

# Deadpan(s) - David Evans

## Buster Keaton

The term 'deadpan' emerged in the United States in the 1920s, combining two slang words: 'dead' (blank or vacant) and 'pan' (face). It has now entered mainstream English as an adverb or adjective, usually meaning an expressionless face or manner. Today the term regularly crops up in the art world, but is deployed in two very distinctive ways.

One: the idea of a deadpan aesthetic is foregrounded by writer and curator Charlotte Cotton in her bestselling survey *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (2009). She mainly uses it to describe the so-called Düsseldorf School, that is, the Bechers and their famous graduates like Andreas Gursky, but also others like Rineke Dijkstra. Take Gursky and Dijkstra. Their output is very different, but both mainly use large-format equipment to create imagery marked by self-imposed, technical constraints regarding, say, composition or lighting, plus an emotional detachment. In other words, there is a calculated sobriety, harking back to figures from the Weimar era like August Sander, but also clearly separating them from contemporary photographers like Richard Billingham or Corinne Day whose informal, diaristic approach to the medium is often characterized as a snapshot aesthetic.

Two: Buster Keaton. He was the actor-director of silent shorts and feature films across the twenties and in 1928 *The New York Times* published the first article that characterized his output as deadpan. To be sure, the term references his famous poker face, but also embraces a distinctive type of humour, often revolving around a mismatch between a vacant visage and disastrous encounters with products of the modern world like cars, trains and pre-fabricated housing. Film historian Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has astutely commented that 'Buster Keaton is the one who suffered the worst eclipse with the coming of sound but whose reputation has recovered the best.' Certainly his star continues to rise within the contemporary art world. Steve McQueen's film *Deadpan* (1997) is probably the most celebrated example of a direct homage to Keaton, with the artist starring in the re-make of a scene from *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) where the façade of a house collapses around Bill. Appropriately, in the re-make McQueen doesn't panic and maintains a blank expression throughout.

My two sketches have served their purpose if they clarify what the exhibition at Galerie Andreas Schmidt is, and is not, about. It is not about a highly influential, super serious trend in contemporary photography, notable for a lack of levity. Rather, it is a celebration of Buster Keaton and the ways in which his deadpan humour informs the work of two British artists: Simon Faithfull and Tim Knowles.



## Simon Faithfull

Simon Faithfull and curator Ben Roberts recently co-organized a show called *The World Turned Upside Down – Buster Keaton, Sculpture and the Absurd* (Warwick Arts Centre, 2013). It was an ambitious survey, linking the achievements of Keaton from the silent era to twenty contemporary artists working across diverse media including film, installation art, performance and sculpture.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting straightaway that the show did not include McQueen's film *Deadpan*. Not an oversight, and certainly not a comment on the quality of the work. Rather it was absent because the curators deliberately wanted to exclude work that directly referenced Keaton. Instead their main aim was to draw attention to certain qualities in contemporary art that evoke Keaton, above all, the artist as stoical explorer or investigator, guided by absurdity and reconciled to regular failure.

Faithfull's contribution to that show was *0°00 Navigation*, a film from 2009 in which – Keaton style – he is both the central character and director. His initial inspiration is a relatively late Keaton film called *Railrodder*, released in 1965. Keaton plays an English gentleman who suddenly has a strong desire to visit Canada. The journey begins when the gentleman jumps into the River Thames from a bridge in Central London. He successfully swims across the Atlantic Ocean to reach the east coast of Canada. From there he travels in a straight line towards the west coast, finally reaching his destination after a series of farcical encounters. Equally preposterous is Faithfull's unexplained desire to travel exactly along the Greenwich Meridian. In the film he tackles the English section – lots of swimming, climbing and walking, guided by his GPS device.

The exhibition *Deadpan* presents the video from 2016 called *Going Nowhere 1.5*. Again we have the artist as peripatetic explorer, this time walking the perimeter of an island in the North Sea. Alas, our latter day Keaton has chosen a small, impermanent sandbank found in an intertidal zone. Now we see it, but soon we don't.

1. The show included: Bas Jan Ader, Alexandre da Cunha, Simon Faithfull, Peter Fischli, David Weiss, Brian Griffiths, Jeppe Hein, Sofia Hultén, William Hunt, Tehching Hsieh, Hayley Newman, Roman Signer, Richard Wentworth, Richard Wilson, John Wood and Paul Harrison. All in all, a heady mixture of established and emerging artists, linked by an expansively defined Conceptualism.

## Tim Knowles

In 1967, art student Richard Long caught a train from London's Waterloo Station to some unspecified destination in Surrey. There he found himself a field of long grass where he 'drew' a line by walking backwards and forwards repeatedly. A snapshot recorded his initiative that he called *A Line Made by Walking*. The rest is history. In 2010 critic Dieter Roelstraete published a complete book about this work and he is particularly stimulating when he proposes that it demonstrates a 'deadpan dumbness' worthy of Keaton or Samuel Beckett.

The various drawing projects of Tim Knowles have some clear affinities with 'deadpan' Long. Take his *Tree Drawings*, a series of which were published as an artist project in *Cabinet* (Issue 28: Winter 2007=2008). Knowles offers a lucid statement about the work:

*The pieces here are from a series produced by trees, most of which are located in the Borrowdale and Buttermere areas of England's Lake District. I attach artists' sketching pens to their branches and then place sheets of paper in such a way that the trees' natural motions - as well as their moments of stillness - are recorded. Like signatures, each drawing reveals something about the different qualities and characteristics of the various trees as they sway in the breeze ...*

Unlike Long, then, Knowles continues to use pencils and paper in this case, but the mark making is done by the trees, aided by the wind.

Knowles' contribution to *Deadpan* is another project involving wind called *Windwalk – Seven walks from Seven Dials* (2010). Guided by the wind, the artist makes repeated walks departing from the Seven Dials monument in Central London until he has walked down all seven of the radiating streets. He wears a helmet with an attached weather vane that indicates the direction he must take, traversing the city by night while the streets are empty, like some sleepwalking dowser. Also attached to the helmet is a bullet camera that records his walk. In addition, a GPS device tracks his movements. For *Deadpan*, the artist presents a video of one of the seven walks, a wall drawing of that path, plus the helmet.

*Tree Drawings* and *Windwalk* are symptomatic of an evolving body of work that extend the boundaries of what constitutes drawing. Chance and poetry are important elements of this work, as well as the absurd. Did anyone ask him what he was doing when he got trees in the Lake District to start drawing? Did anyone offer him a drink as he navigated nocturnal London, wearing his weather vane helmet?

