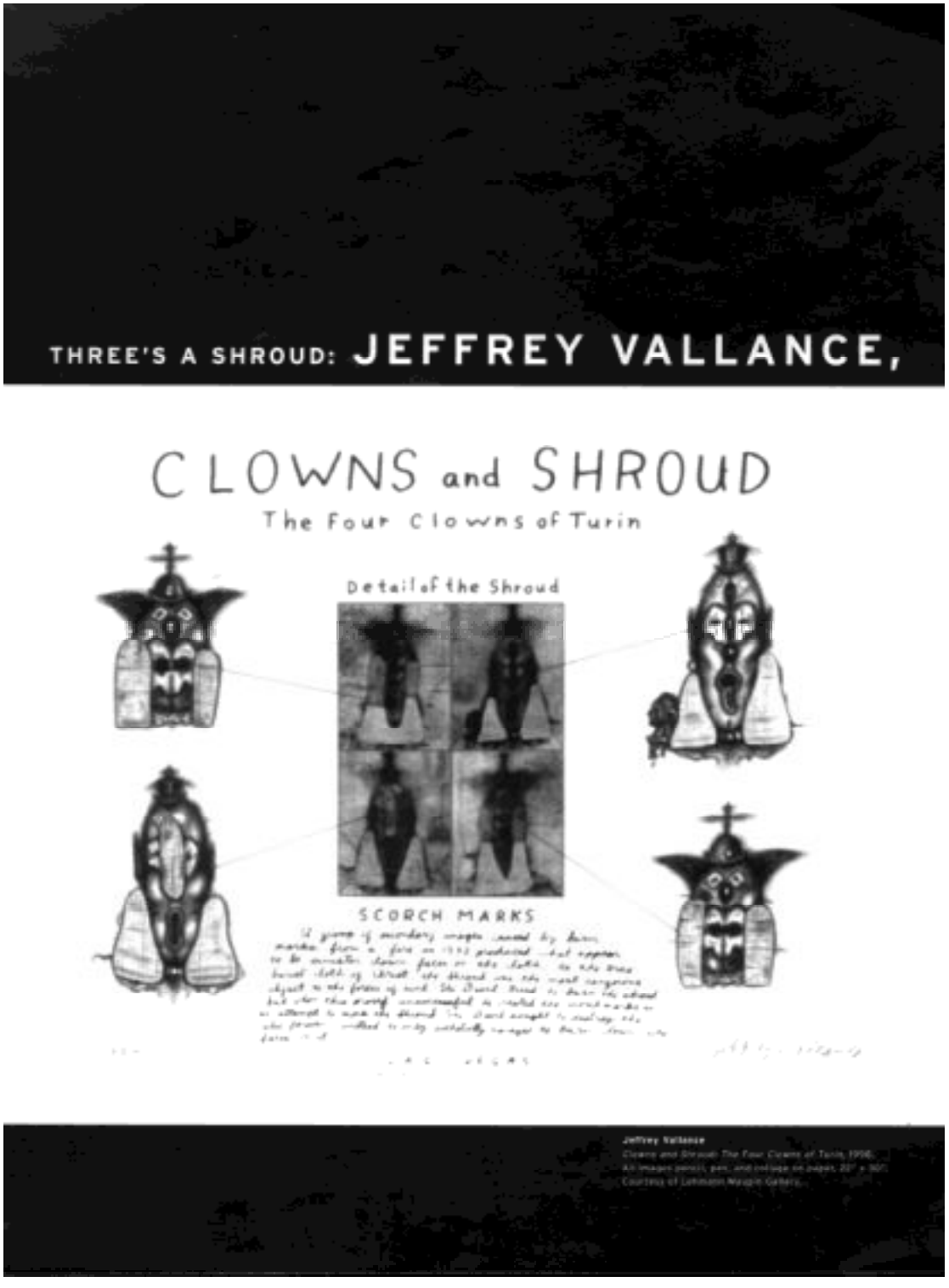
THREE'S A SHROUD: JEFFREY VALLANCE,



Jeffrey Vallance
Clowns and Shroud: The Four Clowns of Turin, 1998.
Courtesy of Lehmann Maupin Gallery.

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Three's a Shroud: Jeffrey Vallance, God, and You
BY JAN ESTEP

> The Church has always reserved the right to pass judgment upon the arts, deciding which of the works of artists is in accordance with faith, piety, and cherished traditional laws, and thereby suited to sacred purposes.
> - The Vatican[1]

> People see... what and whom they want to see.
> - Jeffrey Vallance[2]

A while back on Fox-TV I watched a science/religion show called "Signs of God" that examined miraculous happenings: a statue of the Virgin crying real tears, the image of the Holy Mother appearing on a delicate rose petal, a woman spontaneously reliving Christ's walk to the cross timed to the hour, including the manifestation of stigmata. The show appeared to be working a kind of reverse psychology: by admitting that some claims are false, forged out of trickery and an overly wishful belief, the truly holy claims will stand out in relief. The producers of the show were establishing standards—hardcore, scientific criteria—by which to determine God's presence. By debunking the most manufactured cases, they demonstrated to skeptics that they are not willing to accept any and all possible claims, but only the most indubitable. It felt like they were trying to win me over with their rational, clear thinking.

As a recovering Catholic I'm always a little torn when it comes to demonstrations of God's power. Push came to shove during this program when the last segment aired. Caught on tape— "uncut" and "unadulterated"—is the physical reenactment of Christ's last hours of life as experienced by the prophetic woman. A furiously praying priest stands over her, the woman's daughter and friends so overcome with her pain that is Christ's pain they are in tears, and the camera crew and I witness a supposedly miraculous event, right there in her bedroom, broadcast straight to my living room. Blood was collected from the wounds as they spontaneously appeared and compared to samples of her blood drawn earlier. The thinking was, if Jesus were appearing through her body—if she were *becoming* Christ—then his DNA would appear in the blood issuing from her hands and face. The blood samples were also a protection against any tomfoolery: scientists could check for animal or fake blood and prove if she were

somehow making a switch. Watching the tape of her performance, I didn't need the blood tests to convince me that something real was going on. Not so surprisingly, and sadly for the hosts of the show, the DNA tests revealed that it was her blood, not the blood of Jesus. But the wounds and emotions seemed to be identical to what Jesus would have experienced on his way to Golgotha. For my own peace of mind, I understand her transformation in terms of psychogenesis brought on by a devout religious belief. Her faith allowed her to manifest the wounds and suffering of Christ on the cross, and that in itself seems miraculous to me.

This issue of faith and what it can provide or allow comes up in the work of Jeffrey Vallance. He too operates under a dictate to make sense of religious, miraculous phenomena, to show that there is something rational and sensible about believing in supernatural occurrences. Of course, many people have to spend a little bit of time with his work for that to occur to them, since the work is easily misunderstood as ironic, even blasphemous. Likening the exhumation of a dead, buried chicken to Christ's resurrection (*Blinky, The Friendly Hen*); interpreting various burn marks on the Shroud of Turin as evil clown faces (*The Clowns of Turin*); finding the visage of Saint Luke, patron saint of artists, in a slab of meat ("St. Luke on a Rump Roast"[3]); or creating fake copies of religious relics (*Sudarium, The Holy Lance*): these are not typical acts of the pious and faithful, especially when they are presented to the world under the category of fine art. That move in itself adds a layer of self-awareness, commentary, and history that removes it from a "pure" matter of spirit. His works are not presented naively as religious art but as contemporary art-world art and exhibit all the sophistication and knowingness of a conceptual practice. They look like pranks par excellence but something more serious seems to be going on underneath the immediately recognizable surface. Once I got past the humor of Vallance's work, I started to wonder about his belief, specifically whether he really believes in God and miracles, whether I am supposed to believe in his belief, or even whether he wants me to believe. He makes me question my disbelief, and at moments the work seems to transcend belief altogether. His proselytizing is undetectable one minute and unavoidable the next.

Vallance was raised in, as he calls it, "a very Lutheran family" in West San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles.[4] They went to church every Sunday, and Vallance was first an acolyte (the Lutheran equivalent of an altar boy), then president of the Lutheran youth group in his teens, and in his twenties a member of the church choir, singing solos for the congregation. Given the choice between public and Christian school, he attended a Lutheran school because he thought it would be more interesting. His familiarity with Bible stories can be attributed to that experience. His interest in the relics of the Catholic Church is traced back to his grade-school teacher Mr. A. H. Stelhorn who always showed slides from his vacation trips to the Vatican; these slide shows cultivated in the artist a

distinctly un-Lutheran interest in religious images, rituals, and icons that continues to fuel his work. Martin Luther was strictly opposed to the worship of relics.

In his late teens and early twenties Vallance experienced a spell of adolescent angst and lost his faith totally. For a while, instead of believing in the Bible he believed only in the rationality of science, and decided that if he couldn't prove something scientifically he could reject it. While in this state of mind he read a book by Charles Fort titled *The Book of the Damned* written in 1919, which examines anomalous objects and accounts that are "damned" by scientific and academic institutions because they don't mesh with prevailing orthodoxy. Strictly speaking, it is a book about the paranormal and the lines that systems such as science must draw to safeguard their beliefs against the nonsensical. Fort is the inspiration for *Fortean Times*, a London magazine founded in 1973 that investigates strange phenomena. Fort was skeptical about scientific explanations, arguing that science is just another belief system that reflects the scientist's personal proclivities more than any objective rules of evidence; just like religion it has its pet theories called "facts" and its relics called "proof." In thinking that any belief at all is absurd—be it in science or religion—Vallance concluded that he had the freedom to believe in whatever he chose and his beliefs didn't have to make rational sense. He could believe in Adam and Eve or Noah's Ark simply because he wanted to, because faith is about believing in things that are impossible. Now he pretty much believes in everything: the Weeping Virgin statues, Satan, Bigfoot, extraterrestrials; they are all believable and they are all fair game. But the artist does not believe in anything in the typical way—he religiously recontextualizes his secular beliefs. For example, Bigfoot in Vallance's universe is akin to a devil.

Although quick to say that most traditional believers might find him a heretic since he is skeptical and credulous at the same time and a bit too permissive, Vallance describes his current religion as a mix of Catholicism and Lutheranism. He prefers the early volatile, scatological, and apocalyptic Lutheranism began by Martin Luther in 1517 rather than the cleaned-up, conservative version of today, which he finds too repetitive and habitualized. Lutherans were the first Christian European sect to break from the Roman Catholic Church. What fascinates Vallance is the moment of separation and Luther's struggle to articulate his own interpretation of the scriptures before his protest and Protestantism were institutionalized. Vallance describes Luther as a visionary and a revolutionary, fighting with the devil, full of prophesy and visions, politically motivated to challenge the Church's custom of selling indulgences, forgiving sins for a little lucre. (At the time of the rebellion Catholics were trying to raise money to build a magnificent new church, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, to house all of their relics of Christ and the saints.) It is the fight within Luther that interests Vallance: the confrontation between institutionalized belief and radical new interpretations and ideas.

The love of confrontation is central to most of Vallance's work. He may profess admiration by his frequent choice of religious themes, but his dissection of rituals, relics, and Biblical lore may well come across as sacrilegious and disrespectful. Much of his work looks as if he is satirizing blind faith or showing how arbitrary—no matter how divinely sanctioned—meaning is. The artist's investigation of shrouds is a good example. Blinky the hen was purchased in 1979 from a supermarket in a Saran-wrapped Styrofoam tray and ceremoniously buried in a pet cemetery; at the time the piece was really just something the artist felt like doing, but he rationalized it to be about societal attitides toward animals. Inadvertently, Vallance had made a shroud of Blinky by resting the adopted chicken on a piece of butcher paper before burial. Ten years later Vallance recast Blinky in terms of Christ's story of suffering and redemption. Blinky was "resurrected" from her grave. At the end of the video that documents the exhumation a cartoon caricature of Blinky rises toward heaven, head and body reunited in a glorious, transcendent moment, "proof" that domestic chickens suffer and die for our flesh-eating sins. For Vallance, Blinky is only a stand-in for us; it was the only way the artist could enact all the rituals and emotions of a funeral without having to have a real dead human body. Vallance came to the understanding that in the Blinky saga he was subconsciously acting out an archetypal story from the collective consciousness. As theologians say of the Passion, "It is written on the hearts of men."

Pursuing the line of research sparked by the avian shroud, Vallance started studying the Shroud of Turin, the burial cloth wrapped around Jesus Christ. The artist read dozens of books on the subject and even moved to Turin for a while to be near the original. Bypassing the primary stains, since so much research has already been done on them, he found four clown faces in the secondary marks, complete with funny tufts of hair, oversized collars, round noses, exaggerated make-up around the eyes and mouth, and little beanies with twirlers on them. Taken the wrong way, this discovery is a potential mockery of Christ and the Shroud, because it seems absurd to assert that there are clown faces in the holy relic. But when you follow the artist's research and see that the images are actually on the Shroud and he's just pointing them out for us, you can't dispute the validity of his report. He argues that his findings in no way destroy existing beliefs—he isn't calling into question the existence of the cloth as a sacred relic—his interpretation just adds a new chapter. But that new data required some explanation, and to make matters even more complicated Vallance proposed that the only way to make sense of the clowns was to attribute them to the Devil. In 1532 the Holy Shroud was almost destroyed in a fire; this is when the secondary scorch marks were seared into the cloth. In thinking about who would want to destroy the relic the most, Vallance speculates that the Devil must be to blame. Thus if anyone was making a mockery of the Church, it was the Devil, not Vallance. Further research by the artist shows that the earliest extant images of clowns resemble grotesque demons: bulbous appendages, distorted grimaces, with

strange projections sticking out from their heads and bodies. Contemporary clowns, to us, look just like evil spirits of yore. The gumption of the claim sits right alongside the pedantic methodology of his homework, and once again the viewer is torn both ways: Do you believe him or not? Do you believe he believes or not? But it does not matter because this very process of questioning lights the fuse to a mental whiplash that creates a kind of transcendence that leads on to new, unexpected conclusions.

Vallance's challenge to recognized institutions plays out in the art world too, given its current disdain for serious religious art. Says Vallance, "It's almost taboo. You can do art that makes fun of religion, or makes a mockery of it, or shows it in an ironic way, but if [the art world] thinks that you believe in it, they don't go for it." Because the work is not preachy it's open to multiple interpretations. People enter into the work on the level to which they are attuned, so they can see humor or sacred art or art-world messages, whatever they want to see. The art world tends to overlook the spiritual levels of the work, and religious people do not see the humor in it. Vallance is always trying to push and test our limits as to what we're willing to entertain, and the stranger the findings and the more unsettled a viewer is, the better. "That's what I like to do—it's at the heart of my work—to come up with these ideas that are so far out, so insane, then create a theory that makes them seem reasonable. The weird part of it is, in the end I always believe my own theories. I'm the first one to believe, because I find the evidence."

Vallance has also found evidence of George Washington's visage in the Shroud of Turin, suggesting that the image foretells the founding of a new Christian nation in young America. Besides the images traditionally seen, he has identified hundreds of new images in the eyes of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City, first encountered when the artist crawled in pilgrimage across the Guadalupe Plaza and up the steps to the Basilica where the image is sheltered. The rose-petal stain of the Virgin was manifested in 1531 on a poor man's cloak in response to his prayers for a sign from God. In the Virgin's eyes Vallance has found images of Richard Nixon, Abraham Lincoln, Dwight Eisenhower, Elvis Presley, Bigfoot, Jesus Christ, and other saints and historical figures. He postulates that the endlessly unfolding eyes function as prophesies of the entire history of the world.

Broadening his audience, the artist also writes a regular column called "Paranormal Roundup" for the *L.A. Weekly*, and has been a contributor to *Fortean Times* for almost 20 years. Throughout his career there has been a constant generation of cultural, historical scholarship—part myth, part fact—about the odd, the strange, and the absurd. Vallance speculates that his mind is wired to think in the same way as a religious devotee may think. Religious people try to make sense of things they want to believe, and that's what Vallance does in his art. It's an attempt to find out what he believes by pursuing how far his faith will take him, to what lengths his mind will extend. Religious people, or at least

practicing Catholics, accept a certain miraculous generation of holy objects—they believe that an object can become sacred if it comes in contact with someone or something sacred. For example, a bit of bone or a lock of hair, because it is part of a saint or martyr, is revered as a powerful relic; and anything that has touched an original relic of the cross also shares in that object's holiness. Vallance likens this transference of value to the process of making art, and he pursues the similarity in a number of ways. In the most general sense, artists make things of value through their touch and association; an art object is a relic of a subjective creative act, and the greater the aura of the artist, the more value the relic/artwork has. By cultivating an engaging personality and living an interesting life, an artist increases the value of his or her works. The more information we have about a person's life, like reading about the lives of the apostles and saints, the more meaning we can give their acts and deeds. Vallance has been particularly interested in the underdogs: Judas Iscariot, Marion Barry, and Richard Nixon, people who may not have been seen to have a positive impact on the world but nonetheless have made a significant impression. Each of these underdogs involves a story that starts from a fall from grace and leads to a glorious comeback and knowing about their unbelievable "resurrections" can make them more compelling. This fascination with personality is why we auction off Andy Warhol's cookie jars and Jackie Onassis's pearls; these objects are special because they handled them. The more famous the artist, the hotter the relic; the same with the saints.

In a more literal sense regarding the theory of relics, Vallance has created fake relics, doing his best to turn them into truly sacred objects in accordance with the religious logic of close association. *The Holy Lance* is a replica of the Lance of Longinus belonging to the Roman centurion who jabbed the lance into the side of Christ while he was being crucified; it was the wound that finally killed Christ. It is kept in the treasure chamber at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna. Forged in steel, the new relic was brought as close to the original as possible and then further sanctified in the plaza outside the palace through a reenactment of a ritual last performed in the sixteenth century. The lance was dipped in wine and then pierced into cloth to symbolize the wounds inflicted on Jesus by Longinus; the spear and the cloth were then exhibited as performance relics. In the same vein, the artist claims to possess, and exhibits as such, one of the satin sweat cloths that Elvis Presley used to drape around his neck and throw out into the audience at his concerts.

In another relic piece called *Sudarium*, Vallance made drawings of the stains in the Veil of Veronica. (This handkerchief was offered to Jesus by Saint Veronica on the road to Calvary outside Jerusalem, and it is believed that on it an image of Christ's holy visage was impressed.) The artist then sent one drawing to the pastor of the Lutheran Church of Resurrection in Canoga Park, California, his family church; one to Dr. Paul Crouch, president of Trinity Broadcasting Network, a Christian television station based in Orange

County, California; and another to Pope John Paul II in Rome. All three men sent letters back acknowledging the gift: the pastor hung the drawing above the desk in his church office and announced the new addition of religious artwork in the weekly newsletter, Crouch wrote in detail of the suffering seen in Jesus's eyes, and Monsignor C. Sepe signed off for the Pope on the acceptance of the drawing into their private collection. Vallance exhibits the letters alongside copies of the drawings, which are made more meaningful because of their religious validation. This was not the first time Vallance had tried to get a piece into the Vatican collection. Years earlier, when recycling a religious painting he made in Lutheran school about the temptation of Christ, he carefully boxed it up and mailed it off to Rome. The Vatican rejected the offering, but it came back authoritatively stamped "religious object." As Vallance tells the story, the amateur painting was transformed into something more holy because the Catholic institution stamped its official mark on it. These "authenticating" letters do add a layer of significance to the object, not only because they signify approval and acceptance by various religious leaders, but they also demonstrate the ability of Vallance to situate his art in multiple contexts: religious and irreligious, real-world and art-world. As a viewer I systematically imagine the machinations that propel the work into seemingly disparate circumstances, and the full impact of the work rests with that expanse.

At a recent show of Vallance's drawings in New York, gallery-opening press announcements about the "offbeat religious artwork" brought in a whole assortment of people from both inside and outside the usual crowd. A group of nuns showed up and the artist curiously watched them look at the work: first *The Shroud of Blinky Circular Logic,* then *Liberace was Catholic,* and then *The Eyes of Guadalupe, President Washington vs. Saint Longinus, Face on Mars,* and on to *Clowns and Shroud: The Four Clowns of Turin*. Vallance wondered what their reaction would be. He approached one of the nuns and asked her straight out, "What do you think? Is it insane? You can tell me," expecting a firm scolding. Instead, she seemed transfigured in ecstasy. She beamed a smile and congratulated him: "This is such important work. It's so good to see someone doing it."

Knowing that at the same time a nun can have a religious experience and an art-world person can laugh their head off just a few feet away is crucial to understanding the ecumenicalism of Vallance's position (if you consider art a form of faith). In his world, religious rapture and laughter are somehow related. One reaction doesn't cancel out the other; in fact, the work is made for all these levels of engagement.

It is this multiplicity that returns me to the "Signs of God" television show. I watched the spontaneous reenactment of Jesus Christ's last few hours and was amazed at the woman's faith; another person watching may have been amazed by Christ's visitation. The ontological claims spiral out in ever-widening arcs, limited only by the viewer's

skeptical disposition. Vallance's ability as a trickster, crafting his stories with all their scientific, scholarly buttressing, activates my own ability for conjecture: To what lengths will my mind go? And this is a real experience. In the end, I may not have a clear idea what it is or how to label it, or whether it is irreverent or should be hallowed, but Vallance's work certainly opens up my thinking about what faith can be. And, if I sit with it, the work takes me somewhere I didn't expect to go, namely, across the great skeptical divide. The irony in Vallance's work is that there is no irony. Praise be to God.

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[1] From the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, No. 122, Vatican II Document, as quoted in Jeffrey Vallance, "Veil Lance," in *The World of Jeffrey Vallance* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1994), 83. Many of the religious artifacts and performances mentioned are described in detail in this book.

[2] Jeffrey Valiance, "Nixon in Nature," *L.A. Weekly*, September 13-19, 1996, 51.

[3] Jeffrey Vallance, *Art Issues*, Summer 1996, 28-31.

[4] Interview with the author, August 1999; all subsequent references are from this interview unless otherwise noted. Vallance divides his time between Las Vegas and Lapland and is currently Professor in International Contemporary Art at Umeå University in northern Sweden.