

What Is a Character Capable Of?

Margit Neuhold

Some figures developed over centuries have been shaped by history, legends, incidents, and all other kinds of records. The prizewinners and the losers are two possible ends, yet within societal structures there are many more positions to choose from. A figure which has been around since the middle ages—always standing a bit outside of society and pointing towards shortcomings—is called a “cuckoo”. Having arrived in the twenty-first century, the cuckoo hides in the everyday world and conveys myriads of ideas drawn from different arenas: art fairs, protests, reality shows, pilgrimages to sport events, stand-up comedy, but also the internet and social media—these intangible spheres and stages where such great parts of our lives become increasingly mediated. The cuckoo’s behaviour is geared to mobilise attention, and its ephemeral appearance is to be considered politically subversive—both visually and performatively. Yet the cuckoo seems also categorically condemned to the domain of foolishness, absurdity, insanity, and nonsense. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary states for the word “cuckoo”, besides mentioning the bird, the definition “a silly or slightly crackbrained person”, and the Oxford Dictionary quotes the informal definition of cuckoo as being “a mad person”. However, the approach here should be a slightly different one, turning away from categories and definitions, but rather orientated towards processes in which the cuckoo is entangled. What acts do such characters perform? Or to put it differently: Where do we locate someone knocking on the table, waving, shouting: Cuckoo!

Looking back at the art-historical canon, the beginning of the twentieth century and its sociopolitical conditions provided an excellent framework for such intentions. Modernity with its faith towards technological progress, rationalisation, and professionalisation, its questioning of traditions and putting forward of the individual, shaped the matrix for the emergence of the avant-garde. Protagonists in their own rights are to be found within all of the emerging -ism movements: Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, Abstractionism ... There are numerous powerful examples of radicalism against political conditions and aesthetic norms, yet the avant-garde’s intentions are to be considered more than a public outcry. Their activities could even be thought of as gestures of slipping away from the so-called authorities unfolding the potentiality of art: to point towards continued and hardened conditions, which themselves created the framework for the arts. Times have indeed changed, but have the conditions changed as well?

In her workgroup *Cuckoo* (2012–15), Veronika Hauer addresses such questions with different means and investigates the modes of communication between the body, with its poses on different stages always keeping a spectator’s presence in mind. Her text-image poster work *Cuckoo#1* (2012) builds on a photo of a group of moresca dancers, two wooden figures, caught in unusual dancing postures and dressed in splendid red-golden-green costumes. In correspondence with the snapshot stands a photo of two children with black elastic therapeutic tape, wearing leggings and white shirts, who seem to mirror the figurines’ poses. Yet as the text goes along, the reader—who can, by contemplating the poster, choose to fall into the position of the beholder—grasps an idea of the precariousness of the working conditions, of a non-standard (jester) employment. The text sketches a scene of a jester company in precarious late-neoliberal times, which loses their female front figure because

she accepts the offer of a city government to become the court jester as part of a sustainability programme. In the business world, “artistic creativity” and its related networks and working structures have become a miracle drug very much welcomed by city developers and city marketing managers for regeneration towards a “creative district”. Inherent to the figures of the moresca dancers is a potential, due to their folk characters, which serves such marketing strategies. Here, the ambiguous position of the figures comes into play: being within the centre of the spectacle but at the same time standing outside the crowd since having a job to fulfil.

Three white figurines sprayed in different shades of white are subsumed under the title *Cuckoo#3* (2015). Each figure takes up a very particular pose frozen from a moving choreography, which could have originated in everyday movement, professional performers’ poses, and in traditional depictions of the cuckoo. Moulding these precise moments into a figurine made from clay translates the cuckoo back into a commodity appreciated by its burgeoning art scene—from which performance art tried to escape. By its very nature, performance is ephemeral and was meant to slip through the art world’s complexities of displaying, collecting, preserving, and explaining materials. Yet the figurines are even rounded off towards a conceptual sculpture by their perfectly balanced plinth, serving the museum’s needs. Moreover, the plinth gives each figurine a polished platform, inviting the limelight to be ideally reflected. Herewith the work is very light-footed—taking the “living sculpture” in reverse—and enters the discourse on institutional critique: museums that were once the target of artists’ performative protests have now established performance art departments which fully embrace “the live” as an artistic medium.

The element of the stage was already introduced in the poster work *Cuckoo#2* (2013) placarded outside the fluc, a Viennese club located at the traffic hub Praterstern. Photographed in an artist’s studio and standing on one leg, the other leg angled holding her knee, Veronika Hauer freakily smirks out of the poster addressing the spectator directly. The cuckoo takes centre stage in this prominent public place, also in the accompanying header titled “Cuckoo. A jester always needs a stage”: the figure left the atelier to occupy the billboard—this commoditised space which plasters exurbs and suburbia—and to irritate the audience for a moment: travellers, passers-by, party guests The text goes on: “She does not exist outside her performance. Her humour is anarchic, dedicated only to an end in itself. A jester is amoral. Her pose always on the go.” It becomes evident here that the staged photograph does not embody an autobiographical approach, yet that taking on a jester identity is part of Hauer’s artistic strategy. The scrutiny of a variety of fleeting “cuckooish” appearances, correlating the body and its identity, not caring about right or wrong, as well as analytical investigations of the space between ephemeral and capitalist production, are put forward in this consistent group of works. What is a character capable of? This is a question that a jester never fails to ask.