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#TheHead: Genealogical Mapping Notes

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Abstract

What do a mascot, a bell wearer carnivalist and a visual artist have in common? What worlds does a mask connect and what violations does it allow? Can you change your age, gender or species? What are we when we wear the head of another, instead of our own? The #thehead project is an ongoing artistic research on disguise and the carnivalesque, and the following text serves as an attempt to trace a genealogy of these concepts. How carnivalesque is a medieval Walk of shame? How literally torturous can a carnival prank be? Who are the carnival's animals? What are the carnival's politics? What is carnival love? The text has a mainly visual character; there is a camera through which the content is revealed to us, the information is extracted in fragments, through snapshots, with the intention to be noted, recorded and archived but not analyzed. The text is instead a mapping of an area of concepts, images and sounds, types, qualities, style and textures throughout which the work will move. The text, following the cinematic rhythm of close-ups and distant shots, attempts with a multimodal-poetic disposition to understand in practice known and less well known theoretical approaches regarding disguise and the carnivalesque, torture, animalness, humanness and gender. The different characters that lurk within people and texts raise the question again and again: What happens if we wear the head of another?



Figure 1: Artist Andreas Gkenios wearing a Babougera mask, video still, part of the project #thehead by artist Panos Sklavenitis

In a field, alongside a provincial road, a herd of carnival bodies stagger like the sick or the drunk. They wander aimlessly, distanced from each other, then they come closer, mingle, stumble, cuddle, sing, laugh and eat, urinate and defecate, cry, give birth and die and then they wander again in a distance which is lost as soon as they start anew to stumble, dance, eat, drink, give birth and die.

The camera isolates the one that stands the nearest, while the rest blur and merge with the surrounding landscape. This one is gigantic, blood red, and hairy. It has a wide-open mouth, full of saliva dripping from its rotten teeth, and a pair of tiny eyes. It has no trunk or arms, only five long, crooked legs and huge buttocks.

At the point where there should be a neck, where the feet meet the head, rests a multitude of phalluses and vulvae, grouped in zones.

From its mouth, its nostrils and between its eyes, flows a stream of satires and maenads, sileni, demons and goblins, cicadas, drone bees, foxes, coyotes, donkeys and zebras; the crowds of Saturnalia, of the feast of the fools; the Charivari, the feast of the ass -we mainly hear bells and loud brays; the actors of Commedia dell'arte; mascots, scapegoats and masquerades from all over, with goat heads and bear skins; brides and priests and watermelons instead of heads.



Figure 2: Director and dramaturg Elias Adam, video still, part of the project #thehead by artist Panos Sklavenitis

They climb up, like a mohawk, crawling on the back of the head, penetrating the vulvae, returning from the urethras and diffusing to its five feet. It is an upside down world, a grotesque utopian kingdom of abundance, freedom and intimacy; pregnant old women and animal-shaped big-bellied men who devour, laugh and rejoice; a world of renewal and equality that enjoys the abolition of morals and rules, prohibitions, hierarchies, classism and privileges. A second life that is allowed to be performed only as a parody of the first, exceptionally, and for a while.

In its big ears and temples live the Joker, the Clown, the Madman, the Jester and the Trickster and even theater, music, dance, the carnivalistic artistic performances of modern and contemporary art: the Futurists and the Dadaists, the Fluxus, the Situationists, and Joseph Beuys.

From its first leg starts the ritualistic performances of the Shaman-Priest. In its veins takes place the sacred act of mediation with the divine. Seductive masked healers, large animal heads, wings, gods, demons, eagles and hawks, lightning, wide eyes, fires and long tongues. With rhythmic steps, with animal movements, in ecstasy, they ascend between its hairs and mix with the other streams.

From the second leg begins the stream of torture, public executions and shame walks. Majestic theatrical performances from hell, rituals of triumph, tortured bodies on display. Wandering, exhausted bodies, which are carnivalized, punitively, against their will, by the authorities: they hang animal intestines around their necks, they force them to wear animal-shaped iron masks and crowns of thorn, they smear them with feces, they spit on them, they uproot their hair, they carve and stigmatize them. An unholy disguise symbolically deconstructing the body that will soon be literally dismembered and exposed as the last part of the spectacle.



Figure 3: Performance artist Filippou Tsitsopoulos wearing one of his masks made from living materials, video still, part of the project #thehead by artist Panos Sklaventis

On the third leg acts the carnival's political body. The body that is transformed and painted, that wears masks and raises placards to protest, to denounce, to demand and to claim. The body that needs to be augmented in order to stand out, to address its demands loudly, to become visible. Pig heads, black flags, red paint - the body that dresses its request to strengthen it. It climbs from the calves to the knees, pours out, holding bullhorns and yelling slogans.

In the fourth leg lays the sexual masquerade. Crowds of bodies meet erotically, rubbing on their thighs and between their fingers, contourless, they move slowly all together, somewhat circularly, like a primitive organism. Bodies in seducing disguises, exchange roles and fantasies, they subdue and are subdued.

On the fifth leg rest the masked robbers, the murderers and the outlawed folk heroes. Here is the terror, the crime, the deception and the dishonesty, but also the opposition to injustice and exploitation. Lower on this foot, on the edge of the heel, still lives Ulysses the beggar. From the feet to the genitals, from the back to the head and vice versa, the streams meet and pour into each other: medieval and renaissance public executions that have a strongly festive atmosphere, the scaffoldings

as places from which erupts political unrest, demonstrations and revolutions. A little higher, the dark side of the carnival, the grotesque laughing body that commits crimes and pillories. The infamous “Koulourou’s wedding” in Patras, a literally torturous shaming that took place against a defenceless woman, in the form of a prank, during the carnival, and is celebrated every year, until our days. Authoritarian and punitive practices in sexual intercourse, and vice versa, the sexual dimension of an act of public torture.



Figure 4: Visual artist Christos Tsiampakaris (Fruit Gillette), video still, part of the project #thehead by artist Panos Sklavenitis

The camera focuses again on the herd: a frantic parade, streamers and paper war, staggering like the sick or the drunks. The nightmarish course of a body heading to the place of the execution of its final punishment.

Pushing, spitting, hair pulling. They wander aimlessly, thrown into life and left to their fate. A religious procession, banners and flags, holy and sacred, distanced from each other. A restless wandering of the chased outlaw; sweat, heavy breath. Anguish. Then they get confused, stumble, fall on top of each other, cuddle, sing, laugh and eat, urinate, defecate, cry, give birth and die. A fluttering roar, an erotic procession, a herd of animals, a parade of insects, a coordinated demonstration of bodies envisioning and demanding a political change. And then they wander again in a distance which is lost as soon as they start anew to stumble, dance, eat, drink, give birth and die all over again.

Panos Sklavenitis (b. 1977, Ithaca, GR) lives and works in Athens, Greece.

His interdisciplinary work includes performance, participatory action, video, text, sound and installation, and it has been exhibited worldwide. He has graduated the Athens School of Fine Arts (Integrated master in Painting, 2006 – 2011). He studied in Royal Academy of fine arts ARTESIS HOGESCHOOL ANTWERPEN (2009, painting -In Situ) with an Erasmus scholarship. He has participated in events such as AB4 AGORA - 4th Athens Biennale, Month of Performance Art-Berlin, Athens biennale 2018: ANTI, ACTOPOLIS | The Art of Action, Kultursymposium Weimar 2019. In 2013 he presented the solo exhibition "THE MIRACLE OF THE BLACK LEG" (Zabriskie Point-espace d'art contemporain, Geneva). In 2019 he held the solo exhibition "It's me!" (Stoa 42, Athens). He was a founding member of the Voices (2011, coordinated by: Elpida Rikou), the Temporary Academy of Arts (2014, curated by Elpida Karaba) and Most Mechanics Are Crooks. In 2021 he founded the interdisciplinary artist group Sinodi Papu.