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Tom Otterness: Public Art and the Civic Ideal in the Postmodern Age

One Sunday in late November near dusk, a family walks down Broadway toward Lincoln Center on Manhattan's Upper West Side. As they approach 65th Street, the mother, a casually but stylishly dressed woman, says, "There's a sculpture over here I don't quite understand, but I think it's hysterically funny." She leads the group to an L-shaped assembly of bronzes in a broad plaza that divides the uptown, downtown, and cross-town lanes of rushing traffic and also contains entrances to the 1 and 9 subway lines. They gather around the sculpture's various elements: a six-foot-long squat rectangular pedestal on which sit a mouse, two dogs, and a bird; a shorter two-tiered pedestal set perpendicular to the first, supporting an owl on a perch on the upper level and a cat sitting on its haunches on the lower; and a hound standing on its hind legs on the ground, facing the cat. Dressed in a business suit, the hound holds one paw behind its back and a sheaf of papers in the other. The entire vignette is rendered in comic-book fashion.



Life Underground, 2002. Bronze, multi-part work commissioned by MTA, New York City. Photo: Patrick Cashin

The family discusses the work, trying to decide what it's about. The mother, a psychotherapist, recognizes a jury trial in progress. The grown-up daughter, a medical librarian, looks intently for a moment. "It's the cat that swallowed the canary!" she pronounces, pointing at the accused on the witness stand, feathers sticking out of its mouth.

The piece in question is *Trial Scene* (1997) by Tom Otterness. It's one of 25 examples of the sculptor's work, created between 1984 and 2004, installed from Columbus Circle in Midtown to 168th Street in Washington Heights as part of "Tom Otterness on Broadway," a public art project undertaken by the City of New York Parks and Recreation Department, the Broadway Mall Association, and Marlborough Gallery, the artist's dealer. Originally scheduled to be on view during the fall of 2004, the temporary exhibition was extended twice to run until the middle of March 2005 and will now travel to downtown Indianapolis from April 15 to July 31 of this year.

Catherine Plumb and her daughter, Abigail Plumb-Larrick, essentially "got" *Trial Scene* even if they weren't aware of the fact that the sculpture was inspired by the O.J. Simpson trial, which adds a layer of social commentary to their interpretation. The illumination brought on by chance encounters between artworks and ordinary people is generally held up as an ideal of public art. And the 52-year-old Otterness is perhaps the quintessential public artist for the postmodern age, a time when individuals are said to be savvy to the come-ons of the culture industry and yet at the same time skeptical of the purported authenticity of "pure" art.



Born in Wichita, Kansas, Otterness has been a player on the New York scene for nearly three decades. In 1977, he helped found Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Colab) as part of a group of then-emerging artists that included Jenny Holzer and Kiki Smith. Colab's legendary 1980 "Times Square Show" was mounted in a former bus depot

and massage parlor building found by Otterness and sculptor John Ahearn at Seventh Avenue and 41st Street. (A cooperative endeavor, the exhibition announced the entrepreneurial aspirations that inflated the art market bubble that was to come, launching the careers of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and a host of other 1980s art stars.) He now works out of an extensive studio complex in Brooklyn, two blocks from the East River.

One of America's most prolific public artists, Otterness has created outdoor sculptures for locations from coast to coast and throughout Europe; he's also represented in numerous private and public collections. His work blends high and low, cute and cutting. The combination of accessibility and thoughtfulness, the melding of fine-art production and pop-culture style, shows the influence of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, which he entered in 1973. Like many artists who have come through the program, Otterness walks the line between theory and practice, aesthetic autonomy and political engagement—although some might contend that his inclinations have more in common with the worldly ambitions of fellow ISP alumnus Julian Schnabel than with the critical aloofness of alumna Andrea Fraser.

Otterness's aesthetic is best seen as a riff on capitalist realism. On the one hand, it relates to the recognition by Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Konrad Lueg (who took up the term for an exhibition of paintings in 1963) of the realities of the art market in which supposedly autonomous objects of disinterested contemplation circulate as highly desirable commodities to be bought and sold. But it's also about what has come to be more popularly understood by the term "capitalist realism," the representations of advertising and the media, following Michael Schudson's influential 1984 study, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*. Otterness's work is a contemporary form of social (as opposed to socialist) realism, an art of post-Cold War disenchantment, an expression of anxiety in the face of global capital unbound.



Marriage of Real Estate and Money, 1996. Bronze, 74 x 53 x 32 in. View of work installed on 91st Street, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

This is especially evident in works in which images of capitalist and proletarian are dialectically intertwined. In *Educating the Rich on Globe* (1997), a circle of worker-figures forms the pedestal supporting the earth, like Atlas in Greek mythology. A top-hatted plutocrat in evening clothes lies on his back on top of the world, coins falling from his pockets. Astride his belly sits a woman reading a book. The sculpture visually presents Karl Marx's base/superstructure analysis, with labor power constituting the foundation on which the capitalist world rests; in turn, culture depends on capital (what Clement Greenberg in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" calls "the umbilical cord of gold") to provide respite from the need for toil in order to be free to pursue "higher" endeavors like literature and fine art. In *Marriage of Real Estate and Money* (1996), a daisy-topped house dressed in a skirt stands next to a penny, which holds a bowler in the crook of its arm. It's a portrait of a happy couple, aristocracy and bourgeoisie in blissful dominion over land rents and wage labor, the mechanisms for wresting control of the means of production from the proletariat and the foundations of alienation under capitalism.

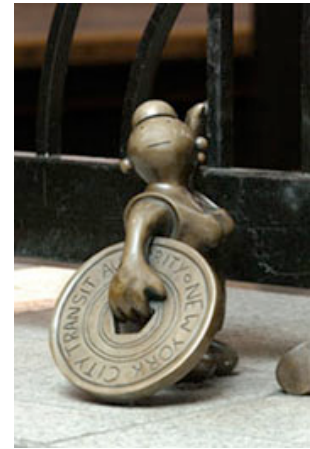


Free Money, 1999. Bronze, 36.25 x 27 x 20.75 in. View of work installed on 107th Street, New York.

Capitalist realism is also present in Otterness's more sublimated work that engages myths and other imagery in the public domain. Especially in recent years, Otterness has explored traditional folk and modern mass-representational forms as if to argue for a public sphere that is increasingly under siege with the contested terrain of intellectual property in the wake of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 and the vertical integration of the media and communications industries. The DMCA is referred to by its critics as "the Mickey Mouse law" because its primary corporate sponsor, The Walt Disney Company, wanted to extend the monopoly over its cartoon character whose copyright protection was about to expire. Paradoxically, Disney has secured tremendous revenues by converting folktales and myths into marketable commodities with brand extensions that boggle the imagination, fencing off vast regions of the collective memory for its own profit. With works like *Frog Prince* (2001), *Kindly Gepetto* (2001), and *The Lion and the Mouse* (2003), Otterness seems to take aim—like a hacker posting a company's proprietary software code on-line for others to see—at the enterprise whose own employees surreptitiously refer to as "Mauschwitz." (Indeed, a writer for *Interview* magazine once characterized Otterness's work as being like "Disney on crack.")

With the fall of communism, the overthrow of capital seems like a dream destined to remain unfulfilled. This disillusion has expressed itself in Postmodernist art from the beginning in the recognition of cultural production as an avenue of resistance in lieu of the transcendence no longer deemed possible to attain. Following Renato Poggioli in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, one option is “undergroundism” (as distinct from “ivory towerism”), given literal and metaphorical expression by Otterness in the sculpture cycle, *Life Underground* (2002), installed in the New York City subway station at 14th Street and Eighth Avenue.

Life Underground consists of over 100 cast-bronze sculptures placed throughout the platforms and stairways of the A, C, E, and L lines. The various groupings read like panels of a comic book, the archetypal expressive medium of mass-culture alienation. And like Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novella *Notes from Underground*, Otterness’s cycle addresses the petty offenses against authority perpetrated by the disaffected. There’s a fare jumper crawling under a metal gate and a homeless woman being rousted by the police. (These figures are well-dressed in sardonic reversal of conventional social roles.) Otterness subtly invites deviant behavior with a floor sculpture of two large feet cut off flat at the ankles, the perfect platform for boom-boxes banned on the New York subway. Another grouping shows two figures holding a crosscut saw, going after an I-beam that holds up a stairway. The underground culture of urban legends takes the form of one of the alligators rumored to populate the New York City sewer system emerging from under a manhole cover to snag a small man with a moneybag head.



Woman with Token, from *Life Underground*, 2002. Bronze, multi-part work commissioned by MTA, New York

This quality of resistance, however, can also be read as a deconstructive moment, the site of a play of meanings that can be read both positively and negatively. What from one perspective is understood as resistance (i.e., the refusal to submit to authority) may from another be seen as catharsis, the dramatic release that gives vent to pent-up frustrations, the channeling of discontent into socially acceptable mechanisms such as works of art. And artworks, contentious though they may be, are still things to be possessed, part of a system of rarefied commodities whose very existence is made possible by the forces under critique. Thus, as with Dostoyevsky’s main character in *Notes from Underground*, the reliability of Otterness’s narrative becomes an issue to be resolved. And along with this questioning comes a consideration of public art in these postmodern times.



Educating the Rich on Globe, 1997. Bronze, 62.5 x 35 x 37 in. View of work installed on 114th Street, New York. Photo: © 2004 D. James Dee

In *Public Sculpture and the Civic Ideal in New York City, 1890–1920*, Michele H. Bogart identifies the 19th-century fin-de-siècle as the moment when public art first flourished on a broad level in America. John Massey Rhind, Daniel Chester French, Frederick MacMonnies, and the National Sculptors Society put artistic representation at the service of republican ideals at a time of dramatic social change. Neoclassical allegories in monuments and architectural ornamentation worked alongside Progressivist politics and the City Beautiful movement to help assuage predominantly Anglo-American middle- and upper-class anxieties over the seemingly imminent demise of the American Way in the face of rising immigration and the chaos of urbanization. While new immigrant groups also sought to mark their place in American society through monuments to ethnic pride, the overall process was managed from the top down, with gatekeepers such as the Municipal Art Society in New York facilitating acceptable projects.

Ironically, self-referential Modernist sculpture first emerged in the same period in Europe, as Rosalind Krauss notes, starting with Auguste Rodin. Referring to nothing beyond itself, the nomadic work of Modernist sculpture sometimes sits sphinx-like, to the bafflement of the average passerby. In densely populated areas, the “placeholder” character of much public sculpture reflects zoning ordinances that seek to free street-level space from the shadows cast by skyscrapers towering above, the creation of a vacuum that human nature abhors. As with the commissioned sculpture of the Progressive Era, the process is still managed by gatekeepers, typically the owners or developers of the real estate projects where the work will ultimately reside. And those who control the use and flow of space do so to suit their own interests and values. The potential for conflict in this model is famously exemplified by Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981), which although it may have

responded brilliantly to its site on an aesthetic level, arguably failed to consider its function on a social one.

Just like public art and Modernist sculpture at the end of the 19th century, Postmodernist art emerged at another moment of dramatic social change: the transition from industrial to informational society that began in the late 1960s and early '70s. In this new environment, the civic ideal, if it can be said to exist at all, has taken the form of crowd-pleasing entertainment, the happy consciousness of spectacle society. The contemporary cultural milieu requires that public art be nothing if not socially aware, responsive to multiple constituencies.

The accessibility of Otterness's comic-book illustrational style acknowledges what Dave Beech and John Roberts term the "specter of the aesthetic" (i.e., the philistine, who is uninformed not necessarily so much by personal choice as by social circumstance) that permeates the ether surrounding the public sphere; but Otterness's work doesn't condescend like so much Postmodernist appropriation of popular culture seems to do. The work's complex, often subversive content also lends itself to more reflective appreciation. In this way, Otterness integrates the realms of popular culture and fine art, which in reality have always been united by their alienated condition under capitalist rule. Their mutual alienation is made all the more apparent by the work's insertion into the public domain. For although art is autonomous, something created in, of, and for itself, its independence is bound by social determination. Freedom from any purpose other than its own existence (the privileged position atop capital's soft belly) comes at a price: art can speak the truth but can't do anything about it. And with public art, this short-circuiting of redemption is put on display for all to see, philistine and aesthete alike.



Large Covered Wagon, 2004. Bronze, 85 x 185 x 48 in.
View of work installed on 147th Street, New York.
Photo: Adam Reich

Otterness demonstrates kinship with viewers of all stripes by using popular forms of address to express distance from commonly recognized modes of authority (including Modernist art conventions), acknowledging that in "the real world" artist and audience inhabit the same unstable environment. However, the nature of his sculpture—the sheer expense of its construction, the maze of official channels that must be negotiated to bring it to fruition as a public work—requires self-effacement before the powers that be. This seeming contradiction makes it possible for one critic to dub the artist a "Coca-Cola communist," while at the same time wealthy collectors lay down big bucks for limited-edition bronzes like *Marriage of Real Estate and Money*. And while kids enjoyed playing on *Large Covered Wagon* (2004), a lumbering representation of the pioneer spirit pulled by a male ox, driven by a pipe-smoking woman, with tussling siblings hanging out of the back, installed on 147th Street, adults fretted about it as a sign of impending gentrification in their Harlem neighborhood. Comfort and anxiety, submission and resistance are the equivocal conditions of both popular culture and fine art in the postmodern world, two sides of the same coin that add up to a dialectic. As Walter Benjamin writes, "There is no act of civilization that is not at the same time an act of barbarism." Otterness may indeed be an unreliable narrator, but in so being he speaks to our times.

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