

Positions
Bridget Riggir-Cuddy

Meg asks me to play Mary Boone because I am unafraid to perform, having pursued stage acting as a serious high school pastime – and letting everyone know about it. She says I have such an interesting face. I know: big eyes, cheeks, teeth – wide features can carry things.

I say yes, because I have committed to help artists. It's the most comfortable, what feels like the most natural, way to engage with them. I guess I'm one of those people "stuck painfully between" as Andrea Fraser puts it; between luxuriating in the power, prestige and privilege the artworld offers, and wanting to have absolutely nothing to do with any of it.¹ But helping friends on their projects doesn't require my tired defences of doubt and manoeuvre. I can say just that, "yes!"

Though, this time I immediately regret it. The more I learn about Mary Boone – the more I think about what people have said about me. I like to exercise humility, I realise, to give the look of not being concerned by my image. Saying no would have allowed disowning and allying with her in private measure. I said yes because I was confident in the distance between myself and Mary Boone – comprehending my disavowal – I wish I hadn't.



Boone, a New York based art-dealer and gallerist, played a serious part in the art market of the 1980s. For her youth and 'aggression', she came to be known as the 'new breed' of art-dealer. The new breed, I'm guessing, true to the 80s, approached their business unabashedly, and developed the professional profile and conduct we see still in gallerists today.

Mary Boone is a celebrity. She was played by Parker Posey in Julian Schnabel's 1996 *Basquiat*, was sued by Alec Baldwin for misrepresenting a painting, and in 2018 was found guilty of defrauding the IRS. It's said she spent the missing money on cosmetic surgery, renovating her apartment, and on a shopping spree at Hermès and Louis Vuitton. Mary spun her 30-month sentencing to become the "Martha Stewart of the art world".

Hers is a cautionary tale; the epitome of what not to do and be in the artworld. By current standards the 'new breed' was a turn for the worse. Today, of course, there's plenty of hope ours is a meaningful, purposeful artworld, less filled with vanity, excess, and especially not lies.

I have never sold an artwork and don't care for shopping. I work in a gallery one day a week, with a few extra hours for openings – the hosting and clean-up required. I use the title "Art Administrator" and like to imagine that this would be more definitive in a place with more resources and minds, a place other than Auckland. Here, still – at least to the aspiring plenty – I am an available arbiter of value in art – I am Mary Boone.

1. 'There's no place like home', Andrea Fraser in the 'Whitney Biennale 2012' (catalogue), Yale University Press, 2012.



Bourdieu said one's relationship to the social world is never more clearly expressed than in the space and time one feels entitled to take from others.² In my experience, you are never told you are a gatekeeper by someone who doesn't personally want something from you. This is why it's so particularly annoying. It exposes both parties – what is, and what is expected. It's embarrassing and cumbersome to process. Oh, they'll say, you deserve power but it's misused not spent on them. Nothing can change – the statement is itself a kind of binding designation. What you weren't willing to offer you still won't offer – reenacting your better judgment and denying anything different.

In his later life my Dad found employment as a live-in caretaker of a community hall, and later a high-school groundsman. This meant as kids we had a kind of unfettered access to the school pool and the stages of empty halls. The terms were always clear – we were there because of his work – though it still felt special – to be in these places without the community, maybe it even felt safe – that the space cared for us too.

Even though I have laughed in the past about what was my central Auckland real-estate portfolio – with keys to art spaces both sides of K Road – I only recently thought about the privilege Dad's work afforded us, when I started cleaning a yoga studio in exchange for membership. I guess working in galleries, both paid and unpaid, is too complicated to feel similar. Or maybe they aren't nice places to be in alone.



Meg's mood board for the film included: a glamour shot of Mary Boone seated in her gallery's viewing room; a short video profiling her filmed in 1986; a print profile from the publication *The ART Dealers*; and, the opening paragraph from the eighth chapter of J.G Ballard's 1975 *High-Rise*. The excerpt, from the chapter *Predatory Birds*, describes its character's discontent for the designed lifestyles of educated professional people, for 'good-taste'. The 'good-taste' in question, reminded me of Meg; her apartment, her photos, her things. It must have reminded her of Sarah – her once art-dealer and my employer, whose gallery and carefully selected office chair feature in the film. Meg hopes that Sarah won't be upset by the project. I'm relieved it's not about me but still try prompting: "this could just as easily be about you two, as artists, right?"



Meg and Rea will make fake 'prop' artworks for the shoot, to be staged in 'Mary Boone's gallery'. After an opening on K Road, a group of us head up to Meg and Rea's studio. Meg is out of town and it's the first time we see her

2. 'Distinctions. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste'. Pierre Bourdieu, translated by Richard Nice. Harvard University Press, 1984 (466–84).

'fake' works. I am delighted by them – and go on about them to the point when someone has to redirect us to Rea's paintings, which are unsurprisingly adroit.

It's funny, the good work a pretence or stand-in can do. Clowns depend on bad disguise to play illusions of identity – to be the opposite of what they half appear to be.³ Medieval court jesters are often depicted holding a mirror and a wooden staff with their image carved at its end. The jester uses his staff to folly self-love, "foolishness pleases itself". In one trick, to show others' wrongness, the jester turns his mirror on the spectator, who sees their own image and the fake fool – his staff – reflected back.

When I first learnt about clowning – I chose to emulate the Little Tramp. I borrowed a bowler and cane from the school costume room and the oversized jacket and shoes from Mum's wardrobe. Round our house I practised his bow-legged walk and made one with the cane and all its illusions. I couldn't perfect the ballet of it. Nor did I really understand the trick of this beloved character. Chaplin's Little Tramp is forever-trying to escape his permanent position as outcast. He elicits emotion in most of us because he is so unfit for the manners and machines of the modern world. The gag is that he doesn't really want admission.



\$50.00 is deposited into my account by Meg, so I can get a manicure of 'classic red' just before the shoot. But I'm incapable of selecting classic red. Checking my selection against the mood board now – a note under Meg's reference image reads "classy colour".

I arrive at the gallery, having given them the key to set up while I get my nails done. It is a meticulously arranged film shoot. A fold-out trestle table holds a 12 pack of 300ml bottled water, coffee, a run sheet, props, croissants, and a cosmetics spread.

Rea spends a long time doing my make-up. She pencils my waterline, which is excruciating for us both – my eyes keep watering. She squints her eyes and cocks her head, considering her work.

To organise looks for certain events, Meg and Rea keep running lists of clothing items and ideas, they tell me. They're good at costuming. The black capris are Moschino, Meg's own, the white clinician's top, Marni, borrowed from a recycle boutique she is friendly with. A pair of high-heels is purchased, that I am allowed to keep after the shoot. The hairs on my legs had shown through the stockings in our test shoot, so I shave that morning.

Already in costume and sat reading over the short list, my co-actor is committed; shrugging his shoulders, searching for a particular hunch. It's clear to him, this will be a performance. I practice mincing in my heels.

I am asked to play Mary Boone selling the prop art to my co-actor, a 'suit' who is keen on good investment but knows too little about the work he sees. During the first few takes, I am aware that his gestures – crook – caricature – overpower the me/not me I try to hold as

3. 'Some Principles of Clowning'. Adriane L. Despot in *The Massachusetts Review*, Winter, 1981.

performance. Since the scene will be scored over I throw out a German accent, a bad one, the pretend curator/psychoanalyst type. The accent's illegitimacy distances me into character – "You like birds you sick fuck?"

It works again when we record the voice-over. My native accent tucks away in an uncontrollable denial, and I can't use my own voice. This happens somewhat regularly in my ordinary life, when I use the 'Kath and Kim Accent' instead of my natural North of Auckland inflection. They are pretty similar – people are just allowed to laugh at one and not the other.



The film's first draft is too still – too close to the mood board, to photography. I play the Odessa Steps scene from *Battleship Potemkin* to illustrate Eisenstein's idea of montage as meaning made in the conflict of opposing images. Rea wants to go full-bird. She has already painted portraits of Meg and dealer Geoff Newton with beaks. I think it's a good idea, of course, a proper costume – transformation – theatre, not mimicry.

We talk about Nicolas Roeg's *The Witches* and Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* – good examples of womanly ambivalence collapsed into full grotesque. We frame Mary's disordered eating – she gorges out of sight.

Meg and Rea laugh at me from behind the camera. Though I didn't intend to, I am glad to be funny. People laugh at things that aren't funny for many reasons. Their breaking the fourth wall reminds me that it wasn't really there, or required in the first place. I'm recognisable despite my disguise.

Inside the beak that Rea made, is a red, plastic clown nose. It clips perfectly to my own – a tight and heavy clasp – weighted by the paper mache build-up. It hurts enough that my eyes, already irritated by feathers and face paint, are a maddened red for the shoot's duration.



It's not that I can't disown Mary Boone and all the ways her character collides with mine. It's that I don't need to. Because any place where patterns and clear expectations exist will be good territory for clowning. Clowns have an extraordinary freedom from rules – to manipulate, transform, and break order.⁴ Laughter, in turn, is momentary release – an expression of pleasure in changing patterns, or a defence against what is recognised at play in oneself.