

*Marta Moraczewska*

**BRITISH OR HUMAN NATURE?  
ART, SPORTS AND GAMBLING IN SELECTED WORKS  
OF MARK WALLINGER**

Mark Wallinger has been more than once called “a contemporary Renaissance artist” (Tate Online 2007). A representative of Britain at the 2001 Venice Biennale, painter, sculptor, installation and video artist, dealing with issues such as identity, religion, appearances and illusions, and human – or sometimes, more specifically, British – condition, Wallinger is an explorer in the world of values. Interested in “the politics of representation and the representation of politics” (Cole 2007) – the artist’s State Britain exhibition is on view in Tate Britain as I’m writing (15 January–27 August 2007) – he adopts, one is tempted to say, a British, reserved, and slightly ironic approach to the themes he examines.

Irony – if we adopt a dictionary definition – is “a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance” (Baldick 1996). Wallinger, then, is an ironist, whose work is often centred around the clash of appearances and that which lies beneath; the conflict of ideals and reality, the desired and the achieved. In a given theme, he often finds more than one of such slightly ironic “inconsistencies” and invites the viewer to explore the theme in contexts which reveal them.

One of such major themes explored in Wallinger’s art has been horse-racing, which has provided the artist with material for conceptual work, the implications and references of which go far beyond this seemingly limited territory. Racing is a lifetime passion of Wallinger’s; the artist has often admitted being far from objectivity, much nearer a baffling emotion-saturated attitude – one that makes him confess “when Dawn Run won, I had to take myself around to the casualty department of my local hospital with heart palpitations” (Bonaventura and Wallinger 1994). No wonder then

that the 'equine' topic constitutes a substantial portion of Wallinger's work. His continuous interest in the theme had first resulted in the creation of several series of paintings.

The earliest of these – *Race, Class, Sex* – is a group of four paintings of thoroughbred horses depicted life-size on a clear, blank background. The portrayed stallions are descendants of the famous eighteenth-century racehorse Eclipse and of Darley – the first Arabian thoroughbred imported to Britain – both representing the very top of the equine aristocracy. The horses are presented in poses similar to those in which they are photographed in the stud books; in fact, the paintings are partly based on photographs from the Jockey Club publication *Stallions of 1991* and the paintings are not far from photorealism, although the mimetic effect is also due to the academic, technically flawless execution.

Another series, entitled *Half-Brother*, painted in 1995, consists of joint diptychs showing racehorses that are indeed half-brothers by sire or dam. In each case, the left and right panels depict the front and rear of two different animals. The form and technique is identical to one adopted for *Race, Class, Sex*, including the blank background; it is no different in *Fathers and Sons*, yet another series of oil paintings, this time in a portrait format, featuring just the heads of racehorses. Portraits of fathers are positioned above those of their sons, just as human portraits might, in an attempt to pinpoint the similarities and differences across generations.

An association between these paintings and those by George Stubbs is among the observations most frequently made by viewers and critics. The allusion to Stubbs' work is an intended effect. "Centuries apart but dramatically close in thought" (British Council 2002), both Stubbs and Wallinger have investigated the cultural phenomena related to horses.

Mark Wallinger would not have been branded a major conceptual artist if his interest in horses didn't go beyond rendering the glamorous charm of thoroughbreds. Interestingly, George Stubbs, although a major practitioner of "sporting art," was already interested in the theme in ways which exceeded the standard eighteenth-century attitude.

The superiority of Stubbs' work over the productions of his contemporaries lies not only in the artist's technical skill resulting from a lifelong study of the equine anatomy. The decisive factor is subject treatment. The focus of Stubbs' paintings are indeed the animals – not the grounds as a whole, not even the riders – patrons commissioning the artworks, founders of the Jockey Club and other members of the upper classes. Stubbs' works transcend the eighteenth-century status of oil paintings as evidence of the commissioners' prosperity; many are quite unlike the standard productions of the era, which were chiefly depictions of property – in this case, animal property – on display as, to use John Berger's expression, *furniture on four legs* (Berger 1990: 93).

This characteristic of Stubbs' work is most evident in his best known painting, *Whistlejacket*, a picture of a racehorse owned by the Marquess of Rockingham, winner of the 1759 2,000-guinea race at Newmarket. Instead of being shown in its usual environment, Whistlejacket has been placed in a radiant, otherworldly void. By eliminating the background with all its distracting elements, the artist has directed the viewers' interest at the horse, which cannot be any longer perceived in the context of its owner.

Apart from the obvious grace and beauty of the animal, the composition suggests courage and wisdom. Jonathan Jones thus describes the impression: "Blindness has often been a sign of insight in painting. . . . Stubbs makes him appear not just as an amazing physical specimen but as a conscious being" – and goes on to draw a parallel between Whistlejacket and Jonathan Swift's Houyhnhnms – "In this painting, Stubbs concentrates on the blinded gentle mind of the horse, enduring with fortitude the rule of posh Yahoos" (Jones 2004).

Stubbs' scientific study, *The Anatomy of the Horse*, was inspired by a wish to popularise the knowledge about the horses' biology, the necessary steps to be taken in order to keep them in a good shape, the humanitarian training methods. To correct the skills of veterinarian quasi-specialists, make treatment more effective and limit the suffering of animals:

All Gentlemen who keep Horses, will, by it, be enabled not only to judge of the Structure of the Horse more scientifically, but also to point out the Seat of Diseases, or Blemishes, in that noble Animal, so as frequently to facilitate their Removal, by giving proper Instructions to the more illiterate Practitioners of the veterinarian art into whose Hands they might accidentally fall (Stubbs qtd. in Jones, 2004).

Stubbs' concern, evident in the above passage, and his paintings suggest that the artist indeed might have seen horses as somewhat resembling Swift's Houyhnhnms. The relationship between the gentle animal and the seemingly superior human being – and its cultural implications – is what interests Mark Wallinger. The artist admits: "I am fascinated by racing's obsession with breeding" (Bonaventura and Wallinger 2004). The term can be applied both to the breeding of racehorses and to 'good breeding' in relation to the values and beliefs of the social class involved in the sport.

All of Wallinger's paintings depict thoroughbreds – horses most successful in racing. The breed has been developed in the seventeenth century after importing several Arabian stallions to Britain and breeding them to English mares; all present-day racehorses are their descendants. Horse breeding has been pursued for diverse reasons – matters of prestige and tradition (the first documented flat race in Britain was between the stables of Richard II and the Earl of Arundel; ever since, racing has continued to be "the sport of kings," indulged in by those who enjoy privileges of birth, wealth and

power), financial gain, entertainment. Thoroughbreds, to quote the artist, "are playthings of the wealthy, inextricably bound up with nobility and privilege" (Bonaventura and Wallinger 2004).

Due to selective breeding, thoroughbreds have become exceedingly fragile creatures, frequently suffering from leg injuries often leading to their death. The breeding process has begun to influence the animal's natural balance. The ratio of racing accidents, in which both the horse and jockey are exposed to injury, exceeds almost all other figures in animal and human sports. Wallinger remarks:

Thoroughbreds are to be admired on so many different levels and yet they are so vulnerable. They wouldn't have existed unless we had chosen to design them that way, manipulating their natural impulses for our own ends (Bonaventura and Wallinger 2004).

A similar point is made by visual means in *Half-Brother*. The split images suggest the biological manipulations that the horses are subjected to in order to strengthen the qualities sought by breeders – qualities such as speed, endurance and beauty, not unlike the qualities which human beings wish to attain themselves with little regard to the costs.

Wallinger's work and the artist's comments both indicate a view according to which British society is still dominated by conservative and patriarchal values. The artist had attempted a more direct critique of these when faced with the problem of choosing his racing colours:

Any owner of a racehorse in this country has to register his or her colours with the Jockey Club and there are currently 14,000 on record so it's quite difficult to come up with anything strikingly original (Bonaventura and Wallinger 2004).

This 'problem' resulted in an artwork entitled *Self Portrait as Emily Davison*. Wallinger relates:

I felt that the most subversive act in this rigidly patriarchal world would be to choose colours which were linked historically with the Women's Movement. In 1913 Emily Davison threw herself under and brought down the King's horse in Epsom Derby. Davison and the King's jockey, Herbert Jones, both lay unconscious on the turf for a while so in a way these colours are an amalgam of those two figures who just happened to coincide at a particular historical moment (Bonaventura and Wallinger 2004).

The format and anthropomorphic concept of *Fathers and Sons* is another ironic showcase of the artist's reservations towards 'patriarchal' values and lifestyle. All the above issues add up to the negative side of the argument surrounding racing. If we adopt this point of view, it is easy to conclude that we are indeed very similar to Swift's Yahoos, with their "undistinguishing Appetite to devour every Thing that came in their way," the "shining

Stones of several Colours, whereof the Yahoos are violently fond" (Swift 271–272), materialist, concentrated on artificial social distinctions and conventions; moreover, forcing other creatures to fit into this questionable structure.

Still, Wallinger is far from definite judgments. Alongside suggesting the above issues, the paintings' seductive realism cannot be dismissed as mere irony. Among the motives for pursuing horse sports and breeding racehorses are ones which go beyond mere entertainment. The breeder is not unlike a craftsman or artist in pursuit of an ideal form, not unlike an artist as understood by Oscar Wilde: "We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely" (Wilde 1993: 4).

The fascination with beauty and speed is reflected in the names the racehorses are and have always been given, often inspired by names of historical, literary or mythical personages, extraordinary natural phenomena or human emotions: *Eclipse*, *Orlando*, *Messenger*, *Charisma*, *Birdcatcher*, *Fantastic Light*, *Flight*, *Galileo*, *Heroic*, *Skyline*, and so on (for a more comprehensive list see: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Thoroughbred\\_racehorses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Thoroughbred_racehorses)). Risk is another factor. Betting on horses is a game of chance in which skill makes a difference. Such chance games allow to involve oneself in them, to make the game a profession, to become an expert, at the same time never to lose the element of gambling, chance, adventure.

Gambling has held human being in its thrall for millennia. It has been engaged in everywhere, from the dregs of society to the most respectable circles. Pontius Pilate's soldiers cast lots for Christ's robe as He suffered on the cross. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius was regularly accompanied by his personal croupier. The Earl of Sandwich invented the snack that bears his name so that he could avoid leaving the gaming table in order to eat.

Peter Bernstein, historian of risk games and risk management, points out, and adds "Human beings have always been infatuated with gambling because it puts us head-to-head against the fates, with no holds barred" (Bernstein 1998: 11–12). A true gambler bets to win, that is, picks the horse to win the race. The stakes for this type are highest in the three racing bet types for a good reason: betting to win is true risk – either one wins everything or loses everything, with no middle options, no risk limitations. Britons, supposedly phlegmatic, cold-blooded, calculating and reasonable, still haven't fallen out of love with gambling – the artist seems to point out. On the contrary, in fact – as can be, for one example, demonstrated by the account of the opening weeks of the National Lottery by *The Independent's* correspondent (qtd. in a catalogue of The Art Casino, group show featuring Wallinger's work):

Wherever you went – in bus queues, in the check-out line at supermarkets, in post offices, at black-tie parties or cloth cap clubs – people only had one topic of conversation. It usually began ‘If only...’ and often ended up ‘...but next week’ (Barbican Art Gallery 1995).

Thus, the interest in racehorses and all activities which surround it are founded on a dream, on something which, after all, serves no utilitarian purpose and is far from the mundane: on the human tendency to chase the unattainable. Wallinger’s racing works, viewed together, are a project showcasing a panorama of human attitudes and social tendencies.

But apart from those insights into human nature in this British manifestation, another reference the artist makes is to the art world – art practitioners and other professionals involved – and art practice. Wallinger chose horse-racing to demonstrate ideas about the functioning of the contemporary art world by means of a minimalist artistic gesture: play between work and title. After registering in the Jockey Club in 1993, the artist bought a racehorse and, in the following year, ran her in a flat race under the name *A Real Work of Art*.

The gesture ‘brackets’ the horse and gives it a status of an artwork without any physical or spatial intervention. “It extends Duchamp’s gesture by returning the nominated object to its rightful home,” he said. “To have this horse, whose prospects are completely unpredictable and whose activities are totally beyond my control, says something about how far one can go in choosing to annex an object from quotidian reality as a work of art” (Bonaventura and Wallinger 1994).

The reflection on the boundaries – or lack of boundaries – of contemporary artistic practice in Wallinger’s action is two-sided: the concern about the risks accompanying a complete creative freedom is balanced by genuine enthusiasm towards the boundless possibilities of contemporary art, which allow to use whatever the artist feels like using in order to create a desired effect. If Wallinger’s paintings were a continuation of a British tradition, the *Real Work of Art* is another – if unorthodox – take at the same tradition, with meta-commentary. There is also a hint at the view that any action might be artistic if one adopts a thoughtful attitude; as Polish conceptual artist Pawel Althamer remarked, “I prefer to watch the landscape in a 1:1 scale than to paint it” (Wisłocki and Althamer 2001).

Perhaps more importantly, however, the concept behind *A Real Work of Art* is not far from institutional criticism:

‘A Real Work of Art’ was an attempt to push the Duchampian notion of taking something out of context to the glare of a museum, institution. ... So I thought that I might be able to nominate a living object that could exist as an artwork without ever going near a gallery’ (Illuminations 2002).

In an earlier work called *Fountain*, which was a more direct tribute to Duchamp, Wallinger pointed out that the most avant-garde or anti-establishment artworks of any kind slowly become absorbed by the mainstream, losing their original edge.

A lot of contemporary work claims allegiance to the ready-made tradition, but there seems to have been an inversion of power inasmuch as it is the institutions and galleries which sanction and give authority to the objects and activities which come under their aegis

he remarked (Bonaventura and Wallinger 1994). By choosing to limit his readymade-related action to naming and publicising the new status of his chosen "object", Wallinger attempted to offer a solution of the problem. The limitations inherent in the project are, thus, a deliberate choice; a choice of a 'piece' impossible to exhibit in the museum or gallery in order to escape its environment, imposed contexts and selective audience. The artist relates:

It would have worked better if she'd run ten or dozen times in that season. Her every run would be televised all over the country, because there are bookmakers in every nook and cranny of the country that cover these things live ... Unfortunately she got injured during her one and only race. But essentially the naming was the all-important thing and anything afterwards was secondary (Nairne 2002).

The world of art and that of racing are not far apart. Much depends on luck, on a good bet, no matter how much expertise is invested in the evaluation of particular items. No art historian or writer can predict the fate of a new work; museum and gallery operations are based on risk management. Curator of The Art Casino exhibition admitted: "Making an exhibition is a gamble" (Barbican Art Gallery 1995). And as before, what keeps the business going is the search for the exceptional, ideal, extraordinary, for thrill and adventure. On the other hand, though, also for identity and status, defined by belonging to the club. "All artworks are trophies," says the artist, "there to demonstrate the wealth and good taste of the patron. Horses have a similar status" (Bonaventura and Wallinger 2004). Any attempts to evaluate both passions in terms of morality are doomed to failure. Art admirers or connoisseurs of racing invest time and emotion in these occupations out of snobbery, but also out of a genuine wish to be involved in something that cannot be easily manufactured, duplicated, mcDonalised; out of a wish for the extraordinary.

To return to George Stubbs, the 2001 *Ghost*, a life-size negative photograph of *Whistlejacket*, lit from behind, gives the viewer an even greater impression of the otherworldly character of the animal than the original, an impression immediately justified as the 'x-ray' photo 'reveals' a unicorn's horn appended to Whistlejacket's forehead.

The unicorn is one of the two heraldic beasts on the British escutcheon. The unicorn and lion symbolise a harmony of opposites, the lion representing power, inheritance, tradition, the urge to impose one's idea of order upon the world, the Empire, while the Unicorn stands for knowledge, consideration, insight. Edmund Spenser wrote of "a lion whose imperial power a proud rebellious unicorn defies" (Spenser 2004: 103). Robert Brown has described the unicorn as the

... wild, white, fierce, chaste Moon, whose two horns, unlike those of mortal creatures, are indissolubly twisted into one; the creature which endlessly fights with the Lion to gain the crown which neither may retain (Brown 2004: 1).

If horse-racing can be treated as a showcase of the social passions and pursuits of the British, then *Ghost* may be interpreted as a positive statement asserting the saving grace of tradition and the genuine emotions involved; or, as a reminder that the two modes of acting and thinking – that of the Lion and Unicorn, or, the Yahoo and the Houyhnhnm, should be kept in proportion. Horse-racing and art might be guilty pleasures, but as long as we remember the ideals we are chasing, even if they are as hard to capture as the unicorn, there will be no need to be ashamed. The only thing Wallinger seems to consistently encourage is awareness, going beyond the surface of things, breaking the boundaries of a single extreme point of view. After all, even the most fundamental of social and individual choices are often enough a matter of bet-and-win.

Department of British Literature and Culture  
University of Łódź

## Works Cited

- Baldick, Chris. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford University Press, 1996.  
 Barbican Art Gallery, *The Art Casino* (exhibition catalogue), 1995.  
 Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin, 1990: 93.  
 Bernstein, Peter. *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*. Wiley 1998: 11–12.  
 Bonaventura, Paul and Wallinger, Mark. "Turf Accounting". *Art Monthly*, April 1994.  
 British Council. *Race, Class And Sex Work by Mark Wallinger; The Anatomy Of the Horse Drawings by George Stubbs from the Royal Academy Collection*, 2002 <http://collection.britishcouncil.org/html/exhibition/UserExhibition.aspx?id=15264>.  
 Brown, Robert. *The Unicorn: A Mythological Investigation*, Kessinger Publishing, 2004: 1.  
 Cole, Olivia. "Tate Puts Artistic Bomb under Blair". *The Sunday Times*, January 17, 2007.  
 Illuminations Media. *The Eye – Mark Wallinger* (documentary), release date: 15 December 2005.  
 Jones, Jonathan. "Leonardo of Liverpool". *The Guardian*, August 31, 2004.

- Nairne, Sandy. *Art Now – Interviews with Modern Artists*, Continuum, London 2002.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Fairie Queene in: The Works of Edmund Spenser*, Kessinger Publishing, 2004: 103.
- Stubbs, George. *Anatomy of the Horse*, quoted in: Jones 2004.
- Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Signet Classics, 1999: 271–272.
- Tate Online, [http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/BP\\_artist\\_talks/mark\\_wallinger/default.jsp](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/BP_artist_talks/mark_wallinger/default.jsp), 2007.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Reading Classics – CIDEB, 1993: 4.
- Wiśłocki, Sebastian. Althamer, Paweł. Lepiej chodzić w pejzażu i oglądać go 1:1, niż malować”. *Magazyn Sztuki* 27/2001.
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Thoroughbred\\_racehorses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Thoroughbred_racehorses).

*Marta Moraczewska*

## Sztuka, sport i ryzyko w wybranych pracach Marka Wallingera

Mark Wallinger jest jednym z czołowych brytyjskich artystów współczesnych, reprezentantem Wielkiej Brytanii na 49. Biennale w Wenecji. Wallinger korzysta z różnorodnych mediów (malarstwo, rzeźba, instalacja, wideo) do opisu bieżących zjawisk kulturowych.

Artykuł stanowi próbę analizy prac Wallingera powstałych przed 2001 rokiem, koncentrujących się na wątku wyścigów konnych i powiązanych z nimi zjawiskach. Artysta wykorzystuje motyw wyścigów jako punkt wyjścia do rozważań na temat mentalności Brytyjczyków, a także jako zaproszenie do przemyślenia uniwersalnych kwestii dotyczących kondycji i natury współczesnego człowieka w ogóle. Wallinger wskazuje też na podobieństwa pomiędzy światem wyścigów konnych a światem sztuki, muzeów i kolekcjonerów.