

Concrete Comedy: An Alternative History of Twentieth-Century Comedy. By David Robbins. 360 pages / 300 b/w images / 2011 / 2000 ex / published by Pork Salad Press

The artist David Robbins suggests, in his book *Concrete Comedy*, that the Twentieth Century has seen the rise of an alternative form of humour, different from the verbal, narrative comedy in which a punchline gives us a payoff for our undivided attention. He calls this new genre ‘concrete comedy’, insisting that it is not an illusionistic form, but rather a comedy of real things, real actions. This concrete comedy isn’t necessarily interested in giving us a punchline payoff. Often it goes to work by keeping us in a protracted condition of uncertainty as to the ‘meaning’ of a particular comic situation. Subverting our need for well-defined meaning would seem to be a primary aim of this humour of the actual. And as in other forms of comedy, concrete comedy takes a good look at life and questions our preconceptions about it. What is important is “comedy’s cardinal relation between The Thing and What You Say About The Thing”. Unlike narrative comedy, concrete comedy interrogates by taking hold of life itself. It “comprises strategies that align comedy with the integrity of the real ... The weight of mattering has been taken off content, and transposed into the structure.”

This alternative history begins with Karl Valentin and Marcel Duchamp. Valentin created a *Panoptikum*, his own little show of objects, in the basement of the Hotel Wagner in Munich. With Robbins: “Karl Valentin conceived and realized the idea that *a theatricalized context could be invented*.” His Panoptikum “embodied a context of objects that had been created with expressly comedic intent... Objects and gestures of the Valentinian persuasion stand on their own merits as comedy and infer their own, comedic context.”

Duchamp, on the other hand, made use of existing contexts: “Use of ‘the art context’ as a material for comedy is a possibility derived from the example of Duchamp’s attitude whether or not the specific attributes of any given comedy are explicitly “Duchampian”. Duchamp contributed the idea that uncontrived context, which includes, of course, the art context, is *a material that you can do things with*. From this twin base, Robbins is able to map out the history of 20th Century art, film, television, and entertainment, while elucidating non-fiction, “materialist” comedy.

A wonderful example Robbins gives of what he calls a substantiated fiction, is that of Ingold Airlines, a one-man Swiss airline that doesn’t actually have planes. This does not prevent the “airline” from taking part in trade fairs, publishing annual reports, and presenting possible in-flight experiences to the public. IA never tries to hoax anybody — even the trade fair organizers are in on the ruse. And in the public face that Ingold presents, there is always a moment of discontinuity that grants the viewer a chance to discover the fiction.

Unexpected things happen though. Industry representatives, acknowledging Res Ingold’s (IA’s CEO) novel approach to the business, have occasionally invited him to take part in panel discussions, and people happily claim to have flown with Ingold Airlines.

Robbins is at pains to point out the limitations of the hoax as such, where the desired result, to fool people, is already known at the outset. He distinguishes this from concrete comedy, which, he says, operates on a more subtle level. CEO Res Ingold, for example, maintains that his airline

represents “a way for people to dream, and to connect through dreaming... Ingold Airlines lives through the wishes and fantasies of its ‘clients.’” This is indeed a world away from the parameters of the mere hoax.

Concrete comedy may be found in all forms of cultural production. If an artist has a comic sensibility, he merits the appellation, comedian. Martin Kippenberger, who is an artist, is lined up alongside the pop-punk band *The Replacements* and ‘the world’s worst movie director’ Ed Wood Jr. Robbins understands comedy as something that is bound up with the question of power. The idea of *the successful failure*, and that one can esteem such a thing, is ascribed to the relentless pushing of a culture of success. As the 20th Century progressed, the argument goes, people came to appreciate the downside of success. Those who failed publicly, consummately, spoke to our disenchantment with Success with a capital S.

That there are larger themes at work in concrete comedy’s method of keeping us in a condition of uncertainty is central to Robbins’ own Concrete Comedy. This form of comedy arose, he says, in the machine age, an age in which human beings, subject to mass production, mass consumerism, and the menace of the atom bomb, came to view their situation as somewhat ridiculous. If it is true that a materialist comedy could not have arisen before the machine age, the author finds an exception in the Eighteenth Century writer Jonathan Swift’s satirical essay, *A Modest Proposal*. The work is utterly deadpan in its suggestion that the solution to the problem of starving children is to eat them. It is evidence, says Robbins, that previous ages were totally lacking in deadpan. Yet for our times, the form of concrete comedy twentieth century man might best recognize is, precisely, deadpan. Deadpan crops up in forms with which we feel an affinity, from the films of Buster Keaton to the art of Andy Warhol. Influenced by the neutrality of the machine — the camera lens and the microphone record anything and everything without passing judgement — deadpan is “*the machine-age style of comedy*”.

In reading this thick book, I sometimes found myself struggling to see how a particular example might qualify as concrete comedy, but this may have been due to the whims of my own sense of humour. Robbins’ argument is cogent and thought-provoking through most of the book, casting fresh light on his examples and on our modern world, as well. No subject is too great or too small to escape his penetrating questioning. And he insists on the importance of humour.

Comedy, traditionally the domain of the Jester, himself at the mercy of the King, was a social convention that kept criticism to a level not to be transgressed. Concrete comedy, in our democratized era of little jesters and little kings, is the occupation of fools who, each in his small way, doubt the actions of the prevailing wielders of power.

Concrete comedy thus regards the things of this world from a comic viewpoint, the underdog’s last recourse.

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