

# GREGOR KREGAR: THE ART OF THE RIDICULOUS SUBLIME

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Let me start with a police-like interrogation: Who is Gregor Kregar? As a police question wants to know identity – who are you? – art brochures, monographs, catalogues try to establish an identity of artists or rather of his or her art. While in the surveillance machinery of the police the process of identification is much simpler, down to earth, in the cultural or art context the answers are elusive, and sometimes make a point of eluding hard identifications by further mystification and complications. However, both the police and art worlds suffer from the problem of representation: Who is Gregor Kregar: an artist, a sculptor, who on several occasions has exhibited his self-portraits, coming from Europe, Slovenia, Ljubljana to New Zealand. Is he in exile? Or voluntary displacement? Or maybe he just wants to experience a different culture? Has he finally settled in the Land of the Long White Cloud? Will he continue to have exhibitions in Australia and the US and so on and on?

The easiest solution to the problem of representation was proposed by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham – an auto-icon. For Bentham a particular thing can be most adequately represented only by itself, therefore each thing should be its own icon, that is, an auto-icon. Anticipating postmodern artistic experiments with cadavers and human corpses, Bentham suggested that after death bodies should be dissected and then preserved as their own most adequate representations. Exemplifying this himself, Bentham had his own body ‘auto-iconized’ and thus he can still be seen today, sitting in a wooden box in University College London, as ‘his own statute’. Of course, I don’t want to suggest that Gregor, who is still much alive and kicking, a young artist sculpting his own replicas, should experiment with his afterlife. From the very beginning when I started to think about the way to represent Gregor’s work, I have seen two icons, two quite different Gregors: one that produces grandiose sublime objects resembling spheres, planets, cosmos; and the other Gregor sculpting little ‘kitschy’ figures from sheep to gnomes, televisions and self-portraits. The question is whether those two different series overlap and could be subsumed under the One? Or are they totally different, growing and living separately? Out of this dilemma, out of contemplation about these two series’ almost unbridgeable gap, this essay is born; it mediates the sublime and the ridiculous.

The art of the ridiculous sublime.

Let me start with the sublime: the sublime is mostly associated with powerful nature, something of the magnitude that evokes awe and terror, something that is beyond our grasp, incongruous with the banality of everyday life, something that eventually dwarfs reason, ultimately something which we cannot represent directly. And from Burke to Kant, from Lyotard to Žižek, the sublime shifts and changes, but it is still here: from the sublime of nature – endless oceanic masses or high, soaring peaks of mountains, to the deep, never fully explained sublime of horror and terror evoked by monsters, Gothic castles, ghosts and premonitions. The postmodern technological sublime spreads from the infinity of the World Wide Web embodying, for some theoreticians of cyberspace, a new, virtual holy city, a New Jerusalem, inhabited by heavenly virtual communities, to media, simulacra, constantly undermining a slippery and elusive concept of reality, that is to say, the very foundation of postmodern reality. It was Lyotard who developed a concept of the postmodern sublime by indicating the very impossibility of grasping the whole of society: society is leaking, reality is leaking like the dilapidated interstellar spacecraft in *Alien*. And then, it was Žižek who in this vague impossibility to present the sublime outlined an emerging object, an object that fills in the gaps and fractures in reality – the sublime object of ideology. And by ‘looking awry’ at a various presentations, narratives, significations, at this dark

and uncanny place of any ideology, we don't have to succumb to tragic impotence, but rather in this very impossibility, which is a constitutive impossibility to present the sublime, we can find the optimism of the negative and the infinite laughter, the moment of the ridiculous.

From the very beginning, in the growing of Gregor's artistic opus I have found both, the sublime and the ridiculous: the sculptural odyssey in search of perfect forms and muted echoes of the laughter, frozen in a joy of modulating, shaping, sculpting different materials. Gregor's large, spherical objects connote the sublime. *Another Round* in Raku ceramic, *Oko* (in Slovenian an eye), *Prstan* (a ring), *Oko 2, 3*, *Steel Life Planet*, *One More Round* and *Polyhedron Dwelling* – all these spherical objects, like huge globes, balls, planets, made of steel, glass and light, invite us to 'think big', evoking associations of something beyond – the sublime. A gigantic eye *Oko 2* resembling a globe or planet, recalls the time, though ironically, when the sublime, in the form of the sacred, was incorporated in society, when the idea of harmony between a polis (society) and the cosmos still existed – Greek philosophy preserved by the European dream. The idea was that the harmony of nature and the cosmos mirrored that of the polis and the other way around, that moral, political and poetical principles were fused with the cosmos, like Platonic solids. Just as a measure of cosmos was captured in regular polyhedrons, 'cosmic figures', the material out of which the constellations and heavens were made, all Gregor's spheres, like *Oko* or *Prstan* or *Polyhedron Dwelling* are built in the combination of multiplied polyhedrons. Unlike a popular obsession with a spatial example of the balance and symmetry of the Golden Ratio of Da Vinci's code, Gregor's polyhedrons conceal a sinister twist: through painful torture of armature of glass and steel they undermine their very presuppositions, namely the possibility of the European dream of absolute harmony.

On the other hand, a series of figures and objects, usually in smaller dimensions, look totally familiar, bordering on kitsch and yet with a slight touch of the ridiculous. Ridiculousness is capable of ridiculing both the sublime and kitsch: to make fun of higher, elevated, noble forms, often on the verge of the grotesque. 'Kitsch' is a Central European invention, signifying the lower, degraded forms of art at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, a fear of the loss of the original compensated by fabrication of emotions and domestic familiarity. Kitsch, as Milan Kundera says, is a total denial of shit, and we may add, sexuality, filthy, degraded forms of matter; kitsch tends to elevate to the sublime by annihilating its uncanny, sinister side, a side of awe and terror. Political connotations: a pure world permeated with cliché, naïve sentimentality conceals various totalitarianisms, the basic flavor of different ideologies, from totalitarianisms to the celebrations of the global market. Kitsch, firstly enclosed in the Central European context, then accused of its totalitarian dimension, transcends its confinement and the different totalitarian modes. It comfortably assumes a global form of existence in democratic political leaders' embracing and kissing children, in the Disney-like animal planet and, mostly in global consumerism. Indeed, in a postmodern world, it is difficult to distinguish high from low culture, and for some, when mass production mounts to various versions of simulacra, the difference between high and low art seems obsolete. In that case, as Gregor shows in his figures and objects, kitsch can spread everywhere; the artist himself is in danger of becoming just a replica like numerous Gregors, or a court jester, like his parody of postures and gestures of great monuments such as Rodin's *Thinker*. The television could become a sacred object, a shrine in a securely sheltered domestic space of postmodernity; sheep could assume a wide range of meanings from ironic comments on New Zealand national identity to different biblical connotations and wisdom; and pigs dressed in tuxedos could be lovely corporate animals, tycoons wallowing in different postures, as in his latest show *Pygg/ Piggy Bank Project* in Australia.

How then are Gregor's majestic spherical cubes, the sublime forms, connected with ridiculous,

kitschy figures? Do these two series of work overlap, or rather grow separately into the Two – two Gregors receding in different directions? From the very beginning, especially with the growing figures, this has been a little mystery to me, a problem that I have never tried to solve until invited to write this essay. Of course, out of politeness, I tended to explore the possibility of the One, instead of admitting that there are two unconnected works of art, and, consequently, for the two Gregors I wanted enlightenment, an illumination of the undercurrent intersection of the sublime and the ridiculous.

One of the clues towards an intersection of the ridiculous and the sublime in Gregor's work is in his use of material. Besides their forms, volumes, and spaces, sculptures certainly communicate through their material. How material is used has been an important issue since the beginning of art: from monuments made out of stone to the Twentieth Century notion of the avant-garde, contemporary artists play with different ready-mades, and incessant exploration of new materials. For instance, Mauricio Cattelan engraved all England's national football team defeats in the Twentieth Century into granite slabs: a combination of very mundane, popular entertainment, like football, and the material usually reserved for more serious topics, such as monuments and tombs. In a different way, Gregor constantly plays with the incongruity and discomfort between theme and material. In *Prstan*, for instance, a spherical ring – a quality of a holistic unitary volume – dispenses with an internal armature, forcing all attention to the elaboration of its surface: an almost violent combination of heavy steel and fragile glass produces a tension. A gigantic eye *Oko 2*, constructed of blue and green bottles, elevates the ordinary, ready-made object – a bottle – to an element of something magnificent, an entity of cosmic status embodied in his different spherical rings like *Polyhedron Dwelling*. All the spherical objects with their volumes that simultaneously represent big and small – like an eye that has associations with a planet – suggest interconnections, fragility and vulnerability of both macrocosms and microcosms. Indeed, the broad, planar surfaces of these sculptures radiate pain, tension, irony and the ridiculous, mostly ridiculing its sublime dwelling, but never giving it up. On the other hand, for instance in *Steel Life Exhibition*, a television box is transformed by the very use of material – an uncomfortable abutment of metal and glass instead of the television screen in which stained glass alludes to the sacred, the space of the church with luminosity and chiaroscuro effect. Marshall McLuhan once opined that television ads of the Twentieth Century would be regarded as we now regard stained glass windows in the cathedrals of Europe – as the great artworks of a generation. Irony: the banality of the televised word that through reality TV-shows has become more and more out-referential, simulacra in which catastrophes and commercials are mixed together, producing constantly new social realities. The accumulation of images culminates until they themselves become capital: a society of spectacle sliding to the sublime. Against a sculptural illusionism which converts one material into the signifier for another, in the art of the ridiculous sublime, material produces tension in ridiculing and ironically underlying its very effort of presentation, by displacing, inverting 'high' and 'low' material: stained glass for televisions, or garbage for *Archie* (a monumental gate) in Wellington, or the wine bottle as a basic element of huge spheres. In this process the very distinction between the high and low, the sublime and the ridiculous becomes precariously unstable, opening up space for an unexpected alchemy of mixtures and permutations.

Besides the use of material, the second series of figures *I disappear...* reaches the sublime in another way: they are never singular, ONE, but always many: many hands, many televisions, many sheep, many pigs, many gnomes. At first this constant multiplication connotes the industrial serialization bordering on kitsch. But there is a difference. Whereas kitsch as an absolute denial of shit suppresses its sexual side, that is, its very proliferation by presenting itself as something unique, by sentimental adoption into domestic spaces, Gregor's figures, on the contrary, 'indulge' in showing their multiplications, very often indicating that in this proliferation is something much more than many – something sinister and uncanny, especially in its infinite

tension, its power to create its own world. In addition to that, this proliferation is never of absolutely the same objects, except for *Roke*, an installation of a myriad of hands. For example sheep are in different postures and colours, self-replicas of the artist range in babushka-style from life-size to miniature and so on. Although multiplying and proliferating, displayed in different formations addressing and reinterpreting the gallery space itself; they resist an absolute identity, they are like flawed simulacra. Though sometimes constrained by strong numerical symbolism, like the sheep project *Mathew 12 /12*, one cannot escape from the impression that the multiplication can go on and on, and in this uncontrollable profusion there is a sense of the sinister and uncanny, and by hinting at its infinite possibility it comes close to the sublime. It is in this multiplication, an abstract sex, or sexuality of the inorganic as well as the organic, that each particular sculpture transcends its position. On the other hand, in the very use of material, compressing the lightness (glass) and heaviness of being (steel), the spheres, associated with Greek forms, indicate the impossibility of harmony, of embracing a safe position, in other words, they ridicule their overwhelming pretensions, reaching the point of an intersection between the sublime and ridiculous – the ridiculous sublime.

The art of the ridiculous sublime.

It is in this nutshell of the ridiculous sublime that Gregor finds a precarious balance, under constant threat of falling back either to kitsch itself, which, especially since postmodernism has become extremely difficult to outline, or arty-farty, dead forms that cannot communicate with the world any more, forever muted with their incomprehensible, meaningless signs, because any subliminal tragic effort in art as in life in the present climate of cynicism and robust relativism seems to be impossible. But in other words, the art of the ridiculous sublime preserves both opposite poles: high and low, the unrepresentable and naïve mundane clichés; the utopian moment by constantly ridiculing its pretensions, or in the ridiculous itself finds an outlet for the utopian. The art of the ridiculous sublime revolves around a complex set of complementary oppositions, which in Gregor's universe is marked by the opposition of the ridiculous and the sublime, that sometimes overlap, intersect, sometimes Gregor's figures embody both poles and so on. The art of the ridiculous sublime dwells in the precarious balance wherein clichés, though unbearably naïve, have to be taken seriously, wherein higher forms coincide with their opposites – (very often Gregor exhibits at least one sphere with figures and televisions). The art of the ridiculous sublime is political insofar as it reveals how our fantasies support our sense of reality, how reality itself is always reduced to the banal in order to be accepted in our everyday life; therefore kitsch permeates any ideology: there is no ideology without kitsch (which sometimes could be mistaken for the sublime). The art of the ridiculous sublime reveals and decomposes that fantasy of the sublime object that unifies society in a holy totality, the sublime object of ideology.

Another approach to the art of the ridiculous sublime is to fulfill its utopian promises, in other words erase the distinction between art and life, by transforming life itself in art and art in life. The last historical moment, which embodied such efforts, was the Russian avant-garde at the beginning of the Twentieth Century to which Gregor refers sometimes in his work. In *I Appear and Disappear*, the figures of the self-replica in orange overalls can be associated with numerous artists as workers, as engineers that ultimately constructed social reality itself. That sense of the possible fabrication of reality was encapsulated in the very transition from one social system and ideology to another, which Gregor witnessed as a student of fine arts in the 1980s. Like nowhere else in Eastern Europe or the former Yugoslavia, Slovenia was a site of burgeoning social movements that articulated their challenge to the existing symbolic order: the women's movement, gay and lesbian groups, alternative trade unions, an ecological movement, 'new age' spirituality, peace activists, squatters and alternative health movements.

Especially important was Neue Slovenische Kunst based in Gregor's birth city, Ljubljana. Fused with the new social civic movements in Slovenia of the 1980s, this multimedia project combining theater, music, painting, and new media appropriated different expressions of totalitarian discourses in art and culture by ridiculing their overwhelming pretension, in their attempt to cement, or enclose society by equating it with the subliminal object.

Traces of the Russian avant-garde, constructivism, filtered through the Neue Slovenische Kunst echo in Gregor's New Zealand experience and artistic expressions. Of course, in a broader sense, in a gut feeling of the relativism of the social construction of reality, and the uncanny connection between kitsch and ideology. But now interrogation of art and taboos, in the new environment, assume different forms.

There is an enormous accumulation of energy in his Auckland studio, ranging from the tiny vibration and joy of the first mold, the joy of the firstborn, to the factory-like, collective production of molds and sculptures. As work progresses and the time of exhibition approaches they start to inhabit all nooks and crannies of the studios, existing parallel with metal constructions, skeletons of geometric forms. And in spite of all this creative chaos, an order that underlines disorder, gestures still towards the art of the ridiculous sublime. Except now, the sublime object of ideology, as Žižek would put it, creates a new object named New Zealand: 'clean and green', 'last paradise on the earth', adrenalin sports, and enchanting nature epitomized by *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Even though in a different context, far away from Central European anxieties, the art of the ridiculous sublime, in Gregor's version, finds different outlets: namely in the incessant consumerism of 'the new world', the naiveté of infinite consumption, with nature becoming an absolute brand and advertisement for tourist destinations. The art of the ridiculous sublime itself is in danger of becoming a commodity among others commodities. Just that.

The last attempt to resist commodification in 1968 and 'change the world' opened instead the gate for new consumerisms in which a work of art's final measure is its financial value. The avant-garde is not just commercialized and dispersed through postmodernism, but its negative, destructive tendencies pave the way for its final demise. According to Virilio's scorching vision of the Twenty-First Century, scientists are overtaking the avant-garde mangling of forms by becoming the ultimate artists as genetic engineers prepared to turn themselves into the worst expressionists; becoming artists scientists produce monstrous forms, which previous revolutions destroyed so enthusiastically (*Art and Fear*). Contrary to this, the art of the ridiculous sublime presents a stubborn resistance to the 'final solution'; it is constantly on the edge, in the dangerous equilibrium, in which the work *Polyhedron Dwelling*, though impossible in the postmodern moment, still harbors memories of its utopian dimension. The precarious position of the art of the ridiculous sublime may be epitomized by *Oko* whose pupil of green and blue bottles linked by steel pipe occupies 360 degrees of vision; such a gigantic eye imbued with an omnipresent, powerful gaze may evoke Panoptical machinery of surveillance; of the cyberpunk world of total control; but on the other hand, the very same eye, the gigantic eye, can see inward, the seer or viewer, ridiculing one's stable position, the eye may see the past and the future by undermining the false eternity of the present.