

THE GAG OF THE FALLING DOOR: THE KLAU MICH SHOW (Radicalism in society meets experiment on TV)

A project for Documenta 13

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The Gag of the Falling Door

The *Dean Martin Show* on the NBC network, which ran for more than 200 episodes, was not exactly a model of experimentation in new aesthetic forms, nor did its presenter, Dean Martin, feel at ease with the idea of the counter-culture exploding at that moment. Sufficient proof of this is the way he presented The Rolling Stones at the Hollywood Palace in 1964: 'Now, something for the youngsters: five boys from England who have sold a stack of discs: The Rolling Stones...I've also been rolled when I was stoned...I've no idea what they sing about, but here they are: The Rolling Stones!' Then came the performance with the Rolling Stones looking like cherubs, but with quite daring words such as 'I don't wanna go to work all day...I just wanna make love to you' (Muddy Waters). When the performance ends, Dean Martin comes on stage as The Rolling Stones are leaving, applauds poker-faced: 'Yes...The Rolling Stones, aren't they magnificent? They're going back to London now, where they're going to meet the Beatles and have a hair-pulling contest. I'll let you into a secret: some of you think that today's musical groups have long hair. You're wrong, it's only an optical effect: they simply have very low brows and very high eyebrows.'

This kind of humor sounds as reactionary today as the many sexist jokes filling the *Dean Martin Show* which finally sank it after nine years on air (like the gag *A day at the Men's Hair Styling Salon*, with Orson Welles and James Stewart). And yet the King of Cool did have his Brechtian, deconstructionist moments, such as when, screwing up his eyes as he was supposedly reading from the *teleprompter*, he looked up and cracked: 'You wouldn't want me to say anything like that, would you?' or when John Wayne said to him on one show: 'I'm pleased to see you here; I'd be pleased to see you anywhere as long as you're standing', to which Martin replied: 'My, what a good joke you've just read on the *teleprompter*'. But none of those moments was as iconoclastic as the gag of the falling door.

The structure of the show was this: Dean Martin came on set walking down some steps or sliding down a firemen's pole. He would leap onto the piano and sing a song, and tell a few jokes. Then he would go over to a closed door, open it, and the night's first guest appeared. This idea of the closed door began because Martin had made it a condition of becoming the presenter of his own show that he should never have to rehearse and did not want to know anything about the show until he appeared on set. The producers thought the guests could come on when Dean Martin himself opened the door for them, so that his surprise (which

was absolutely genuine) would seem part of the script. So it was that people like Jack Benny or Ronald Reagan came through the door, as well as many scantily-clad young women.

There was a constant stream of jokes between Dean Martin and the production team. On one occasion, when it seemed as though Dean was incapable of reading one of the big prompt cards, the man simply threw it in his face. This heavy-handed humor eventually centered around the famous door. And so, on one particular occasion, Dean Martin walked over to it, crooning, opened it slowly, and at that precise moment the whole décor fell on top of him – the door and the fake bookcase. Everything was smashed to pieces and all the camera, sound, and lighting cables were clearly visible.

Doubled up with laughter, Martin collapsed onto the sofa in this fake living-room, while the camera stayed on him for an incredibly long time, showing the viewers his contortions and outbursts of laughter while, presumably, the door was being repaired.

KLAU MICH

Meanwhile...the counter-culture was breaking out all over. In Berlin in 1967, Fritz Teufel and Rainer Langhans, the members of the political and mediatic commune Kommune Eins, had to face trial for distributing leaflets *encouraging* Berlin's citizens to set fire to the big stores, so that even in Germany they could have some idea of the *Vietnam feeling*. The tone was irreverent and ironic.

In court the two men refused to play the role of the accused, and their impertinent language and attitude challenged a judicial body that was, as everyone knew, riddled with former Nazis. In the end, after testimony from respectable literary and artistic figures such as Günter Grass, the leaflets were classified as artistic satire and therefore innocent.

The trial was described in the cult book *Klau Mich*¹ (*Steal Me*) compiled by Langhans and Teufel. Its even-numbered pages gave a transcription of the trial; the odd pages were a selection of libertarian texts being distributed in the Berlin of the time.

The book was originally published by Voltaire, the publishing house headed by Bernward Vesper, whose life and business partner was Gudrun Ensslin before she got together with Andreas Baader. Bernward Vesper was the son of Will Vesper, one of the poets of National-Socialism and a devoted follower of the Nazi party. In addition, Will Vesper was the author of the speech that preceded the burning of *anti-German* books in Dresden on 10 May, 1933.

Klau Mich is still controversial, which goes to show that seldom have so many contradictions and taboos been concentrated in one book. Curiously, it was

¹ Rainer Langhans y Fritz Teufel: *Klau Mich*, Berlín: Voltaire, 1968 (Voltaire Handbuch 2).

published three years before the much better-known *Steal This Book* (1971), another cult classic of U.S. counter-culture, written by Abbie Hoffman in the form of a guide for young people with instructions on how to fight against the State.

While there is no apparent link between the two titles, the time overlap is significant, showing as it does how truly international the impulse for revolt was.

Art protects

Among the arguments which led to the not-guilty verdict in the case against Langhans and Teufel, the most telling was the placing of the incendiary leaflets in the tradition of Dadaist and Surrealist texts (especially the famous declaration by Breton in the *Second Surrealist Manifesto*: 'the simplest Surrealist act consists in going out in the street, revolver in hand, and firing at random at the crowd as long as one can'); as well as emphasizing their direct link to Debord's Situationism (Dieter Kunzelmann, the *patriarch* of the Kommune Eins, was a member of the German artistic group Spur, which was part of the Internationale Situationniste until 1961). The Spur group had its own history of trials and police searches, with accusations of blasphemy and pornography. In their defence, Rudolphe Gasche published «Zum Spur Prozess» in *The Situationist Times* #2 (1962), an article in which he stated:

'The only art that is recognized is that which doesn't question the existing society and therefore directly or indirectly justifies it. The reaction of the court is simply a symbol of the manner in which the police forces take action against groups that critically touch upon their foundations, not to mention undermine those foundations (...) A symbol of the validity, adequacy and necessity of a genuinely new form of art is the fact that the process of becoming more objective coincides with the recently-stated demand for an all-encompassing art, by which we mean a cultural revolution in everyday life, in the time as well as in the psyche of man. . . This revolution will involve: the purely playful confrontation of opposites; the creation of antinomies, vibrating in their spontaneity and aggressiveness (whereby emptied forms are given new meaning); *détournement*, or dialectical opposition in which new forms are created by correlation.'²

Therefore, the strategies of the Kommune Eins were imbued with the spirit of Situationism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. As a result their actions were, on this occasion at least, judged as innocent by a judicial apparatus that was not often benevolent towards youthful revolt: art protects.

Peter Davis' documentary *An Anatomy of Violence* (1967) centers around the Dialectics of Liberation and the Demystification of Violence congress, organized in the Roundhouse of London in that same year 1967 by R. D. Laing, Joe Berke, Leon Redler y David Cooper. All the outstanding figures of left-wing culture of the time had been invited: Paul Goodman, Herbert Marcuse, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Allen Ginsberg, Emmett Grogan.

2. Rudolphe Gasche: «Zum Spur Prozess», in *The Situationist Times* #2 (1962). Translated from the German in 1990.)

Joe Berke, the only one among the organizers who felt at all close to contemporary art (he had given a talk at the Symposium on Destruction in Art organized by Gustav Metzger in 1966), had also invited the artist Carolee Schneemann to take part in a *happening* (which she did with her performance *Round House*, despite the huge resistance of an academic apparatus which despite being so left-wing was no less sexist).

In Davis' film one can see Gustav Metzger and Carolee Schneeman talking about the protection that art offers. Metzger says: 'I agree with Carolee about the protection that art offers the individual(...) after the Symposium on Destruction in Art, people ask me: 'How come you haven't already destroyed yourself?'. And I say: 'Don't be ridiculous: the idea is to destroy things in order to protect the individual!'

Bernward Vesper was also among the audience to hear Stokely Carmichael from the Black Panthers, fascinated by the most aggressive form of revolution of the Afro-american community, with whom he and many other young Germans wanted to create a common front against Fascism.

Entartete Kunst- Degenerate Art

Art protects, but not always. The organizers of the Dialectics of Liberation and the Demystification of Violence congress, R. D. Laing, Joe Berke, Leon Redler and David Cooper, were the most visible leaders of the Anglo-saxon movement known as anti-psychiatry (*psichiatria democratica* in Italy –Franco Basaglia–, *psychothérapie institutionnelle* in France –Félix Guattari–). Curiously, this anti-psychiatric movement had a much greater impact in politics and culture than in psychiatry, which mostly remained unmoved by the anti-psychiatric theses of open hospitals, voluntary treatment, and the emancipation of the patient.

The anti-psychiatric movement was born at the start of the sixties out of the sense of rejection some young psychiatrists felt towards psychiatry's dark past. They considered it above all a method of control and repression of the marginal elements in society. Traditional psychiatric treatments (electroshock, insulin comas, lobotomy) were forms of torture in which ideas of hygiene or domination were much more important than that of a cure.

However, no psychiatric past was as dark as the programme of racial hygiene developed by the Nazis under the code name T4. This programme of euthanasia (which officially lasted from 1939 to 1941, but in fact continued until 1945) offered a *merciful death (Gnadentod)* to the mentally ill and the psychically or physically handicapped. The programme got its name from the address of the building in which the extermination of these *unworthy* lives was decided: Tiergarten 4, Berlin.

Carl Schneider, director of the psychiatry department at the University of Heidelberg from 1933 to 1945, and one of the main people responsible for the T4 programme, was keen to contribute to the *Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art)* exhibition in Munich, 1937) with works of art made by mental patients and collected by Hans Prinzhorn in that same Heidelberg hospital some ten years earlier.

A lot could be said about the *Degenerate Art* exhibition. It was an extraordinary success: three million people visited it between 1937 and 1941, and it toured to 13 German cities. But what interests us here is that it was a mixed exhibition of works on the one hand by artists in institutions and on the other avant-garde modern artists (from Fauvism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism: Dix, Schwitters, Klee, Kandinsky, Ernst, El Lissitzky). Also of great interest are the commentaries filling the walls explaining to the public the National-Socialist view of modern art/ art created by mental hospital patients: 'ugly', 'incomprehensible', 'sick', 'made from garbage', and last but not least 'paid for from public money, with the taxes of the German people'.

Similar descriptions have often been heard about art in very different epochs and situations.

Excavating the hidden continuities

In Guy Debord's defence of the Spur group at the trial they faced in Munich for obscenity and pornography, he wrote:

To the President of the tribunal
28 April 1962

Mr. President:

Around 1920 and afterwards, Germany incontestably had the highest rank in the elaboration of art and, more generally, the culture of our era. You know how this center of creation was extinguished in 1933. And, since then, nothing has reappeared. Everyone is obliged to attest to the fact that post-war Germany has been characterized by a total cultural void and by the dullest conformism. ⁴

Well, things were about to change, thanks to the Spur group and their contemporaries. For the art historian Walter Grasskamp, the Kassel Documenta exhibition was born as a response to the trauma created by the cultural desert bequeathed by the Nazis and their idea of degenerate art. But it was not until

³ The work of institutionalized artists had already been shown together with Dada artists in the first Dada exhibition organized by Max Ernst and Johannes Baargeld in the Cologne Kunstverein in 1919. Following the Degenerate Art exhibition, the works from the Prinzhorn collection remained in the attic of the University of Heidelberg, where they were discovered by Harald Szeemann and put on show at the Kunsthalle, Bern, in 1963.

⁴ Guy Debord, *Correspondance*, Vol. 2, 1960-1964. Note by Alice Debord. Translated from the French in May 2005.

Documenta 5, curated by Harald Szeeman in 1972, that it offered a response on a par with the 1937 exhibition. It was then that politics returned to the centre stage of art and the 'false continuities were destroyed in order to excavate the hidden continuities'.

Die KLAU MICH Show

In the theater and TV, a *sidekick* is the character who responds to the hero. He complements the main character, so that if the protagonist is romantic and dreamy, the *sidekick* will be realistic and sensible; if the protagonist is aggressive, the *sidekick* will be conciliatory; and if the protagonist is analytical and cold, the *sidekick* will be friendly and warm. He very often functions as a kind of comic relief or subversive humor, *sotto voce*.

But the *sidekick* is much closer to the public than the hero, and often shares comments with them about the hero's actions through the *fourth wall*.

The *sidekick* also functions as a shoulder to cry on, and as a sounding board for the hero's monologue. He also answers the hero, asks him questions, and exposes him to the public by seeking their opinion about what he is doing. In this sense, the *sidekick* is very close to the much more archaic figure of the chorus. The chorus is a homogeneous group of actors who provide a collective comment on what is happening on stage. At first, the chorus was made up of 50 actors, then 12 (Sophocles), and then 15 (Euripides), and 24 in the comedies.

The *KLAU MICH* show is a project for local television and internet TV, and a performance. It has been developed by Dora García for Documenta 13 in collaboration with Ellen Blumenstein, Samir Kandil and Jan Mech as presenters/protagonists; Theater Chaosium Kassel as *sidekick*/chorus of 11 actors; and Offener Kanal Kassel as the local television channel.

The *KLAU MICH* show is in the form of a *talk show* which every Friday afternoon during the 100 days of Documenta 13 will receive between one and 20 guests.

These guests have been invited with the idea of building *a sort of historical novel* that tells the story of the incredible adventure of the anti-institutional or anti-authoritarian movements in Germany since the Second World War, with special emphasis on radical forms (those which seek extreme change in the *statu quo*) of psychiatry, art, and politics.

DOCUMENTA(13) presents every Friday

KLAU MICH: Radicalism in society meets experiment on TV

Ständehaus Kassel
free entrance

Friday, June 8, 1:50 pm

Metanoia: destruction in art and the dialectics of liberation
Peter Cross, Leon Redler and Homage to Gustav Metzger

Friday, June 15, 1:50 pm

Why the Germans?
Götz Aly

Friday, June 22, 1:50 pm

Steal Me, Pirate Party and Communication Guerrilla
Rainer Langhans, Joachim Scharloth, Piratenpartei Deutschland: Jessica
Miriam Zinn

Friday, June 29, 1:50 pm

Corrected Slogans
Art & Language

Friday, July 6, 1:50 pm

Justice
Rote Hilfe

Friday, July 13, 1:50 pm

Counterfeit money. Investing in the time after the future
Daniel Tyradellis, Joseph Vogl

Friday, July 20, 1:50 pm

Vergangenheitspolitik
Norbert Frei, Rudolf Kreis (to be confirmed)

Friday, July 27, 1:50 pm

Theater of Cruelty
Frank Matzke & hArt times theater

Friday, August 3, 1:50 pm

Putting paid
Felix Ensslin
Ulf Aminde

Friday, August 10, 1:50 pm

I (still) can't get no satisfaction

Rolf Schwendter

Friday, August 17, 1:50 pm

On Radical Education

Ayse Gülec, Lothar Kannenberg, Rütli-Wear Berlin

Friday, August 24, 1:50 pm

Total Institution vs. Invented Institution

Carmen Roll, Franco Rotelli, Gunnar Richter, Rose Ostermann

Friday, August 31, 1:50 pm

Politics, Performance and the Right to the City

Matthias von Hartz, Christoph Twickel

Friday, September 7, 1:50 pm

Radical art and politics

Astrid Proll, Klaus Stern

Friday, September 14, 1:50 pm

Killing the father? Avant-garde and violence in post war literature and art

Felix Ensslin, Johannes Ullmaier

TV stage set and rehearsals daily open to the public