

The Sparkling Shadows of Gravity's Recurrence: On Keith Kaziak's Rule No. 8: Don't Look Down!

John Baldacchino, May 2022

There is a curious attraction to an anvil which sparkles over you. Its promise is ominous, but the possibility of it falling is offset by a feeling that it will never happen. And if it were to fall on one, it is safe enough to, at best, give you a few cuts from its tiny glass tesserae.

If this makes no sense, it's because you have not experienced Kaziak's sparkling anvil which brings together all the elements of his show *Rule No. 8: Don't Look Down!* As Kaziak explains, this manner of odd reassurance recalls the trials and tribulations of Wile E. Coyote, who in his endless chase after the elusive Roadrunner, is perhaps one of childhood's first introduction to an existential feeling which Albert Camus identifies with Sisyphus.

As a child I sided with the Roadrunner. Coyote had to play the role of "the loser". Or at least that seemed to be the moral of the story. It was a tale forced on us by a tacit ethic which then I never realized to be the norm in a society that seems to have always rewarded and extolled the virtues of the "winners" and by implication, despised all "losers". Even though this concept was quite alien to me (as I was always told to look after and root for the most unfortunate), when I religiously watched the Roadrunner cartoons, I lived on an island in the middle of the Mediterranean, where I was born and grew up back in the sixties. Watching the Looney Tunes, I lived thousands of miles away from a huge union of states which, amongst other, sought to enshrine the very "pursuit of happiness" in its very Constitution—a happiness, which some would still identify with always being a winner and never a loser.

Thinking back, after so many years, Coyote appears to be condemned to a sad life, even though, somehow, we were to assume that he deserved it for being "wily". As in all of these stories, an ethical cycle had to be closed, and even when the Roadrunner was only "innocent" insofar as he was a potential prey to the Coyote's frustrated culinary appetites, the eternal chase—*per se*, as it were—was crueler than it appeared. Coyote was depicted as an eternal loser because even death was a luxury for him. Just like his fast colleague, he was immortal. The poor coyote found himself trapped in a life of an endless and hopeless pursuit. No matter how high he fell, or how heavily those boulders would crush him, not to mention how many trucks would run over him ... Coyote will always wake up to chase his fast feathered prey again and again.

Just like Coyote's immortal *gift* (if that's the right word), in Kaziak's *Enchanted by a Shadow of Impending Doom* (2022)¹ the anvil's sparkle gives out its opposite effect: what sparkles signifies the shadow that it leaves behind. In the same way, "not to look down" might well suggest that we must "look up", even when the impending binaries of life or death, shadow or light, fast or slow, heavy or weightless, to float or to sink ... are only defied by an unexpected moment of realization that what always appeared to be so ethically secure, has been suddenly thrown out of any semblance of certainty and reassurance.

¹ Early video documentation of Kaziak's work *Zenith (becoming)*

The point I am making is that Kaziak's work recalls questions that for centuries humans have been engaged with, to the extent of avoiding them—just as we had to do when we watched Coyote being flattened on the ground, only to know that his tragedy is meant to be funny. After all, Coyote will never die, and he's always fit enough to chase his colleague in the endless circle of living. Not to spoil my childhood's fun, perhaps what is latent in one's reflection on life, is child's play. When you come to think of how in effect these narratives seem to urge us to avoid answering hard questions, we might begin to understand how play and childhood still have a role in our adult approach to life and the living.

Kaziak's work is doing the opposite to what we always wanted as children and seem to keep desiring as adults. By presenting us with the illusion of weight, we are shocked to find it weightless. Likewise, the reality of shadows, in whose light we seek a way out, is never forthcoming because it can't be seen or felt. Kaziak's works remind us that even when being suspended in an *either-or* situation suggests some solution, in effect it signals the opposite. This might surprise, if not irritate us. In the fool's errand of our "pursuit of happiness" as enshrined in the highest document of Law, we have been reassured that there are no problems to chase.

Here I must declare my sources and say that this reflection on Kaziak's work is not coming fresh from outside. I cannot but comment on this body of work from long discussions that I had with him. Unlike those who are privileged to be confronted by artworks which they can, in their autonomy, interpret from where they come from, where I come from is far from innocent—which leaves me with less room for speculation. This is because I have come to *know this work* as it has come to *know me*.

Experiencing Kaziak's work challenges the idea that art can be simply placed without necessarily weighted into the lightness of casual observation. Here I am not insisting that the meaning of artworks is exclusive to those who know them. On the contrary, I am saying that when one knows the artist and has partaken of the process by seeing the work grow, one's curiosity and expectation of where it will *end* (as a destination or *telos*) is bound to give the same work more autonomy. Put another way, when one knows a body of work, one must expect that the work asserts its own autonomy, even from the artist.

Not unlike Wile E. Coyote, we can only approach this body of work by being *wily*—that is, cunning. Just as the cunning of Reason, Hegel reminds us, continues to draw us back into a dialectical logic which we hardly understand, art's wily nature keeps us beholden to its surprises. On this note, I should clarify that my take on his work remains what has always struck me from the very start—when it confronted me with heavy pans that turned out to be weightless and "bread" floating in a bin full of water. There I discovered how *formal* reality gains more meaning when it challenges my *normal* expectations. Kaziak's work challenges the very terms of reference which we tend to assign to reality. Likewise, our sense of binary meaning (heavy or weightless; to sink or to float) are challenged. Even when we speak of a dialectical logic that requires two opposites, what transpires is not a synthetic conclusion from their clash of meanings, but third and fourth, fifth, sixth and innumerable other possibilities.

Rather than indulge in citing philosophers like Nietzsche and Deleuze and engage in their take on eternal returns, I would prefer to stay reassured by how Wiley E Coyote and the Roadrunner finally find themselves to be kindred spirits. This is bound to happen when, as we grow out of our innocence, we discover a world that could never close those ethical circles that continue to deceive us. Rather than feel reassured by how "the pursuit of happiness" is some divine right, I would pay closer attention to

Kaziak's work, and thank him for the opportunity to be a fellow traveler in a world whose shadows may well signify a shimmering light which, though fleeting, keeps us hopeful.

For this to happen, and for us to defy certainty, we only need to recognize gravity and its playfulness. The recurrence of gravity is not much of a grounding but a tease; a seductive invitation to chase those ways by which we could ultimately unground ourselves and find other ways of understanding happiness. Maybe, just like Camus invites us to regard Sisyphus as happy, we should find ways of seeing Wile E. Coyote as a fulfilled character.

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