

Art & Jack-in-the-Box¹

BRIGITTA KUSTER

Let us assume that examining the question of art would no longer make any sense, neither from the perspective of culture nor of art's adjectival differentiations (as for instance »African art« or »contemporary art«), but rather from the perspective of an old, quirky and disturbing companion, who has been known to deceive tradesmen by substituting a box full of money with an empty one: Jack-in-the-box. He is likely to be traced back to ancient times, but no one knows for certain. What is for certain, though, is the surprise the whole thing holds: Jack inside the box, a trickster, a toy, a symbol, a piece of merchandise, a marvel, a commodity – a small figure that is always kept inside; a Jack who turns into a stereotype: He becomes a distorted average-personality type, exposed to the play of light and darkness, inner and outer worlds alongside his companions Sambo, Nat, Jezebel, and Mammy, whose characters were based upon a system that denied the personal status of human property in an area where it was forbidden to look. He was not born with the name of Henry but was simply called so, as he was born a slave in the 19th century. He acquired fame under the name of Henry Box Brown in allusion to the wooden box in which he transported himself into freedom. Boxing for dissidence. At a later stage, when the mirror of representation was splintered, Jack-in-the-box was accompanied by the uncanny and terrifying din of his own emptiness – like the maddening echo of the Marabar caves: *Ouboom* is the sound of colonial nonsense, the tam-tam to which Adela might have lis-

1 This contribution originates in the collaborative work of the artist and researcher group Artefakte in the context of their 2014/15 project *Künstliche Tatsachen* (artificialfacts.de).

tened. But, there was never ever any Jackie involved. As far as she was concerned, the suppression of the right to look, of the right to the real outlived other figments of the other, so that she was constantly and persistently asked to move on, to be looked at, to represent the enigma and the secret, the new and the ancient – as though there was nothing in her eyes to see – neither beauty nor horror. She is the living proof that there is clearly no decolonial genealogy of visuality, but only to look, to look, to see ...

All things considered, with reference to the consumerism the J-form entails, to the idea of surroundings and inner versus outer worlds, or to notions of reproduction and conservation, it remains unclear whether Jack and his Box can ever be differentiated and separated from one another. In itself Jack-in-the-box is an inseparable entity. Obviously, within this strange entity, the relation of acting and being acted upon derives from arcane arts. Does Jack dispose of a shell that contains something, of a casing that keeps him inside like a snail? Jack-in-the box is a blinded figure who tries to escape but is nevertheless held back by a spring – a mobility already constantly being constrained. To produce such tension and release one needs a force that presses down. But does this bring about transcendence, an external reference and measuring point toward which Jack-in-the box would become subservient? Like a game of *Fort-Da* (disappearance and reappearance), like a tireless repetition of the desire for control and domination? *O-o-o-o* ...

Incidents were also reported where the box was orphaned and became a kind of remains, a kind of witness of having been in touch. Consequently, the box was regarded as an icon for the loss of Jack. A leopard – was he a runaway or was he stolen? – used the box as shelter. Fear arose in the world and people were in doubt as to whether the leopard might be involved with a royal insignia, a trophy or a stunt, an illusion or mere camouflage – something which only pretends to remain within itself, a pretended immanence.

Jack-in-the-box is a configuration of the problem of form and substance. To obtain the merits or to reach the core of Jack-in-the box, one cannot simply rip Jack out of a picture frame as one does with a painting. And not forgetting the gradients of time, the duration within the necessarily obscure black box against the continuation and expansion of the seemingly timeless white space. Even though you might expect that a Jack would pop up somewhere, his appearance would invariably bedazzle and amaze – probably due to the rules of suspense ... and due to the centrifugality inherent in the uncertainty of every designation ...

Perhaps we will never know if Jack-in-the-box is a specific formation, an artificial fact which derives its effect from a particular discursive framework, or if the whole assemblage, the constrained force within the coil he represents is trans-historical ... Jack-in-the-box is a deeply strange being, perhaps even related to Odradek. To date, it has not been possible to know with certainty whether Jack-in-the-box is a creature or a creator, if Jack-in-the-box constitutes a circularity like a dipping bird. Hence we cannot always state for certain how his worth is generated and circulated, and what his purpose consists of – to come outside or to remain hidden inside. We still do not know precisely to which conditions his existence is subject, or whether he is unconditional, which is said about the autonomy of art with its inherent element of impossibility. And not least with its power to transcend cultural difference and social hierarchies – a power that today becomes all too often endowed with a sort of ethical bonus, a surplus, an excess of goodness, malice or cynicism in the midst of all contemporary forms of enduring violent forces on a global scale ... so that it can almost count as a blessing that in contrast to Pandora's box the lid of Jack-in-the-box is not opened only twice. Jack-in-the-box has something bottomless and inexhaustible about it: Whether open or closed, whether the coil spring to which Jack is usually attached, whether in a state of strong tension or bobbing up and down in smooth oscillation, Jack-in-the-box has been activated all along.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Homi K. Bhabha (for the Marabar caves and his thoughts on *A Passage to India*), Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka (for Odradek in *Die Sorge des Hausvaters*), Nicholas Mirzoeff (for his notion of the right to look), historians of the American South such as John Blassingame and Deborah Gray White (for describing slave personality types), Kwame Opoku (for his research on the whereabouts of the leopard and the loot of the Benin Bronzes).

