

Vallance, Jeffrey. "Blinky The Friendly Hen." *Art issues* (Summer 1989), p. 17-20.



(dedicated to the billions of hens sacrificed each year for our consumption)

Introduction

On April 27, 1978, I went to the meat department at Ralph's supermarket and looked at frozen chickens in plastic bags. I picked out a nice one and named it Blinky. Next, I drove to the Los Angeles Pet Cemetery to bury Blinky. At the cemetery office, I ordered the complete funeral service, which includes a powder-blue casket with pink satin lining, a lot, interment, a flower vase, the viewing room and a grave marker. By the time she got to the viewing room, Blinky was beginning to thaw, so she was placed on a paper towel so that moisture would not seep into the satin. A pillow was placed where Blinky's head would have been. A subtle spot shone on Blinky, and beads of moisture glistened in the light.

At the grave site, artificial grass was placed over the dirt, and on this surface were placed the casket and the flower vase. To my surprise, when the coffin was brought out, my name instead of Blinky's was written on the lid; I felt as if I was witnessing my own funeral. The casket was lowered into the grave in the peaceful cemetery grounds, and the granite marker was set into place.

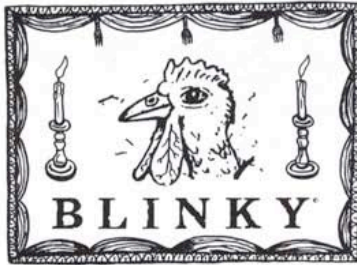
The mortician at the cemetery had only one question to ask me: "How did your pet die?" To this, I answered truthfully: "I don't know exactly how it died. One day, it just died." The question, however, planted a seed in my mind, which only recently came to fruition.

In 1988, on the tenth anniversary of Blinky's burial, I collaborated with video artists Bruce and Norman Yonemoto to make a videotape. The idea was to exhume the remains of Blinky and to use legal, medical and scientific means to determine the cause of death. An autopsy was performed on Blinky, and her bones were analyzed by a computer. The symbols of death (the cemetery, the exhumation, the earthen grave, the corruption of the body, the putrid smell) were so strong that I could no longer think of the scene as dealing with the death of a mere chicken, but rather with the cold reality of all death.

Bird-Spirit

After acting out this absurd drama, I discovered that the Blinky story follows classic folkloric/mythological/psychoanalytical logic. The bird, because of its ability to soar in the heavens, is associated symbolically with spirit. In Christian iconography, the Holy Ghost is represented by a dove and the angels of Heaven have wings. On the island kingdom of Tonga, the spirit of death is represented by the albino bat.

Blinky was buried and after 10 years she was exhumed, her bones washed, and reburied. At the exhumation, there was one unforeseeable problem. The water

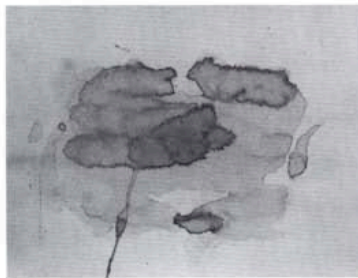


The Naming of Blinky

Blinky's name refers to the cockeyed stare of the chicken. A chicken does not have binocular vision, so it has to cock its head to one side in order to see an object on the ground.

The Shroud of Blinky

After Blinky was purchased at the supermarket, I placed her on a piece of paper for the purpose of photo-documentation. Once lifted off the paper, a perfect imprint in blood of Blinky remained. Thus was formed the Shroud of Blinky. It is a negative image, similar to the Shroud of Turin.



Jeffrey Vallance
Blinky Shroud of Turin, 1978
 Blood on paper
 8-1/2" x 11"
 Photo: Douglas M. Parker

table was extremely high, and after digging only a few feet, liquid was reached: Blinky had been buried in a watery grave. Instead of a dry carcass, mud filled the casket to the lid. The bones had to be washed and sifted through a screen. This process seems to me now a reenactment of other processes, native to cultures far different from my own. In Madagascar, the ritual of the second burial is at the core of religious life. When a Malagasy dies, a preliminary burial takes place, and after a period of time, when it is judged that the dissolution of flesh and bones is complete, the deceased is exhumed. The remains are washed and wrapped in a fresh shroud [*Lamba mena*] and then reburied to complete the process of entombment. The ritual is known as "turning of the dead" [*Famadihana*]. The ultimate aim is to end up with clean dry bones, which are subjected to the second burial. The polluting "wet" flesh is separated from the "dry" sacred bones. The flesh is thought of as female, the bones as male. It is believed that a snake [*Fannina*] is produced from the putrid fluids. During the *Famadihana* celebration, the remains are held, carried around, talked to and danced with. In Malagasy cemeteries, cenotaphs, or standing monoliths, are erected; these are referred to as male stones [*vato lahy*]. It is believed that the dead who are subjected to a single burial will be transformed into bats.

Character of Poultry

Since the domestication of fowl, man has closely observed the character of birds. Man has associated many barnyard attributes with his own nature. From the vigilant activity of the rooster come the terms: cocky, cocksure, cock of the walk, cock-a-hoop, cockalorum. We like to think that when a cock crows, he is saying his own name: "cock-a-doodle-do." From the timidity of the hen come the terms: chicken (coward), henpeck, chicken livered, chicken hearted. In Eastern Africa, a Wagogo man thinks that to eat the heart of a hen will make him timid. In a more profane vein, the slang term "chicken shit" denotes a worthless person. In the nineteen-sixties, hot rod artist Big Daddy Roth developed the character Chicken Shift, a drooling "weirdo" with flies buzzing around its head, its hand clutching the gear shift knob of a dragster. The chicken is also the object of ridicule and parody. A "cluck" is a stupid person. The joke-shop rubber chicken is thought to have slapstick appeal. The cartoon "Superchicken" presents a nerd-chicken who miraculously attains extraordinary powers. Closely related is the term "egghead," correlating the egg's ovoid shape with the bulbous head of a nerd-genius.

Fowl Sexuality

Descriptions of male and female human attributes have been derived from the sexuality of poultry. The egg is the female emblem for potentiality, conception, birth, renewal, immortality and afterlife. The spring celebration of cyclic renewal and resurrection is represented by brightly colored Easter eggs. In Egyptian tombs, the hieroglyph of an egg floating over a mummy signifies afterlife. Maternity is represented by the mother hen sitting on a nest incubating her eggs and in turn gathering her chicks under her wings. Cute baby chicks are symbols of the spring season. The term "chick" is used for a young, attractive girl. A young boy or girl who has been exploited sexually is called a piece of chicken. In La Grange, Texas, there was a whorehouse called the Chicken Ranch, its logo a rooster kissing a chicken. An older man interested in having intercourse with young boys is referred to in certain circles as a chicken hawk.

The cock (rooster) is an obvious male symbol, and the word "cock" has become synonymous with the penis, due to the resemblance of the wattles on the

rooster's head to the human scrotum, especially in its proximity to the phallic beak. Another slang word for the male organ is "pecker," denoting the pecking action of the beak. In the Vatican collection is a celebrated bronze sculpture that has male genital organs placed on the head of a cock, supported by the neck and shoulders of a man. The Greek inscription on the pedestal reads, "The Savior of the World." In the Hellenistic temple of Dionysius at Delos is a monument in the form of a phallus. On the front facade is represented the bird-phallus, a roosting bird with the head of a penis. In contemporary porno stores can be found a "tickler," a rubber condom with the head of a rooster at the end, its beak and cockcomb serving as the semen reservoir. The word for the alcoholic beverage, "the cocktail," originated by the joining of cock and tail, which are slang for the penis and female sexual organs, respectively. The consumption of alcohol is regarded by some as a substitute for orgasm. Originally, the "cock pit" was an enclosed arena for cockfighting. In nautical vessels, it is the sunken space toward the stern used by seamen to steer. In the airplane, it is the space for the pilot. Cocktail bars located near airports are often called "The Cockpit." In foul language, the vulgar term cockpit refers to the vagina; pilots can sometimes be seen driving with the bumper sticker, "Pilots do it in the cockpit." Another usage for "cock" is to assume an erect or tilted position, such as the setting of the hammer of a gun into firing position.

The cockcomb, the fleshy protuberance on the crown of a rooster's head, has fascinated man. The aggressive and rebellious tendencies of the rooster are associated with the cockcomb; in imitation of it, we find Mohawk hairdos or military helmets. Almost every culture has examples of the shape: Romans, Hawaiians, Native Americans, Chinese, Mr. T and punk rockers. The cockcomb resembles both a king's crown and its counterpart, the fool's cap. The red cap with notched cloth worn by jesters is called a "cockcomb;" from this usage, we still call a silly fellow a cockcomb. American colonists wore a three-cornered hat called a "cocked hat." The practice has evolved into the "cockade," a knot or ribbon worn in a hat.

Folklore

According to folklore tradition, if a person takes a hen's egg and places it under a toad or snake to incubate, out hatches a creature called a cockatrice, which has the head, body and feet of a cock, the wings of a bat, and the tongue and tail of a snake. Like Medusa, the cockatrice has the ability to annihilate by its glance; it can be hunted and killed only with the aid of a looking glass. In the Bible, the cockatrice is mentioned five times. In Isaiah 59: 5, it is said of the wicked that "they hatch cockatrice eggs." The word "cockatrice," in the Bible, is sometimes translated as adder [*Vipera berus*], a vile and venomous snake. The cockatrice, or basilisk, is the heraldic symbol of Basel. A representation of Yahweh used by the ancient Hebrews and in turn the Gnostic Christians was the image of a man with the head of a cock and twin serpents as legs. In Transylvania, among the Gypsies, if a woman gives birth to a boy, she is made to pass after childbirth between the sacrificed pieces of a cock which has been cut in two, or between pieces of a hen, if the child is a girl. Following this ceremony, the men eat the cock and the women eat the hen. This ritual is thought to cleanse the woman from disease and attacks by unclean spirits. On the island of Samoa, the kings are said to be descendants of the moa (chicken) clan. The island itself is named after a sacred preserve of fowl—"sa"



Jeffrey Vallance
Blinky in the Viewing Room, 1978
 Performance documentation
 Photo: Jeffrey Vallance

Chicken Sex Change

It has been noted throughout history that poultry can have an abrupt sex change. In Basel, Switzerland, in 1474, a cock was accused and convicted of the crime of laying an egg. The cock and its egg were burned at the stake with "all the solemnity of a regular execution." In Germany, a superstition still exists that a crowing hen should be killed at once or its owner will suffer bad luck. In 1923, Mr. E. Nicholson of Brompton, England, stated that during the winter his hen laid eggs, but during the summer it sprouted the comb and wattles of a male bird, starting to crow and trying to mate with hens.

Chicken-on-a-Stick

From the observation that a bird will perch on a high object comes the association of the bird (spirit) and the staff (a male symbol). The earliest recorded example of this image is found in the Paleolithic Lascaux cave paintings which depict a bird on a pole. On the Northwest coast of America, Native Americans carve a bird on the top rung of their totems. In the United States, an eagle is mounted on top of the flag pole. The heraldic coat-of-arms for Mexico shows an eagle on top of a cactus, with a snake in its talons. In Christian iconography, a bird is pictured on top of the tree of life or the cross. St. Francis of Assisi, the Patron Saint of the Pet Cemetery, is often depicted preaching to the birds with a bird on his shoulder. At Kentucky Fried Chicken, we observe the white-bearded father-like figure of Colonel Sanders, holding a staff and clothed all in white; above his head on a pole rotates a barrel of fried chicken. The cock that crowed three times at St. Peter's denial of Christ stands on a column, or some other architectural pedestal. The cock, as a symbol of the Resurrection, is invariably placed on the highest weather vein, tower or cathedral dome. Currently, the image of a chicken-on-a-stick reemerges in the guise of "country" design, which proliferates in the form of prefabricated, jigsaw-cut fake folk art—the wooden chicken mounted on a dowel.

means sacred and "moa" means hens; thus, "sacred hens." In Fiji mythology, the chief of all the fowl, Toatoatavaya-O (cock-a-doodle-doo), while looking for juicy worms on the reef, inadvertently placed his foot in the shell of a giant clam. The clam closed tight around his foot. When the high tide came in, the water rose over his head and he drowned. Today, it is believed that is why the rooster crows and the hen cackles when the tide is rising.

The cock is the symbol of the corn-spirit. In parts of Germany, when the last corn stalk in the field is to be cut, the reapers bury a live cock in the ground up to its neck and strike off its head with a sickle. The cock is identified as a fertilizing power, and when killed rises to a fresh life in the spring. In America, the cock as corn-spirit can be seen as a logo on the box of Kellogg's Corn Flakes, crowing at a bowl of the flakes. In rural areas of Europe, the person who succeeds in grasping the last ear of corn harvested is called the "cock," and grain is thrown in front of him, at which time he must crow. Beer served at this festive time is given the name cock-beer. Among the village peoples of Asia, if a woodsman fears that a tree he has felled is possessed by a spirit, he must cut off the head of a live hen on the stump of the tree with the very same axe he used to fell the tree.

Severing the head from the body is thought to release the spirit. This procedure is still practiced today in modern supermarkets. Consumers want to disassociate the meat they buy from dead animals.

A Story of Sacrifice

The sacrificial story of Christ (the Lamb of God) and of Blinky (the Friendly Hen) contain similar symbols. The lamb and the chicken are both domestic animals used for food and sacrificial rituals. Christ is the son of God; the cock is a sun sign. Christ was sacrificed for the sins of the world; Blinky was sacrificed for our consumption. St. Peter's cock crowed at the dawn of the Resurrection; in the barnyard, the cock crows at the dawn of the day. Christ compared himself to a hen when speaking about Jerusalem in Matthew 23: 37 "...How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings..." Christ was hung on a cross; Blinky was put on a supermarket shelf. Christ's body and blood are eaten at the Eucharist; chicken's flesh is eaten for supper. The head of Christ miraculously appeared on Veronica's veil; Blinky's head was severed. Christ was buried in a tomb; Blinky in a coffin. The image of Christ appears on the Shroud of Turin; Blinky's image appears on the Shroud of Blinky. Christ descends to Hell; Blinky returns to the marketplace. Christ was resurrected; Blinky was exhumed.

At the conclusion of the videotape, Blinky's head is reattached, and her spirit travels up from the grave, like the triumphant ascension of Christ. But first she must return to her place of origin, the supermarket. Blinky is a product, and as her life flashes before her eyes, so does a maze of other consumer products. In the end, she is able to transcend the marketplace and enter Heaven, where she is once again whole. R.I.P. ■



Sources for the above include: *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* by George Bataille; *The Mythic Image* and *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* by Joseph Campbell; *Folklore and Psychoanalysis* by Paulo de Carvalho-Neto; *The Golden Bough* and *Folklore in the Old Testament* by James George Fraser; *Myths and Legends of Fiji* by Inez Hames and A.W. Reed; *The Encircled Serpent* by M. Oldfield Howey; *Sexual Symbolism* by Richard P. Knight and Thomas Wright; *Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors* by John Mack; *The Fool and the Trickster* by Paul U.A. Williams; *The Shroud of Turin* by Ian Wilson; *The Sacred Hens* by Glen Wright.