

How Many Buster Keatons Does It Take To Fill an Art Gallery?

Artists are drawn to the silent-film comedian's inspired physical and visual flair

BY MARC SPIEGLER



British video artist Steve McQueen re-creates Buster Keaton's famous stunt, in which the side of a house falls over without touching him, in the 1997 video *Deadpan*.

BUSTER KEATON, CLOWN prince of the silent-film era. Samuel Beckett, master playwright of existentialist theater. One sweltering day in August 1965, a movie brought them together. Only two years from death, Keaton was almost 40 years past his heyday. Beckett had never before written a

short, Keaton scurries and scuttles around New York City, averting his face from all passersby. The final shot reveals it to be frozen in a hideous contortion. Never intended for theatrical release, the film is now just an idiosyncratic footnote to the oeuvre of both men.

Yet when Iranian-born conceptual artist Shahram Entekhabi, who lives in Berlin, was searching for a movie to reshoot with himself as the protagonist, a film-connoisseur friend suggested *Film*. In Entekhabi's 2004 reworking, *I?*, for a solo show at PLAY Gallery in Berlin, the artist walks around the German city's working-class neighborhoods, dressed in the cheap clothes of a new immigrant. Despite arriving in Germany 20 years ago, Entekhabi says, he is constantly reminded of his own foreignness, and Keaton's film characters feel somehow akin. "Like an immigrant, he has to fight to survive, constantly running or jumping or climbing," the artist explains. "His face is never really emotional, more like someone just doing his job. And he never speaks, which is something immigrants go through—the feeling of not being fully part of the society they live within."

While Keaton was no immigrant, he certainly started life on the margins of society. A Vaudeville baby, born Joseph Francis Keaton Jr., in Piqua, Kansas, in

1895, he was nicknamed Buster by Harry Houdini, at age six, for his ability to rise unharmed from brutal falls. Throughout his youth, Keaton's family toured the United States, selling "Kickapoo Elixir" at the end of their popular road show, which consisted of his mother's facial contortions, his father's acrobatic pratfalls, and Houdini's escape acts. The junior Keaton quickly became part of the act, bouncing around the stage like an india-rubber ball, ricocheting off scenery or into the orchestra pit, in violent father-son stunts. Later, as an adult, this madcap physical virtuosity made Keaton a perfect fit for the early cinematic comedies, with their frenetic ragtime piano accompaniments.

The arrival of talkies in the late 1920s spelled the end of Keaton's bankability as a Hollywood star. But if Keaton is today a relatively forgotten figure compared with his rival (and friend) Charlie Chaplin, he continues to pop up in contemporary art. "There's a natural attraction because Keaton was the quintessential artist—vastly talented, misunderstood, and a tragic figure," points out Laura Hoptman, curator of this year's Carnegie International, opening next month. "He's an intellectual's Chaplin, and I see his influence in the work of people like John Bock," the German performance artist



The falling-house gag originated in the 1920 short *One Week*, but Keaton himself reenacted it in his 1928 comedy *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*

screenplay. In one respect, the script for *Film* harked back to Keaton's past: it had no dialogue. Throughout the 20-minute

LEFT: KOBAL COLLECTION/UNITED ARTISTS; RIGHT: COURTESY MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

whose “lectures” star himself as a clownish protagonist.

Many other artists have connected to images or characters in Keaton’s films. Jeff Koons, for example, created the 1988 sculptural homage *Buster Keaton*, an editioned piece depicting the sad-sack actor astride a small pony that has regularly popped up for sale at head-spinning prices. In November 2002, it sold for \$1.1 million at Phillips, de Pury & Luxembourg’s New York auction.

But the best-known example is *Deadpan*, by British video artist Steve McQueen, part of the artist’s 1999 Turner Prize exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, which appropriates a Keaton sight gag that originated in his 1920 short *One Week*. In the film, Keaton stands outside a clapboard house. Suddenly the entire wall topples over toward him. But rather than running away, he stares straight ahead, affectless. And by a miracle engineered through precise measurement, the only gap in the otherwise solid wall, an open window, fits Keaton’s body exactly, leaving the placid figure standing with the fallen-



Jeff Koons created his own sculptural homage to the silent-film star in 1988.

down wall at his feet. “That scene of the apex of the front of the house falling ‘through’ Keaton is particularly

poignant,” explains McQueen. His video re-creation, shot in grainy black and white, seems antiquated, with McQueen sporting timelessly drab work wear. Filmed from several angles, some of them quite extreme, the several-second event was then edited into a relentless four-minute montage, varying the pace and the emotional pitch. Exploring the piece’s dynamics, McQueen explains: “The frame of the open window, the frame of the apexed house, the frame of the film projection, the frame of the space, the frame of the institution. All of that being framed by that open window and the stillness of myself. It’s almost like a self-portrait.” Detractors called McQueen’s work a rip-off; the Turner Prize judges clearly disagreed, naming the artist as the 1999 winner.

More than just a physically gifted actor, Keaton also owned a production company and directed many of his own films, often ambitiously exploiting technology to amplify his humor. In 1921’s *The Playhouse*, for example, he used multiple exposures to play virtually every role, creating scenes in which up to nine Keatons gallivant about the stage. French conceptual artist Pierre Bismuth saw the short as perfect material for an ongoing series centered around symmetry. He made the 2002 *One Man Show* by stacking two monitors (referencing Bruce Nauman) and showing a six-minute section of *The Playhouse*, with one simple alteration: on the bottom monitor, the left half of the image is mirrored onto the right side of the screen. On the top one, it’s the right half of the original image that’s mirrored. As Bismuth explains, “I wanted to start from the logic of Keaton’s films and keep pushing it further, to the point of deconstruction.” Indeed, while one can mentally splice back together the original film by watching it with one’s head tilted leftward, the exercise is exhausting. If you lose focus even momentarily, the viewing experience becomes virtually hallucinogenic; myriad mirrored Keatons collide midscreen and then disappear into the ether—or, alternately, spawn as attenuated twins from the seemingly empty center of the frame.

Scottish artist Brian Griffiths aims for another sort of disorientation with *Beneath the Stride of Giants*, the centerpiece of the Saatchi Gallery’s summer show in London, “Galleon and Other Stories.” The 37-foot-long installation is a giant



In his 2002 *One Man Show*, Pierre Bismuth plays with a clip from Keaton’s 1921 *The Playhouse*.

ship composed of furniture and other detritus that Griffiths collected from various flea markets, clearance auctions, and thrift shops. What’s the Keaton connection? “In his films, there are often these strange constructions that he has to physically navigate his way around,” Griffiths explains. “They become like characters he is interacting with. And people who see my piece have to work their way around this oversize object. So the scale in itself is a sort of deadpan humor.”

Griffiths also cites as an influence *Boat*, a 1921 Keaton short in which the actor builds a boat too large to exit the garage he has used as his atelier, causing great consternation once he has completed the undertaking. (The garage collapses as Keaton pulls the ship out. The ship founders the instant it is launched.) Though he discovered Keaton only five years ago, Griffiths recently staged an evening of Keaton and Chaplin films at the Camden Arts Centre in London. “Keaton makes it all look so seamless, so light, so ingenious, but there’s an incredible pathos in his films, this complete sadness,” Griffiths explains. “For me, Keaton and Chaplin are like Brancusi and Judd. I appreciate Judd, but I feel like I already get it; Brancusi is always niggling at me—and Keaton has the same inspiring effect.”

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