



HOW DOES
THE PERFECT
HUMAN
FALL?
LIKE THIS

MAX ANDREWS TALKS WITH

**JORDAN
WOLFSON**



SOUP BURG COFFEE HOUSE, MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY, 2 MARCH 2006

MAX ANDREWS: We are sheltering from the snow here in this café across the road from the Whitney Museum of American Art where the Whitney Biennial 2006, titled *Day for Night*, has just opened. You've made three works for the Biennial, which I'll just recap. A 16mm film that shows a man in a tuxedo, seen from his bow tie down, performing in sign language the final speech in Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, and the complete text of the speech, written by Chaplin if I'm correct, is the 700-odd word title of the work. Then there is *Untitled (Frank Painting Company)*, dated 1966/2006, for which you invited your 94-year-old landlord Jack Frank to come to the Whitney to scrape back the paint from a section of the museum walls that you'd discovered in conversation that his company had painted forty years ago. So now the wall has been repainted and visitors only know the work is there because of the wall label. Then although it's not mentioned anywhere in the exhibition or in the catalogue, there is this work outside involving luring crows to the roof of the Museum building, where we were planning on doing this interview, but it's so cold and windy outside. Do you see the three works to be a kind of trilogy?

JORDAN WOLFSON: No I don't really see them as a trilogy or necessarily connect them in a formal way, except possibly I would connect the crows and the Chaplin piece, in that both signal some sort of change coming about. But the wall painting piece has nothing to do with either of those works, it has work to do with the Whitney itself.

MA: Is your crows work a secret work – is it strictly part of the Biennial?

JW: It's in the Biennial and it's not a secret work, but it's not on the checklist – it only exists in conversation, in folklore and within the community surrounding the Whitney.

MA: Could someone buy the piece?

JW: No. But you can own it. Everyone owns it, because its folklore. It's not about the crows coming, or them being there – it's not a Gothic work or a cinematic work, it's about the contrived act of attracting them, the act of trying to call for an omen.

MA: So in that sense it couldn't really ever be a piece that's strictly by Jordan Wolfson, it's not 'Jordan Wolfson put speakers on the roof ...' in terms of the fiction of the work. If you say that you are the 'will' of the work, it doesn't really function – the omen part of the artwork isn't really ascribable to an author in a sense. Your conjuring up this state of possibility...

JW: It's part of the fiction of the work that an artist did that – I'm the facilitator of the work even though it's unnamed. All I did was put speakers on the roof, played out taped crow calls to attract birds and didn't have any reference in the catalogue, with the intention of making the act of attracting the birds. The act is the work – its not about birds flying around the top of the Whitney, its about us, the piece is a mirror. It means so much to do it for the Whitney Biennial because the event is about American culture – so it's part of the content of the piece that it's at the Biennial.

MA: I like the fact that we're talking about it and I haven't actually seen any crows.

JW: Yes, it doesn't matter, it's so much about the image of the work in your mind.

MA: Perhaps the crows and the Chaplin piece are both dealing with cursed moments – I thought of this analogy that the three works are like your *Zombie Trilogy*. You know in zombie movies there is almost always some premonition that something bad is going to happen – so here that's the crows maybe – and the Chaplin film is like this undead piece of traumatic history, given life like the walking dead. And it's also a moment when Chaplin's career sort of suicided. Then the wall painting work is a kind of reburying ...

JW: I'm super interested in moments when things are about to change, when things are at such an intensity that they either have to reverse or go forward, and for me that's what the Chaplin piece is about – a certain moment in history where we were reaching critical mass in terms of tolerance towards people like Hitler, etc.

MA: But how can you come to experience that moment? – your not a historian for example, and you obviously didn't live through the war ...

JW: I think that we all exist together throughout history. Being born during a certain era is not specific to being human.

MA: I just wondered how you came to be interested in the psychology of *The Great Dictator*, was it through looking firstly in a more formal, cinematic way?

JW: I became really interested in Chaplin as a historical figure and how, for example, the silhouette of Chaplin at the height of his popularity was more recognisable than the image of Jesus Christ. He was this universal symbol throughout the world, we all have a relationship with Chaplin. I started watching all of his films after I saw part of *The Great Dictator* – the scene where he is throwing a ball up in the air – one night in Naples at this party, that was the moment when I became interested in Chaplin. There is this very strange scene at the end of the movie and I read up on it and it turns out that he broke character to speak as himself, the actor. I thought this was a really interesting moment, where something breaks and this man makes a speech to address the public. It turns out that there were a bunch of alternate endings to the film. He realised that the ending could not be funny – it's a funny film, but if you end it funny, you say that it's not serious. So you could maybe call it a public service announcement for humanity that Chaplin makes at the end of the film. This was his first talking film as well and I starting thinking, 'how do I put it back into motion', because that's the original way he communicated, so I re-silenced him by having the speech translated into sign language. Then I realised that that wouldn't be enough as a work, because people might see it but they wouldn't understand it – it would be alienating the viewer. I realised that the title of the work had to be the entire speech so then the work became totally circular and totally open – it wasn't going to be the formal and closed work that would exclude people who hadn't seen the film as the speech was always there in the title.

MA: Why then did you choose to mention the Jørgen Leth film *The Perfect Human* in the accompanying wall text, isn't that an alienating reference?

JW: Because at a point the work was still not finished and I was thinking 'if I'm going to redo this, I can't dress someone up like Chaplin'. I was looking for something to somehow counter Chaplin, and I had just seen *The Five Obstructions* by Lars von Trier where he focussed on this film *The Perfect Human*, which in my interpretation is about a certain irony of the acceptance of man's imperfection. That man drives himself to fail in the end. And the film is presented in this pseudo-scientific late-1960s aesthetic with this perfect white, very sterile backdrop – there was this notion of a good clean future like in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. For example, 'soon we are going to be able to rely on the robot'. So there are these two failing portraits of Utopian ideals, one is so idealistic that its impossible – that being Chaplin's – then on the other hand *The Perfect Human* admits to all these flaws, but this also fails and you watch it fail. So my work is a combination of these two things.

JORDAN WOLFSON (b. 1980)

Untitled (Frank Painting Company, Inc.), 1966/2006

Scraped and repainted wall

Courtesy Jack Frank and family

I just moved into my new apartment, and the 94-year-old landlord climbed through my second-floor window this morning because I slid the wrong set of keys under his office door, and the plumber and painter had to get in. I told him I needed new light fixtures, so together he and I walked around the corner to the lighting store, and he began to tell me about his life. When he was 32, his plane was shot down on D-day, and this building I'm living in has been in his family for more than 150 years. He owned a painting company that worked in many buildings here in New York City over the past sixty years. He asked me what I did, and I explained that I was an artist. He asked me when he might see some of my artwork, and I told him about the 2006 Whitney Biennial. He then told me that his company painted the walls of the Whitney when it reopened in 1966. So I asked him if he would be interested in doing it again.

—Jordan Wolfson



I'm sorry but I don't want to be an Emperor – that's not my business – I don't want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone if possible, Jew, gentile, black man, white. We all want to help one another, human beings are like that. We all want to live by each other's happiness, not by each other's misery. We don't want to hate and despise one another. In this world there is room for everyone and the earth is rich and can provide for everyone. The way of life can be free and beautiful. But we have lost the way. Greed has poisoned men's souls – has barricaded the world with hate; has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed but we have shut ourselves in: machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical, our cleverness hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity; More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost. The aeroplane and the radio have brought us closer together. The very nature of these inventions cries out for the goodness in men, cries out for universal brotherhood for the unity of us all. Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world, millions of despairing men, women and little children, victims of a system that makes men torture and imprison innocent people. To those who can hear me I say "Do not despair." The misery that is now upon us is but the passing of greed, the bitterness of men who fear the way of human progress: the hate of men will pass and dictators die and the power they took from the people will return to the people, and so long as men die [now] liberty will never perish... Soldiers – don't give yourselves to brutes, men who despise you and enslave you – who regiment your lives, tell you what to do, what to think and what to feel, who drill you, diet you, treat you as cattle, as cannon fodder. Don't give yourselves to these unnatural men, machine men, with machine minds and machine hearts. You are not machines. You are not cattle. You are men. You have the love of humanity in your hearts. You don't hate – only the unloved hate. Only the unloved and the unnatural. Soldiers – don't fight for slavery, fight for liberty. In the seventeenth chapter of Saint Luke it is written "the kingdom of God is within man" – not one man, nor a group of men – but in all men – in you, the people. You the people have the power, the power to create machines, the power to create happiness. You the people have the power to make life free and beautiful, to make this life a wonderful adventure. Then in the name of democracy let's use that power – let us all unite. Let us fight for a new world, a decent world that will give men a chance to work, that will give you the future and old age and security. By the promise of these things, brutes have risen to power, but they lie. They do not fulfill their promise, they never will. Dictators free themselves but they enslave the people. Now let us fight to fulfill that promise. Let us fight to free the world, to do away with national barriers, do away with greed, with hate and intolerance. Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness. Soldiers – in the name of democracy, let us all unite! Look up! Look up! The clouds are lifting – the sun is breaking through. We are coming out of the darkness into the light. We are coming into a new world. A kind new world where men will rise above their hate and brutality. The soul of man has been given wings – and at last he is beginning to fly. He is flying into the rainbow – into the light of hope – into the future, that glorious future that belongs to you, to me and to all of us. Look up. Look up.

Charlie Chaplin, "The Great Dictator" (1940), 2005, Collection of the artist – courtesy Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York

MA: With many of the works in the Biennial – for example Francesco Vezzoli's *Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's "Caligula"* – there seems to be this suggestion by the curators that they are 'biting satires on the Bush administration'. Well, with Richard Serra's *Stop Bush*, piece it's obviously the intention, but do you think your Chaplin piece could be shoehorned into being seen as a comment on the Great Dictator that is George W. Bush? Maybe curatorially there is an opportunity to reflect on Chaplin's characterisation of the roles of the powerful or the common man?

JW: I don't see the work as a specific reference to George Bush, but it does reference today, because that's where I'm showing the piece. The work is a reference to today like the Biennial is a reference to today. Whenever you see a work your going to reference it to the present, it's just the nature of art.

MA: But by its very nature, the Chaplin work is political.

JW: It's a piece about human nature. I guess behaving politically is part of human nature: to feel that you are being oppressed by a power and to revolt against it – that's political.

MA: We have talked before how you are always careful not to oversubscribe your work with too much specified meaning, but it seems to me that these are things that aren't necessarily available in the work itself as you would hope, but are things that exist in knowing about the history of Europe in the 1940s or knowing about Chaplin or Jørgen Leth.

JW: Well, it's true that not everyone will know about Jørgen Leth's film, for example. But it's my responsibility to mention him, because I referenced his film.

MA: So you mean that if you didn't note Leth, you'd feel that you hadn't duly credited the film.

JW: Yes, part of the intention of the work conceptually has a lot to do with it. Even though it's a heady film reference to some degree, so be it. I can't deny the content.

MA: So, to turn to your wall piece. If you'll entertain my spurious Zombie Trilogy thinking, there is a reburial of the zombie moment that's unleashed in the Chaplin film. Zombie's come back from the dead because something went symbolically wrong with their burials. So perhaps that's what emerges from your Chaplin film – a Hitler body that is never able to be assimilated or understood or dealt with and this spectre of fascism rises again in a comedy. So in the Jack Frank piece – if you follow your works on a symbolic register, like a charm or a curse – having the same man whose company first painted the wall of the museum 40-odd years ago return to the wall and strip it back to the original layer of paint and then seal the wound if you like, its almost like a ritual or a rite, something that was somehow wrong and had to be existentially reshuffled.

JW: I guess its like history repeating itself.



Paul McCartney

von

MA: I understand your work as operating on these psychic levels rather than being so readily parsed out into references, it exists for me in the realms of emotional states or moments of suspense, between being dead or alive. I'm thinking of your work about Christopher Reeve (*Infinite Melancholy*) that presents a really weird suspended state of memory or dreaming ...

JW: I guess in a way it's a question of setting up a situation of recognition for the viewer. There is a certain kind of formalism in the work whether it's a blank wall or a film.

MA: In terms of how you present your work as it appears to the viewer?

JW: Exactly, and from there the viewer finds their own response, the chance to experience something on their own terms, and that brings it back to why I chose Chaplin, because he was so universal. I figured there must be a way of making a work that exists for everyone on their own terms.

MA: For the sake of argument, what kind of art or artist would be the opposite? Something that automatically sets up a conflict and alienates its audience?

JW: I don't know. Well, if the Chaplin film were a pure sign language film and the title was something else other than the text of the speech ...

MA: But isn't that a question only of how one frames an art object?

JW: No, it's a question of how one constructs an art object.

MA: I guess what you are aiming for is a precision that enables clarity in what is expected of someone approaching a work?

JW: Sure, at one end I want to construct something precisely and on that end there is clarity.

MA: So for you an art work has a content that you create a package for, choosing how you present that idea?

JW: I don't know if I'm 'creating a package', but the ideas of preciseness and fluidity in communication are important to me in my work. But I guess that's formalism not content. You could have the best content in the world but without formulation the work doesn't exist, it sinks. But maybe the way I'm talking about this right now is formalistic, maybe I'm being conservative as an artist. You can have a work that has content but it doesn't really matter how it turns out, it's all about how it exists in the viewer's mind, for example the crow piece functions on that level. It's not about formalistic or conservative fault in the work: it is what it is. It exists the minute it's thought of, the minute it's said it exists and doesn't need to go further than that.







MA: Would you say that the category of cinema encapsulates all of your works in that respect?

JW: If anything I use cinema as a tool of recognition. Maybe our memories are made up of films and all of our expectations about love and death and how we deal with things have already been portrayed to us in films, and when these things happen to us we can reference these things we have third-party memories of and then behave with them. Like a break-up or falling in love with someone. What's romance? Maybe romance is something you see in the movies, it's a idealism. So it's possible that I'm working with the image of idealism, not with the actual idea of Hollywood or cinema.

MA: I guess I mean cinema as a form of consciousness. I don't know to what degree you are aware of this but you always talk about your practice in terms of pieces, and there might be a cinematic analogy there in that there are clearly-defined works within an oeuvre within an auteur structure.

JW: Cinema is something of the last one hundred years – maybe it's more like story telling, how one gives form to a story, how is the action of portraying or how does one illustrate or articulate an idea, publicly. That's all a film is – a public articulation of an idea. I'm operating cinematically but maybe more humanistically, using humanism in my work. I'm not interested in cinema as a phenomenon, I'm more interested in the experience of life and the experience of memory and how we see the world – that's a phenomenon. Cinema is only a reflection of a greater picture.

MA: I can try and be a bit clearer about how you tend to conceptualise your work as a conglomeration of 'pieces' rather than how another artist might characterise their practice as research, where the boundary between engaging in research and constructing 'pieces' is never established. So you work in works?

JW: Well it's not really about me, I feel I'm working as an anonymous individual and that's why each work is finished, closed, finished, closed, and then you move on. I don't feel I have an 'open project'.

MA: Do you have something analogous to a sketchbook, a state of being where things are allowed to half-exist as works or trials?

JW: I don't do any of that stuff. I don't have a studio practice. I just have a laptop and a couple of hard drives and most of my ideas come to me on the street or in conversation. Usually I don't even 'work', I just hang out. So I don't sit there drilling away, but then when I become interested in a subject I'll rent videos or go to the library, I'll do research like that. For example right now I'm reading a biography of Lenny Bruce. Things sort of fall into my lap, that's how I feel. I want to keep it open. I'm usually working on two or three works at once and during the process I won't allow myself to have any new ideas, because it will only distract me.

