Research Grant – Spring 2009

Title: “The World Feeds Many Fools (De Wereld voedt veel zotten): Laughing Subjects and the Performance Pictorial Transgression”

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Abstract: Funds awarded will be used to defray costs for delivering a paper entitled, “The World Feeds Many Fools (De Wereld voedt veel zotten): Laughing Subjects and the Performance Pictorial Transgression,” at the symposium, “Laughter in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age: Epistemological Investigations from an Interdisciplinary Perspective” at the University of Arizona, April 30-May 3, 2009. My paper will be submitted for selection to the publication of the conference proceedings that will be published by Brill Publishers, Leiden.

Proposal:

In funding my research and participation at the University of Arizona symposium, the College advances its mission to support innovative inquiry and achieve national and international recognition. My paper, “The World Feeds Many Fools: Laughing Subjects and the Performance Pictorial Transgression,” will not simply lead to a focused article, but will also be incorporated as a case study in the introduction to my book in preparation, The Sociability of Images: Laughter and the Art of Painting in the Early Modern Dutch Republic.

Art historical research on laughter has tended to focus on either the oeuvres of artists such as Pieter Bruegel and Jan Steen who were known in their own day for producing humorous images, or on the poetics of comic painting—that is to say, the generic markers of pictorial subjects that were thought to be laughter-worthy in the early modern period. In contrast to important scholarship produced in the disciplines of history and cultural studies, art history has traditionally been preoccupied by iconographic subjects, rather than laughing Subjects. In this paper I aim to bridge this divide by investigating how one image—used here as a case study—participated in and reinforced cultural attitudes towards laughter in the early-sixteenth century.

In a little-known, sixteenth-century Flemish painting, two fools gaze out at the beholder and laugh (private collection, Mechelen). Above the figures a seemingly odd collection of signs are depicted—a letter ‘D,’ a crystalline orb surmounted by a cross, a foot, and a viol. One fool has cheerfully inserted a spoon into his open mouth, while the other raises his finger to his nose as he snickers gleefully. The panel can be understood if we recognize that the small images above the fools form part of a rebus which is ‘performed’ by the figures below: De wereld voedt veel zotten (“The world feeds many fools”). The beholder, instantiated before the image by the intensely animated laughing gazes of the fools, is implicated in their folly by the process of looking itself, which entails ‘reading’ the signs both visually and phonetically.

This paper will employ the Mechelen panel to explore the dialogic relationship posited by these panels’ exceptionally transgressive engagement of the beholder—viewing
processes that are predicated upon participatory readings. The panel frames the conditions for its visual consumption through the use of proverbial maxims, and the beholder is forced to momentarily assume the role of the fool him- or herself. I will offer a conceptual model for thinking about images and objects that ‘interact’ with the viewer—that of the object as joking partner, a notion borrowed from anthropologist Mary Douglas. Whether or not the beholder laughed before such images, I argue, is dependant upon the viewer’s willingness to assume the role of the Butt of the pictorial ‘joke’ and to operate ‘outside’ the norms of language in the jesting exchange. Ultimately, understanding the subject positions offered by the Mechelen panel requires a finely calibrated awareness of the moral-ethical meanings of laughter as a historically-situated social behavior and as a pictorial strategy.