, a double-sided reproduction of Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X, set spinning on a hanging brass chain at ten rotations a minute, could sound a tad facile. But the reversal of the image on one side generates a strangely compelling optical effect, while the very idea of a spinning pope becomes a satirical comment on current headlines throughout Europe about Catholic priests and child abuse. Again and again, apparent trifles develop into mud pies that Wallinger pitches at eminent targets, including himself. As he says of *My Name is Legion*, he has resisted the temptation to pun on his name for fifty years but has finally succumbed. Quotidian objects are arranged casually against the wall and emanate string, as in *According to Mark*, although this time the vanishing/emanating point is less elevated, communing at eye level. 'Mine, mine, mine' it seems to be saying with juvenile insistence. But consider the title and, as is often the case, a concealed door creaks open and a multitude of profound associations tumble forth. In the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament, Jesus meets a man possessed by the demon of Gadarenes: 'And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many.'² This tumble-down still life seems imbued with an overwrought confession or self-deprecating self-portraiture, conveying an object neurosis that might as easily be philic as phobic.

Downstairs we zoom back out to a historical scale that is strangely more comfortable in *The Nightmare of History*. Each of the 14 photographic scenes is to be peered at through the small dual apertures of 'viewmaster' viewers, a breakthrough technology of 1950s schlock cinema that has recently been technologically updated and marketed as a 'lion in your lap' experience. Stereoscopic photographs of soldiers at the demarcated boundary between Germany and Russia at the beginning of WWII, Queen Elizabeth II visiting

² King James Bible, Mark 5:9

Nigeria in 1956, a contemporary unpopulated scene at the site of the UN Green Line in Nicosia, Cyprus – these images speak of displacement and the negotiation between aggressors or the colonised and the colonising. As if to ape this, the viewing technology, too, communicates to our left eye and our right eye separately, brokering a neural discussion that results in the orchestrated illusion of three-dimensionality.

‘UN’ reappears writ huge in the upstairs windows of the gallery, facing outwards to the busy thoroughfare of the city below. While in the Cypriot Green Zone the hurried UN presence reflects the political context, here the gallery façade easily adopts the authoritative air of a serene United Nations building, an apparent context made all the more plausible by the nearby Royal Palace and Canadian and Japanese Embassies. The UN was established at the end of WWII to promote economic and social recovery and legislate on human rights issues; today its attentions are broader, encompassing contemporary problems such as the environment, migration and the incorporation of culture and human rights into economic development strategies. As British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, said at the inception of the UN: ‘We must make sure that [...the UN] is a true temple of peace in which the shields of nations can some day be hung, and not merely a cockpit in the Tower of Babel.’³ Although the UN has not always succeeded in brokering harmonious accords, its function continues to be recognised as interlocutor and emollient in a polyglot Babel of conflicting ideologues.

While Wallinger undoubtedly spurs us to think of the United Nations here, the trailing hyphen of the title, *UN-*, tips us off that this is not a simple case of a building in a fancy-dress costume. In English ‘un-’ is a prefix of negation or opposition; through its addition an adjective, adverb or verb is reversed or undone. Even though it was already the most prevalent prefix in English, its usage increased with telegram communication, when cost per letter prompted the replacement of ‘not’ with its two-letter alternative. Analogously, then, the UN itself can be thought of as the un-doer of acts, a political ‘command-Z’ for the word processor of world power structures. And the Kunsternes Hus is re-imagined

³ Unsourced quote in Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, Thomas G. Weiss, *UN Ideas That Changed the World*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University press, 2009

as a un-beacon of reverse hope: what's done is not necessary done; the future is there for the unmaking.