

Preferring to Laugh

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This essay discusses two recent performative installations by La Ribot, who trained as a dancer but presents work in art galleries and other non-theatrical spaces. *40 Espontáneos* (2004) and *Laughing Hole* (2006) are works that install laughing bodies within spaces associated with visual art practices. Like much of the installation art of the 1990s and 2000s, by stressing the object-like qualities of what is installed, these works make beholders aware of their own material presence within the gallery. The main focus of this essay is the way in which beholders use their embodied knowledge to read the corporeal information they derive from such works as part of the process of interpreting them. Art historian Jonathan Crary has recently observed: ‘We are now in a material environment where earlier 20th-century models of spectatorship, contemplation and experience are inadequate for understanding the conditions of cultural creation and reception’.¹ A general recognition that ‘art must reconfigure itself in relation to transformed modes of cognition and experience’ has, in Crary’s view, led artists to create ‘unanticipated spaces and environments in which our visual and intellectual habits are challenged and disrupted. The processes through which sensory information is consumed become the object of various strategies of de-familiarization’.² As a result of these strategies, beholders are denied the possibility of inertly consuming high cultural products and put in a position where they need to actively work at reading and interpretation. I aim to show that an important aspect of these installations by La Ribot is that, rather than making the kind of active challenge implicit in Crary’s account, they produce a passive performative presence that indicates a preference not to reiterate anachronistic aesthetic and cultural discourses. Beholders of these works, I shall suggest, become witnesses to a performance of passivity that has the potential to open up a space of resistance.

In *40 Espontáneos*, a large group of around forty amateurs who have had no previous experience of performing, laugh for seventy minutes while carrying out tasks involving coloured cloth and other objects. In *Laughing Hole*, which is a durational performance that can last anywhere from two to eight hours, three professional performers laugh continuously while gradually attaching onto the gallery’s walls cardboard placards inscribed with captions that indirectly refer to vulnerable outsiders who do not belong, are largely invisible, absent, and often exist in illegality and poverty. Both pieces refer, in tangential ways, to outsiders forgotten or ignored within twenty-first century western society. However, the performers do not in any way become or represent these others. Instead, the way La Ribot uses laughter in these pieces not only disrupts the position of detachment conventionally taken to be a prerequisite to aesthetic appreciation but, by

doing so, raises critical questions about society's responsibility towards these invisible others. When the performers in these works prefer to laugh, it is as if they prefer not to reiterate callous ways of thinking that, in effect, dehumanize these others. By preferring not to, they open up a potential for thinking differently.

The fictional character Bartleby, in a nineteenth-century novella by the American author Herman Melville, 'preferred not to'. In order to assess the ethical implications of the passive strategy I am identifying in La Ribot's work, it is useful to consider the novelist and critic Maurice Blanchot's reading of Bartleby. Blanchot used this to develop an account of literature's responsibility that drew on the ethical writings of his friend the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. The two performative installations by La Ribot, I suggest, need to be read in the light of Blanchot's account of responsibility.

In his 1980 book *L'Écriture du désastre* [*The Writing of the Disaster*], Blanchot discussed the ethical efficacy of the aesthetic strategy of passively preferring not to reiterate normative discourses. He develops this proposition through a discussion of Melville's 1853 novella *Bartleby, the Scrivener: a Story of Wall Street*. In Melville's day, lawyers employed scribes to make copies of legal documents. In the tale, this was a role that Bartleby initially seemed to perform diligently; but then, for no apparent reason, he gradually began to withdraw his services. Although continuing to occupy his place in the lawyer's office, whenever he was asked to do any work he replied 'I would prefer not to'. The story of Bartleby therefore suggests an ethical way of resisting the seemingly unstoppable processes of the legal machine. Blanchot's reading of Melville's story, I suggest, offers a way of interpreting the ethical implications of La Ribot's pieces.

Blanchot points out that, when Bartleby says 'I would prefer not to', he disrupts the present through passivity. It is, Blanchot writes, 'an abstention which has never had to be decided upon, which precedes all decisions'.³ In other words, coming from an untimely past, before the moment when decision becomes necessary, it creates the possibility of an alternative future, and an untimely politics. Blanchot explains the ethical implications of this strategy by focusing on Bartleby's passivity. He notes that "'I would prefer not to ...'" belongs to the infiniteness of patience; no dialectical intervention can take hold of such passivity. We have fallen out of being, outside where, immobile, proceeding with a slow and even step, destroyed men come and go.⁴

Part of the difficulty of Blanchot's text here lies in the way that he plays, in French, with the multiple meanings and associations of the word 'pas'. 'Pas', meaning not, is part of 'I would prefer not to' – 'J'aimerais mieux *pas*', while it also means step, as in the slow and even step ('pas') with which destroyed men come and go. Passivity (in French *passivité*), and patience (patience, whose French pronunciation seems to begin with the sound 'pas') all complicate this poetic play on the associations of 'pas'. Patience in this context seems to mean the ability to merely persist in being present while putting up with the impingements of modernity and waiting for an alternative future. The patient performers in La Ribot's work can thus be seen, in Blanchot's terms, as 'destroyed men' (and women), as people undone by the disaster of modernity.

What Blanchot is doing here is blurring the boundaries between a poetic voice and the mode of discourse used to discuss philosophical ideas. The particular philosophical text

in which his discussion of *Bartleby* intervenes is the 1961 book *Totalité et infini* [*Totality and Infinity*] by Blanchot's life-long friend, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Passivity, for both Blanchot and Levinas, is an ethical, human response that is connected to the disastrous effects of modernity. Thus Blanchot writes:

Passivity. We can evoke situations of passivity: affliction; the final, crushing force of the totalitarian State, with its camps; the servitude of the slave bereft of a master, fallen beneath need; or dying, as forgetfulness of death. In all these cases we recognize, even though it be with a falsifying, approximating knowledge, common traits: anonymity, loss of self; loss of all sovereignty but also of all subordination; utter uprootedness, exile, the impossibility of presence, dispersion (separation).⁵

These are the qualities that Blanchot identifies in *Bartleby*; the legal system, which he passively resists, is equated with states that render individuals passive by removing their human rights.

Consistently throughout the last hundred or so years, sovereign governments have exercised the right to declare a state of emergency and override the rights of individuals in the interests, they argue, of national security. Giorgio Agamben has argued that these states of exception should really be seen as the norm, as the only way in which modern states can function.⁶ In his view, the idea that there are any universal human rights guaranteed by law is a delusion. Both Agamben and Blanchot have written about the need to find a new basis for existing together in communities that will avoid the mistake of trying to define a closed set of supposedly universal human characteristics since any attempt to do so will inevitably exclude those who fall outside its bounds.⁷ For Blanchot, Levinas's account of responsibility offered a way of imagining an untimely community that includes vulnerable outsiders who are at present undone by the disaster of modernity. To join with them in their loss of rights can become an act of resistance because, as Blanchot points out, a loss of sovereignty can be turned into freedom from subordination.

For Levinas, ethics is the first philosophy, the founding quality of being human, which manifests itself in the passivity with which one responds in an encounter with an Other. Humanity, for Levinas, lies in the necessity of resisting the impulse to kill the other or exploit the other's vulnerability. This ethical passivity, in Levinas's view, obliges one to put the needs of the other beyond even one's own needs. In his account, this impossible responsibility is sacred. He likens it to hearing the voice of God. Blanchot's secular application of Levinas's philosophy to modern experience, I suggest, offers a way of understanding the ethical implications of La Ribot's two installations. Blanchot argues that:

In the relation of the self (the same) to the Other, the Other is distant, he is the stranger; but if I reverse this relation, the Other relates to me as if I were the Other and thus causes me to take leave of my identity. Pressing until he crushes me, he withdraws me, by the pressure of the very near, from the privilege of the first person. When thus I am wrested

from myself, there remains a passivity bereft of self (sheer alterity, the other without unity). There remains the unsubjected, or the patient.⁸

The demand that one adopt a passivity bereft of self was one that Blanchot not only practiced in his own writing, and identified in the writing of Samuel Beckett and others. It also characterized his one significant act of political commitment.

In 1960, Blanchot was the joint author of *The Declaration of the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War*, which called for the right to refuse to accept the acts of war which the French state was carrying out in the name of the French people. As Patrick Hanafin has recently argued, the actions advocated in the manifesto itself, and Blanchot's behaviour when summoned to court for writing it, exemplify 'a lack of unity, presence, and identity' which 'unsettle both the political machine and the machine of justice'.⁹ Hanafin links this to *Bartleby's* passivity: 'Like Melville's *Bartleby*, his not saying, his passivity, his persistence just being there is enough to disrupt'. Blanchot's political commitment, Hanafin argues, exemplified a similar disruptive passivity: 'This giving up of the self in the service of an impossible responsibility is similar to the effacement of the self which, for Blanchot, was writing'.¹⁰ The performers in *La Ribot's* installations, through their incessant laughter, exemplify the passivity bereft of self that Blanchot saw as the role of the modernist writer. What might seem weak and submissive is in fact a principled strategy to avoid being interpellated into a supposedly normative identity: one that is blind to the violence carried out in the name of the state or in the interests of globalization. By installing laughing bodies, *La Ribot* makes beholders aware of their impossible responsibilities.

Whereas *Laughing Hole* indirectly cites vulnerable outsiders through its captions, *40 Espontáneos* exemplifies an effacement of self through its use of inexperienced performers and through their laughter. When I saw this piece, the space in which it was installed was strewn with hundreds of brightly coloured pieces of fabric, two rolls of red carpet, some astro-turf, twenty upright chairs, two armchairs, a sofa and two tables. These were not only scattered indiscriminately across the floor but also some of the furniture had been capsized on top of some of the audience's seating, knowingly disrupting the normal kinds of social behaviour that the arrangement of fixed seating conventionally prescribes. The gently laughing performers had met for the first time six nights previously and had rehearsed every evening since then. (In order to conserve their spontaneity, *La Ribot* avoids over-rehearsing and limits the number of performances.) Gradually they collected the fabric, began dressing themselves with it and arranging it, along with the furniture, into a seemingly random patchwork that gradually filled the performance space. This took quite a while, and when it was done, one by one they lay down, stopping laughing as they did so, holding against their shoulder or chest a piece of white paper that had a number on it. As they lay, all laughter stopped and, as I remember it, their silence came as an unexpected relief. An impersonal number rather than a name thus identified their objectified, anonymous bodies as they patiently merged with the fabric on which they lay and in which they were wrapped.

When they got up and started laughing again, they put away their numbers, and gathered all the cloth together in the centre of the room and rolled up the carpets.

They then began to pick their way slowly through the pile, dressing themselves again in the same pieces of cloth and reassembling the patchwork a second time. There was then a section where they ran, laughing, across the space, embraced someone, and then slid slowly against them down to the floor. Or they ran to a table or chair and stood on it, holding up their number. Several large, brightly coloured posters were brought on and added to the patchwork. Finally they carried on a stack of meter wide sheets of brown cardboard with which they gradually covered over the whole patchwork, including fabric, posters and furniture. What had been a brightly coloured, softly textured jumble of things gradually submerged beneath a unifying over-blanket of crisp, brown card on which the forty performers finally lay down silently, clutching their numbers while the space was flooded with violet light.

In interviews and in a statement published on her website, La Ribot has explained some of the connotations that the Spanish word ‘espontáneos’ has for her. In a bullfight, an espontáneo is someone who leaps into the ring while the bull is running, despite the danger and without any skill or means to protect him or herself (except to run as fast as he or she can). Espontáneos can thus cause chaos in an otherwise highly ritualized event, sometimes making things dangerous for everyone in the ring. They do so, she says, to claim some of the public attention that the professional bullfighter enjoys. La Ribot also thinks of them as being like film extras. She had come across production photographs of large scale crowd scenes taken during the filming of big-budget, fifties feature films where all the extras were holding pieces of white paper with their number on it. Apparently these photographs were used as aids for continuity and for establishing how much each extra should be paid.

In *40 Espontáneos*, the local performers were, in effect, outsiders brought into the world of installation art, in a way that contrasted their inexperienced spontaneity with the theoretically sophisticated refinement with which beholders generally approach ‘advanced’, conceptually based installation. La Ribot’s use of untrained performers may not widen the public for installation art, but goes some way towards making people aware of the narrowness of this public. As she herself has observed:

The group of spontaneous that is formed has an interesting political and social dimension. Unemployed people, university professors, athletes, teachers, sociologists, architects, housewives, shopkeepers, retired people, poets, writers, etc. This heterogeneity plays an important role, it humanises and enriches the group and all of them suddenly form a compact unity full of complicity.¹¹

Although beholders might have thought that the initial patchwork was random, when it re-emerged a second time exactly the same as the first one, they will have realized that what had seemed accidental and unstructured must have had some order to it that only the performers could understand. This exemplifies what La Ribot calls the performers’ compact unity full of complicity.

When La Ribot goes on to suggest interpreting this outsider position in political terms, her description recalls those whom Blanchot called destroyed men:

I am speaking of the anonymous, of the person used, or hired, of that person that in the cinema for example, passes by as if he or she did not exist, who drinks in a party or kills a Roman, makes us believe that what we see is more real. I am speaking of the soldier used to defend illegal homelands, the worker who sews t-shirts in filthy factories for somebody else's homeland. I am speaking about the reality that is too big for us, out of our limits, out of our rules, a reality that is interpreted like in the cinema, an 'illegal' reality'.¹²

The performers' behaviour as they execute their tasks and laugh seems to evoke this illegal reality for *La Ribot*, but the installation does not cite it in the way that the cardboard placards do in *Laughing Hole*.

Where the patchwork in *40 Espontáneos* stretches right across the performance space, *Laughing Hole* begins with another informal, all-over, horizontal spread; hundreds of long, thin brown cardboard placards, each the same size, spread across the floor. These are scattered at all angles, sometimes three or four deep, their top surfaces blank, and their caption only revealed when *La Ribot*, Marie-Caroline Hominal or Delphine Rosay pick it up and show it to the beholders. Gradually these are attached with adhesive tape to the walls, butting against one another in a haphazard and sometimes slightly crooked way. When I saw this installation at Toynbee Hall in London, in June 2007, it was in a studio with windows on three sides. Performers attached placards across the windows, sometimes bending them so that they would follow the contours of the window frames. They also sometimes stuck them over central heating radiators. The form that the resulting collage of placards took was thus largely independent and uninfluenced by the conventional form of the room. It flagrantly disregarded architectural hierarchy.

The captions also take a non-hierarchical form and suggest anti-hierarchical attitudes. They are handwritten in capital letters with marker pens in different colours, some with a second colour scribbled over them. Grammatically, they consist of two halves, a noun and a word or words that describe or modify it, and each of these parts repeats in many different combinations as if any particular half could go with any of the others. There were a number of captions about holes including the piece's title, LAUGHING HOLE. There were: BLACK HOLE, TOYNBEE HOLE, GUANTANAMO HOLE, SUNNY HOLE, DISTURBING HOLE and so on. Along with the latter, there were also: DISTURBING BEACH, DISTURBING BAY, DISTURBING WAR, DISTURBING SALE. Other captions took a different form, including LOOK AT ME, FOR SALE and STILL LAUGHING. The two parts of the caption sometimes came together to create a striking meaning, but after a while, the repetitive play with words began to render the placards increasingly meaningless. Furthermore, the performer greeted each new caption, regardless of whether it carried happy or painful connotations, as if it was hysterically funny. The implicit social and political concerns in *40 Espontáneos* became explicit in *Laughing Hole* through captions like GUANTANAMO DETAINEE, LEBANON WAR and GAZA REFUGEE.

Each performer had a small microphone taped inconspicuously to her cheek, and the sound was mixed in real time by Clive Jenkins, a sound engineer, who sat with his mixing

desks and laptop prominently in the studio, broadcasting laughter through speakers arranged around the walls. As well as changing where the sounds seemed to be coming from, he played with their density, sometimes echoing, overlaying or repeating sounds. Generally he was absorbed in his equipment, but occasionally he appeared to become fascinated by what the performers were doing, and smiled or laughed with them. This often seemed to be at quiet moments. My impression was that what he found involving was the way each performer's laughing was developing in counterpoint with that of the others' laughter, creating improvised duets and trios. Every half hour or so, he built up the sounds gradually until it was as if there were thousands of people laughing, then dropped it down again to nothing. (He used a similar effect at the close of the event to signal an ending.) Without this, the installation would have seemed entirely unstructured, since the performers' incessantly repeated actions caused me, as a beholder, to lose track of any overall progression, despite the fact that more and more placards were gradually being fixed over the walls and windows.

Whereas the inexperienced performers in *40 Espontáneos* seemed largely to use laughter as a way of bonding and supporting one another, La Ribot, Hominal and Rosay were able to focus their laughter towards beholders in a stronger way. Often their intention seemed to be to make beholders laugh. At times this was because something seemed genuinely funny – a coincidence, or the fact that the performer had accidentally slipped. At other times, the laughter was in opposition to the meaning of the caption. A performer kneeled close in front of me, laughing hard, thrusting towards me a placard on which LEBANON SPECTATOR was written. Aware of the British government's dismal failure to do anything to stop the 2006 war between the Israeli army and Hezbollah militants, I found this caption an uncomfortable one. Yet all the same, just as it was difficult not to be affected by the plight of civilians and refugees during this war, it was also hard not, at least, to smile when someone close to me was laughing so hard. It was almost as if the performer were saying to me 'why feel any obligation towards a government that acts in your name regardless of your beliefs?'. Laughter thus became a performative assertion of a right to insubordination similar to the one Blanchot had advocated in 1960.

The fact that, in both this piece and *40 Espontáneos* performers laughed for such a long time shows that they were not laughing about anything specific and not giving expression to any psychological motivation but merely executing a task. The anthropologist Mary Douglas identified two main aspects of laughter. First, she noted, it is 'a process that begins in a small way, observable on the face, and is capable of ending in involving the whole body. Second, it is normally a social response; private laughter is a special case'.¹³ As a dancer, La Ribot has analysed the physical act of laughter as a neuro-musculo-skeletal action and developed a laughing technique, which she teaches to performers. In *Laughing Hole* they laughed so hard they could hardly stick each placard to the wall, and had to keep trying again and again before they managed to do so. In both pieces, beholders thus became aware of the process through which performers kept themselves in a state of laughter and of the effort and skill involved in continually sustaining and remaking this state.

Douglas explains the social significance of laughter by placing it in the context of the discourse of bodily communication. Her argument is that, as we read bodily actions within social situations, we screen out things like hiccoughs, sneezes and throat-clearings

as insignificant noise. But laughter, she argues, 'is a unique bodily interruption which is always taken to be a communication'. This, she suggests, is because:

A laugh is a culmination of a series of bodily communications which have had to be interpreted in the usual way as part of the discourse. The final erupting laugh cannot be screened off, because all the changes in bodily posture preceding it have been taken as part of the dialogue.¹⁴

Douglas goes on to suggest that if one compares the way people in different societies allow themselves to let go as they laugh, one finds that the way they laugh can be read as an indication of the degree of social control operating within a society. The looser the social structures, Douglas argues, the more likely it is that people will laugh in a free and abandoned way.

It is this relation between laughing and social control, I suggest, which enables La Ribot to use laughter in a critical way. The laughing performers in both these pieces are making a prolonged interruption of the discourse of bodily communication that lasts for the length of the performance. While Douglas suggests that laughter is a licensed exception from normal social behaviour, within the terms of these pieces, it becomes normal. In this way, the pieces create a space where it is possible to imagine an alternative way of being, one that I suggest has particular ethical significance. This was because beholders responded in the kind of impersonal, physical way that Levinas and Blanchot argued made people aware of their responsibilities to others.

La Ribot says that there has sometimes been stow-always in performances of *40 Espontáneos*, members of the audience who, like an *espontáneo* at a bullfight, chose to join in the performance. I did not notice any during the performance I attended, but while watching video documentation of a production in Rio de Janeiro in 2004, I spotted a child tucking herself under a piece of material the size of a blanket that was right in front of where she had been sitting, and, of course, laughing at what she was daring to do. At one moment in *Laughing Hole*, after about two hours in the studio, I found myself the only beholder, alone with the three performers, sound engineer, and technician. I found myself appreciating quiet moments and laughing along with the performers and crew. It was as if I was encouraging them to keep on going. As a beholder, laughing with the performers was like stowing away in *40 Espontáneos*. Both these installations of laughing bodies provoke beholders, for as long as they choose to stay within the studio or gallery space in which the work is presented, to respond to the performers' alterity and witness their patient approach to the problem of surviving the current organization of modern society. They also invite beholders, who do not want to go as far as becoming a stow-away, to imagine what it might be like to be part of this communal pocket of passive resistance.

Notes

¹ Jonathan Crary, 'Foreword', in *Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses*, ed. Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), pp.6–9 (p.6).

² Jonathan Crary, 'Foreword', p.7.

³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p.17.

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.17.

⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, pp.17–18.

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) and Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1988).

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, pp.17–18.

⁹ Patrick Hanafin, 'The Writer's Refusal and Law's Malady', *Journal of Law and Society*, 31:1 (March 2004), pp.3–14 (p.8).

¹⁰ Patrick Hanafin, 'The Writer's Refusal and Law's Malady', p.4.

¹¹ La Ribot, '40 espontáneos: information' (2005), <<http://www.laribot.com/laribot/40esp.php?tbl=espontaneos>> [Accessed 23/04/2007].

¹² La Ribot, '40 espontáneos: information'.

¹³ Mary Douglas, 'Do Dogs laugh? A Cross-cultural Approach to Body Symbolism', in *Social Aspects of the Human Body: A Reader of Key Texts*, ed. Ted Polhemus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp.295–301 (p.298).

¹⁴ Mary Douglas, 'Do Dogs laugh? A Cross-cultural Approach to Body Symbolism', p.299.

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