

When the Serious is Tinted with Humor, it Makes a Nicer Color. A conversation with Tim Lee by Jens Hoffmann - April 21, 2004

Jens Hoffmann (JH): Since we are going to talk about art and humor I would like to start our conversation with a quote by Marcel Duchamp that I always liked very much: "When the serious is tinted with humor, it makes a nicer color." Your work seems very connected to this thought and I like to know about this particular aspect of your practice. You once spoke about the idea of humor as an agent for social commentary. Could you elaborate on this a little, maybe also in relation to your own work?

Tim Lee (TL): Duchamp's line is interesting, mostly because the carefree analogy so easily expresses what could possibly be regarded as an urge for a large moment of transformation in art. His association with color makes a distinction - in his typically oblique way - to art's distillation towards essentials. For Duchamp, to make art a different color would correspond as some sort of fundamental gesture, or small formal action that might grandly alter the way we make, look at, and experience art.

This sea-change in perspective - to make art humorous - marks what I always think of as the question of an artistic struggle over affect. I think mainly, a lot of this stems from my interest in Modernism, particularly in the notion of the gap that exists between artist and viewer. How can one bridge or accommodate that divide? In Modernism, the equation became simple: to affect someone creates effect. For instance, by turns, Jeff Wall wants to make beautiful pictures and his photographs are indeed very striking in their explicit beauty. For Agnes Martin, her chosen vehicle of affect is serenity, whereas for Bruce Nauman it's aggression, and for someone like Christopher Williams it's confusion. I'm not sure how, but in some roundabout way, when I started to make art, Comedy became my mechanism. The reasons for this are various, but partly it emanates from how I think that Comedy is, in many ways, a social leveler. I always liked the idea that you can be anyone, and it wouldn't matter who you are, and you would find my work funny. Laughter in art becomes its own experience, and the immediate response of humor would lead one to speculate on or think about the work further. This could be seen as an egalitarian response - where the motivations to make something funny can be judged as some sort of democratic or political act - and this is where I think my interests

could possibly intersect with Duchamp's. But it was only after some time that I came to realize that humor could indeed be very political. That to make something a joke is to signal some sort of upending, or rupture of a belief, system, pattern or tradition.

JH: It would be good if you could maybe give me a concrete example in regards to what you said. Can you tell me for example more about your piece "Duck Soup, the Marx Brothers, 1927" (2002)? I am particularly interested in your idea of how humor could be political and how this manifests itself in this work for instance where you bring together Dan Graham and the Marx Brothers.

TL: I think a lot of my work comes out of an urge to relative certain traditions, especially with what we normally associate as the hard-edged rhetoric of classical conceptualism. "Duck Soup, the Marx Brothers, 1927" was partly realized with Dan Graham in mind. I guess you could call it a double-entendre on the "mirror-stages" of the Marx Brothers famous routine and of Graham's 1977 work "Performer/Audience/Mirror". My photographs originated as a partial attempt to make a sight gag out of Graham's concerns with optics and his interest in American behaviorism and European phenomenology. Yet the sight gag is one of the lowest forms of humor, right down there with puns and one-liners. But I liked the circularity of the joke: that if my photographs was about the sight gag, then it was about the double-take, and if it was the double-take then it meant to look again, and if it was about looking again then it was about basic perception. In the end, the adoption of an askance viewpoint is what Graham was trying to do all along.

JH: This is interesting what you say about Graham as he really comes across as very serious and not amusing at all. Someone who I think is very political and at the same time extremely funny is US artist Martha Rosler. I do not think that her mechanism is comedy though, in her case it is probably really politics expressed in an often humorous but still sincere and serious way. It is more this idea of Aristotle that humor is educated insolence.

TL: Yes, Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen" is a very funny piece. Funny, because it is so serious - "Deadpan" is probably the most appropriate word. I think that her work, like the particular strain of performance and video art that arose in the seventies, often has a dark, mercurial edge to it. This can be partly attributed to the way conceptual art at the time engaged with

social subjects in both explicit and covert fashion, almost as if to simultaneously point to and conceal its importance. Hence how the Deadpan became such an underlying strategy; to be overtly political was to be dead serious, but the comedy allowed to take some of the edge off a little. Rosler's satire, like Vito Acconci, Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman's, is indeed very humorous, but often not in a way that is very comforting.

Graham, like Rosler, was very political, and it's interesting to note that he has criticized Duchamp in the past for being too aristocratic; that he didn't have a social conscience. My interest in politics is likeminded with them in a certain way, except I initially wanted the social ambitions of my work to be more subdued. The danger of dealing with politics in art is pedantry. So I took this as an operative challenge to avoid the obvious. It's a question that has often been repeated in my head: how can one make polemical art that does not look or appear to be overtly polemical? Comedy just seemed to offer itself as the most willing example.

JH: Who else comes to your mind in regard to art and comedy/humor in the field of visual art? John Bock I think could be seen in this line but again his humor comes also from another angle and is more connected to notion of absurdity and nonsense. Maybe Maurizio Cattelan could be the closest to what we described, he certainly has a connection to Duchamp. Also there is Andreas Slominski who is incredibly funny, maybe also related to the idea of the absurd.

TL: John Bock is indeed a very good funny artist. I'm not sure if I could ever make some real sense out of his nonsense, but that's almost the point. His absurdity functions in that rupturing I talked about earlier, about upending established conventions in order to realize new forms of social, political and aesthetic freedom. This abject quality also finds its forbears in Mike Kelley and Fischli and Weiss, who are also very good at positing strange new forms of art while dramatizing different ways to behave: through playful slapstick, what these artists aim to observe is how absurdity can evade the responsibilities of meaning until it becomes something else. Cattelan also has that playful recklessness, but he's probably more interesting in that he uses humor as psychotherapy - especially in the way his objects act as ersatz self-portraits that personify his anxieties. Charles Ray is another great example of the comic neurotic. Unlike Bock or Kelley, he treats humor with a very clean aesthetic, but if there's any mess to his work, its in his psyche. The joke of Ray's work is that he trades personal trauma for sculpture and

hides his anxiety beneath the slick veneer of Minimalism. If Minimalism suppresses anything, its emotion, and Ray further succeeds by inserting personality into the archetype while simultaneously giving it a laugh.

JH: I found this line of Ludwig Wittgenstein that I think fits very well here: "A serious work of philosophy could be written entirely of jokes."

Particularly Conceptual art was responsible to bring the idea of a good-natured laugh back into the arena of art. Here we are back at Duchamp, just think about "LHOOQ" (1919) or a very late piece "With My Tongue in My Cheek" (1959). Think about Baldessari's "I am Making Art" (1969) for example. I like it when artists make fun of themselves in such a sharp, ironic and witty way. Humor is the enemy of authority and Baldessari was clearly parodying Nauman. Later he did this hilarious version of Lewitt's "Sentences on Conceptual art." But let us talk more about your work, somehow I see some parallels to Baldessari early strategy of parody. Tell me more about pieces such as "Untitled (Number 4, 1970)" (2002) or "Louie Louie, The Kingsmen, 1963" (2002).

TL: By itself, the idea of Baldessari singing Lewitt is pretty funny, but the actual footage of Baldessari singing Lewitt is made even more humorous because he does it in such a straight, literal tone. Again, it is a return to the deadpan - here realized through a very emotionless read of an intellectual text. "Louie Louie, The Kingsmen, 1963" was achieved in a similar way. It was born of the idea that I wouldn't be singing as much as I was reciting lyrics which were incomprehensible in the first place - that words, emptied of context, are treated like pure, formal props used to articulate the autonomy of the artist and signal the dematerialization of conceptual art towards text. "Louie Louie" came as a furtive attempt to defeat a regressive form of language - here as sixties garage rock - by trying to articulate it, and because it was also the first time I ever tried to play any musical instrument, I only had the initial suspicion that the work might end up being funny (it probably ended up being more ridiculous than I imagined). Maybe this is what Wittgenstein was trying to suggest with his idea of the language game - although I always thought the joke of Wittgenstein was that the language game could be about anything, therefore opening up the possibilities of intellectual free agency. Nauman, of course, learned a lot by reading Wittgenstein, and part of my interest in Nauman is that he engages humor with such an archly serious and dramatic intensity. Like Samuel Beckett, his humor-noir approach was very intellectual, and it resulted in

scenarios that were so overtly rational they became absurd.

Nauman's 1966 photograph "Failing to Levitate in the Studio" best illustrates this example, and my diptych "Untitled (Number 4, 1970)" is partly a parody of Nauman's strange and self-imposed situation. I guess in terms of generally trying to out-do him - of actually levitating in the studio - I was trying to reverse his standard of failure into achieved success while also transforming the index of pain in his picture towards something more humorous. Again, it was through the relativizing of conceptual art history that I was able to make Nauman's problems my own. In the end, I guess you could say that I was trying to ironize his irony. And as David Foster Wallace observed, isn't this an implicitly sincere act?

I like that Wittgenstein quote. It reminds me of Benjamin when he said that history could be measured by its discontinuities. And how else to rupture tradition than through a joke? To look at humor as a way to both philosophize and articulate history is appealing because it means that the strategy serves a purpose other than its own excuse for being. I guess I identify with this notion, because the thing with me is that I take comedy very seriously.

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