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For Lawrence Preece

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## Why did the Chicken Cross the Road?

### 1. Jokes

[The Clown] is the man of gigantic efforts and diminutive accomplishments: the midwife who aids the mountain to deliver the mouse.

Arthur Koestler (81)

Most jokes are fairly tragic

Richard Prince ("Hollow Laughter")

To recommend 'the joke' as a way of facing art is not by any means to suggest that art should be judged by the standard of jokes, measured say according whether it makes us laugh or not. Weightier approaches can be imagined but just as games and performance provide representations to help picture existence, might not jokes embody a philosophical outlook or world-view? Clichés and sayings such as "life's a game", "all the world's a stage", "life's a joke" or "history repeats itself" presumably serve some purpose (at least up to the point of overuse, where the thinking stops). Looked at seriously any one of these axioms potentially forms the basis of a method for managing with consciousness or modelling life. According to Cambridge

Psychologist K. J. Craik the nervous system's main function is "to model or parallel external events" (qtd. in Koestler 618). A function of art may be to help us visualise the models which exist in our minds and to assemble new ones. And why shouldn't 'the joke' correspond to one such model? It seems paradoxical to request that comedy be taken seriously or used for such sober purposes but Freud considered it important to do so introducing his work on the subject with the complaint that "jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life" (40). Other criteria to consider, related to life, and which feature in what is called art, incorporate ideas such as repetition, looping, feedback, games and performance.

Bearing in mind these schemas let us begin by considering the work of an artist. Rebecca Horn employs raw materials such as springs, cam shafts, motors, wire, violins, liquids and fluid mixtures, pointed spindles, knives, feathers or long thin sharp elements made of metal. Often these become the components of ominous looking kinematic sculptures situated in space with sources of light positioned to cast significant shadow, allowing for an infinite number of equally provocative viewpoints. The nature of the routines drawn out when pieces of this type are set in motion is such that, at the recent show of Horn's work, *Bodylandscapes* at the Hayward Gallery, London, I mistook the wheelchair lift, connecting two slightly different floor levels, for an exhibit. Once I'd stepped onto the slow-moving elevator its purpose became obvious, not least because isn't characteristic of Horn to lure unsuspecting visitors, to participate in her work, in such one-dimensional fashion. The apparatus, sealed in a box of transparent panels, had none of the artist's customary extensions etc. etc.