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## Than Hussein Clark's Politics of Melodrama

The artist queers the canonical histories of art and theatre, pointing to how things might actively and fantastically engage in being otherwise

BY MARTIN HARGREAVES IN FEATURES | 20 APR 18



*'Sirk has said: you can't make films about things, you can only make films with things, with people, with light, with flowers, with mirrors, with blood, in fact with all the fantastic things which make life worth living.'*<sup>4</sup>

Writing, in a 1975 issue of the *New Left Review*, about Douglas Sirk's 'women's films' of the 1950s, Rainer Werner Fassbinder stresses the political dimension of these melodramas. The west German director seems to be enjoying a deliberate anachronism: refusing to conform to the stereotype of the radical filmmaker calling for the destruction of spectacle, he instead proclaims the beauty of golden-era Hollywood. While we might see this as camp homage – along the lines of Jack Smith's love of Maria Montez or Kenneth Anger's fetishization of the fascist all-American boy – it is also part of Fassbinder's attempt, across his writings and through his own filmic references to Sirk, to propose a queer historiography. Fassbinder was intent upon denaturalizing how desire flows within the frame, delighting in how the scenery flirts with us as much as the protagonists. As Laura Mulvey – also drawn to look to Sirk for a consideration of female spectatorship – would attest in 1977, the overt staginess of melodrama can harbour the potential for a different kind of gendered performance: one that draws attention to multiple exchanges of desiring gazes.<sup>2</sup>

These threads of citations and references, and how they weave their way through visual culture and subcultural practices, could be said to be major preoccupations of Than Hussein Clark. In writing about him, I find myself needing to follow lines backwards and aside, to understand the complex skeins he picks up in order to connect genealogies of theatricality and desire. Like Sirk, Clark repeatedly asks the viewer to pay attention to the arrangement of fantastic things and how they produce effects. And, like Fassbinder, replete with references and re-articulations, he sets out to disturb the sedimentation of canonical histories of art and theatre.



Than Hussein Clark, *Love at the Frankfurt Autoshow*, 2017, video still. Courtesy: VI, VII, Oslo

Fassbinder had a cameo in Clark's most recent exhibition at Gak Bremen, albeit lurking somewhat in the chiaroscuro of references. An overpainted poster for Fassbinder's film *Veronika Voss* (1982) was displayed as part of a screen and there was also an allusion to a costume worn by Margit Carstensen, an actress who frequently appears in Fassbinder's later works. Titled 'The Director's Theatre Writer's Theatre', the show – comprising an installation, text and play – explored the form of Regietheater (director's theatre) prevalent in Bremen in the 1960s and '70s, where Kurt Hübner, then artistic director of the Bremen Theatre, promoted the experimental re-interpretation of texts. Fassbinder himself was invited to present there in the 1970s; it was here that he met Carstensen and she joined the company of actors who regularly performed in his work.

In Clark's revisiting of this style of theatre, there are perceptible echoes of Fassbinder's use of melodrama to focus on the struggles of women and gay men within dominant, straight cultural norms. Clark himself trained as an actor, but chiefly within the Anglo-American tradition, where the playwright is the revered authorial voice and the director's role is to embody, rather than challenge, how the script is received. In 'The Director's Theatre Writer's Theatre', the tension between these schools of direction and how they invite the audience to view differently the voices within the text was not resolved but allowed to play out. Clark frequently occupies the positions of both director and writer, and his theatricality results from the incongruities and gaps in these roles, rather than an overlaying or consolidation of authorship.

At Gak, the various components of the exhibition were rearranged daily across a scenography of three zones suggesting a backstage, stage and entrance lobby. associations between objects had the transience of a play, where props assume temporary functions and meanings – much as an actor 'puts on' a character – and can then be repurposed to other ends. In the performance *Three Types of Wind in Trieste* (2018), presented at Schwankhalle Bremen, the characters also moved the set around, echoing the dramaturgical rearrangements of Regietheater, so that the props became objects – or, rather, objects citing props citing objects, hovering between a thing and a representation of a thing. As in many of his other exhibitions and performances, Clark suggests that what these objects do to and with each other is more important than what they are in themselves.



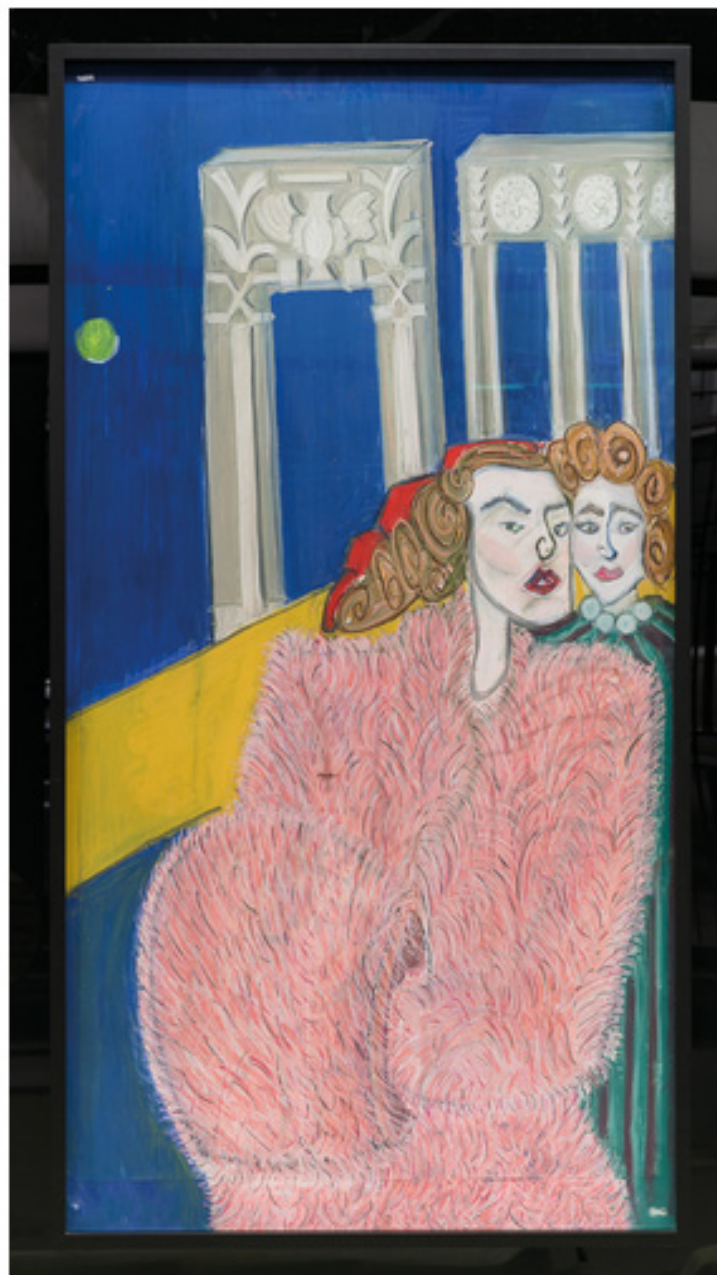


Than Hussein Clark, 'Jean Désert', 2017, installation view at Frieze London. Courtesy: VI, VII, Oslo

This relationship between acting with and acting upon can be observed in Clark's first feature-length film, *Love at the Frankfurt Autoshow* (2017), produced for the exhibition 'recognition (Love at the Frankfurt Autoshow)' at VI, VII in Oslo. It stars a character who could have stepped out of a 1950s melodrama, played by Laura Schuller, one of the key performers in the company Clark has assembled around him (another echo of *Regietheater*). Dressed in a white silk headscarf, faux fur and sunglasses, she goes by the name of Miss Flux and repeatedly states: 'I don't like staying in one place too long' – a claim that could be made by all of Clark's transient works. The other characters, including one played by Clark himself, wear colour-blocked costumes and inhabit a claustrophobic set of stage flats and transparent tables and doors. We never step into realism, but hover on the borders of hysteria, and lines are often obscured by exaggerated speech impediments. Contrived poses are held and the camera frequently pans across the furniture or the walls to keep our attention on the heightened artifice of the performers' delivery. The titular autoshow is happening offscreen; Clark's focus is, instead, on the machinations of relationships and the economic exchange of desire, here staged through the slippery ambivalence and duplicity of self-conscious theatricality and high camp.

## Crève-cœur

For Clark, theatre – and, by extension, film – is not a mirror of life but a privileged space in which artifice can skew our belief in the consensus that produces everyday reality. In a conversation I had with the artist recently, he told me that one of his main references in terms of the politics of theatre is Jean Genet. In his plays and novels, Genet exalts the pure love only accessible through deceit; roses blossom in shit and Genet loves the stink of both. For Jean-Paul Sartre, Genet's play *The Maids* (1947), in depicting the allure of the sham, reveals something fundamental about our subjectivity: 'Appearance, which is constantly on the point of passing itself off as reality, must constantly reveal its profound unreality. Everything must be so false that it sets our teeth on edge.'<sup>3</sup> A similar delight in the unnerving and the unreal is behind Clark's attention to the performativity of people and things. By looking closely at the scenery that surrounds us, we might get a glimpse of the roles we are called to play.



Than Hussein Clark, *La Voix Humaine (Stage Door Exit)*, 2017, pastel on vellum, 155 x 82 x 5 cm. Courtesy: the artist and VI, VII, Dalo

Another Jean, this time an imaginary one, was conjured in Clark's booth for VI, VII at Frieze London last year. In the early 1920s, the Irish furniture designer and architect Eileen Gray opened a boutique in Paris named Jean Désert: a form of butch drag that combined a male forename with Gray's love of the desert. Clark, in turn, took this name for his booth, creating a fitting room for gowns that alluded to the complex gender performances Gray enacted as she moved within the male-dominated design world and the lesbian subcultures of Paris. There were also references to the kind of interdisciplinarity redolent of Jean Cocteau's queer coteries in interwar Paris. In Clark's re-imagining of *haute couture*, you could book an appointment to buy a gown and have a fitting directed by the artist. These took place on a stage, partially visible to visitors through windows in the booth's walls. Nodding towards the performance that putting on a dress entails, as well as the labour that underpins it, Clark's fitting room focused on the histories of design and mediations of taste, offering a queer counternarrative to idealized femininity.

Clark's use of theatricality always turns on this preparation for playing the role: the costumes, the scripts, the choreography and the backdrops that enable the passing off of appearance as reality. He also points to the pleasures of following the quotation marks around a character, tracing the conventions of a style, hearing the echoes of other voices in a speech. Susan Sontag proposed that camp 'is the love of the exaggerated, the "off", of things-being-what-they-are-not'.<sup>4</sup> Clark's camp aesthetic draws attention to how things (including actors) might actively and fantastically engage in being otherwise, and might always be open for re-organization. This entails a practice of constantly rethinking the pleasures and complex histories of queer artistic production. If we shift the scenery, we might play out the scene differently; we should never want to stay in one place too long.

1 Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 'Six Films by Douglas Sirk', *New Left Review*, 1/91, May-June 1975, pp. 88-96

2 Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', *Movie*, 25, Winter 1977-78, pp. 53-56

3 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr*, WH Allen & Co, London, 1963, p. 154

4 Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', *The Partisan Review*, Fall 1964, p. 518

Than Hussein Clark is an artist, designer, performer, director and writer based in London, UK, and Hamburg, Germany. He is a founding member of Villa Design Group and sits on the editorial board of Montez Press. Recent exhibitions and performance projects include: 'The Director's Theatre Writer's Theatre', GAK Bremen, Germany (2017-18); 'Recognition (Love at the Frankfurt Autoshow)', VI, VII, Oslo, Norway (2017); and 'Yes, Yes, all the News That's Fit to Print', Art Basel Parcours, Switzerland (2017). Forthcoming exhibitions include a group show at CAC Passerelle, Brest, France.

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Main image: Than Hussein Clark, *Three Types of Wind* in Trieste, 2018, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist and VI, VII, Oslo