

# *PROXIES, WITH A LIFE OF THEIR OWN*

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It must have been in early 2014 that I saw the balloon sculptures in the middle of Tahrir Square in Cairo. They were placed by the then electorally validated military regime to celebrate a project expanding the Suez Canal. While accused by many of being a merely nominal project, unlikely to yield any real material gains, it was presented by the government as one of its grandest, and of which it was most proud. So what a strange choice to use inflated teddy bear–like balloons to commemorate it, and to place them in the physical and symbolic center of the 2011 uprising.

Over the next months and years, equally unusual officially commissioned commemorative monuments and statues started to emerge all over the country, such as the 2015 statue of Nefertiti in the governorate of Minya, whose form and careless execution were so extreme as to prompt a citizen-led outcry for the government to remove it (which they did), or the 2017 statue of Mustafa Kamil, a man commonly referred to as a national hero, in the village of Denshawai,<sup>1</sup> which resembled a figure straight out of a cartoon and was so ill-executed, with visible paint marks dripping all over its body.

It is tempting to attribute these monuments' forms to the carelessness and bad taste of the officials who commissioned and executed them, but I think such an interpretation fails to do them justice. Their large number and varied locations and sources suggest them to be symptoms of their historical moment.<sup>2</sup> As forms they have a comic character. And like many comic characters, they perform a double function, an assertion of a thing with its simultaneous rejection. Their audible speech is cloaked in insincerity, shedding doubt on the accuracy of its content as it is uttered. As they stand commemorating a nation's heroes, accomplishments, or history, I imagine these monuments winking at their viewers, telling them that as monuments

they and what they stand for are a sham.

This dynamic doesn't seem so far off from what is happening in the United States government at the moment, best embodied in what its president has become most famous for: his lying. Trump is one of the first to admit of his lying, which he did in November 2018, when asked by an ABC News journalist if he tells the truth, to which, without bating an eye, he replied: "I try. When I can, I tell the truth."<sup>3</sup> Trump's behavior is in line with a public performance of insincerity, transparently predicated on his political position as president. His unapologetic flip-flopping of facts and statements makes clear (to a comic extreme) what presidents have always done: fail to consistently tell the truth. Disregarding differing motives and agendas (some noble, others less so), this behavior of concealing and bending truths, and the assumption of a distance between proclaimed goals and latent intentions, becomes nothing radically new but is arguably rooted in the very role and institution of a president. Granted, in this case, it is done in the most transparent of manners and with a level of ludicrousness, frequency, and intensity that may have been previously unimaginable. In this way, like the air-stuffed balloons or the deformed Nefertiti which, while inhabiting the role of monuments, clearly inform their viewers that they are proxies for neither grandiose projects nor national pride, these performances of the current US president are immune to accusations of bad taste, lying, or insincerity, for these are the very qualities they openly celebrate.

This mocking of official structures and roles is surely not new, but the subject position from which it emerges is. For many years, it has been the traditional role of satirists, artists, dissidents, and cultural and social commentators to undertake such comic caricatures, with the aim of shaking belief in the stability of historically significant figures, narratives, and gestures, but rarely, in recent memory, have such caricatures been performed from the subject position of the very institutions they were meant to deconstruct.<sup>4</sup> For now the monument and its parody, the president and the comedian making fun of what a president is, are one and the same.<sup>5</sup> So what happens when the parody is not performed from the margins attacking the center, but is identical with the original, or more precisely is the original?

In *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Alenka Zupančič posits comedy as a practice resting firmly on its ability to link individual narratives or characters to the larger universal structures under which they can be grouped. She sees comedy presenting what she terms "the concrete universal," where comic characters are not subjects opposed to a structure, rather "they are subjectivized points of the structure itself."<sup>6</sup> In laughing at the botched statue of Nefertiti or Trump's incredible claims,

we must be able to access something concrete about monuments or presidents in general. We link these individual cases to their larger encompassing structures and see how much they conform or depart. Comedy never departs too much from the norm it references, for it must be able to keep this link between the individual case and the universal concept. “Comedy is not a deviation from the norm, or its reversal, but its radicalization; it is a procedure that carries the (human) norm itself to its extreme point; it produces and displays the constitutive excess and extremity of the norm itself.”<sup>7</sup>

Comedy also simultaneously accesses multiple dimensions of its subject. “It plays upon the duality of appearance and truth, of surface and depth. And it does so in a way, which, at some precise point, links the two.”<sup>8</sup> This operation, when successful, alters both its subject as well as the universal concept this subject is attached to. “When in comedy some imaginary Oneness or Unity splits in two, the sum of these two parts never again amounts to the inaugural One; there is a surplus that emerges in this split and constantly disturbs the One.”<sup>9</sup> It is a revolutionary process, resulting in a reshaping of the very concept of the subject at hand, albeit in this case a revolutionary process carried out from the least expected of channels, those meant to guard and perpetuate the coherence of this concept. It is in this way a process unlikely to be easily reversed with a change of characters (a more tempered president or more graceful-looking monument), for its effect is not limited to individual players but extends to the entire larger conceptual structures they spring from.

One might be tempted to ask why these “parodies” have successfully and effortlessly been able to step into the shoes of the subjects they are “clumsily” copying, and why this attribution of parody to them is not enough to stop them in their tracks, to render them ineffectual. If there is an intelligence to these symptomatic eruptions, it lies solely in their ability to understand something fundamental about our modern life and its institutions, which is that it is only the channels that matter. If someone tells you straight out that they are going to tell you a lie, you will likely still believe the content of that lie if they say it from the right platform. More precisely, you will have no choice, for in our current systems, lying or telling the truth are equally capable of producing material results, once they come from a validated channel. Zupančič identifies this dynamic as most clearly embodied in Hegel’s description of the Absolute Spirit, which, while emanating in consciousness, nonetheless has real, material, and historical existence. “This is the ultimate impotence of the reason of Enlightenment, the reason which knows that the Other (world) does not exist, yet remains powerless in the face of all its practices.”<sup>10</sup> A point Zupančič further clarifies with the following joke:

A man believes that he is a grain of seed. He is taken to a mental institution, where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a grain, but a man. No sooner has he left the hospital than he comes back very scared, claiming that there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid that it will eat him. “Dear fellow,” says his doctor, “you know very well that you are not a grain of seed, but a man.” “Of course I know that,” replies the patient, “but does the chicken?”<sup>11</sup>

“It is not enough that we know how things really stand in a certain sense; things themselves have to realize how they stand.”<sup>12</sup>

“If you tickle us, do we not laugh?” writes Jalal Toufic.

I, for one, don’t, and not because I am depressed, but because I find this historical period largely so laughable that were I to start laughing I am afraid I would not be able to stop ... All I ask of this world to which I have already given several books is that it become less laughable, so that I would be able to laugh again without dying of it—and that it does this soon, before my somberness becomes second nature ... In a laughable epoch, even the divinities are not immune to this death from laughter: “With the old gods, they have long since met their end—and truly, they had a fine, merry, divine ending! They did not ‘fade away in twilight’—that is a lie! On the contrary: they once—laughed themselves to death! That happened when the most godless saying proceeded from a god himself, the saying: ‘There is one God! You shall have no other gods before me!’” (Nietzsche, “Of the Apostates,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).<sup>13</sup>

Indeed comedy upon comedy is piling up, hijacking humor and making laughter a risky prospect. But it could also be that as we somberly contemplate the comedies unfolding all around us, removing the distinction between surface and depth, linking literalness with its beyond, we are faced with a rare opportunity to short-circuit how things “think they stand” and with the right resolve to restructure it all. This assumes that we do not try to go for the less painful but surely more detrimental route of mending what has been irreparably broken and hallucinating into reality what is certainly no longer there and may actually have never been.

## Notes

1 A significant location as it was the site of a famous massacre by the British in 1906, which was one of the main factors in prompting the strong national resistance movement, of which Kamil was a major figure.

2 I have been able to locate at least fifteen such statues, including renovations that render the original unrecognizable.

Examples include the 2015 mermaid in a public square in the city of Safaga located in the Red Sea governorate, the 2016 lions placed in the entrance of the Teacher's Syndicate in Cairo, the 2017 lion in Tanta, the 2018 statue of the famous Egyptian soccer player Mohamed Salah by the artist Mai Abdallah, which was unveiled at the inauguration of the World Youth Forum in Sharm el Sheikh, the 2017 renovation of the Khedive Ismail statue in the town of Ismailia, the 2016 renovation of the statue of the famous Egyptian singer and composer Mohamed Abdel Wahab in Cairo, the 2015 renovation of the statue of the writer and thinker Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad in Aswan, the 2015 renovation of the statue of the scholar and thinker Rifa'a al-Tahtawi located in Thata, the 2016 renovation of the statue of the revolutionary figure Ahmed Urabi located in the town of Zaqaziq, where he was born, and the 2016 renovation of the statue of the famous singer Om Khalthoum in the neighborhood of Zamalek in Cairo where she lived, among others.

3 Alexandra Hutzler, "Donald Trump Admits He Only Tells the Truth 'When I Can,'" *Newsweek*, November 1, 2018.

4 Prior regimes may have come close to creating caricatures of the institutions they occupy as well, including the Mubarak regime in Egypt and George Bush Jr. in the US, or to go back even further, Ronald Reagan, but this moment seems to offer a new benchmark.

5 It is hard to distinguish Trump proper from his impersonator on *Saturday Night Live*, which has more to do with Trump's performance than his impersonator's skills.

6 Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (MIT Press, 2008), 55.

7 Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 210.

8 Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 210.

9 Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 185.

10 Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 15.

11 Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 15.

12 Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 15.

13 Jalal Toufic, *Forthcoming* (Sternberg Press, 2014), 44.

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