

“Variations on being put into a form.”

Or

**“Variations on being put into a form,
even if it doesn’t get to the form I think it should be at.”**

An interview with Howard Kleger.

Howard Kleger lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he immerses himself in a prolific though distinctively *Klegerian* form of cultural production. He refers to all of his projects rather even-handedly as “*items*” (which I also find more sayable than “works,” “pieces,” or “practice”). These can be music or film *items*, conceptual, visual, or internet *items*, and as you’ll see, even *items* made in the medium of his daily existence. Ever eager to bring the under-understood Howard to wider audiences, I asked if I could interview him over the phone. He agreed, but not without first insisting on an experiment in which we would conduct the entire interview via an adult chat roulette site, *dirtyroulette.com*.

Howard: *I’ve been meaning to do this. I want to see how fast we can find each other. Keep clicking next. I’m not naked; I’m just not wearing a shirt.*

Brandon (clicking): *I’m just seeing a lot of naked guys, Howard.*

Howard (clicking): *Usually it happens faster. Seems to be a lot of people today. Normally if you just stay where you are, especially if you put a bag on your face, they’ll do all the clicking for you – like if you do something creepy.*

I didn’t ask what Howard normally did on the site. I only knew that it probably wasn’t sexual and that only Howard could do something that would be considered “creepy” on a website where lonely, anonymous men come together to masturbate. Up popped little blue faces and penises from all over the globe: Croatia, Iceland, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Tennessee. After clicking for thirty minutes, without success, we brought the first round of the interview to a close. For the next, I decided it would be better to just casually chit-chat with Howard about his current projects – primarily the film that he’d be working on when he visited me in Los Angeles, come January. There was a lot on the agenda, including renting a golf cart and filming a golf club on fire. Most pressing, however, was footage requiring the clandestine use of a giant crane. Informed that this was a tall order, Howard offered a workaround:

Howard: *I’ll just use balloons, and set it down on top of the building as a “grapple capture.” It would be completely disguised because, from the street, it would just look like someone playing with balloons. I’d have strings attached to something that looked like a kite – a chassis – for complete non-wobble control, then slowly lower it onto the edge of buildings as I filmed. You can’t argue with this. I know how the balloons will behave because they’ll be attached to a chassis, which will be made out of tongue depressors...*

As arbitrary as the “*components*” might sound, nearly all originate in some problem or prickly encounter from Howard’s own life: a mysterious bump on his nose, a sour run-in with a clerk or officer of the law, the flight patterns of birds. This balloon scenario, for example, harkened back to yet another balloon cam that had gotten tangled in power lines in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, near a “*Beverly Hillbillies-style house, but with a more Victorian slant, and a family and a chicken out front.*” He had conscripted members of the family to help him retrieve the balloon. “I

got way more involved with them than I ever do with strangers. Almost directing them. It was slightly uncomfortable. Kids got involved. One guy, he took a black steel knife and duct taped it to a metal pool pole, and I had him using that next to the power line. It didn't work. But five months later, when I went back, it was retrieved. I had to keep bugging them." In other words, the current film would recreate both the lost cam footage and the months-long saga of its failed retrieval, rehearsing while amplifying all the social tensions of the original.

Howard: *Everything parallels an experience, but I have to decide how literal I want to make it, since it's really just an abstraction. It's a mimeograph of a real reality into a different reality, into a different set of blocks and conceptual planes. It's not the entire story of the movie. Just a component, itself with different fragments that fit into other parts of the movie. I just need a house with a second story, and a kid, or maybe a chicken, to denote the family. Is that possible? This family also knew a police officer so I'd like to have a police officer put me in a cop car. It's a common thing, you know: every movie has a police officer in it.*

I told him that I lived next to a police academy.

Howard: *Do you think you can ask permission? The police around here love to be on camera. I had some footage that I lost – probably the greatest, rarest footage ever. Nothing can beat it: a police officer jumping up and down on my bed. I had this fake bed made of crates when I lived off Fairmount. I was videotaping myself cutting a couch in half out front with some device. The neighbors said I was wielding an axe around trying to kill somebody. So the police showed up. They came into my apartment and were like "what's going on here?" They saw the cameras set up, and I actually had a mobile made out of paper police vehicles and they were like "whoa, this is really cool. It has lights on it and everything." There was this one weirdo police officer who was like "looks like, uh, you're making porn in here. You don't mind if I jump on top of your bed do you?" So with his shoes on, he was bouncing up and down and saying "Look, I'm on film!" That was actually the first bed where I had a comfortable sleep. Everything before and after that was just, like, doors. Or wood. Now I just sleep on the floor.*

Brandon: *You had something else when I visited – a car seat, right?*

Howard: *Yeah, a car seat. I had a lot of half-things, to save room. I modified that IKEA couch to make it shorter; I cut it in half and then re-attached the arms. But then my feet were hanging off. Really the problem is that my place is too small" ... Then, switching gears again: "I have this other idea that I want to go through with. Any time I watch a movie – a foreign film – with people smoking cigarettes, eventually I break down and get a pack of Dunhills. But I never end up smoking the entire pack. I don't do it that much, and the last time I threw the half pack in the sewer. But this time, I have this idea for a care package, a method of mailing items as a control device.*

Brandon: *By this, do you mean self-control?*

Howard: *Yes, which I have none of. But I'm gaining self-control. Again, it's all visually coded. Like the bagel theme – the "transcontinental bagel theme" – from a few years ago. I'm now figuring out how to integrate cigarettes.*

He explained how he was going to mail me a care package with a halfpack of Dunhills and a Styrofoam ball. I was to then light a Dunhill, stick it in the Styrofoam ball – while still lit – and film it floating down a river. After listening to a long excursus on this *Smoke on the Water* theme, I had to go. We picked up the topic again the following evening, over videochat, as Howard prepared for Halloween.

Howard (excitedly): *I had a strange synchronicity yesterday. I went into the gas station and there was a box the exact size for the Styrofoam and cigarettes package. I asked this friendly clerk there if I could hide the halfpack of cigarettes in this box, in the gas station –*

Brandon: — *So you wouldn't smoke them?*

Howard: — *Yeah, so I wouldn't smoke them. But he said no, which was probably better because there was this mousy young guy sitting four doors away, on the porch. I don't know why, I just went over to him and asked him if he could hold onto the cigarettes while I waited a few weeks to get Styrofoam balls. He said "sure, I guess, but I'm moving out in a couple hours" — he was actually moving that day to a new place on 58th. So I got his number. But then later that day, I had more add-on ideas and came back to him. You know that I've been filming people moving in all various stages, for a long time, because I'm interested in "transition" or in the idea of "motion between homebases." So I asked him — I even offered to pay him — if I could attach a greenscreened piece of foam to his back, with a camera harness on his front, as he was moving. I guess it would be a slight inconvenience, but he didn't want to. I don't know. I mean I don't know the guy, but I thought it would be cool. Only the upper body, picking up boxes.*

Howard was busily fabricating a costume. He was going trick-or-treating as a drone, in order to get more clips. The body of the drone was a huge stovepipe-shape made of cardboard, with holes for his face and arms. Two foam helicopter blades were waiting to be attached, with mounted cameras and lights to film his neighbors as they whizzed around. As we spoke, his apartment hallway was doubling as a studio, crammed with cardboard, string, paint, tape, knives, and any AV equipment necessary to continue our interview.

Brandon: *What do your neighbors think about you working in the hallway?*

Howard: *Ask them. They can hear you now. My speakers are blaring. They're usually hiding, eating Indian food. This guy just plays chess with himself. Anyway, this is the axle and these are the blades. Somehow these have to get downstairs. It pretty much spans the entire stairwell. My face is going to be here. It's a tight fit — especially with the helmet. It's going to suck; you can't imagine how much torture it's going to be. It's up there with transferring photocopy machines across the city.*

Brandon: *I remember that — the one you were carrying from downtown to your apartment. You made a cart using your vacuum cleaner and laundry basket. Then you threw the whole thing off a bridge.*

Howard: *I guess I did. Probably the Market Street bridge. It's easier to throw things off the South Street bridge. But I didn't know that at the time.*

Brandon (after a lull): *Is there anybody you want to see when you visit? Damon Packard?*

Howard: *No, that guy hates me. Maybe Ryan [Trecartin].*

I mentioned that I had just run into Ryan, and that he, Lizzie and Rhett were currently working on a videogame. Pepping up, Howard said that he too had worked on a videogame, over ten years ago — a videogame made out of cardboard. *"It was called Ducks and Origami. The idea of it was translating videogames back into meatspace, keeping their logic. It was back in Kutztown and the videogame opened up onto the campus there, and folded into it because it shared the same logic."* Howard had long enjoyed screwing with the already complicated relationship between the internet and "meatspace," using both as an arena and, in his words, *"an infinite storage dump."* Really, they were but the two equal halves of Howard's everyday life, which I'd always insisted was his truest medium. When I brought this up again, he demurred, claiming that this way of looking at things was too *"zoomed-out"* and that he personally had to stick with *"applications."* The way he saw it, it was a matter of striking a balance between the *"solid"* (the more defined, durable activities and items) and the *"purated"* (the swirl of energies and half-meanings that could inform yet also undermine that solidity).

Howard: *You and I know that there's a certain quality that makes up "an experience," to fabricating reality. An excitement. If a dog can get excited, then people can get excited as well. It's just a layer of reality. It's one of the reasons people take drugs. But a lot of the stuff I do is not because I'm hyperactive; its just: do it or it's not getting done. However, at this point, I'm overworked. I take little breaks in my mind. But I'm not on a natural rhythm. Any little stress throws me off. I've hit my limit-point with following other people's schedules, or even my own schedule. The way a day is broken up, between asleep and awake – I see that as a stress. Sleep becomes a terror because it reminds me that I'm working within a larger framework, something larger than me, and I would like that annoyance to stop for a long time. Back then – (while we were all living in Philadelphia) – there was this excitement, but I was living a more parallel excitement, a self-excitement. Ever since then, I've just been honing things to perfection. Now it's all about craft.*

With this, I left Howard to his craft, wishing him all the luck on his costume as well as the video mashup he planned to project from his window. The next day, I received a two-word text message: *"post dramatic."* Not only had the stairwell been too tight for the costume, the arm and face hole placement had forced Howard's spine into a painful hunch. But ultimately it didn't matter: he had gotten some workable shots and was feeling pretty optimistic.