

THE CHARLATANS



I shall never forget that day. It was a Tuesday, about four o'clock in the afternoon, when I reached the town. The summer afternoon was quite warm, and the slight wind picked up the sandy dust from the streets, coating everything in a fine mist of yellow-orange. The main street of the town seemed deserted, but I soon found that its inhabitants had all been drawn to an encampment of gaudy circus tenting on the western outskirts of the village. The carnival had come to town.

My trip had been a long and arduous one, as I was spending my

summer holiday from the university attempting to cycle from the coastal plains of the Piedmont, over the endless mountains, and circle through the flatlands beyond before returning by much the same path to my home. The trip was to take three weeks altogether, and now at the end of the second week, I found myself still on the inland plain, attempting to muster my strength to scale the demanding hills of the mountains once again. The diversion of the carnival seemed an ideal way to avoid the question of returning for another day.

Upon reaching the fairgrounds, I worked my way through the bustling

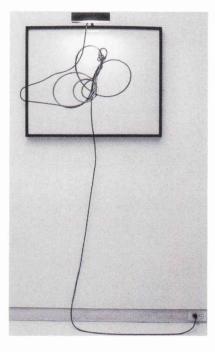
crowd to see the attractions on display in the road-weary, red-and-white striped tents. Large banners hung from several of them, advertising the acts held within, ranging from sword-swallowing to fire-eating to snake-charming. Each attraction carried its own admission price, and since I had but little money left to complete my trip, I decided to choose carefully which one to see.

At the end of the row of these tents, my interest was piqued by a rather small banner proclaiming "Muniz the Magnificent—Magician and Hypnotist Extraordinaire." Having always been interested in magic, I was irresistibly drawn to see its quotidian practice in this minor venue.

Paying the small sum requested at the door, I entered the stuffy atmosphere of the tent and found my seat on the rickety wooden risers facing the stage. Every minute or two, a few more locals shuffled in, and shortly the tent appeared comfortably full. Several minutes later, the hum of conversation was broken by a loud cymbal crash—the show was to begin.

A small, impish-looking character stepped through the opening at the back of the tent, brandishing an aged silk top hat and a wand. He began to perform the most rudimentary of magic tricks, "hiding" coins behind a child's ear, guessing the card selected by another member of the audience, pouring milk into his hand without spilling a drop. Unimpressed, I began to weary of the third-rate level of his legerdemain, and began to wish that I had selected another act to see. Couldn't the audience see through his tricks? From here in the fourth row I could see the marks on his deck of cards!

Thankfully, the magic portion of the show ended quickly. Now he turned to hypnotism. I began to cast about the audience to see if I could tell which one of these onlookers was



actually the magician's "plant," the person who would feign a hypnotic trance to astound the unwitting audience. The atmosphere in the tent was hushed as he scanned the seats—it seemed that he did so for a very long time, I thought. To my amazement, he stepped forward to pull me from the audience!

Unaccustomed to the spotlight, and still in shock from the selection. I stood on the stage next to him, feeling my heart beat quickly and loudly. I could barely breathe in the oppressive, dank heat of the tent. I can only remember snippets of the patter preceding the demonstration, as I was struggling to regain my wits. No, he couldn't really intend to hypnotize *me*, could he? No, of course it would never work. I don't believe in such things. Gradually, I regained my senses and began to cooly determine how best to react to his instructions. That's it, I would feign the trance, but not follow any of the instructions.

As ordered, I stared at his watch, swaying back and forth before my face. No, I was not in a trance. Through half-closed eyes I studied the audience, which was totally enraptured by this display. He asked me to do simple things—put my hand on my head, lift my left foot. These I did without thinking, as they demonstrated nothing. I could hardly believe that the crowd would find these minor commands interesting, but they seemed to be going along with the premise good-naturedly. Then he began to ask for the ridiculous. He told me that I was a chicken. "Cluck like a chicken," he insisted, waving the watch before me again.

The crowd began to titter, and then laugh at his inability to make me perform. A rough character in the front row began to jeer at him, calling him a charlatan and a fake. Others in the audience began to join in, and the crowd began to get restless. I sensed a

small note of urgency in his voice as he asked me one more time, "cluck like a chicken."

Amazingly, I found myself doubling my arms up along my sides, forming chicken wings, and choking on the sound, I attempted a weak cluck. The audience began to laugh again, but at me this time, not him. I clucked again, louder, and they began to roar. My face was beet red, but there I was, clucking and scratching, to save the reputation of a third-rate magician and inept hypnotist. Thankfully, the show was over soon, and I slunk out of the tent to lick my wounds, hoping I would not be recognized outside by the others.

I avoided the main row of attractions, and instead found myself dejectedly walking along the backside of those tents, where small booths were set up for minor games and other displays. I happened upon one which advertised "Photographer Within," on a board which was signed "V. Muniz, proprietor." My pulse quickened. This must be "Muniz the Magnificent," turning a buck when his act was not appearing. I felt an urgent need to speak to this man, to confront him for my humiliation. I charged into the booth to demand my admission fee back, if nothing else. To find out why he had done this to me...

"Welcome," he said as soon as I entered the makeshift studio. "I knew you would want to see me."

"Why?" I demanded, "how could you have humiliated me so? Why didn't you use a plant in the audience like everyone else does?"

He appeared somewhat surprised that I knew the tricks of the trade, but he continued to smile as he spoke. "I had to pick you," he said, "you were the *least* susceptible member of the audience, and thus the obvious candidate. How may I explain it? You see, the audience understands both sincerity and insincere



sincerity—both being sincere and playing sincere. Either one will hold them in their seats, amuse them. When one begins to play at being insincere, on the other hand, the entire impression one attempts to create fails.

"I try my best, you see, to create an illusion that amuses, at least, but through which they can still see at least a part of their own delusion. Your delusion, as I diagnosed it from the stage, was that of being above such self-deception; hence, you were the perfect subject, one who would complete the illusion for md."

I began to recognize the ring of truth to his words. I wanted to thank him, in a strange way, but the words escaped me. Before I could stammer any such acknowledgement, he asked me to sit before his camera. "Please allow me to photograph you," he asked, "as a way of making up part of my debt to you."

The bulb flashed before I could fashion a smile out of the grimace on my face, and I feared seeing the final result of this impromptu sitting. He told me the photo would be ready in a half hour, if I wouldn't mind coming back then. I stumbled out of the booth, and diverted my attention for a time at some of the other attractions. When I returned to pick up the gift, I was informed by another carnival worker that he had gone to perform another show, but that he had left behind my photograph.

In the fading light of day, I opened the envelope and pulled out the rough cardboard mount. Flipping open the frame, I saw inside an image of the holder itself, closed. He had written a note inside the cardboard flap.

"Your image is within. This photograph, as you can see, will never be out of date. The image is, after all, but a shortened form of imagination."

Beth Wilson

PHOTOS

COVER:

FATE (DETAIL)

COLLECTION MICHAEL WERNER, COLOGNE

INSIDE LEFT TO RIGHT: MAKING FACES 1989

15"×42" SILVER PRINT/FRAME

COLLECTION JANET GREEN, LONDON

UNTITLED 1989

18"×120" RUBBER/PHOTO/FRAME COLLECTION VERA LIST, NEW YORK

COGITO 1989

68"×31"×8" PHOTO/LIGHT FIXTURE/WIRE COLLECTION GERALD D. TALBERT, NEW YORK

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