

ALIVE AND FREAKING / By effi & amir

Introduction – about this paper

In this paper we reflect on our performance “when we were kings”, through the filter of Freakdom and Freak Shows, which we use as a linkage between our work, contemporary art and popular culture.

The paper contains three blocks; the first summarizes the historical evolution of Freaks, how they were perceived and presented. The second analyzes the performance “When We Were Kings” using freak-world vocabulary as a main reference.

In the third part we express our own views on the metaphorical aspects of the Freak and how, in our view, they are relevant to the broader context in which we work.

A. The image of the Freak;

A brief overview of the historical status of freaks in society

The term “freaks” for describing human beings with obvious congenital deformities came in use only in the second half of the 19th century, the “golden era” of presenting extraordinary bodies for amusement in side shows and human circuses. Monsters, curiosities, prodigies, were among many other terms that were used throughout history in an attempt to describe the fascination and anxiety stirred in the human soul by bodies that stray from what is typical and predictable. The abnormal body, its hybridity, along with excess and absence are the principles that constitute freakdom. The anomalous body suggests other modes of being and therefore confuses the distinction between what is human and what is not. It occupies the middle zone between basic oppositions dividing human from animal, one being from the other, one sex from the other, adults and children, humans and gods. The apparent transgression of the natural order threatens and challenges the way we define ourselves as individuals. It is a violation of the categorical boundaries that seem to order our own psychological, physical, and social perception. The confusion we feel while encountering the abnormal body resembles the discomfort resulted by looking at grotesque images. Reuven Tsur tries to explain the human discomfort towards the grotesque: “*what*

characterizes the grotesque, according to some psychologists and literary theorist, is a disruption of alternativeness. Instead of deciding unambiguously in favor of one or another defense mechanism, the grotesque leaves the observer in an intermediate state, in uncertainty, in a state of indecision. He has a sense of 'emotional disorientation' (01). What is clear is the fact that human beings, who were found to be outside the borders of normality in appearance, have always provoked the imagination of their fellow beings. The exceptional body demanded explanation and inspired representation. The uncomfortable, disturbing encounter with the deviant, the freak, triggered the human impulse to textualize, to contain and to explain these phenomena. Therefore the freak functions in society only for the sake of the "normal", it becomes a tool by which society draws its borders. *"Singular bodies become politicized when culture maps its concerns upon them as meditations on individual as well as national values, identity, and direction"* (02). Thus, the way culture chooses to represent the extraordinary body is fundamental to the narrative by which it makes sense of itself and the world.

In the ancient world freaks were called *monsters*. The origins of the word derive from the Latin word '*monstra*', meaning to warn, show or sign. In this world that was predominated by religion, monsters were sign of a divine-will. Stone age cave drawings record monstrous births. In prehistoric gravesites traces of ritual sacrifices of such bodies were found, and Assyrian clay tables from Nineveh describe in details congenital abnormalities together with their prophetic meanings. The birth of monstrous children was given in the Greek world a fatal significance. They were believed to be a divine warning of the future and even the death of the emperor Claudius was preceded by the birth of a double-headed monster. Moreover, certain phenomena of nature such as an eclipse or comet were thought to influence monstrous births. Freaks, like other facts that man could not explain, were given supernatural origins and according to superstitions were caused by god or the devil. Naturally they were also attributed with paranormal powers and often were treated as magicians or witches. The presence of the anomalous human body in the collective cultural consciousness and imagination has found its representation in the creation of centaurs, griffins, satyrs, minotaurs, sphinxes, mermaids and Cyclopes, that

are perhaps a mythical explanation to the unexplainable, mysterious human “monsters”.



fig. 1

Manticore: The earliest accounts of the existence of the manticore come from the Persian courts in the fifth century B.C. the manticore became the symbol of tyranny, disparagement and envy, and ultimately the embodiment of evil

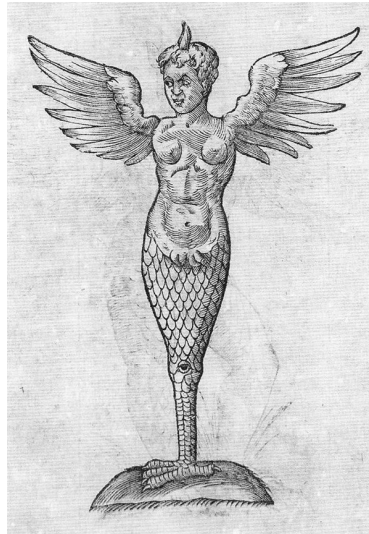


fig. 2

the Monster of Ravenna, one of the most notorious monstrous births,

Provided by: <http://www.strangescience.net>
Appears in: *Monstrorum Historia*
Now appears in: *Rare Treasures* edited by Judith Magee

In the middle ages, the *monster* becomes the *prodigy* as the Christian church, places monsters in the rosette window besides a varied group of astonishing natural phenomena known as prodigies, marvels or wonders. They serve as portents, as an indication of something unpleasant that is yet to come. They are examples of the god’s wrath as well as forms of god’s mighty power. The church challenged the boundaries of the human and natural world by representing human monsters together with comets, earthquakes and other surreal creatures, which formed a sublime grotesque image, merging the wonderful and the terrible. They are there to warn when the gods are silent. They are part of nature’s fancy.

In 1573, Ambroise Paré, a French surgeon, publishes “*Des Monstres et Prodiges*” a catalogue of marvels such as conjoined twins, giraffes, hermaphrodites, elephants, unicorns and Egyptian mermaids. This catalogue is the first attempt to combine divine, religious interpretation and a medical, secular, clinic approach to the anomalous body. For the first time empiricism was imposed upon the narrative of wonder.



fig. 3. Siamese Twins in Benedictine Abbey Church of Sante-Marie-Madeleine (France: Vézelay)



fig. 4 human monsters: Gregor Reisch's Margarita Philosophia (1517)

The 17th century with its humanistic, scientific approach tried to combine the religious prodigies with more secular explanations. It places the extraordinary body as a nature's whimsy, a friendly, freakish creation of nature, which suppose to delight man's curiosity and inspire his awe- not as a divine warning but rather a symbol of the world and nature that are there to please man, who is their master.



fig. 5. Parasities: Johann Schenk's Monstrorum historia memorabilis (1609)



fig. 6. Late 19th century freak-show

The 18th and 19th century freak discourse fades the *prodigy* completely from the ominous marvel and shifts it to the category of the *curiosity*. It also moves the ownership over such bodies from god to the scientist. The Empiric approach has now gained enough knowledge to drive the divine away from the world. Oddities are displayed in cabinets of curiosities and not on the church walls. Teratology, the science of monstrosity, that aims to tame and rationalize the wondrous freak, is introduced. The fanciful, strange, prodigious marvel of

nature is now the abnormal, the intolerable, "*a vicious normative violation*", which requires reconstruction, surgical normalization and therapeutic elimination. (03)

With the progression of modernity, the curiosity for the extraordinary body not only shifted toward the secular and the rational, it flourished also in the market place and institutionalized under the banner of **freak shows**. "*In a turbulent era of social and material change, the spectacle of the extraordinary body stimulated curiosity, ignited speculation, provoked titillation, furnished novelty, filled coffers, confirmed communality, and certified national identity*". (04)

In Victorian America from the mid 19th to early 20th century it has become a public ritual. Human oddities were exhibited in taverns and slightly more respectable halls evolved slowly to permanent, more respectable, "*dime museums*", that offered the Americans a chance to gaze at the Other. The most important and influential was P.T Barnum's American museum, which was established in 1841 and showed freaks well into the 20th century. Dime museums expanded freak discourse by showing everything that was deviant: extreme fat ladies, living skeleton, albinos, cannibals, hermaphrodites, midgets, Chinese giants, Fiji princes and other large variety of human attractions. The freak show exaggeration and sensationalism ranged between two categories of humans: physical deformities and exotic ethnics. It framed them and heightened their differences from the viewers. Moreover, by adding decoration and ornament it intensified their deviance to create an extreme spectacle. "*An animal skin wrap, a spear, and some grunting noises, made a retarded black man into the missing link... feathers, blankets and a seven pound hammer turned an "ordinary nigger" into the ironed-skulled prince*" (05). Congenital anomalies were given titles that hinted towards the historical man-animal hybrids: the lion woman, the alligator man, the bear woman. Together with the actual performance there were three elements that constructed the freakish experience.



Fig. 7. The "Wild Borenos", Barnum Museum fi. 8. "Figi cannibals"



fig. 9. Zip, the Pinhead, was presented as "What is it?"

The oral: a "lecture", given by a "professor", who in most cases managed the exhibit. The "lecture" normally contained false details and "facts" about the freak's amazing life history. Textual: pamphlets and news advertisements featuring the exhibit. Visual: staged drawing and photographs that became highly popular and even penetrated family albums. This multi sensual effort of constructing and amplifying the image of the freak, comprise the process David Hevey calls: "enfreakment" (06). *"Enfreakment emerges from cultural rituals, that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies the freak-hunters or showman colonize and commercialize. Paradoxically, however, at the same time that enfreakment elaborately foregrounds specific bodily eccentricities, it also collapses all those differences into a "freakery", a single amorphous category of corporeal otherness"* (07). Managers and promoters knew the public's desire for the abnormal. In an attempt to have the widest appeal (and collect more dimes) they excited their audiences by creating new, half mythological identities for their exhibits; *"In a strict sense of the word, every exhibit was a fraud...every person exhibited was misrepresented"* (08)

Although freak shows still existed till 1950, since the beginning of the 20th century it gradually lost its popularity and moved to the fringe of society. Victorian middle-class saw it as low form of culture entertainment, rude and exploitive and disapproved of it strongly. Already in 1903 the Barnum and Bailey circus had to replace the name "freaks" by "human curiosities" in

response to a group protest by the circus freak performers. Freak shows slowly broke off from respectable society and were showing only in small towns till they finally faded away.

Freak discourse, however, did not vanish, on the contrary, it proliferated into a variety of contemporary discourses: genetics, embryology, anatomy, teratology and reconstructive surgery are different scientific fields that pathologize the extraordinary body. Anthropology and ethnology researches as well as museum culture reflect the same essence of curiosity which stimulated the ethno-freaks and entertainment fields as vaudeville, circuses, zoos, horror films and rock celebrity culture. All this is deeply rooted in the long history of freak show.



fig. 10. Live human oddities

B. Freakish elements in our performance "When We Were Kings"

B1. General Description of the work "when we were kings" (may 2004, at the "Kunstvlaai 5") documentation online at: www.sandberg.nl/~effi-amir/proj04_wwwk_page.htm

When We Were Kings was made specifically for the 5th Kunstvlaai event, which took place between the 8th – 16th of May 2004.

On the Westerpark grounds, in the admission-free area, we placed a fair stand; a blue tent of 1.5x1.5 meter and 2 meters in height. The front of the tent was open from top to our hips' height and thus framing us as "the show". We stood still inside our tent, facing the crowd, dressed identically in a blue Lycra suit, that has an open cut beneath the chest from which a white napkin stuck out and with a half falafel ball placed on a bald spot above our foreheads. To the lower part of the tent front we attached a structure- a cycling mechanism, inviting the visitors to pick a song out of a given menu, and to pedal in order to hear the song he chose. The songs in the menu were famous Israeli songs that were canonized by Israeli society as representatives of "golden era". A

viewer who approached the stand would see a playground-looking seat with cycling pedals, five colored plates with unfamiliar song titles (translated to English and in phonetic transcript) and operating instructions. The minute a participant took his/her place on the seat we fixed our gaze on them until they left it. The pedaling would turn on little lamps above our heads, and as long the lights were on, we would sing the selected song. The pedaling task was not an easy one, and certain persistence and considerable effort were required to complete a whole song. A peddler who has managed to keep us going through the whole song received a napkin with the print: "Thank you for sweating it out".



fig. 11, 12, 13. *When We Were Kings*, Amsterdam, 2004

B2. Context

B2.1. The Kunstvlaai

The Kunstvlaai event manifests itself as an alternative art fair. Alternative to commercial art fairs (and more specifically to the KunstRai), which show mainstream, "for sale" art. The atmosphere at the Kunstvlaai was indeed of a fair - it was big (about 200 participants), occupied a huge space, located in a public park (which targets the potential visitors as the "broad public", not necessarily art-goers), produced with a low budget and it offered amusement rather than high culture. In this sense, the Kunstvlaai is a *side-show*, an activity that takes place "off" the mainstream, institutionalized culture, a role that avant-garde art was always eager to adopt. In fact the Kunstvlaai cadre is only an acceleration of the modernity notion of the artist as a cultural deviant. *"Being defined as a freak is not a function of specific physical difference, but of social categorization. "Freak is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is the enactment of tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation"* (09). It

becomes a social institution, not a physical characteristic" (10). Since the Van Gogh myth, avant-garde artists and especially movements such as dada, surrealism and fluxus, also crowned themselves as social deviants, as an ideological statement and often emphasized and stylized their ideology with an exceptional appearance. Dali even used images of physical freaks as source of inspiration and his moustache has become a symbol of uniqueness. Warhol is another example of genius and/or madness, which also expresses itself in the look. More contemporary artists, like the French artist Orlan or Matthew Barney, already include deformity and freakery in the discourse of their works.



figs. 14, 15. Orlan

fig. 16. Matthew Barney

In big events such as biennales and art fairs this deviance becomes the essence of the competition, only the most exceptional will survive (that is, will be noticed). In this sense, the artist himself or herself becomes the exhibit itself. Their own uniqueness, originality, genius- are put to the test. This self-display brings to mind the Vaudeville, the first format of the "one man show"- where each show-man did his own "act", an act that was based on his own special, deviant ability often derived from distorted physiognomy.

B2.2 The ethno-freak: personal-cultural context

"When We Were Kings" is undoubtedly an outcome of two and a half years in a situation which we define as self-imposed exile. The experience of the foreigner, in the broadest sense, has become a meaningful part of our personal and artistic identity.

"in 1850 'Barnum's Chinese Museum' featured live Chinese family on display for American amusement...capitalizing on the market appeal of the ethnic Other, Barnum's presented the Chinese as toy-like, eroticized, "primitive", being beyond whom American civilization have progressed...

Americans developed a taste for gazing at an ever-changing pageant of wonders, often observing the ethnic other for diversion" (11). The ethnic foreigner is presented as freak, in the sense that he/she represents an ultimate alienation. Therefore, many of the above mentioned freak implications, are applicable to the case of the foreigner; The physical difference, which is also an inner- cultural difference, the threat to the society- both economical and cultural, the relation to animals and primitivism that was often suggested by spectators. The traveling performance "The Couple in the Cage" by Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco, is a precise comment on this ethno-freak perception. In this piece they exhibited themselves as caged Amerindias from an imaginary island (fig. 17). Audience's reactions dramatize the dilemma of cross-cultural misunderstanding as many are shown to believe that the "savages" were real.



fig. 17. Couple in a cage

Other artists, like Grace Jones, for example, have used the de-humanizing aspect of the ethno-freak (the animal-like aspect, the wild) and turned it into a powerful un-human quality (figs. 18,19). Unlike these examples, our own ethnic background, or our 'foreign essence', carries no distinct physical characteristic and recognizable appearance, which enables us to refer to freakery in its more metaphorical sense. Still, Israel offers a specific exoticism: an almost pervert mixture of the oriental, the military (a symbol of Israeli resurrection- once considered a "wonder"- a supernatural phenomenon), and the technological (with a direct reference to the Jewish myth of "genius"- an

"ethnic" feature). Traditionally, the exotic Other is regarded as either "naive" or "demonic". In our view, the particular history of the Israeli state is a gradient transformation from the former to the latter.



figs. 18,19. Grace Jones

B2.3. The double-headed monster- The personal-artistic context

Since the beginning of our collaborative work (1998), the work as a duo was of a main concern, and this plural formation has become a new sort of singularity. That is, we no longer regard ourselves as two individuals, but as one autonomous "unit" that functions independently and in full correlation between its two components. Pretty much like Siamese Twins, who share a common blood and other systems - like the famous Siamese twins performers Daisy and Violet Hilton, who were known for completing each other's sentences intuitively. This kind of self contained system suggests both forceful symmetry and tragic destiny- The case of the 'original' Siamese twins, Chang and Eng, demonstrates this dependency in the most straight forward way; Chang, who was ill and died in his sleep, caused his brother's inevitable death within few hours. The Siamese twins is not the only applicable model for the duo situation. Other "monstrous" forms of hybridization (12) are also used to refer to the collaborative process. Apart from its specific functionality, the hybrid entity brings forward a set of terms and prejudices that we find most relevant: the grotesque, the deviant, the supernatural and the tragic- are all strongly related to the still common image of "the artist". Therefore, this recurring metaphor applies both to our

personal status, and our professional position.



fig.20. In "all my sons" (2001) we are both pregnant and give birth to 8 morally deviant children



fig. 21. "The Marathon" (1999, 2004). in this performance we create a closed unit, self sustained and self motivated.



Fig. 22. Recreation



fig. 23. the double headed eagle - pirating the Albanian flag

B3. Appearance

In "When We Were Kings" our physical appearance signifies, or hints, a freakish entity.

1. The identical lycra uniform, with an open cut beneath the chest, immediately suggests the reference to identical twins, who, conventionally dress up, at least in "display" context, in identical cloths. The specific design-the shiny material and the tightness of the suits, brings to mind the early science fictional look (such as star trek), which probably meant to represent some degree of non-humanness of the characters. This aspect is emphasized by the blue color of sacredness and divinity, which also refer to the supernatural. The supernatural often manifests itself in body extremities of freakish elements, from the mythical monsters (Cyclopes, mermaids, sphinx...), through Christian saints, who suffer great physical deformities, that nowadays would have been considered as freakish (St. Denis who was decapitated and walked

away with his head in his hand, Santa Barbara- who became a bearded lady, for her own protection), to science fiction androids (Mr. Spoke's ears, Data's super-light eyes (fig. 24) and Rock stars, who often use the same elements to suggest their deviance and their super natural quality- David Bowie, Marlyn Manson, prodigy (figs. 25,26).

The designed cut in the skin-tight uniform, which we used for storing the handkerchiefs we handed to the pedalers, suggests a body whose border between the interior and exterior is violated. The "open" body, and the way we treat it, does not suggest violence or pain, but rather a denial of its physical substance. The denial of the human body is a very common practice in the supernatural business, from tortured saints to magicians who cut bodies to pieces or penetrate them with swords. (13)



Fig 24. Data

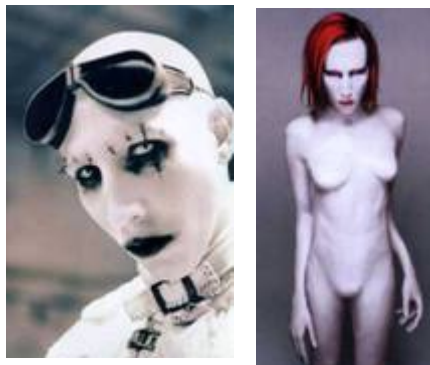


Fig. 25, 26 Marilyn Manson

2. The falafel ball that grows on our foreheads is another visualization of freakery, referring to three of its above mentioned aspects; body deformities such as- elephantiasis, external twins, extra limbs...etc, (fig. 27) the ethno-cultural Other as a spectacle (the falafel ball being a representation of the Israeli, both in Europe and in Israel itself), and to technological implantations- a common characterization of the science fictional freak.

"In Freudian terms the ambivalent figure is split into a fearsome and a laughable one. According to Thomson, "what will be generally agreed upon is that grotesque will cover, perhaps among other things, the co-presence of the laughable and something that is incompatible with the laughable". The "other things" include the suspension of the boundaries between the categories "human, animal, plant" (Reuven Tsur)



fig. 27. Joseph Carey Merrick, the elephant man



fig. 28. Chang and Eng, the original Siamese Twins

The falafel ball and the way it was “growing out” of our heads was the most ‘grotesque’ feature in our appearance. It evokes repulsion- being organic, greasy and smelly sort of a tumor, And is also laughable- due to its de-functional function as a receptor and transmitter, as suggested by its location beneath the lamp.

B4. The Action

B4.1. The “act”

The original Siamese twins, and almost all the exhibited Siamese twins used to perform as singers or musicians (14). In “when we were kings” we sing, and as this is the only thing we do, it seems that this is the only thing we are “good for”. The singing is in perfect timing with each other, which again, suggests a common inner system. The exact correlation in pace (including pauses, accelerations, slowdowns) is like a mechanical device, a live juke-box, emotionless and inexhaustible.

The songs

The songs that composed the menu are songs that were canonized by Israeli culture during its first decades. In this sense, we supply the ethno-freaky goods; the songs are exotic, often refer to militant aspects, heroism and the Israeli landscape. In such a young culture, as the Israeli culture is, these 30 years-old songs have become folklore and the act of performing them in public, and in a foreign country, is not very different from the real folklore street-performances of Mongolians, Indians and Romas, that can be seen all over Europe.

The mechanism

But the songs are being sung only under very specific conditions. There is a mechanism involved, but this mechanism is not scientifically applicable- we only sing when the spectator makes an effort, as if we were fed by his/her sweat or run on his/her energy, pretty much like monsters in horror movies, the early vampires or the contemporary aliens or zombies. When the participant pedals, a connected dynamo is lighting up two lamps above our heads. Our singing is perceived as related to the lights, as long as they are on- we sing, and when they stop or flicker, we stop, or stammer. The lights symbolize the show, or the "on-stage" situation, what declares us, the artists-freaks as an exhibit, and recalls a long tradition of displaying humans as objects; in the freak-show world, limbless human, so-called "torsos", were often displayed on podiums, under the same conventions as a Greek antiquity, or a vase (fig. 29). While Gilbert and George's famous "singing sculpture" is already a comment about alienation and the borders between art (representation) and life (themselves). But in fact, the display **is** the only true realization of both the artist and the freak. Both are meaningless without it. This dependence does not refer only to the necessity of the audience, but also to the very definition of the deviant, which can be discerned only against the "normal", represented by the audience.

At the end of the process, if it was successful, that is, if the pedaler managed to endure throughout the whole song, he/she gets a napkin, which we draw from the open 'wound', expressing our gratitude for the effort and energy invested. On the napkin it is written "thank you for sweating it out", and except for its literal meaning, it echoes the ridding off some heavy illness, or exorcism. With this, we connect the participant in a more demanding way by suggesting this was not merely a game, but a ritual.



fig 29. "Violette" a limbless woman on display

B4.2 Behavior

The "exposition" is a basic element in our behavior during the performance. Adopting the traditional objectification of freaks, we stand still. In the article "The case of 'freaks': public reception of real disability" Robbin Larsen, Bath A. Haller (published in "journal of popular film and television" 2002) the authors explain the movie's commercial failure in its refusal to obey this rule. "The movie's unusual social construction of freaks eating, joking, proposing marriage, even giving birth- in short, behaving as humans capable of "normal" embodied action and desires- defied commercial circus conventions. People were accustomed to promotions of "real" side shows through amusing stories about their exotic origins. They expected to see them on display, like museum pieces or popular performers." We, on the contrary, rebel against the denial of this convention, by making it very visible. We stand frozen, undistracted by the environment, and are set to motion only when the lights are on. This behavior resembles also other un-human, semi-freakish imagery, such as robotic/ programmed humans (the 'golem', Frankenstein...) or humans driven by 'other' forces, such as moonwalking or evil spirits.



fig. 30. Still from the film "der Golem" (1920, [Carl Boese Paul Wegener](#)) the star on the golem's chest functions as an on/off switch

B4.3. The interaction

The relations with the viewer are based on attraction and anxiety, emotions we expect to derive directly from our appearance and behavior.

The viewer is attracted to activate the mechanism. But can only do so by participating in the show. This requires an effort, a more direct confrontation, and a certain risk.

"The freak-show institution allowed circus goers the pleasure of looking at freaks and being fascinated by them, but they were also protected from feeling guilty about it" (15).

In "When We Were Kings", this pleasure and protection are broken or threatened once a viewer, a "normal" human, is becoming a part of the show.

For the participant the work creates a sharp shift from the secure position of gazing to an uncertain physical and emotional involvement.

"There is a clash between incompatible responses – the laughable, on the one hand, and the horrible, the disgusting, or the pitiable, on the other. The element that is so "hard to take" is the uncertainty, the emotional disorientation" (Reuven Tsur) The threatening feeling is provoked by the alienation in behavior and language. But not only we behave in a slightly un-human manner, and speak a foreign language, we are also unified, and thus break the 'singularity' principle of the deviance. We are two exceptions, and two exceptions might lead to more and become a rule. This abstract threat is very figurative in the movie "freaks": *"the film's center piece is a horrifying wedding banquet for Hans and Venus, from which she flees in terror and disgust after the guests begin chanting ritualistically:*

you're one of us, one of us, one of us. The epilogue shows Venus indeed to be "one of us" as she performs her own side show act as the 'hen woman' after she's disabled by the freaks attack" (16). The movie fulfils the fear of the abnormal: In spite of our knowledge that human deformities are not contagious – we still fear they are. And they indeed might be; if freaks represent an alternative order of things, they potentially can infect others. If they unite in a group- they can gain enough power to affect society. If they copulate, there is the (scientifically untrue) possibility that they reproduce.

The participant's involvement starts as soon as they start pedaling and discovers that a real effort is required for accomplishing the task. At that moment, they become performers too, and put their abilities to the test. But soon they realize also the power they have over us; they find out how to control our singing, and the fact that we are live-less without them. If at first, there was a common goal (for us and for the participants) - to complete a whole song, than during the interaction, when the participants takes their place close and below us, confront our non personal but direct gaze, encounter the physical demanding task, and on the other hand, discover the potential power they have over us -the common interest is replaced by dilemmas.

Should they use their power to abuse us, or let us abuse them? Should they stick to the original task, and make our effort a conjoined one, or should they interfere with our singing and make fun of it? The dilemma is also whether to let the machine run and do its act, or test it and push it to its limits – an option that has proved to be very tempting, as when the machine breaks down it exposes its human nature and the threat is removed. The possibility to break the mechanism down (though never actually happened during the whole 6 days of performance), might provide an optional escape from the 'emotional disoriented' situation. But the foreign language stays an uncrossed barrier. The participants find themselves incapable of understanding the content - the emotional charge- that the songs hold, while the song is actually dedicated directly to them. They are in an intimate situation, which they cannot fully interpret. And

especially the fact that these songs are the only thing we can offer, puts them (the songs) in a position of communicators of higher meaning, probably even of representing the essence of the 'creatures' we are. The essentiality of the language we speak, transforms it into a special tool or weapon, like a secret language, if not a sacred language: Tod Browning, the creator of the movie "freaks", who spent many years in traveling circuses and side shows, believed that "*Over the centuries freaks developed a gibberish language of their own*" (17), and the film's representation of this mythical gibberish language, in the unforgettable wedding banquet scene, has later become a symbol of non-conformist deviance, and was mainly adopted by the punk group "Ramones".



fig. 31. the Ramones, with "gabba gabba hey" in the background

C. Self-Made Freaks

C.1. The higher meaning of The Freak

David Cronenberg, in an interview about his film 'Crash' (1996), says: "*one of the things that is fascinating about a car crash is the breaking down of order*" (18). This remark points the very essence of freakery. According to Harlan Hahn, the fascination and disorientation at the site of a freak, this "*aesthetic anxiety*" (19), which involves "*some painful cognitive or psycho dynamic processes*" (20), is not caused by the mere striking appearance, but by the "deviation from the moral order of the body" (21). The completely uncategorized human, challenges both our aesthetical and moral concepts, and this breaking down point, is both frightening and attracting. In 'Crash' the car crashes provide an ecstatic moment of anxiety and relief from the "all-too ordered" world. The breaking down of order- the car crashes, are accidents

(like freaks are 'errors'), but are also an outlet of an extreme mental situation, and they give birth to human deformities (scars, amputation, burns) that are a reminder and a symbol of this moment. According to Cronenberg, these order breakdowns are essential, as was the role of the freak in society since its beginning.

"...The impaired body is the site and symbol of all alienation. It is psychic alienation made physical. The contorted body is the final process and statement of a painful mind. The impairment of the disabled person became the mark, the target for disavowal, a ridding of existential fears and fantasies of non-disabled people" (22) The power of the freakish image lies in its metaphorical charge; the alienation and transgression it represents is far more radical. And indeed, along modern history, many rebels against the moral order of things have adopted freak's collective archetypal quality to visualize their social agenda.

C.2. The contemporary freak

It might be interesting to connect the extensive use of self-made freakish imagery in the 20th century with the decline of 19th centuries' freak show and the gradual elimination of natural deformities through medical science and institutionalization. Natural born freaks are hard to find today, they are either prevented, corrected, or hidden. In an article about the actor Jerry Lewis and his Muscular Dystrophy Association Telethon, [Beth Haller](#) says: *"His message is: People with muscular dystrophy are only half people, but with a cure, they can become whole people. This idea fits with a societal code that if someone is sick, he or she must be made well."*(23) contemporary society will aim to fix nature's mistakes and to adjust the deviant to the social and aesthetic moral codes. Whereas, in the past, these deviances had their own justified existence in society, and deviant people were not expected to better themselves or to change, but to play their unique role, and even to exaggerate it: "circuses and carnival side shows, had given people with disabilities of honored status and celebrity", this option no longer valid today. But despite the fact that nature's mistakes are gradually reduced, other forms of deformities have emerged with modern world- war injuries, car and work accidents and plastic surgery and

cinema's special effects have brought us new kinds of freakish images. Our fascination with these kind of imagery, proves that normal humans still need this startling experience of encountering the complete deviant. Artists, performers and celebrities who adopt freakish imagery are in a way fulfilling this human crave for total Otherness, that is less and less being satisfied as natural freaks are vanishing, and their display is prohibited.

Oppositional movements such as Dada and Surrealism were the first to use freakish imagery as a symbol of social enfreakment. They claimed their deviance from the moral order of things, by breaking down the aesthetic conventional order and by adopting the most extreme aesthetical anxiety-provoking imagery. Since Marcel Duchamp throughout the 1970's one can track down a major tendency for alienating the ordinary, by re-seeing it. This enfreakment of everyday life and objects (that is also reflected in existentialistic writings) is perhaps also a product of a society that was deprived from its natural right for real freakery... This tendency suggests an interesting inversion of what is normal and what is not (24). Not only artists, but also social movements turned to the Freak for inspiration; many hippies considered themselves freaks- with pride, and used this term to declare their social deviance and to point out their a moral difference. The punks were freaks in the even more original sense of the word, as they demonstrated their deviation from society through their extreme and exceptional appearance, which was not less shocking than that of a real freak, at the time.



fig. 32. Limbless WWI soldiers



fig. 33. British Punks

C.3. The Ethno-Artist

In contemporary art world, many similarities can be drawn from the freak-

show business world. Starting from the artist-gallerist relationship that often resembles that of the freak-manager, including key features such as profit making, the “discovery” (of the artist by the gallerist) and the “exposure” (of the not yet known wonder). Two main principles of the freak-show world are especially applicable in the case of ‘art-stars’; exaggeration and sensationalization. Both can be found in the aesthetic of the work itself, but also in many cases, in the artists’ appearance and the way their extraordinary personal life-story is made public and plays a main role in their marketing identity.

The ‘ethno artist’, as we would like to call the 90ies-onwards fascination with non-central European art, is an even more extreme reincarnation of the freak show world. Curators, just like 17th century explorers, are almost competing with each other on who will discover the next exotic, un-explored art scene (or artist) and will present it to the ‘western world’. In the case of the ethno-artist, their art-work becomes a curiosity- an object with which we, the west, expand our horizons.

C.4. Freakery as strategy – a tribute to Mr. Wackenheim

A tiny stuntman who protested against a French ban on the little-known sport of "dwarf-tossing" has lost his case before a United Nations human rights committee. Manuel Wackenheim used to earn his living being thrown around bars and discotheques by customers. He became unemployed in the mid-1990s, after France's highest administrative court ruled that his job was contrary to human dignity. Mr Wackenheim appealed against the French ban, but when this failed, he took his complaint before the UN's Human Rights and Anti-Discriminational Committee, claiming that his rights had been violated. But the UN committee said it was satisfied that the ban on dwarf-tossing should be upheld "in order to protect public order and considerations of human dignity". (BBC news, Friday, 27 September, 2002)

Obviously we are not the first artists, to make a conscious decision to play the

traditional freak role. The political structure of the contemporary art world together with our personal background and our current immigrant-ness, force us to take a stand. We choose to go back to the original freak show forms, in order to make this role transparent, and in order to put forward its complex symbolism and culture-politico background.

By referring to a specific historical representation of freaks, we provoke the specific set of concepts attached to it; The historical freak show is regarded today as immoral and abusive, thus, by deliberately reconstructing it, we hope to amplify the freak-show aspects of contemporary art world. If the way contemporary culture dealt with the immoral aspects of freak show, was by directing it to other, more sophisticated "elite" systems, which camouflaged its abusive aspects and are more easy to handle and justify, than by projecting the historical freak show upon the current art-world dynamics we arise the old, basic questions, but within a new context. This is not to say that our work is aimed to protest against freak-shows in its various manifestations. What we'd like is to make the sanctimonious situation transparent, to claim that freaks have always been there and will always be. Just like Mr. Wackenheim, and following the conclusion of the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, who claims that the only way for the individual to cope with absurd, alienated existence, is by choosing this existence consciously, we are not willing to deny the circumstances.

Notes

- (1) Reuven Tsur "The Demonic And The Grotesque" (2003)
- (2) Rosemarie Garland Thomson "From Wonder to Error- A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity" (Freakery - cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body, 1996)
- (03) Arnold I. Davidson, "The horror of monsters" in the boundaries of humanity: humans, animals, machines.
- (04) Rosemarie Garland Thomson "From Wonder to Error- A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity" (Freakery - cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body, 1996)
- (05) William G. FitzGerald "side shows" (Strand magazine- the magazine for mystery and short story lovers, 1897)
- (06) David Hevey "The creatures that time forgot: photography and disability imagery" (1992)
- (07) Rosemarie Garland Thomson "From Wonder to Error- A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity" (Freakery - cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body, 1996)
- (08) Robert Bogdan "the social construction of freaks" (Freakery - cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body, 1996)

- (09) Robert Bogdan "Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities For Amusement And Profit" (1988)
- (10) Robbin Larsen, Bath A. Haller "The case of 'freaks': public reception of real disability" (Journal of Popular Film and Television, winter 2002)
- (11) Lori Jirousek "spectacle ethnography and immigrant resistance: Sui Sin Far and Anzia Yeziarska" (Melus, spring 2002)
- (12) Hermaphrodites, for example, are also worth mentioning in relation to our work, in which we hardly discern between the sexes. Either we dress the same, denying both genders, or each gender adopts attributes of the other's. Even when we are faithful to physical male/female categorization, it is rarely manifested in the way we act or in the roles we play.
- (13) The body that denies its physical substance, is a concept that paradoxically often manifests itself in physical extremities. "Impossible" bodies, exaggerated, distorted or amputated, actually points out that "humanness" does NOT reside in the flesh, but somewhere beyond it. The more extreme the gap between the appearance and the physical or mental function, the more striking is the separation between the "human" and its "shell". Human oddity generate this feeling, as they make us wonder "how such thing can survive?" Stephen Hawking, is an outstanding example of a genius mind that functions within an un-functional body, and in the Chapman Brothers' piece his figure plays exactly this freaky role. Opening the body is also a very common way to mark a character as artificial-mechanical.
- (14) The film "On Freaks and Men" (Aleksei Balabanov, Russia 1998) features (fake) Siamese twins, who are also musical performers, they play on one accordion (each twin plays one hand) or piano, and sing. In the film, the plot masterfully connects the freak presentation to early pornographic cinema, two voyeuristic genres that flourished in the end of the 19th century.
- (15) Robbin Larsen, Bath A. Haller "The case of 'freaks': public reception of real disability" (Journal of Popular Film and Television, winter 2002)
- (16) Ibid
- (17) Jack Stevenson "Freaks- A Movie Undead" (1999)
- (18) Interview with David Cronenberg, from the website: www.finelinefeatures.com
- (19) Hanoch Linveh -Disability and Monstrosity (Rehabilitation Literature 41, 1980)
- (20) Reuven Tsur, ibid.
- (21) Harlan Hahn "Can disability be beautiful?" (Social Policy 1988)
- (22) Robbin Larsen, Bath A. Haller, ibid.
- (23) Beth Heller The misfit and muscular dystrophy - actor Jerry Lewis and his Muscular Dystrophy Association Telethon (Journal of Popular Film and Television, Winter, 1994)
- (24) what important to note here is that even the 'exceptional' is standardized, and is expected to behave/do 'its thing'. If, in the movie 'Freaks', the characters were expected to confine themselves to their role "...on display, like museum pieces or popular performers" but they violated their boundaries by acting like normal humans, then, in the same manner, 70ies performance artists violated the boundaries of display, by bringing the ordinary and the daily into museums and galleries, instead of doing the unique, the special, the worth-displaying- their own expected "thing".