Singularities in the Streets: Bodies, Incongruity and the Metaethical Effect

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1. Incongruity, Philosophy and Humour

It is no doubt a sad commentary on our society to note that a Google search with the terms "bodies in the streets" yields results connected to violence and massacres, terrorist attacks and war. Thankfully, the "spaces, rhythms and logics of city life" – to quote the call for papers – can sometimes be more irenic, and the physical interaction of our bodies with urban spaces can play a more positive role. Though I do not wish to deny the reality of urban suffering, I intend to turn to lighter matters in order to examine connections between urban art, humor, and the notion of singularity that I will explain shortly.

As argued in a recent French volume devoted to the art of the city and the city as art, an urban environment can itself be conceived of as a *body*, a Gestalt functioning either in an organic and healthy manner, or perhaps "dysfunctioning" because of errors and disharmonies in its conception and construction.[1] My goal in this paper is to examine a certain number of projects that explicitly or implicitly aim to challenge the routine organization of the experience of the city via the injection of radical incongruity into the urban landscape. Some of the projects evoked are quite official; others are more clandestine or even subversive in their aims and operations. But all of them can be seen to have a similar purpose – that of provoking a renewed consciousness of the place of the body in the city and thus the place of the individual in society. This renewed consciousness can be seen to occur via the perception of incongruity in an otherwise ordinary urban situation. I will link this concept of incongruity to a general notion of *singularity* that I borrow from the hard sciences, showing how these "singularities" in the streets produce what I call the metaethical effect of the work of art.

My reflections here are part of a work in progress on the connections between art, sensorial experience, humor and this concept of singularity that I intend to apply to æsthetics via what Nelson Goodman would call a "transfer of symbol schemata". Obviously, at some point I will need to confront the famous arguments formulated by Sokal and Bricmont against the illicit metaphorical use of scientific models in the humanities.[2] And I would also like to add that, as an ardent supporter of pluralism, I wish to avoid any implication of essentialism that might attach

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1 See *L'Art des villes, Figures de l'Art 31*, Juin, 2016, and more particularly, Cécile Croce, "Avant-propos : L'art des villes", *Figures de l'art 31* (Juin, 2016), p. 15

2   Alan Sokal & Jean Bricmont, *Impostures Intellectuelles*, (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1997)

itself to the term: I use the term *singularity* in the plural, and this singularity that I see at the heart of many contemporary artistic practices is not to be conceived of as a substantial or formal *essence* of art but rather as a recurrent yet unpredictable pragmatic feature of the operation of our current artworld.

In astrophysics, the notion of *singularity* designates that moment or spatial location where the laws of physics no longer apply, notably at the heart of a black hole, beyond the edge of what is called the "event horizon". Obviously, this phenomenon is quite complex, and my aim is not to apply all of the mathematical or physical implications of this theory to the realm of art. I simply wish to argue that the transfer of schema here can be illuminating. My study will examine four separate theses, the first of which is far from revolutionary: it claims simply that the work of art is a singularity in a purely metaphorical sense of the term, since it often involves a rupture with previous forms and practices. The second thesis is more ambitious – it argues that certain works of art attempt to produce singularities in a sense that is not merely metaphorical. I have in mind works that endeavor to disorient perception, negate the laws of physics, or challenge our current epistemology. The third thesis argues that such works are at least analogous, or perhaps identical, to those moments in philosophy and the hard sciences where radical new paradigms are formulated. The fourth and final thesis uses this notion of singularity to enhance certain contemporary theories of humor and argues that humor often plays a deep philosophical role. Here I will be following up on a famous comment attributed to Wittgenstein who claimed that "a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of *jokes*".[3]

Over the centuries, there have been various theories of humor and laughter, many of which have been based on the body. For example, somatic and psychological considerations are close to the heart of the theories of Hobbes, Bergson or Freud. But a *psycho-physiological* explanation of *laughter* is not the same thing as a philosophical analysis of *why* we laugh, of how *humor* functions, and I find that the most promising general answer to this question is provided by the notion of *incongruity*. Contemporary proponents of the notion include John Morreall, Noël Carroll, Simon Critchley and others, but the idea goes back at least to Kant who argued that humor arose "from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing."[4] As a pluralist, I am eager to recognize different forms of humor, and I do not wish to establish incongruity as the essential condition of all forms. But I do think that the concept is useful when dealing with humor in the visual arts. Indeed, the concept helps me link humor to the idea of singularity that I am trying to explore. To quote Simon Critchley, "Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world."[5] It is to this extent that a joke can indeed be philosophical, and I interpret Wittgenstein's remark in this light. But to go a bit further than Wittgenstein, I would like to argue that these moments of rupture provoke a consciousness of the *form* and *nature* of both perception and judgment. This is what I mean by the "metaethical effect" of the singularities produced by works of art. I will return to this point later in the paper, notably when discussing Olafur Eliasson.

Like a work of art, a joke by definition seeks an audience. Just as there is no such thing as a private language (at least according to Wittgenstein), there is no such thing as a joke that is eternally and intrinsically solipsistic. In her introduction to the volume on art in the city, Cécile Croce argues that the urban landscape itself can be seen as a collective work of art (18). If all

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3   "It is worth noting that Wittgenstein once said that a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of *jokes*", see Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 27-28

4   Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, James Creed Meredith, trans. (Oxford, OUP, 1952), p. 199

5   See Simon Critchley *On Humour* (London, Routledge, 2002), p. 1

works of art seek an audience, then city dwellers, by definition, as bodies in a public space, are both potential spectators and potential actors in this collective work. Of course, a city is not a museum – one goes to a museum with certain expectations, with a certain somatic disposition, whereas the city is a more varied, unpredictable or even "rhizomatic" space. But indeed, this varied and unpredictable dimension can make the effect of incongruity even greater. One goes to a museum expecting to contemplate; the city is the scene of countless other actions, and the body can thus be brought to interact in unforeseen ways.

2. Urban Singularities in the Work of Mark Jenkins

I will take as my main example of urban incongruity several pieces by the American artist Mark Jenkins. In quite a literal way, Jenkins tears holes in our predictions about the empirical world. Jenkins is a street artist whose installations are situated in the midst of routine urban landscapes. The two series entitled "Storker" and "Embed Bodies" are particularly good instances of how incongruity can produce both urban singularities and social interaction.

The body occupies a central position in Jenkins' work. One typical piece is *Kicked Painting*:

Figure 1: *Kicked Painting* (2012) by Mark Jenkins

Artists hate it when you compare their work to other contemporary figures, but this particular piece is not far from some familiar items by Robert Gober:

Figure 2: *Untitled Leg* (1989-90) by Robert Gober

There are also aspects of Jenkins' art that recall the work of Maurizio Cattelan or Ron Mueck.

But unlike Gober, Cattelan and Mueck, Jenkins is less famous for museum pieces and better known for his surprising and ostensibly facetious interventions in urban situations. In the *Storker* series, Jenkins surreptitiously places plastic infants in unusual and amusing public contexts:

Figure 3: *KFC,* Storker series

Here the familiar kitsch figure of Colonel Sanders is transformed into the loving if somewhat absent-minded grandfather of one of these plastic babies. In a French study of the work of Jenkins, Frédéric-Charles Baitinger links these transparent, scotch-tape babies to the traditional notion of the Trickster, a mischievous character playing tricks, disrupting routine and undermining the habitual social order.[6] The babies do seem to be having their share of fun in incongruous contexts, turning a handrail into a sliding board, fiddling with a fire hydrant or or turning a lamppost into a seesaw:

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6   Frédéric-Charles Baitinger, *Mark Jenkins : La Rue mise en scène* (Grenoble, Critères, 2013)

Figure 4: *Canarias,* Storker series

Figure 5: *Fire hidrant,* Storker series

Figure 6: *See-saw,* Storker series

But the real Trickster is of course Jenkins himself. Baitinger sees him as a "sculptor of events", and goes on to argue that the urban setting becomes a "space of events" a "performative"

form of art that seeks to "question, shock, or, at least provoke reflection." For Baitinger, Jenkins' interventions in urban settings, often the object of police scrutiny, confront "the physical, legal and moral limits of a culture."[7]

Baitinger borrows this notion of the *event* from Greil Marcus, himself inspired by Guy Debord and Situationism. In the appropriate context, for Marcus:

> *"Each situation would be an "ambient milieu" for a "game of events"; each would change its setting, and allow itself to be changed by it. The city would no longer be experienced as a scrim of commodities and power; it would be felt as a field of "psychogeography," and this would be an epistemology of everyday time and space…"*[8]

These joyful babies turn the stark urban setting into an unlimited playground, undermining the usual play of power and order. Baitinger also links Jenkins to what Roland Barthes called "le texte de jouissance" – the type of work that provokes unease or crisis via a destabilizing experience (13). One can well understand the concern of the police in cases such as the following unauthorized installations:

Figure 7: Malmö

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7   Baitinger, *Mark Jenkins*, p. 9

8   Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* (London, Faber, 2011), p. 164

Figure 8: Roofgirl

Figure 9: Blonde 101

Figure 10: Biker

Figure 11: Head Above the Rest

Figure 12: Hangers

The following installation is no doubt less potentially threatening or unsettling, but it remains, paradoxically, both vaguely disturbing and yet irreverently funny:

Figure 13: Walker

One ideal of Western art has often been to make all of the details in the work converge to form a complex and powerful message, and Jenkins must certainly have chosen intentionally to install his walker in front of a shoe store. And his picture of the installation does indeed provide us with an urban walker who seems to be intrigued by the incongruous object in his field of vision.

3. The Metaethical Effect

Jenkins might be seen as creating *heterotopia* in the sense defined by Michel Foucault. It seems indeed that these surprising and incongruous urban landscapes provoke "a communal effect based on the lived and shared experience obtained via an active approach to the environment."[9] I'm quoting another of the authors from the French volume I mentioned at the outset, but instead of exploring the Foucauldian notion, I'd like to connect this idea to my own concept of the metaethical effect of the work of art as developed in a certain number of my publications.[10] Many theorists have underlined the social or relational nature of art, the idea that the work of art engages not only a personal but also a social reaction. Quite obviously, works of art in public spaces provoke not only contemplation but also *consciousness of a shared necessity for interpretation*. My theory of the metaethical effect tries to explain the actual process of this interaction. Briefly put, the idea is that the perception of incongruity in a shared public space pushes us even more efficiently to a consciousness of the need for interpretation and to an awareness of its nature.

This point needs some clarification. It is useful to introduce a distinction between the "ethical" and the "metaethical" that is roughly analogous to the difference between *praxis* and theory. The distinction is basically between a reflective or philosophical discipline (metaethics) that analyses the way our moral concepts and values work, and a practical human endeavor

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9   On this see Claire Azéma, « L'hétérotopie des *Lieux possibles* : Quand les pratiques 'utopisées' de l'espace urbain renouvellent les usages de la ville, » in *L'art des villes, Figures de l'art 31* (Juin, 2016), pp. 231-243

10   See (for example) my articles "Theory as Solidarity: The Ethical Dimension of Fictional and Theoretical Reading," in *Herbert Grabes & Wolfgang Viereck* (eds.), *The Wider Scope of English*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2006, 205-219; and "Less than Greek - Art, Perfection and Metaethics (On Berys Gaut)", Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics, vol. 5, 2013, 407-423

(ethics) that applies these values to particular human problems. Whatever else it is, æsthetic reception always involves a metaethical effect. In other words, æsthetic reception is a sphere of activity where the *form* or the *process* of judgment is taught, experienced or analyzed. This does not necessarily involve making any specific decisions as to the application of these forms to concrete praxis. My argument, very briefly, is that all works of art involve an activity – a form of life – that fosters this awareness of the nature of interpretation and choice. I might go even further to defend what has been called *utopianism* by Noël Carroll.[11] This is the doctrine that holds that any work of art has at least one positive social effect: by its very existence it shows us that new ideas can be formulated, new perceptions organized, new solutions perhaps found. In other words, art shows that the human world can be changed. One can indeed get this fundamental idea from a work by Yves Klein or James Turrell, even if such works do not express explicit moral values.

Now my point here is that the urban walker, when faced with a work by Jenkins, is subtly aware of the necessity of interpreting both the work itself and its place in a shared social environment. But the surprised pedestrian does not only think about the work, does not only think about what other people may be thinking about the same object. More profoundly, he becomes conscious of this need for shared interpretation. He becomes conscious of interpretation itself. What I am saying may have much to do with Eco's idea of the "open work" or Barthes' concept of "l'oeuvre scriptible", but my argument goes a bit further in claiming that anytime we play the language game of æsthetic contemplation, interpretation and judgment, we are both aware of the game itself, aware of the "rules" of the game, and aware of the fact that the other people playing the game with us are also aware of these rules and structures. One might want to import a bit of John Searle here, and set up some sort of formula along of lines of his revision of Grice's model of linguistic understanding as formulated in *Speech Acts*:

> *S utters T and*
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> *(a) S intends (i- I) the utterance U of T to produce in H the knowledge (recognition, awareness) that the states of affairs specified by (certain of) the rules of T obtain. (Call this effect the illocutionary effect, IE)*
>
> *(b) S intends U to produce IE by means of the recognition of i-I.*
>
> *(c) S intends that i- I will be recognized in virtue of (by means of) I-!'s knowledge of (certain of) the rules governing (the elements of) T.*[12]

But, in our case, in the case of art, one would have to redefine the notion of "rules" in a rather exotic way, and I believe it would suffice to say that the urban walkers are mutually aware both of the necessity of interpretation and of their mutual, interactive awareness of this very necessity. Just to provide a random counterexample, I could point out *digestion* as something we may do together at the same time, with greater or less success, but my own digestive process in no way interacts with yours, and none of us need to be aware of any shared rules, practices or contexts in this particular case. Yet the body in the street, when faced with a singular installation, when faced with an apparently lifeless or endangered fellow body, automatically experiences both the implicit or explicit socio-political content of the work and the *form of judgement and interpretation itself*.

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11   Noël Carroll, "Art, narrative, and moral understanding," in Jerrold Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge, CUP, 1998, 2001), p. 127

12   John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge, CUP, 1969), pp. 49-50

On the event, Baitinger also quotes the French philosopher Mehdi Belhaj Kacem: "At whatever scale in which it occurs, the event is that which brings a system of representation to its breaking point" (in Baitinger, 34). It is this idea of a *breaking point* that brings me back to the notion of singularity. The installations of artists such as Jenkins are singular in many senses of the term, and they often question our epistemology in subtle and implicit ways. But, to take a further example, the work of Olafur Eliasson *explicitly* attempts to modify our epistemological standpoint. We all have in mind many of his famous pieces, pieces that illustrate his slogan "see yourself sensing",[13] a project which is quite obviously a somaesthetic quest, so I will limit myself to quoting a particularly significant passage from a preface to one of his books:

> "*The artworks in this book are mostly models for space, defined by movement. They are world-makers. They love transformation. They make time their tool. […] Many of the artworks [included in this volume] are installed outside, in public space. I like to think of them as urban gestures, insisting on the inclusion of passers-by, visitors, city inhabitants. […] [My work] is an investigation into colour, theory, movement, and generosity. To me, these spaces are not utopian, but defined through their atmosphere and agency. One of the challenges that drives me when I am making a new work is the desire to create structures that acknowledge the visitors and respond to their physical presence. […]*"[14]

In countless works and installations, Eliasson shatters our perceptual expectations, ostensibly defies gravity or freezes time, asking us to renew our physical interaction with the world. To that extent, his work does indeed attempt to create singularity in a quasi-scientific sense of the term But in Eliasson's vision of art, these singularities also have a social and moral dimension: a renewed vision of our place in both the physical world and the urban setting can change our lives profoundly.

4. Space, Time and Eternity…

No other artist ever made this claim as dramatically as the conceptual architects Arakawa and Gins. In *Reversible Destiny: We Have Decided not to Die* and in *Architectural Body*, they declared solemnly that revising architecture in public and private spaces could eventually lead to the elimination of death.[15] Bodies in the streets of their ideal city would achieve eternity via the very structure of the public spaces. Curiously enough, a similar idea of achieving eternity via a reconfiguration of space and time was imagined in a whimsical story entitled "Mimsy Were the Borogoves".[16] Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore collaborated in 1943 to write this rather philosophical tale about the capacity of objects to change our consciousness and to reverse our destinies. The authors imagine a being of another dimension who accidentally sends a number of what we might call *educational toys* back in time, first to Oxford in the 19th century, and

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13   On Eliasson, see my articles "Olafur Eliasson et la métaéthique de l'art," *Nouvelle Revue d'Esthétique n°6*, 2010, 101-112 and "Notion Motion : L'image-mouvement d'Olafur Eliasson et la métaéthique du sensible", *Écrans 2015-1,* n°3, *Expanded Cinéma*, Paris, Garnier, 2015, 191-205.

14   Olafur Eliasson, *Unspoken Spaces* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2016). This quote is available online at http://olafureliasson.net/archive/publication/MDA118343/studio-olafur-eliasson-unspoken-spaces

15   See Arakawa and Gins, *Reversible Destiny – We have Decided Not to Die* (New York: Guggenheim Museum & Harry Abrams, 1997) and *Architectural Body* (Tuscaloosa, U of Alabama P, 2002)

16   Lewis Padgett, "Mimsy Were the Borogoves," in Robert Silverberg, *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, Vol. 1 (NY, Avon, 1971), pp. 181-210

then to contemporary America.[17] The first recipient of the toys is a certain Alice Liddell, who unfortunately is already too old to be able to be shaped by these paradoxical and otherworldly objects. She does manage, however, to get an adult friend of hers to transcribe a certain number of instructions that the toys have communicated to her, as well as other details and stories that she has grasped while playing with these trans-dimensional objects. The second recipients of these mind-shaping toys are much younger, and the two children's destinies are altered as they are slowly molded by the objects, learning first how to digest their food in a special way so that they needn't eat so much, figuring out trans-dimensional puzzles and eventually passing into another space-time continuum where death has no dominion. "Twas brillig" turns out to be a design for escape, that is, the beginning of the formula for leaving the mortality and constraints of our Euclidean prison. Or, as the Alice character puts it when asked what the stanza means by her adult friend, "It's the way out, I think," the girl said doubtfully. "I'm not sure yet. My magic toys told me" (Padgett 1943: 207). In the vocabulary of Arakawa and Gins, these toys are procedural tools for profoundly modifying our landing sites in order to achieve a reversed destiny.

Now I don't really believe that visual artists can actually defy gravity, create black holes or singularities, but some of them certainly see this physical and epistemological revolution as an ideal to be pursued. And I also doubt that any future modification of urban or private architecture might enable us to decide not to die. But it is reasonable to claim that our bodies can achieve greater awareness and fulfilment, greater *shared* awareness and fulfilment, via the singularities of urban art.

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17 Actually, to the America of 1943, when the story was published.

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