



George William Price

Ship of Fools

In his seminal text *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, philosopher Michel Foucault writes lyrically on Plato's allegory of the ship of fools taken from Book VI of his *Republic*. Foucault fictitiously wrote of great ships that would transport society's madmen, in their leaking bows, from port city to port city around the coast of mainland Europe. Sometimes these barges of the damned would come crashing ashore and release their human cargo out onto the jagged rocks below like a burst artery. It is this spillage of "likeminded" insanity and temporal dissonance that is explored throughout *Ship of Fools*. From the viscerally disturbed performance of Hester Scheurwater in her video *Mama* to the camp irony of Tom Rubnitz's *Pyskho III the Musical*, each title wrestles with the subjects of family and addiction, death and dying, and social or physical movement.

The works curated within the program *Ship of Fools* are both physical and metaphysical entities holding the potential for social rupture through a redistribution and reinvention of forms – be that of the detritus of contemporary life, or of the fragile human body. Videos such as Max Almy's *Deadline* are self-reflexive loops that rework contemporary culture by opening up a space in the form of a temporal fissure – an all knowing, never-ending circuit.



The Perfect Spot, Jennet Thomas, 2002

The magnified mouth in *Deadline* exists as a pressured reminder of capitalism's endless consumption and regurgitation of the waste of mainstream society. Although there may be no originality in the system of capitalism itself, through the process of metabolization it reshapes all who it chases. Almy's feedback loop short-circuits the concept of transmission.

Upon playing and, quite predictably, losing the national lottery, a beloved grandmother is required by British law to take her own life in Jennet Thomas' *Perfect Spot*. We witness her ever-loyal daughter pulling her along on an oversized rope as they ascend up a rolling cliff to the chosen site of suicide – wicker picnic basket in hand. Once they have found the perfect spot, they sit, and the daughter rummages through the basket of delights that she has assembled for them, listing the items as she goes. Her mother looks mournfully out across the water; the grassy edge

a provisional waiting room for the pair. The conversation between the two is fragmented and awkward, as if the speed of communication is hindered by their proximity to death – the grandmother suspended out of living time. She does not eat the imported delicacies, but dances alone to forgotten classics and waits to take the twelve suicide pills from her daughter. Her bones will once again become a part of the white chalk cliffs on which they are resting.

Mike Kuchar's *Grip of the Gorgon* is a reinterpretation of Eugene O'Neill's American classic *Long Day's Journey into Night* as a telenovela – a play deeply wrought with psychic and emotional trauma. *Grip of the Gorgon*, like O'Neill's play, paints a twisted family Hellscape, one in which we see both mother and daughter deal with addiction, abuse, and regret. In sharp juxtaposition to the quiet smoldering quality of the play, Kuchar's video soap opera



Human Touch, Sterling Ruby, 2001



Deadline, Max Almy, 1981

picks over the bones of life through brash, vibrant, and cacophonous camp. Just like his late brother George, Kuchar's use of camp is more than parody – it is a strategy of transgression used to create and define utopian ways of being and relating to one another.

As Judith Halberstam argues in her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, failure preserves the anarchy of childhood and disturbs the boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. Tom Rubnitz and his performers in *Pyskho III the Musical* align the values of camp with those of failure – muddying the borders of creativity and making individual works less legible. Through this deployment camp becomes a strategy that challenges normative notions of taste and value, locating itself simultaneously at the margins of culture and within its dominant forms. The video carries with it a destabilizing potential through its subversion and questioning of established intellectual truths – from the queer reading of Hitchcock to the collaborative nature of the original live work of the same title, which had been performed at one of downtown Manhattan's most notorious venues, *The Pyramid Club*.

This collapsing of artistic confines is also made apparent within Tony Oursler's *Grand Mal*, a deeply existential work in which Oursler agonizes over sex, love, and death. The performances within the work are familiar and free, using the body as an economy of means. The props used by the actors are made by hand and largely out of refuse, allowing for political and artistic autonomy within the work. Through its DIY set construction and amateurish delivery, *Grand Mal* celebrates in-the-moment experience and reflection – recognizing that there are no predetermined rules for defining what is "art." As with Kuchar and Rubnitz, Oursler intentionally incorporates the cultural and physical ruins of capitalism, which allows himself and the viewer to navigate through complicated political environments. All three works make light of that which they take seriously – sex, popular culture, and Americana.

Two other works in *Ship of Fools* show greater restraint, moving away from the camp and outlandish toward the uncomfortable and bleak. The specter of death looms large in Sterling Ruby's *Human Touch* as we watch the hands of two hunters gently caress the antlers of a slain deer. Looking into

the dead animal's glassy eyes Ruby asks us to consider the thin line between self-discovery and self-destruction, intimacy and distance, resistance and capitulation. The opening title for the program, Hester Scheurwater's *Mama*, sees the artist violently beating her white paint-smeared face while crying out for motherly relief. The artist's masochistic gesture repeatedly punctures the mainstream symbolic order – pushing the artist's own constraints, stretching the constraints of others, and rearranging mainstream societal constraints. What does it mean to look at death? What does it mean to look at sex? What does it mean to look at the functions of one's body and, through an act of self-destruction, attempt the erasure of oneself?

Like the passengers of Foucault's ship of fools, these artists guide us as we attempt to navigate the treacherous waters between them. As viewers we embark on a journey of perpetual motion as we find ourselves loaded, unloaded, and loaded again by the polyrhythmic sensibility of the work encountered. This journey lasts until we find relief in the completion of the program, or until our last breath passes through our lips.