

## I Am the Walrus

Curated by Jan Avgikos

Cheim & Read Gallery  
June 10--July 31, 2004

"I Am the Walrus" brings together key contemporary artists who have worked with clown iconography at one time or another in the last 20 years, as well as those who evocatively "clown around" in their art. It's all personal theater, and different values run through it.

These days, Bruce Nauman's "mean clowns" find lots of company. Indeed, over the course of the past several decades, so many clowns have begun to crowd into the frame of contemporary art as to occasion a much closer look at the swelling ranks of these happy-sad, glad-mad, flamboyant performers who are at once totally familiar and enduringly strange.

What is the collective effect of the diverse faces, voices, demeanors, and practices that fluctuate in and out of clown character? That question inaugurated "I Am the Walrus." It was fueled by the observation that clowns have become prime characters in early 21<sup>st</sup> century art, and they arrive on the scene with a pedigree as long as culture itself.

Performing up and down a comic-tragic continuum, clowns epitomize excess and exaggeration, and seem uniquely qualified to represent the complex identities we negotiate today. They are synonymous with self-deprecation and buffoonery; and yet once, as court jesters, they alone were given permission to speak the truth. Embedded in the overlap between self and other, their comic by-play includes make-up and costumes, mimicry and mischief; terror and delight. They live to entertain us and also to distract us. They are well practiced in the arts of utter nonsense and absurdity; ever adept at switching roles, and free in a way that we humans will never be, to laugh and to cry, to succeed and to fail—usually, before large audiences.

Yes, the clown *is* the artist. What's more, *everybody* plays the fool. Here's how the Beatles's song, "I Am the Walrus," begins: "I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together." That's a good approximation of the personal theater this exhibition aims to bring to view, with as much visual intensity as possible.