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RED GROOMS: THE FORGOTTEN EXISTENTIALIST  
*RUCKUS MANHATTAN* AND THE INFLUENCE OF SARTRIAN  
EXISTENTIALISM

by

John E. Curley IV

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

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**Red Grooms: The Forgotten Existentialist: *Ruckus Manhattan* and the Influence of Sartrian Existentialism. Major Professor: William McKeown, Ph.D.**

**This thesis focuses on the influence of the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre on the American artist Red Grooms.** An analysis of Grooms's "sculpto-pictorama" *Ruckus Manhattan* as an installation demonstrates the influences of Sartrian existential concepts and acts as an arena in which viewers can discover these existential ethos in a culturally specific setting. Red Grooms's background as an American artist working in New York in the mid-twentieth century and his interest in French art and philosophy document further the influence of existentialism on Grooms. A thorough discussion of tableaux from *Ruckus Manhattan*, which visually represent Sartrian existential concepts, reveals Red Grooms to be an artist who is much more sophisticated than the comic artists described in the current scholarship.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

**Red Grooms (born June 7, 1937) is an artist who defies easy categorization.** His use of comedy distinguishes him from most artistic movements as does his propensity for borrowing from many different media and styles. Grooms has been called a court jester of the art world who serves high art from below.<sup>1</sup> Vincent Katz describes Grooms's art as combining the "high-art aestheticism of French modernist artists, the spontaneous, aggressive draughtsmanship of the Abstract Expressionist painters, and the low-art spectacle, humor, and plain zaniness of comedic movies and comic books."<sup>2</sup> Grooms produces prints, paintings, drawings, sculptures, happenings, and his very own combination of all of these: sculpto-pictoramas. Sculpto-pictoramas, such as *Ruckus Manhattan* (figs. 1-4, 10-12), are three-dimensional multi-media installations. They are often made of paper, cardboard, and found objects which are then fastened together and painted and drawn upon. Sculpto-pictoramas act in much the same way as installation and environment art. They are fully immersive tableaux through which the viewer is welcome to walk in and through. These sculpto-pictoramas are hectic with their combination of sculpture, painting, and installation work. *Ruckus Manhattan*, with Red Grooms's artistic style and flair, stood out from the New York art scene as much as his bright red hair and southern Nashville drawl.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Richard, "Red Grooms: Art with 100 Faces," *Washington Post* August 25, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Katz, "The Prints of Red Grooms," in *Red Grooms: The Graphic Work*, ed. Adele Westbrook, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 21.

Because Red Grooms's works refuse to be categorized within a single medium or artistic movement, he has not received the same thorough scholarship as have other artists associated with Pop art, environment art, Abstract Expressionism, or Happenings. Grooms's works reveal influences from each of these movements, while also poking fun at his art historical influences and contemporaries such as Jackson Pollock, Rembrandt, Robert Rauschenberg, and Clement Greenberg. Many of Grooms's works, such as *De Kooning Breaks Through*, *The Existentialist*, *Dali Salad II*, and *Jackson in Action*, create laughs but ultimately pay respect. While Abstract Expressionism was one of the largest influences on the art and philosophy of Red Grooms, works such as *Ruckus Manhattan* stand very much in contrast to the two-dimensionality and metaphysical seriousness of the Abstract Expressionists. The influences of the movement upon Grooms are noted by Judd Tully as she refers to Grooms as being an action painter "in the truest sense" because of his burlesque style.<sup>3</sup> The burlesque style and rapid manner in which he works certainly mirrors aspects of Abstract Expressionism, but in the same as *De Kooning Breaks Through*, the similarities act to poke some fun at the movement's core beliefs. Any similarities can often be quickly dismissed because of the obvious differences between Grooms and his Abstract Expressionist predecessors. The most obvious difference between the two is Grooms's voracious use of humor as a communicative tool within his artwork.

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<sup>3</sup> Judd Tully, "Red Grooms Has Artful Fun with High Culture - and Low," *Smithsonian* 16 (June 1985): 104.



Humor and art, however, are two concepts that often have trouble being combined within the very serious vein of Abstract Expressionism. A desire for seriousness, according to Wendy Wick Reaves, causes the comic and satiric to often be ignored.<sup>4</sup> By the standards of modernist critics such as Clement Greenberg, if art is not serious, it loses its intellectual status that separates it from craft and kitsch.<sup>5</sup> This perceived need for seriousness in art is especially true of works that deal with difficult philosophical concepts such as existentialism. The humor in Grooms's art is not only found in his court-jesterish mockery of the art world's kings but also in his depictions of modern man and society. This humor, especially in sculcpto-pictoramas such as *Ruckus Manhattan*, has led most scholars to look at his work only through a comedic lens. Timonhy Hyman, John Russel, Grace Glueck, Peter Schjeldahl, and Paul Goldberger all have written on the humor in Grooms.<sup>6</sup> Words like "carnival," "loony," and "funny" dot the titles and fill the descriptions of *Ruckus Manhattan* in these articles and reviews as opposed to terms like "sophisticated," "intellectual," or "existential." The humor in Grooms's art takes different forms for each of these scholars, but his humor is always the main focus.

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<sup>4</sup> Wendy Reeves, "The Art in Humor, the Humor in Art," *American Art* 15, 2001, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (1939): 34-49.

<sup>6</sup> See: Timothy Hyman, "Carnavalesque: To Reconstruct the Grotesque Cannon," *Modern Painters* 13, no 2 (2000): 106-108; John Russell, "A Red Grooms Traveling Carnival." *New York Times*, August 25, 1985; Grace Glueck, "Red Grooms Reshapes his Loony World," *New York Times* March 29, 1981; Peter Schjeldahl, "He Dares to Make Art That is Fun." *New York Times*, June 15, 1970; Paul Paul Goldberger, "Architecture View; Red Grooms's Cities of the Mind," *New York Times*, August 9, 1987.

*Ruckus Manhattan* consists of many separate sections of lower Manhattan that are placed together to create a city scene through which one can walk freely. Included in the multi-part “sculpto-pictorama” (as Grooms called such installations) is:

the Statue of Liberty wearing platform shoes; the Staten Island Ferry; the Manhattan skyline; the Brooklyn Bridge; Wall Street including the New York Stock Exchange, Trinity Church, Federal Hall, Chase Manhattan Plaza featuring Noguchi’s rock garden and Dubuffet’s *Four Trees*; the Woolworth Building and Chambers Street; the World Trade Center; Chinese chefs and meal; Forty-second Street with Porno bookstore; streetlamp with pimpmobile, pimp, and streetwalker; tourists at Rockefeller Center; and a three-dimensional subway station and car, complete with token booth, nude commuters, turnstiles, larger-than-life passengers, and spring-loaded floor.<sup>7</sup>

It is evident from this listing of scenes that Grooms attempted to recreate and reinterpret as much of New York as possible. Paul Marincola’s list-like description of the included sections of the city does not tell the entire story. The figures within the tableau are of equal importance as their setting. They mirror the unruly nature of New York City in exaggerated and caricature-esque ways. For instance, the prostitutes have absurdly large breasts while the pimps who stand near them are covered in large chains, checkered pants, and wildly patterned hats. The subway riders are exaggerated representations of every type of person one would expect to see in 1970s New York: hippies, the homeless, shoppers with bags, and workmen in expensive suits. Meanwhile, the surrounding buildings reach up in jagged angles and twist and turn back onto themselves as though in the midst of

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<sup>7</sup> Paula Marincola, “Chronology of Red Grooms’s Sculpto-Pictoramas,” in *Red Grooms’s Philadelphia Cornucopia*, ed. Janet Kardon and Paula Marincola, (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1982), 30.

an earthquake. The city is as alive as its inhabitants. The Woolworth building even has a dragon growing out of its bricks.

The humor in the work arises from the satirical repetition of stereotypes of the city itself and its inhabitants. Grooms's *Subway Scene*<sup>8</sup> (figs. 1-4) exhibits numerous instances of humor and stereotyping. In the detail from figure 3 there is a cartoonish elderly woman with her grocery bags clinched tight against her chest as a monstrous male figure leans over a small child between them toward the old woman. The look of shock on the child's face is funny in its exaggeration as is the grotesqueness of the monstrous figure. In figure 1, there is a morbidly obese man with multiple chins sitting next to a stereotyped African American who wears pimp-like clothing. One of the funniest scenes is that of an old man whose has fallen into the lap of his neighbor which can be seen in figure 2. The woman pulls her knees together and away from the man as if to get them out from underneath him and the look of shock and horror on her face is very funny. A security guard is painted onto the wall of the car near these figures who looks on with apathy and no sense of regard for either this woman or the terrified child across the subway car. These scenes are humorous for anyone who has ridden on the Metro in New York, or subways in any large city because, while exaggerated, they present fairly common occurrences and types of people who ride public transportation. This comedy begins to appear darker the longer one spends in *Ruckus Manhattan* however. The viewer is surrounded by forms of grotesqueness that become overwhelming because all of the scenes employ

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<sup>8</sup> Red Grooms, *The Subway Scene* from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media, 9' x 18'7" x 37'2". Reproduced from Judd Tully, *Red Grooms and Ruckus Manhattan*, (New York: George Braziller, 1977): Images 41-44.

these forms. What was funny becomes disturbing. The man who has fallen over in the older woman's lap could have fallen asleep, or he could have died and collapsed into her lap. The monstrous man on the subway may simply be a homeless man or he may be attempting to molest that scared child. The comedy in *Ruckus Manhattan* begins to mirror the type of comedy in Bruce Nauman's 1987 work *Clown Torture*.<sup>9</sup> In the "Pete and Repeat," video from *Clown Torture*, a clown repeats the joke "Pete and Repeat sat on a fence. Pete fell off, who was left? Repeat. Pete and Repeat sat on a fence. Pete fell off, who was left? Repeat." This joke continues in an endless loop. The continued joke loses its humor and becomes deeply disturbing because the clown, and the viewer, are stuck in an endless cycle within the confines of the joke. While in *Ruckus Manhattan*, the viewer is in a similar situation to that of Nauman's clown. The subway scene also acts to instill this existential sense of alienation. The viewer originally laughs at these figures, but soon realizes that although he is physically on the subway with them, he is not necessary. This car would continue on its way with the same story playing out with or without his presence. These Others in the car cannot make eye contact with him because they are not real. This inability to be perceived by another annihilates one of the manners in which reality and identity within a worldly setting are recognized by the individual. The uneasiness, or nausea, that one feels in this scene is an uneasiness about both one's alienation and the city's disturbing current state. Concerns over identity and social responsibility are very Sartrean existential themes.

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Nauman, *Clown Torture*, 1987, four channel video and sound, Art Institute of Chicago.

The repetition of disturbing and comedic images is found in all of the tableaux from *Ruckus Manhattan* and not just in the *Subway Scene*. In *Girls, Girls, Girls*, (fig. 5)<sup>10</sup> Grooms' portrays two headed pimps, prostitutes, and cops. The exaggerated figures are strongly stereotyped for both their professions and ethnicities. The pimps are dressed in checkered and striped brightly colored pants, loud shirts, large sunglasses, and oversized floppy hats. The prostitutes wear long boots, fishnet stockings, and a tight pink lacy top around their enormous breasts. The police officers each have mustaches and their hats cover their eyes to further reveal they are turning a blind eye to this illegal profession. What is first a humorous representation of stereotypes of pimps, prostitutes, and police officers becomes much darker the longer one stands in front of it. One is faced with the horrific actions these prostitutes must take in order to make a living and the fact that these pimps are taking advantage of them. The cops do nothing to right this wrong and one of them even pokes a prostitute with his nightstick in a suggestive manner. Instead of protecting and serving the people, he may be concerned with abusing his position of power in order to receive sexual satisfaction. All of the humor in Grooms' work begins to become disturbing the more the viewer is left to confront it. These jokes on the decrepit state of New York and its citizens is repeated so often that it begins to incorporate the viewer as a complicit accomplice in these vices. The discomfort that this type of humor creates has been largely overlooked by Grooms's

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<sup>10</sup> Red Grooms, *Girls, Girls, Girls*, from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media. Reproduced from Carter Ratcliff, *Red Grooms*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 162.

scholars, however it raises the questions of what type of experience the viewer is intended to have if it is not the simple laugh riot proposed by many scholars.

Timothy Hyman sees Grooms's humor as a modern take on the Carnival motif of the world-turned-upside-down. He discusses *Ruckus Manhattan* as a type of joke in which the normal and serious world is exaggerated and manipulated to create laughs at the expense of the status-quo. He compares Grooms's art to European works that focus on the contrast of Lent and Carnival. Since Carnival is the one time of the year when appropriate decorum can be dispensed with and the absurd celebrated, Carnival works have a freedom to poke fun at the established order. This humor most often comes from exaggeration and turning normal social customs on their head. *Ruckus Manhattan* is a grossly exaggerated version of New York in which its less appealing aspects become the center of attention.<sup>11</sup> John Russel, meanwhile, sees the humor in Grooms's work along the lines of traveling carnivals. This type of humor is used as a tool for mass entertainment. He describes the set-like nature of *Ruckus Manhattan* as one that encourages audience participation. Russel's main focus is on the enjoyment that this type of art brings to the audience. He claims that everybody loves Grooms's art and they take away a sense of amazement at the funny metamorphosis of the city.<sup>12</sup>

Arthur C. Danto discusses Grooms as a clown instead of a caricaturist whose humor in *Ruckus Manhattan* acts as a form of catharsis for the viewers who laugh at themselves and their city. He argues that the clown differs from the

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<sup>11</sup> Hyman, "Carnavalesque," 107.

<sup>12</sup> Russell, "A Red Grooms Traveling Carnival," 26-27.

caricaturist because he uses humor to raise the audience in their esteem as opposed to the caricaturist who lowers the subject depicted as a way to raise the viewer. By acting as a clown, Grooms can transform his viewers by depicting the negative aspects of society humorously instead of spitefully. This type of humor, according to Danto, allows for a cathartic laughter. Grooms is communicating with the audience and assisting on engaging them with the problems of the city rather than mocking one of the perceived roots of the problem.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars, such as John Ashbery, have picked up on this same sentiment. Ashbery mirrors Danto in his assertion that Grooms creates sharply satirical works, but does so in a manner that avoids meanness in an effort to create deeper involvement by the audience.<sup>14</sup>

Paul Richard discusses Grooms works as a jester who serves “high art” from below. His writing focuses on Grooms’s art that depicts other famous artists and critics, but in his description of all of Grooms’s works, including the sculpto-pictoramas; he notices a richness of fun, puns, jokes, and sight gags. This humor, for Richard, always contains something darker. Grooms does not ignore the miserable but makes a joke out of it, and thus his work has an element of truth telling to it.<sup>15</sup>

Paul Goldberger focuses on the architecture within Grooms’s works especially *Ruckus Manhattan*. He exclaims that the twisting energy of the

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur C. Danto, “Red Grooms,” *The Nation* 245 (Sept. 1987): 242; Arthur C. Danto, “The World as Ruckus: Red Grooms and the Spirit of Comedy,” *Redgrooms*, ed. Ellen Cohen, 67-72 (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> John Ashbery, “Painting The Town Red,” *Newsweek* 97 (April, 1981): 86.

<sup>15</sup> Richard, “Art With 100 Faces,” *Washington Post*.

buildings belie a city on the edge of chaos. The architecture acts as another element to display the humorous and the dangerous in *Ruckus Manhattan*. He notes, like many of the other scholars, a darker aspect to Grooms's humor that can act as a form of social commentary. He mentions the gray figures below the gray Chase Manhattan building as a comment on the deadening affect of this type of architecture and the capitalistic drive behind it on the people who work there.<sup>16</sup>

Robert Hughes does not find much darkness or seriousness behind the humor in Grooms's work. He describes *Ruckus Manhattan* as "Corn-Pone Cubism, Red-Neck Deco" in the title of his review. He argues that *Ruckus Manhattan* does not have any satire and cultural commentary, but is instead a simple laugh riot. He describes the scene at *Ruckus Manhattan* as being as full as a Saturday night barbeque in a dry county while stating that Grooms's work is perfect for the viewer who wants to pretend to have a cultural experience without the risk of any "hangover of thought." He describes Red Grooms as the "good ole boy *extraordinaire*."<sup>17</sup> Clearly, Hughes does not find Grooms's work to be anything more than readily consumable kitsch.

While Grooms's humor is often employed as a form of satire or cultural critique, scholars have yet to consider the influence of particular philosophical concepts on Red Grooms's works. My thesis will act to situate Grooms's work within a philosophical context and reveal a lacuna in the scholarship on Grooms.

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<sup>16</sup> Goldberger, "Architecture View."

<sup>17</sup> Robert Hughes, "Corn-Pone Cubism, Red-Neck Deco," *Time* 130 (September 1987): 78.



Even Bradley J. Nickels, who has called for more serious scholarship on Grooms, writes that Grooms has always appeared “somehow outside of art history” and untouched by the issues of his time.<sup>18</sup> While Nickels deserves credit for his re-examination of Grooms’s presence in the modernist canon, he still sees Grooms as dealing with the social issues of his time and overlooks Grooms’s potential engagement with philosophical issues.

The scholarly writings on Grooms acknowledge concepts which reflect ideas exposed in Sartrian existentialism, but these concepts within Grooms’s work are never discussed as existential. Recognizing an existential ethos in Grooms’s works has not been attempted primarily due to his works’ context in 1970s New York and his extensive use of humor. Given this scholastic disconnect, plus Red Grooms’s own discussions of existentialism in his art, I propose that *Ruckus Manhattan* is imbued with concepts that closely parallel the Sartrian concepts of the act of self discovery, *being-for-itself* and the *being-for-others*, responsibility, and audience engagement. Furthermore, Grooms exhibits a deeper philosophical ethos in *Ruckus Manhattan* than has been previously noted by scholars. *Ruckus Manhattan* acts as an arena in which to act out and discover these Sartrian existential principles in much the same way other environment art, such as work by George Segal, incorporate and expose existential principles. From my analysis of *Ruckus Manhattan* as a work that is situated within the existential tradition of environment art and that parallels many of Sartre’s principles, I will argue that Grooms should be studied equally as the

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<sup>18</sup> Bradley J. Nickels, *Public Works-Private Patrons: Images of Modern Times by Red Grooms*, (Tampa: Tampa Museum, 1983), 5-11.

sophisticated thinker as much as he is the humorist. In my thesis, I will demonstrate that Red Grooms was at some level influenced by the writings of Jean Paul Sartre on existentialism and that existential concepts are both visible and under-appreciated in Grooms's sculpto-pictorama *Ruckus Manhattan*.

## CHAPTER 2

### RED GROOMS: THE FORGOTTEN EXISTENTIALIST

In order to view *Ruckus Manhattan* through an existentialist lens, it is first necessary to show that Red Grooms was indeed well-versed in the terms and concepts associated with existentialist philosophy. Mikel

Dufrenne defines existentialism as a philosophy that gathered steam in the post War World II years. It is at its essence a philosophy of existence as a category of being - or ontology. It starts with a reflection of the phenomenon and as such is a discussion on the idea of subjectivity. It deals with a notion of a lack of pre-ordained essence, and all subsequent facts are derived from this lack of natural essence. Man is a product of his decisions and creates an essence for himself.<sup>1</sup>

This Sartrean concepts of *being-for-itself* is defined most clearly in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Sartrean ideas had permeated American popular culture by the 1970s. This American audience, Grooms included, would have been familiar with these ideas from the art criticism of Harold Rosenberg in works such as his article "The American Action Painters,"<sup>2</sup> and contemporary popular films that featured anti-hero characters, especially those set in New York, such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*. Grooms had access to these existential concepts, as did most Americans in the 1970s, through secondary sources even if he was not directly reading *Being and Nothingness* in its entirety. The existential moment of self realization is the most

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<sup>1</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, "Existentialism and Existentialisms," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 26.1 (Sept, 1965): 51-53.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* 51.8 (Dec., 1952): 22-26.

recognizable of Sartre's existential ethos that had permeated American culture.

This act of self-creation arises from Sartre's theory of subjectivity in *Being and Nothingness*. He explained in a more simplified manner elsewhere:

*Existence* comes before *essence*- or...that we must begin from the subjective. What exactly do we mean by that?...We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is not human nature...Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing-as he wills to be after the leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.<sup>3</sup>

By this Sartre means that man is not endowed with an *a priori* or natural essence. Anything that man does he does of his own free will, including creating and recognizing his own identity. The only way man can give himself an essence, or an identity, is to make choices and actions. These actions are ultimately futile, however, since it is impossible to create a stable or lasting identity. The actions he takes, the reasons he takes them, and the consequences of those actions (which will ultimately lead only to more choices and actions) create an identity, albeit a temporary and contingent one. The realization for the individual human being that he is alone, is responsible for his identity, and that this identity is precariously constructed on a shifting field of existence (with no hope for God to intervene and provide one with a firm and stable foundation), can create much anguish and despair.<sup>4</sup> This anguish is not necessarily pessimistic, although

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism' in *Being and Nothingness*," in *Existentialism*, ed. Robert C. Solomon, (New York: Random House, 1974), 196-198.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

Sartre believed that most people could not cope with this realization and chose instead to take false comfort in a mythic human “nature” (whether a divinely ordained or biologically mechanistic one) to which they would attribute the responsibility for their identity. Nevertheless, for the human being who has come to terms with the anguish of knowing he carries the full weight of his actions and choices, this realization is a liberation and even an optimistic experience, for he is able to identify himself as the “incontestable author of an event,” and thereby can live an authentic life.<sup>5</sup>

The quotation referenced to understand the Sartrean concept of identity does not come from *Being and Nothingness* but instead from *Existentialism is a Humanism*. *Existentialism is a Humanism* was a simplified form of Sartre’s existentialism intended for lay audiences for whom the original text would seem fairly impenetrable. It is even possible that Grooms would have read this essay over the entire tome of *Being and Nothingness*. It is important to note that while existentialism was prevalent in the cultural context of 1970s New York, it was well passed its apex in the art world.<sup>6</sup> Despite belonging to a group including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Camus, and others, Sartre is generally considered the most famous existential philosopher because of the popularity of *Being and Nothingness* along with his fictional works, such as *Nausea* and *No Exit*. In

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>6</sup> The 1970s art scene had rejected much of existentialism as outdated and thus Grooms, if understood as an existential artist, would have seemed outside the *avant-garde* despite the frequency with which existentialism appeared in popular culture, film, and literature of 1970s New York.

America, Sartre especially became synonymous with existentialism.<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that I will focus almost solely on Sartrian existentialism as the well from which Grooms derives his knowledge of the philosophy.

Given the popularity of Sartrian existentialism in the popular culture of America in the 1970s, it is no surprise that Grooms would have come into contact with the philosophy. Grooms directly referenced existentialism in interviews as well as in his art works that depict those figures most commonly associated with the school of thought. He also creates works that pay homage to existential artists such as Alberto Giacometti and George Segal. Grooms follows in the existential footsteps of these artists by also creating urban scenes of isolation not unlike *The City Square* and *The Subway*. Grooms's statements about existential aspects in his own works along with his verbal and artistic references to existentialism will reveal Red Grooms to be an artist incorporating existentialist concepts.

The most compelling statement by Grooms is perhaps his simplest. He states in an interview cited by Grace Glueck that the reason he did *Ruckus Manhattan* was because it was the era of existentialism and they [the Ruckus building crew] were up for projecting themselves into the unknown.<sup>8</sup> Grooms mentions existentialism and its important concepts on many occasions in his

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<sup>7</sup> For example, when existentialism is discussed in the films of Martin Scorsese, Sartre is almost always the sole philosopher discussed. Part of the reason for Sartre's popularity in the United States is that he was one of the first and most widely (in English) published existentialists in America. See Dufrenne, "Existentialism and Existentialisms," for a further discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Grace Glueck, "Red Grooms Reshapes his Loony World," *The New York Times*.

interviews. Often the conversation turns to the comedy in his art during which Grooms will discuss some aspect of existentialism. Grooms's discussions of existentialism in his works casts this humor in a new light. In an interview with David Shapiro, Grooms was asked how he thinks an ideal viewer would see his art. Grooms responded:

I definitely do *not* try to make funny works. I start out painstakingly strict on myself. Usually, in the process of the work, there's a frustration. You're trying to do your best, and it's not working, so you start slugging away, and that's when the humor thing happens. It's a release, a point of release. It's the tension of trying to do a good job and the recognition that you can't - the human condition. There's an existential element as well, because nobody is going to build their prosperity on humor. We're done for; it's an admission of mortality.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from Grooms's declaration that there is an existential element in his works, he reveals an understanding of at least the basic notions of existentialism. By defining the existential element in his work to be an admission of mortality, he is recalling Sartre's renunciation of a preordained or a *priori* essence for humanity and with that a denial of traditional beliefs in God as endowing humanity with an essence in the form of a soul.<sup>10</sup> Realizing that man is only what he makes of himself, he is also recognizing his complete and total mortality. There is no afterlife, so the sum of a man's choices during his life are his only defining essence. This focus on the present, man's solitude, and mortality are not the most chipper of themes; Grooms, however, realizes the serious and dark aspects

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<sup>9</sup> David Shapiro, *Red Grooms: New York Stories*, (New York: Marlborough Gallery, Inc., 1995): 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans., Bernard Frechtman and Hazel E. Barnes, (New York: Citadel Press, 1987), 16-34.

of this worldly life, but he is taking the world too seriously not to laugh at it.<sup>11</sup> This is a particularly existential humor because it deals with the confrontation of the individual with the nature of the absurd and the concept of contingency. Because man is ultimately not in control but can only make choices within the confines of the constantly changing world, he is often confronted with a sense of helplessness and lack of control because he is contingent upon a world he cannot control. Grooms's humor arises from the recognition of this contingency within an absurd world.

Grooms exhibits his knowledge of existentialism in a 1960 interview with Clara Hieronymous in which he claimed that he wanted to "make some kind of strong statement about man...such as a man standing up against the sky, wrapped in atmosphere and blowing his breath against the universe."<sup>12</sup> While this statement does not explicitly mention existentialism, its language mirrors that of the abstract expressionists who were most often associated with existentialism such as Barnett Newman, who stated:

Man's first expression, like his first dream, was an aesthetic one...Original man, shouting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Judith E. Stein, "All Around the Cobbler's Bench with Red Grooms," in *Red Grooms: A Retrospective*, ed. Peter K. McKenzie, (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1985), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Judith E. Stein, "Red Grooms: The Early Years, in *Red Grooms: A Retrospective*," ed. Peter K. McKenzie, (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1985), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Barnett Newman, "The First Man Was an Artist," *The Tiger's Eye*, (Oct 1947): 59.



This type of language which discusses self-awareness before the void and man's tragic state are highly reminiscent of Sartrean existential writings. The use of existential language by artists and critics caused abstract expressionism to become the style most often associated with existentialism. Existentialism does not *necessarily* characterize abstract expressionist art, but certain writers—notably Rosenberg and Newman—used explicitly existentialist language in describing abstract expressionist art hence the association of some abstract expressionist artworks with existentialist ideas. This image of a man isolated in the universe as he blows his breath against it can be understood in terms of the act of self-discovery. At this moment of existential self-discovery, man realizes his solitude in the world. He struggles with that realization. Wrestling with this new found reality can originally cause anguish and despair. Man can attempt to make his mark, but his existence can be so marginalized that any effort is as effective as blowing against the universe. The weight of that struggle now rests on mankind since, according to Sartre, man is responsible for everyone through his actions.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of existential responsibility is not unique to Sartre as Camus also described the struggle against the weight of the world in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This struggle with the discovery of one's isolation in the universe and one's responsibility for creating meaning in the universe hearken back to statements such as that of Harold Rosenberg when he described how the American vanguard explored the expanse of the canvas: "On the one hand, a desperate recognition of moral and intellectual exhaustion; on the other the

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<sup>14</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 16-17.

exhilaration of an adventure over depths in which he might find reflected the true image of his identity.”<sup>15</sup> Finding one’s true identity in the vast expanse of the white canvas through an adventure sounds similar to Grooms’s man standing up against the universe blowing his breath in the same hope of finding self-identity. Grooms’s statements go beyond familiarity with Abstract Expressionism and acknowledge the existential overtones found in some of these works and certain Abstract Expressionist writings.

While Grooms’s references to existentialism proves his familiarity with the philosophy and its more superficial notions of isolation and despair, his prints *Les Deux Magots* and *The Existentialist*, feature a deeper knowledge of the writers and artists who define the existential movement. *Les Deux Magots*<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 6) is an etching and aquatint which represents dozens of famous artists and writers in front of the famous Parisian Café Les Deux Magots. Included amongst the many famous artists and writers are Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Alberto Giacometti. Sartre and Camus, of course, are two of the most recognized writers associated with the existential movement. The inclusion of Sartre and Camus in this crowd does not necessarily mean that Grooms was reading these writers’ works, since these are names that any educated artist would know. It is important to note, however, that Grooms spent time in Paris in

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<sup>15</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* 51.8 (Dec., 1952): 24.

<sup>16</sup> Red Grooms, *Les Deux Magots*, 1985. Etching and Aquatint 66.7x79.7cm. Knestrick Collection, cat. no. 107. Reproduced from Vincent Katz and Walter Knestrick. *Red Grooms: The Graphic Work*, ed. Adele Westbrook, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 144.

1960 just after the height of existentialism's influence in the 1950s.<sup>17</sup> Grooms was ideally situated to have been exposed to the writings of Sartre while there. This assumption is confirmed in a statement about *Les Deux Magots* written by Grooms. He declares that the print "is a homage to the French culture that has shaped my view on art and *philosophy*."<sup>18</sup> Grooms is admitting that he is not only a Francophile but that this French culture has influenced his views on specifically art and philosophy. The major philosophy of France in the 1950s and 1960s is existentialism whose biggest star is arguably Sartre. When Grooms states that the print is an homage to the French culture and philosophy that influenced him, it should be understood that existentialism is most likely the philosophy he is crediting as an influence.

Grooms further exhibits this knowledge of existentialism in his woodcut *The Existentialist* (fig. 7).<sup>19</sup> This woodcut is a massive 77x42 inch portrait of the bust of Alberto Giacometti. The title alone makes evident Grooms recognition of the existential themes with which Giacometti's work is associated. Grooms says that he has always loved Giacometti and had seen him both in cafes and on the streets while he was in Paris in 1960.<sup>20</sup> Sartre also wrote the introduction to the

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<sup>17</sup> Laurene Buckley, "An Interview with Red Grooms," in *Red Grooms: A Personal Art History*, 2 (New Britain: New Britain Museum of American Art, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Vincent Katz, "The Prints of Red Grooms," in *Red Grooms: The Graphic Work*, ed. Adele Westbrook, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 141. Italics for emphasis are my addition.

<sup>19</sup> Red Grooms, *The Existentialist*, 1984. Woodcut 77x42in. Knestruck Collection, cat. no. 103. Vincent Katz and Walter Knestruck. *Red Grooms: The Graphic Work*, ed. Adele Westbrook, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 148.

<sup>20</sup> Buckley, "An Interview with Red Grooms," 2.

catalogue of Giacometti's 1948 show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is a likelihood, given Grooms's appreciation of Sartre, that he would have come across Sartre in reference to Giacometti. Giacometti is represented here as an older, seemingly worn out man. His eyes sag and his lips neither smile nor frown as a cigarette hangs limply from them. This is the look of a man who has felt existential anguish and despair. The weight of all mankind has been his responsibility as suggested by the male and female figure on either of his shoulders depicted in the elongated style of Giacometti's most famous works. Their position remind one of Sartre's statements on the individual as responsible for all men through his actions. It is the weight of responsibility that causes the anguish that is seen in Giacometti's strained face. Grooms is thus acknowledging both Giacometti's own works and the Sartrian existentialist themes that fill them.

Grooms created more than one print of Giacometti and has spoken of his love for Giacometti in multiple interviews. In Grace Glueck's article "Red Grooms Reshapes his Loony World," Grooms states that he finds and appreciates humor in Giacometti's art. In a statement about wanting to create art more like that of the Paris and New York schools which shaped the century, Grooms says:

The comic stuff is one thing, but I do have an interest in the other side. When I look at art outside of my own, I don't care in particular for anything like it. I admire Giacometti; there's my idea of a good artist who could do both comic and serious things.<sup>22</sup>

This statement is unusual because it is associating humor with Giacometti. The existential art of Giacometti is not often described in such terms. For Grooms

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2000), 149.

<sup>22</sup> Glueck, "Red Grooms Reshapes his Loony World," *The New York Times*.

there appears to be some connection between the seriousness of life as seen through the existential eye and the comedic. The lack of any *a-priori* essence creates a situation in which the best route for dealing with angst or despair becomes to laugh at it. Grooms, again, is taking life too seriously not to laugh at it. The inclusion of humor in his work is that admission of mortality of which Grooms spoke of in the Shapiro interview. Grooms's illumination of the human condition as "the tension of trying to do a good job and the recognition that you can't"<sup>23</sup> closely mirrors Giacometti's own claim that he had never been able to honestly portray reality and if he could have only once represented what he saw, he would not have to ever paint or sculpt again.<sup>24</sup> Both men want to make art that is truly authentic, but both recognize the ultimate futility of their efforts. This futility is what Grooms seems to be laughing at and what Giacometti struggles with. Arthur C. Danto points out, in connection to Grooms, that Socrates believed "the genius of comedy is the same as that of tragedy, and the true artist in tragedy is an artist in comedy also."<sup>25</sup> Thus the tragedy, anguish, and despair associated with existentialism can in fact be seen through a humorous lens. Existentialism has a reputation for being excessively serious and completely lacking in humor. Depressing is often used to describe the philosophy, but Grooms grasps that existential despair and anguish are not entirely pessimistic concepts as defined

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<sup>23</sup> Shapiro, *Red Grooms: New York Stories*, 7-8.

<sup>24</sup> Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Danto, "Red Grooms," 242.

by Sartre.<sup>26</sup> Sartre has even employed humor in works such as the play *No Exit*.<sup>27</sup> A type of dramatic comedy is what Grooms aspires to and sees within Giacometti's art.

Another similarity between Grooms and Giacometti is their focus on the city. *The City Square*<sup>28</sup> (fig. 8) places the typical elongated figures of Giacometti on a platform that stands in for a city square. While *The City Square* does not have the architectural details of a Groomsian city nor the individualized character of Grooms's city dwellers, both are placed within the setting of the concept of a city. This urban setting is no coincidence. The city is the site wherein existentialism takes form. It is within this crowded yet decidedly non-intimate setting that man is most clearly faced with his isolation. His loneliness is highlighted further by the crowds who surround him but do not know him.

Using a tableau of city setting to portray existentialism is typical of much of the environment art that was popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Environment art focuses on the setting as highly important to any search of self because no man is ever removed from his context or environment. The use of the city setting to explore existentialism can be seen in environment works by other artists, such as George Segal's plaster figures. The term "environment" is often used to describe

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<sup>26</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer L. McMahon, "After Hours: Scorsese on Absurdism," in *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, ed. Mark T. Conrad, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 109-128.

<sup>28</sup> Alberto Giacometti, *The City Square*, Bronze, 8 1/4 x 24 5/8 x 16 7/8 inches, Guggenheim Museum, New York.

the art of Segal, Grooms, and others such as Kienholz.<sup>29</sup> Situating *Ruckus Manhattan* as a type of environment art creates a clearer application of existentialism to Grooms's works. Certain aspects of Sartrean philosophy (whether from *Being and Nothingness*, *What is Literature*, or Sartre's fiction) had been circulating within American cultural consciousness since the 1940s; some artists and writers had incorporated some of it, especially the ideas of anguish and self-realization, but in isolation of the social facets of Sartre's discussions. By the time Grooms is on the scene, a few other artists, primarily sculptors, have responded to the significance of society and the world of the Other as integral to Sartrean self-realization—hence, we have Giacometti and many years later, Segal. Grooms picks up threads from many of these other artists, and adds to them his own sense of the grotesque and comic. Grooms was familiar with Segal and had met him through Kaprow.<sup>30</sup> Segal uses human figures within city settings, showing aspects common to both Grooms and Giacometti. The plaster figures have coarse, jagged, unfinished exteriors much like the elongated sculptures of Giacometti. They also lack distinct individual properties beyond sex and general age-range. These figures, however, are placed within slices of an actual cityscape. Instead of the open, architecture-less platform of Giacometti, they are situated in diners, subways, or photo booths. Segal's city settings are not as detailed or fully immersive as Grooms's are, but they do acknowledge the

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Wheeler, *Art Since Mid-Century: 1945 to the Present* (New York and Paris: The Vendome Press, 1991), 174.

<sup>30</sup> Marco Livingstone, "Seeing Red: Reasons to be Cheerful," in *Redgrooms*, ed. Ellen Cohen, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2004), 14.

importance of setting to what Segal calls “the presence of man in his daily life.”<sup>31</sup> This presence of man in his daily life is the recognition that man can never be totally removed from his situation or context. Segal’s environments have been described as portraying its figures in existential situations.<sup>32</sup> They have been noted for having “an acute sense of alienation.”<sup>33</sup> Segal and Grooms have both even focused on the same city setting: the subway. For instance, Segal’s *The Subway*<sup>34</sup> (fig. 9) shows a woman sitting alone in a section of a rebuilt subway car, while Grooms’s *Subway Scene* from *Ruckus Manhattan* is a full replica of the entire subway car and has multiple figures. Despite their differences, both share an aspect of isolation or anonymity within a very public place. Anonymity and isolation within a public setting are touchstones of existentialism. The inability to recognize the authenticity of the other and the objectification of self by others are key to Sartre’s thoughts on authenticity.<sup>35</sup>

Scholars discussed existentialist themes in artistic installations because of the focus on the city as the place of heightened existential awareness, but Grooms similar urban environments have not been studied as such. It is with this

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<sup>31</sup> George Segal quoted from Wheeler, *Art Since Mid-Century*, 174.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Friedman, “George Segal,” in *Figures / Environments*, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1970), 16.

<sup>33</sup> Sam Hunter, *American Art of the 20th Century*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1972), 289.

<sup>34</sup> George Segal, *The Subway*, 1968. Plaster, metal, glass, rattan, electrical parts with lightbulbs, and map, 2.25 x 2.88 x 1.3m. Reproduced from Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940*, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2000), 194.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, ed. Hazel E. Barnes, ( New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Washington Square Press, 1992), 340-400.



recognition of existentialism's influence on Grooms, its compatibility with his humor, and Grooms's placement within the tradition of environments that one can turn towards *Ruckus Manhattan* in order to see it as an arena in which the viewers can experience elements of existential discovery.

## CHAPTER 3

### ***RUCKUS MANHATTAN AS AN ARENA OF EXISTENTIAL REALIZATIONS***

Grooms designs *Ruckus Manhattan* to envelop the viewer within an environment, much like with Segal's *Subway Scene*. Instead of a single tableau, however, Grooms presents a massive slice of Manhattan. By including a multitude of lively characters and interactive settings, Grooms has created a work in which the viewer goes beyond simply recognizing his urban, existential isolation. Instead, he becomes a part of the work and interacts with it, as opposed to simply seeing, appreciating, and understanding the work in a museum setting, as in the case of a Segal work that never divorces itself from its museum setting. For *Ruckus Manhattan*, the art becomes the museum that holds it as well. By becoming so inclusive, and fun, one can forget one is in a museum. The artwork allows greater freedom for the viewer to react to what is around oneself as if experiencing similar sights in the actual city. This freedom to react and act within these tableaux as an arena is what allows Grooms to portray existential concepts beyond the recognition of isolation and the realization of self. In this setting, Grooms allows for the discovery of *being-for-itself, being-for-others, responsibility, and engagement*.

The incredibly diverse and numerous tableaux within *Ruckus Manhattan* tower over and fully surround the spectator. This fully encompassing setting twists the traditional experience of viewing art; instead of looking at individual pieces spaced evenly on whitewashed walls within the arena of a gallery or museum of fine art, *Ruckus Manhattan* serves as both the museum and the art

simultaneously. By taking the viewer and placing him quite literally within the art work, Grooms has created a piece of art that has become an arena in which to experience an existentialist self-realization. The viewer, when inside *Ruckus Manhattan*, is faced with an exaggerated play on reality which asks him to question his importance and identity.

Grooms had declared that *Ruckus Manhattan* was an attempt at projecting himself into the unknown, but Grooms and the ruckus crew do more than project themselves into the unknown; they built a space for the viewers to project themselves into the unknown as well.<sup>1</sup> Grooms constructs his existential arenas so that they allow the viewer to experience the act of self-realization primarily through the concepts that recall what Sartre identified as the *being-for-itself*, and *being-for-others*, and responsibility.

In *Ruckus Manhattan* Grooms moves beyond a basic representation of Sartrean existential concepts and allows, instead, for the viewer to experience oneself as a *being-for-itself*, and thus as a fully liberated and authentic human being. In the 1940s, Harold Rosenberg had famously described the canvas of the Action Painter to be “an arena” in which one struggles with creating and asserting one’s individuality.<sup>2</sup> This is not only very existential language, but existentialism was a well documented influence on the Action Painter’s search for self and

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<sup>1</sup> Glueck, “Red Grooms Reshapes his Loony World,” *The New York Times*.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters.” *Art News* 51.8 (Dec., 1952): 22-23.

means to visually represent it.<sup>3</sup> The use of the word arena in reference to *Ruckus Manhattan* by scholars such as Carter Ratcliff reveals that this connection between Grooms and existential themes via abstract expressionism has some scholarly precedent.<sup>4</sup> Carter Ratcliff has noted that Grooms's immersion in his art mirrors that of the abstract expressionists who treated their canvases like an arena. Ratcliff, however, will incorrectly dismiss the existential elements in Grooms's work because of a misconstrued notion of existentialism as being purely about the *isolated* individual's search for meaning. Carter Ratcliff stated:

But when Grooms deploys these devices [muddied palette, lurching space, frenzied surfaces, expressive spontaneity] from the Action Painter's repertoire, he puts them to work in the service of a comic and, in its way, detached vision of urban life. Thus, although Grooms's art has always displayed an Action Painter's traits, he does not treat his work as an arena where the self does battle with its own authenticity. Grooms's eye turns outward, not inward.<sup>5</sup>

While Ratcliff does point out the connection of Action Painting with the arena as a place to express an existential search for self, he concludes that Grooms's subject matter is solely of the outside world and therefore does not qualify as existentialist in the way that the works of American Action painters do. If Ratcliff were correct in his limited application of existentialism as an isolated search for identity to *Ruckus Manhattan*, then his argument would render mine completely moot. However, Ratcliff's understanding of existentialism, and in particular

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich, "Prefatory Note," in *New Images of Man*, ed. Peter Selz, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Selz, "Introduction," in *New Images of Man*, ed. Peter Selz, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Carter Ratcliff, *Red Grooms*, eds. Nancy Grubb and Terry Ann R. Neff, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 59.

Sartre's conceptualization of the *being-for-itself*, is flawed. What Ratcliff has overlooked is the fact that any realization of self and consciousness occurs within a human environmental setting. Therefore, by emphasizing the social situation of *Ruckus Manhattan* and the urban viewer by turning his eye outwards, Grooms should not be regarded as *less* existentialist than the Action Painters. Indeed, quite the contrary: as I will argue, *Ruckus Manhattan* can be seen as *more* faithful in rendering an existentialist arena than were the canvases on which the Action Painters recorded their gestural marks.

According to existentialist philosophy, including Sartre's, it is only within the world that a person can realize his self and struggle with its authenticity.<sup>6</sup> Ratcliff's understanding of existentialism is a distorted one based on the assumption that the "isolated genius" associated with Action Painting corresponds exactly to the existentialist notion of the "being-for-itself." Bradley J. Nickels, in his essay for the *Public Works-Private Patrons* exhibition of Grooms's works, comes closer than Ratcliff in recognizing the existential aspects of Grooms's focus on the human environment.<sup>7</sup> Since this environmental context plays an integral role in the formation of human identity, Nickels claims that this focus on the environmental is what allows Grooms to move beyond the Action Painters in the ability to express the human condition. He takes the example of Pollock's primordial "males" and "females" and de Kooning's *Women* series to depict that Action Painters portrayed the human figure as they imagined it would be outside of any human culture. For Grooms, however, the human figure only

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<sup>6</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Nickels, *Public Works Private Patrons*, 1-12.

had meaning when it was “rooted in the surroundings and artifacts of a particular culture or historical period.”<sup>8</sup> Nickels chose the more figurative works of the Action Painters to discuss in relation to Grooms, but this representational art is not really typical of Action Painting. Nickels chose the less typical side of Action Painting to make his argument, but this is largely inconsequential because both the representational and nonrepresentational action paintings confront issues of identity while refusing to place them within a specific setting. The point of the discussion is to reveal the more fully realized existential elements within Grooms’s work regardless of which branch of Abstract Expressionism he is compared to. For example, the Action Painters also strove for timeless, universal imagery which stands in contradiction to the social specificity of Grooms’s installations and Sartre’s writings.

The importance of the social setting in an individual’s crisis of identity is addressed in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, when, defining the basic tenets of existentialism, Sartre states:

In any case, what can be said from the very beginning is that by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a *human setting* and a human subjectivity.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Nickel’s statements on Grooms’s belief that the human condition must be situated in its human setting present a strong correlation between Sartre’s writings and *Ruckus Manhattan*. For Grooms to express to the viewer an

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Italicized emphasis is my addition: Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 10.

existential search for self, he had to first create a replica human environment in which to begin this discovery.

Once within the human setting of a stylized lower Manhattan, Grooms begins to unveil the nuances of the Sartrean search for identity. For Sartre, this self-discovery is based on the concept of the being having a two-pronged consciousness of *being-for-itself* and *being-for-others*. The next step in revealing that *Ruckus Manhattan* recalls Sartrean existential themes is grasping how the installation deals with the *being-for-others* and its inherent responsibilities. Sartre states:

The for-itself has knowledge of being, but we must add that this knowledge has being. The identity of the being of the for-itself and the knowledge does not come from the fact that knowledge is the measure of being but from the fact that the for-itself makes known to itself what it is, through the in-itself; that is, from the fact that in its being it is a relation to being.<sup>10</sup>

The for-itself is essentially the knowledge of self within a setting. The *for-itself* is what allows for the entire idea of foundation of being to come into the world.<sup>11</sup>

The *being-for-itself* founds itself upon a negation of the world to which it reacts and in which it always is - a world populated by other *for-itselfs* - thereby leading to the *being-for-others* as the social facet of the *for-itself*. Thus, the first principle of existentialism, that man's existence precedes his essence and that he is nothing but what he makes himself, is revealed to man.<sup>12</sup> This first principle is the moment of self-realization and all of the existential dread and anguish that comes

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<sup>10</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 294-295.

<sup>11</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 130.

<sup>12</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotion*, 15.

with it which had been the focus of Action Painters. *Ruckus Manhattan*, however, moves beyond the Action Painters' representation of this moment in their own lives, and instead gives the viewer an arena in which to experience for himself the existential anguish that accompanies realization of self in the social setting by creating a setting in which the constant bombardment with disturbing humor and instances of alienation pushes the viewer to existentially question both his identity and his social responsibilities.

The manner in which Grooms accomplishes this feeling of anguish is through the viewer's alienation from society and subsequent realization of self as for-itself in the viewer's interaction with *Ruckus Manhattan*. The first tableau in *Ruckus Manhattan* and the one through which the viewer must enter the work is the *Subway Scene*.<sup>13</sup> When one enters the Groomsian Subway, the reality of the human setting is highlighted by the fact that the subway is full of riders and the floor moves and shakes as it does when one is actually riding.<sup>14</sup> Despite this reality, however, the viewer is entirely alienated. The figures are frozen in a moment of time and none of them directly interact with the viewer. One man has fallen asleep on the lap of a thoroughly shocked woman; another man reads the newspaper. An elderly woman tightly clutches her possessions as a grotesque man with massive hands leans over suspiciously. Even with all of this activity, no figures make eye contact with the viewer nor seem to acknowledge his presence at all. The viewer's existence is entirely his own. He has no meaning in this setting and thus he has no exterior, or *a-priori*, essence. He is not integral and

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<sup>13</sup> Danto, "The World as Ruckus," 65.

<sup>14</sup> Goldberg, "Architecture View."



his absence would change nothing. Whatever meaning this viewer intends or desires for himself he must make for himself. Thus the existential *de trop*, or “superfluousness,” as well as “dread” and “anguish,” associated with the first principle are brought jarringly to the forefront.

When the *Subway Scene* is looked at through this existential lens, its moving floor becomes all the more important. Without it, these tableau could be read as simply another piece of environment art in the form of installation. The figures’ grotesqueness and the graffiti filled subway car could be read as a social commentary on the state of New York City in the 1970s without any reference to the viewer’s recognition of being as a for-itself. This shaking floor (a mechanized back and forth swaying that mimics the shaking of a moving subway car), however, further highlights Sartre’s discussions on how the for-itself is realized. Because the for-itself is part of a body and conscious of that body, the senses are integral in the for-itself to recognize its “nature-for-us” as a “being-in-the-world.” This recognition allows a physical reference to anything immediately present which we may perceive.<sup>15</sup> The shaking floor awakens in the viewer this recognition of the senses and thus the body as part of the for-itself. The shaking of the floor also conjures another connection to Sartre in his discussions of *nausea*. Sartre argues that the for-itself has a perpetual apprehension of an insipid taste, which one cannot place, but that is termed *nausea* and it perpetually reacquaints the body to the consciousness.<sup>16</sup> The shaking of the floor

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<sup>15</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 429.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 444-445.

can be seen as a play on this term of *nausea* because the movement simulate forward travel which often induces motion-sickness highlighted by the physical feeling of *nausea*. This nausea Sartre speaks of is the psychic feeling as opposed to the physical feeling of sickness, but by creating movement in the subway, Grooms has employed a pun on the *nausea* that is one of Sartrian existentialism's major points as well as sharing the title of one of Sartre's novels.<sup>17</sup> Puns in Grooms's work have precedent as Grooms has used puns in other works, such as *Saskia by her Dada*, which is a paper-sculpture of Saskia Grooms playing off of being a work by her dad, Grooms, and the absurd or dada construction as a paper sculpture.

This recognition of the self lays the foundation for the next principle of existentialism that has parallels in *Ruckus Manhattan*: responsibility. Sartre argues that man "chooses and makes himself," but also "it is impossible for a man to transcend human subjectivity." Since man cannot transcend human subjectivity, it means that the world can only be the world that he perceives and shapes it to be. The only reality someone can know is the reality they perceive through their own subjectivity. If man is choosing and making himself in a world that is of his own perception, then he is responsible for his choices as they pertain to himself and the rest of the world; thus the next principle is that man is responsible for himself as well as all men, and when he makes choices he makes them for himself and for all men.<sup>18</sup> It is with this understanding of his

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964).

<sup>18</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 16-17.

responsibility for the entire world that man can assume all of his responsibilities and go out into the world to put these responsibilities into practice so as to live an authentic life.

It is in this setting of the oft decrepit cityscape of *Ruckus Manhattan* that Grooms discusses the responsibility of the individual. Each individual's choice being both his own and for all mankind posits a type of ethics in which a man should only choose good because, according to Sartre, a choice is an affirmation. To choose evil is to affirm it as a positive quality for oneself and everyone else. Since one cannot choose evil for himself, he must choose the good, and nothing is good if it is not good for all of the world.<sup>19</sup> Sartre's use of the words "good" and "evil" do not connote that these decisions are moral ones, *per se*. Morality requires an *a-priori* definition of good and bad which is impossible in a humanity that has no *a-priori* essence. These decisions and their subsequent responsibility, for existentialists, are based in ethical choices which means that their quality of "goodness" is decided based solely on the current situation at hand, instead of rules handed down by a god. All of the bad or unjust aspects of Manhattan are now put in front of the viewer where the viewer must make a choice. That choice may be to laugh at the absurdity and unjustness of the city, ignore these aspects of the city, to condone them, or to desire to change them. One's choice though must be the decision one believes everyone should make. Sartre highlights this belief by stating that: "In creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

an image of man as we think he ought to be.”<sup>20</sup> Some of Grooms’s tableaux exhibit a concept that is very similar to Sartre’s discussions on the universal responsibility inherent in choices.

In the *Girls, Girls, Girls* vignette in the 42nd Street area of *Ruckus Manhattan*, there is a two-headed pimp, a two-headed prostitute, and a two-headed cop. In each of these figures the respective heads are of different ethnicities. They each share a body and have one doubly large shared torso conjoined at the chest, two arms, and two legs. In each of these pairs the choice of one figure affects the other. If one man wants to be a pimp or one woman wants to be a prostitute, the other has no choice but to be a pimp or prostitute as well. If one cop wants to be corrupt, so must both. This duality could be read along the lines of representing *bad-faith* as the concept of two-faced can be open to a variety of readings. The differing ethnicities of the two heads in each figure, however, reveal that the two heads are not two sides of the same person. If these figures were to represent one person living in bad-faith with one side as a prepackaged identity and the other side as the “true” identity, then it would make more sense for Grooms to have variations of the same person represented rather than two entirely different heads. By having each conjoined figure share a head of another ethnicity, he is further emphasizing that these figures represent the responsibility for all mankind despite inherent differences of ethnicity, nationality, religion, or gender. Here Grooms has not only confronted the viewer with the types of choices he must make within the urban human setting, but also visually represented a concept quite similar to Sartre’s principle of responsibility.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

The outcome of realizing one's self and assuming responsibility for that self is to live an authentic life. This authentic life means that one must avoid falling into *bad-faith* in making all future decisions. Grooms has his viewer come to this understanding of self in the opening of *Ruckus Manhattan* before sending him out of the subway and into the "real world" of the *Ruckus Manhattan* cityscape. The viewer, with his new self-awareness, must also attempt to recognize what constitutes an authentic life through the Sartrean ideas of this responsibility and avoiding *bad-faith*, which Grooms lays out in subsequent *Ruckus Manhattan* tableaux.

Upon exiting the subway, the viewer is thrust into a sprawling recreation of lower Manhattan comprised of numerous vignettes. In addition to major monuments such as the Statue of Liberty, the Chase Building, Wall Street, and the Brooklyn Bridge, Grooms presents one with an incredible amount of everyday detail. There is a Chinese restaurant with highly stereotyped Asian cooks holding chickens. The streets are filled with businessmen, mothers with children, and vagrants. Trash-cans and fire-hydrants populate the street corners. Grooms leaves nothing out, including the decrepit aspects of New York. While the subway had also included some horrendous figures and graffiti, it did not present New York in its more corrupted state. Once in the vignettes of lower Manhattan, however, the viewer comes across dead construction workers in the streets, porno-shops, pimps, prostitutes, and cops who turn a blind eye. This responsibility of making good choices for oneself and all humanity, for Sartre, is reliant on the ability of the individual to make choices in *good-faith*. Good-faith is

obviously the opposite of *bad-faith*, but in order to understand the former it is important to first grasp the latter. *Bad-faith*, for Sartre, is any attempt to put oneself out of reach or escape a situation. To escape a situation is to try to avoid the anguish that comes from making choices. Bad-faith is essentially the hiding of a displeasing truth, or disguising a pleasing untruth as if to be the truth. It is also the failure to recognize the complete humanity of the others who share in this worldly setting. In each of these situations *bad-faith* differs from a lie because the displeasing truth is being hidden from oneself.<sup>21</sup>

There are essentially three main types of bad-faith choices: allowing the past to dictate a choice; ignoring the past because each new choice brings a chance to start over; and refusing to recognize the full humanity of others. An authentic choice, or good-faith choice, is one that recognizes: "the condition of the possibility of bad faith is that human reality, in its most immediate being, in the intra-structure of the pre-reflective *cogito*, must be what it is not and not be what it is."<sup>22</sup> This concept of being what one is not and also not being what one is can be best understood in terms of the *being-for-itself* as human consciousness. Consciousness is a condition of being which is constantly in flux and therefore never coinciding with a static object in-itself. Any attempt to treat the for-itself as though it were an in-itself is an act made in *bad-faith*. To be what one is not and also not be what one is means that in each choice, the chooser must try to separate from his past choices as they are not applicable to right now as well as not project what one will be in the future. The choice needs to be made in terms

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<sup>21</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

of its immediate and broad impact. Thus, after the original self-realization, each choice becomes a heavy burden. Sartre discusses the first *bad-faith* choice in terms of a homosexual who, instead of recognizing his desires and actively seeking to choose against them, refuses to either call himself a homosexual or take responsibility and change his action. Sartre is not asserting that the homosexual must choose against being homosexual. The problem is that the homosexual refuses to recognize that his actions are a choice and an act freely entered into and not determined by some preexisting nature of his being. If he accepts his identification as being a homosexual, that is bad faith because it is premised on the notion that he possess a static, unchanging identity. He is shifting the blame for each choice to a supposed predetermined condition. This is bad-faith because his choice is not a real choice. He blames his past as an excuse for all future choices. The existential belief that every choice is a new and immediate present should allow him to admit to and assess his past actions and then choose the right one.

Grooms exhibits what can be seen as his take on this principle in the *Porno Bookstore* vignette (fig. 10)<sup>23</sup>. In the King Porno adult bookstore one is confronted with a wide assortment of pornographic magazines on the walls and tables. All sorts of pleasures and perversions are covered in the smut magazines. Titles include “Ear Licker,” “Chain Me,” “Men Men Men,” “Dike Dip,” “Ape,” “Teeth,” and “Nuns.” The phallic toys, with names like “The Patriot” and “The Bowery Banger,” are twisted and grotesque. The large number of

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<sup>23</sup> Red Grooms, *Porno Bookstore*, from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media, 9 x 17ft. Reproduced from Red Grooms, *New York Stories 1976-2011*, (New York: Marlborough, 2011): 14.

homosexual themed pornography in the shop hearken back to Sartre's discussion of the homosexual who refuses to take responsibility for each action by blaming it on a condition. For both Sartre and Grooms, this is not a moral condemnation of homosexuality or any sexual choices. There is nothing in *Ruckus Manhattan* that implies religion or a preordained morality within this scene. It is simply an example of a man acting in *bad-faith* by refusing to take full accountability of his decisions. The Groomsian figure in the porno shop likely blames his predilection for pornography on any number of previous conditions. The porn aficionado Grooms depicts could even be blaming his plight on the perceived highly sexualized nature of men. It is, for this figure just as the homosexual in Sartre's writings, something one falsely assumes one cannot help and therefore one can make excuses for this action or choice. This is bad-faith decision making.

Grooms also parallels another form of *bad-faith* which is that of ignoring the full reality of others. Sartre discusses this type of *bad-faith* in terms of defining a person by only one of their attributes. He uses the example of a waiter. A person is not entirely one of his attributes such as a waiter.<sup>24</sup> That person plays at being a waiter just like any human being plays out a social role which is not synonymous with his or her total existence. To define a person by a single attribute is to deny their totality. Grooms uncovers this limited definition one places on others through the humorous stereotypes he uses in *Ruckus Manhattan*. The grotesque passengers, by their nature of being artificial, are presented as objects. They take up seats on the subway in a manner that is no

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<sup>24</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 101-105.



different than placing a large bag on the seat. They exist only as points of reference for the viewer as the *for-itself* in this state. While these figures are not real humans, they are stand-ins for the real masses of humanity that crowd the subway everyday. A ride on the subway or city bus in most large metropolises reveals a shocking similarity in how a city dweller treats his or her fellow human beings as though they were the mannequins of *Ruckus Manhattan*. There is little to no talking. People brush up against each other as if running into a doorframe. If all the seats are empty, the passengers become nothing more than obstacles to the for-itself's desire to sit. The individual, in this setting, is treating others as objects. Sartre's waiter fulfills the same role. The waiter is objectified by being treated as a means and as only one aspect of his individuality. The waiter is objectified by both his clients, who see him only as "a waiter," and by himself if he thinks of himself as "a waiter" rather than a human consciousness performing a role or "playing at being a waiter." This waiter is practicing bad-faith by trying to convince himself he is only a waiter.

Sartre claims, however, that the other cannot be an object. This recognition of seeing others as objects is realized by the recognition of the look from these Others. The gaze from the Other forces the subject in question to realize that he is perceived by a fellow human consciousness, and that he (the subject) has no control over how the Other perceives him.<sup>25</sup> Man realizes that if he sees these figures and objectifies them as simply one of their aspects, rather than as fully human beings, he in turn is being objectified by the gaze of the Other, who perceives him (the subject) as reducible to one aspect, whether it be

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 340-347.

his social profession or some other public trait. In other words, the Other sees the subject as an object. The figures in much of *Ruckus Manhattan*, especially *The Subway Scene*, do not look back at the viewer, and they are very clearly stereotyped. The subway passengers have not only been reduced to one of their characteristics (their stereotype of hippie, junkie, elderly person, etc), but these mannequins, as part of an art installation, cannot return a gaze and therefore are fixed in a moment where they are quite literally an object and nothing else. The objectification of the Other as a tool to depict existential elements of isolation and the Other within a public setting recalls both Giacometti and Segal again. Giacometti's and Segal's depictions of public space have both been previously covered as having an existential element. Their alienated figures caught up in the lonely crowd of the modern city are part of an existential tradition that also traces back to abstract expressionism despite abstract expressionism's limited application of existential themes devoid of a public setting. Giacometti and Segal had both created works in which the Other is objectified. Giacometti's *City Square* initiates a feeling of alienation by presenting the viewer with sketchy humanoids that remind the viewer of his isolation in the crowd. Segal uses plaster figures in actual settings that recreate, much like *Ruckus Manhattan*, figures which the viewer can only identify as objects instead of fully human. *Ruckus Manhattan* follows in this environment art tradition by focusing on the individual and his Other filled setting. Grooms challenges the viewer to accept his

role as an authentic being which exists both for itself and for others. The contribution Grooms has made to this lineage of existential environments is his use of the humorous and grotesque.

This shock value, humor, and grotesqueness serve a greater purpose than just to pique interest. That purpose is to shock viewers into realizing the decrepit state of New York which they may have been hiding from themselves. This awakening is reminiscent of the patterns of *bad-faith*. *Bad-faith* is not so much a single decision but a habit. It is the patterns of choices that an individual makes over stretches of time. This pattern of bad-faith for Sartre is like a dream state:

One *puts oneself* in bad faith as one goes to sleep and one is in bad faith as one dreams. Once this mode of being has been realized, it is as difficult to get out of it as to wake oneself up; bad faith is a type of being in the world, like waking or dreaming, which by itself tends to perpetuate itself.<sup>26</sup>

Sartre is stating that one chooses to put oneself in *bad-faith* and that once there it becomes a perpetual cycle. It is easy to run from responsibility by hiding displeasing truths from oneself. Once one has begun down this path, it becomes a state of being. Sartre compares it to a dream from which one must be awoken. *Ruckus Manhattan* becomes jarring once the viewer goes through the process of discovery from humor to the disturbing elements behind that humor. It is nearly impossible to walk through this installation and not be shocked at what one sees. Grooms, through the exaggeration, distortion, and grotesqueness of *Ruckus Manhattan* is attempting to wake viewers up to this realization of their patterns of *bad-faith*.

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<sup>26</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 113.

These viewers were awoken first to their dual sense of self as a *being-for-itself* and a *being-for-others* in the subway and then to the responsibility they have to make decisions in good faith. Carter Ratcliff seems to recognize this potentially existential aspect of *Ruckus Manhattan* when he states that the “ruckus vision” causes one to question the usual image one has of the world. This vision is fragile and created by social propriety and the desire to believe oneself to be better than one actually is. Ratcliff clarifies this view when he writes:

To let the truth of our deepest feelings be known is to shake the world dramatically. When the dust settles, reality is violently changed. A ruckus world has taken the place of the one in which we tried so hard to believe...Red Grooms’s burlesque echoes with peculiarly telling doubt about human nature and its attempts to see itself as ethical.<sup>27</sup>

These “deepest feelings” and the viewer’s confrontation with them call to mind the feelings awoken by our recognition of self and one’s responsibility. Upon achieving this self-realization, the individual’s world is indeed violently changed. One could say that the ruckus world is the existential world, which replaces one’s former, misguided perceptions of reality. The pre-awakening world was the one in which *bad-faith* ruled by which the individual hid displeasing truths and performed inauthentic actions in the dream of *bad-faith* patterns. While Ratcliff does not explicitly mention existentialism and Sartre, he has recognized aspects of Grooms work that parallels Sartrian existentialism.

*Ruckus Manhattan* acts as a city that is calling out for help. The ruckus New York highlights some of the more distasteful aspects of 1970s New York

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<sup>27</sup> Ratcliff, *Red Grooms*, 170-171.

City. Grooms is portraying a city that needs healing and even states that these works were created as part of desire to want to heal the city and inspire change.<sup>28</sup> For Sartre, an existentialist ethos carries with it certain social and political obligations; the moment of self-realization is not made in isolation from one's fellow human being. Instead, the outcome of self-realization and assumption of one's responsibilities is engagement with the world, and implementing as much change as possible by one's choices. Sartre calls existentialism "an ethics of action and involvement."<sup>29</sup> Grooms has attempted to awaken the viewer to these existential concepts so as to call for them to move to action. The grotesqueness and humor touched on in *Ruckus Manhattan* will play more of a role in following discussions in chapter three of how Grooms exhibits existential concepts that parallel those in *What is Literature*. The major points will be that of audience and engagement. Sartre proposes creating an art that reaches the largest audience possible and is effective in its engagement of that audience, while Grooms creates an art that draws in, and engages, incredibly large, circus-like crowds.

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<sup>28</sup> Timothy Hyman, "Red Grooms in Conversation with Timothy Hyman," in *Redgrooms*, ed. Ellen Cohen, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2004), 105.

<sup>29</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 36.

## CHAPTER 4

### AUDIENCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN *RUCKUS MANHATTAN*

**While the previous chapters have seemingly ignored the humor in Grooms's art, I have not delayed a deeper discussion of Groomsian comedy in order to marginalize the humorous.** To do so would be a disservice to Grooms as his humor is one of the key, and most obvious, elements of *Ruckus Manhattan*. While the prior chapters have delved beneath the comic side of *Ruckus Manhattan* to discern the existential concepts in alignment with Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, this chapter will demonstrate how Grooms's comedy functions to engage a large audience to promote themes of social and political engagement in a fashion that is evocative of what Sartre calls for in later texts, particularly in *What is Literature*.

In *What is Literature*, Sartre focuses on the function of the arts within society. As the title would suggest, his main focus is on forms of literature, particularly the differentiation of prose and poetry, but in several instances he discusses painting. Furthermore, the language he employs to define literature as an art can be equally applied to the visual arts. In particular, Sartre argues that as a medium for communication, literature carries with it certain social obligations. He discusses the social roles that literature fulfills and the forms it should take; he comes to the conclusion that the arts should be much more utilitarian than they currently are. Sartre's use of the word utilitarian should be understood as meaning that art should have a well defined function that pertains more to having a practical use than to beauty or aesthetics. Sartre's utilitarian art

forms should not be read as the utilitarianism of Bentham or Mill because their use of the term implies the ability for others to be used as a means to an end. Sartre is critical of some visual arts and poetry for their use of language as things instead of signs. The beauty of poetry or abstract art serves little function if it cannot be read by the common man and does not promote social justice. He furthers this argument by stating that ideas, emotions, and passions may lay at the origin of abstraction and poetry, but they are not effectively expressed there. Sartre describes poetry as withdrawn from language as an instrument.<sup>1</sup> Sartre continues this thought by stating:

One might think that he [the poet] is composing a sentence, but this is only what it appears to be. He is creating an object...Prose is, in essence, utilitarian. I would readily define the prose-writer as a man who *makes use of words*.<sup>2</sup>

Ideas, emotions, and passions are not expressed in abstraction and poetry because the poem is a word-object that is too detached from political realities. Poems become purely aesthetic and no longer capable of communicating political situations and the need for change in the world at large. Sartre sees the pamphlet as a stronger communicator than poetry or art because of its straightforward literary elements.<sup>3</sup> The essay format of the pamphlet more directly disseminates the ideas of the writer or artist. Literary or artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-18.

straightforwardness conveys a message more clearly than the concept based presentation of intellectual theories through poetry and abstraction that only the elite and initiated can grasp.

Grooms, as this self-described storyteller who wanted to have a literary element to his art, worked in a representational style in order to create clear communication with the audience. Humor is not enough without a story to tell. Without representation there is no real narrative. Again, this is an element of *What is Literature* that Grooms has seemingly appropriated in order to create change by reaching a large audience. Sartre saw writing as the best art for promoting change because it was direct, clear, and had a story to follow. By having narrative, the reader can be lead, but not forced, to the conclusions the author intends. Sartre calls reading a “directed creation.”<sup>4</sup> Nonrepresentational art does not allow for this clarity and direction. For this Sartrian understanding of ethics to work though, it must not only be accessible to a wide audience but it must also be effective. The audience must be able to grasp the ethical call for change as opposed to simply being drawn to the work for pure enjoyment. Not only must the audience grasp the meaning behind the work, they must do so without being forced into it. Sartre pokes fun at abstracted art and poetry by citing Breton as having said: “If he had meant it, he would have said it.”<sup>5</sup> Judith Stein showcases that this type of directed leading was already being seen in the representational art of environment artists such as Grooms. Stein references Thomas B. Hess’ statement that these artists were “trying to reach out from their

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



works to give the spectator's hand a good shake or nudge him in the ribs."<sup>6</sup>

Grooms is able to nudge the viewer into realizing the need to change a broken city full of people who were not aware of their authentic existence and the subsequent responsibilities.

Looking at two tableaux from *Ruckus Manhattan*, *Neolithic Hard Hat*, and, *Fire on Wall Street*, one can see both a call for action and the use of humor to help promote that ethical involvement. Grooms's most potent existential calls to action can be seen in the more violent aspects of the city. *Neolithic Hard Hat intersected by PATH trains*<sup>7</sup> (fig. 11) in the World Trade Center tableau shows a large construction worker who has been flattened and become a part of the train system. He lies there cut in two, horizontally, just below the shoulders. The face is red and white and almost unrecognizable. The train lines run through his midsection where he is halved and also through his legs. The city's drainage pipes run into his navel and out of his shoulder. The work is funny because the construction worker is of outrageous proportions. He is larger than most of the transportation system that he has become. There is also the sight gag of the drainage pipe being connected at his navel like an umbilical cord. At first look, he is not in pain and there is no pool of blood or visible internal organs so laughter is easy to come by. However, much like with *The Subway Scene*, the longer one looks, the more disturbing it becomes. His red and white face starts to look as if it

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas B. Hess, "Mixed Mediums for a Soft Revolution," *Artnews* 59 (Summer, 1960), 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Neolithic Hard Hat Intersected by PATH Trains*, from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media, 27 x 25 x 25ft. Reproduced from Judd Tully, *Red Grooms and Ruckus Manhattan*, (New York: George Braziller, 1977): Image 29.

is bloodied and beaten from his fall to the concrete. The realization that this scene is a commentary on the sometimes unethical side effects of capitalistic growth overcome the viewer and the laughter subsides. Grooms is showing how men are used as means in the capitalistic drive to build and modernize at all costs. This dead man is no longer a man, but a tool used in the creation of a transportation system. His authenticity is not realized by those who employed him and treated him only as a means to the ends of having transportation. He serves in place of infrastructure and pavement.<sup>8</sup> The previously discussed *Girls, Girls, Girls* shows women being treated as means to the end of sexual enjoyment. Their authenticity too is diminished to a single trait.

In the Wall Street section of *Ruckus Manhattan*, Grooms gives the viewer *Fire on Wall Street: Mother Bank Succumbs to Anarchist Bomb*<sup>9</sup> (fig. 12). In this piece, an explosion has occurred. The columns are cracked and crumbling; some have started to fall onto the people below as flames shoot up. The comedy in this work is again in exaggeration of its forms and figures. Grooms has made no effort to make the columns appear life-like. They are very much straight from a Saturday morning cartoon. The figures below the falling columns are also exaggerated in their proportions and are much flatter than many of Grooms's other ruckus figures. Many of them share a look of annoyance at the situation instead of genuine fear. One man holds up an umbrella as if that will stop the raining debris. Another figure is pulling himself up from the head after being

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<sup>8</sup> Ratcliff, *Red Grooms*, 164.

<sup>9</sup> *Fire on Wall Street: Mother Bank Succumbs to Anarchist Bomb*, from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media. Reproduced from Judd Tully, *Red Grooms*, (New York: George Braziller, 1977): Image 60.

flattened in the rubble like Wile E. Coyote after being crushed by an anvil. This comedy becomes darker though with more time spent in front of the scene. Figures run or huddle in fear. One figure, who may be blind with his dark glasses, has fallen and is being crushed by falling bricks. The columns that originally looked cartoonish now start to look monstrous. Again, Grooms uses this dark comedy to depict men treating others as less than human and as means to an end. While *Neolithic Hard Hat* showed how capitalism can cause men to live inauthentic lives and ignore the responsibility they share for all of man, *Fire on Wall Street*, exhibits how those who oppose one type of bad-faith can employ it as well. These anarchists are using the injuring or killing of innocent people to deliver a political message. These injured men are simply means to the end of making a statement. Given the existential principle of responsibility, to kill a man for progress or to make a statement must be taken as the good choice, or the one that all men should make. Obviously for Grooms, and Sartre, killing or other unethical actions can never be the good choice. Grooms is bringing to light the horror of these actions but also man's ability to be ambivalent towards them. Deciding not to take action to change this broken city, or world, is a bad-faith choice. It is hiding an ugly truth from oneself. By showing these acts and placing them in humorous situations, the viewer laughs at it only to realize the inappropriate nature of that laughter. Grooms is fulfilling the function of the writer or artist as one who must "act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it's all about."<sup>10</sup> Grooms's dirty, horrific, yet comedic city functions as a conversation on the

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<sup>10</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature*, 24.

unethical in a clear enough manner to effectively keep viewers from walking away still ignorant. By creating a fully immersive city scape and populating it with very readable imagery, *Ruckus Manhattan* does not allow the majority of viewers to be ignorant of the decrepit state of the city upon leaving it. Anyone who sees *Ruckus Manhattan* should then see the reality it is based on when they walk out of the gallery and back into the city. The pattern of bad faith that they have followed in ignoring the needs of the city and its people has been brought forth and that viewer can no longer hide behind innocence or ignorance.

Much of Grooms's piece is filled with the grotesque and the violent and the absurd, but it is masked in a veneer of comedy. This comedy allows viewers to "vent some of their anxieties about existence."<sup>11</sup> This venting of anxieties and call for action are hallmarks of *Ruckus Manhattan* and the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. Humor, although a very dark type, is found directly on the pages of Sartre as well. In *No Exit* he writes, "[It's] all useless...how funny...let's get on with it."<sup>12</sup> In *The Wall*, the narrator, after accidentally revealing the whereabouts of his military leader in an attempt to lie, says: "Everything began to spin and I found myself sitting on the ground: I laughed so hard I cried."<sup>13</sup> Both of these statements are about the laughter that comes from realizing one's contingency. It is dark and often disturbing, but the only positive reaction is to laugh at it. This

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<sup>11</sup> Jennifer L. McMahon, "After Hours: Scorsese on Absurdism," in *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, ed., Mark T. Conrad, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 123.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, (New York: Vintage, 1946): 37 quoted from McMahon, "After Hours: Scorsese on Absurdism," 120.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Wall and Other Stories*, trans. Lloyd Alexander, (New York: New Directions, 1948): 17.

type of existential humor in Sartre, and Camus, has been noted by Richard E. Baker who states that the absurd as discomfort in the face of one's own humanity can have a darkly humorous quality.<sup>14</sup> Grooms uses dark comedy as a tool to deal with the absurdity of life and contingency much like Sartre does in *The Wall* and *No Exit*.

Grooms's incorporated the grit and decay of the city into his Ruckus works. They fester and ooze with the nastier aspects of a decrepit society. His characters are sometimes dead, his buildings have been bombed, and people are mistreated. All of these horrific scenes are dealt with in his trademarked humor for a reason though. This humor acts as a type of existential humor, but also it acts as a widely communicable means of speaking to an audience; it is able to promote the change in the masses that Sartre calls for. This ability to speak to the masses is evidenced by the the crowds at *Ruckus Manhattan*. *Ruckus Manhattan* had a massive audience. *Ruckus Manhattan* showed twice in 1975 and 1976. The first was at 88 Pine Street where it drew roughly 50,000 visitors. While at Marlborough's Fifty-seventh Street Gallery, it drew 100,000. The Pine Street location in particular speaks to Grooms's desire to reach a wide range of people: it was a gallery space from a nonprofit called Creative Time, whose mission was donating spaces for public art.<sup>15</sup> He was not interested in showing at an *avant-garde* gallery in which only the art elite would see his work. For his existential portrayal of New York and its citizens to succeed, he needed

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<sup>14</sup> Richard E. Baker, "Nausea and Existentialist Humor," in *Journal of Language and Literature* 1, (2007): <http://www.scientificjournals.org/journals2007/articles/1010.htm> (accessed November 9, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Ratcliff, *Red Grooms*, 157-158.

as many of the citizens as possible to see it. The nontraditional, non-art crowds that these events drew created an extravaganza. There were more blue jeans and T-shirts than coats and ties. One almost expects to find a vendor selling funnel-cakes around the next street corner in this ruckus museum. This type of museum crowd was an aberration in the very *avant-garde* and sophisticated New York art scene of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. The type of message of action that Grooms is attempting to communicate is the very Sartrean one of realizing the full humanity of the other and not using him as a means to an end.

Grooms's work is less *avant-garde* than many of his contemporaries, and he admits that there is a "storytelling and literary element" to his work which makes Sartre's discussions in *What is Literature* applicable.<sup>16</sup> For visual artwork to be literary or narrative, the works generally need to be representational and contain some sort of understandable narrative. For *Ruckus Manhattan*, this narrative is one of showing life in 1970s New York City through the representation of the city itself and its residents. This literary and narrative type of art went against the grain of much 20th-century art, especially the abstractions of the *avant-garde* in the early/mid century, because *avant-garde* art had become focused on the deconstruction of art to its most formal elements. Critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg were the champions of this nonrepresentational art. Representational and narrative art, or prose, was key to Sartre because it most effectively presented man with his existential dilemma. For Sartre, once man has recognized his existential dilemma, he is bound by

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<sup>16</sup> Joyce Henri Robinson, "The Man of the Crowd," in *Red Grooms and the Heroism of Modern Life*, (University Park: Palmer Museum of Art, 1998), 4.

*good-faith* to attempt to change the situation of the world for the better through his choices. This requirement has its roots in the recognition that when man chooses for himself he so chooses for the world. Sartre highlights this notion when he claims: “that by speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it; I reveal it to myself and to others *in order* to change it...with every word I utter, I involve myself a little more in the world.”<sup>17</sup> For Sartre, each written or uttered word should have the intention of revealing the current situation of the world and the need for changing the world. The responsibility of the artist or writer is to recognize the injustice of the current situation and bring attention to it through his work. Speaking, writing, or creating art, is an attempt to reveal. If one replaces “utter” and “word” with “stroke” and “paint,” the artist can fit into this description. The existential discovery of an authentic life and the responsibilities required of that life are revealed to the audience through both Sartre and Grooms’s works. This same type of rally to action sentiment was covered in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* when Sartre stated that existentialism is a philosophy and ethics of action.<sup>18</sup>

Grooms once stated that *Ruckus Manhattan* was an attempt to “show the public how low it gets sometimes, down under the belly of the beast.”<sup>19</sup> Grooms is stating that he wants to represent the situation of the modern city dweller. His

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<sup>17</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Red Grooms and Lysiane Luong, “The City That Never Snores: A Gunslinger Caper,” in *Red Grooms: New York: 1976-2011*, (New York: Marlborough Gallery, 2012), 1. This quotation comes from a short story written by Grooms in which his alter-ego Gumshoe, a detective, describes much of Grooms’s works in the form of capers and detective stories.

showing the disturbing state of modern life in New York City makes a call to action in a manner that recalls Sartre's statements in *What is Literature*. Sartre's ethics of involvement is explicitly political and Marxist while Grooms's is more socially minded and less explicit, but both men are showcasing a work that promotes a change in social consciousness within their audience. Grooms's revealing the situation of the modern city in order to change it has not been overlooked by Grooms's scholars; however, they have failed to examine *Ruckus Manhattan* through Sartrean existential terms. Arthur C. Danto and Paul Richard discuss *Ruckus Manhattan* in terms of its ability to promote social change and create change in the viewer's consciousness. Both of these notions are very reminiscent of Sartrean existential themes.

Paul Richard expounds upon Grooms's ability to point out gritty reality through humor. Grooms's art is actually far from simply funny, and quite often, dangerous and savage. His funny art does not discount or poke fun at misery but instead unmask the awful and acts as truth-telling art.<sup>20</sup> While not directly referencing Sartre or *What is Literature*, Richard is exhibiting that he has grasped from Grooms this desire to create change. Truth-telling is the same as revealing the situation. Richard recognizes that Grooms has successfully revealed the situation of 1970s New York. There is no ability to remain ignorant of the uglier side of modern life unless one continues to hide realities from oneself through *bad-faith*.

Arthur C. Danto continues this discussion of seemingly existential principles in *Ruckus Manhattan* while not naming them as such. Danto describes

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<sup>20</sup> Richard, "Art with 100 faces," *The Washington Post*.



Grooms as an artist whose aim is not the production of interesting visual pieces, but the transformation of his viewers. His work, Danto insists, engages the viewer internally and morally.<sup>21</sup> Transforming the viewers is, like Richard's description of *Ruckus Manhattan* as truth-telling art, a phrase that could be culled directly from Sartre. In *What is Literature*, Sartre explains this need to transform the viewer:

I shall say that a writer is engaged when he tries to achieve the most lucid and the most complete consciousness of being embarked, that is, when he causes the engagement of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and others, to the reflective...In trying to become clear about his own personal situation, he clarifies theirs for them. He mediates, names, and shows them the life they lead from day to day in its immediacy, the life they suffer without finding words to formulate their suffering...He is their conscience"<sup>22</sup>

The artist, through engagement, must direct the viewer to the reflective so that one can have this existential self discovery for oneself. Sartre, here, is stating that the artist needs to be the conscience for his readers. He needs to point out the absurdity of this life found at his moment of existential awakening. The existentialist needs to be always moving to spread his message and free the lost souls who inhabit the world around him. For this reason, his message needs to be clear. It needs a large audience, not a limited coterie of avant-garde specialists. This moment of self discovery is very much a transformation. By clarifying the situation and mediating it in understandable terms, the author or artist leads the viewer or reader to a recognition of the situation and the need to change it. Danto's writings clearly expose that Grooms's intent to create change in the viewer is grasped, but a deeper, philosophical understanding of that

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<sup>21</sup> Danto, "Red Grooms," 242.

<sup>22</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature*, 79.

change is overlooked. The scholarly reception on *Ruckus Manhattan* as a call for social change certainly makes clear that Grooms's work was effective. Grooms intended for *Ruckus Manhattan* to be seen as a call for action, and the writings on it largely discuss that aspect. He draws viewers into the work as partners and participants in to order get involved and become a part of the act.<sup>23</sup> Grooms admits to the healing that the city needs in an interview with Timothy Hyman.<sup>24</sup> It is the healing that he asks the viewer to become participants in when they become a part of the work.

Arthur C. Danto most perfectly sums up the effectiveness of Grooms's art being a call for action when he describes Grooms as the only real public artist working. Danto defines public art as not simply art in public spaces, but an "art that transforms the consciousness that defines us as a public, that gives us an identity as a community from within."<sup>25</sup> Danto is arguing that Grooms's art is successful in changing the manner in which his audience is forced to deal with reality and community once one leaves the works. "Transforming the consciousness" and an "identity as a community from within" are phrases that seem as if they could be pulled directly from existential writings especially those of Sartre. Transforming the public consciousness is exactly what Sartre calls for in his statements that the writer or artist must act so that no one can be ignorant

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<sup>23</sup> Russell, "A Red Grooms Traveling Carnival."

<sup>24</sup> Hyman, "Interview with Red Grooms," *Red Grooms*, 105.

<sup>25</sup> Danto, "Red Grooms," 242.

of this world<sup>26</sup> and also to advance the public to the reflective.<sup>27</sup> An identity that is both communal and from within incorporates the responsibility that is discovered by an authentic self.

Danto goes on to detail the effectiveness of Grooms's art as stemming from its humor. He writes that the exaggeration and comedy of the comic strip is used by Grooms to exhibit that violence and injustice are all around. Humor is what allows for him to attain communication with the audience.<sup>28</sup> Both Richard and Danto have noted this Groomsian comedy as the aspect which communicates truth and transformation. This comedy is a double edged sword, however, because while it is effective in its message, it is likely what causes scholars to overlook the philosophical and intellectual aspects of *Ruckus Manhattan*. If Grooms work is read only as comedy, it is missing both the call for action and any potentially sophisticated readings.

Another reason Grooms's work has not been studied as potentially existential is that it has not been looked at through the lens of other popular forms of art with the masses in the 1970s. First, one needs to fully set Grooms's art within the art historical and cultural context of 1970s New York. The art scene still catered to the elite gallery goer as conceptual art dominated. During this time art was quite political, but it had moved away from the canvas and back toward performance and the body. Artists such as Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, and Nam June Paik became popular, but their conceptual art was perhaps even less

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<sup>26</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-79.

<sup>28</sup> Danto, "Red Grooms," 242.

open to the uninitiated than the pure abstraction of the 1950s. Jonathan Fineberg describes this conceptual art as an art so “focused on the artistic experience itself and its theoretical components...that recourse to an object was frequently superfluous or entirely irrelevant.”<sup>29</sup> Vito Acconci in the 1972 *Seedbed* hid under a ramp and masturbated while the public could listen to him but not see him. Dennis Oppenheim in the 1971 *Rocked Circle...Fear*, videotaped his friends stoning him for half an hour in his backyard.<sup>30</sup> These types of works often were not found in galleries except through videos or photos of the actions. Conceptual art often dealt with issues of the body, artist-viewer relationships, political activism, and feminism; however, these concepts were almost entirely incomprehensible to the common viewer unversed in contemporary art theories. Grooms’s art of the 1970s stands in stark contrast to his contemporaries. The art he had been influenced by was nonrepresentational while the art of his contemporaries was highly conceptual.

In avoiding any serious discussion of the philosophy of Red Grooms, in the context of the 1970s New York art scene, many scholars have lost track of placing his art within the context of another medium which covered existential angst and the corrupt city while still drawing large audiences in the 1970s: film. Martin Scorsese has had many of his films discussed as existential, especially the 1976 film *Taxi Driver*.<sup>31</sup> Gretchen Schwartz discusses the Sartrian trope of

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<sup>29</sup> Fineberg, *Art Since 1940*, 346.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>31</sup> Gretchen Schwartz, “You Talkin’ to Me?: De Niro’s Interrogative Fidelity and Subversion of Masculine Norms,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 41.3 (June 2008): 443-446.

the look within *Taxi Driver*, while Andrew J. Swensen has drawn parallels between Travis Bickle as “God’s lonely man” and Dostoevsky’s “The Underground Man.”<sup>32</sup> Mark T. Conrad has even compiled and edited an entire collection of essays entitled *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*.<sup>33</sup> Grooms made numerous films along with his sculpto-pictoramas some of which, such as *Fat Feet*, deal with similar themes to *Ruckus Manhattan* through its depiction of a decrepit city. Timothy Hyman even describes *Fat Feet* as a form of proletarian dissent.<sup>34</sup> Grooms also began some of his first public works by putting on Happenings which act like unscripted, one-off films. His history with happenings and work as an artistic film maker imply that he would be familiar with film and its ability to tell a coherent narrative in much the same way he intended for *Ruckus Manhattan* to do. *Ruckus Manhattan* as this massive installation also acts as a sort of movie set, not unlike an arena, in which the viewer acts out the life of a New Yorker while hopefully having an existential awakening.

Looking at *Ruckus Manhattan* through the lens of Scorsese’s existential films allows another look into the probability that Grooms was making existential art works that were overlooked by scholars. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle is a man who, like other Scorsese characters (Charlie, LaMotta, Cady), can be understood as being on a search for self-awareness in a setting that has a quality best

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<sup>32</sup> Andrew J. Swensen, “The Anguish of God’s Lonely Men: Dostoevsky’s Underground Man and Scorsese’s Travis Bickle,” *Renascence* 53.4 (June, 2001): 267-286.

<sup>33</sup> Mark T. Conrad, *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, ed. Mark T. Conrad, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Hyman, “Carnavalesque,” 107.

described as “New York-ness” which is urban, working-class, and gritty.<sup>35</sup> *Ruckus Manhattan* shares in this same New York-ness in its setting. In both the film and *Ruckus Manhattan* the main character (Travis Bickle or the viewer of *Ruckus*) are faced with an ethics of action. In “God’s Lonely Man: *Taxi Driver* and the Ethics of Vigilantism,” Aeon Skoble discusses Travis’ vigilantism as form of ethical action. He states that Travis sees a city in which people are turning a blind eye and someone must do something. Travis exclaims at one point “Listen, you fuckers, you screwheads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit. Here is a man who stood up.”<sup>36</sup> This standing up is the type of action, in theory, that Sartre calls for from the responsible and authentic individual, although Travis’ choice of a murderous rampage as the means to stand up would certainly fall into *bad-faith*. This same type of misguided action is shown in the *Fire on Wall Street* tableau in which anarchists stand up to the perceived villainy of capitalism, but perform an act of violence in their actions.

There is a striking difference between *Taxi Driver* and *Ruckus Manhattan*; that difference is humor. Laughs are to be found around every corner in *Ruckus Manhattan*, even if they are nervous laughs at the comically overdone corrupt nature of the city and its inhabitants. *Taxi Driver*, meanwhile, is entirely devoid of humor and in its place is graphic violence. This difference can be seen as a large

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<sup>35</sup> George S. Larke, “Martin Scorsese: Movies and Religion,” in *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*, ed. Yvonne Tasker, (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 291-293.

<sup>36</sup> Aeon J. Skoble, “God’s Lonely Men: *Taxi Driver* and the Ethics of Vigilantism” in *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, ed. Mark T. Conrad, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 25-27.

reason why, in the 1970s, *Ruckus Manhattan* and *Taxi Driver* have not been seen as both being existential works. Existentialism is often applied to the dark and serious, but not the dark and funny. Existentialists have often preferred the alarming over the amusing to command the viewer or reader's attention.<sup>37</sup>

Scorsese, however, in the 1985 made a film *After Hours*, shows that the funny and the existential can, in fact, share the same screen. *After Hours* is shocking as a Scorsese film because it is a comedy. After *Mean Street*, *Taxi Driver*, *Casino*, and *Goodfellas*, it is hard to think of Scorsese making a comedy.

Jennifer McMahon discusses *After Hours* as an existential comedy that deals with the Sartrean nature of the absurd. She describes the Sartrean absurd as the knowledge that existence is based entirely on contingency. This contingency is what allows for the absurdist plots of *Nausea* and *No Exit*, in which characters are left to make choices in a world that is random and places the individual in situations that were not planned for. The absurd can create existential crises through events both ordinary or extraordinary.<sup>38</sup> In *After Hours*, the protagonist Paul finds himself in a series of worsening situations after agreeing to a date with a woman he met in a coffee shop. In this scene, there is already a hint of the existential crisis to come as he is reading Henry Miller's *The Tropic of Cancer*. After going on the date, Paul finds the woman to be slightly insane and attempts to get away. His money is missing because of a careless taxi driver; he cannot take the subway because the fare increased only hours ago; his original date kills herself and is revealed to be the girlfriend of the bartender that Paul attempts to

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<sup>37</sup> McMahon, "*After Hours: Scorsese on Absurdism*," 121.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-117.

help in order to obtain subway fare; he scorns another woman who takes revenge by accusing him of being the robber who has been ransacking the entire neighborhood. All of this leads to an angry mob chasing Paul before a woman helps him by encasing him in plaster of paris to look like a statue. This statue/Paul is subsequently stolen and falls out of the truck right in front of his office as the doors open in the morning. *No Exit*, much more so than the very serious *Nausea*, invokes a similar humor to *After Hours*. With its main characters (Garcin, Inez, and Estelle) set in a waiting room that is hell, Sartre exposes the absurdity of the human condition through the often humorous bickering between the characters.<sup>39</sup> Both of these comedies are dark comedies in that they rely on others' misfortune to produce a comic effect, but McMahon states that this dark comedy gives a voice to existential anxiety and a way to help manage it by showing both the human condition and the inherent humor in it.<sup>40</sup>

A major connection between the films of Scorsese and the art of Grooms is that they were popular with the masses. While a talented filmmaker, Scorsese did not alienate his audience by creating art films that were excessively conceptual like those of Bruce Nauman. His films covered heavy subject matter, but always in a manner that the audience could grasp. Grooms realized this advantage of speaking directly to a large audience and therefore chose to make art that was decidedly not *avant-garde*. In general *avant-garde* art has had a small and insular audience. Its method of representing employs a language and jargon that is out of reach for the uninitiated. Jonathan Fineberg elucidates nicely

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.



this idea of audience and its lack of size for modern art. He argues that as art moved from commissioned pieces to art measured on a scale of aesthetic and theoretical criteria, it became harder to grasp for the majority. He claims that in the twentieth century, the *avant-garde* has been defined as a reaction to the previous era's criteria for "high" art. He says:

But the more original an artist's vision, the more his or her frame of reference will vary from what the rest of us think and see. Thus the individuality that we prize so highly in an artist's work makes understanding the work a much more complex interpretive task; the meaning of art today is far less accessible to us than new art was to the audience of earlier eras.<sup>41</sup>

For Fineberg, the movement of art away from a thing that was meant to please visually and fulfill a utilitarian role had caused its value to lie in its ability to break down previous standards and roles. Art is always moving forward and at a rate that creates great difficulty for those unfamiliar with art's history and its present role. This teleological explanation for the forward movement of art, it should be noted, is largely a fiction and meta-narrative of its own fostered by the *avant-garde* and their patrons. This discussion applies to *avant-garde* while not necessarily corresponding to art in general. Having so many different artists with so many different styles and messages in the 1970s also clouds the ability to read or understand art for the neophyte.

This convoluted message and even more unclear method for delivery stands in stark contrast to the goal of the existential writer or artist to clarify for the audience the anguish which this pre-existential-awakening audience has no words for. Robert Motherwell admitted to the problem of *avant-garde*'s insularity

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<sup>41</sup> Fineberg, *Art Since 1940*, 14-16.

and elitism when he stated that: “suppose that we assume that, despite faults and confusions, modern art succeeded in ridding us of the costumes of the past...that it became, though ‘understood’ only by a minority, a people’s art, a peculiarly modern humanism.”<sup>42</sup> Motherwell can clearly see the built in disadvantage of advocating any sort of message through an art with such a small artistically literate audience. While grasping its disadvantages, Motherwell still holds out hope that art that appeals only to the educated minority can create a people’s art. This hope seems rooted in a type of hypocrisy. Grooms, meanwhile, had moved away from Motherwell’s convictions as well as the highly conceptualized art of his contemporaries.

Grooms’s insistence on humor in almost all of his artwork, not just *Ruckus Manhattan*, stems from his attempt to create art that is accessible. He desires to discuss existential themes, but in a more Sartrean, engaged position. Danto writes on this subject in “The World as Ruckus,” when he states:

But the mere fact that Grooms began making ruckuses at a moment in art history when the idea was that art should aspire to be ‘plastic, mysterious, and sublime’ - to quote Robert Motherwell on the art of his generation - tells us a great deal about the meaning of the ruckus, and of Grooms’s mission in constructing them. A well-known curator once said...‘If it’s funny, it isn’t art.’ I suppose he must have meant that if it is funny, it is laughable, which means that it cannot be serious, and hence cannot be art. But Grooms was part of an art-historical reaction against artists taking themselves with metaphysical seriousness.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Motherwell, “A Tour of the Sublime,” *The Tiger’s Eye* 6 (Dec. 1948): 47. Cited from Jachec “The Place Between Art and Political Action: Abstract Expressionism and Ethical Choice in Postwar America 1945-1950,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14 (1991): 21, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Danto, “The World as Ruckus,” 51.

Danto is suggesting that the humor in Grooms's art acts as a thumbing of the nose to the solemn and sublime abstract expressionist works as the status quo. It also fulfills the same function towards the conceptual art of his time. Grooms's art is funny and is part of a reaction against the solemnity of the prior generation and his own. The choice of humorous additions to Grooms's artistic repertoire must come from more than a desire to go against the grain. Grooms is dealing with similar existential crises as the abstract expressionists but in a manner that allows for these existential ethos to be more clearly received by that public. The metaphysical seriousness has been replaced with an existential humor. His humor provides the best low-art platform through which to discuss these complicated and philosophical existential crises in a manner that differs from his predecessors.

*Ruckus Manhattan* reaches across social, geographic, and economic boundaries to bring issues of high art, such as existential thinking, down to the masses. Abstract forms, colors, and art theory had been the tools of the abstract expressionists in their attempts to question identity and portray the crises of alienation in a large city. Grooms, meanwhile, uses representation and understandable narrative to allow the viewer to see himself and his situation mirrored through *Ruckus Manhattan*. He is breaking from the insistence of previous art movements to focus on the interior world at the expense of the exterior world. Dirty reality was implanted into the realm of the conceptual. Grooms created a "vernacular realism;" art for art's sake was a dying notion for

Grooms and his fellow compatriots as they strove to go “beyond the rectangle,” and create an art that related to life with all of its urban grit and decay.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Barbara Haskell, *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism, and Performance 1958-1964*, (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1984), 15.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

**All of the connections between Red Grooms and Jean-Paul Sartre suggest that Grooms is influenced by Sartrian existentialism.** Grooms admitted knowledge of Sartre through Giacometti, and his abstract expressionistic origins make clear that Grooms was cognizant of Sartre and his philosophy, despite there being no direct statement by Grooms to his reading of *What is Literature* or *Being and Nothingness*. The issues of identity, social justice, and ethical actions explored by Grooms in *Ruckus Manhattan* certainly could suggest a direct reading, but his knowledge of these aspects of Sartrian existentialism could have come from other avenues. By the 1970s existentialism's ideas had been widely disseminated in many forms including art, literature, and film. While making a connection between Sartre's writings and Grooms is important, the major issue is not that he was reading all of Sartre's oeuvre in depth and making direct visual representations of pure Sartrian existentialism. The issue these connections brings up is why previous scholarship has not attempted to connect Grooms and Sartre or attempted to see Grooms as anything more than the comedian or satirist with an eye for social critique.

With Danto and other scholars writing on Grooms as a product of Abstract Expressionism and using language that very often calls to mind Sartre, it is a wonder that none have directly made this connection between Grooms and existentialism. Grooms is repackaging existentialism and reinterpreting it through

his own lens. He reacted to other artists, writers, and filmmakers, in the 1970s who are already reassessing the importance of Sartre. Grooms's humor is most likely to blame for this refusal of scholars to take him as an intellectual and sophisticated artist. As previously noted, Harold Rosenberg accused him of "playing the country boy,"<sup>1</sup> while Ratcliff, Danto, and Hyman had all discussed him as some form of clown.<sup>2</sup> There seems to be a respect for his humor as it pertains to its ability to reach a wide audience in a manner that is beyond the superficially funny comic strip, but its intellectual and philosophical discourses are overlooked. Red Grooms's greatest gifts and tools act as his greatest weakness as well. His humor and originality create difficulty in defining him within a specific movement, and therefore he is not studied as thoroughly because there is no preexisting box of concepts to apply to his work by virtue of its shared similarities to one school. By culling from Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and environment art, he has been excluded from being discussed within any one of them.

William Olander writes that scholars have "bent over backwards" to describe how Grooms's art is so different from "serious" art.<sup>3</sup> This outdated focus on seriousness in art has caused Grooms to be seen solely as the art world clown that the scholars make him out to be. He points out the absurdities in many

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from: Paul Richard, "Red Grooms: An Appreciation," in *Red Grooms: A Catalogue Raisonné of his Graphic Work 1957-1981*, (Nashville: Cheekwood Fine Art Center, 1981), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Danto, "Red Grooms," 242; Hyman, "Carnavalesque," 106-108; Ratcliff, *Red Grooms*, 59-171.

<sup>3</sup> William Olander, "Red Grooms's Alternative Reality," in *Red Grooms's Welcome to Cleveland*, ed. Marjorie Talalay, (Cleveland: New Gallery, 1982), 12.

of the other “serious” art movements around him while also revealing a gritty reality; however, these scholars seem to see his work only as a type of roast of the art world, or world at large, without any deeper possibilities. Grooms is often seen as a simple clown as opposed to an incisive comedian.

This use of comedy should not be a deterrent to a deeper understanding of Grooms or even existentialism. Sartre was not afraid of using comedy to get his existential message out, and neither was Grooms. Not only is Grooms creating art that uses comedy to expose the existential crisis, so is his film-making contemporary Martin Scorsese. This humor acting existentially has been noted in Sartre and Scorsese, but not in Grooms. McMahon notes that existentialists may avoid humor because it may risk losing the audience’s appreciation for the ultimately serious subject matter, but that often the most hard of truths are more successfully digested by the viewer in smaller and “sweeter” doses.<sup>4</sup> Grooms is giving out these same smaller and sweeter doses of existential anxiety in *Ruckus Manhattan* while also fulfilling Sartre’s definition of existentialism as an ethics of action; only his work has not been studied through this existential lens. Perhaps existentialism’s long standing connection with visual art as a topic of abstract expressionists has caused it to be seen as a purely serious matter in the eyes and pens of critics of scholars, while literary and film scholars, free from this long-standing need to be serious, have noted the ability for darkly comedic existentialism. Despite whatever it is that is causing scholars to look at Grooms’s work as, at best, a comedic social critique and at worst simple face-value comedy, this thesis should push scholars and critics of Grooms

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<sup>4</sup> McMahon, “*After Hours: Scorsese on Absurdism*,” 123.

to look beyond the humor at the underlining themes of this sophisticated and intellectual artist who has not received his due.



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## APPENDIX 1

### FIGURES



Figure 1. Red Grooms, *The Subway Scene* from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media, 9' x 18'7" x 37'2". Reproduced from Judd Tully, *Red Grooms and Ruckus Manhattan*, (New York: George Braziller, 1977): Images 41-44.



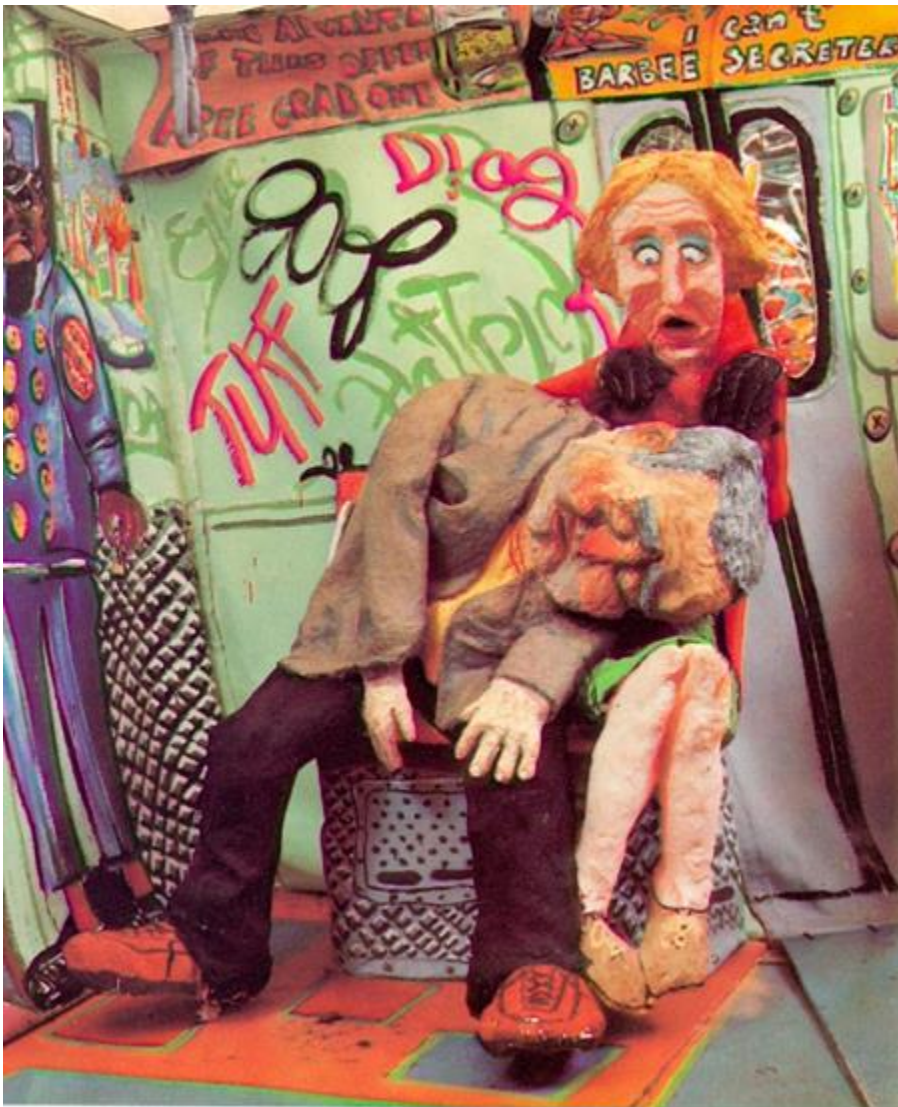


Figure 2. Red Grooms, *The Subway Scene from Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media, 9' x 18'7" x 37'2". Reproduced from Judd Tully, *Red Grooms and Ruckus Manhattan*, (New York: George Braziller, 1977): Images 41-44.



Figure 3. Red Grooms, *The Subway Scene* from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media, 9' x 18'7" x 37'2". Reproduced from Judd Tully, *Red Grooms and Ruckus Manhattan*, (New York: George Braziller, 1977): Images 41-44.



Figure 4. Red Grooms, *The Subway Scene* from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media, 9' x 18'7" x 37'2". Reproduced from Judd Tully, *Red Grooms and Ruckus Manhattan*, (New York: George Braziller, 1977): Images 41-44.



Figure 5. Red Grooms, *Girls, Girls, Girls*, from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media. Reproduced from Carter Ratcliff, *Red Grooms*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 162.

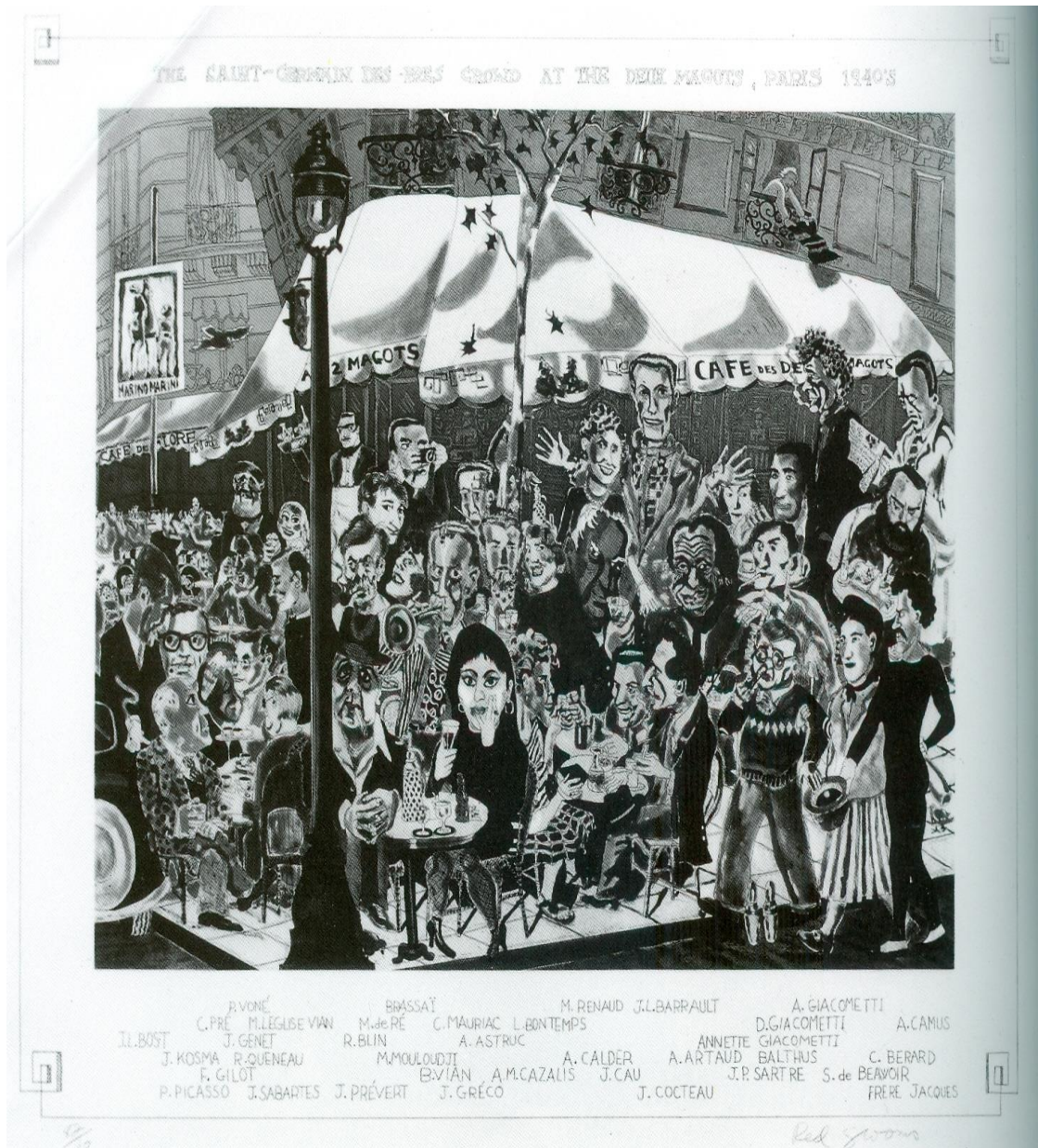


Figure 6. Red Grooms, *Les Deux Magots*, 1985. Etching and Aquatint 66.7x79.7cm. Knestrick Collection, cat. no. 107. Reproduced from Vincent Katz and Walter Knestrick. *Red Grooms: The Graphic Work*, ed., Adele Westbrook, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 144.



Figure 7. Red Grooms, *The Existentialist*, 1984. Woodcut 77x42in. Knestrick Collection, cat. no. 103. Vincent Katz and Walter Knestrick. *Red Grooms: The Graphic Work*, Adele Westbrook ed., 148, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001).



Figure 8. Alberto Giacometti, *The City Square*, Bronze, 8 1/4 x 24 5/8 x 16 7/8 inches, Guggenheim Museum, New York.

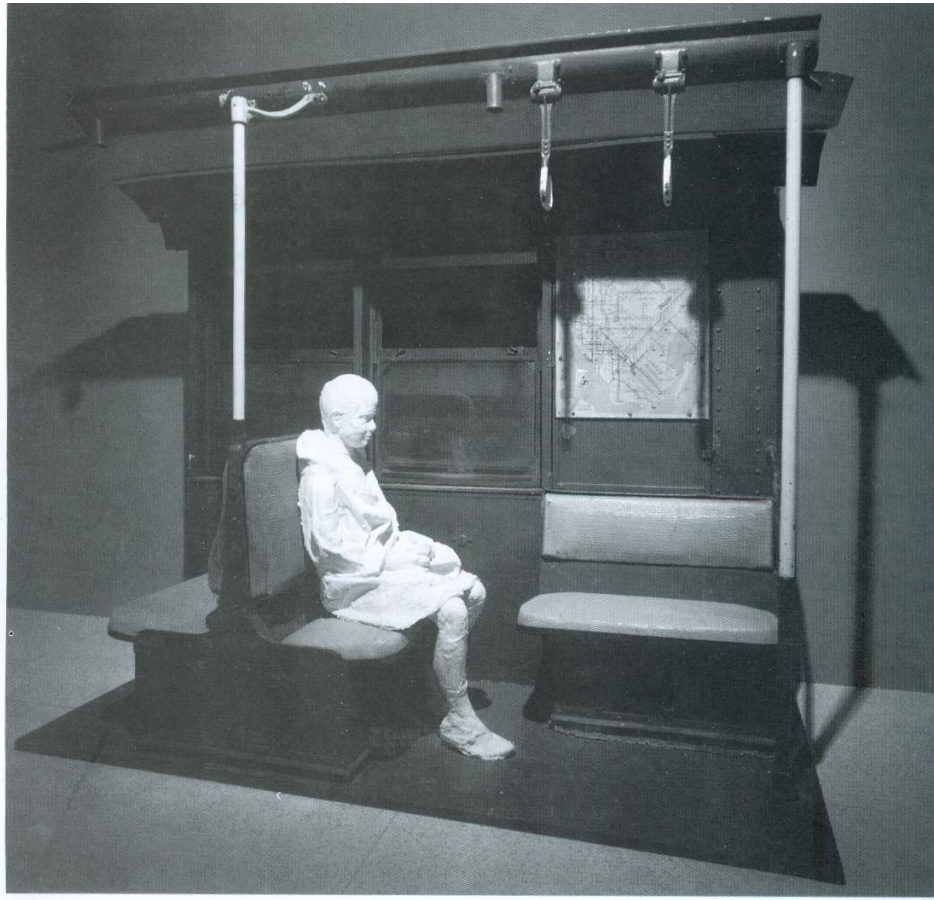


Figure 9. George Segal, *The Subway*, 1968. Plaster, metal, glass, rattan, electrical parts with lightbulbs, and map, 2.25 x 2.88 x 1.3m. Reproduced from Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940*, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2000), 194.





Figure 10. Red Grooms, *Porno Bookstore*, from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media, 9 x 17ft. Reproduced from *Red Grooms, New York Stories 1976-2011*, (New York: Marlborough, 2011): 14.



Figure 11. Red Grooms, *Neolithic Hard Hat Intersected by PATH Trains* from Ruckus Manhattan, 1976. Mixed Media, 27 x 25 x 25ft.



Figure 12. Red Grooms, *Fire on Wall Street: Mother Bank Succumbs to Anarchist Bomb*, from *Ruckus Manhattan*, 1976. Mixed Media. Reproduced from Judd Tully, *Red Grooms*, (New York: George Braziller, 1977): Image 60.