Creatures of Play

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Creatures of Play

Melissa Shelton

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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This thesis explores my practice as an artist and my work’s cultural, theoretical and social contexts, such as carnival theory, feminist studies, and film studies, as well as references to mythology and my own biography. I discuss forms of representation of gendered identities through my work in drawing, performance, animation, video, and installation.

The masks we wear become as real as our bare face. Through the act of doubling the representation, my thesis work BECOMING/a fine line situates the mask as the mediator between reflections, mirroring the identity and the notion of performativity. Embracing a certain incompleteness and embodying the theoretical idea of becoming, my work relies on the ill-defined and immediate drawing quality to reflect the perpetually unrealized performance of a stable and fixed identity.
This thesis explores my practice and the contextual implication of the carnival spirit and the spectacle to complicate identity performance and representation. The Bakhtinian carnival offers a platform, a literal and metaphorical space, for the mixing of high and low culture that transcends labels. I work to create a neutral platform that invokes carnival culture, visually and conceptually. The spectator becomes implicated by participating in the spectacle and so, enters a safe and subversive space to explore personal, as well as, cultural, boundaries of pleasure, pain, desire, humor and disgust.

Masks, costumes, mirrors and mouths become ways in which I discuss identity, performance and representation. This thesis is concerned with how my practice as an artist deals with representations of beauty, horror and humor within an image or across a narrative through carnivalesque imagery. My work focuses on producing non-linear narratives and resisting normative modes of production and signification through drawing, animation, video as well as in installation, providing room to play with the time and space between still and moving imagery.

By negotiating boundaries between oppositions, like static and dynamic, human and other, illusion and actual, contradictions, critiques, and fictionalizations all coexist. Playful monsters and hybrid creatures’ interactions and performances within a carnivalesque spectacle reflect the spectrum of nuanced identities and narratives often obscured, co-opted and othered in the surreal circus-like reality of contemporary politics and social media.
Misbehaving mirrors reflect a challenging perspective. When metaphorical and literal representations collide, illusion meets reality: boundaries become fluid, boundaries between self and other, human and monster, order and chaos. A place to play: in liminal time and space, drawing connections between images and narratives.
She sees into her reflection. Her hair is slick, tight in a bun. The thumps of feet above quicken, then soften, and then slow to a stop. Applause rings out.

“We look at ourselves in the mirror to please someone, rarely to interrogate the state of our body or our spirit, rarely for ourselves and in search of our own becoming”

(emphasis mine)

- Orlan

Figure 1

Within If I Had a Face for Every Trace (fig. 1), I am attempting to interrogate my identity through playing with the boundaries of reality and illusion. In facing my own imagined reflection, I am facing my own representation, my own self-image, which I have constructed to reflect the mutability and hybridity of human nature and identity. I
am *becoming* the mask and the character performed both literally and metaphorically through representation and costume. The mask worn within the live-action is very clearly an artificial disguise. The cheap, plastic cat nose has fishing wire whiskers. The elastic string presses into my cheeks. On the opposing side, the hand-drawn animation, the minimal, and at times ambiguous, lines blur the edges of the mask with my own face. In making these choices, I am trying to highlight and dissolve distinctions between artificiality and reality. I am interested in the abilities and limits of disguises and costumes to realize and perform hybridized identities.

As Bertolt Brecht theorizes epic theatre, “There must be no question of creating an illusion that the demonstrators really are these characters.” Exaggerated costume or garments that have been somehow marked as objects for display can counteract this illusion, he continues. This anti-illusionistic action counteracts the distancing between spectator and performer by reminding the audience they are watching a theatrical performance as opposed to reality.

I am trying to blur this distinction between performance and reality not to distance the spectator from the performer but the opposite. Brecht’s aim for theatre to enact social change through provoking self-reflection in the viewer aligns partially with my own intention. Brecht argues for a distinction between the character performed and the identity of the actor to counteract the viewers’ romanticization of the character. Within *If I Had a Trace for Every Face*, on the live-action half of the video, I am wearing a distinct mask. There is no attempt to create the illusion that I am a cat-human hybrid. However, within the animated portion of the video, I am attempting to create a representation that is in the process of *becoming* the character I am performing via the mask. In the same video, I am simultaneously performing the character *and* becoming the character. When
experienced within an installation (fig. 4), the viewer is literally reflected in the space. This space of literal and metaphorical self-reflection is only activated with participants. In constructing this relationship I am attempting to mirror and reinvigorate the social engagement within the Bakhtinian carnival.

“The Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it and everyone participates”

Figure 2

*I Wasn’t Made to Play the Son* (Fig. 3), a stop-motion Claymation video by Nathalie Djurberg explores the violent pleasure in creating a spectacle. A purple figure visibly handcrafted, the imperfections, wrinkles, and creases are highlighted by a glossy sheen. The assumed mother cries out to the short boys in bird masks while they dismember her exaggeratedly stereotypical feminine body. “I wasn’t made to play the son,” they reply.
Djurberg creates a spectacle separating the voyeurs watching the performance from the characters participating within her animations. However, within her installations, she creates an immersive environment that reflects the alternate reality depicted in her Claymation videos. Djurberg brings the figures out of the production studio and into the space with the videos and with the audience. The audience now finds themselves navigating the fantastic world subject to Djurberg’s manipulation (fig. 2).

Participating in the “spectacle” not only reflects a Bahktinian carnivalesque perspective, dissolving hierarchies and boundaries, but also reflects John Berger’s theorization of an ideal field.
“The ideal field would apparently have certain qualities in common with (a) a painting – defined edges, an accessible distance, and so on; and (b) a theatre-in-the-round stage – an attendant openness to events, with a maximum possibility for exits and entrances.”  

Installations of Djurberg’s work and hopefully my own present a neutral platform that invokes carnival culture, which provides the viewer a metaphorical space/landscape to explore boundaries between self and other that provokes social reflexivity. This platform is also a “field” in which you can observe from one perspective like a painting and as an interactive experience in time and space.

Within my own work, I am attempting to implicate the viewer through installation, in a similar manner to Djurberg. I am interested in complicating the roles and
expectations of the subject and spectator to examine specifically the boundaries of self and other. The mask and the mirror become an outlet for this exploration in my practice.

In the video, *If I Had a Trace For Every Face*, opposites mirror each other yet, imperfectly. On the left side, I am infinitely applying lipstick while wearing a cat mask, which is literally reflected in the drawn animation, on the right side. When the space of the installation is empty the mirrors appear as monochromatic panels. However, once the viewer enters, not only are their bodies are reflected within mirrors, but according to your position in the room, the animation will also be reflected and fragmented. Minimal ambiguous lines and colors convolute neat categories of human and animal realizing the potential of the mask while negotiating a sense self and other.

In this incongruence I am attempting to draw a parallel to the manner in which representation reflects the real. Throughout the video, at times the drawing leads the action and others the animation is catching up to “the real”, opposite the screen. This failure of the mirroring act reflects both the failure of representing the real and the failure of performing a stable and fixed identity. I believe, at times, aesthetically mediated representations, like drawings, paintings, and sculpture can better express the reality of a figure, experience or event. But, really, is there any objective documentation? Are photographic representations of “reality” any less mediated than any other visual medium? There is no “objective documentation”, no real “truth” to be captured. There is aesthetics, context and framing. If anything, am hoping to express the reality of subjectivity and the slippery and often mistranslated ambiguity of human identities and narratives.
The seduction of the anonymous mask has long served as a golden ticket to actualizing desires too exotic for ordinary life, this act of bringing fantasy into reality is of particular interest to me. The European tradition of masquerades is deeply entrenched in religion and politics. During carnival times monarchial hierarchies collapse and suppressed carnal desires were now permissible. These opportunities provided a release for societal expectations.

The symbolic power of the mask is something I work towards complicating in my own work. The masks within my work are not used to conceal identities neither do they necessarily reveal identities either. For example, late nineteenth and early twentieth symbolist painter James Ensor used the motif of the mask (fig. 6) in his later career, but for him, the mask often functions as a macabre social critique, a “Face beneath the Face”\textsuperscript{6}. 

Figure 5
In Djurberg’s animation *I wasn’t made to play the son* (fig. 3, 5), two jester-like boys donning bird-masks trample over the woman they just dismembered with no aversion to the act they have just committed. The masks shield the aggressors’ faces providing an anonymous cover to commit their atrocities. The notion of the masquerade is directly tied to the carnival and the carnivalesque. The mask is a mimesis but modified, again familiar made strange. But mimicry of what? Are the bird-masks signaling an animal mentality and the glorification of sexual violence in our contemporary culture? Or does this deployment of the carnival actually level hierarchies and destabilize culturally constructed notions of pleasure and pain? I am using masks to instead function as a symbolic example of a possible identity, an option.
Because of my interests in creating new possibilities, realities and narratives, I find myself making drawings or paintings to represent this fiction. Photography is seemingly objective and this “truth” factor is uncomfortable for me. However, as I began to take more photos, I found myself excited by the possibilities to create my own truth, whatever that may be, through the manipulation of the photographic image.

Figure 7
Within the Self-ie Transformations Series, (fig. 7) the camera’s eye is aimed at its operator, myself. Who’s the Clown? and Four Faces are digital photographs taken after I completed the If I Had A Face For Every Trace animation. Within these photos I imagined myself as characters donning masks I would find in my drawings or paintings. Characters in the process of transformation, performing for the camera and myself.

“Because it’s a new you every day/ Putting on a different face”
Playfulness and the carnivalesque are two behaviors with similar foundational aims: to become something “other”.

“Playfulness can manifest in any act allowing for limited freedom. If the structures were not limiting, playfulness could not occur. Playfulness is an attitude manifesting in the experience of approaching these limits, of exploring them.”

Wearing a costume, disguise and or mask is a strategy of play and expression of the carnivalesque that approaches the actualization of becoming other. Johan Huizinga in *Homo Luden* (1938) and Roger Callois in *Man, Play and Games* (1961) both theorize that play is free, unproductive monetarily, separate from normative culture and life, and imagined but constructed by rules. Erving Goffman, an American sociologist extends this philosophy postulating that play is a form of human relating, drawing similarities between social interactions and theatrical performances in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). Within my work, different masks symbolize different characters and identities, through static two-dimensional images and also time-based representations of these performances. The fun of play is derived from the contrast between people and their actions as players in games and lives as persons in normative society, the more fantastic, the more enjoyable. I believe that in repeating these “playful” or ludic acts boundaries between the normative and the fantastic begin to dissolve, eventually collapsing oppositions between play and every day life.

“In this world only the play of artists and children exhibits becoming and passing away, building and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence. And as artists and children play, so plays the ever-living fire, building up and destroying, in innocence. Such is the game that the aeon plays with itself. It builds towers of sand like a child at the seashore, piling them up and trampling them down. From time to time it starts the game anew. A moment of satiety, and again it is seized by its need, as the artist is seized by the need to create. Not hybris but the ever-newly-awakened impulse to play calls new worlds into being.”

–Friedrich Nietzsche
For me, making art is play, but it does have rules and it’s not always
spontaneous. It is within the constraints of ludic activity that I am constantly
redefining boundaries between work, play and art.

I work to invoke playfulness, again in hopes of complicating culturally
constructed oppositions. Games of mimicry and illnx as Caillois theorizes, I believe
provide safe and productive avenues for acting out desires and fears. Ilinx being the
act of altering perception, an experience in the non-normative, like the enjoyment in
seeing reflections in fun house mirrors, or riding a rollercoaster, even watching
magic tricks. This experience allows the participant to experience something outside
of everyday life. Mimicry, or role-playing is a more direct translation of this act of
“other”. In becoming or playing something other, I believe, these acts interrogate
our identity and social role. These possibilities give play power. Games of chance
and of competition require the competitor to exert or relinquish control to win. And
while players in the games of mimicry and ilinx must have a sense of control, the
excitement is rooted in becoming other, either physically or perceptually.

The limited freedoms that the rules of play create do construct a boundary
between everyday and other. But, in increasing the frequency and renegotiating the
boundaries of play within our everyday life, labels between work and fun I hope will
become more complicated. I feel as if my role as an artist and the role of my practice
is to facilitate this renegotiation of work and play.

Much of my practice as an artist is bringing the component of play into my
artwork literally and metaphorically. This impulse to confuse or complicate
oppositions has even translated to the character performed and the aesthetic
created within If I had a Trace for Every Face. The Trickster character and myth
throughout literature and popular culture has a habit of playing with conventions. David Mcconville analyzes this character through the lens of play theory:

“One of the Trickster’s primary characteristics is its blurring of boundaries between imagination and reality. It mediates between realms of thought and states of being that are normally assumed to be in opposition.”10

I am attempting to achieve this through the juxtaposition of live-action with hand-drawn animation. By bringing these two realms into comparison through the playful performance of my ‘trickster’, I hope the viewers themselves question the relationship between real and imagined worlds destabilizing normative notions of identity and narratives.

In addition to the embodying the trickster character, I also use playful “carnival” imagery to represent a fantastic world outside of everyday life. I see the circus as a potential metaphor for life. A utopic, participatory circus, a fun house, a county-fair carnival, an orchestrated set of performances that is dynamic and spectacular entertainment for both the performers and audience, a space where work is play and play is work.

Historically, American circuses reaffirm constructs between “normal” and “other”. Philip McGowan explains in his book American Carnival:

“…Circuses provide a cultural outlet for the controlled performance of dangerous acts and the temporary realization of the repressed desires of the audience. They satisfy a fascination with fear, a curiosity with the unknown, and a need for the parodic display and operations of comedy… Their inversions of expected reality or the encounters of regular social interaction bespeak a temporal phenomenon equivalent to Bakhtinian renditions of carnival.”11

McGowan goes on to include side shows, Hollywood, political campaigns, Disneyworld, Halloween and Mardi Gras in this theorization of the American carnival and how it
contrasts with European tradition analyzed by Bakhtin. The French Feast of Fools and the Venetian masquerades were often tied to religious celebrations under monarchical rule.

Instead of angels and gods, Americans “imagine [themselves] as heroes, artists and magicians,” as argued by Deborah Bell. Bell attributes this shift to the ‘democratization’ of the masquerade.\(^\text{12}\) Conversely, McGowan analyzes the non-European carnival culture constructed within the mid-nineteenth century in America as less democratic. He argues that the “American carnival seeks to displace the subversive and rehouse it in spaces and theaters of display.”\(^\text{13}\) McGowan asks on page 5, “Are the same impulses toward equalition and release from social restraint, hierarchies, and hegemonies in operation in America’s carnival spaces and its own particular culture of carnival?” He argues that in dividing the US into two realms, the carnival spectacle and “normal” everyday existence, which becomes mediated by a ticket booth, this financial boundary supports a hegemonic and capitalist America.

“The opportunities and potentials for what Bakhtin terms “becoming”, are repackaged in American carnivals.\(^\text{14}\) ... Bakhtin’s carnival space aspires to a notion of democratic equality, but American carnival works in countermovement, from a self-proclaimed and hegemonic position of democratic quality that nonetheless utilizes hierarchical and social structures and routines of Othering to maintain its own “utopic” existence.\(^\text{15}\)

The Bakhtinian carnival offers a platform, a literal and metaphorical space, for the mixing of high and low culture that transcends labels. The masquerade element of the carnival especially, provides an opportunity for flagrancy and anonymity. The liberation of constructed social norms through the concealment of their “true” identity allows the participants in the carnival to explore their desires and fantasies more freely. My practice as an artist is to reinvigorate an American perspective of carnival culture with the freedom and participation of Bakhtinian carnivalesque theory.
Mary Russo analyzes the carnivalesque and the grotesque body and theorizes that these playful moments provide “room for chance” within “the very constrained spaces of normalization.” Russo situates the grotesque body in the “spatial and temporal dimension of modern spectacle” and that in this spectacle, and in the risk of exposing feminine excess, is where empowerment and resistance is produced.

Russo examines the female grotesque in “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory,” and articulates the body as a site of resistance in the employment of the uncanny, the carnival, and the abject. Expanding upon Mikael Bahktin’s notion of the grotesque, Russo argues that the laughter produced by the carnivalesque and grotesque can destabilize hierarchies of power. Russo presents the creation of the spectacle as a space for this alternate or surreal reality. Bahktin argues that within this realm of the carnival, those who laugh at it and also of it. He writes of this laughter as “gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.”

The carnivalesque encompasses this spirit of carnal pleasures and transgressive behaviors. The grotesque is the unregulated, the boundary-less, incorporating notions of the uncanny, the familiar but strange. Both of these elements, the carnivalesque and the grotesque are realized through the violent and comedic birthing of the spectacle. And in the spectacle, in the risk of exposing excess, of any normalized boundary, this liminality is where empowerment and resistance is produced.

By providing a platform for power relations to play out, the work undermines culturally constructed social hierarchies granting alternatives to those on the margins of life. Contradictions, critiques, and fictionalizations all coexist. This platform is theoretical
and physical when realized in an installation environment. Outside of normative space and consequently, time, this platform reflects a queering of perspective.

Halbestram states, “A ‘queer’ adjustment in the way in which we think bout time, in fact, requires and produces new conceptions of space.”\(^{19}\) and the author elaborates, “Queer space” refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics.\(^ {20}\) This relationship between time and space is at the center of queer studies, the carnival, animation and my own practice.

The compiling of multiple snapshots of single moments into a linear progression in animation produces an alchemic sense of life. Halberstam in her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, discusses the power of animation.

> “Motion is *implied* by the relation of one shot to another rather than *recorded* by a camera traveling alongside moving objects.”\(^ {21}\)

And, through a figurative mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, the animation process breathes life into still images and/or objects. This animated life is entirely dependent on the manipulation and the performance of the creator. The animated movements are sometimes fluid sometimes jerky, presenting a fragmented sense of time which produces psychological and somatic effects in its viewing.

> “Building on Freud’s notion of the uncanny we can think about animated objects as embodying a repetition, a recurrence, an uncanny replay of repressed activity. There is no question that stop-motion lends animation a spooky and uncanny quality it conveys life where we expect stillness, and stillness where we expect liveliness.”\(^ {22}\)

Although Halberstrom is directly mentioning claymation, hand-drawn animation is its analog equivalent. Like Djurberg, the gesture of incising time is repeated until a moving image is produced; animating movement like an invisible puppeteer. Animating
drawings frame by frame is a time-intensive process, in which I imply movement between each drawn frame, recreating each drawing with a slight adjustment in each. Halberstram concludes:

“...stop-motion animation is uncanny precisely because it depends on the manipulation of the figures in front of the camera by those behind...So the ghostly shifts that stop-motion animation records and incorporates...force upon the viewer a darker reality about the human and about representation in general.”

This element of temporal manipulation can be described as uncanny. In Freud’s definition of the uncanny, it is the familiar made strange. Djurberg recreates and even expands on this notion through her animations. Not only is the queering of Djurberg’s animations embodied through the stop-motion process, but also extends to the actual subject matter, the story and the treatment of the material. Through the lens of Halberstam’s “Queer Temporality and Post-modern Geographies,” each of these artworks adjusts normative conceptions of the logics and organization of community, sexual identity, embodiment and activity in space and time. Djurberg constantly jolts us out of expectations, never remaining fixed but also rejects normative ideas of fluidity. Djurberg interrupts normative ideas of cinematic and linear time through the repeated cuts and jumps of her grotesque figures.

This instability refuses a fixed notion of time and movement. His conscious manipulation of time, space and their borders is a refusal of fixity that I work towards in my own work. Each frame is purposively different from the last to imply movement, but not with smooth subtly. The transition between these slightly incongruent images creates a choppy movement, destabilizing normative time.
When installed most of Djurberg’s animations continuously loop to enact an infinite circling. *Tiger Licking Girls Butt*, an early work of hers, directly acknowledges this continuous repetition. Following the climax of the animation, bold letters ask, “WHY DO I HAVE THIS URGE TO DO THESE THINGS OVER AND OVER AGAIN?” This situation in many ways can be applied to compulsory heterosexuality Adrienne Rich theorizes in her 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”
I would like to consider the strategy of looping a formation of queer time; the loop is repeated infinitely, refusing normative notions of narratives. Like the ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail, a self-sustaining closed loop, my animation Loop (fig. 8) resists fixity. Disembodied hands reach down to wrangle the laces, each frame slightly different than the last, creating both a rhythmic and choppy movement. As the hands reach the end of their magic trick, pulling the strings of a clown shoe into two floppy loops, the laces manage to slip out of the knot and the looping loop begins again, fingers fall into the same dance over and over.

Figure 9
Queerness presents itself as an alternative to the normative. Jonathan Weinberg is one of the first to contextualize queer theory in relation to lesbian and gay studies and to a contemporary artwork; in his 1996 essay “Things are Queer.” Six years after Judith Butler’s foundational text Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Weinberg examines the application of queerness in the series of photos by Duane Michael (fig. 9) with the same title as the essay. Michael’s destabilization of normative modes of perception calls attention to the constructed nature of images. It also calls attention to other culturally constructed ideologies permeating our contemporary culture.
I agree with Weinberg in that, “Michals's series could stand as an allegory for the current ambitions of lesbian and gay studies to go beyond documenting specific homosexual entities and cultural practices.” Weinberg elaborates, that, “as a field of inquiry, queer studies potentially shifts the emphasis away from specific acts and identities to the myriad ways in which gender organizes and disorganizes society.” This shift should not gloss over the lived experience of marginalized people and should not diminish the history of resistance of binary power relations within lesbian and gay studies. The queering of texts and artworks is a political act. Queer can celebrate homoeroticism, but also refuses a fixed identity. It critiques normative behaviors, all in an effort to subvert gendered power structures.

“The world is queer, because it is known only through representations that are fragmentary and in themselves queer. Their meanings are always relative, a matter of relationships and constructions.”25

- Jonathan Weinberg

Any constructed or imagined space is queer when meanings are built and change according to its relationship to its representation. Although Weinberg is specifically addressing Michael Duane’s photograph series and the queer world constructed within, I am excited by a broader application of this idea. In always shifting, meaning can never be nailed down, an infinite process of becoming, one that truly reflects real.

I hope to escape the constraints of “real” time and construct my own realities and narratives. In creating an alternative arena to play out desires and fears, I hope to offer the viewer and myself, a safe and subversive space to question and explore our constructed perspective and identity.

The seemingly inherent meanings found within symbolism and iconography has been constructed through history and culture. I work to deconstruct and reimagine these
relationships to create nuanced narratives from my own perspective. By queering my own world, I hope to expose the fragility and ultimate malleability of constructed meanings of beauty and ugliness, normal and other. I am interested in finding and creating new meanings in the in-between; between series of photographs and between series of drawings and between animation frames. I work towards creating non-linear narratives to resist normative modes of production and signification.

I am interested in the space between images and how that can form different, new and hybrid meanings. Thirty still images can be flashed consecutively in one second and our eyes will perceive this as real-time motion. The slower the images are flashed the more detail can be seen in a single frame but, it is harder to connect the movement between the preceding and following images. And conversely, the faster the images are flashed, the harder it is to differentiate between single frames, but now the same still images appear to have morphed into one collective movement. Within my work, I am working to find a balance between this illusion of a seamless collective movement and a slower frame rate that exposes the serial nature of video.

In my practice, I hope to craft time-based media works that exceed linear narratives reinterpreting chronological experiences into a subjective (and so, perhaps more truthful?) representation through manipulating frame rate and plot structure. The looping gestures present in my work reference the circularity of life and the Sisyphean task of identity performance. However, I am not interested in creating a seamless loop. I am attempting to bring attention to the constructed nature of time-based media, animation, representation, gender performance and truth itself. A purposeful glitch is an oxymoron and I hope this contradictory gesture makes the viewer question my intentionality.
This relationship between the story, the image and how this plays out over time, has always been of interest to me. Spending afternoons as girl at the public library with fairy tales and Nancy Drew mysteries, illustrations were clues to the narrative and I was always looking for the hidden message. The drawings I make are not illustrations of a narrative. I look instead to form narratives between and within the images themselves: narratives that unfold over time through the succession of images, narratives that form between juxtapositions of distinct but connected images and narratives that form between juxtapositions of symbols within a single image. Although the last two, are not necessarily a time-based media, drawing and the resulting representation is a literal recording of action in time.

Even if drawings are not animated through stop-motion, I find my drawings and animations do share a serial quality. For me drawing is a storyboarding process, beginning with singular visual representations then letting a narrative form between and within these. It is the quick, sketchy style and also color that connects the still and moving images; sickly greens, ultramarine blues, pinky reds and warm yellows are favorites. Using a limited almost primary palette of vibrant and saturated colors repeatedly again, reflects a serial quality of connection over time.

I am not interested in erasing my hand within my work. I am not interested in creating the illusion that images are created without manual manipulation over time. The visible mediation of the medium itself signifies the action of drawing. In two-dimensional works, rather than filling the page, working slowly and recording large amounts of time onto the surface, I am working towards a quick and immediate expression. Drawing is both impulsive and deliberate but also always still in progress. Embracing this incompleteness is also a reference to the idea of becoming; the perpetual incomplete
performance of identity explored conceptually is reflected in the immediacy and incompleteness of the drawing quality itself.

I believe working outside of normative time and space has powerful potential. I believe in resisting the “reality” constructed for me instead of by me. And in our current political reality, I believe others believe in this resistance as well. I am not saying that I believe my work to be only politically motivated. But I want my work to challenge the homogenizing force of the MAKE AMERICA GREAT, AGAIN campaign.

Whiteness, American-ness and “traditional values” are constructed as a moral high ground and even “normal” in the United States, this delusion is protected and promoted under our current presidential administration. This political position denies criticism within the paradigm of “fake news”. If Sean Spicer can assert during a White House press conference that Hitler “didn’t even sink to using chemical weapons” in order to justify Trump’s order to bomb Syria, I think there is validity in anyone asserting their own version of reality.

Spicer, even when receiving huge amounts of backlash, apologized by saying he used “an inappropriate and insensitive comment”. Refusing to out his claim as false, Spicer continued to clumsily backtrack until the meaning is spliced enough to lay it to rest with the other “alternative facts” our new reality purports. In our current status, it seems as if there are no truths, only possibilities.

To both parallel and resist our current political actuality, where KKK parades honor our celebrity president, I have created my own alternate reality. A reality in which people are complicated, not black and white but a spectrum, a reality that is less about what you are and more about who you are becoming. A reality that realizes what I want
to believe in and like Spicer’s, this reality can be validated by anyone else who wants to believe too.

A subjective reality that evokes empathy in the viewer is what I wish for my work. I hope that my hybrid creatures’ interactions and performances within a carnivalesque spectacle reflect the spectrum of nuanced identities and narratives often obscured, co-opted and othered in the surreal circus-like reality of contemporary politics and social media.
“...what I like is multiple, evolving, mutating identities, not one fixed identity with an image you want to resemble.”

It’s that time of year again,
They’re always matching,
Outfits and poses,
Doll-babies in a JcPenney photo booth

Figure 10
“We want to know what is the body and what is not, and it is in domain of ritual and the carnival grotesque that we see this boundary confused and ultimately redefined.”

-Susan Stewart

“The images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics. The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek; it is identified with the “high” or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with the rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official “low” culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation.”

-Mary Russo

Mary Russo’s theorization of the grotesque body in *The Female Grotesque*, provides a strategy for resistance that has the potential to move beyond the narrow politics of heteronormativity through employing the carnivalesque and the abject. Eradicating borders between object, subject, abject, and other, the body becomes a spectacle and an expression of transgression. Within this creation of a spectacle, hierarchies between high culture and organized society are subverted. As Russo states, “...carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure”. This also echoes Halberstram’s theorization of a queer counterpublics. The carnivalesque is directly connected to the grotesque body, in that it relates to the “spatial and temporal dimensions of modern spectacle.” However, in this visible and exaggerated act of transgression, women specifically risk dangerous attention and exposure. Russo contests the idea that this makes a female spectacle a powerless victim subject to ridicule. She argues that feminist parody is most powerful and subversive when it is aggressively excessive.
"On the one hand, those images, which define woman as monstrous in relation to her reproductive functions, work to reinforce the phallocentric notion that female sexuality is abject. On the other hand, the notion of the monstrous-feminine challenges the view that femininity, by definition, constitutes passivity."

Figure 11

I am working towards presenting options not solutions. I hope to create representations similar to Djurberg’s animations, in that they have the potential for
multiple and contradicting meanings. Combining high and low culture, theory with base pleasure, embodying the carnival, the grotesque and queer. I am trying to offer a neutral platform for the viewer to explore their own personal as well as cultural boundaries in relation to pleasure, pain, desire, humor and disgust.

In the work, *GreenSickGirl (self-portrait)*, I am trying a queer approach to negotiating positionality within the world as it relates to consumption specifically. I want the work to function as a visual mapping of my personal perspective and experience. I hope to create a non-linear narrative that allows the viewer to enter and explore their field of vision from multiple points. I see the work functioning as a theoretical and metaphorical space for ontological self-examinations. In doing so, I hope to interrogate the complications of the complicity in normative behaviors and culturally constructed notions of identity.

The drawings and animations depict expressions of the mouth and hand gestures that reference sexual and animal violence, domesticity and literal consumption. What can a mouth do? An orifice that is just as active as it is passive. A constant give, a constant take; a site of violence and a site of empowerment. A mouth has the potential to scream, laugh, smile, yawn, bite, open and close for what or whom it chooses. As a single voice, or collective chorus, our mouths become a witness to how we interact with the world. Touch, taste and speech become the cipher to which we understand ourselves.

By challenging the cultural constructions of normativity through crudeness, fragmentation and exaggeration of color, line and the uncanny, I hope, *GreenSickGirl*, interrogates the viewer’s complicity, positionality and subjectivity within society. I am questioning behaviors in others, and myself and how these behaviors influence and affect personal history gender, sexuality and the environment. Somewhere between a storyboard
and idea map, I hope to suggest connections but open ended ones. It is in this back and forth navigation; shifting from spectator to participator, from predator to prey, that I hope nuances our connections to the world around us. *GreenSickGirl* I hope toes the line between disturbing and cheeky, expressing the messy process of “becoming”.

Julie Kristeva’s defines the abject as, “what does not respect border, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”

By reminding the viewer of their own fragile, monstrous materiality and identity, I hope to destabilize normative ideas of subjectivity. As cited earlier, Russo describes the grotesque body as, “open, extended, protruding, [it is the] secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change” (62). Thinking of the grotesque as queer and fluid, that which disrupts normative notions of gender, sexuality, temporalities and behaviors.

Thinking about Djurberg’s *I Wasn’t Made To Play The Son*, the bodily composition of the figures’ are completely unbalanced. There appears to be no spine, no bones, all actors are anatomically incorrect; but their bodies seem to support their disfigured limbs. The stylized nature of figures draws attention to the constructed nature of these characters. We can look back to Duane Michael’s series Things are Queer and its destabilization of perception through an emphasis on revealing the artworks construction. Michael and now Djurberg are part of a lineage in resistance of binary power structures through violating artistic and cultural norms that regulate appearances.

In Djurberg’s piece *I wasn’t made to play the son*, as the nude purple figure lays on the floor, two figures approach her. Her body appears both soft and structured. This emphasis on the tactility creates a psychological affect in which the viewers become conscious of their own materiality. In an effort to protect our vulnerability,
we develop an aversion to our own abjectness, denying the reality that our bodies are subject to manipulation and construction.

The trace of fingerprints and the jerky movements contribute to this awareness of the constructed nature of the objects and the animation. By destabilizing notions of naturalized cinematic and linear time, this queers temporalities and subverts power relations and constructed perceptions offering alternatives for the production of knowledge, as does the mixing of high and low culture in the carnivalesque. By eliminating boundaries and manipulating perceptions, power play is productive and fluid. As Russo suggests making a spectacle of oneself can be a source of oppositional power.

The violent technicolor dismemberment in Djurberg’s animation celebrates the transgression of boundaries. Lines are more than crossed; the inside and the outside of the body literally bleed into one. Both donning masks with large bird-like beaks, the two figures begin to dismember her with casual ease like a choreographed dance. The boys remove her white teeth, the final boundary to the fleshy cavern concealed behind skin contained by orifices. The woman becomes less figural, less human and more organic and visceral as the violent and grotesque spectacle continues. This entropic blend of the self and the abject other cannot be unseen or undone.

Dismantling the distinction between inside and outside with the violent spectacle of Nathalie Djurberg’s embodiment of the carnivalesque, the openings in the body of the figure destabilizes boundaries between the body and the world. Through this trangressive act, Djurberg reconfigures normative notions of pleasure, pain, and power suggesting alternatives to the violent oppression of culturally constructed binary structures. Just as
the bird masks provide an anonymous mask to play out the boys’ darkest fantasies, 
the viewer becomes a voyeur and participator in these violent and sexual acts. 
Suggesting a queer space for self-examination, resistance and celebration. 
The materiality of Djurberg’s sculptures provokes an exaggerated awareness of 
surface and texture employing the abject, creating a visceral affect. The grotesque 
body are at the center of the spectacle in *I wasn’t made to play the son*. 

![Image](image1) ![Image](image2) ![Image](image3)

**Figure 12**

Within *GreenSickGirl*, I have purposely arranged the disembodied mouths 
and openings and leakages (fig. 11, 12) to emphasize the grotesque boundaries 
threatening normative bodies, landscapes and narratives. By emphasizing 
ambiguous borders, I want to question the boundaries of “normal”. By drawing 
attention to the constructed nature of the narrative we have to face the 
Frankenstein monsters we are becoming. As subcultures outside of the mainstream 
form alternative temporalities and spaces for themselves, I am also interested in 
constructing my own reality, becoming the grand Oz, creator and performer but like
Djurberg, an actor that barely veils her presence in this formation.

The grotesque has many manifestations, as Susan Stewart explain in *On Longing*:

“…in addition to this interpenetration of the exterior of the body, an exchange of sexuality and an exchange between animal and human also can be used to effect the grotesque and it corresponding sense of interchange and disorder.”

I am interested in exploring animal-human relationships and the grotesque body within my work to destabilize notions of identity and normativity. *cat/dog*, a diptych of two self-portraits as animal-human hybrids (fig. 13) is loosely drawn, sparse patches of color draw the figure out of the blank negative space. I am trying to blur borders of human and animal features and create fictional hybrid alter egos.

The gouache works on paper are drawn representations of the photographic images of two characters within my body of work. Drawing from the photographs, sometimes even literally tracing the lines of my face, these representations are directly translated from the
“real” source. This layered translation of the “real” destabilizing the “true” nature of the characters represented in the images and myself as well.

I am interested in pursuing my perspective on the relationship between human and animals that has been studied, mythologized and theorized throughout human existence through my practice as an artist. I believe separating the category of human being from animal has asserted a hierarchy that puts humanity as the moral and physical authority in nature. Even though reality is often contrary to this. Humans are capable of just as savage of acts as animals and animals can be more orderly than humans. Assigning certain characteristics within a binary structure often relegates one as “normal” and one as “other”. The oppositions between humanity and animality often obscure the true similarities and differences. The human-animal hybrids within my work are commentary on “bestial” nature.

The act of othering animal characteristics sets up oppressive power structures; I am interested in combatting this. J. J. Grandville, the nineteenth century French artist whose caricatures and illustrations often depicted humorous metaphorical and allegorical scenes of anthropomorphized animals comment on social order and human behavior. It is not that Grandville applies animal characteristics to humans, but translates animal attributes into human like characters.

In one of Grandville’s illustrations for Fables de La Fontaine, “The Fox and the Mask, (fig. 14) the artist depicts a clever conception of animal mentality and comments on the value of aesthetics and beauty. This classic tale originates from Aesop. Grandville’s update imagines the fox at a gallery exhibition, turning his head away in contempt from a sculpted bust being
closely examined by a donkey.

Grandville applies the cleverness of the fox to the character depicted destabilizing notions of animality as demoralized, savage or chaotic. It is because the fox is clever that it becomes critical of a purely “beautiful” object. A translation of the story reads “He praised the art and added: A splendid head! Pity it has no brains.”34 I think this lesson is interesting when considering the value and impact of representation and images in society. An image, especially one that trades in representing the category human, without “brains” or a concept, is not only lazy but potentially dangerous.
The 1930s pre-code films *Blonde Venus* and *Island of Lost Souls* also problematize the implications of human/animal hybridity and its intersections with female sexuality. “Blonde Venus”, played by Marlene Dietrich, wears a gorilla suit during a strip tease representing the illusion of an animal that reveals its humanness. In *Island of Lost Souls*, Lota the Panther-Woman attempts to perform humanness to conceal her animality. Lota played by Kathleen Burke, and Dietrich complicate seemingly neat categories of feminine beauty and primal sexuality, as well as boundaries constructed between whiteness and monstrosity. These culturally constructed dichotomies collapses when beauty is the beast.

Lota, the Panther-Woman, an experiment of Dr. Moreau’s, is subject to his manipulation both physically and sexually compounding the colonial force with a patriarchal one exploring the film’s premise as “a parable regarding man’s bestial nature”35. Moreau’s effort to domesticate Lota, as an animal and as a woman, is realized within his arrangement of a sexual partner for her. Dr. Moreau sets out to control every instance of Lota’s existence including her appearance and mate. He even watches from the shadows to observe his creation seduce his selection. When Lota begins to kiss the shipwrecked captain, Paul, her animal claws creep out from under her skin (fig. 16).
Lota’s sexual arousal triggered her suppressed bestial nature; this perceived failure of conquering her animality enrages Dr. Moreau. These non-normative, or “queer”, sexualities and identities explored in both the novel and the 1932 film, Island of Lost Souls complicates our understanding of human and non-human. This transgression triggers a questioning of cultural constructs. Ultimately, Lota rebels in her own way. Lota’s animality cannot be suppressed. Her hybridity cannot be cleanly separated. The Panther-Woman complicates boundaries between animal and human, savagery and beauty, other and normal.

In examining Marlene Dietrich’s first performance as Helen performing as “Blonde Venus” on stage, her gorilla suit striptease into a platinum blonde afro wig reveals her physical and sexual appropriation of the “other”. “I’m beginning to feel like an African queen/Those drums bring up the heaven inside me,” “Blonde Venus” croons towards the end of her song “Hot Voodoo.” Dietrich uses shock value to titillate her audience and while her transgressions of cultural norms are subversive; do they reify power structures or challenge them? Is she preforming for the male gaze or subverting it?

Helen’s first appearance as “Blonde Venus” on stage is perplexing. We cannot see her as the beat begins, instead we are given a close up of the black musicians, and then we are drawn to the chorus line of women in blackface gyrating to the beat. Entering the stage, with them, a gorilla drags its knuckles walking around the crowd. The gorilla makes its way to the stage. Its movements are too deliberate to be a wild animal. The costumed creature gently removes its hairy black hand, and to our surprise, a feminine and pale, white hand is exposed (fig. 15). Moving onto the other hand the disguise continues to disintegrate. Both hands, now bare, slowly lift and remove the gorilla’s head, revealing where our “Blonde Venus” has been hiding. She smiles as they applaud her
magic trick. She continues to undress on stage and for one more laugh she puts on a blonde afro wig and begins to sing.

In this instance, Dietrich associates sexual excess, rhythmic music and animality with blackness. Is Dietrich, a white woman, appropriating these qualities and casting them aside after her seduction routine is finished? Or is this an entropic moment where female sexuality and femininity embraces its monstrosity? Although, through this performance, Helen does reify racial stereotypes, her emergence from within the gorilla is significant. In complicating the boundaries of human and nonhuman, Helen questions concepts of humanity and therefore beauty. The “Blonde Venus”, rather than regressing into an animal form; her humanness emerges from within the animal. This outward subversion of the “animal within” challenges normative notions of identity.

As Noel Carroll asserts in his article “Ethnicity, Race and Monstrosity: The Rhetorics of Horror and Humor,” our horror humor response to transgressive acts are rooted in coming face to face with a defective or an imperfect achievement of beauty. Monsters and clowns embody deviancy from the norm physically. Where as clowns’ ugliness are a source of goodness and laughter, the monsters’ ugliness is horrifying. Although, she is essentially donning blackface, Helen revels in her monstrosity and ugliness in crossing the human/animal boundary and complicates notions of beauty, humor and horror by asserting her desirability at the end of her performance through her striptease.

“The beautiful exterior is taken as a sign of inward moral goodness; the nonbeautiful or ugly exterior is often imagined to correlate with evil or depravity.”

36

37
If beauty and non-beauty are binary oppositions, so must be the aesthetic responses to such representations. According to Noel Carroll, whose theory follows Kantian notions of beauty, finding someone or a representation beautiful is an aesthetic response relative to their realization of the concept of human. So the aesthetic response to non-beauty, that which taints or fails the concept of human, *ugliness*, Carroll theorizes, is bifurcated again into horror and humor responses.\(^{38}\)

While I agree that we, as a (western) society, find representations beautiful that are the perfect realization of its concept, I don’t agree that the horror and/or humor response is irrevocably at odds with the beauty response or that humor and horror are always are at odds with each other either. Carroll explains,

> “Horror is a genre predicated on exploring our fascination with the ugly, the anomalous, and the category violation. Humor, too, is deeply involved with category violation.”\(^{39}\)

I am interested in how representations can play with and realize notions of beauty, horror and humor within one image or across a narrative.
I find Cindy Sherman’s work to function as an interrogation of those aesthetics and how that influences identity and sense of self. In 2011, Sherman collaborated with a mainstream beauty brand, M. A. C. Cosmetics (fig. 17), to further complicate notions of transformation through make-up and staging. Although this work was commissioned by a beauty brand, Sherman resists normative notions of “beauty”. The three images portray Sherman metamorphosed. All communicate both a distinct identity and an amalgamation of familiar characters, the familiar yet strange. The clown character on the right of the triptych in (fig. 17) dons a vivid costume and vibrant makeup, yet their expression appears almost bored, somewhat annoyed. The plastic surgery show pony in the middle is an parodic example of beauty, doe eyes, painted smile, perfectly pink cheeks and vacant eyes. Exaggerated features convey an uncanny and unsettling quality complicating the horror and humor response (per Carroll,) realized within the mechanisms of a beautification process.

I also find Bruce Nauman’s artwork Art Make-Up from 1967-68 (fig. 18) to interrogate similar themes. But Nauman, in contrast to Sherman’s elaborate, almost carnival images, reduce identity transformation to simple fully body grease paint application. As the video begins his body nude body almost blends into the background. Nauman covers his entire visible body in white grease paint. As his nude body is occluded by the make-up, he appears almost alien, a disfigured version of the earlier figure. This uncanny transformation triggers a physiological response, making the viewers aware of their own mutability and materiality. Makeup and the manipulation of appearance are again not used to beautify its subject but to interrogate normative notions of identity, ugliness and beauty.
Carroll uses this binary of ugliness and beauty to outline how cultural representations of the “other” as inhuman monsters have been and continue to be oppressive.

“..Monsters may be interstitial figures, figures that blend, blur or conjoin disparate categories: wolfmen, apemen, catwomen, and you-name-it people that inhibit a conceptual space between recognized cultural categories.”

I am attempting to reclaim the monster and ugliness in my work through complicating the horror, humor and beauty response. In representing the non-human or “other”, I am questioning the construction of the concept of human in contemporary society.

“The posthuman is a direct challenge, not to the former human, but what it means corporeally and discursively to be, or more correctly to count as, human..Like queer, the posthuman does not seek to exchange or go beyond toward a set goal. Both interrogate the arbitrary nature of systems of power masquerading as truth.”
-Epilogue-

Self / Other
Subject / Object
Truth / Mask
Reflection / Reality
Ideal / Real
I am interested in the destabilization of narratives and the literal and metaphorical drawing of connections between humanity and monstrosity. In my practice, working two-dimensionally, in animation and in installation I find room to play with the time and space between still and moving imagery. Through negotiating boundaries between oppositions, like static and dynamic, human and other, illusion and actual, I work to complicate notions of identities, narratives and representations. Through collapsing artifice and authenticity into one another, I hope to complicate the notion of the real. Within my animations, performance-based videos or drawings, I hope to provide options or possibilities while drawing attention to the construction of fictions and of binaries.

My work does not attempt to provide an illusion of perfect representation. My images are created through manual manipulation over time. My hand and the resulting manipulation is a visible mediation of the material surface itself, signifying the action of drawing. In two-dimensional works, rather than filling the page, working slowly and recording large amounts of time onto the surface, I am working towards a quick and immediate expression. Drawing is both raw and deliberate but also always still in progress. Embracing this incompleteness and embodying the theoretical idea of becoming, the immediacy and ill-defined quality of the drawing itself reflects the perpetual incomplete performance of a stable and fixed identity. My own identity and lived experience has been a source, both explicit and implicit of the unresolved, ill-defined, collision between the self and its reflection.

I hope to expose the fragility and ultimate malleability of constructed meanings and representations of beauty and ugliness, normal and not. I am interested in
complicating the roles and expectations of the subject and spectator to examine specifically the boundaries of self and other. The mask and the mirror become an outlet for this exploration in my practice. I work towards creating a utopic, participatory circus, a fun house, a county-fair carnival, an orchestrated set of performances that is dynamic and spectacular entertainment for both the performers and audience, a space where work is play and play is work. Hybrid creatures’ interactions and performances within a carnivalesque spectacle reflect the spectrum of nuanced identities and narratives often obscured, co-opted and othered in the surreal circus-like reality of contemporary politics and social media.

This relationship between time and space intersects with concerns of queer studies, the carnival, animation and my own practice. My practice as an artist experiments with how narratives relate to images over time and how these are contextualized within a certain space. To find and create new meanings in the in-between, I look to form narratives that unfold over time through the succession of images and narratives that exist between juxtapositions of imagery. I work towards creating non-linear narratives to resist normative modes of production and signification. Creating an alternative arena to play out desires and fears offering the viewer and myself; a safe and subversive space to question and explore our constructed perspective and identity.

The characters in my work are a fiction, a representation versus the real. Humans are complex individuals with even more complicated belief systems. It’s not which reality is the most truthful, but who has the power to make others believe in theirs and why? As an artist, I can’t answer this question, but I want to make work, which leads the viewers to their own conclusion or to more questions.
Costumes, make-up, masks and wigs signify a performance, an artificial transformation. But, when do costumes become everyday outfits? Are you truly hiding behind a mask? Where is the boundary between play and reality? Combing live-action video and hand-drawn animation, I am creating a representation of a subjective reality, complicating subjective notions of identity and truth. I am interested in creating a space for monsters to play out their own alternate narratives.
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Endnotes

1. Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.” – Judith Butler. For more discussion of gender performance theory and its representations see “The Body You Want” Liz Kotz interview in Artforum November 1992.


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19. Ibid, 2

20. Ibid, 2

21. Ibid, 178


23. Ibid, 178


26. Spicer “clarified” that he was meaning to make the distinction between Assad’s and Hitler’s method of dispersal of chemical weapons.


30. Ibid., 6


33. Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 105

34. Alexander Calder, *Selected Fables of Jean de la Fontaine*, (Courier Corporation, 2014 ),47


36. Ibid, 40


38. Ibid, 39 “Finding a representation beautiful – or finding what is represented beautiful – is one kind of aesthetic response... However, while the beauty response is keyed to the perfect or exemplary realization of the relevant concept, horror and humor responses are connected to imperfect or defective instantiations of concepts. Horror and humor are, in this respect, antithesis of beauty, though antitheses that themselves diverge from each other as well in terms of their characteristic emotional timbres.”

39. Ibid, 41


Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.

– Judith Butler.


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"Finding a representation beautiful—or finding what is represented beautiful—is one kind of aesthetic response… However, while the beauty response is keyed to the perfect or exemplary realization of the relevant concept, horror and humor responses are connected to imperfect or defective instantiations of concepts. Horror and humor are, in this respect, antithesis of beauty, though antitheses themselves diverge from each other as well in terms of their characteristic emotional timbres.
