

# Jess Perlitz's Tragicomic Practice

by Bean Gilsdorf



Figure 1. Jess Perlitz, *A Rainbow Every Other Day*, 2009, fabric, bucket, body, 7 x 2 x 3 ft.

A dejected cloth rainbow, an animate boulder guiding a smaller rock through a city, a series of clownish but eerie masks—what do these have in common? If you're artist Jess Perlitz, they are devices that might engage viewers on topics as varied as the landscape, the body, and power with wry, deadpan humor. Though she employs a variety of artistic strategies that include (and frequently combine) performance, interactivity, and sound, Perlitz's foundational relationship to physical materiality remains central to her practice. Originally from Canada, Perlitz moved to Portland about seven years ago to teach at Lewis & Clark College, where she is currently an associate professor of art and the head of the sculpture department. Before arriving in Oregon, her education included a BA from Bard College and an MFA from Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia. Her work has been exhibited in notable venues such as CUE Art Foundation and Socrates Sculpture Park in New York, and Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. In 2018, the Oregon Arts Commission awarded Perlitz the Joan Shipley Fellowship, and in 2019 she received a prestigious Hallie Ford Fellowship from The Ford Family Foundation.

Perlitz's hybrid projects inspire multiple, sometimes conflicting, interpretations. For her 2009 sculpture/performance *A Rainbow Every Other Day* (fig. 1), Perlitz carried a rainbow-striped tube of fabric in a five-gallon bucket to locations around Temple University. Climbing onto the overturned bucket, she pulled the tube down over herself and the bucket and leaned her forehead against the adjacent wall, thus creating a temporary "rainbow" between wall and ground. As a connector of heaven and earth, the rainbow is symbolically potent; in our contemporary moment, its associations range from childlike awe for nature to LGBTQ pride. Perlitz's materially dynamic work contrasted soft, colorful fabric against solid brick and concrete, while positioning a yielding, semi-human form against the hard right angles of the constructed urban landscape. Each performance of *A Rainbow Every Other Day* lasted 25 minutes, with the artist remaining so immobile and silent that passersby would sometimes poke the fabric and exclaim in wonder to find a person inside.

There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, and Perlitz's work calls to mind age-old strategies in which sobering subjects are given a comic treatment. One of these is incongruity, or the disruption of established expectations,<sup>1</sup> and in the creation of comedic artworks the pattern is often established by the world itself. In *Rainbow*, Perlitz set the initial emotional trajectory via the pleasure of glimps-



Figure 2. Jess Perlitz, “People Making People Sounds,” exhibition at Holding Contemporary, Portland, Oregon, November 7–December 14, 2019, showing *Bones*, left, and *Crotch Pipe*, right (Photo: Mario Gallucci)

I spoke to Perlitz about this work, she told me that when she pulled the cloth over her head she was also thinking about body bags.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the work has another potential significance, one that reckons with the contemporary history of gay death, from the U.S. government’s disastrously negligent handling of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s to the current-day hate crimes that continue to be perpetrated against the queer community.

Though Perlitz frequently relies on the suggestive properties of her materials and forms, she also probes the extent to which symbols can be employed to engage with the most troubling aspects of society. She describes how her nascent practice was formed within the traditions of institutional critique and social practice, with an aim to explore art’s use as a tool for social change. Yet, like many artists, she ran afoul of the paradox inherent to both of these modes: because art’s operations are primarily symbolic, it functions poorly as a weapon for



Figure 3. Jess Perlitz, *Body without body masks*, 2019, *abaca pulp*, dimensions variable (Photo: Mario Gallucci).

ing a rainbow situated within the hard, unyielding angles of the architectural environment. However, the unexpected discovery of the human inside the rainbow derailed the viewer’s initial perception, and set interpretation on a different path. The revelation that a real human being occupies an emblem of a social movement for freedom seems an apt metaphor for the then-expanding rights won by gay people, such as the marriage equality bills that were passed in Iowa, Maine, New Hampshire, and New York that same spring. Simultaneously operating counter to the work’s playful, potentially celebratory feel was the tension between its cheerful colors and the artist’s forlorn pose; though the rainbow is an emblem of hope, to lean with one’s forehead against a wall is a demonstration of despondency. When

direct action—especially when it must rely on the very structures it claims to critique. In response, Perlitz adopted a view of art as autonomous, in which its practical limitations become strengths. Art may have little capacity to change laws, feed people, or spark revolution, but it can delineate moments and spaces of respite in which such possibilities can be cultivated and fostered. And when art is wholly or partially unburdened from direct confrontations with reality, she realized, it creates room for multiple resonances and interpretations.

Perlitz’s unadorned materials, straightforward titles, and uncomplicated descriptions imply sincerity, and yet I often find myself responding to her artwork with a rueful laugh. When asked about the function of humor in her work, Perlitz observes that “when a work feels right, it’s dumb in the most beautiful and tragic of



Figures 4 & 5. Jess Perlitz, *Body without body masks (details)*, 2019, *abaca pulp*, 9 x 7 x 3 1/2 in. and 9 x 7 x 8 in. (Photos: Mario Gallucci)

ways. I'm hesitant to talk about it because I am not in control of it. It's not really a tactic I use, but when a work is right it can seem humorous and it's borderline miserable." This tension lends much of Perlitz's art an aura similar to "straight-man" comedy, which employs an effect of (deceptive) simplicity in order to evoke more complicated realities. In particular, the sculptures in "People Making People Sounds" (fig. 2), Perlitz's 2019 solo exhibition at Holding Contemporary in Portland, were strongly connected to her post-MFA training in the Pochinko method of clowning, which she studied at the Manitoulin Conservatory for Creation and Performance in Ontario, Canada. The artist describes this as an education in service of the physical world: "It really helped me rethink sculpture—how the work is activated, what my role can be in it, and how to rethink scale. Clowning embraces the absurd, but it is inspired by the world as we know it. It materializes social relations and structures of power."<sup>3</sup> In the same way that art operates in a space set aside from "real" life, clowns, jesters, and fools perform narratives that mimic day-to-day human interactions—often involving subtle, everyday hierarchies—and amplify them to the point of silliness. Historical examples abound, from the tradition of court jesters in China and Europe, whose job was to mock royal authority and pomposity; to Shakespeare's fools (like Feste in *Twelfth Night*), whose role was to speak the truth to other characters or to the audience; to the Lakota *heyoka*, who performs a backwards version of normal behavior; to the exaggerated efforts of a contemporary circus-clown "policeman," whose actions point to the institution's bloated sense of control. Under the guise of gags and laughter, clowns burlesque scenes of desire, transgression, and even violence that are then negotiated to a resolution.<sup>4</sup> And like artists, clowns occupy a social space seen by mainstream society as marginal—yet from this distant vantage they gain insights into human nature.

All cultures have tricksters that play with the sacred and the profane, and for her "People Making People Sounds" exhibition Perlitz took the body itself as the clown. The goofy, illogical works on view (all 2019) included the silent "wind-chime" titled *Bones* (fig. 2, left), made of plaster bones hung in a weighty tangle from the ceiling by a dirty rope. Like most of Perlitz's work, this sculpture appears multivalent: on one hand, it reads as a guileless misinterpretation, like a child's innocent reinvention of an instrument as one that neither moves nor makes sound; on the other, in scale and form, it is also reminiscent of a carcass in an abattoir. It references the final, inert state of the body, which when alive is mobile and clamorous with creaks, pops, and groans. *Bones* takes the miraculous, noisy human body and reduces it to its vulgar animal framework, forever silenced. Equally quiet was the wall-mounted *Crotch Pipe* (fig. 2, right), a ninety-inch-tall steel megaphone with its mouthpiece set a few feet above the floor as though to broadcast what genitals might say if they could speak. Its scale and spareness impart the aura of a utilitarian implement, and yet the directness of its deadpan title reveals the surreal irrationality of its function. At the

back of the gallery, in *Body without body masks* (fig. 3), four abject face masks leered from the wall at eye level. Constructed at roughly life-size from abaca pulp (which is derived from banana leaves), three of these masks sport exaggeratedly bulbous noses while one simply has a large round hole where the nose would be (see figs. 4 and 5). Together they formed the most direct visual and conceptual reference in the exhibition to the stereotypical masked, red-nosed clowns who slip on banana peels. But any evocation of cheerful whimsy is undermined by the masks' grotesque aspect—their dun flimsiness gives them the look of peeled flesh. One can easily imagine the wet pulp drying and shrinking, forming the slightly puckered grimaces that appear on all four faces. Here the pathos of the tragicomic is in full display: The mortal body will shrivel, and fall silent.

Other works by Perlitz are more enigmatic. The absurd *Rocks Moving Rocks* (2015, fig. 6), a day-long performance along the Willamette River, is announced on the artist's Web site with the statement: "The artist will be a rock and will move other rocks."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, documentation of the work shows the artist in a rock costume, pulling another ersatz rock behind her on a small wheeled platform. These two rocks often stopped to regard other rocks along the way, and eventually concluded their journey at the Portland Art Museum, where both entered without paying (because rocks don't pay admission fees). Photos of the artist in costume bring to mind Louise Bourgeois's *Avenza* (1968–69), a sculpture suggestively collapsing body and landscape forms, or her 1978 *Fashion Show of Body Parts*, which included a costume studded with breastlike lumps. All three projects share references to physical exposure and vulnerability. As a mobile performance, *Rocks Moving Rocks* encountered other rocks in the landscape, and thus became associated with them, if only briefly: the rocks in corporate flowerbeds, boulders used to prevent homeless people from sleeping on public and private property, rocks that delineate boundaries. In



Fig. 6. Jess Perlitz, *Rocks Moving Rocks*, performance at various locations in Portland, Oregon, October 24, 2015

effect, the array of possible interpretations, both painful and droll, varied with the landscapes that Perlitz traveled through, placing herself among embellishments and deterrents. Perhaps the fake rock made passersby see the real rocks anew, and think about how and why we use them. That the performance finally came to rest that day at the museum among other artworks emphasizes Perlitz's contention that art exists alongside reality, and can help us think through the world we've made. By its very separation from the everyday, it creates a space for contemplation and inquiry.

Perlitz's grounding in sculpture underscores the spirit of these practices, explicating the real and symbolic power of objects and their potential to redeem anguish. What does comedy rely on, if not symbolism? Who is more canonically funny than a fallible mortal teetering in a pratfall and landing with a thud? What is more laughably sad than the useful rendered inoperative? As a follow-up to *Rocks Moving Rocks*, Perlitz produced a book titled *Rock Will Move Rocks* (2018, edition of 100), with essays sketches, and

project documentation. The launch of the book was accompanied by the production of a series of fist-sized rocks containing music boxes; wind the brass knob on the side of the rock, and the tinny notes of "Amazing Grace" leak out like an invocation. As I held one of these rocks in my hand, I thought of rocks in the landscape, of rocks thrown in riots, of the famous protest slogan of May 1968, *Sous les pavés, la plage!* (Under the cobblestones, the beach). Amidst these associations, I see an artist coming to terms with the difficult operations of living, finding comedy under the hardness of stones and the abjection of masks, and through comedy, finding grace.

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1. This is illustrated by the structure of a joke that relies on the power of threes, where the first two instances are used to construct a pattern, and the third interrupts it, as in the classic, "A priest, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar..."

2. Conversation with the artist, Portland, Ore., 17 May 2020. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent artist observations all derive from this interview.

3. Personal email communication, 26 May 2020.

4. Sometimes artists turn even this paradigm on its head. In *Clown Torture* (1987), a four-channel video with sound, Bruce Nauman notably did not let the travails of his clowns come to an end; the one-hour loop is infinite, which only increases the work's sense of hysteria.

5. See <http://www.jessperlitz.com/#/rockmovingrocks/>.

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