

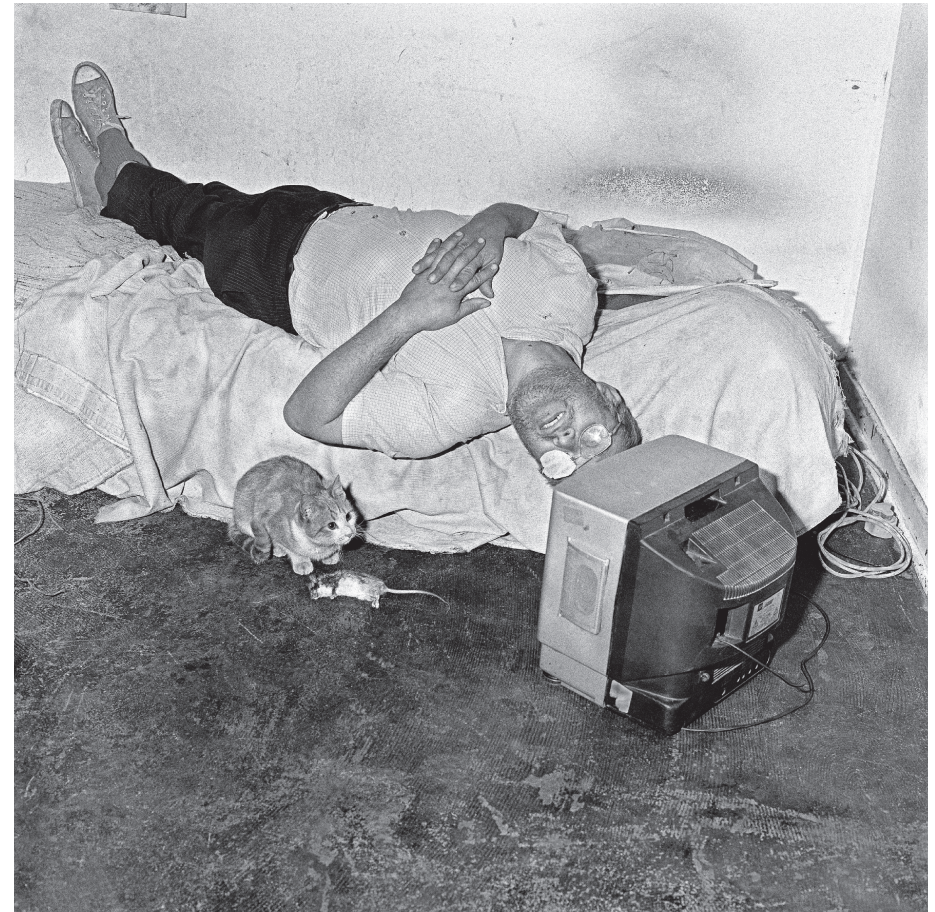
THEATRE

OF THE

ABSURD

My eyes are drawn to a dark, cigar-shaped smudge with indeterminate edges on the whitewashed wall. There is also a pale, grey annulus. They are, I suppose, the residues of hours someone has spent sitting upright on the bed that lies immediately below the smudge, unknowingly rubbing from their clothes and hair the dusty accumulations of days out of bed. A man lies on the bed, his head hanging upside down in front of the screen of a television set on the floor. I have no idea whether he is asleep or awake, since the lenses of his glasses are rendered silver-opaque by the light emitted from the screen that is turned away from the viewer. The man's pose is mirrored in miniature by a mouse, which may also be sleeping; although the presence of a cat immediately next to the mouse suggests that it is more likely dead. The cat is staring with what looks like rapt interest at the television screen. Each participant in this scene – each element, in a way – engages purposefully, intentionally. There is another purposeful presence in the room, invisible to the viewer outside the picture and apparently of no interest to the others with whom he shares the space. This is the artist, Roger Ballen.

Though it is titled *Cat and mouse*, the subject of this photograph from 2001 is surely the television screen that we cannot see. What dreams are played out on that screen? What realities? In which ways has the device invaded that primitively furnished space? For the viewer outside the picture its invisible face functions somehow as messenger and witness. The cat's attention attests to this. But that is absurd. I look again and again for meaning in this image, and repeatedly I am drawn to the cigar-shaped smudge. Like a play by Samuel Beckett, or a novel by Albert Camus, the smudge attests to time being used up, but it does not imply meaning. Around it are sleep/reverie, animal surprise, death and undirected sound and flickering image. When Ballen was asked recently whether he

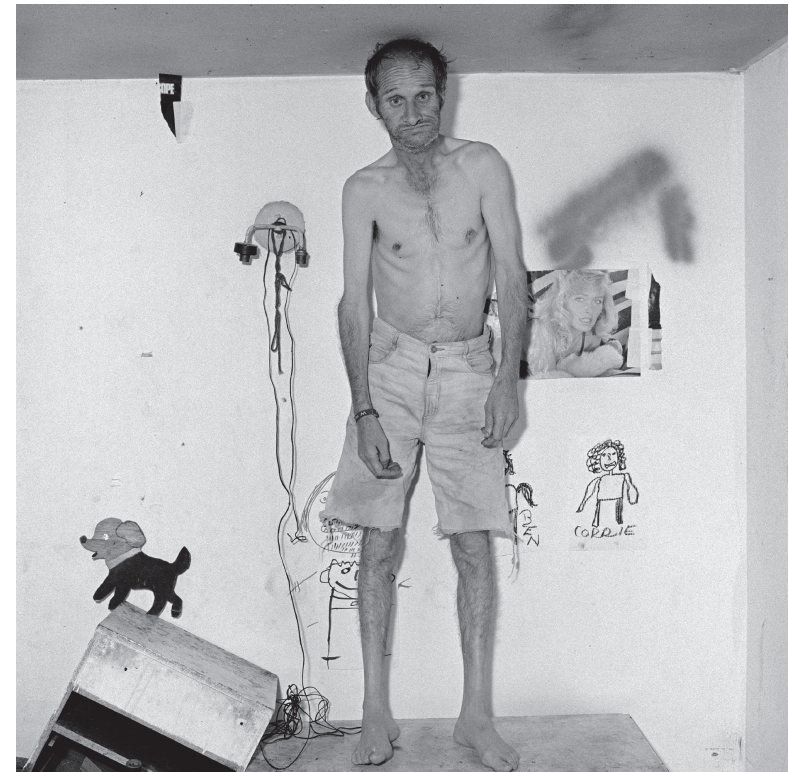


Cat and mouse 2001

thinks things happen for a reason, he replied, "Not really." And when asked what he hoped for, he said, "Hope is an illusion." In the tradition of Sartre and Beckett, to be without hope is not necessarily to be without purpose; but it is for each individual to instill meaning into existence. Asked the flip question, "What do you like the best about your body?" his response was anything but: "Its loyalty to itself."¹

The metaphor of theatre is at work throughout Ballen's practice, though not in any simple sense. The artist does not act as a 'director'; his photographs are not 'staged'. Rather, I use the term, theatre, in its widest sense here; to describe a place in which to act, and where purposeful action takes place and is played out – the dramatic theatre, yes, but also the operating theatre, the theatre of war, and so on. Crucially, I believe that Ballen's photographs are made and remade through the active participation of viewers; that they are, in the sense used by the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, 'dialogic'. Writing about Bakhtin, the political theorist Andrew Robinson says, "dialogical works ... don't subordinate reality to the ideology of the author."² Rather, dialogical works are composed, instead, of multiple, authentic voices. In the convincing, dialogic work, the author is present as the accumulation of the voices of the others it contains. Furthermore, "Bakhtin emphasises that it is not enough to simply understand the other's perspective. Only if it is made other than itself by being seen from outside can it produce something new or enriching."³ Ultimately, in art this is about looking and analysis of the subject, to be sure, but it is also an imaginative pursuit. So photographs by Ballen, such as, *Bennie* (2001), *Puppies in fishtanks* (2000), and *Partytime* (1998), which are the physical manifestations of his artistic practice, result not only from experiences of people and things in particular times and places, but also from the operations of imagination. Ballen himself says of the work: "The compositions are very formal. They're simple, they're clear. But inside there's a theatre; a complexity of the inner mind; a complexity that reflects the human condition in some way. This is about the human condition in a place. It's a place in my mind; reflecting the human condition in Roger Ballen's condition."⁴

Theatre, then, is as much a metaphor for living a life in which we are both audience and participant as it is for the (somewhat) formalised construction of an event. There is a strong element of the psychological in thinking about art in this way: I am brought to mind of the so-called 'Magic Theatre' in which Harry Haller, the misanthropic protagonist of Hermann Hesse's 1927 novel, *Steppenwolf* confronts his repressed unconscious head-on and plays out his deepest desires and fantasies; and also of the artist Unica Zürn's 'House of Illnesses' described in her eponymous novella (written in 1958), which is a manifestation, as though real, of her own body occupied by forbidden desire, compulsive obsession, and the men who might be either her saviours or destroyers. The embodiment and manifestation of Ballen's internal psychological excavation leads me to consider his work as a 'theatre of the mind', articulated in five parts: Theatre of the Absurd, Theatre of the Real and Unreal, Theatre of



Bennie 2001