

On the value of the ridiculous



Performer and writer Alexandra Tatarsky on the potent power of the ridiculous, the aesthetics and ideology of working as a clown, engaging with politics, and freeing oneself from the forces in the universe that conspire to make us feel like failures.

March 10, 2020 -

As told to Annie Bielski, 2939 words.

Tags: [Performance](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Anxiety](#), [Mental health](#).

You work across so many disciplines. How do you approach each project?

I would say that one of my fascinations is the ridiculousness, but sometimes necessity, of categories. Why do we need borders and when do we need borders? What makes something a poem or a piece of theater or a dance or a freak out? Is it a freak out that you want to do alone in your bedroom? Is it a freak out when you want to create a situation in which other people can be a part of it or watch it? I would say most of my work is some form of a freak out. So what form of a freak out feels the best right now, and I think for me it usually has to do with the situation.

Everything I do is rooted in the philosophy and the practice of the clown who just shows up and tries to be as present and as responsive as possible, and as vulnerable and honest about what's not working. Hopefully by being honest about what's not working something starts working, and that's what the gift is. That really guides everything. I don't typically have an idea that is fully formed that I then find a venue or a space for. It's more like when some situation or opportunity arises or seems exciting to me, then it tells me what needs to happen there, whether that's a journal covering things I find really interesting, or a warehouse that has a great corner that looks really cozy to wiggle around in.

As a clown school graduate, will you say more about how you use the clown in your work?

For me the clown is a mode of performance that is honest about what's actually happening in the room, so there's no fourth wall and the work is really made in between the performer and the audience. It comes out of this Jacques Lecoq tradition, who was a French mime pedagogue. I studied with [Pig Iron](#), and they all studied with [him]. What he would always say is, "Tout bouge," which means, in French, "everything moves." That to me is this unending wellspring of inspiration. Everything moves, so you don't have to always search inside yourself for some inner genius, which I think can lead to a lot of grief, but you can look around you and notice that everything is already moving, and everything is already there for you to respond to as information and material and to be in conversation with.

Specifically, I'm interested in this tradition called bouffon. The myth of the bouffon is that all the outcasts in the olden days were sent to live in these bogs at the edge of town, and they would watch the elites all year long and make fun of them, and they got really good at imitating them and making fun of them. Then one day during Carnival they would be invited back into the town to perform at the King's court, and this is what they'd been waiting for all year. They basically had to be so masterful at mocking the King to his face that he would reward them, and give them delicious cheese and money, and then when they would go back home, he would sit around his court and realize that he'd been completely humiliated, and feel so ashamed that he would go home and chop his

own head off. That's also clown philosophy to me—you need to live, you need to eat, right? And if you're getting paid a lot of money, somewhere down the line it's dirty money. So, okay, if you're getting the King's money, you have to be really aware. How can you keep getting the King's money while still making work that would ideally make the King kill himself?

Aside from the politics inherent to the clown, how do you engage with the political in your work?

I used to feel really confused about how one's art practice and more explicit political involvement should or shouldn't intersect, because it feels important for me to protect my wacky zone from any interference by a sense of responsibility or obligation to say the right thing, or be didactic or try to help the world or something through my art. For me, it has felt like a tricky thing to navigate—a desire to use art as a vessel and then a desire to protect art from having to serve a function societally. However, the more that I've just been alive, there are people and groups that I've had the pleasure of working with who I think have really showed me what that path could look like of art and community organizing, being part of a shared project in a really beautiful way.

[Related reading: [Roni Horn on politics in art](#) →]

One of those places is [Loisaida Center](#) on the Lower East Side in New York. They bring over many puppet makers from Puerto Rico and elsewhere every year to create this big garden parade and celebrate all of the heroes of the neighborhood. Nuyorican organizers and artists have done so much work to build community in the neighborhood, to fight for resources for the neighborhood, and also to create out of this decimated abandoned rubble really vibrant community gardens, and to fight to protect that from developers.

This is the world that I grew up in that made it seem even possible to become an artist. I would walk around as a kid and see all of these beautiful people with hats made out of grass or this artist & recycling guru, Rolando Politi of [Garbagia](#), who makes a hat out of cigarette butts that he picks up around the neighborhood and he calls the piece Butt Head. This is exactly where I think it's most beautiful, where the ridiculous does serve a function by being ridiculous. Butt Head is like the beacon.

Another group that comes to mind is [Poncili Creación](#). One year they asked me to march with them in the Puerto Rican day parade. I was in the back helping with this beautiful, wearable sculpture that they made out of foam that they find in couches and things on the side of the street, that they carve and paint. Many of the other floats in the parade were beautiful and celebratory, but their sculptural puppet intervention was specifically to bring attention to the amount of unreported deaths after [Hurricane Maria]. We had a really intense experience marching in the parade in that way, then the next day the photo of their sculpture with the statistic carved into it was on the front page of the Daily News, which is not a publication that would normally cover something like that. I was so struck by the power of an image, but also an embodied image, a clown image, to convey this information that would normally be pushed aside. So increasingly I feel like there are really, really exciting intersections.

How do you feel energetically before, during, and after a performance?

Before a performance I experience a great deal of self-doubt and total shock at what I've chosen to do with my life. I'm just like, "Why? Why did I bring this upon myself?" And then if the show goes well, by which I just mean I feel really in my body, and I'm being generous with the audience and the audience is being generous with me, then afterwards it's like the best feeling in the world. I'm more high than any drug could ever provide, and if I wasn't able to get there, if I feel somehow disconnected, then it's pretty horrible afterwards. It's very, very low energy. I really feel tired in my body. It's so extreme.

I am trying to just be more accepting with myself [in the low moments], but also be curious. Curiosity is all we have in those moments. I think like, "Okay, let me just be in this feeling, whatever it is, and maybe even take a look at it." I'm very prone to getting bummed out, and I know that's fine in a way, and part of being a human being, even though it's pretty unbearable in the moment.

I'm just really trying to get better at riding it out, and just thinking of it as more material, because it's access to a really intense place. I remember when I had my heart broken for the first time, I went out to a show with a friend, and I was like, "Oh my god, this is so much worse than I even ever thought possible. Now I understand. I understand what all the songs are about. I understand what all the movies are about. I didn't know before. This is the worst, the most exquisite pain." And my friend was like, "Oh god, I'm so jealous. You're feeling everything so intensely right now." That really stuck with me. Intensity of experience is interesting if you are able to appreciate that it's something to ride.

What do you do when you feel stuck or when you get in your own way?

I took this really amazing workshop with Miguel Gutierrez, who's one of my favorite choreographers, called "Making Work." You get there and then he says, "Okay, now go make something for an hour," and then you do that and then you come back and you write about it. I found this really, really illuminating because what I discovered was that the way I actually make work is very different from the way I *think* I make work. So I might think that I need to be in a studio and warm up, or that if I'm writing, I need to go sit somewhere with a computer. But actually I realized that when I had the time crunch of "in one hour you're going to have to show us something that you just made," I immediately left the building, went outside and went wandering around Grand street and ended up speaking to this older gentleman on a bench outside for a really long time, and he basically made fun of me and was really hysterical. Just kind of riffing on things.

Then I went back in and I was able to perform, and when I think about that I'm like, "Oh yeah. Usually being stuck is thinking there's a "should." Thinking that there's a should to how you should work and that you have to work and that you're trying to be professional now, or how you have to be legit, you have to be serious. You have to go to the workplace and you have to do the work, and what could possibly be less fun than that?

[Related reading: Christelle Kocher on never having time to be stuck →]

Another question was about how you gather material and research for a show, but you answered it. Leave the building!

Leave the building! I'm an obsessive reader, also. I read constantly, probably too much. Sometimes I feel like what looks like research is actually a method of procrastination and the actual research is in my body. And whether I'm improvising movement or whether I'm improvising writing, because I think letting my hands just move on the page is also a kind of improvised choreography, so that's where the actual making happens and the thinking, thinking, thinking, reading, reading, reading might be important preparatory work, but sometimes it can be a way of pushing, of not letting yourself enter into a different zone.

I like falling down internet holes and oscillating between academic articles and weird corners of the internet and message boards, and things like that. So that's one associative research reading method. But then also, I'm very obsessed with Fred Moten's work, and thinking about poetic etymology and looking at what the word itself revealed if you—this is putting my interpretation on top of his project—but thinking about the word in this kind of embodied way where it can break apart and reveal things. I like to sit in on his classes as well and let the way that he talks intersect with the way that he writes. The other day he was talking about the word "complicity," making friends with that word, and really looking at what it means. Complicity. It means togetherness. So, to say to someone "you're complicit" as a judgment overlooks the way in which the speaker is also complicit—we're complicit together. Then find the plea inside of it, the pli  , the way that we're all bending and folding in order to be in this together. So, writers who write and talk about language in that way, where language itself gets bendy, and language itself does a kind of dance, is the most exciting thing to me in the world.

How do you measure success and failure in your work?

I've been thinking about this pretty actively because one of the projects I'm working on right now is a perpetual work-in-progress, revisiting material and continuing to build material for the rest of my life. So in digging into it, it's very much about all the ways that progress has fucked us, and taking strength from *not* progressing,

or what it might mean to resist progress or be curious about a sense of a lack of progress. What are all the forces in our culture that conspire to make us feel like failures, and what does that make more difficult? That makes it difficult to go on. We see in the arts—and outside of the arts—a profound phenomenon of despair, of not feeling like you’ve done enough in your own personal life and for the world at large. And the result is just continuing to feel that way and maybe even becoming more paralyzed. That’s such a killer of life force, to be convinced that you’re a failure.

I don’t think it does anything to try to talk yourself out of it per se, but rather to think about the larger, structural issues and the kind of day-to-day experiences that make so many people feel like failures, even though they’re doing the magnificent, impressive task of managing to get through the day and live in a world that feels kind of like a hellscape often, you know?

[Related reading: [Jlin on learning from failure](#)—]

What’s your relationship to fear like, either in making or sharing your work?

Fear is such an amazing rush. I’m so terrified to go on stage every single time and I’m so terrified to share my writing with anyone. Always. I think the only thing to do is be grateful for that because it’s a crazy chemical rush. In a performance way, they say you should be scared when you’re *not* scared anymore, because then you don’t care. What’s inside *scare*? Care! If you care you’re going to be scared. So it could be seen as a good sign, as a vital part of things, which doesn’t mean that it’s pleasant, but that it’s just always going to be there, probably.

Alexandra Tatarsky Recommends:

1. on the topic of fear, Bernie Mac [in this clip](#). Also his outfit.
2. the children’s book illustrations and air mail dances of [Remy Charlip](#)—pure imaginative bliss zone, [Harlequin and the Gift of Many Colors](#) is especially responsible for ruining me, by which I mean turning me into a clown, with this truly inspiring story of fashioning the most beautiful costume in town out of trashy scraps!!! Also, his “dance for a bed,” which is what it sounds like—a dance you can do in your bed! (Work with what u have).
3. [Silvia Federici](#) for some Marxist feminist history—very liberating to learn that fences and hedges were deliberately put up around the commons in 16th century Europe to force the commoners to have to work off debt to stay on the land that was shared between them all to begin with! I find it comforting to think about this when so many of us can’t afford rent in the cities we grew up in. Maybe that’s not our fault, maybe it’s a concerted effort to force people into exploitative working conditions just so they can try to stay in their homes—a concerted effort with a long history. Challenge capitalist economics and social relations!
4. community gardens & composting!!! Highly recommend getting tender with your waste & rot. Nothing more rewarding than watching garbage transform into brown gold and sprouting green lil babies. [Here](#) is an instructional song I wrote to try to convince my mom to compost (it half-worked). I talk about composting so much my gramma’s best friend said to me recently: SHUT UP ALREADY WITH THE DAMN COMPOST. But seriously, if you have any questions, email me I will come to your house and set one up with you!!! If I weren’t a clown, I’d be a composting consultant! It’s basically the same thing anyway. (See: harlequin, above)
5. [manuel arturo abreu](#) is doing some of the most exciting brilliant and darkly humorous analysis of our current moment that “orbits the topics of art, race, tech, and feelings” through poetry, criticism, sculpture, video, music, memes, and by forging community spaces across so many forms and forums. Grateful for their work and mode of investigating being alive.

Name

Alexandra Tatarsky

Vocation

Performer, writer, organizer, clown

□