

GILES-GOAT BOY

Stephanie LaCava on John Barth, Authorship, and “Giles” at Gagosian Athens

Stephanie LaCava

Josh Kline, Forever 27, 2013, Video still HD video, color, sound, 14:39 min. Image courtesy the artist.

The Believer October 5, 2016



Here I am, waiting for an update on Steven Soderbergh’s TV series adaptation of John Barth’s 1960 book, *The Sot-Weed Factor*. Confirmed again late last year, the project doesn’t seem to have moved forward, unsurprising considering Hollywood’s fear about the commercial viability of such a story. This is itself important considering the Barth’s own complicated vision of creative work, virtue and the establishment, whatever form it may take.

Still, the moment is ripe for that trickster Barth to rear his head after years of having fallen out of fashion. So, perhaps unsurprisingly, another of his works has popped up as

a clever touchstone in a contemporary context as the crux of a new Gagosian gallery exhibition, which opened a few weeks ago in its Athens' location.

Through the end of November, "Giles," a group show curated around Barth's metafictional novel *Giles-Goat Boy* will be on display.

"I am a romantic leftover that enjoys reading and feels comfortable in literature," says independent curator Artemis Baltoyanni about the genesis of the show. When Baltoyanni reread the *Giles-Goat Boy*, she was taken with the text's approach to redefining and exploring the idea of failure, both as an artist and human being.

At around eight hundred pages, the 1966 cult-classic is a multi-layered narrative surrounding the life and times of Billy Bockfuss (our George Giles, goat boy) on his hero's journey to become a great spiritual leader known as the Grand Tutor. A metafictional work, the start of the book

features a disclaimer about the story's origin, claiming it is not from the author's imagination, but rather from another man who then shoulders the origin as technologic—from the machinations of a computer. All this sounding suspiciously similar to academic discussions of speculative realism and aesthetics, and the current landscape of the artist's identity amid new media.

In her original notes on the project, Baltoyanni writes. "In *Goat-Boy* we find an alter ego of the author, one that captures the rite of passage from early naif writer to maturity—perhaps even later recognition and renown." For her, the cohesion exists in an awareness of one's own artificiality, or the artificiality of pursuing an abstracted identity as artist or author. "I have never done a show of this size," she wrote me, "and to be honest it is a bit like opening a therapist's office (in the sense of one that studies, not one that heals)."

As part of the preface to *Giles-Goat Boy* is a argument among fictitious editors, Barth himself in a way joining in. He questions the quality of the work, and whether it should even be published.

On August 3, 1966 in a *New York Times* article entitled, *The Surfacing of Mr. Barth* [Laughter] Eliot Fremont Smith wonders if Barth is the most original and brilliant writer in the English language at that moment or "the most impertinent and long-winded?" Despite polarized reviews, *Giles-Goat Boy* became a short-lived bestseller on publication. A brilliant example of gaming cultural capital, and an apt place for Baltoyanni to find footing for her show.

Included in the show are sixteen works among them is *Untitled, 1987*, Cindy Sherman's photograph of a female form face down in pinecones and autumn leaves, bow barrettes in her hair, and a doughy pastry in her hand. At the bottom right two hard cover titles are visible, one with the French title "*Les aventures de...*" stained white underwear at the other corner. A children's narrative—some kind of myth— among the discarded books at the dismal scene.

There is also Bobby Jesus's Alma Mater, passage from a movement therein: where is the hand, 2014 Frances Stark's digital print on plastic of a black and white chessboard collaged with images: George W. Bush, Tupac, and what looks to be a riff on an old etching of men jousting on horseback. Written in broad black marker strokes is "Young Andres" on the top and "Don Quixote" across the bottom. The rectangular work mounted to the wall is circled in thick red spray paint, a floating hand silhouette to its left, a single finger pointed back at it. Lest we forget Don Quixote as one of the great self-referential narratives.

Maurizio Cattelan's piece Untitled 2009 features a black rubber boot pulled tight over what is presumably a form of the artist's head. Cattelan's work may be the most obvious of the lot, the artist himself having achieved worldwide acclaim and visibility for his own subversive sculpture making use of complimentary characters and themes.

Forever 27 2013 is Josh Kline's nearly fifteen minute color video of a Kurt Cobain character talking about staging his own art show, his hair dyed green, dressed in a tie-dye shirt, pinkie ring on his left hand, a comedically large cowrie shell at his neck. To create this film, Kline used software to place Cobain's face on that of an actor.

Baltoyanni was initially interested in Kline's 3D-scanned portraits that included dismembered limbs as a visual extension of the notion of metafiction. She decided on Forever 27 because she felt the interview with the Cobain figure mirrored the psychological trajectory of Giles, similar to that of artist as disposable commodity.

The question of authorship and identity—of what it takes to create work and be seen and how exactly one chooses to play the game is not a new battle, rather one that shapeshifts with the times.

Consider French author Romain Gary writing under the pseudonym Emile Ajar in the 70s, in part to prove the critical establishments interest in youth and buzz. His plan worked—Ajar even won the Prix Goncourt, the prestigious prize given to an author only once in his lifetime. Gary became a two-time winner in a historic episode which speaks to the conceit of the show, most specifically Kline's video.

I think Barth might caution against quick, single-minded judgment of the viability of any artist's career without acknowledgement of abstracted layers of gamesmanship. Lest the unwitting cynic ends up the only one not laughing.