

Claire Barliant, "The Artless Dodger: Jim Shaw and His Endless Compendium," **Afterall**, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California, Issue #19, 2008, pp. 91-97

Jim Shaw, *Dream Object (Vise Head)*, 2006, bronze, wood, steel, 119.4 × 137.2 × 90.2cm. Courtesy the artist and Patrick Painter Editions, Vancouver

**The Artless Dodger:  
Jim Shaw and His Endless Compendium  
— Claire Barliant**

A pack of younger artists have been responding tentatively to modernist icons recently, throwing themselves at their feet while chopping off their legs. In contrast, Jim Shaw's bold and unfiltered take on the history of art — along with that of religion and the American West — is always frankly irreverent in its use of these subjects. For some, his voice may be a little too frank. Unlike much of today's art, which is cool and detached, primly following a Conceptual and Minimalist track, Shaw's work is garish, messy, confessional and indulgent. Perhaps its most striking difference, though, is in its relation to time. Though he is wildly prolific, Shaw takes years to complete his projects, which encompass such a range of media and formal styles that they are almost impossible to comprehend fully. Arguments against a hyperactive contemporary art market may be overblown, but there is a case to be made for the diminishing effects of the pressure to produce, and produce quickly. Shaw is hardly immune to this heat, but his idiosyncratic, omnivorous approach results in work that more or less operates in a manner antithetical to a market that likes to eat its prey whole.

Shaw is ruthless in the editing, revising and reconfiguring of his own work, and the often tortuous revision process itself seems to hold a key to understanding his practice. When he showed a selection of *Dream Objects*, paintings and home décor modelled in the shape of body parts at Metro Pictures gallery in New York last year, Shaw reshuffled its contents five weeks after the opening, and doubled the number of works within.<sup>1</sup> The press release explained Shaw's reasoning:

*For the initial installation, Shaw was keenly aware of his impulse to edit works for any number of reasons — perhaps against his better judgment. Works may have been deemed unresolved, undesirable or non-commercial in Shaw's wish to curate a 'traditional' gallery exhibition. Overriding these inhibitions, the second half of the show will illustrate the cumulative effect of the artists' abundant ideas and his desire to see the installation as part of an ongoing artistic practice and not a single exhibition.<sup>2</sup>*

Almost all of Shaw's production could be read through a counter-establishment lens, as long as one acknowledges that for Shaw the lens needs to be wide enough to include not only the current Bush administration and American religious fundamentalism, but also a cultish, elitist and insular art world and its uptight institutions. His work stems from processes of self-discovery that almost always reveal a desire to go against the grain, flipping off the artistic conventions and easy critical characterisations that usually result in watered-down mediocrity. The *Dream Drawings* and *Objects*, which he has been making for the past seventeen years, are just one example of the way in which he continually plumbs the depths of his own subconscious for fresh material, and splays out his id for our bemused analysis. Resisting self-censorship and the inhibitions that come with trying to please the masses, or at least seeming to, he is nevertheless tireless in his efforts to get at the core of *something*.

<sup>1</sup> Jim Shaw, 'Dr Goldfoot and His Bikini Bombs', Metro Pictures, New York, 2007—08.

<sup>2</sup> Press release for the exhibition. Available at [http://www.metropicturesgallery.com/index.php?mode=past&object\\_id=267&view=pressrelease](http://www.metropicturesgallery.com/index.php?mode=past&object_id=267&view=pressrelease) (last accessed on 29 July 2008).





Shaw's cycling through strategies, styles and possibilities, and his refusal to settle, suggest a rejection of a universalising mandate. At times his endless citations and devotion to being thorough, as well as his dedication to articulating multiple voices and points of view, make him seem like one of the most writerly artists out there. And of all the authors he could resemble, Shaw is probably closer in spirit to William Faulkner than, say, E.M. Forster, at least in terms of his sheer obsessiveness. Faulkner once famously said, 'Kill your darlings', referring to passages that, for one reason or another, an author can't relinquish but really should – those parts of a story or a well-crafted turn of phrase that the author loves beyond reason, but which ultimately are detrimental to the overall success of the text. It is fitting that Jim Shaw, who cites Max Ernst as a major influence because of the many styles he tried on and discarded over the course of his lifetime, made an installation that borrowed Faulkner's words as its title.<sup>3</sup>

Shaw's use of the phrase 'Kill your darlings' has another side to it, too: the homicidal undertones resonate with his ongoing cannibalising not only of the work of other artists



– such as the Abstract Expressionists, Judy Chicago or countless comic-book artists – but also of his own prodigious output. Cannibalisation is homage by other means, but it goes hand-in-hand with the seemingly more benign concept of misinterpretation. To paraphrase Harold Bloom, misinterpretation is the first step toward finding artistic freedom. Bloom argued that by misunderstanding the legacy of a writer or artist you are

Jim Shaw, *Dream Object (I dreamt up an image of a yellow walled city with a yellow kid sticking his finger in the outer wall)*, 2004, acrylic on muslin, 6.7 × 11.6m. Courtesy the artist and Patrick Painter Inc, Santa Monica

<sup>3</sup> 'Kill your darlings', Patrick Painter Inc, Santa Monica, 2005. Shaw made a series of paintings of Oist movie posters incorporating colour-field painting and other styles that have fallen out of favour. In an interview with Mike Kelley, Shaw said: 'The Pop artists maintained the large scale of late modernism, and whoever had jumped around stylistically in the past wasn't very well respected; Max Ernst did a lot of jumping around stylistically. I responded to that.' 'Here Comes Everybody: A Conversation Between Jim Shaw and Mike Kelley', *Everything Must Go: Jim Shaw 1974–1999* (exh. cat.), Luxembourg, Geneva and Santa Monica: Casino Luxembourg - Forum d'art contemporain, Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain and Smart Art Press, 1999, p.22.



furiously trying to imitate, you begin to carve out a space for your own style to evolve.<sup>4</sup> Deliberate misinterpretation, then, in Shaw's hands, is not an innocent exercise – it is a revolutionary tool. When he collected and exhibited the work of more than a hundred unknown artists for his first 'Thrift Store Paintings' exhibition in 1990, it was more than a way of rejecting the high/low distinction – it was also a way to give primacy to visions that were warped or twisted, with the unnamed artists seeming to have digested reproductions of famous artworks and discovered their own, alternative style and formal language in the process.

It is often said that Shaw's wide range of references has the effect of flattening hierarchies. His encyclopedic knowledge of popular culture is related perhaps to his having once worked in Hollywood, directing commercials and creating special effects, but the freedom with which he wields this arsenal of knowledge makes his references fully autonomous. His citations are never more than a starting point; they become his own largely because he concentrates on unlikely imbrications, including modernism,



Jim Shaw, *Paintings Found in Oist Thrift Stores (Early History / 1800s)*, 2008, acrylic on board and canvas, one of three paintings, variable dimensions. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

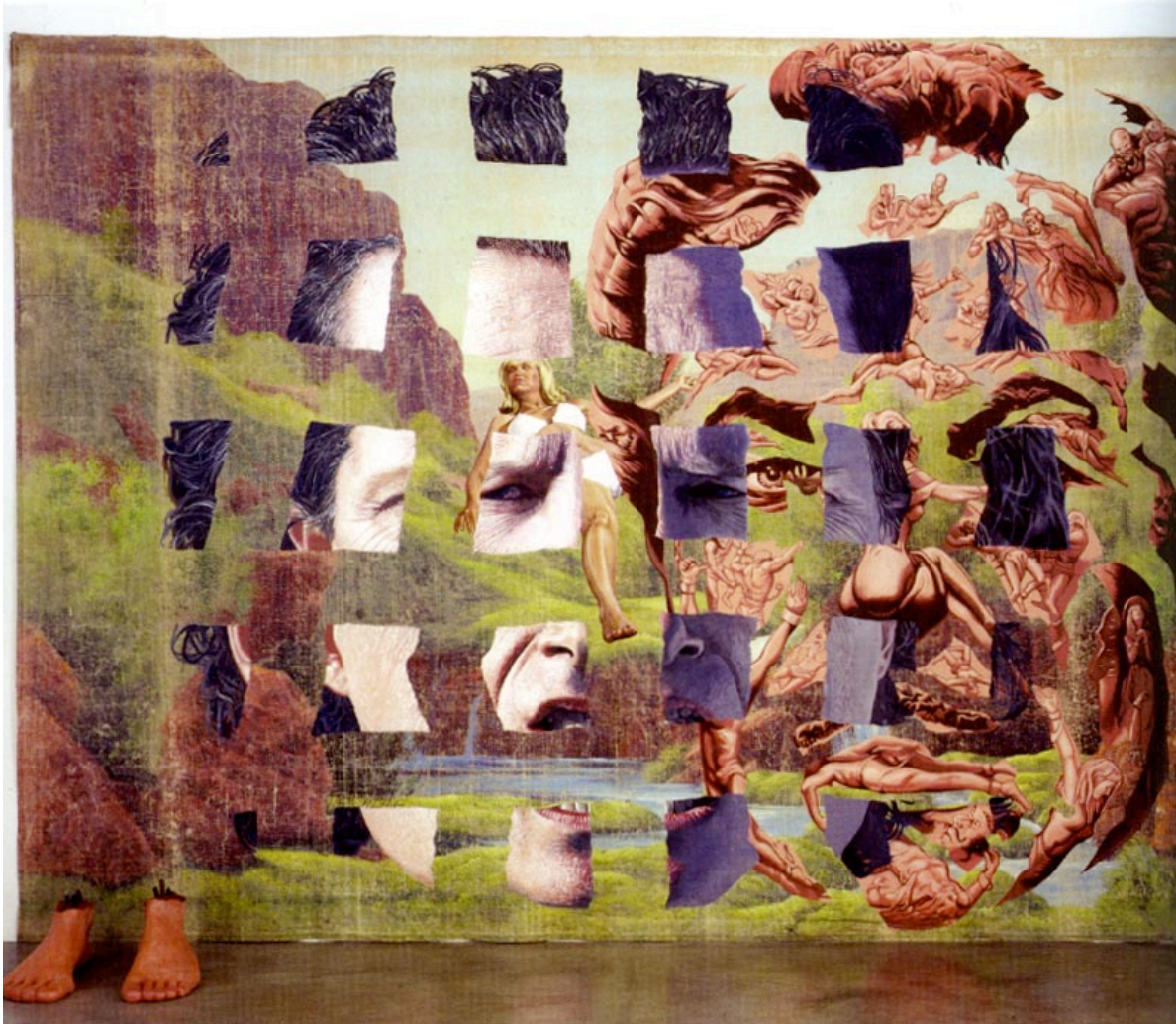
popular culture, politics, religion, mythology and myriad other subjects. In the end, despite using a vast range of references that seems part of an effort to avoid being pinned down, this technique of layering itself becomes something of a signature style. At the same time, Shaw cultivates a massive (and phagocytic) network that encourages shape-shifting, change and transformation, harnessed through the use of narratives such as his self-generated religion (Oism) and *My Mirage* (1986–91), a series of about 170 works – drawings, paintings, sculptures, videos – that recount the life of Billy, a typical American who grows up in a suburban household, rejects the bourgeois values imposed on him during adolescence, experiments with hallucinogens in the 1960s and 70s, discovers Jesus as an adult and is then 'born again'.

4 See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.



Shaw's embrace of multiplicity and his employment of fictitious figures such as Billy have less in common with, say, Rodney Graham's *alter egos* than with the heteronyms and identities created and channelled by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa that enabled him to write in different styles. Like Pessoa, Shaw is less invested in trying on false identities (which often result in facile parodies) than in cutting through the constructs of a social self. 'I want to be free and insincere,' Pessoa wrote.<sup>5</sup> Allying freedom with insincerity may initially seem counterintuitive until one considers the opposite: that sincerity, or 'just being yourself', is itself a falsehood – the world simply imposes too many limits and constraints. But liberating oneself to be insincere and to explore the possibilities of deceit, narrative and fiction opens up unlimited avenues of potential.

Insincerity, like the idea of a mirage, offers a way to project and perform one's own desires. By piling on the references, Shaw allows others the freedom to misinterpret in turn. His discussion of *Utopian Landscape #4 (Plain of Jars)* (1988) reveals the way



the connectors of his mind click into place. In the drawing, which is part of his *Utopian Landscape* series, a seemingly infinite number of jars, each containing a decaying human head in formaldehyde, are laid out in a V formation on a dry field, pockmarked here and there by tiny rocks. One jar in the foreground contains a droopy head, its features squished to fit the confines of the vessel. In a 1999 interview with Mike Kelley, Shaw explains that the piece was based on the Plain of Jars in Laos, a combat site during

<sup>5</sup> Fernando Pessoa, untitled poem, *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems* (trans. R. Zenith), Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2006, p.308.

Jim Shaw, *Dr Goldfoot and His Bikini Bombs*, 2007, acrylic on muslin, 365.8 x 485.1cm (painting), 141.6 x 25.4 x 62.2cm (left foot), 141.6 x 49.5 x 62.2cm (right). Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



the Vietnam war.<sup>6</sup> Hearing about the field during his youth, Shaw envisioned many jars spread out on a plain – and in fact that is pretty close to the truth, as massive ancient rock jars that were possibly once used for burial purposes are scattered throughout the area. Shaw elaborates on the drawing's concept, giving us a glimpse of how his mind works:

JS: *I transmuted that delusion into that Alfred Hitchcock Presents version about the Ray Bradbury story about the head in the jar at the carnival which the hillbillies sit around...*

MK: *...and free-associate about...*

JS: *...and try to understand the meaning of. It compares to the central concept of My Mirage, trying to understand the meaning of life through misinterpretation.*<sup>7</sup>

Faithfully retold by Hitchcock, Bradbury's story 'The Jar' is worth summarising here since it illuminates aspects of Shaw's own work. A man walking through the carnival buys the aforementioned irresistible vessel, bringing it home and enchanting his friends and neighbours with its prismatic allure. The story builds to a grisly conclusion when the man's wife, jealous of the attention her husband showers on the jar, furiously unscrews the top and destroys the mystery of its contents. When it comes time for the husband to choose between the jar and his shrewish wife, well, guess who (or what) wins. The jar's contents are refreshed and the wife mysteriously disappears. Bizarrely, a later remake of this same story on the updated *Alfred Hitchcock Hour* in 1986 featured as its main character a conceptual artist (played by Griffin Dunne, the lead actor in Martin Scorsese's *After Hours*, 1985), whose moribund career explodes when he puts the jar in an exhibition. He too has a jealous wife, whose need to expose the jar's contents leads her to a similar end.

Choosing insincerity over authenticity, and encouraging free association and misinterpretation over any kind of objective analysis – not unlike the lead character in 'The Jar', who can't resist showing off his prize – Shaw aims for, and often gets, our full attention. Throughout his work, there is a palpable undercurrent of aggression and insecurity, an urgent desire to please by creating entire worlds that encourage total immersion. Yet unlike recent works by Los Angeles-based contemporaries such as Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy which evoke fantasy-driven rides at Disneyland (albeit terrifying and complex ones), Shaw's work is more demanding, requiring one to sort through its striated levels and accept that it involves a temporal commitment, often taking years for a single series to run its course.

Unlike *My Mirage*, which channelled the inner life of an individual, Oism, Shaw's most ambitious and enduring project to date, was initiated in the late 1990s and encompasses many more voices. The history of Oism seems loosely based on Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Science movement, although Mormonism is also a model, and one can discern hundreds of other references folded into its ever-growing annals. According to Shaw's mythology, it was founded in upstate New York by a woman called Annie O'Wooten in the early nineteenth century, and celebrates a feminist civilisation that existed 5,000 years ago. O'Wooten's following slowly grows and, after being hassled for her unorthodox views, she moves her flock to Omaha. Fast forward several decades to the birth of Mandy Omaha, who decides to create a fictitious feast based on Oism history and principles set on a round table made of miniature pioneer wagons, each place setting evoking a particular figure or moment pivotal to Oism's growth. She calls her work *The Donner Party* (2003). Mandy Omaha is clearly modelled on Judy Chicago, and *The Donner Party* is, obviously, not just a story of desperate, cannibalistic pioneers, but also a spoof on Chicago's 1979 *The Dinner Party* and her alleged exploitation of the hundreds of assistants that helped her to create it.

During an email interview between Shaw and curators Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun, he is asked: 'Would it be wrong to say that one "enters" your work the way one would a cult?'<sup>8</sup> Shaw doesn't outright deny this is a possibility, maybe because it is difficult to make up a religion as a critique – especially a made-up religion that is replete

6 'Here Comes Everybody: A Conversation Between Jim Shaw and Mike Kelley', *op. cit.*

7 *Ibid.*, p.32.

8 Lionel Bovier and Fabrice Stroun, 'Interview with Jim Shaw', in L. Bovier, F. Stroun and Yves Aupetitlot (eds.), *Jim Shaw: O* (exh. cat.), Zürich and Grenoble: JRP / Ringier and Le Magasin, 2004, p.45.



with its own history, rituals and trappings – without falling into the trap of going so far that it is no longer clear what is being criticised. This contradictory stance gives the work an edge. In Shaw's video *The Rite of 360 Degrees* (2002), which satirises 'the pompous and proprietary boys-club atmosphere that makes the art world so stifling', there is a ritual in which a young artist is initiated into the ranks of the inner circle, the various participants of which form an orchestra.<sup>9</sup> The group includes many established Los Angeles artists and critics, each playing an instrument resembling a different body part – testicular bag pipes, a lute in the shape of an ear, ribcage chimes and so on. As if the body gags weren't enough, the objects have a rough-hewn quality, like props made for a school play. The crafting of these pieces and the camerawork in the video seem intentionally awkward, conjuring a lo-fi aesthetic that is adolescent, even juvenile. Recently Shaw has started using body parts as the basis for more elegantly constructed, functional objects such as nose sconces, butt-head stools and a *chaise longue* shaped like an ear (perhaps as a sly critique of the design world encroaching on art, particularly among a subset of Los Angeles-based artists). Taking the private, the intimate and the anatomical and exploiting them for utilitarian purposes is yet another way of exposing our prejudices: what is gross and uncouth suddenly becomes ... furniture.

A code that needs to be unlocked, surrealist undertones, the use of body parts – Shaw's oeuvre can be usefully compared to that of an East Coast counterpart: Robert Gober. Gober's early work *Slides of a Changing Painting* (1984) shares Shaw's revisionist drive, documenting an impulse to constantly refine, hone and alter a painting on a small board that results in the painting's disappearance altogether – the existence of this infinite project proven only by a slide show tracking the work's dematerialisation. But where Gober's work is sombre, hermetically sealed and *arty*, Shaw's is simply funny, openly courting the viewers by engaging their sense of humour and appealing to a need to experience pleasure. Gober rarely strays into the territory of the comically absurd, but Shaw has no such qualms. He embraces figuration for its purportedly 'impure' status among modernist devotees, going to an extreme that few artists are willing to follow, or even investigate. Gober's later works, including *The Meat Wagon* – installed at the Menil Collection in Houston in 2005 and featuring a fireplace that uses human limbs made of beeswax – have less in common with Shaw's apart from superficial similarities, but still provide another meaningful point of contrast: while Gober's sculptures and installations are technically pristine and often conceptually opaque, Shaw messily lays it all on the table. Viewers can feel like bystanders guiltily sneaking glimpses at carnage, the results of a soul stripped bare for all to see and consume.

The ego, the id and the superego. With Shaw, it is all on display. But that doesn't make it any easier to wrap your head around his oeuvre. Because of their multidimensionality, Shaw's projects can be difficult to describe: shuttling back and forth between reality and fiction is awkward, and inflicts critics with the fear that they will sound like half-wits as they attempt to summarise such a sprawling body of work. Perhaps this is the intended effect – it is certainly in keeping with a practice that defies all efforts at encapsulation. The dismembered body parts left behind by the cannibalistic ritual in his work begin to seem like bits of incriminating evidence. It is worth pointing out that in a more enduring myth of O, the myth of Osiris, the Egyptian god is killed by his own brother, who then scatters his remains to prevent his reincarnation.<sup>10</sup> Talk about killing your darlings.

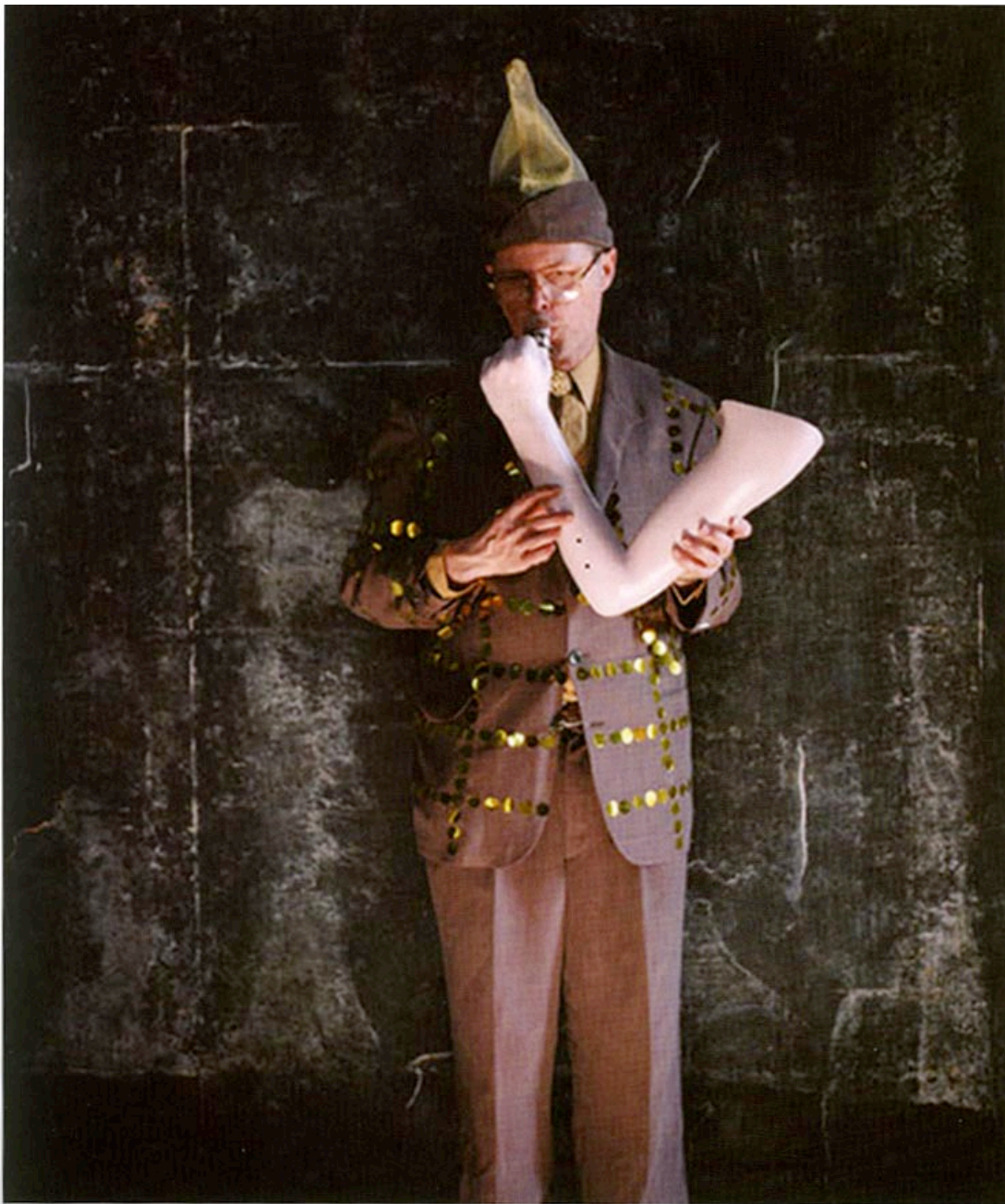
The idea of privileging the notably yonic 'O' above all other letters is more than an endless source of amusement, though – it is a potent symbol, both perfectly delimited and quintessentially void. The 'O' is the symbol for the *ouroboros*, the serpent that bites its own tail. Without a clear point of beginning or ending, the symbol connotes infinity, as well as reflexivity. It is also a sign of alchemy or transformation.<sup>11</sup> Metamorphosis is the sub-theme of Shaw's work that has haunted this essay from its beginning, and it is now time to complete the circle and come to terms with it. Billy's being 'born again', the Oist theory that time is going backwards, even Shaw's own relentless tinkering and revising – all point toward an imaginative reality where the rules of time don't figure.

<sup>9</sup> Doug Harvey, 'Chasing His Own Tale: Jim Shaw's Closed Circuit Religion', *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>10</sup> *The Rite of 360 Degrees* takes this story as one of its points of departure.

<sup>11</sup> Originating from the Greek idea of *Oceanus* ('a circular river that girdled the earth ... with neither outlet or source', writes Jorge Luis Borges in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Trans. A. Hurley), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005, p.147) the *ouroboros* represents the protean, a term also rooted in the oceanic – Proteus was a Greek god who attended to Polseidon, and could change form at will.





Jim Shaw, *The Music of the Degrees (Arm Clarinet)*, 2002/07, colour print, 120 × 150cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris and Berlin

Time, at least in the worlds made up by Jim Shaw, does not automatically lead toward decay or death (or deadlines), but rather toward transformation. In an essay on Siegfried and Roy, Dave Hickey compares the entertainers' tiger-taming Las Vegas spectacle with Victorian pantomime, citing Nina Auerbach's argument that 'pantomimes challenged Victorian proprieties by creating "a world where gender was malleable, where history mutated with no transition into myth, where human pageants gave way to a fantasy of animals ... [where] dreams of bliss were indistinguishable from the horror of nightmares".'<sup>12</sup> This description, its innate delight in miscegenation and gore and the rejection of all constraining gender and racial constructs, basically sums up Shaw's mission. Knowing that I don't have to be a believer to subscribe to Shaw's system of beliefs, I have to admit that 'A Faith for the Faithless', the Oist motto, begins to sound like a pretty reasonable slogan.<sup>13</sup> A religion that accepts failure as form? Sign me up.

12 Dave Hickey, 'Lost Boys', *Air Guitar*, Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997, p.179.  
13 See L. Bovier and F. Stroun, 'Interview with Jim Shaw', *op. cit.*, p.46.







