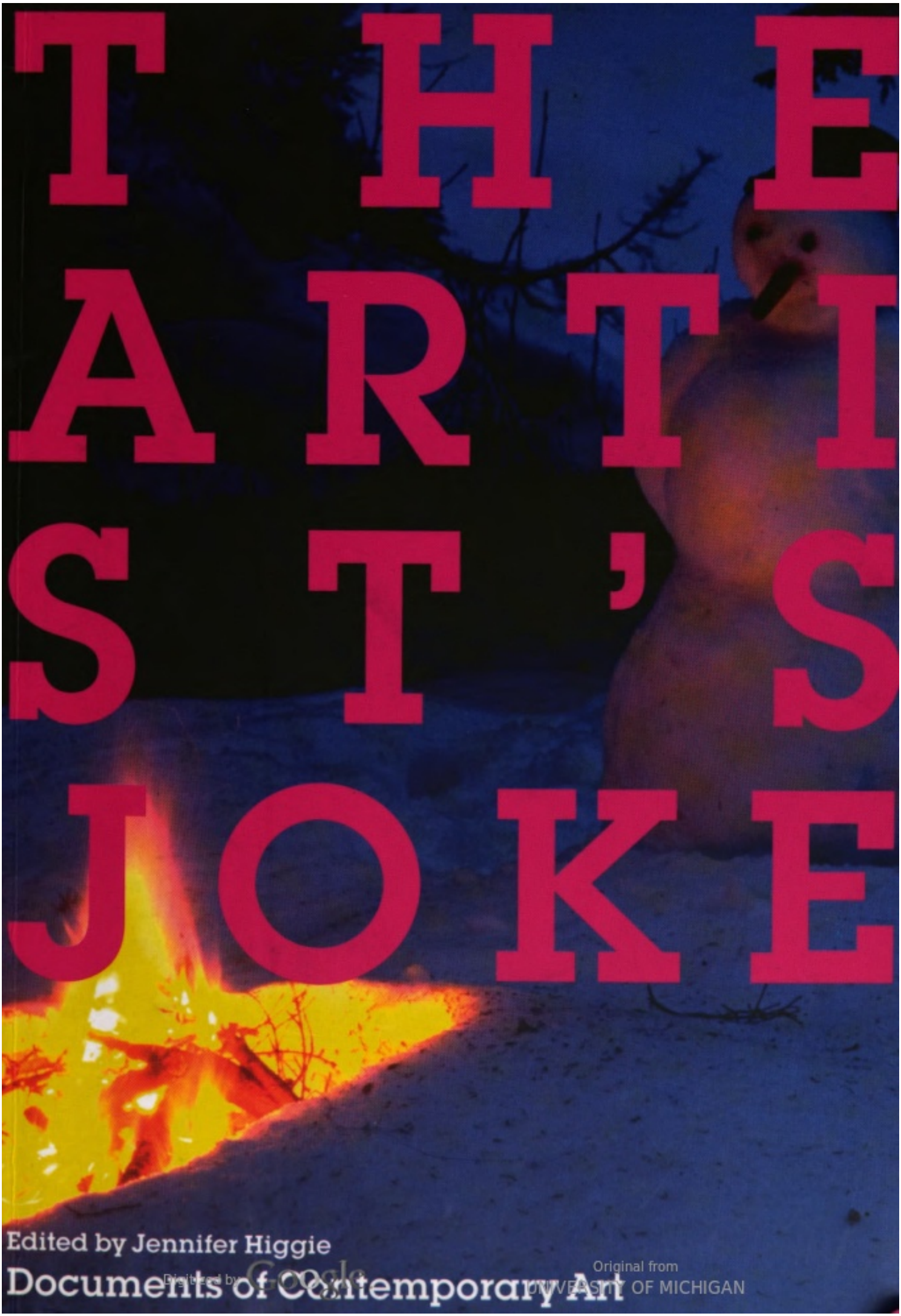

Hugo Ball//Henri Bergson//Michael Bracewell//André Breton//Dan Cameron//Leonora Carrington//Hélène Cixous//Suzanne Cotter//Marcel Duchamp//Marlene Dumas//Alex Farquharson//Fischli & Weiss//Dan Fox//Andrea Fraser//Sigmund Freud//Guerrilla Girls// Jörg Heiser//Dave Hickey//Hannah Höch//Stuart Horodner//Jo Anna Isaak//Mike Kelley//Martin Kippenberger//Barbara Kruger//Sarah Lucas// Nathaniel Mellors//Tom Morton//Heike Munder// Bruce Nauman//Claes Oldenburg//Raymond Pettibon// Francis Picabia//Pablo Picasso//Richard Prince// Arnulf Rainer//Ad Reinhardt//Peter Schjeldhahl// Carolee Schneemann//David Sedaris//Robert Smithson//Frances Stark//Kristine Stiles//Annika Ström//Anna Tilroe//Sheena Wagstaff//Hamza Walker//Andy Warhol//Gregory Williams//Slavoj Zizek

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Documents of Contemporary Art

In recent decades artists have progressively expanded the boundaries of art as they have sought to engage with an increasingly pluralistic environment. Teaching, curating and understanding of art and visual culture are likewise no longer grounded in traditional aesthetics but centred on significant ideas, topics and themes ranging from the everyday to the uncanny, the psychoanalytical to the political.

The Documents of Contemporary Art series emerges from this context. Each volume focuses on a specific subject or body of writing that has been of key influence in contemporary art internationally. Edited and introduced by a scholar, artist, critic or curator, each of these source books provides access to a plurality of voices and perspectives defining a significant theme or tendency.

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I WOULD LIKE TO SEE SOME ART THAT IS COURAGEOUSLY SILLY

Dave Hickey, 'Frivolity and Unction', 1996

PLAYFUL JUDGEMENTS

POP GOES THE WEASEL

PUNCHLINES

INFINITE JESTS

It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story, Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story. Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night ...' It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story, Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story. Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night ...' It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story, Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story. Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night ...' It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story, Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story. Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night ...' It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story, Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, 'Tell us a story. Jack.' And Jack said, 'It was a dark and stormy night ...'

Bruce Nauman, *Clown Torture: Dark and Stormy Night with Laughter*, 1987

Jennifer Higgie
Introduction//All Masks Welcome

'Jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life', wrote Sigmund Freud in 1905.[1] His observation remains just as relevant today – despite some important exceptions, relatively little has been written about the role of jokes, humour, wordplay and satire in art of the last century.[2] Somewhat ironically it seems that humour has not been considered a subject worthy of serious consideration, despite the fact that – quite apart from making us laugh – it has been employed to activate repressed impulses, embody alienation or displacement, disrupt convention, and to explore power relations in terms of gender, sexuality, class, taste, or racial and cultural identities. Humour has been central to the cultural politics of movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus, Performance and Feminism, and of course much recent art practice that defies categorization – indeed, if humour has a common characteristic, it is to thumb its nose at pigeonholes.

It's not my intention to analyse here why there has been this lack of scholarly attention to humour in art – a subject demanding a book to itself. Rather, this anthology offers a cross-section from a century of writings by artists, critics and cultural commentators to illustrate the diverse ways in which humour – encompassing jokes, slapstick, satire, irony, parody, caricature – has contributed to transforming the practice and experience of art, from the early twentieth-century avant-garde period to the present. Taking account of humour's rarely timeless but generally zeitgeist-related qualities, each of the book's four sections charts an era of cultural transitions. *Playful Judgements* spans the period from Freud's writings on jokes and the philosopher Henri Bergson's on laughter in the 1900s to the Surrealist André Breton's *Anthology of Black Humour*, first printed in 1940 in occupied France and banned for its subversive content.[3] *Pop Goes the Weasel* traces humour's resurfacing in the rapprochements between art, everyday life and pop culture of the 1960s and early 1970s. *Punchlines* traces several different trajectories from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, from the pioneering feminist performance of Carolee Schneemann – to take one strand – to the painter Marlene Dumas' witty reappropriation of female representations two decades on. *Infinite Jests* surveys the more expansive roles of humour which have emerged across diverse, often indefinable art practices from the mid-1990s to the present. Overall the selection is restricted to art and humour situated in the West, partly due to the limits of my familiarity with such a culturally fine-

tuned subject; it would be fascinating to read a similar anthology on art from a non-western context.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud cites the German philosopher Kuno Fischer's speculation that 'a joke is a *playful* judgement' – the source of the first section's title. *Playful Judgements* looks at what Breton characterized in the *Anthology of Black Humour* as the 'lightning bolt' of the unsettlingly comic – the fact that humour can, paradoxically, be a way of coping with the most tragic of circumstances: 'There is nothing that intelligent humour cannot resolve in gales of laughter, not even the void ...'[4] Earlier Bergson, despite declaring 'we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition', had similarly stressed that 'to understand laughter we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one ... it must have a social signification.' (*Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 1900). A case in point is the Dadaists at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, who responded to the carnage of the First World War with a wild absurdist humour that was for them an aptly alienated response to a culture that could sanctify such horror. As Hugo Ball, one of Dada's founding members, wrote on 12 March 1916: 'What we are celebrating is at once buffoonery and a requiem mass ... the Dadaist ... knows that life asserts itself in contradictions, and that his age, more than any preceding it, aims at the destruction of all generous impulses. Every kind of mask is therefore welcome to him, every play at hide and seek in which there is an inherent power of deception.' The prescience of Ball's remark in anticipating developments in the performance art decades later of, say, Mike Kelley or Paul McCarthy, is startling. Another well-noted dimension of Dada humour, present in the readymades of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, is the questioning of art's fundamental definitions and categories, this role of insider criticism being carried forward in more overtly philosophical form in Magritte's surreal jokes and conundrums. Breton's Surrealist *Anthology of Black Humour* is sampled in this section with examples of Duchamp's punning word games, Picabia's anarchic assaults, Picasso's poetry inspired by the group's practice of automatic writing, and some fabulous early feminist satire by Surrealist Leonora Carrington and Berlin Dadaist Hannah Höch – the latter narrating the story of a male painter called Heavenlykingdom whose creativity is thwarted by his wife: 'at least four times in four years he was forced to wash dishes.' He ends up titling his masterpiece *The Chive and the Female Soul: A Comparison* ...

Pop Goes the Weasel surveys the work of artists who in the aftermath of the Second World War explored ideas of the role of the individual in relationship to authority, politics, the everyday, and the boom in mass production. Many artists of this period, particularly the Fluxus group, inspired by Dada and the chance

operations of John Cage, as well as the instigators of Happenings and Environments, such as Claes Oldenburg with his *Store*, viewed the gap between art and life as a false one and attempted to narrow it, an aim that would inevitably accommodate the comic. As Oldenburg wrote in 1961: 'I am for an art that is political-erotical-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum ... I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary.' Or as Andy Warhol later quipped: 'Any time you slice a salami, you take a risk! ... Why do people think artists are special? It's just another job!'.

The everyday qualities of humour are also frequently rooted in context. In the critic Peter Schjeldahl's eyes, Ed Ruscha is to Los Angeles what Edouard Manet was to Paris: 'There are two sounds in Los Angeles, traffic and laughter ... such laughter is apparently uncaused, childlike, irresponsible, and gratuitous. It is a chuckle in the throat, a constant eddy of mirth that is the opposite of irony: rather than penetrate and expose incongruities it heals and elides them, homogenizing all differences in the emulsion of a positive attitude ... it is the sound of grown-up children determined not to be afraid.' Jörg Heiser is similarly fascinated by the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader's performance pieces made in Holland, cycling straight into an Amsterdam canal or falling strategically across a path strewn with objects to echo a De Stijl composition.

Clowns have long been a popular motif in art, where their masks and tragi-comic melancholy make them potent metaphors for the oft-fraught relationship between the actual and the symbolic. In an interview with the critic Joan Simon, Bruce Nauman reflects on how he got 'interested in the idea of the clown first of all because there is a mask and it becomes an abstracted idea of a person ... and for this reason, because clowns are abstract in some sense, they become very disconcerting ... there is a fairly high suicide rate among clowns.' Arnulf Rainer admits too that 'It was only when I began to re-work the photos of my mimic "face-farces" by drawing on them, that I discovered the unexpected. All new, unknown people, who had been hiding inside myself, but who were not able to formulate my muscles by themselves ... these anti-yoga tragi-comic poses, mannered clowneries, and tired gestures without grace, chic or charm do not ask for a harmonious physical expression, but for a search for the unlimited possibilities and the unlikely people who are concealed in all of us'. Robert Smithson's essay on 'paradoxes of conduct in mannerism' looks at the way mannerist 'travesty' in art and film has subverted naturalism – from the combined 'humour and terror' of an anonymous Mannerist painter's *Beheading of John the Baptist* in the Prado to the 'artificial normality' of 'queens acting like plain-janes' in Warhol's films.

The 1970s saw a rise in the number of women who were working as artists

and employing humour, especially satire, as a form of rebellion against male power structures – what the critic Jo Anna Isaak, in the landmark group show she curated in 1982, summed up in its title 'The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter'.[5] The potential of wit both to disrupt authority and entertain an audience made it the perfect vehicle for feminist strategies. A good example of this, opening the *Punchlines* section, is Carolee Schneemann's hilariously ironic excerpt of filmscript for *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973–75) which she read out as part of her performance *Interior Scroll* (1975/77) in a sardonic send-up of the gendered artist/model scenario.[6] Equally influential in this climate was the French theorist and writer Hélène Cixous' manifesto-like text 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975) which celebrates the potential for creating new forms of the feminine, breaking free from the patriarchal past: 'Laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking.'[7]

The disenchanted 1980s saw the rise of the Guerrilla Girls, self-proclaimed 'conscience of the art world', an anonymous group of women who for over twenty years have targetted art world sexism and racism with 'facts and fake fur'. Their sarcastic manifesto proclaims the advantages of being a woman artist: 'Working without the pressure of success. Not having to be in shows with men. Having an escape from the art world in your four freelance jobs. Being reassured that whatever kind of work you make it will be labelled feminine ... '. Other positions are articulated in Barbara Kruger's text 'Not Funny', where she describes the comedic as 'motored by its intimacy with objectification, by its ability to step outside of it all and still get under its own skin', and by the painter Marlene Dumas who wrily observes how her images of black and white fashion models 'consciously allude to the politics of colour and the colour of paintings. They are even a bit funny. Nothing wrong with black humour.'[8] This use of humour as a way of getting 'under the skin' of emotionally and socially difficult subject matter is carried further by artists who employ cartoons and caricature in their work to diffuse the power of stereotypes. Artist Kara Walker, for example, uses the 'look' of racial and sexual stereotypes – by their very nature a form of cartoon – to highlight their viciousness. Similarly the derivation of caricature from '*caricare*, to load, as in a loaded portrait' informs artist Mike Kelley's survey of the genre's significance in 'Foul Perfection: Notes on Caricature'.

Discussing his *Joke Paintings*, Richard Prince traces their gradual transition from image to text, from comedy to pathos: 'What I was calling jokes were, in fact, cartoons, so dropping illustration and working simply with text seemed logical, they began as something abstract. Gradually they became tragic in a quite unexpected way.' That the function of a joke is mutable becomes clear in art historian Gregory Williams' text on Martin Kippenberger: 'The joke here ... is

less a formula than a metaphor, a fallback solution that could take on a wide variety of forms. In the most straightforward cases, gaps emerge between the image and the work's title, many of which read like a punch line.' For the writer Dave Hickey, allowing art to be 'bad, silly and frivolous' is liberating: 'Wouldn't that open up the options a little for something really super? An orchid in the dung heap would seem all the more super for our surprise at finding it there.'

That humour can simultaneously reflect upon the human condition and challenge consumerism and authority is no more apparent than in the works of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy. Curator and critic Dan Cameron examines how 'by revealing the concealed violence implicit in American family life, McCarthy eliminates the possibility of psychologically distancing oneself from what is taking place; the viewer laughs and recoils at the same time. [...] McCarthy lets us know how seductive the call to cultural entropy really is. He shows us sides of the American character few of us can endure at sustained close quarters, and he does so at enormous risk.'

The final section, *Infinite Jests*, samples the diverse range of art exploring humour in recent years, when it's often been said that the only orthodoxy left in art is the lack of one, and which have seen a boom in humour-related exhibitions such as 'When Humour Becomes Painful' (2005), 'Situation Comedy: Humour in Recent Art' (2005) and 'Dada's Boys: Identity and Play in Contemporary Art' (2006).[9] Artists and writers in this section move between the deadpan – Annika Ström's one-liner piece, *Excuse me but I need to lie down here and think about my next piece of art* – and the slapstick, discussed in Jörg Heiser's interview with the artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss and in Carl Freedman's interview with Sarah Lucas. Here the artist follows up her throwaway line, 'yeah, well, I like to have a laugh', with the important qualification that what stops it from being slapstick is a closeness of attention to the specificity of objects and their often unnoticed aspects. For the writer Michael Bracewell, David Shrigley's tragi-comic drawings bear an unexpected comparison 'with the acuity of a moral philosopher'. His work 'externalizes the doubts and fears of the human condition in comic scenes and objects, the sincerity of which is reinforced by the seemingly painful amateurism of their author's style ... Shrigley's comedy appears to confirm the belief of great humourists (from Laurence Sterne to Woody Allen) that laughter is synonymous with hope.' It could also be described as synonymous with artistic freedom. Raymond Pettibon combines drawings and texts that superficially seem like cartoons; asked, then, why he works in art rather than commerce he replies as one of his artworks might: 'In art, impurity is not a mortal sin'.

Contemporary artists employing explicitly political humour include William Pope.L, who makes use of irony, sarcasm and satire in solo performances.

drawing connections between race, gender, politics, economics, history and art in the US today.[10] An excerpt is included here from the book on his work, *The Friendliest Black Artist in America*. Curator Anna Tilroe describes how the late Leigh Bowery was similarly transgressive: 'Overstepping the physical was a philosophy of life, with the hilarious as a point of departure. The hilarious was his own body. Not only did he design wild costumes for it ... but he regarded his body as material too. ... There had to be laughter, for laughter is the most beautiful form of boundary transgression.' Andrea Fraser uses humour in her work to analyse the power structures of the art world. *Official Welcome*, performed in the homes of art collectors, took the form of a welcoming speech lifted from sources as diverse as US President Bill Clinton and the art historian Benjamin Buchloh. Describing herself in the third person Fraser reverently pronounces: 'Her work is inventive, poignant and brazen, as well as humorous. She's an artist who takes no prisoners, even when she works in the belly of the beast. Her performative critiques are meticulously researched portraits of institutions, revealingly appropriated from original sources, yet they're often, they're often also tantalizingly ambiguous ...'

Sean Landers' laughter is anxiously tempered with constant analysis and self-doubt, which he regularly lays bare in his artworks. Alex Farquharson quotes the artist describing his method: 'My original idea was to make conceptual art entertaining, sloppy, emotional, human and funny. Over the years I got so far out on this conceptual limb that I went around full circle until I was a traditional artist again. I tried to be ironic about it but eventually became sincere. Now I'm a happy victim of my own charade. I figured out that it's better to be a sucker who makes something than a wise guy who is too cautious to make anything at all.' Landers once titled a picture *I'm a Clown in a World of Chimps*; across the Atlantic in Britain, Jake and Dinos Chapman titled one of their works *Flogging a Dead Clown*, another *The Clown Who Lost His Humour*. Suzanne Cotter discusses the work of the iconoclastic brothers in her essay 'The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning'. In his piece on Maurizio Cattelan, 'Infinite Jester', Tom Morton describes how 'the clown's job is to hold up a mirror to our pomposities, foibles and fears', something Cattelan, the art world's most notorious joker, 'does with aplomb, upping the comic ante with each work he produces.'

Several other writings in this final section are included for the very reason that they come at humour from various often uncategorizable directions: artist Nathaniel Mellors' fictional testimony evoking the Amazon location of Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972) – a 'recollection' in which the starring actor, Klaus Kinski, becomes a real-life crazed monster who 'eats God and vomits Man'; artist Frances Stark's ruminations on eccentric neighbours and their collections: 'I Recently Helped Repair the Broken Horn of Pan'; an excerpt

from the 'memoir' of humourist David Sedaris: 'The First Six Moments from Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist'; curator Heike Munder's essay: 'Humour: The Secret of Aesthetic Sublimation'; and cultural critic Slavoj Zizek's reflections on the relationship between religious belief and humour: 'The Christian-Hegelian Comedy'.

As has become evident, the uses of humour in art of the last hundred years are many and varied. I trust this anthology will serve as a useful – and entertaining – introduction to the myriad shapes it has assumed.

1 Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious' (1905), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. VIII (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1960) 9.

Other quotations in this essay are not footnoted if they are cited from the extracts included in this volume.

2 Please see the bibliography for further reading in addition to the texts reprinted here.

3 Breton compiled his *Anthologie de l'humour noir* in the late 1930s. Among the leading writers in the collection are Isidore Ducasse (Lautréamont), Arthur Rimbaud, Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel, followed by Lewis Carroll, the Marquis de Sade, Jonathan Swift, then Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp and Jacques Vaché. It was first printed by Éditions du Sagittaire, Paris, in late 1940 but had to be presented to the committee of censors in February 1941, when its circulation was refused. It was thus not distributed until after the liberation in 1945. In a later expanded edition Breton added the texts by Charles Fourier, Benjamin Péret, Jean Ferry, Leonora Carrington and Jean-Pierre Duprey. (See Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002] 387–9.)

4 Pierre Piobb, *Les Mystères des Dieux* (1909), quoted by André Breton in 'Paratonerre' [Lightning Bolt], preface to *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, op. cit., trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997) xiv.

5 'The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter', curated by Jo Anna Isaak, opened at the Protetch McNeil Gallery, New York, in 1982, touring the US and Canada for two years. In 1995 Isaak curated an updated sequel, 'Laughter Ten Years After'. The original catalogue essay was revised at that time and republished in Isaak's book *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), from which the extract reprinted here is taken.

6 Carolee Schneemann first performed *Interior Scroll* to a largely female audience at 'Women Here and Now', East Hampton, Long Island, in 1975. She began draped in a sheet, announcing that she would read from her book *Cézanne. She was a Great Painter*. She posed naked in a parody of life-model positions while reading from the book. Then she slowly unfurled a scroll from her vagina (a reference partly based on research into 'vulvic space' and serpent forms as goddess attributes in ancient cults) and read from the scroll (scroll 1). The performance was repeated at the Telluride Film Festival, Telluride, Colorado in 1977 (scroll 2). For a full description see Carolee

Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002) 153–5.

7 Hélène Cixous, 'Le rire de la méduse', *L'Arc*, 61 (1975). This first appeared in English translation in the journal *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1976). Cixous' distinction in her work between a practical, campaigning space of feminism and an aesthetic space for the construction of new forms of the feminine through a radical form of writing contributed to opening up parallel approaches in art practice and theory.

8 The South African-born Dutch painter Marlene Dumas wrote 'The Blonde, the Brunette and the black Woman' at the time she was working on her *Models and Rejects* series of paintings and ink and wash drawings, based among other sources on magazine photos of contemporary fashion models, and first exhibited in 1994.

For further discussion of the question whether humour can be both potentially offensive and funny, see the moral philosopher Berys Gaut's essay 'Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour'. He also looks at the flip side of comedy, when it is used as an instrument of oppression and control, discussing Aristotle's description of the joke as a 'type of abuse' and cases when such 'abuse' might ethically be justified. (Berys Gaut, 'Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour', in *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 22, no. 1 [April 1998] 51–68.)

9 'When Humour Becomes Painful' (Migros Museum für Gegenwartzkunst, Zurich, 27 August–30 October 2005), curated by Heike Munder and Felicity Lunn. Artists: Vito Acconci, Alex Bag, Aidas Bareikis, Beagles & Ramsay, Joseph Beuys, Anna & Bernhard Blume, John Bock, Olaf Breuning, Jake & Dinos Chapman, Jan Fabre, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Knopp Ferro, Fischli & Weiss, Rachel Harrison, Martin Kippenberger, Peter Land, Klara Liden, Lutz/Guggisberg, George Maciunas, Piero Manzoni, John Miller, Bruce Nauman, Martin Parr, Sigmar Polke, Jean-Frederic Schnyder, Jürgen Klauke, Mark Wallinger, Boyd Webb, Bernhard Willhelm/Carles Congost, Thomas Zipp.

'Situation Comedy: Humour in Recent Art' (The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii, 9 September–31 December 2005, touring in US and Canada), guest curated by Dominic Molon and Michael Rooks for iCI (Independent Curators International, New York). Artists: Stephanie Brooks, Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragset, Tom Friedman, Luis Gispert, Felix Gmelin, Rodney Graham, Christian Jankowski, Martin Kersels, Alexej Koschkarow, Peter Land, Cary Leibowitz, Kelly Mark, Dave Muller, Laura Nova, William Pope L., Richard Prince, David Robbins, Kay Rosen, Erika Rothenberg, Dana Schutz, Lawrence Seward, David Shrigley, Bob and Roberta Smith, Michael Smith, Susan Smith-Pinelo, Tony Tasset, John Waters, Olav Westphalen, Erwin Wurm.

'Dada's Boys: Identity and Play in Contemporary Art' (Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland, 27 May–16 July 2006), curated by David Hopkins. Artists: Knut Åsdam, Matthew Barney, John Bock, Roderick Buchanan, Marcel Duchamp, Angus Fairhurst/Damien Hirst, Keith Farquhar, Douglas Gordon, Martin Kippenberger, Jeff Koons, Sarah Lucas, Man Ray, Paul McCarthy, Lee Miller, Francis Picabia, Richard Prince.

10 Other contemporary artists who use humour in related ways include Jimmie Durham, Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gomes-Peña and David Hammons.

A
sizable
nose (big
as a small
melon) made
of a ductile-elastic
material (compact rubber,
appropriately); over the aerodynamic
and supersmooth curves of the nose there
would be a great many 'strange bodies', perfectly
inlaid so as not to break the homogeneous and
supersmooth continuity of the surface. It would
be enough that a general compression be applied
with both hands to have hundreds of tiny
objects (night tables, skulls, bottles,
lamp shades, etc.) come up
in slow ascension (like
the Paramount
orchestra)

Salvador Dali, Aerodynamic Apparition of Things-Objects, 1934

PLAYFUL JUDGEMENTS

Henri Bergson
Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic// 1900

What does laughter mean? What is the basal element in the laughable? What common ground can we find between the grimace of a merry-andrew, a play upon words, an equivocal situation in a burlesque and a scene of high comedy? What method of distillation will yield us invariably the same essence from which so many different products borrow either their obtrusive odour or their delicate perfume? The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation.

Our excuse for attacking the problem in our turn must lie in the fact that we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life. We shall confine ourselves to watching it grow and expand. Passing by imperceptible gradations from one form to another, it will be seen to achieve the strangest metamorphoses. We shall disdain nothing we have seen. Maybe we may gain from this prolonged contact, for the matter of that, something more flexible than an abstract definition – a practical, intimate acquaintance, such as springs from a long companionship. And maybe we may also find that, unintentionally, we have made an acquaintance that is useful. For the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness. It dreams, I admit, but it conjures up, in its dreams, visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group. Can it then fail to throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective and popular imagination? Begotten of real life and akin to art, should it not also have something of its own to tell us about art and life?

At the outset we shall put forward three observations which we look upon as fundamental. They have less bearing on the actually comic than on the field within which it must be sought.

The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given

it – the human caprice whose mould it has assumed. It is strange that so important a fact, and such a simple one too, has not attracted to a greater degree the attention of philosophers. Several have defined man as 'an animal that laughs'. They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to.

Here I would point out, as a symptom equally worthy of notice, the *absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity. In a society composed of pure intelligences there would probably be no more tears, though perhaps there would still be laughter; whereas highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter. Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said and done; act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion: as though at the touch of a fairy wand you will see the flimsiest of objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue spread over everything. Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy. It is enough for us to stop our ears to the sound of music, in a room where dancing is going on, for the dancers at once to appear ridiculous. How many human actions would stand a similar test? Should we not see many of them suddenly pass from grave to gay, on isolating them from the accompanying music of sentiment? To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.

This intelligence, however, must always remain in touch with other intelligences. And here is the third fact to which attention should be drawn. You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain. Still, this reverberation cannot go on forever. It can travel within as wide a circle as you please: the circle remains, nonetheless, a closed one. Our laughter is always the

laughter of a group. It may, perchance, have happened to you, when seated in a railway carriage or at *table d'hôte*, to hear travellers relating to one another stories which must have been comic to them, for they laughed heartily. Had you been one of their company, you would have laughed like them; but, as you were not, you had no desire whatever to do so. A man who was once asked why he did not weep at a sermon, when everybody else was shedding tears, replied: 'I don't belong to the parish!' What that man thought of tears would be still more true of laughter. However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary. How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! On the other hand, how often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group! It is through not understanding the importance of this double fact that the comic has been looked upon as a mere curiosity in which the mind finds amusement, and laughter itself as a strange, isolated phenomenon, without any bearing on the rest of human activity. Hence those definitions which tend to make the comic into an abstract relation between ideas: 'an intellectual contrast,' 'a palpable absurdity,' etc. – definitions which, even were they really suitable to every form of the comic, would not in the least explain why the comic makes us laugh. How, indeed, should it come about that this particular logical relation, as soon as it is perceived, contracts, expands and shakes our limbs, whilst all other relations leave the body unaffected? It is not from this point of view that we shall approach the problem. To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification. [...]

Henri Bergson, *Le rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris, 1900); trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911); reprinted, ed. Per Bregne and Guy Bennett (Copenhagen/Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 1999) 7–13.

Sigmund Freud
Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious//1905

Anyone who has at any time had occasion to enquire from the literature of aesthetics and psychology what light can be thrown on the nature of jokes and on the position they occupy will probably have to admit that jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life. Only a small number of thinkers can be named who have entered at all deeply into the problems of jokes. Among those who have discussed jokes, however, are such famous names as those of the novelist Jean Paul (Richter) and of the philosophers Theodor Vischer, Kuno Fischer and Theodor Lipps. But even with these writers the subject of jokes lies in the background, while the main interest of their inquiry is turned to the more comprehensive and attractive problem of the comic.

The first impression one derives from the literature is that it is quite impracticable to deal with jokes otherwise than in connection with the comic.

According to Lipps (*Komik und Humor*, 1898), a joke is 'something comic which is entirely subjective' – that is, something comic 'which *we* produce, which is attached to action of ours as such, to which we invariably stand in the relation of subject and never of object, not even of voluntary object' (ibid., 80). This is explained further by a remark to the effect that in general we call a joke 'any conscious and successful evocation of what is comic, whether the comic of observation or of situation' (ibid., 78).

Fischer (*Über den Witz*, 1889) illustrates the relation of jokes to the comic with the help of caricature, which in his account he places between them. The comic is concerned with the ugly in one of its manifestations: 'If it [what is ugly] is concealed, it must be uncovered in the light of the comic way of looking at things; if it is noticed only a little or scarcely at all, it must be brought forward and made obvious, so that it lies clear and open to the light of day ... In this way caricature comes about' (ibid., 45). – 'Our whole spiritual world, the intellectual kingdom of our thoughts and ideas, does not unfold before the gaze of external observation, it cannot be directly imagined pictorially and visibly; and yet it too contains its inhibitions, its weaknesses and its deformities – a wealth of ridiculous and comic contrasts. In order to emphasize these and make them accessible to aesthetic consideration, a force is necessary which is able not merely to imagine objects directly but itself to reflect on these images and to clarify them: a force that can illuminate thoughts. The only such force is *judgement*. A joke is a judgement which produces a comic contrast; it has already

played a silent part in caricature, but only in judgement does it attain its peculiar form and the free sphere of its unfolding' (ibid., 40–50).

It will be seen that the characteristic which distinguishes the joke within the class of the comic is attributed by Lipps to action, to the active behaviour of the subject, but by Fischer to its relation to its *object*, which he considers is the concealed ugliness of the world of thoughts. It is impossible to test the validity of these definitions of the joke – indeed, they are scarcely intelligible – unless they are considered in the context from which they have been torn. It would therefore be necessary to work through these authors' accounts of the comic before anything could be learnt from them about jokes. Other passages, however, show us that these same authors are able to describe essential and generally valid characteristics of the joke without any regard to its connection with the comic.

The characterization of jokes which seems best to satisfy Fischer himself is as follows: 'A joke is a *playful* judgement' (ibid., 51). By way of illustration of this, we are given an analogy: 'just as aesthetic freedom lies in the playful contemplation of things' (ibid., 50). Elsewhere (ibid., 20) the aesthetic attitude towards an object is characterized by the condition that we do not ask anything of the object, especially no satisfaction of our serious needs, but content ourselves with the enjoyment of contemplating it. The aesthetic attitude is *playful* in contrast to work. – 'It might be that from aesthetic freedom there might spring too a sort of judging released from its usual rules and regulations, which, on account of its origin, I will call a "playful judgement", and that in this concept is contained the first determinant, if not the whole formula, that will solve our problem. "Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom", wrote Jean Paul (1804)[1] "Joking is merely playing with ideas"' (ibid., 24).

A favourite definition of joking has long been the ability to find similarity between dissimilar things – that is, hidden similarities. Jean Paul has expressed this thought itself in a joking form: 'Joking is the disguised priest who weds every couple.' Vischer carries this further: 'He likes best to wed couples whose union their relatives frown upon.'[2] Vischer objects, however, that there are jokes where there is no question of comparing – no question, therefore, of finding a similarity. So he, slightly diverging from Jean Paul, defines joking as the ability to bind into a unity, with surprising rapidity, several ideas which are in fact alien to one another both in their internal content and in the nexus to which they belong. Fischer, again, stresses the fact that in a large number of joking judgements *differences* rather than similarities are found, and Lipps points out that these definitions relate to joking as an ability possessed by the joker and not to the jokes which he makes.

Other more or less interrelated ideas which have been brought up as defining

or describing jokes are: 'a contrast of ideas', 'sense in nonsense', 'bewilderment and illumination'.

Definitions such as that of Kraepelin[3] lay stress on contrasting ideas. A joke is 'the arbitrary connecting or linking, usually by means of a verbal association, of two ideas which in some way contrast with each other'. A critic like Lipps had no difficulty in showing the total inadequacy of this formula; but he does not himself exclude the factor of contrast, but merely displaces it elsewhere. 'The contrast remains, but it is not some contrast between the ideas attached to the words, but a contrast or contradiction between the meaning and the meaninglessness of the words' (Lipps, *Komik und Humor*, 87). He gives examples to show how this is to be understood. 'A contrast arises only because ... we grant its words a meaning which, again, we nevertheless cannot grant them' (ibid., 90).

If this last point is developed further, the contrast between 'sense and nonsense' becomes significant. 'What at one moment has seemed to us to have a meaning, we now see is completely meaningless. That is what, in this case, constitutes the comic process ... A remark seems to us to be a joke, if we attribute a significance to it that has psychological necessity and, as soon as we have done so, deny it again. Various things can be understood by this 'significance'. We attach *sense* to a remark and know that logically it cannot have any. We discover *truth* in it, which nevertheless, according to the laws of experience or our general habits of thought, we cannot find in it. We grant it logical or practical consequences in excess of its true content, only to deny these consequences as soon as we have clearly recognized the nature of the remark. In every instance, the psychological process which the joking remark provokes in us, and on which the feeling of the comic rests, consists in the immediate transition, from this attaching of sense, from this discovering of truth, and from this granting of consequences, to the consciousness or impression of relative nothingness' (ibid., 85).

However penetrating this discussion may sound, the question may be raised here whether the contrast between what has meaning and what is meaningless, on which the feeling of the *comic* is said to rest, also contributes to defining the concept of the *joke* in so far as it differs from that of the comic.

The factor of 'bewilderment and illumination', too, leads us deep into the problem of the relation of the joke to the comic. Kant[4] says of the comic in general that it has the remarkable characteristic of being able to deceive us only for a moment. Heymans (1896)[5] explains how the effect of a joke comes about through bewilderment being succeeded by illumination. He illustrates his meaning by a brilliant joke of Heine's, who makes one of his characters, Hirsch-Hyacinth, the poor lottery-agent, boast that the great Baron Rothschild had treated him quite as his equal – quite 'famillionairely'. Here the word that is the

vehicle of the joke appears at first simply to be a wrongly constructed word, something unintelligible, incomprehensible, puzzling. It accordingly bewilders. The comic effect is produced by the solution of this bewilderment, by understanding the word. Lipps (*Komik und Humor*, 95) adds to this that this first stage of enlightenment – that the bewildering word means this or that – is followed by a second stage, in which we realize that this meaningless word has bewildered us and has then shown us its true meaning. It is only this second illumination, this discovery that a word which is meaningless by normal linguistic usage has been responsible for the whole thing – this resolution of the problem into nothing – it is only this second illumination that produces the comic effect.

Whether the one or the other of these two views seems to us to throw more light on the question, the discussion of bewilderment and enlightenment brings us closer to a particular discovery. For if the comic effect of Heine's 'famillionairely' depends on the solution of the apparently meaningless word, the 'joke' must no doubt be ascribed to the formation of that word and to the characteristics of the word thus formed.

Another peculiarity of jokes, quite unrelated to what we have just been considering, is recognized by all the authorities as essential to them. '*Brevity* is the body and the soul of wit, it is its very self,' says Jean Paul[6] merely modifying what the old chatterbox Polonius says in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act II. Scene 2):

> Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
> And tediousness, the limbs and outward flourishes,
> I will be brief.

In this connection the account given by Lipps (*Komik und Humor*, 90) of the brevity of jokes is significant: 'A joke says what it has to say, not always in few words, but in *too* few words – that is, in words that are insufficient by strict logic or by common modes of thought and speech. It may even actually say what it has to say by not saying it.'

We have already learnt from the connection of jokes with caricature that they 'must bring forward something that is concealed or hidden' (Fischer, *Über den Witz*, 51). I lay stress on this determinant once more, because it too has more to do with the nature of jokes than with their being part of the comic.

I am well aware that these scanty extracts from the works of writers upon jokes cannot do them justice. In view of the difficulties standing in the way of my giving an unmistakably correct account of such complicated and subtle trains of thought, I cannot spare curious inquirers the labour of obtaining the information

they desire from the original sources. But I am not sure that they will come back fully satisfied. The criteria and characteristics of jokes brought up by these authors and collected above – activity, relation to the content of our thoughts, the characteristic of playful judgement, the coupling of dissimilar things, contrasting ideas, 'sense in nonsense', the succession of bewilderment and enlightenment, the bringing forward of what is hidden, and the peculiar brevity of wit – all this, it is true, seems to us at first sight so very much to the point and so easily confirmed by instances that we cannot be in any danger of underrating such views. But they are *disjecta membra*, which we should like to see combined into an organic whole. When all is said and done, they contribute to our knowledge of jokes no more than would a series of anecdotes to the description of some personality of whom we have a right to ask for a biography. We are entirely without insight into the connection that presumably exists between the separate determinants – what, for instance, the brevity of a joke can have to do with its characteristic of being a playful judgement. We need to be told, further, whether a joke must satisfy *all* these determinants in order to be a proper joke, or need only satisfy *some*, and if so which can be replaced by others and which are indispensable. We should also wish to have a grouping and classification of jokes on the basis of the characteristics considered essential. The classification that we find in the literature rests on the one hand on the technical methods employed in them (e.g. punning or play upon words) and on the other hand on the use made of them in speech (e.g. jokes used for the purposes of caricature or of characterization, or joking snubs).

We should thus find no difficulty in indicating the aims of any new attempt to throw light on jokes. To be able to count on success, we should have either to approach the work from new angles or to endeavour to penetrate further by increased attention and deeper interest. We can resolve that we will at least not fail in this last respect. It is striking with what a small number of instances of jokes recognized as such the authorities are satisfied for the purposes of their enquiries, and how each of them takes the same ones over from his predecessors. We must not shirk the duty of analysing the same instances that have already served the classical authorities on jokes. But it is our intention to turn besides to fresh material so as to obtain a broader foundation for our conclusions. It is natural then that we should choose as the subjects of our investigation examples of jokes by which we ourselves have been most struck in the course of our lives and which have made us laugh the most.

Is the subject of jokes worth so much trouble? There can, I think, be no doubt of it. Leaving on one side the personal motives which make me wish to gain an insight into the problems of jokes and which will come to light in the course of these studies, I can appeal to the fact that there is an intimate connection

between all mental happenings – a fact which guarantees that a psychological discovery even in a remote field will be of an unpredictable value in other fields. We may also bear in mind the peculiar and even fascinating charm exercised by jokes in our society. A new joke acts almost like an event of universal interest; it is passed from one person to another like the news of the latest victory. Even men of eminence who have thought it worthwhile to tell the story of their origins, of the cities and countries they have visited, and of the important people with whom they have associated, are not ashamed in their autobiographies to report their having heard some excellent joke.[7]

1 Jean Paul Richter, *Vorschule der Ästhetik* [School for Aesthetics] (1804) part II, paragraph 51.

2 [Theodor Vischer, *Ästhetik* (Aesthetics) (1846–57) vol. 1, 422.]

3 Emil Kraepelin, 'Zur Psychologie des Komischen' [On the Psychology of the Comic], *Philosophische Studien* (1885) 143.

4 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* [Critique of Judgement] (1790), part I, section 1, 54.

5 G. Heymans, 'Ästhetische Untersuchungen in Anschluss an die Lippische Theorie des Komischen' [Aesthetic Investigations after the Lippische Theory of the Comic], *Z. Psychol. Physiol. Sinnesorg* (1896).

6 Jean Paul Richter, op. cit., part II, paragraph 42.

7 Von Falke's *Memoirs*.

Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious' (1905), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. VIII (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1960); reprinted, *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 6, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 9–15.

Hugo Ball
Dada Fragments//1916–17

12 March 1916

Introduce symmetries and rhythms instead of principles. Contradict the existing world orders ...

What we are celebrating is at once a buffoonery and a requiem mass ...

12 June 1916

What we call Dada is a harlequinade made of nothingness in which all higher questions are involved, a gladiator's gesture, a play with shabby debris, an execution of postured morality and plenitude ...

The Dadaist loves the extraordinary, the absurd, even. He knows that life asserts itself in contradictions, and that his age, more than any preceding it, aims at the destruction of all generous impulses. Every kind of mask is therefore welcome to him, every play at hide and seek in which there is an inherent power of deception. The direct and the primitive appear to him in the midst of this huge anti-nature, as being the supernatural itself ...

The bankruptcy of ideas having destroyed the concept of humanity to its very innermost strata, the instincts and hereditary backgrounds are now emerging pathologically. Since no art, politics or religious faith seems adequate to dam this torrent, there remain only the *blague* and the bleeding pose ...

The Dadaist trusts more in the sincerity of events than in the wit of persons. To him persons may be had cheaply, his own person not excepted. He no longer believes in the comprehension of things from *one* point of departure, but is nevertheless convinced of the union of all things, of totality, to such an extent that he suffers from dissonances to the point of self-dissolution ...

The Dadaist fights against the death-throes and death-drunkenness of his time. Averse to every clever reticence, he cultivates the curiosity of one who experiences delight even in the most questionable forms of insubordination. He knows that this world of systems has gone to pieces, and that the age which demanded cash has organized a bargain sale of godless philosophies. Where bad conscience begins for the market-booth owners, mild laughter and mild kindliness begin for the Dadaist ...

13 June 1916

The image differentiates us. Through the image we comprehend. Whatever it may be – it is night – we hold the print of it in our hands ...

The word and the image are one. Painting and composing poetry belong together. Christ is image and word. The word and the image are crucified ...

18 June 1916

We have developed the plasticity of the word to a point which can hardly be surpassed. This result was achieved at the price of the logically constructed, rational sentence, and therefore, also, by renouncing the document (which is only possible by means of a time-robbing grouping of sentences in a logically ordered syntax). We were assisted in our efforts by the special circumstances of our age, which does not allow a real talent either to rest or ripen, forcing it to a premature test of its capacities, as well as by the emphatic elan of our group, whose members sought to surpass each other by an even greater intensification and accentuation of their platform. People may smile, if they want to; language will thank us for our zeal, even if there should not be any directly visible results. We have charged the word with forces and energies which made it possible for us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the 'word' (logos) as a magical complex of images [...]

30 March 1917

The new art is sympathetic because in an age of total disruption it has conserved the will-to-the-image; because it is inclined to force the image, even though the means and parts be antagonistic. Convention triumphs in the moralistic evaluation of the parts and details; art cannot be concerned with this. It drives toward the in-dwelling, all-connecting life nerve; it is indifferent to external resistance. One might also say: morals are withdrawn from convention, and utilized for the sole purpose of sharpening the senses of measure and weight ...

18 April 1917

Perhaps the art which we are seeking is the key to every former art: a salomonic key that will open all mysteries.

23 May 1917

Dadaism – a mask play, a burst of laughter? And behind it, a synthesis of the romantic, dandyistic and daemonistic theories of the nineteenth century. [...]

Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1927), trans. Eugene Jolas, in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951); new edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989) 51–4.

Hannah Höch
The Painter//*c.* 1920

Once upon a time there was a painter. He wasn't called Dribble, or anything like that, as he might have been in earlier times. It was around 1920 – the painter was a modern painter – so his name was Heavenlykingdom. Unlike the real painters of earlier times, he was not asked to work only with brush and palette. This was his wife's fault: she thwarted the boundless flight of his genius. At least four times in four years, he was forced to wash dishes – the kitchen dishes. The first time, actually, there had been a pressing reason. She was giving birth to the baby Heavenlykingdom. The other three times had not seemed absolutely necessary to Heavenlykingdom, Sr. But he wanted to keep the peace – because after all God had created the male to do just that – and so had no choice but to obey her Xanthippian demand. Yet the matter continued to weigh on him. He felt degraded as a man and as a painter under its dark shadow. On the days of crisis he would suffer nightmares. He kept seeing Michelangelo washing up the cups. He knew enough about psychoanalysis to confront the woman with the truth that such demands always arise out of the desire to dominate, no matter what other reasons there might be. As a modern person he felt that in theory he had to agree with the equality of the sexes – still, if one looked closely at the situation one could not – and then, especially in your own house – her demand seemed to him comparable to an enslavement of his soul ...

Now one day he began to paint a picture. A dark force moved him, because he was full of dark forces. He wanted to represent, to cube really, the essential likeness between the nature of chives and the female soul. In theory the whole problem was solved. He saw the emptiness that fills both these objects precisely and with total intellectual clarity. There is more to genius than intellect, however, and, when he connected the herb's snake-like form with the previously mentioned soul, his unusually developed instinct gave him mystical knowledge. No genius would deny a certain complement of mysticism.

Our Heavenlykingdom was deeply wounded by something he had also heard about from his fellow men: although these little women are often really tiny, they can still not be shaped and modelled into the form one needs for physical and psychic comfort. Had he been a writer, he would have been compelled to enrich literature with a ponderous work on the theme 'when you go to Woman, do not forget the whip'. But under the circumstances that you know about now, his painting was to be called 'The Chive and the Female Soul: A Comparison'. I think it was already announced for exhibition, while the canvas still shone

blankly, spotlessly receptive. One has to do everything in good time. Gotthold – that was Heavenlykingdom's first name – suffered under the female soul in the totality of his manhood. And we all need to confront what makes us suffer. No wonder, then, that Heavenlykingdom (secretly) began to think of himself as on a level with a redeemer – let's admit it, with Christ – because of the likeness he had discovered.

But you have to imagine the painting properly – as it were, a scientifically dissected representation – the female soul, totally clear in a segmented cubist painting – so that everyone able to adopt an abstract point of view could read, there she is, that's her innermost being. And next to that the analogy and parallel: chives. Wouldn't everyone see it as clear as day? We also know that when we recognize what ails us, we are cured. So what perspectives would open up with the creation of this painting? Wouldn't the most burning question of our time be solved? Yet we have had to admit too often that theory and practice don't coincide. He had worked on his picture for two years and two days already. He laboured and laboured mightily, unable to advance beyond the chives. In the first place, the painting remained green. As soon as he used a different colour, the disturbance that resulted was so great that he covered it with green again. For a while he thought that the treacherous female soul (treachery no doubt its most important element alongside emptiness) could appear as a cubist lemon-yellow spiral amongst the green – a shape more or less like one of those sofa-springs that winds crookedly upward. But alas, painting is colour as well as form. The yellow refused to meld with the massive green of his chive allegory. He had no choice but to remove the winding spiral. A painter must remain enough of an aesthete to refuse to paint badly for the sake of his idea. The same thing happened with the composition. He tried and tried, even falling into trances, but nothing beyond the dull repetitive up-and-down of the chive motif would develop. Over and over again he hoped to fix the damnable female soul in a fluted doughnut-shape. But his eye remained objective and told him the truth without pity: this fretwork muddies the powerful melody of the chive movement. His most intimate friend, looking at the painting, remarked that it had the kind of power that liberated itself in an overwhelming sense of bore... No, that's not what he said. He said, liberates itself in sameness. Then he decided with a heavy heart to abandon the female soul and to devote himself only to chives from now on.

A month later, and the President, who has just opened the exhibition, is propelling his presidential belly around the myriad chambers that display the works of all the painters of the realm. Suddenly he stops. His face displays emotion. His entourage observes closely. He begins to speak. 'A masterpiece', he stammers. 'Has my administration ever produced anything better?' He

questioned everyone around him. All that green – what can it remind me of? His adjutant (unless an assistant goes by another name in a Republic) suggested helpfully, 'Of the revolution? Of the revolution, my President?'

'Absolutely right. The revolution.'

They say the State bought the painting for the National Gallery. They say that when its creator was asked for the title, he omitted mention of the chives and proudly called it 'The Female Soul'. They say Gotthold Heavenlykingdom will be the next candidate for a Nobel Prize.

Hannah Höch, 'Der Maler', Berlin, *c.* 1920; reprinted in *Hannah Höch: Eine Lebens-Collage*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Archiv-Edition, 1989) 747–9; trans. Anne Halley, in Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) 216–18.

Francis Picabia
Five-Minute Intermission//1920

I had a Swiss friend named Jacques Dingue[1] who lived in Peru at an altitude of 13,000 feet. He'd left several years before to explore those regions, and while there he had succumbed to the charms of a strange Indian woman, whose refusal to grant her favours had driven him mad. He grew progressively weaker, no longer even leaving the hut where he'd gone to live. A Peruvian doctor, who had accompanied him there, treated him in the vain hope of curing a dementia praecox that he deemed incurable!

One night, a flu epidemic swooped down on the small tribe of Indians who were sheltering Jacques Dingue. Everyone was stricken without exception and, of two hundred natives, 178 died in just a few days. The terrified doctor had quickly hightailed it back to Lima ... My friend, too, was infected with this terrible disease, immobilized by fever.

Now, all the dead Indians owned one or several dogs, which soon had no other means of surviving but to eat their masters; they shredded the corpses, and one of them carried into Dingue's hut the head of the Indian woman with whom he was in love ... He recognized her at once and no doubt experienced an intense inner commotion, for he was suddenly cured of both his madness and his fever. His strength restored, he took the woman's head from the dog's mouth and amused himself by tossing it to the other side of the room, commanding the animal to fetch and bring it back. Three times the game began anew, with the dog carrying the head back with the nose between its teeth; but on the third toss, Jacques Dingue having thrown it a bit too hard, the head smashed against the wall. To his great delight, the handball player noticed that the brain flying out of it contained but a single circumvolution and could easily have been mistaken for a pair of buttocks!

1 A rough translation of this name would be 'Jack Wacko'. [trans.]

Francis Picabia, 'Entr'acte de cinq minutes', from *Jésus-Christ Rastaquouère* (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1920); text reprinted in André Breton, ed., *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1940); trans. Mark Polizzotti, *Anthology of Black Humour* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997) 239–40.

Funny-Guy
"391"[1]//1921

Cubism was invented
by Picasso, it's become
a Parisian product.
Dadaism was invented
by Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia
– Huelsembeck[2] or Tzara found the word Dada
– it has become Parisian and Berliner wit.
Parisian wit, which mustn't be confused
with the wit of Paris, consists of fantasies
both external and spiritual; it lives in people to whom
'one doesn't do it!' and possesses the secret of transforming
chicory into chicory, spinach into spinach and shit
into poo. Obviously shit and poo are the same thing
but spraying a little opoponax[3] on poo transforms
this poo into profiteroles, that Madame the Countess of Q...
is happy to eat and offer to her chosen guests.
These chosen guests are: .....
..... and possibly M. André Gide who doesn't eat profiteroles
but nonchalantly slips them into his pocket where he forgets all about them
and they soon become poo again illustrated by Roger de le Fresnaye.

1 *391* was the review edited by Francis Picabia since 1917, which supported the international Dada movement until his disenchantment with Parisian Dada in 1921. *Le Pilhaou-Thibaou* was a special illustrated supplement of *391*. Picabia described himself as 'funny guy' in a number of his poems and statements of this period.

2 [sic]. Richard Huelsenbeck (1892–1974).

3 The resin of the plant Opopanax chironium, known as sweet myrrh and used for incense.

'Funny-Guy', "391", *Le Pilhaou-Thibaou* (Paris, 10 July 1921); trans. Susan de Muth, in *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Dawn Adès (London: Tate Publishing and the AHRC Research Centre for Surrealism and its Legacies, 2006) 134.

Pablo Picasso
Poem//1935

Young girl nicely dressed in a tan coat with violent facings 150,000–300–22–95 centimes calico ensemble corrected and revised by allusion to ermine fur 143–60–32 an open bra, the edges of the wound held back spread by hand pullies making the sign of the cross flavoured with reblochon cheese 1,300–75–03–49–317,000–25 centimes openings openwork daylight added one day out of two embedded on the skin by shivers kept alert by the mortal silence of the colour lure Lola de Valence type 103 plus languorous gazes 310–313 plus 3,000,000–80 francs–15 centimes for a glance forgotten on the dresser – penalties incurred during the game – throwing the discus between the legs by a succession of facts which for no reason manage to make themselves a nest and transform themselves in some cases into the reasonable image of the cup 380–11 plus expenses but the drawing so academic size of the whole story from his birth to this morning doesn't even write if they're walking on fingers that point to the exit but spits out his bouquet with the tumbler that the odour formed by regiments and parading flag at the head of the line that if the tickle of desire can't find a good place for transforming a sardine into a shark the shopping list lengthens only from this moment without the inevitable stop at the table at lunchtime so to write sitting down amid so many hyperboles mixed with cheese and tomato.

Pablo Picasso, Poem (1935), included in André Breton, ed., *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1940); trans. Mark Polizzotti, *Anthology of Black Humour* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997) 252.

Leonora Carrington
The Debutante//1939

When I was a debutante, I often went to the zoo. I went so often that I knew the animals better than I knew girls of my own age. Indeed it was in order to get away from people that I found myself at the zoo every day. The animal I got to know best was a young hyena. She knew me too. She was very intelligent. I taught her French, and she, in return, taught me her language. In this way we passed many pleasant hours.

My mother was arranging a ball in my honour on the first of May. During this time I was in a state of great distress for whole nights. I've always detested balls, especially when they are given in my honour.

On the morning of the first of May 1934, very early, I went to visit the hyena.

'What a bloody nuisance', I said to her. 'I've got to go to my ball tonight.'

'You're very lucky', she said. 'I'd love to go. I don't know how to dance, but at least I could make small talk.'

'There'll be a great many different things to eat', I told her. 'I've seen truckloads of food delivered to our house.'

'And you're complaining', replied the hyena, disgusted. 'Just think of me, I eat once a day, and you can't imagine what a heap of bloody rubbish I'm given.'

I had an audacious idea, and I almost laughed. 'All you have to do is to go instead of me!'

'We don't resemble each other enough, otherwise I'd gladly go', said the hyena rather sadly.

'Listen', I said. 'No one sees too well in the evening light. If you disguise yourself, nobody will notice you in the crowd. Besides, we're practically the same size. You're my only friend, I beg you to do this for me.'

She thought this over, and I knew that she really wanted to accept.

'Done', she said all of a sudden.

There weren't many keepers about, it was so early in the morning. I opened the cage quickly, and in a very few moments we were out in the street. I hailed a taxi; at home, everybody was still in bed. In my room I brought out the dress I was to wear that evening. It was a little long, and the hyena found it difficult to walk in my high-heeled shoes. I found some gloves to hide her hands, which were too hairy to look like mine. By the time the sun was shining into my room, she was able to make her way around the room several times, walking more or less upright. We were so busy that my mother almost opened the door to say good morning before the hyena had hidden under my bed.

'There's a bad smell in your room, my mother said, opening the window. 'You must have a scented bath before tonight, with my new bath salts.'

'Certainly', I said.

She didn't stay long. I think the smell was too much for her.

'Don't be late for breakfast', she said and left the room.

The greatest difficulty was to find a way of disguising the hyena's face. We spent hours and hours looking for a way, but she always rejected my suggestions. At last she said, 'I think I've found the answer. Have you got a maid?'

'Yes', I said, puzzled.

'There you are then. Ring for your maid, and when she comes in we'll pounce upon her and tear off her face. I'll wear her face tonight instead of mine.'

'It's not practical', I said. 'She'll probably die if she hasn't got a face. Somebody will certainly find the corpse, and we'll be put in prison.'

'I'm hungry enough to eat her', the hyena replied.

'And the bones?'

'As well', she said. 'So, it's on?'

'Only if you promise to kill her before tearing off her face. It'll hurt her too much otherwise.'

'All right. It's all the same to me.'

Not without a certain amount of nervousness I rang for Mary, my maid. I certainly wouldn't have done it if I didn't hate having to go to a ball so much. When Mary came in I turned to the wall so as not to see. I must admit it didn't take long. A brief cry, and it was over. While the hyena was eating, I looked out of the window. A few minutes later she said, 'I can't eat any more. Her two feet are left over still, but if you have a little bag, I'll eat them later in the day.'

'You'll find a bag embroidered with fleurs-de-lis in the cupboard. Empty out the handkerchiefs you'll find inside, and take it.' She did as I suggested. Then she said, 'Turn round now and look how beautiful I am.'

In front of the mirror, the hyena was admiring herself in Mary's face. She had nibbled very neatly all around the face so that what was left was exactly what was needed.

'You've certainly done that very well', I said.

Towards evening, when the hyena was all dressed up, she declared, 'I really feel in tip-top form. I have a feeling that I shall be a great success this evening.'

When we had heard the music from downstairs for quite some time, I said to her, 'Go on down now, and remember, don't stand next to my mother. She's bound to realize that it isn't me. Apart from her I don't know anybody. Best of luck.' I kissed her as I left her, but she did smell very strong.

Night fell. Tired by the day's emotions, I took a book and sat down by the open window, giving myself up to peace and quiet. I remember that I was

reading *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. About an hour later, I noticed the first signs of trouble. A bat flew in at the window, uttering little cries. I am terribly afraid of bats. I hid behind a chair, my teeth chattering. I had hardly gone down on my knees when the sound of beating wings was overcome by a great noise at my door. My mother entered, pale with rage.

'We'd just sat down at table' she said, 'when that thing sitting in your place got up and shouted, 'So I smell a bit strong, what? Well, I don't eat cakes!' Whereupon it tore off its face and ate it. And with one great bound, disappeared through the window.

Leonora Carrington, 'La Debutante', from *La Dame Ovale* (Paris: GLM, 1939); reprinted in the expanded edition of *L'Anthologie de l'humour noir*, ed. André Breton (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1966); text trans. Katherine Talbot and Marina Warner, in *Anthology of Black Humour*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997) 337–40.

André Breton
Lightning Rod//1940

The preface could be called 'the lightning rod'.
—Lichtenberg

'For there to be comedy, that is, emanation, explosion, comic release', said Baudelaire, 'there must be ...'

Emanation, explosion: it is startling to find the same two words linked in Rimbaud, and this in the heart of a poem that is as prodigal in black humour as can be (it is, in fact, the last poem we have of his, one in which his 'expression as buffoonish and strange as possible' reemerges, supreme and extremely condensed, from efforts that aimed first at its affirmation, then at its negation):

Dream

In the barracks stomachs grumble –
How true .....
Emanations, explosions,
An engineer: I'm the gruyere!
.....

Chance encounter, involuntary recall, direct quotation? To decide once and for all, we would have to take the exegesis of this poem – the most difficult in the French language – rather far, but this exegesis has not even begun. Such a verbal coincidence is nonetheless significant in and of itself. It reveals in both poets a shared concern with the atmospheric conditions, so to speak, in which the mysterious exchange of humorous pleasure between individuals can occur – an exchange to which, over the past century and a half, a rising price has been attached, which today makes it the basis of the only intellectual commerce that can be considered high luxury.

Given the specific requirements of the modern sensibility, it is increasingly doubtful that any poetic, artistic or scientific work, any philosophical or social system that does not contain *this kind* of humour will not leave a great deal to be desired, will not be condemned more or less rapidly to perish. The value we are dealing with here is not only in ascendancy over all others, but is even capable of subsuming them, to the point where a great number of these values will lose the universal respect they now enjoy. We are touching upon a burning subject;

we are headed straight into a land of fire; the gale winds of passion are alternately with us and against us from the moment we consider lifting the veil from this type of humour, whose manifest products we have nonetheless managed to isolate, with a unique satisfaction, in literature, art and life. Indeed, we have the sense – if only obscurely – of a hierarchy in which the total possession of humour would assure man the highest rung; but to this very degree, any global definition of humour eludes us, and will probably continue to elude us for some time to come, in virtue of the principle that 'man naturally tends to deify what is at the limit of his understanding'. Just as 'high initiation (which only a few elite spirits have reached), as the ultimate postulate of High Science, hardly teaches us how to reason with Divinity'[1] (the High Kabbalah, reduction of High Science to an earthly level, is jealously kept secret by the initiates), there can be no question of explaining humour and making it serve didactic ends. One might just as well try to extract a moral for living from suicide. 'There is nothing,' it has been said, 'that intelligent humour cannot resolve in gales of laughter, not even the void ... Laughter, as one of humanity's most sumptuous extravagances, even to the point of debauchery, stands at the lip of the void, offers us the void as a pledge.'[2] We can imagine the advantage that humour would be liable to take of its very definition, and especially of this definition.

Under these conditions, we shouldn't wonder that the various surveys on the subject have so far yielded only the most paltry results. For one of them, poorly executed in the November 1921 issue of *Aventure*, Paul Valéry wrote: 'The word *humour* cannot be translated. If it could, the French would not employ it [in its English form]. But employ it they do, precisely because of the indeterminacy that they read into it, which makes it a very useful word when trying to account for taste. Every statement in which it figures alters its meaning, so that this very meaning is rigorously no more than the statistical totality of all the sentences that contain it, or that eventually will contain it.' In the final analysis, this stance of total reticence is still preferable to the verbosity demonstrated by Mr Aragon, who in his *Treatise on Style* seems to have taken it into his head to exhaust the subject (one might say cloud the issue); but humour was not so forgiving and, subsequently, I can think of no one whom it has abandoned more radically. 'You want the rest of humour's anatomical parts? All right, if you look at that fellow who is raising his hand, Suh? to ask permission to speak, you've got the head of hair. The eyes: two holes for mirrors. The ears: shooting lodges. The right hand called symmetry represents the law courts, the left hand is the arm of a one-armed person missing the right ... Humour is what soup, chickens and symphony orchestras lack. On the other hand, road pavers, elevators and crush hats have it ... It has been pointed out in kitchen utensils, it has been known to appear in bad taste, and it has its winter quarters in fashion ... Where is it

running to? To the optical effect. Its home? The Petit Saint-Thomas. Its favourite writers? A certain Binet-Valmer. Its weakness? The sun like a fried egg in the evening sky. It does not scorn adopting a serious tone. All in all, it bears a strong resemblance to the foresight of a rifle', etc. A good grade-A senior paper, which takes this theme as it might any other, and which has only an *external* view of humour. Once again, all this juggling merely begs the question. On the other hand, the subject has been handled with rare precision by Leon Pierre-Quint, who in *Le Comte de Lautréamont et Dieu* presents humour as a way of affirming, above and beyond 'the absolute revolt of adolescence and the internal revolt of adulthood', a *superior revolt of the mind.*

For there to be humour ... The problem remains posed. Still, we can credit Hegel with having made humour take a giant step forward into the domain of knowledge when he raised it to the concept of *objective humour.* 'The fundamental principle of Romantic art', he said, 'is the concentration of the soul upon itself. On finding that the external world does not perfectly respond to its innermost nature, the soul turns away from it. This opposition was developed in the period of Romantic art, to the point where we have seen interest be paid sometimes to the accidents of the external world, sometimes to the whims of personality. But now if that interest goes so far as to absorb the mind in external contemplation, and if at the same time humour, while maintaining its subjective and reflective character, lets itself be captivated by the object and its real form, we obtain in this penetration a *humour* that is in a certain sense *objective.*' Elsewhere I stated that the black sphinx of *objective humour* could not avoid meeting, on the dust-clouded road of the future, the white sphinx of *objective chance*, and that all subsequent human creation would be the fruit of their embrace.[3]

Let us note in passing that the position Hegel assigns the various arts (poetry leads them all as the only *universal* art; it patterns their behaviour on its own, in so far as it is the only art that can represent the *successive situations* of life) suffices to explain why the kind of humour at issue here began appearing in poetry much earlier than it did in painting, for example. Satiric and moralizing intentions exert a degrading influence on almost every work of the past that in some way has been inspired by that kind of humour, threatening to push these works into caricature. At most, we would be tempted to make an occasional exception for Hogarth or Goya, and to reserve judgment about others in whose work humour can be sensed but at best remains hypothetical – such as in the quasi-totality of Seurat's painted opus. It would seem that, in visual art, we must consider the triumph of humour in its pure and manifest state a much more recent phenomenon, and recognize as its first practitioner of genius the Mexican artist Jose Guadalupe Posada. In his admirable 'popular' style woodcuts, Posada brought to life all the upheavals of the 1910 revolution (the ghosts of Villa and

HUMOUR IS WHAT

SOUP

CHICKENS

AND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRAS LACK

ON THE OTHER HAND

ROAD PAVERS

ELEVATORS

AND CRUSH HATS HAVE IT ... IT HAS BEEN POINTED OUT IN

KITCHEN UTENSILS

IT HAS BEEN KNOWN TO APPEAR IN

BAD TASTE

AND IT HAS ITS WINTER QUARTERS IN FASHION

Louis Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, 1928

Fierro should be studied alongside these images, for a possible passage from speculative humour to action – Mexico, moreover, with its splendid funeral toys, stands as the chosen land of black humour). Since then, this kind of humour has acted in painting as if it were on conquered territory. Its black grass ceaselessly ripples wherever the horse of Max Ernst, 'the Bride of the Wind', has passed. If we limit ourselves to books, there is in this regard nothing more accomplished, more exemplary than his three 'collage' novels: *The Hundred Headless Woman*, *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*, and *Une Semaine de bonté, ou les Sept Eléments capitaux* [*A Week of Goodness, or the Seven Deadly Elements*].

Cinema, in so far as it not only, like poetry, represents the successive stages of life, but also claims to show the passage from one stage to the next, and in so far as it is forced to present extreme situations to move us, had to encounter humour almost from the start. The early comedies of Mack Sennett, certain films of Chaplin's *(The Adventurer, The Pilgrim)*, and the unforgettable 'Fatty' Arbuckle and 'Fuzzy' (Al St John) command the line that should by rights lead to the midnight sunbursts that are *Million Dollar Legs* and *Animal Crackers*, and to those excursions to the bottom of the mental grotto – Fingal's Cave as much as Pozzuoli's crater – that are Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Âge d'or*, by way of Picabia's *Entr'acte*.

'It is now time', says Freud, 'to acquaint ourselves with some of the characteristics of humour. Like wit and the comic, humour has in it a *liberating* element. But it has also *something fine and elevating*, which is lacking in the other two ways of deriving pleasure from intellectual activity. Obviously, what is fine about it is the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure.' Freud gives this common, but adequate, example: the condemned man being led to the gallows on a Monday who observes, 'What a way to start the week!' We know that at the end of his analysis of humour, he sees it as a mode of thought that aims at saving itself the *expenditure of feeling* required by pain. 'Without quite knowing why, we attribute to this less intensive pleasure a high value: we feel it to have a peculiarly liberating and elevating effect.' According to him, the secret of the humorous attitude would rest on the ability that certain individuals have, in cases of serious alarm, to displace the psychic accent away from the *ego* and onto the *superego*, the latter being genetically conceived as heir to the parental function ('it often holds the *ego* in strict subordination, and still actually treats it as the parents – or the father – treated the child in his early years'). I thought it might be interesting to confront this thesis with a certain number of individual attitudes that reveal humour, and with some texts in which this humour has

been given its highest degree of literary expression. In order to reduce them to a common, fundamental idea, I thought it best to employ Freudian terminology in my account, without this dispelling the reservations caused by Freud's necessarily artificial distinction between the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego*.

I will not deny a considerable partiality in the choice of texts, all the more so in that such a frame of mind seems the only one appropriate to the subject at hand. My greatest fear in this case, my only cause for regret, would be not to have proven exacting enough. To take part in the black tournament of humour, one must in fact have weathered many eliminations. Black humour is hemmed in by too many things, including stupidity, skeptical sarcasm, light-hearted jokes (the list is long). But it is the mortal enemy of sentimentality, which seems to lie perpetually in wait – sentimentality that always appears against a blue background – and of a certain short-lived whimsy, which too often passes itself off as poetry, vainly persists in inflicting its outmoded artifices on the mind, and no doubt has little time left in which to lift toward the sun, from amid the poppy seeds, its crowned crane's head.

1 Armand Petitjean, *Imagination et réalisation* (Paris, 1936).

2 Pierre Piobb, *Les Mystères des dieux* (Paris, 1909).

3 'Surrealist Situation of the Object' (1935) [reprinted in Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969)].

André Breton, 'Paratonerre' [Lightning Rod] (1939), *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1940); trans. Mark Polizzotti, *Anthology of Black Humour* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997) xiii–xix.

Strangles strangers.

Sacristy, crassity. [...]

My niece is cold because my knees are cold.

Among our articles of lazy hardware we recommend a faucet which stops dripping when nobody is listening to it. [...]

Physics of luggage:
Calculate the difference between the volumes of air displaced by a clean shirt (ironed and folded) and by the same shirt when dirty.

Incest, or familial passion.

... An incesticide must sleep with his 'relative' before killing her; bugging required.

Adjustment of the coincidence of objects or parts of objects; the hierarchy of this kind of adjustment is in direct ratio to the 'disparate'.

Oblong dress, exclusively designed for ladies suffering from the hiccups.

A full box of wooden matches is lighter than an opened box because it doesn't make any noise.

Daily lady will dally with Daily Mail.

Should one react against the laziness of railway tracks between the passage of two trains?

Transformer intended to use up wasted bits of energy, such as:
excessive pressure on electric buzzers;
the exhalation of cigarette smoke;
the growing of hair, body hair, and nails;

the fall of urine and excrement;
movements of fear, astonishment, boredom, and anger;
laughter;
the dripping of tears;
demonstrative motions of the hands and feet, tics;
sour looks;
arms dropping to one's side;
stretching, yawning, sneezing;
spitting normally and spitting blood;
vomiting;
ejaculating;
unwanted hair, tufts;
the sounds of nose-blowing and snoring;
fainting;
whistling, singing;
sighing, etc.

Anemic cinema.

Abominable abdominal furs.

Litany of the scents:
I believe the tips of her breasts smell.
Shut up, the tips of your breasts smell.
Why do the tips of your breasts smell?
I'd like the tips of my breasts to smell.

Oh! do shit again! ...
Oh! douche it again! ...

Ruined, urined.

Litter erasure.

Marcel Duchamp, plays on words, various dates, collected in André Breton, ed., *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1940); texts trans. Ron Padgett, Elmer Peterson, Mark Polizzotti, Roger Shattuck and Trevor Winkfield, *Anthology of Black Humour*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997) 280–2.

Sometimes I think that extreme beauty must be absolutely humourless. But then I think of Marilyn Monroe and she had the best funny lines. She might have been a lot of fun if she'd found the right comedy niche. We might be laughing at skits on *The Marilyn Monroe Show* today

Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*, 1975

POP GOES THE WEASEL

Kristine Stiles
Fluxus Performance and Humour//1995

Allan Kaprow was one of the artists who initially responded to the Fluxus 'something' and then distanced himself from it. In a 1964 radio broadcast he shared with George Brecht entitled 'Happenings and Events', Kaprow revealed his skepticism:

> The group, with few exceptions, that associates itself with Fluxus is irresponsible. It is my impression that many people just simply goof-off ... [and] its effect is to say ... 'You guys are doing important things, but look, we are even more important doing unimportant things'.[1]

Kaprow's lack of appreciation at the time for one of the principal virtues of Fluxus is instructive. 'Goofing-off' is a quality that Fluxus artists certainly honed in performance, and while Kaprow had meant the term to be disparaging, there are positive qualities to goofing-off.

Goofing-off requires developing a fine-tuned sense of what it means to pause long enough and distance oneself far enough from worldly objects and events to recognize their illusory dimension and thereby reinvest the world with wonder. In order to really goof-off well, the instrumental sense of purpose deeply ingrained in Western ego and epistemology must be abandoned. Although they seldom identified with Beat Generation poets, Fluxus artists' ability to goof-off might find support in works like Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958),[2] in which narratives of Beat Generation activities and insights are mixed with contemplations on dharma-nature (substance, principle and truth). Robert Filliou's manifesto 'GOOD-FOR-NOTHING-GOOD-AT-EVERYTHING', published in his *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, restates in Fluxus-style humour the concept of a dharma:

> I create because I know how. I know how good-for-nothing I am, that is.
> Art, as communication, is the contact between the good-for-nothing
> in one and the good-for-nothing in others.
> Art, as creation, is easy in the same sense as being god is easy.
> God is your perfect good-for-nothing.
> The world of creation being the good-for-nothing world, it belongs
> to anyone with creativeness, that is to say anyone claiming his natural
> birth gift: good-for-nothingness.[3]

Filliou's humour reflects his legendary lack of pretentiousness, ability to empathize, sense of discovery, and gentle compassion for human fallibility, a self-forgiveness and acceptance of others that represents the best in the reciprocal acts of teaching and learning fundamental to Fluxus performance.

Filliou's creative 'good-for-nothingness' relates to an aspect of goofing-off that was, and remains, a structural part of Henry Flynt's aesthetic theory. Coining the term *veramusement* (a combination of the Latin *veritas* and English *amusement*) and later, in 1963, *brend* to name his theory of pure subjective enjoyment unrestrained by convention, objective standards or intersubjective value, Flynt proposed an art that affirmed an individual's 'just-likings':

> You just like it as you do it ... These ... should be referred to as your just-likings ... These just-likings are your 'brend'.[4]

While Flynt was absolutely earnest in his articulation of brend, the very term, employed in the service of aesthetics, is hilarious. Particularly in a society thoroughly indoctrinated with prescribed cultural values, the idea of affirming personal idiosyncrasies, that could include goofing-off, seems irresponsible and ridiculous – but liberating.

Flynt made the following recommendations for ways to arrive at one's individual brend:

> Consider the whole of your life, what you already do, all your doings. Now please *exclude* everything which is naturally physiologically necessary (or harmful) such as breathing and sleeping (or breaking an arm). From what remains *exclude* everything which is *for the satisfaction of a social demand*, a very large area which includes foremost your job, but also care of children, being polite, voting, your haircut, and much else. From what remains *exclude* everything which is an agency, a '*means*', another very large area which overlaps with others to be excluded. From what remains, *exclude* everything which involves competition. In what remains *concentrate on everything done entirely because you just like it as you do it.* (Flynt's emphasis) [5]

Flynt asserted 'just-likings' as themselves defensible and performable cultural forms, and he devised activities through which to heighten them.[6] His own brend consisted of studying, writing, lecturing, and engaging in political activities that sought to aestheticize personal and intimate performance practices. All of these activities became, in effect, his art: its principal artistic materials were concepts and language utilized in the performative context of lecture-forums, and it represented individual research valued as a quality for itself.

I have lingered long on the earnest values of goofing-off because the ability to balance self-abandon and self-awareness in self-oriented activity is part of the ontology of Fluxus performance. Such a delicate tension holds the potential to increase personal growth and at the same time recognizes that the self belongs to institutions and phenomena larger than that self. But another quality of goofing-off that is equally apparent in Fluxus performance – indeed, one of its salient features – is that particular brand of Fluxus humour reflected in the quirky, funny quality of these performances. The impulse to laugh *at* Fluxus represents the artists' ability to invite laughter *with* them. The performances are full of the unadulterated foolery, abandon, nonsense and unmitigated silliness that distinguishes human intelligence and endows the entity 'Fluxus' with its overriding quality of humanity; for these events merely exaggerate the conceptual paradoxes and contradictory behaviours that guide and determine life.

Fluxus humour can be unpredictable, has the appearance of chaos, is unpretentious and nonconformist, and often very dry. 'There's Music-and Eggs-in the Air!', Richard O'Regan's review of one of the first Fluxus concerts, offers a marvelous sense of a Fluxus festival of events:

> The opening work that night was 'Danger Music No. 2' by a New Yorker, Dick Higgins. Higgins entered and took a bow. He sat himself beside a bucket. His wife, Alison Knowles, appeared with a pair of scissors. She began to cut his hair. Higgins looked content. After 15 minutes, the audience grew restless. Paper airplanes circled from the back row. Conversation took over. 'I'm sure I don't know what it is all about or what it is supposed to mean', commented one of Germany's well-known abstract painters. 'I tell you Higgins is performing a rare work', said Emmett Williams, a part-time performer and composer of this Very New Music living in Germany 'He could play a Chopin étude every night. But Higgins can't give another performance like this for six months, until his hair grows back'. 'But there is no music', we protested naïvely 'Is this parody or protest?' 'You have to understand', said George Maciunas, the American promoter of the festival, 'that in new music the audible and the visible overlap. This is what is called action music'. [7]

Photographs of Fluxus events capture the momentary incongruity and contradiction of the performances that is their hallmark. The synchronic presentation of information in a photographic representation, as in painting, overrides any sense of developmental sequence and narrative description expected from action and delivers the essentially visual aspect of a Fluxus performance. A man in a business suit pours water over his head (Nam June Paik, *Simple*, 1962); a man, also dressed in formal attire, nails down the keys of a piano (George Maciunas, *Piano Piece No. 13 for Nam June Paik* [a.k.a. *Carpenter's Piano*

Piece], 1964); a woman wearing glasses and dressed in the most conventional conservative street-wear – a white blouse, modest skirt, flat shoes, dark stockings – parodies burlesque by methodically taking off pair after pair of her underpants before an audience (Alison Knowles in Nam June Paik's *Serenade for Alison*, 1962); a man in a suit, overcoat and bowler hat brushes his teeth after eating food at a table set up on the sidewalk (Ben Vautier, *Mystery Food*, 1963).

These events all signify through discord, but it is a dissonance neither of violence nor threat – although both of these can be found within the ranks of Fluxus performance as well. The pleasurable aspect of the inharmonious derives from the way Fluxus events depart from convention. Performers appear oblivious to the inappropriate use of the body or its objects, to their own apparent ineptitude, and to the incongruity and jumbling of seemingly unconventional behaviours. This ostensible inability to do or to get things right is the source of amusement and release. It is also the vehicle by which the deepest pleasure and sense of gratification is communicated. For these odd physical manifestations and peculiar mental constructions stretch and unfetter the imagination.

Fluxus humour resides in these states of the unfit. So it was appropriate that Fluxus-associated artists Daniel Spoerri and Robert Filliou organized an event in London from late October to early November 1962 called the Festival of Misfits. The handbill to the exhibition described the 'Misfits' according to each artist's caricaturized identity: Arthur Koepcke was a 'German professional revolutionist', Benjamin Patterson a 'captured alive Negro', Emmett Williams 'the Pole with the elephant memory', Spoerri simply a 'Romanian adventurer', Ben Vautier 'God's broker', Filliou a 'one-eyed good-for-nothing Huguenot', Per Olof Ultveldt 'the red-faced strongman from Sweden', Robin Page a 'Yukon lumberjack', and Gustav Metzger an 'escaped Jew'.[8] Metzger eventually was disinvited and excluded. As Robin Page explained, 'Metzger was so misfit, he misfit the Misfits'.[9] Metzger's travesty? He had proposed to exhibit two copies (front and back) of the *Daily Express*, a London newspaper, each consecutive day of the show. This proposal to hang the daily newspapers would have placed the Misfits in an important relationship to actual world events (on opening day of the festival the front page announced 'Kennedy: We Bar Ships of *All* Nations Ferrying Arms to Castro CUBA BLOCKADE') and confronted the Fluxus context with politics in real time.

Robin Page's actions were notorious at the Festival of Misfits-and overflowing with Fluxus humor. He turned a corner of Victor Musgrave's Gallery One into a *Suicide Room* filled with all the knives, razor blades, and poisons normally found in the home. There the public was encouraged to interact and a sign read: 'Kill yourself or else stop beefing and get on and enjoy life'. Page also performed *Block Guitar Piece*, in which he kicked a guitar off the stage at the

Institute of Contemporary Arts, down the aisle and out of the building, around the block – with his audience in pursuit – and returned to kick what remained of the instrument back onto the stage. In part, this action reflects destructive tendencies in performances such as Paik's *One for Violin Solo* (circa 1962), Philip Corner's *Piano Activities* (circa 1962), and in Metzger's 1959 theory of 'Auto-Destructive Art', in which Page had a keen interest. Together with Metzger's lectures on Auto-Destructive Art during this period, such performances directly anticipated the ritual destruction of musical instruments that was institutionalized at the frenzied climax of rock 'n' roll performances by The Who several years later.[10] But Page's action was also the bawdy, macho act of a 'lumberjack' – a class-bound action that clashed with the aristocratic pretence of 'fine art', delicate instruments, and their inherited practices and origins in Baroque salons. Such undermining of class distinctions was often a source of Fluxus humour, especially the Fluxus custom of 'dressing up' – bowler hat and business suit for men, dress clothing for women – to perform acts completely antithetical to the class-bound significations of traditional musical performance.[11]

During the Misfits festival, Vautier lived in the window of Gallery One for a week. There he presented himself on the stage of life, aided and amused by everyday objects: a bed, table, chair, a gas cooker (for heating food), a television set, a hand-drill, teddy bear, and such treasures as two blue glass eyes. Vautier presented himself as the absolute aesthetic object for contemplation. In self-display, he displaced the common and framed the extraordinary that remains latent in the undisclosed ordinary. Exhibition, display, framing, viewed/viewer, and relations of subjects and objects – all of these institutional elements that delimit 'art' were present in his performance. Vautier exhibited himself at the very nexus of re-presentation *and* presentation, the usual *and* the unusual, both sites of Fluxus humour and action.

Vautier's self-exhibition, or exhibitionist self, underscores one of the important aspects of humour in Fluxus performances: the rehabilitative capacity of laughter, especially laughter at the self, which distinguishes humour as a special category of philosophical theory concerned with the emotions and thoughts. The humorous quality of Fluxus events was central to Maciunas' thinking when he included gags and vaudeville as sources for Fluxus. But associations with slapstick and jokes have led to misunderstandings about Fluxus humour when the serious social commentary, psychological consequences, and political potential for self-empowerment inherent in humour are overlooked. Freud, for example, theorized that humour was an essential element in the release of psychic energies associated with freeing the imagination of inhibitions. From Plato to Aristotle, Descartes, and Hobbes, humour has been philosophically attributed to betraying and undermining

hegemony and power relations. Descartes related the physiological aspects of humour to three of the six emotions (wonder, hatred and joy among love, desire and sadness) he considered basic to human character. Hutcheson, Kant and Schopenhauer all argued that humour resides in the inappropriate association of things and in incongruity. Kierkegaard understood humour to mark 'the boundary between the ethical and religious spheres [which] is the last stage of existential awareness before faith'.[12]

At its best, the humour in Fluxus performance is of an entirely different order than either the self-satisfied satire, irony and parody characteristic of modernism or the self-aggrandizing superiority and cynical pastiche claimed for postmodernism. Filled with the marvel of a sense of discovery and release, Fluxus humour escorts freedoms: the freedom to play and goof-off, the freedom to value that play as an aesthetic habit (one's brend), the freedom to abandon reason and aesthetics and to just be.

1 [footnote 46 in source] Allan Kaprow, in a 1964 discussion with George Brecht entitled 'Happenings and Events', broadcast by WBAI Radio, New York; reprinted in Hans Sohm, ed., *happening & fluxus* (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1970) n.p.

2 [47] Certain Fluxus attitudes resemble similar interests of Beat Generation poets. Nevertheless, Dick Higgins disassociated Fluxus concerns from those of the Beats: 'The Allen Ginsbergs told how they wanted to be God while the unions shut my generation out ... To concentrate on A-bombs and peace movements is surely worth while but not so much to the point as recognizing the economic basis of our conflict with the East, and then working for peace through economic means ... We are not non-participants, like the beats were: we are arming to take to the barricades'. See Higgins, *Jefferson's Birthday/Postface* (New York: Something Else Press, 1964) 13. In many ways this statement represents rhetorical posturing, a means of marking out Fluxus intellectual and creative territory.

3 [48] Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performance Arts* (Cologne: Verlag Gebr. König, 1970) 79–80.

4 [49] Henry Flynt, 'Down With Art' (Fluxus Press Pamphlet, 1968), repr. in idem. *Blueprint for a Higher Civilization*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Multhipla Edizioni, 1975) 64-65.

5 [50] Idem, 'From 'Culture' to Brend' (1959–1963), unpublished ms. (Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart) 35.

6 [51] See idem, 'Exercise Awareness States' (April–July 1961), original ms. read at the AG Gallery in New York City on 15 July 1961. A copy of this unpublished material was sent by Flynt to the author in a letter of 1 October 1989. These 'activities' are similar to the 'Mock Risk Games' published in Flynt, *Blueprint*, supra, note 49, pages 153–9. Such techniques for self-discovery became routine aspects of performance art in the 1970s, as Allan Kaprow's conversion of the polymorphous Happening into private experiential 'Activities' during that decade attests.

7 [52] Richard O'Regan, 'There's Music-and Eggs-in the Air!', *Stars and Stripes* (Sunday 21 October

1962) 33.

8 [53] See a handbill for the exhibition reprinted in Sohm, ed., *happening & fluxus*, op. cit.

9 [54] Robin Page in an unpublished interview with the author, 26 May 1982, Munich. Responding to my inquiry about Metzger's exclusion, Filliou answered: 'I do not recall the details of actualization of the Misfits' Fair. In London, I thought I had simply minded [my] own contribution. Those were wild years, tho, and I blush to the top of my ears when some of the uncouth things I said or did at times come to my mind or are brought back to me. In contrast, I do remember Gustav Metzger as a quiet, thoughtful man. I am sorry if I ever said anything that was offensive to him' (unpublished letter of Robert Filliou to the author, 28 July 1986).

10 [55] Metzger had been invited by the artist Roy Ascott to lecture in December 1962 at the Ealing School of Art on 'Auto-destructive art auto-creative art: The struggle for the machine arts of the future'. Peter Townshend, then an art student at Ealing, was present for Metzger's lecture and by 1964 had begun to incorporate the destruction of instruments into the end of The Who's concerts. Townshend has cited Metzger's lecture at Ealing as the catalyst and inspiration for his destruction actions. See *The Who* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982) 6–7. For documentation on Metzger and destruction art see Kristine Stiles, 'The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-Structured Art' (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1987).

11 [56] When Milan Knizak used musical instruments and other objects in unconventional ways in the streets of Prague in 1962, however, his metaphoric demonstrations of the hypocrisy of class-symbols used in Communist state-imposed culture for the repression of the 'people' yielded little humour. In Eastern European countries like Czechoslovakia and Romania, where laws required the registration of typewriters as a means to control *samizdat* publications (self-published political tracts and censored works of art, literature, philosophy and political science), actions like Knizak's became highly charged and personally dangerous political protest.

12 [57] John Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987) 83. In this paragraph, I have paraphrased Morreall's excellent summaries of various philosophers' views on humour that appear in the individual introductions to the chapter entitled 'Traditional Theories of Laughter and Humour', 10–117.

Kristine Stiles, extract from 'Between Water and Stone. Fluxus Performance: A Metaphysics of Acts', in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, eds, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center/New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 1993) 72–7.

Claes Oldenburg
I Am for an Art//1961

I am for an art that is political-erotical-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum.

I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero.

I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top.

I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary.

I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself.

I am for an artist who vanishes, turning up in a white cap painting signs or hallways.

I am for art that comes out of a chimney like black hair and scatters in the sky. I am for art that spills out of an old man's purse when he is bounced off a passing fender. I am for the art out of a doggy's mouth, falling five stories from the roof. I am for the art that a kid licks, after peeling away the wrapper. I am for an art that joggles like everyone's knees, when the bus traverses an excavation. I am for art that is smoked, like a cigarette, smells, like a pair of shoes. I am for art that flaps like a flag, or helps blow noses, like a handkerchief. I am for art that is put on and taken off, like pants, which develops holes, like socks, which is eaten, like a piece of pie, or abandoned with great contempt, like a piece of shit. [...]

Claes Oldenburg, extract from 'I am for an art ...', *Environments, Situations, Spaces* (New York: Martha Jackson Gallery, 1961); reprinted in an expanded version in Oldenburg and Emmett Williams, eds, *Store Days: Documents from The Store (1961) and Ray Gun Theater (1962)* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967) 39–42.

Ad Reinhardt
To Be Part of Things//n.d. (1953–66)

To be part of things or not to be part or having been part of things as they've become, to part from that part that was part of things as they are or not to part?

Part of life is more than life. Part of an artist is more than an artist. Everyman in the everyday today part of things lives like everyman. So do I. Part of myself is separate from several selves. Painting is special, separate.

Some claim to represent nature, hell on earth, sick society, inner turmoil, wild beasts and things as they are. May not one side of me speak up for the side of the angels? (Wholeness by separation)

Separation, in the past, of painting from walls and books, from architecture and sculpture, from poetry and theatre, from religion, history and nature, from decoration, documentation and description, was achievement in awareness.

Separation, in history, of fine and liberal arts from labour and business, from trade skills and entertainment, from professions of pleasing and selling, was achievement in freedom.

Dumping together in three American fauve decades (social-real, surreal, abstract expressionism) of painting with politics, sadism, publicity, subconsciousness, primitivity, suffering, pleasure, psychology, symbolism, love, hate, fate, accident, irrationality, action personality and conspicuous patronization, was achievement in romancing.

POVERTY LUXURY SATIRE SALVATION

Painting is special, separate, a matter of meditation and contemplation, for me, no action or physical sport. 'As much consciousness as possible.' Clarity, completeness, quintessence, quiet. No noise, no schmutz, no schmerz, no fauve schwärmerei. Perfection, spirituality, absoluteness, consonance, coherence. No particularities, no agitation, no automatism, no gesticulation, no grotesquerie. Detachment, disinterestedness, passiveness. No humbug, no button-holing, no mixing up, no exploitation. No lack of loftiness, no humourlessness.

Consummateness, transcendence. Folk. Dignity, order, rationality.

Place apart where painting can be itself and nothing else. [...]

Ad Reinhardt, extract from 'To be Part of Things', unpublished, undated notes (written between 1953 and 1966); first published in *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, Documents of Twentieth-Century Art series (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975) 126–7.

Robert Smithson
From *Ivan the Terrible* to Roger Corman, or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema//1967

Laughter is the revelation of the double ...
– Charles Baudelaire

There are no 'real' doubles in my novels.
– Vladimir Nabokov

There seem to be two aesthetic roles that artists and critics tend to develop. The first is not considered a role by the person who assumes it. This kind of person acts 'naturally', and always affects what he terms *honesty*. He is apt constantly to congratulate himself on being frank, humble and unaffected. William Empson points out that Shakespeare had contempt for such a sensibility: 'What Shakespeare hated in the word [honest], I believe was a peculiar use, at once hearty and individualist, which was then common among raffish low people but did not become upper-class till the Restoration' [*The Structure of Complex Words*, 1951]. With the rise of naturalism in the arts the artist began to pose or play the role of hearty individualist, who had no manners or principles, but lots of feelings and natural desires. The nineteenth century myth of the Renaissance is based on the sensibility of naturalism, and is opposed to manners and conventions. Naturalism in a sense became an unprincipled defence against the problem of corruption in both aesthetics and society. Natural expressiveness replaced the rules of the game, and so confused inanimate objects with personal feelings. The art object became in the naturalist's mind the direct expression of his own feeling, not the result of a convention or manner, and thus began the belief in expressiveness in art.

This first role was in a sense formalized by Constantine Stanislavsky in so far as he based his 'method' on internal feelings and natural expressions. This 'method' dominated the major actors of the1950s, and indirectly influenced the 'life styles' of many American artists and critics. Mutations of the 'naturalness' of the 'method' may be seen in the photographs of artists and critics in books such as Fred W. McDarra's *The Artist's World* and more recently in Alan Solomon's *New York: The New Art Scene*. The artist or critic poses or fakes being unaffected; he imitates everyday, mundane, natural events – such as playing baseball, on-the-job painting, or drinking beer. Andy Warhol takes this *artificial normality* to

'marvellous' extremes by having 'queens' act like 'plain-janes'. Thus the phony naturalism of we're-just-ordinary-guys-doing-our-thing becomes brilliant manneristic travesty under Warhol's direction.

This brings us to the second kind of role, which is closer to the pictorial principles of V.V. Meyerhold and Bertolt Brecht. The critics who are committed to expressive naturalism always attack pictorialism because they fail to understand what Brecht termed 'alienation effect'. Many of Brecht's ideas for the a-effect were derived from the narrative pictures of Brueghel the Elder; the *pictorial* origin of the a-effect is opposed to the sensory character of the picture as a 'painting.' Far from being non-illusionistic, Brecht calls attention to the physical elements of illusion; thus illusion exists on an equal level with reality. Says Brecht in a description of Brueghel's *Tower of Babel*: 'The tower has been put up askew. It includes portions of cliff, between which one can see the artificiality of the stonework.' The 'cliff' is thus *alienated* from the 'artificiality of the stonework'. This is true of many Mannerist pictures, where for instance everything turns away from the centre of interest. This *turning away* from what is thought to be 'important' is at the bottom of the a-effect. A similiar a-effect exists in a Mannerist engraving by Stich von Johann Sadeler; a feast is going on in a hall with singing and love making (the actual drawing is cold and stiff) while through windows and a door we see a rather uninspiring apocalypse. God or somebody is riding a rainbow, but nobody at the feast seems to care. A nearby war doesn't seem to interest them either.

Sergei M. Eisenstein in his masterpiece *Ivan the Terrible* (part II) rejected the expressive naturalism of the Stanislavsky Method in favour of the Meyerhold Method of 'automatic imitation'. Eisenstein employs Meyerhold's Method in a most rigorous mannerist way in the second part of *Ivan the Terrible*. The actors are not encouraged to have *deep and profound feelings*, but rather they are *built* into the setting of the film. Each emotion is constructed rather than directed. Ivan is a set of manners, or a collection of devices. The blind faith that Meyerhold had in the role of 'the worker' is transformed by Eisenstein into a sinister paradox in *Ivan*. Eisenstein defines Ivan as 'a personality in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe' and says ironically he is a conception that 'would hardly interest the young Soviet worker'. The reference to 'the manner of Edgar Allan Poe' is worth exploring.

Manneristic art is often called pseudo, sick, perverse, false, phony and decadent by the naturalists or truth tellers, yet it seems to me that what the Mannerist aesthetic does disclose or recover is a sense of primal evil. Both Eisenstein and Poe seem to have been acutely aware of such a malevolent condition. Parker Tyler in his *Classics of Foreign Films* has this to say: 'Eisenstein knew perfectly well that 'Mephistofeles' and 'wild beast', the labels he had given Ivan, also applied to *himself*, to the history of his career as man and film artist'.

Such an awareness not only locates him within the Mannerist aesthetic, but also makes him an artist of the first order.

The Mannerist is not innocent of corruption. He casts a cold eye and what he sees he treats with humour and terror. A great example of pictorial humour and terror is *The Allegory of Europe* or the *Beheading of John the Baptist* by an unknown Mannerist master (collection of the Prado). The very word 'allegory' is enough to strike terror into the hearts of the expressive artist; there is perhaps no device as exhausted as allegory. But strangely enough Allan Kaprow has shown interest in that worn-out device. Jorge Luis Borges begins his *From Allegories to Novels* by saying: 'For all of us, the allegory is an aesthetic error.' The *Allegory of Europe* is challenging for the same reason. The court intrigue shown in the *Allegory* parallels the court intrigue in *Ivan*: both display an exquisite but noxious sense of decorum. Compare, for example, the festering jewels on the complex and often teratological costumes. The world of both the *Allegory* and *Ivan* is one that rejects Renaissance naturalism and the image of the self-sufficient man acting in a rational environment. One could almost say the environment is lost under a network of tiny surfaces that reflect nothing but ungraspable meanings. Here is a world of countless plots and counterplots, all combining to make up a delicate structure that evades simplism. An excellent example of the a-effect in the *Allegory* occurs when a bare-breasted woman holding the head of John the Baptist on a plate, is seen looking indifferently away from the gruesome object. The prominence of the (face) and (breast) amidst the chaos of poisonous brocades and jewels somehow suggests the 'woman series' of Willem de Kooning. Actually, de Kooning speaks like a Mannerist, not an Expressionist, when he says 'art doesn't make me pure' or 'I'm not a pastoral character', and paints like one – 'I put the mouth more or less in the place where it was supposed to be.'

The 'faces' in mannerist pictures are abstractions, because they do not call attention to 'paint quality'. The face in an expressionist *painting* is concerned with the 'paint', but the face in a mannerist *picture* is a 'conception'. The mannerist face is a mask detached from the material fact of the pictorial surface. Roland Barthes tells us what constitutes the abstract mask, when he says 'As a language, Garbo's (face) singularity was of a conceptual order; Bardot's (face) is of a substantial order. Garbo's face is an Idea, Bardot's a happening.' (From *Mythologies*). Or the Idea face is a *mannerist picture* while the Happening face is an *expressionist* painting.

In order to deal with the face as a 'language', we must avoid the 'formalist' trap of discussing 'the painting' in terms of 'framing supports' or 'shaped canvases'. I shall concern myself with the difference between expressive *paintings* and mannerist *pictures*. The substantiality of painting may be seen in

Rembrandt's 'Self-Portraits'. The sensory and temporal roles of the artist are clearly defined by the following titles: *Rembrandt as a Young Man*; *Rembrandt Dressed as an Eastern Prince*; *Rembrandt as an Officer*; *Rembrandt as a Standard-Bearer*; *Rembrandt at the Age of 34*; etc. Rembrandt is putting us on, but in a very poor, honest, natural and expressive way. The naturalist ethic responds to such degraded postures, but rejects the terrible 'virgins' by Parmigianino. The naturalist ethic opposes the mannerist aesthetic by preferring the 'honest whore' to *The Virgin of the Rose* – rustic charm is preferred to celestial terror. One reason why Rembrandt's paintings fetch such high prices is that they give value to low ideas. Marcel Duchamp, the last fabricator of 'virgins', shows his contempt for Rembrandt by recommending that his paintings be used as 'ironing-boards'. Duchamp shares Shakespeare's disgust when it comes to the elevation of expressive naturalism over the rules of the game. To put it pictorially: when the painting is valued over and against the picture, you can be sure philistines have taken over art.

Let us now compare the face of Parmigianino's *Virgin of the Long Neck* with Rembrandt's self-portrait *The Artist Laughing*. The first thing one notices in the Rembrandt is the 'paint quality'. It is rough and lumpy; a kind of good-natured air is conveyed by this grinning portrait. The type of humour it displays is rustic and down to earth, it lacks what Duchamp would call 'meta-irony'. Yet, the self-portrait betrays a 'negative-irony'; this Duchamp defines as a type of humour that only depends on 'laughter'. Rembrandt's 'laughter' does not allude to anything sinister or to what Vladimir Nabokov refers to as 'laughter in the dark'. This laughter of Rembrandt's is warm and friendly, its expressive character leads directly to the artist's inner sense of individualism. Not so, when it comes to Parmigianino's virgin face; nowhere is good nature or 'character' suggested in his conception. This is a picture, not a painting, because it derives from the mind and not sensations. It is an infernal abstraction and not a 'real' person. Consider the Virgin's eyes – she has none, but there is a gaze, a terrible snake-glance that seems to turn her child to ice, or perhaps it has even killed her 'immaculate conception'. The notion of 'a child of ice' is alluded to in *The Virgin of the Rose*, where the child touches with his little finger the North Pole on a globe of the world. Returning to *The Virgin of the Long Neck*, an alienated Saint turns away from the 'monster'. The Saint declaims in the lower right corner of the picture, near an illusory column or set of columns. The distance between Parmigianino's humour and Rembrandt's is immense.

Parmigianino transforms a humorous illusion into a solid fact, while Rembrandt turns a solid fact (himself) into a humorous sensation. Parmigianino's 'idea alchemy' is similar to Duchamp's in so far as Duchamp takes every opportunity to transform ideas into facts. Both artists seem to deal with

the concept of a *prison*. Says Duchamp: 'Establish a society in which the individual has to pay for air he breathes (air meters; imprisonment and rarefied air) in case of non-payment, simple asphyxiation, if necessary (cut off the air)'. The world of Parmigianino appears to verge on asphyxiation. The air in his pictures seems about to be turned off, his figures seem on the brink of being frozen. The terrible prison-like world Duchamp proposes is related to Mannerist aesthetics and conduct.

If Rembrandt subverted upper-class value and roles to shabbiness, then Warhol has elevated lower-class value and roles to the level of grandeur. Rembrandt posed as 'a prince', Warhol poses as an 'idiot'; both roles are false.

In *My Hustler* Warhol treats sex as a commodity: his hustler hero is no 'honest whore'; if a 'John' wants some of his commodity he has to pay for it. Sex in Warhol's film is 'a way to make a living' or forced sex like forced labour. The hustler puts sex into his work; his sex, however, is so longer his own, but rather a commodity value that belongs to his employer – thus sex becomes an alien 'thing' to the hustler. The private parts have price tags on them. This is a parody of Marx's 'division of labour', only Warhol discloses the 'division of sex'. All the hustler's sex is placed in the service of money.

Parmigianino's *Virgin* is like Warhol's *Hustler*: both have their sex alienated from their person or self. The question of *love* in such a context is transformed into a fearful duality. The cold mask-like faces of the hustlers and virgins hide a humorous pessimism.

The films of Alfred Hitchcock are Mannerist on every level. 'As early as the credit list monstrous faces writhe on a background of threatening sky', says André Techiné, writing in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 'The obsolete device of double exposure is reinforced by the crudity of grimaces. No artifice is spared the spectator. The contrivances are avowed.' *Torn Curtain* is perhaps even more manneristic than *Vertigo*. Hitchcock's actors, like the figures in pictures by Jacopo da Pontormo, seem trapped in a beautiful prison that produces intricate types of 'visual nausea'. (See *Mannerism – Style and Mood* by Daniel B. Rowland). A sweetness of colour pervades the totalitarian settings in *Torn Curtain*. One thinks of the moods defined in Vladimir Nabokov's novels. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov seems to be describing the Hitchcockian view: 'I am here through an error – not in this prison, specifically – but in this whole terrible, striped world; a world which seems not a bad example of amateur craftsmanship, but is in reality calamity, horror, madness, error – and look, the curio slays the tourist, the gigantic carved bear brings its wooden mallet down on me.' The red ribbons that represent a fire, in a ballet scene in *Torn Curtain*, suggest a means of escape to Paul Newman (scientist-spy) when he shouts 'Fire'. A panic turns Julie Andrews' face into a mask of exhaustion, not unlike the swooning face of the Virgin in

Pontormo's *Deposition*. The 'amateur craftsmanship' is everywhere in Hitchcock's *mise en scène*, from the ghastly green glow over rooftops in *Vertigo* to the diabolical sky in *The Birds*. Hitchcock's humour informs every terrible situation he takes his 'bad' actors through. His settings are a vast simulacra built by an evil demiurge, and peopled with frozen automatons. The sensibility of Roger Corman is similar to Hitchcock's. Both directors tend to view life as a diabolical game full of bluffing and death. Corman's films seem to be based on Poe's declaration in William Wilson: 'Oh, gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution!' Corman's series of films based on Poe disclose a complete understanding of what Eisenstein meant by 'the manner of Edgar Allan Poe'. Somehow the terror in a Corman movie is a 'false terror' held together by de-realized acting and left-over stage sets. The 'universe' in *The Trip* is a cheap merry-go-round, built of paper flowers and multicoloured junk. In this anti-LSD film nothing is real – not even the 'special effects'. The film ends with a shattered 'still' of the face of Peter Fonda.

Robert Smithson, 'From *Ivan the Terrible* to Roger Corman, or Paradoxes of Conduct in Mannerism as Reflected in the Cinema' (1967), *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979) 213–16.

Arnulf Rainer
Face Farces//1971

During the sixties I drew faces day after day, faces which I had never seen, veiled and deformed, ugly grimaces, twisting profiles, comical diagrammatic schemes. During moments of intensive drawing these caricatures mirrored themselves into my own face muscles. I grimaced with them. So I decided one day to give autonomy to this parallel expression, to transform it from paper into flesh. But the nervous excitement, which comes over me when drawing, did not want to stop so readily. Only when I stood in front of a mirror did I succeed by lurching and tilting to bring about an intensive mimic monologue. I kept repeating these gestures. I had a great deal to relate to myself by means of these faces especially when under the influence of alcohol. When spectators were present my expressions were reduced to reticence.

In 1968 I frequently would sit in a photo booth and practise self mirror images which I then documented photographically. Curious types would always open the curtains and chase me away. Today I work with a photographer.

All the faces I formerly drew had impossible wrinkles, wrong creases and invented accents. These I missed in the photographs. When I smeared them on my cheeks, and went for a walk with them, I felt like a new man; but I was disappointed with the photographic documentation because I still saw always the old self.

It was only when I began to re-work the photos of my mimic 'face farces' by drawing on them, that I discovered the unexpected. All new, unknown people, who had been hiding inside myself, but who were not able to formulate my muscles by themselves.

In this way I fused the performing and the visual means of expression into a single art form, which has now occupied me for a number of years.

These anti-yoga tragic-comic poses, mannered clowneries and tired gestures without grace, chic or charm do not ask for a harmonious physical expression, but for a search for the unlimited possibilities and the unlikely people who are concealed in all of us.

Arnulf Rainer, 'Face Farces' (1971), *Arnulf Rainer* (Cologne: Galerie Ariadne, 1971); trans. Peter Selz, in Selz and Kristine Stiles, eds, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 247–8.

Andy Warhol
The Philosophy of Andy Warhol
(From A to B and Back Again)//1975

[...] Damian walked over to the window and looked out. 'I guess you have to take a lot of risks to be famous in any field', she said, and then, turning around to look at me, she added: 'For instance, to be an artist.'

She was being so serious, but it was just like a bad movie. I love bad movies. I was starting to remember why I always liked Damian.

I gestured toward the gift-wrapped salami that was sticking out of my Pan Am flight bag and said, 'Any time you slice a salami, you take a risk.'

'No, but I mean for an artist ...'

'An artist', I interrupted, 'What do you mean, an "artist"? An artist can slice a salami, too! Why do people think artists are special? It's just another job.'

Damian wouldn't let me disillusion her. Some people have deep-rooted long-standing art fantasies. I remembered a freezing winter night a couple of years ago when I was dropping her off at two-thirty in the morning after a very social party and she made me take her to Times Square to find a record store that was open so she could buy *Blonde on Blonde* and get back in touch with 'real people'. Some people have deep-rooted long-standing art fantasies and they really stick with them.

'But to become a famous artist you had to do something that was "different". And if it was "different", then it means you took a risk, because the critics could have said that it was bad instead of good.'

'In the first place', I said, 'they usually did say it was bad. And in the second place, if you say that artists take "risks", it's insulting to the men who landed on D-Day, to stunt men, to baby-sitters, to Evel Knievel, to stepdaughters, to coal miners, and to hitch-hikers, because they're the ones who really know what "risks" are.' She didn't even hear me, she was still thinking about what glamorous 'risks' artists take. [...]

'You mean you don't get wiser as you grow up?' B said as he walked back into the room.

'Yes', I said. 'You do. You have to, so you usually do.'

B said, 'But if you know what it's all about, you get discouraged and you don't want to live.'

'You don't?' I said.

'Right'. Damian agreed with B. 'If you're wiser it doesn't make you happier.

One of the girls in one of your movies said something like "I don't want to be smart, because being smart makes you depressed".'

She was quoting Geri Miller in *Flesh*. Being smart could make you depressed, certainly, if you weren't smart about what you were smart about. It's viewpoint that's important – not intelligence, probably.

'You're saying that you're wiser this year than you were last year?' B asked me.

I was, so I said, 'Yes.'

'How? What did you learn this year that you didn't know before?'

'Nothing. That's why I'm wiser. That extra year of learning more nothing.'

B laughed. Damian didn't.

'I don't understand', she said. 'If you keep learning more nothing, that makes it harder and harder to live.'

Learning about nothing doesn't make it harder, it makes it easier, but most people make Damian's mistake of thinking it makes it harder. That's a big mistake.

She said, 'If you know life is nothing, then what are you living for?'

'For nothing.'

'But I love being a woman. That's not nothing', she said.

'Being a woman is just as nothing as being a man. Either way you have to shave and that's a big nothing. Right?' I was oversimplifying, but it was true.

Damian laughed. 'Then why do you keep on making paintings? They're going to hang around after you die.'

'That's nothing', I said.

'It's an *Idea* that goes on', she insisted.

'Ideas are nothing.'

B suddenly got a crafty look on his face. 'Okay, okay. We agree. Then the only purpose in life is ...'

'Nothing.' I cut him off.

But it didn't stop him, ' ... to have as much fun as possible.' Now I knew what he was trying to do. He was hinting for me to hand them some cash for 'expenses' that afternoon.

'If ideas are nothing', B continued, laying his argument for easy money, 'and objects are nothing, then as soon as you get some money you should just spend it having as good a time as possible.'

'Well', I said, 'it doesn't mean if you don't believe in nothing that it's nothing. You have to treat the nothing as if it were something. Make something out of nothing.' That threw him off the track.

'What???'

I repeated myself word for word, which was hard. 'It doesn't mean if you don't believe in nothing that it's nothing.' The dollar signs slipped out of B's eyes.

It's always good to get abstract when it comes to economics.

'Okay, say I believe in nothing', Damian said. 'How would I convince myself to become an actress or write a novel? The only way I could ever write a novel would be because I believed it was really going to be something, to have this book with my name on it, or to become a famous actress.'

'You can become a nothing actress', I told her, 'and if you really believe in nothing you can write a book about it.'

'But then to get famous you have to write a book about something people care about. A, you just can't say that everything is nothing!' Now she was getting upset, but she kept thinking, trying to come up with a way to make me say that something was something.

I repeated, 'Everything is nothing'. [...]

Andy Warhol, extract from *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (Florida: Harcourt, Inc., 1975) 177–85.

Peter Schjeldahl
Ed Ruscha: Traffic and Laughter//1985

To know the art of Ed Ruscha, you should know something about Los Angeles, and the reverse: knowing something about Ruscha's art will help you with Los Angeles. He is the artist of that city as Manet was the artist of Paris, as integral to it as sense organs are to a body. He conveys the flavour of consciousness in Southern California like no one else since Raymond Chandler, the prose poet of American detective fiction. I do not mean by this that Ruscha is a 'regional artist', let alone a provincial one. He is the artist of Los Angeles in precisely and only these aspects in which it is world-central. Through his art, as in no other way, Los Angeles announces itself as having and being a civilization.

'The city of the future.' That cliché harbours a truth: Los Angeles is the city of the future and always will be. It has been the city of the future at least since World War II, piling up more and more futurity in place of a present. Its 'past' is a category of obsolete futures, defeated longings still faintly alive like the tinglings in an amputated limb. Time is impalpable there, where one day and one night endlessly recur. Time drowns in space and light (sun alternating with neon), a brilliant ocean into which one plunges, behind the wheel of a car, several times daily.

There are two sounds in Los Angeles: traffic and laughter. Los Angeles laughter is the most extreme form of American laughter, which bemuses most Europeans and many New Yorkers as well. Such laughter is apparently uncaused, childlike, irresponsible, gratuitous. It is a chuckle in the throat, a constant eddy of mirth that is the opposite of irony: rather than penetrate and expose incongruities, it heals and elides them, homogenizing all differences in the emulsion of a positive attitude. It is the valence, the specific gravity, of American consciousness, and it attains maximum pitch in Los Angeles (whence, via movies and television, it is broadcast to the world).

The sound of Los Angeles laughter interpenetrates with the sound of Los Angeles traffic, the background hum of a rushing future that, always arriving, never arrives. Ruscha's art is a distillate of both these sounds and of what they mean, what strange mutations they propose for the forms of human life.

Ruscha's biography is archetypal for Southern California. He was born and grew up in Oklahoma, source of the epic westward trek of dispossessed farmers in jalopies during the 1930s that permanently marked the population and demotic culture. (Among other waves of newcomers, the only one as decisive has been from Mexico.) In 1956, at the age of eighteen, Ruscha retraced that

well-worn migration route – Route 66 – across a thousand miles of desert to the coast's sudden irrigated lushness, but he did it with a friend in a hopped-up car. Planning to enter commercial art, he attended the Chouinard Art Institute, known as a school for Walt Disney illustrators but at that moment, quite by chance, a centre of advanced art. He immediately became a member of the only generation of Los Angeles artists to achieve international resonance, a generation including Robert Irwin and Larry Bell (later augmented by the presence of Bruce Nauman and John Baldessari). The surge of creative intensity in Los Angeles during the 1960s was determined by several factors, of which I will list three.

1. The de-Europeanization of modern art by abstract expressionism, then its fairly complete Americanization in emerging pop and minimal art. From having been a conduit for modernism, New York temporarily became its source, and what was beamed from the East Coast caused a sharp echo, in the form of a major variant, when it hit the West. Young Americans had a sense of entitlement and adventure.

2. The valuing of mediated imagery and industrial techniques. This was largely an intellectual gesture in New York pop and minimalism, a classically modernist, ironic, strategic trope. Transposed to Southern California, it became straightforward and hedonistic, energizing that region's world-leading sophistication in media technology and vernacular forms of industrial design (customized cars, plastics, etc.). Los Angeles had the tools and skills, ready to hand, for a stylistic apotheosis.

3. The aestheticizing of everyday life. The 1960s were an era of conflations: fantasy with reality, dream with politics, art with life. None of this was the least bit surprising from the viewpoint of Southern California, where existence had always been aesthetically mediated. It is a region of instinctive surrealists, matter-of-fact dandies, and cheerful nihilists. Suddenly its local predilection accorded with an international vanguard sensibility.

The period of Los Angeles' artistic eminence was brief, a few years before the city's entropic sprawl and discontinuity dissipated the energy of the moment. (F. Scott Fitzgerald said that there are no second acts in American lives; just so, there are no second generations in California.) However, it lasted long enough to give crucial orientation to Ruscha. He had the advantage of being situated to receive the best artistic information from elsewhere, as the art director of *Artforum* when that magazine was based in Los Angeles from 1964 to 1967. He became simultaneously an informed internationalist and a quintessential Los Angeleno.

Ruscha is personally modest, soft-spoken and handsome. He is one of the least disliked men I know, though also one of the most envied. He is known as a companion of Hollywood beauties. (Recently a Beverly Hills newspaper ran a

photograph of one such beauty in company; the breathless and succinct caption read, 'with *him*') Why this gossip? Because Ruscha's personality, no less than his art, is emblematic of his culture, in a way that makes him enlivening to a historical imagination. (Think again of Manet, the painter in a frock coat.) Ruscha's work emits a subtle emotion from within culture. The emotion is an abstraction of Los Angeles laughter shaded by an austere, slightly disquieting irony – the dandy's irony, a whiff of loss.

In Los Angeles, one laughs to survive, enjoys oneself not to enhance life but to live at all. That society is so tenuous that the only alternative to a spiral of loneliness is a self-contained, steady, pleasurably focused attitude. The LA cogito: I laugh, therefore I am. The laughter is ramified and refined. Only with time and effort does a visitor learn its language. It is the absolute form of civility in a civilization that enables nobody to mature beyond adolescence. It can be erotic and quite beautiful when one hears its undertone of sadness. It can be disturbing when one catches its overtone of anger. It is the sound of grown-up children determined not to be afraid.

Los Angeles is a West that lies between two Easts. Across the mountains and desert there is the eastern US, and across the Pacific there is the Far East, the Orient. If, as I believe, Ruscha and Robert Irwin (who is best known for light-filled, nearly empty environments partly inspired by sensory-deprivation research) are the two most important Los Angeles artists of the 1960s, it may be because they made an even division of the two Easts: Irwin took the Pacific route to Zen-like satori, and Ruscha took Route 66. In so doing, they bisected Los Angeles laughter. Irwin isolated the element of bliss – the chortle of infantile well-being – and Ruscha laid bare the reflex of antic irrationality – the child's rapture in absurdity. Irwin is mystical. Ruscha is witty.

In the early sixties Irwin and Ruscha both developed meticulously crafted, medium-scaled versions of New York field painting, the enveloping vehicle of Pollock and Rothko. Irwin inflected his version with a few thin lines of barely contrasting colour, nudging the viewer toward oceanic reverie. Ruscha invaded his with signs – commercial labels and logos, pictures of common objects, words – from popular culture, triggering a keen sense of violation. To violate is the fundamental gesture of Ruscha's art, as to be inviolable is that of Irwin's.

Ruscha's important insight at the time, akin to Andy Warhol's (Warhol, incidentally, was first shown not in New York but in Los Angeles, in 1962), was that the newly opened field of popular imagery offered far more than a vein of satiric subject matter. He understood that it was potentially a whole structure – subject matter, form and content in one – capable not merely of being used in painting but of displacing the traditional function of painting altogether. Unlike Warhol, Ruscha had no interest in actually performing this revolutionary

dislocation. He was, and has remained, content to work on the verge of the radical break, retaining enough artistic conventions to register the delicate spasms of numberless violations.

Ruscha traces his vocation as an artist to a day in 1957 when he saw the magazine reproduction of a Target painting by Jasper Johns. To be inspired by a reproduction is usually the mark and the debilitating fate of a provincial sensibility, but here it is prophetically in key with Ruscha's later achievement. The moment is delectable: young Ruscha sees the glossy reproduction of a painting that is already a reproduction (in paint, of a mechanical emblem). A mental process of fantastic sophistication commences, and in the sunstruck, sign-filled vacancy of Los Angeles it finds an instantaneous universe of material.

The mode of Ruscha's art is a naturalism of signs, a quizzical and amused investigation of the behaviour of signs not in systems but in specific instances, caught red-handed in the act of signifying. He is the artist as semiotic hard-boiled detective. When he travelled around Europe for seven months in 1961 (two months in Paris), Ruscha took little interest in the art he saw. He was attracted instead by street life and street iconography, which he photographed voluminously, and by such iconological curiosities as the famous R.A. Bertelli *Head of Mussolini* in London's Imperial War Museum, a uniformly rounded black ceramic bust that to every viewpoint presents two perfect profiles of Il Duce. Ruscha absorbed the immanence of Los Angeles even in the Old World.

Ruscha's instinct for the penetrating oddness – the laughter – of signs is apparent in the drawings he made during his European sojourn, including *Bicycle Sign* and *Boulangerie*. The semaphoric use of graphic images, such as that of a bicycle to denote a bicycle route, was still rare in America in 1961, and it excited Ruscha. And already his poetic ear was being piqued by words and expressions that, for one contingent reason or another, rupture meaning, causing thought to stumble. The word *boulangerie*, pronounced with an American accent, is ineffably clumsy, a disjointedly lurching clump of syllables that epitomizes the humiliation – well known to me, alas – of an American's struggle to speak French. It has the poignant aura of a remote, unobtainable Frenchness, an aura amusingly at odds with the word's humble referent. Introduced into the formal and seductive medium of oil paint in the manner pioneered by Johns, such linguistic units sit for portraits that expose their secret lives.

Since I am writing for a European audience, I should acknowledge a difficulty that Ruscha's work is bound to pose for non-Americans. Ruscha's use of language, idiomatic in the extreme, is as translation-proof as lyric poetry. Each phrase triggers inchoate associations and a sensation of being engulfed in the very soul of American language making, that intersection of mind and tongue where meaning and laughter blend. The effect is uncanny. One has no sense of

Ruscha himself speaking. Such verbal talent is rare among artists. To get a literary equivalent, one might imagine a cross between William Burroughs and John Ashbery, two other American masters of impersonal but intimately explosive colloquial voices.

Fortunately, Ruscha's art speaks in languages other than vernacular American, and one of them is the most universal: photography. He uses photographs in very much the way he uses words, with a flat, apparently mindless, tone that becomes more mysterious the more one tries to grasp it. His photographic style is straightforwardly documentary, but what is being documented? What are we being told about Los Angeles parking lots and condominiums? The questions turn back on themselves like snakes biting their tails.

Ruscha's main use of photography has taken place in counterpoint with another medium: the book. He abolishes the usual relation of pictures and books, by which pictures illustrate a narrative or serve as objects of a discourse. In a Ruscha book, pictures expel narrative and discourse. Every habitual way we have of reading a book, and of looking at photographs, is halted dead in its tracks. Thus described, Ruscha's process may sound like a deconstructive game, but, in fact, it serves a realist function. There is a syntax to the images in a book by Ruscha that comes direct from the phenomenal world. It comes from Los Angeles.

The Rosetta stone of Ruscha's books, the one that most plainly collates the languages of Los Angeles, the book, and photography, is the foldout *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. Sunset Strip is a gaudy but not terribly exciting mile-long stretch of clubs, restaurants and hotels on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. As a legendary site, Sunset Strip meets a common definition of celebrity, 'famous for being famous'; but in reality, suffering from Los Angeles's endemic disjunctures and elastic distances, it is incoherent and bland. There can be no integral experience of Sunset Strip to match the seductive density of its name.

Ruscha's treatment of the Strip has the elegant clarity of a scientific theorem, and it engenders a practically Buddhistic lightness of spirit. The end-to-end photographs of, yes, every building, palm tree, and empty lot on the Sunset Strip convey both the droning incessantness that is Los Angeles and the all-embracing, diffuse alertness that is Los Angeles sanity. Done in 1966, this is a pivotal, prophetic work. The ramifications of *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (say the title to yourself several times, slowly) amount to a quiet revolution in urban consciousness, an essential prediction of the architectural thinking of, among others, Robert Venturi and Frank Gehry. This work brings a barbarous reality within the ambit of civilized mind. *Every Building* has to do with present time; it gives a missing presentness, a simultaneity, to an entity that otherwise can exist only through time, the time it takes a car to traverse the Strip. (You wouldn't walk it; like most Los Angeles boulevards it lacks continuous sidewalks.) *Thirtyfour*

Parking Lots in Los Angeles (1967) is, surprisingly, about the past: photographing from the air, Ruscha chose parking lots not for their geometries but for their patterns of oil stains. *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970) is about the future, Los Angeles' metaphysical mainspring, its ever-beckoning promise and lure – here mocked by a selection of obviously atrocious places to live.

Ruscha's presentations of the language of photography and the photographic qualities of language add up to the vision of a totally mediated world: a world of traffic on every level. By accepting this world, Ruscha shows it to be habitable, oddly enjoyable, and even touched by a strange grace. The world of traffic is also the world of laughter. This is not to say (though some critics are bound to say it) that Ruscha is a propagandist for the society of consumption and spectacle. His art maintains an ascetic edge against the trivializing and demoralizing effects of consumerism, its reduction of all value to the economic. Ruscha is not a cynic. He is even, in a way, religious.

Ruscha had a devout Catholic boyhood, uncommon in mostly Protestant Oklahoma and also, among non-Hispanics, in Los Angeles. I think this background illuminates something about the ritualistic equalities of his art and about his preoccupation with purity and violation. Los Angeles, as a culture, gives no one any structure of values or, correlatively, any sense of possible transgression. If present at all, these spiritual mechanisms are imported luxuries. Ruscha in 1956, an emigrant teenager wild for sunshine, girls and fun, brought them along as unsuspected cargo in his customized 1950 Ford.

All the gas stations in Ruscha's first book, *Twentysix Gas Stations* (1963), were found on Route 66, which Ruscha often travelled back and forth between California and Oklahoma City in those days. It seems to me faintly possible that the number twenty-six alludes to the stations of the cross, minus the fourteenth (Calvary) and doubled. In any case, I believe that a liturgical association will help us to grasp the uncanniness of Ruscha's unprecedented use in drawings of an incredible variety of mineral and organic substances, including gunpowder, egg yolk, spinach, blood, ketchup, shellac, fruit juices, lettuce, and zinc oxide. Besides realizing a range of piquant visual beauties, these transubstantiations of humble stuff into the communion of art (ironic, to be sure, and sarcastically debased by banal verbal messages) draw a magic circle around consciousness. The comedy, too deep and elusive for hilarity, consists in an imitation of religion. The drawings do God's work: they give meaning to Creation.

The many large oil paintings that Ruscha has made since the mid-1970s are his most disconcerting works. Why would an artist with a genius for graphic and photographic mediums leave them for one in which his proficiency is unremarkable? And what about the incongruity of employing monumental physical means to deliver slight verbal whimsies? Has Ruscha succumbed to a

fatuous cultural piety in favour of the more 'serious' medium? I don't think so. The culture has scarcely rewarded him, for one thing: these paintings have been the least publicly and commercially successful of his works, and yet he produces them with stubborn persistence. I think the large paintings are calculated assaults on thought, including the form of thought that is Ruscha s own verbal gift. The aim, I believe, is an ecstatic deracination, laughter mingled with awe.

If the painting *Industrial Village and Its Hill*, 1982, were a drawing (seen only in reproduction, it amounts to one), it would be an effective joke. Using exact geographical terms to particularize the uninflected abstraction of a landscape (a Route 66 landscape par excellence) is witty. A graphic format would permit one to savour the delicate absurdity of it in one's mind. (Drawing is the medium that models thought.) Performed on a three-metre expanse of buttery oil paint, however, the exercise is brutalized, self-destroyed as a witticism. Not the idea of landscape but something like the experience of an actual landscape is induced in the viewer, who seizes on the internal captions 'industrial village' and 'hill' to stave off vertigo. What is the word for an urgent reliance on verbal formulas? The word is *prayer.*

Ruscha's large paintings do indeed activate the reflex of prayer, at least of that childlike state in which one stands open to the self-evidence of nature. They enact the mind's swoon in the face of cosmic perspectives. Ever skeptical, Ruscha takes pains to forestall specifically religious conclusions. To evoke a mystery of love, for instance, he appropriates the technical phrase 'friction and wear on mating surfaces' from the jargon of mechanical engineers. And his hymn of praise for natural glory is couched in self-deflating colloquial understatement: 'Not a bad world is it.' Still, he is clearly fascinated by the fact of emotional sublimity, and he schemes to capture it on canvas.

In his large paintings, Ruscha augments the laughter of Route 66 with a laughter of the Orient: the soul of Los Angeles synthesized, complete. Think of it if you visit that city. It will help you. In that basin of bright haze on the Pacific rim, there may seem to be nothing for your mind to grasp – until you realize the palpability of the nothing, the glittering vacancy, itself. Take a drive in it. Cruise past every building on the Sunset Strip. Check on the availability of tacky condominiums. Later, park in the hills near the hollywood sign as the sun dips abruptly beneath the horizon and watch ten thousand lighted signs assert sudden, clamorous desires. If the charm has worked, you will have an excited urge to phone Ed Ruscha and tell him about your day. But, of course, he already knows.

Peter Schjeldahl, 'Ed Ruscha: Traffic and Laughter' (1985), *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978–1990*, ed. Malin Wilson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) 239–47.

Sheena Wagstaff
Comic Iconoclasm//1987

On Two Kinds of Laughter

Angels are partisans not of Good, but of divine creation. The Devil, on the other hand, denies all rational meaning to God's world. World domination, as everyone knows, is divided between demons and angels. But the good of the world does not require the latter to gain precedence over the former; all it needs is a certain equilibrium of power ... Things deprived suddenly of their putative meaning, the place assinged them in the ostensible order of things, make us laugh. Initially, therefore, laughter is the province of the Devil ...

The first time an angel heard the Devil's laughter, he was horrified ... The angel was all too aware the laughter was aimed against God and the wonder of His works. He knew he had to act fast ... And unable, to fabricate anything of his own, he simply turned his enemy's tactics against him ... Whereas the Devil's laughter pointed up the meaninglessness of things, the angel's shout rejoiced in how rationally organized, well conceived, beautiful, good and sensible everything on earth was ... Laughable laughter is cataclysmic. And even so, the angels have gained something by it. They have tricked us all with their semantic hoax. Their imitation laughter and its original (the Devil's) have the same name ... There are two kinds of laughter, and we lack the words to distinguish them.[1]

– Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

As Umberto Eco reveals in his novel *The Name of the Rose*, a mystery story centred on a long-hidden manuscript by Aristotle, in which the central thesis concerns the power of laughter: 'it [laughter] is elevated to art: through wit and metaphor, it obliges us to examine the truth of things more clearly.' The plot of the book concerns the efforts of an old and pious monk to prevent the contents of this Second Book of Aristotle from being known by both the religious community and society at large. He was keeping faith with the medieval fathers of the Church who reasoned that the Law – the control of the plebians – was imposed by fear through intimidation and humiliation. 'Laughter could teach men to have no fear, and then their cleverness could legitimize illustrious artifices ... If one day somebody, brandishing the words of the Philosopher, were to raise the weapon of laughter to the condition of a subtle weapon, if the rhetoric of conviction were replaced by the rhetoric of mockery', then the Church and its status would be totally undermined.

The Name of the Rose recalls Baudelaire's sentiments in his 1855 essay 'On the Essence of Laughter'.[2] In this he describes the orthodox view of laughter – the province of the ignorant and weak – being linked with the accident of an ancient Fall, a physical and moral debasement. It is the same laughter that the monk had such a great fear of, because it knows no fear. But where the latter regarded all humour as diabolic, Baudelaire described the changing nature of the comic when diabolic and angelic elements function in parallel. (He is of course referring to the gamut of nineteenth-century comicry which fed the modern comic idiom: pantomime, humorous broadsheets, buffoonery, melodramatic grotesqueries, and paintings displaying ironic wit.) 'As the comic is the sign of superiority, or a belief in one's own superiority, it is natural to hold that the nations of the world will see a multiplication of comic themes in proportion as their superiority increases.' A century later, America as a superpower has spawned flying superheroes who generally, through the force of over-developed or freak strength, earnestly implement the State's own convictions of right or wrong. Similarly the creations of the Disney empire, Mickey and friends, uphold equally strong moral certitudes and have been seen to operate as vehicles of a particular ideology.

By using comic iconography, artists do the same thing as making a joke: perturbing, provoking laughter, attacking presuppositions and conventions. By annexing the comic character, they recontextualize it, thus altering its 'meaning'. Like the Original Joke, the Fall, it threatens the established order of things. As well as appearing to blur the distinction between so-called 'high' art and popular culture, its seeming abandonment of seriousness has given art of this persuasion its special philosophical character. For while it celebrates the comic character, it is at the same time mocking. Its ambivalent laughter is directed against those in authority and also against the laughers themselves. Like Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival laughter,[3] it is the laughter of the masses, but directed against all people, including the carnival's participants. (Carnival laughter is separate from moralising laughter which laughs from an assumed position of superiority.)

It is this 'comic' laughter that has been echoed throughout the last thirty years by artists who have sought to deconstruct the existential basis of previous systems of cultural security. Being seen to laugh at the Fall demonstrates an acceptance by the artist that she is also a sign, so signalling the end of the notion of authentic selfhood. As Art & Language have wryly stated: 'The joke is the postmodern genre par excellence. It presents us with a perpetual category of failure of category.'[4] Yet recycled jokes get stale, and the comic business has always had its serious side. Through its incorporation of comic imagery some recent artwork attempts to stimulate thoughts concerning the real and counterfeit, metaphors of forgery or imitations. Sometimes it feels as if by

celebrating the mass-produced images of capitalism, many artists are simply eulogising an emptiness which would otherwise destroy them. They are afraid, and couch their fear in comic fakery by laughing on the surface and trembling underneath. [...]

1 [footnote 36 in source] Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Penguin, 1983.

2 [37] In Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Phaidon Press, 1964.

3 [38] Noted by Peter Wollen in *Komar and Melamid*, exhibition catalogue, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1985.

4 [39] In *Julian Opie*, exhibition catalogue, Lisson Gallery, London, 1984.

Sheena Wagstaff, extract from 'Comic Iconoclasm', curator's introduction, *Comic Iconoclasm* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987) 18.

Bruce Nauman
Breaking the Silence: Interview with Joan Simon//1987

Joan Simon Recently, you've returned to video for the first time since the late 1960s. In *Violent Incident* (1986), you not only moved from 'silents' to 'talkies', but you also used actors for the first time. Nevertheless, the video seems to pick right up on issues you've explored from the beginning. The chair is a central element in the action and the whole tape centres on a cruel joke. Again there is this persistent tension between humour and cruelty.

Bruce Nauman *Violent Incident* begins with what is supposed to be a joke – but it's a mean joke. A chair is pulled out from under someone who is starting to sit down. It intentionally embarrasses someone and triggers the action. But let me describe how it got into its present form. I started with a scenario, a sequence of events which was this: Two people come to a table that's set for dinner with plates, cocktails, flowers. The man holds the woman's chair for her as she sits down. But as she sits down, he pulls the chair out from under her and she falls on the floor. He turns around to pick up the chair, and as he bends over, she's standing up, and she gooses him. He turns around and yells at her – calls her names. She grabs the cocktail glass and throws the drink in his face. He slaps her, she knees him in the groin and, as he's doubling over, he grabs a knife from the table. They struggle and both of them end up on the floor.

Now this action takes all of about 18 seconds. But then it's repeated three more times: the man and woman exchange roles, then the scene is played by two men and then by two women. The images are aggressive, the characters are physically aggressive, the language is abusive. The scripting, having the characters act out these roles and the repetition all build on that aggressive tension.

Simon Sound is a medium you've explored since your earliest studio performances, films and audiotapes. The hostile overlayering of angry noises contributes enormously to the tension of *Violent Incident*.

Nauman It's similar with the neon pieces that have transformers, buzzing and clicking and whatnot; in some places I've installed them, people are disturbed by these sounds. They want them to be completely quiet. There is an immediacy and an intrusiveness about sound that you can't avoid.

So with *Violent Incident*, which is shown on 12 monitors at the same time, the sound works differently for each installation. At one museum, when it was in the

middle of the show, you heard the sound before you actually got to the piece. And the sound followed you around after you left it. It's kind of funny the way *Violent Incident* was installed at the Whitechapel [Gallery, London]. Because it was in a separate room, the sound was baffled [sic]; you only got the higher tones. So the main thing you heard throughout the museum was 'Asshole!'

Simon That's sort of the subliminal version of a very aggressive sound piece you used to install invisibly in empty rooms, isn't it?

Nauman You mean the piece that said, 'Get out of the room, get out of my mind'?[1] That piece is still amazingly powerful to me. It's really stuck in my mind. And it's really a frightening piece. I haven't heard it for a few years, but the last time I did I was impressed with how strong it was. And I think that it is one of those pieces that I can go back to. I don't know where it came from or how I managed to do it because it's so simple and straightforward.

Simon How did that come about?

Nauman Well, I had made a tape of sounds in the studio. And the tape says over and over again, 'Get out of the room, get out of my mind.' I said it a lot of different ways: I changed my voice and distorted it, I yelled it and growled it and grunted it. Then, the piece was installed with the speakers built into the walls, so that when you went into this small room – 10 feet square or something – you could hear the sound, but there was no one there. You couldn't see where the sound was coming from. Other times, we just stuck the speakers in the corners of the room and played the tape – like when the walls were too hard to build into. But it seemed to work about as well either way. Either way it was a very powerful piece. It's like a print I did that says, 'Pay attention motherfuckers' (1973). You know, it's so angry it scares people.

Simon Your most recent videotapes feature clowns [...]; why did you use such theatrical clowns?

Nauman I got interested in the idea of the clown first of all because there is a mask, and it becomes an abstracted idea of a person. It's not anyone in particular, see, it's just an idea of a person. And for this reason, because clowns are abstract in some sense, they become very disconcerting. You, I, one, we can't make contact with them. It's hard to make any contact with an idea or an abstraction. Also, when you think about vaudeville clowns or circus clowns, there is a lot of cruelty and meanness. You couldn't get away with that without make-up. People

wouldn't put up with it, it's too mean. But in the circus it's okay, it's still funny. Then, there's the history of the unhappy clown: they're anonymous, they lead secret lives. There is a fairly high suicide rate among clowns. Did you know that?

Simon No, I didn't. But it seems that rather than alluding to this melancholic or tragic side of the clown persona the video emphasizes the different types of masks, the historically specific genres of clowns or clown costumes.

Nauman With the clown videotape, there are four different clown costumes; one of them is the Emmett Kelly dumb clown; one is the old French Baroque clown (I guess it's French); one is a sort of traditional polka-dot, red-haired, oversize-shoed clown; and one is a jester. The jester and the Baroque type are the oldest, but they are pretty recognizable types. They were picked because they have a historical reference, but they are still anonymous. They become masks, they don't become individuals. They don't become anyone you know, they become clowns.

Simon In your tape *Clown Torture*,[2] the clowns don't act like clowns. For one thing, they're not mute. You have the clowns tell stories. Or, I should say, each of the clowns repeats the same story.

Nauman Each clown has to tell a story while supporting himself on one leg with the other leg crossed, in such a way that it looks like he is imitating sitting down. So there is the physical tension of watching someone balance while trying to do something else-in this case, tell a story. The takes vary because at some point the clown gets tired and falls over. Then I would stop the tape. Each of the four clowns starts from the beginning, tells the story about 15 times or so, falls over and then the next clown starts.

This circular kind of story, for me, goes back to Warhol films that really have no beginning or end. You could walk in at any time, leave, come back again and the figure was still asleep, or whatever. The circularity is also a lot like La Monte Young's idea about music. The music is always going on. You just happen to come in at the part he's playing that day. It's a way of structuring something so that you don't have to make a story.

Simon What's the story the clowns tell?

Nauman 'It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men said, "Tell us a story, Jack." And Jack said, "It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One of the men

said, "Tell us a story, Jack." And Jack said, "It was a dark and stormy night ..."'

1 [Footnote 2 in source] In the installation, the recording says 'Get out of my mind, get out of this room.'

2 [3] There are three 'clown torture' video installations, all from 1987: *Clown Torture; Clown Torture: I'm Sorry and No, No, No, No;* and *Clown Torture: Dark and Stormy Night with Laughter.*

Bruce Nauman and Joan Simon, extract from 'Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman' (January 1987); first published in *Art in America*, 76 (September 1988). The interview is excerpted from the film *Four Artists: Robert Ryman, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Susan Rothenberg* (Michael Blackwood Productions, 1988); reprinted in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words, Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003) 333–8.

Jörg Heiser

Curb Your Romanticism: Bas Jan Ader's Slapstick//2006

Some of Bas Jan Ader's most memorable works recall early slapstick comedy. Particularly in the silent films in which we see him falling in one way or another, he employed the simple means of this earlier tradition to reformulate – and to some extent parody – conceptual performance and its documentation, and the Modernist abstraction it had grown out of. In *Fall 1, Los Angeles* (1970), for example, we see the artist falling off the roof of his single-storey house in Claremont; in *Fall 2, Amsterdam* (1970), he loses control of his bicycle and plunges into one of Amsterdam's canals. In *Nightfall* (1971), he holds a heavy stone in each hand in turn until he can no longer support its weight and it falls, smashing and extinguishing two illuminated lamps on the floor. *Broken fall (geometric), Westkappelle, Holland* (1971), shows the artist falling sideways onto a sawhorse and into the bushes on a path leading to the Westkappelle lighthouse, which had been the subject of an early series of Mondrian paintings. The act recalls the comedian's classic visual gag of feigning drunkenness or trying to stand on an imaginary ship; but it also refers to Mondrian's rejection of the diagonal, which led to his falling out with his friend and fellow De Stijl member Theo van Doesburg. Ader makes the reference to Mondrian – whom he had studied closely – even more explicitly and comically in his series of photographs taken at the same spot, entitled *On the road to a new Neo Plasticism, Westkappelle, Holland* (1971), in which he is sprawled on the ground in a black suit mimicking the grid of a Mondrian painting with primary-coloured objects positioned around him: a blue blanket, a warning triangle in its rectangular red plastic box, and a yellow petrol can.

The slapstick – almost silly – element is all the more remarkable because Ader has been mythologized as the ultimate tragic artist because of his disappearance at sea while attempting a solo crossing of the Atlantic for the central element of his uncompleted trilogy *In search of the miraculous* (1975). And admittedly there is nothing very humorous about the silent black and white film *I'm too sad to tell you* (1971) – more melodrama than slapstick – in which we see the artist weeping, apparently so inconsolable with grief that he cannot even tell us why. In fact, a preparatory note for the work reveals that Ader considered including the following line in the film: 'The thoughts of our inevitable and separate deaths fill my heart with intolerable grief.'[1]

Of course there is a peculiar relationship between the tragic and the comic. Ader himself pointed out that his concern with falling was connected to failure

and tragedy.[2] And seminal figures such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton have always played on the tension between comic incident and tragic fate. In his book on the artist, Jan Verwoert argues that Ader ultimately takes recourse to the classical Greek model of the tragic hero who 'takes the conscious decision to carry out a plan that will inevitably lead to his fall.'[3] He refers to Ader's silent film *Broken fall (organic), Amsterdamse Bos, Holland* (1971), as a condensation of this paradigm: we see the artist hanging from the branch of a tree until his strength fails him and he falls into the narrow ditch beneath. In other words: the artist has knowingly put himself at risk by climbing up the tree and dangling over the water.

The question remains whether there isn't a crucial difference between Ader's act and that of the tragic hero. For what we see is not really an existential threat, quite the opposite – apart from maybe a bruised ankle, Ader escapes unharmed. Interestingly, we do not see Ader clamber up the tree; the film starts with him hanging in mid-air and ends with him crawling out of the ditch. Basically he has enacted the children's game, which appears, for example, in Maurice Sendak's famous picture book *Where the wild things are* published in 1963, in which little Max, dressed in a wolf's suit, sails in a little boat to the island of monstrous creatures, tames them by staring them down, is crowned their king, and proclaims that a wild rumpus shall begin – which climaxes in all the monsters merrily dangling from the trees.

Even though Bas Jan Ader's more solitary act inevitably takes on a certain existential gravitas by being isolated and captured on film, it nevertheless relies on the consoling knowledge that the artist's life has never actually been at risk. This is in stark contrast to the performances of Ader's Los Angeles contemporary Chris Burden, who had himself shot in the arm (*Shoot*, 1971), or pushed live electric wires into his chest (*Doorway to Heaven, November 15*, 1973). With regard to Ader's fatal attempt to cross the Atlantic, it should be stressed that his widow stated some months after his disappearance that Ader was convinced – and had convinced other sailors – that he was sufficiently experienced and well equipped to make the crossing unharmed; indeed Ader had already sailed from Morocco to Los Angeles in 1962, albeit in a larger boat and with another crew member.[4] Other works by Ader support the assumption that he was interested less in testing the limits of his body – i.e. putting it at risk – than in what is, according to Alan Dale, author of the book *Comedy is a man in trouble*, the essence of slapstick: 'a physical assault on, or collapse of, the hero's dignity'.[5]

Nevertheless, Jan Verwoert's reference to the classical tragic hero helpfully leads us straight to the crucial issue of the relationship between intention, act and effect: the classical tragic hero acts purposefully and forcefully, and ultimately sacrifices himself in order to enforce a resolution. The religious

martyr does so for the love of God, while the secular figure of the knight does so for the love of his country, or the lady he courts. One strain of comedy since the Enlightenment – from Don Quixote to Monty Python – thrives on the comic mishaps brought about by these worthy intentions. Another strain – that of Chaplin's slapstick for example – reverses this logic by relying on comic mishaps that inadvertently result in heroic deeds. In Chaplin's *The Tramp* (1915), the title character is charmed by the farmer's daughter who has just escaped from a trio of robbers. As he flirts awkwardly with her, he swings his ragbag containing a brick and, one by one, inadvertently hits each of her assailants over the head. Increasingly aware of his unintentional bravery, he rises to the challenge and bluffs until even the strongest of the three is sent packing in the belief that he has encountered an undefeatable strongman. Another classic example of the accidental tragicomic hero is the famous scene in *Modern Times* from 1936, in which Chaplin's character sees a red flag fall from a truck and picks it up. He pursues the vehicle waving the red flag to catch the driver's attention, all the while unaware that he is involuntarily heading a march of angry, striking proletarians. Chaplin's accidental revolutionary leader is eventually thrown in jail.

In Buster Keaton's films, the comic effect is triggered by the seemingly insurmountable forces his character faces. In *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), Keaton is cast as the weakling Willie who inadvertently saves the day when a cyclone and flood hit a small town. The film climaxes with the famous scene in which Keaton avoids certain death when the façade of a house falls on him because he fits neatly through an open window frame; the British artist Steve McQueen re-enacted the scene for his 1997 video *Deadpan*.

Bas Jan Ader turns the mishap itself into the ultimate and intentional performative act. On one level this simply highlights, as Verwoert observes, the 'existential adversity' of the everyday – much in the vein of Chaplin and Keaton's slapstick. On another level, however, it is neither an existential heroic act nor simply its parody, but precisely the short-circuiting of the two. While the classical tragic hero consciously decides to carry out the task at all costs, the slapstick hero either quixotically fails to complete it, or inadvertently succeeds through his hesitations and failures. Ader in turn accomplishes the comical act itself with the solemn purposefulness of a self-endangering act. While the conventional slapstick gag relies, according to Alan Dale, 'on a rupture in the expected link between physical effort and result',[6] Ader's pieces make it very clear that they are executed according to plan and that their outcome holds no surprise.

Ader's gentle rejection of the confrontation between the 'hero's dignity' versus its parodist collapse can be read closely in relation to his artistic peers in Los Angeles around 1970. While Chris Burden was the ultimate 'hero' of the risky performative act, John Baldessari was the ultimate parodist of heroics in video

performances such as *I am making art* (1971), in which he performs a series of small mechanical movements exclaiming 'I am making art' in sardonic reference to the weighty significance attached to physical movement in much body art and performance. Ader certainly didn't aim to discredit either of these artistic approaches (and might not even have had them in mind when making his pieces), but he nevertheless bypassed both the heightened sense of pathos and irony they represented.

Ader's use of slapstick also resonates with the undertones of class difference typical of the genre. His 1967 poster piece *Implosion / The artist contemplating the forces of nature* shows a photograph of Ader sitting in an armchair on the roof of his house (the same roof he will fall off in *Fall 1, Los Angeles* three years later), smoking a cigar, against a background of an actual sky plus fake cartoon clouds. The artistic hero who is, in the words of Lukacs, 'transcendentally homeless' (i.e., sitting on the roof like a bird), is fused with the idle armchair dandy: *The artist as consumer of extreme comfort* (1968), is a photograph of Ader in front of the fireplace that illustrates precisely that snug role. The photo series *Unfilled (Tea party)* of 1972 and the eponymous (but unauthorized and posthumously released) film could have come straight from one of P.G. Wodehouse's satirical stories, as the artist, wearing a suit and tie, crawls on all fours like a silly member of Bertie Wooster's Drone Club. He then drinks tea from a tea set placed under a large box, propped up with a wooden stick like an animal trap, which eventually falls over him: the refined gentleman trapped in a Minimalist box.

But Ader's enquiry into the 'bohemian bourgeois' steers clear of overt comic effect – there is no acrobatic grotesqueness in his movements or facial expressions, quite the opposite: there is seriousness in his actions, isolating and exposing the romanticist strain in the comical mishap as a means to isolate and expose the relation between failure and empathy. In this respect, the slapstick works are intricately linked to, rather than separated from, Ader's evocations of melodrama: both employ the genre traditions of an outmoded medium – silent film – as a means to destabilize the (then relatively new) stereotype of the Conceptual artist as a stem hero of critique who never embarrasses himself. But again, Ader is not simply a parodist. Rather, as a Dutch artist based in Los Angeles, this chasm between romanticism and slapstick at the heart of his work echoes the chasm between Europe and America: between the European school of thought leading from nineteenth-century romanticism via Freud to auteur cinema – the concept of psychological depth and singularity – and the American deadpan concern for repetition and social interaction that connects early slapstick with late Modernism.

Of course the Atlantic can be crossed: there are strong auteur strands in American cinema (Welles, Kubrick), and there are European slapstick comedians

such as Karl Valentin and Jacques Tati. But these cross-relations are actually triggered not least of all by the mutual relationship in the first place: for example, in Tati's *Jour de fête* of 1947, a French village postman sees a news reel hailing the efficient mechanized delivery methods of the US postal system, and the next day tries to compete using his bicycle (upon which he ends up in the water – ditto Ader).[7]

Viewed against this background, Ader's crossing the Atlantic as the central part of *In search of the miraculous* thus becomes not least of all an attempt to traverse the chasm of traditions. The tragedy is that his disappearance at sea was certainly *not* an intended kind of failure. For it seems that the 'miraculous' that Ader sought was the impossibility of being simultaneously the ultimate rationalist and the ultimate romanticist.

1 Christopher Müller, *Bas Jan Ader. Filme, Fotografien, Projektionen, Videos und Zeichnungen aus den Jahren 1967–1975* (Kunstverein Braunschweig/Bonner Kunstverein/Kunstverein München, 2000), reproduction of note book, page 24.

2 Betty van Garrel, 'Bas Jan Ader's tragiek schuilt in een pure val', in *Haagse Post*, 5: 1 (1972), quoted after Müller, op. cit., 60.

3 Jan Verwoert, *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006).

4 Lizy Bear and Willoughby Sharp, 'A telephone conversation with Mary Sue Ader, Los Angeles, May 28th, 1976', *Avalanche*, no. 13, summer 1976.

5 Alan Dale, *Comedy is a Man in Trouble. Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 3.

6 Alan Dale, op. cit., 4.

7 Jan Verwoert pointed out this parallel.

Jörg Heiser, 'Curb Your Romanticism: Bas Jan Ader's Slapstick', in *Bas Jan Ader. Please Don't Leave Me*, ed. Rein Wolfs (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006) 25–8.

A travelling salesman's car broke down one evening on a lonely road.

He asked at the only farmhouse in sight, 'Can you put me up for the night?'

'I reckon I can', said the farmer, 'but you'll have to share a room with my young son.'

'How do you like that', gasped the salesman, 'I'm in the wrong joke.'

PUNCHLINES

Carolee Schneemann
Interior Scroll//1975

Scroll 2
From *Kitch's Last Meal*

I met a happy man
a structuralist filmmaker
– but don't call me that
it's something else I do –
he said we are fond of you
you are charming
but don't ask us
to look at your films
we cannot
there are certain films
we cannot look at
the personal clutter
the persistence of feelings
the hand-touch sensibility
the diaristic indulgence
the painterly mess
the dense gestalt
the primitive techniques

(I don't take the advice
of men who only talk to
themselves)
PAY ATTENTION TO CRITICAL
AND PRACTICAL FILM LANGUAGE
IT EXISTS FOR AND IN ONLY
ONE GENDER

even if you are older than I
you are a monster I spawned
you have slithered out
of the excesses and vitality
of the sixties ...

he said you can do as I do
take one clear process
follow its strictest
implications intellectually
establish a system of
permutations establish
their visual set ...

I said my film is concerned
with DIET AND DIGESTION

very well he said then
why the train?

the train is DEATH as there
is die in diet and di in
digestion

then you are back to metaphors
and meanings
my work has no meaning beyond
the logic of its own systems
I have done away with
emotion intuition inspiration –
those aggrandized habits which
set artists apart from
ordinary people – those
unclear tendencies which
are inflicted upon viewers ...

it's true I said when I watch
your films my mind wanders
freely ...
during the half hour of
pulsing dots I compose letters
dream of my lover
write a grocery list
rummage in the trunk
for a missing sweater
plan the drainage pipes for

the root cellar ...
it is pleasant not to be
manipulated

he protested
you are unable to appreciate
the system of the grid
the numerical rational
procedures –
the Pythagorean cues –

I saw my failings were worthy
of dismissal I'd be buried
alive my works lost ...

he said we can be friends
equally though we are not artists
equally I said we cannot
be friends equally and we
cannot be artists equally

he told me he had lived with
a 'sculptress' I asked does
that make me a 'film-makeress'?

'Oh no', he said. 'We think of you as a dancer.'

Carolee Schneemann, scroll 2: extract of filmscript for *Kitch's Last Meal* (1973–75) read out by the artist in the second performance (1977) of *Interior Scroll* (1975). See footnote 6 on page 18 for details; reprinted in Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002) 159–60.

Hélène Cixous
The Laugh of the Medusa//1975

I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.

The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative.

Since these reflections are taking shape in an area just on the point of being discovered, they necessarily bear the mark of our time – a time during which the new breaks away from the old, and, more precisely, the (feminine) new from the old (*la nouvelle de l'ancien*). Thus, as there are no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break, what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project.

I write this as a woman, toward women. When I say 'woman', I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. But first it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the 'dark' – that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute – there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have *in common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes –| any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible.

I have been amazed more than once by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own which she had been secretly haunting since early childhood. A world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity. This practice, extraordinarily rich and inventive, in particular as concerns masturbation, is prolonged or accompanied

by a production of forms, a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful. Beauty will no longer be forbidden.

I wished that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst – burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! What's the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts? Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naïveté, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick? Well, shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble.

And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. (And why I didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great – that is for 'great men'; and it's 'silly'. Besides, you've written a little in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way, or because you wrote, irresistably, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty – so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until the next time.

Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not *yourself*. Smug-faced readers, managing editors and big bosses don't like the true texts of women – female-sexed texts. That kind scares them.

I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man. So only an oblique consideration will be found here of man; it's up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at: this will concern us once men have opened their eyes and seen themselves clearly.

Now women return from afar, from always: from 'without', from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture'; from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to 'eternal rest'. The little girls and their 'ill-mannered' bodies immured, well-preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. But are they ever seething underneath! What an effort it takes – there's no end to it – for the sex cops to bar their threatening return. Such a display of forces on both sides that the struggle has for centuries been immobilized in the trembling equilibrium of a deadlock.

Here they are, returning, arriving over and again, because the unconscious is impregnable. They have wandered around in circles, confined to the narrow room in which they've been given a deadly brain-washing. You can incarcerate them, slow them down, get away with the old Apartheid routine, but for a time only. As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark.

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove.

We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the bevies – we are black and we are beautiful.

We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking.

What happiness for us who are omitted, brushed aside at the scene of inheritances; we inspire ourselves and we expire without running out of breath, we are everywhere!

From now on, who, if we say so, can say no to us? We've come back from always.

It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her – by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a

movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self. [...]

Hélène Cixous, excerpt from 'Le rire de la méduse', *L'Arc*, 61 (1975); trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1976); reprinted in *Feminism – Art Theory*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 627–35.

NOT
HAVING
TO CHOKE
ON THOSE
BIG CIGARS
OR PAINT
IN ITALIAN
SUITS

Guerrilla Girls, *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, 1988

Guerrilla Girls
The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist//1988

Working without the pressure of success.

Not having to be in shows with men.

Having an escape from the art world in your 4 freelance jobs.

Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty.

Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labelled feminine.

Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position.

Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others.

Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood.

Not having to choke on those big cigars or paint in Italian suits.

Having more time to work after your mate dumps you for someone younger.

Being included in revised versions of art history.

Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.

Getting your picture in the art magazines wearing a gorilla suit.

Guerrilla Girls, text from the poster-work *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* (1988); reproduced in *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995) 53.

Richard Prince
Tell Me Everything: Interview with Stuart Morgan//1989

Stuart Morgan How did you begin painting jokes?

Richard Prince Well, the jokes came out of doing the cartoons, the cartoons came from looking at pictures of cartoons and that in turn resulted from considering various ways that advertising used illustration instead of photography. Before looking at advertisements I was looking at film stills. It's the way most artists move; looking at this, they notice that. What I was calling 'jokes' were in fact cartoons, so dropping illustration and working simply with text seemed logical. They began as something abstract. Gradually they became tragic in a quite unexpected way. The jokes came out of my writing too. Jokes are not like other kinds of sentences, especially the endings.

Morgan At the end something is tied up, but just as this happens everything bursts apart. In front of large audiences the effect of laughter sounds like waves breaking – exhilarating and terrifying at once, like a rough sea. You took a cartoon to pieces in 1986.

Prince I spent a summer copying Whitney Darrow as a way to keep drawing. The one I broke up – two men drinking at a bar and the one saying 'I'm missing and presumed dead' – is a Stan Hunt. That group of images, that gang, is academic but easy to understand if you yourself do the re-photographing. It's like being a movie director; you move around the image, shooting any part of it or all of it. It was the only gang I've ever done that with.

Morgan Why that cartoon?

Prince It's a joke on myself, on appropriation, on authorship. I'm missing and because of the death of the author I'm presumed dead. It's funny to me because I don't sit around thinking about such things.

Morgan Jokes don't have real authors, of course.

Prince Even cartoons don't have real authors. As far as I can tell, a lot of them are drawn first, then the punchline is added by someone else. Similarly, using cartoons was a way for me to hand over what I was doing to someone else. With

the jokes I use I'll see them repeated in other magazines or books. For example, 'I went to a psychiatrist. He said "Tell me everything." I did and now he's doing my act.'

Morgan That particular joke was then superimposed over sets of pictures which involved a couple and someone walking in on them and catching them out. Why did you do that?

Prince Cartoons have recurring patterns, like a person entering a room and discovering a husband or wife with a third person. (The other situation is desert islands.) A husband finding his wife in another man's arms has nothing intrinsically funny about it. And it's international; you don't need language. So I just took the captions of these cartoons and superimposed jokes. Since the caption is no help, it is about how to focus on a situation, and on the fact that at any one time I'm using about eleven jokes in rotation. In a year or so they'll change.

Morgan Like a stand-up comedian.

Prince I used to work for the stage crew in a New York nightclub and when the comedians came off-stage they were the most depressed, unfunny, demanding, mean-spirited people on earth. The transformation by which they become funny is unthinkable. [...]

Morgan [...] What are the jokes about? Taboo, abandonment, terror ...

Prince Personal problems, good problems, not liking yourself, liking yourself as much as you can ... I had no idea what the psychiatrist joke meant. Someone had to explain it to me. Then I didn't know where I located myself. Was I the patient or the psychiatrist? Whose act was I doing and who was doing mine? I ended up putting that joke on the Spectacolor board in Times Square. It was the first thing that came up on January 1st, 1988. The title was *Tell Me Everything.*

Morgan Timing like that has become more important recently.

Prince Now I've even begun signing and dating jokes to the second. I've never signed anything on the front because I felt it would interrupt the look of the work. But it shows how long it takes to write them. The comedian's timing, that wave breaking ... But it's also about a critical position towards the function of the artist and a relationship to an audience. In the eighties the romance of signing has returned – I've seen artists who sign pieces several times, as if they

are halfway through or at the end of a working day. Other people love this: it's something of the artist, like a diary. But doing it to the second is like saying 'Stop. Enough, already.' In terms of my own work, it was a way of ending a practice and beginning something from zero. I'm not associated with the hand; I'd been re-photographing images for ten years. Beginning the jokes was like starting over. I didn't know what I was doing. At the time sculptors were casting sculptures in bronze, making huge paintings, talking about prices and clothes and cars and spending vast amounts of money. So I wrote jokes on little pieces of paper and sold them for $10 each. I had a hard time selling them. One dealer bought two and asked for a 10% discount. So I decided that every six months I'd double the price. All this was possible because no one was looking at my work. That's a fairly good position sometimes. You can get away with a lot of things.

Morgan What was the reaction to the jokes?

Prince The same as the reaction to the re-photographed stuff ten years before. Complete disbelief. [...]

Morgan You've said: 'In the future no one will be famous.'

Prince There was a time when the famous were revered. Now fame is associated with clowns and fools. Gifted people will choose to step out of the public eye because it might be more of an advantage – or more manipulative – to know when to step in and step out again. More people will want that advantage. [...]

Richard Prince and Stuart Morgan, extract from 'Tell Me Everything: An Interview with Richard Prince', *Artscribe*, 73 (London, January/February 1989); reprinted in *What the Butler Saw: Selected Writings by Stuart Morgan*, ed. Ian Hunt (London: Durian Publications) 202–8.

Mike Kelley
Foul Perfection: Notes on Caricature//1989

The word 'caricature' calls to mind the shoddy street-corner portrait, the comic depictions of celebrities that line the walls of bars, the crude political cartoons in the opinion section of the daily newspaper – philistine images, which may provoke indifference or disgust in the educated art-lover. Yet probably in part because of this strong negative reaction, numerous artists have tried to draw caricature into the sphere of fine art. In the hot 'Let's have fun' populism of funk and East Village art and in the 'Let's get serious' populism of agitprop, in the cooler arena of Pop and in the post-Robert Rauschenberg formalism of painters like David Salle, caricature can be found. But throughout most of these attempts at incorporation, the low-art/high-art distinction remains firm: caricature is an alien element, meant to be tamed and transformed from its lowly status to a 'higher' one through the magic of art. At present, the cooler aesthetic is the more dominant, and the more critically sanctioned. Much contemporary artwork is understandable only in reference to the history and issues surrounding reductivist practice – especially Minimalism. But the low-art/high-art distinction becomes cloudy in some of this recent work; the *incorporation of* caricature is no longer the strategy, for the work actually *becomes* caricature. The historical referencing of reductivist paradigms here is only a legitimizing façade. This is a secret caricature an image of low intent masquerading in heroic garb.

Caricature as it is known today – a portrait that deliberately transforms the features of its victims so as to expose and exaggerate their faults and weaknesses – is of relatively recent origin. It did not exist before the sixteenth century, its development commonly being attributed to the Italian painters Ludovico and Annibale Carracci. Even in its earliest definitions, caricature – from *caricare*, to load, as in a 'loaded portrait' – was thought of as aggressive. To a writer from the circle of Gianlorenzo Bernini, for example, it already sought to discover a likeness in deformity. Yet in this way, he continued, 'it comes nearer to "truth" than does reality.' As the Carraccis themselves realized from the beginning, caricature is at root based on the idea of the essence, the inner truth.

As such, caricature has a kind of 'good' twin in less discordant attempts to essentialize the human form [...] Caricature, which uses deformation in the service of ridicule, and the idealized, heroic, classicist portrait, though they may appear on the surface to be very different, are at root linked in essentialism [...] It is interesting to think of these dualities of distortion – the one to make things better, the other to make them worse – as analogous to a primary dichotomy in

Modernist art. For Modernism too distorts, and predominantly in one of two modes: through expressive abstraction or through reduction. My own undergraduate art education was an endless string of assignments to perfect these binary methods of producing art objects. A pair of examples will suffice: one was a life-drawing exercise in which the hand, once comfortable with depicting the figure, was allowed to sort of roam on its own, producing an extension of the figure linked by 'essence' to the original model but dissimilar enough from it to have its own life. The second had to do with drawing from reproductions of Old Master paintings and boiling them down to their primary forms, the essential cubes, spheres and cones that constitute them, or, more essential yet, their squares, circles, and triangles.

This latter effort was clearly a contemporary sort of Platonism, though where once the painter built up from the forms of the ideal, we moderns were expected to strip back down to them. As for the first exercise, it was obviously related to the intentional distortions of caricature. Yet it was idealized, stripped of caricature's aggressive tendencies. The exercise posited Modernist expressionism as an essentialism that dispensed with the negative. This was appropriate, since 'fine art', art associated with the 'high' ideas of culture, is traditionally seldom confrontational or vituperative. And despite the contributions of artists like Georg Grosz or John Heartfield, much of Modernism was ostentatiously 'high'. This was as true of expressionists like Willem de Kooning as it was of reductivists like Piet Mondrian. In general, the difference for which the expressionist artist strove was situated around the split, not between the 'bad' and the 'good' but between the orderly and the expressive. That split, however, refuses to stay clear of a whole set of intertwined dichotomies: organic/geometric, adorned, unadorned, soft/hard, person/social, female/male. Modernism may have supposed itself 'above' caricature, but it progressed unavoidably into what it was trying to avoid: bad/good, the aesthetics of morality [...]

Scatology abounds in caricature and in other forms of satire. From Greek comedies through Rabelais and Swift, to contemporary low humour, anal and faecal imagery, it is frequently used in a political context. (Sandor Ferenczi goes so far as to say that diarrhoea is anti-authoritarian in that it reduces educational measures – toilet training -to an absurdity. It is a mockery of authority.)[2] If faeces can be an agent of besmirchment, so can any foul substance – any substance associated with taboo, and thus with repression. [...]

To make an aside in this regard, a current television game show called *Double Dare* features on-the-verge-of-adolescent boy/girl teams in sports activities that often require them to cover each other in gooey foodstuffs. At certain points they must fish into facilely suspect substances labelled 'brain juice', 'mashed

maggots', 'fish lips', 'dead worms', and so on, in order to win prizes. Part of the show's attraction to youth of that age is surely their fear of their dawning sexuality, which is associated with taboo, or 'disgusting' activities and substances. Bruno Bettelheim's discussion of the 'frog prince' fairy tale is relevant here: a young girl must sleep with or kiss a frog, and feels revulsion at having to do so, but when the task is completed, the frog becomes a desirable prince. The story, Bettelheim remarks, 'confirms the appropriateness of disgust when one is not ready for sex, and prepares for its desirability when the time is ripe'.[3] *Double Dare* occasionally brings on parents, whose submersion in gunk obviously has a different meaning: this is the pure pleasure of defiling an authority figure.

In low comedy and political cartoons, reductive and distortional practices exist side by side. Here, both approaches are set up to attack false or hated authority, for in the context of caricature's distortions, the refined heroic figure becomes a comic butt. In 'fine art', on the other hand, reduction tends to be associated with the revelation of the ideal. Today, geometric forms are probably the most common type of public sculpture. And fine artists tend to keep distortion and reduction apart: David's political cartoons, for example, were meant for the popular audience, and were deliberately assaultive and distortional, but his salon paintings were based on idealizing classical principles. Both reduction and distortion are rarely used aggressively in fine art.

Yet reduction can express other dimensions besides the ennobled, as one can see by comparing Picasso's stylization of organic forms to the treatment of a similar theme in J.G. Ballard's science fiction novel *The Crystal World* (1966). Where Picasso's reductions tend to accentuate the tragic, Ballard's are deadening, ultimately apocalyptic. *The Crystal World and* other books of Ballard's – *The Drought* (1965), and *The Drowned World* (1962), for example – approach the theme of world's end not as a cataclysm but as a slow process of homogenization. Time stops when things have been reduced to one essential property – crystal, earth, water. The positive aspects of this transformation, which can be seen as a version of the mystical notion that 'all is one', are here equated with a kind of addiction: in *The Crystal World*, characters previously crystallized but not revived seek to return to their former pleasant state of non-identity. The impulse brings to mind Roger Caillois' definition of mimicry in nature as 'depersonalization by assimilation to space'[4] and, ultimately, Freud's concept of the death instinct – the desire to return to the uterine existence before the ego's formation.

The death instinct is embedded in a good deal of the art production of the 1960s and 1970s, especially Minimalism and serial practices concerned with the objectification or freezing of time through repetition. Though the surface

meaning of much of this art has to do with structure and material, the work ultimately refers back to and mirrors the bodily presence of the viewer. This thesis, the basis of Michael Fried's attack on Minimalism,[5] was borne out in the body art that developed later, which applied reductivist tendencies to complex psychological and corporeal issues. Where Minimalism was well-mannered, this work was confrontational – even 'grotesque'. Bruce Nauman's various films of repeated body movements and manipulations, Vito Acconci's evocation of architectural libido in *Seedbed* (1972), Chris Burden's packaging of the fear of violence as sculpture in *Shoot* (1971) – all hit the modernist moral schism between form and decoration head-on: this was an aesthetic of sculpting with flesh. The practices of body art were perversely defined as somehow essential forms – marking the body, piercing it, distorting it. And all this was approached in a removed, formal way. The difference between the distortion of the body in much body art and in expressionist performance and painting can in some ways be compared to a distinction between the grotesque and caricature: in caricature, distortion is for a specific purpose, in most cases to defame, but in the grotesque it is done for its own sake, as a formalized displacement of parts. Its only purpose is to surprise the viewer.

One of the initial attractions of the caricature was the speed with which it could be executed, as if its spontaneity set it closer to the original workings of the mind than a more considered drawing. This aesthetic of haste contributed to the adoration once lavished on Michelangelo's unfinished 'slave' carvings, in which the figure is barely freed from the stone, and appears to be receding back into the Platonic archetype that gave it birth. In 1981, Charles Ray made a sculpture called *Memory of Sadat.* A rectangular steel box lies on the floor; from it extend a human arm and leg. These organic marks on the geometric primal form are a distortion. A fouled primal form is a caricature of the very *notion of* perfection ... and when we see this, like the children on *Double Dare* when they see their parents and teachers covered in a disgusting mess, we cannot hold back a shout of glee.

1 See Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (1952) (New York: Schocken Books, 1964) 190.

2 See Sandor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality,* (New York: Norton, 1963).

3 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage, 1977) 290.

4 Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' (1935), *October,* no. 31 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, Winter 1984) 30.

5 See Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum,* (New York, Summer 1967).

Mike Kelley, excerpt from 'Foul Perfection: Notes on Caricature' (1989), *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism,* ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002) 20–39.

Barbara Kruger
Not Funny//1990

If you think there's a long stretch of unoccupied emotion between laughter and sorrow, then think again. Because the two are linked in a messy tango of slippages, mixed messages and quadruple entendres. Demanding a commentary that vigilantly patrols the dicey terrain between vulnerability and megalomania, arrogance and abjection, the comedic is motored by its intimacy with objectification, by its ability to step outside of it all and still get under its own skin. This produces a kind of pathos, a well-choreographed ritual of jokey self-humiliation that reaches both its apex and nadir in the stand-up form, with its proscenium positioning and static, direct address. From its predictable kvetching to its emblematic farewell (the by now mega-Vegasized 'Thanks guys, you've been terrific'), the stand-up genre is less cogent as content than as an excruciatingly tragic form of roteness: a formality yielding few laughs but capable of puking up volumes about the devolution of ironic commentary from powerfully poignant eloquence to vacuous schtick.

Planted in front of the inevitable brick walk of innumerable comedy clubs, mouthing off on scads of network talk shows and cable specials, these practitioners constitute an army of insistently frantic yucksters whose ineptitude makes the possibility of good material recede like a meekly retreating hairline. But it's a sad reminder of the tenor of our times that no matter how inept and pathetic, no matter how desperate and driven, these performers can't hold a candle to the delusionary zeal, weird presentational styles and comic intensity of some of our public officials, the politicians that we're daft or brain dead enough to vote into office. After all, what performer comes close to delivering the laughter provided by our Vice President: by his comedically mesmerizing ineptitude, by his eyes glazed over by blissfully undisturbed delusions, by his ego construction, so brazenly unencumbered by reality testing? He takes us to another place in time, an almost existential realm where we've cast our fate to the wind in a chill world. But while comedy is defined in part by its investment in commentary, by its parodic relationship to lived experience, the laughter elicited by Dan Quayle's ridiculousness is tinged by the terrifying fact that there is no pun intended: what rivets us is not the ironic distancing of an examined life but the fascinating arrogance of stupidity.

Barbara Kruger, 'Not Funny' (1990), in Barbara Kruger, *Remote Control: Power, Cultures and the World of Appearances* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994) 226–7.

Marlene Dumas
The Blonde, the Brunette and the black Woman//1994

I don't want to sound like Michael Jackson saying
'It don't matter if you're black or white',
because that is, like the issues concerning male and
female, unfortunately still painfully burning bright!
This is a sensitive area for almost everybody.
Yet it is not political correctness that inspired these
images, but the loss of integrity and shifts of identity
that affects everything and most of us, everywere.

These paintings consciously allude to the politics of colour
and the colour of paintings.
They are even a bit funny. Nothing wrong with
black humour.

I have never experienced paintings as windows or mirrors.
It is impossible to tell what is up and what is down,
who is above and who below. We just don't know.

Is she humiliating him or is he oppressing her?
Is it a prescriptive or a descriptive position?
The blonde, the brunette and the black woman all share
the same snapshot of myself as source material, although
this does not imply self-portraiture. (When the Barbie doll
went into production they made 3 blondes for every one
brunette). The factual information that this type of paintings
have to offer is almost non-existent.

It has been said that you can't judge a book by its cover
and you can't judge a woman by her lover. Yet it seems,
you have to judge a painting by its cover and especially
by its lovers.

Marlene Dumas, 'The Blonde, the Brunette and the black Woman' (1994), from *Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Balie, 1998) 72.

Jo Anna Isaak
The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter//1996

In the beginning was the gest he *f* jousstly says, for the end is with woman, flesh-without-word, while the man to be is in a worse case after than before since sheon the supine satisfies the verb to him! Toughtough, Tootoological. Thou the first person shingeller. Art, an imperfect subjunctive.
– James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

The history of Western art begins with images of laughter – the laughter of women. In *Lives of the Artists*, the founding text for the discipline of art history, Giorgio Vasari tells us that the young Leonardo da Vinci began his artistic career by portraying laughing women. These heads of laughing women, '*teste di femmine, che ridono*', first fashioned in clay and then cast in plaster, were 'as beautiful as if they had been modelled by the hand of a master' (quoted in Freud, 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood', 1910: 111). The laughing heads have been lost from the canon of Leonardo's art, but when Freud turns art historian in his analysis of the childhood of Leonardo, he returns to Vasari's account of these images of laughing women: 'The passage, since it is not intended to prove anything, is quite beyond suspicion', Freud assures us, thereby arousing our suspicions (ibid.).

Something is at stake here: Freud suspects some obsessional behaviour in the way Leonardo returns to images of laughing women in subsequent portraits. He examines the account of the lost fragments for a clue to the most famous enigma in the history of art – the unsolved riddle of the expression on the Mona Lisa's face. Haunted by the smile himself, Freud discovers that it has become an obsessional topic amongst art historians. He presents the early commentary on this painting as one might set out pieces of evidence in an unsolved mystery. Freud finds, as he sifts through various biographers of Leonardo, that they too have become obsessed with the enigmatic smile: 'Walter Pater, who sees in the picture of Mona Lisa a "presence ... expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men have come to desire" ... writes very sensitively of "the unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it, which plays over all Leonardo's work"' (ibid.: 110). The idea that two contrary elements are combined in the Mona Lisa's expression recurs in several commentaries: For Angelo Conti the smile is more than a smile; it is a laugh, and what that laugh expresses is something quintessentially female, both seductive and threatening: 'The lady smiled in regal calm: her instincts of conquest, of ferocity, all the heredity of the

species, the will to seduce and ensnare, the charm of deceit, the kindness that conceals a cruel purpose – all this appeared and disappeared by turns behind the laughing veil and buried itself in the poem of her smile ... Good and wicked, cruel and compassionate, graceful and feline, she laughed.' (quoted in ibid. 1910: 109).

After citing many passages of this sort, none providing a satisfactory answer to the enigma, Freud announces that he is giving up on his investigations: 'Let us leave unsolved the riddle of the expression on Mona Lisa's face, and note the indisputable fact that her smile exercised no less powerful a fascination on the artist than on all who have looked at it for the last four hundred years' (ibid.: 109). But this is a ruse, for it is exactly at this moment that Freud links the smile of the Mona Lisa to the laughing terracotta juvenilia and then to Leonardo's mother: 'It may very well have been that Leonardo was fascinated by Mona Lisa's smile for the reason that it awoke something in him which had for long lain dormant in his mind – probably an old memory' (ibid.: 110). Freud goes on to assert that 'the smiling women are nothing other than repetitions of his mother Caterina, and we begin to suspect the possibility that it was his mother who possessed the mysterious smile – the smile that he had lost and that fascinated him so much when he found it again in the Florentine lady' (ibid.: 111).

As with the lost laughing heads, there is very little information about Caterina, whom Freud describes as 'probably a peasant girl' who had her illegitimate child 'torn' from her when she was very young. Her name does not appear in Leonardo's journals except in connection with a meticulous accounting of her funeral expenses. The one thing Freud feels certain he knows about her is that she is remembered by her son as laughing. 'This memory was of sufficient importance for him never to get free of it when it had once been aroused; he was continually forced to give it new expression' (ibid.: 110). Freud is one of many scholars who think Leonardo strove to portray this expression in all of his works. Something about these laughing women and their enigmatic expressions has long been disquieting the discourse of art history.

Acknowledging that biographers are frequently drawn to their subjects because they feel they have characteristics in common with their 'hero', Freud undertakes his own obsessional investigation of what lies behind the 'laughing veil'. In his essay 'On Narcissism', written four years after the essay on Leonardo, Freud makes an odd series of connections. He links women and humorists in a rather bizarre sequence that includes great criminals, children, cats and large beasts of prey, as those who seem to have maintained an original, primary narcissism that the adult male has renounced. Women who love only themselves are, in Freud's account, 'the type of female most frequently met with, which is the purest and truest one' ('On Narcissism', 1914: 88), and he declares these characteristics in women are the greatest source of fascination for men. 'It is as if

we envied them for maintaining a blissful state of mind – an unassailable libidinal position which we ourselves have since abandoned' (ibid.: 89). Such women, he feels, while very charming, are the most likely to provoke complaints about their enigmatic nature. We remember that in the history of Freud's writings, the woman who provoked the most complaints of this sort was the Mona Lisa. It may be that we can read back into Freud's account of Leonardo's attachment to his mother the early outlines of the theory of primary narcissism.[1] What is important about Freud's discovery to historians of art is that it points to a breach in the assumed patriarchal contract of artistic production, which has always been a contract between father and son – the constant production of signs, by men, in furtherance of predominantly masculine perspectives, anxieties, and desires. Freud's discovery suggests that the impetus for Leonardo's artistic production derives from an attempt to recover a maternal identification, more specifically, an identification with a woman who maintained a primary narcissism.

While narcissism may seem a rather doubtful characteristic for women to claim as an asset, a number of feminist theoreticians have seen narcissism, along with hysteria, as a potential site of resistance, especially to specular appropriation. 'For once', says Mary Jacobus, 'Freud defines *woman* not in terms of lack but in terms of something she has; primary narcissism replaces the missing phallus.' (*Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, 1986:105).[2] In his essay on narcissism Freud does not indicate what advantage women might derive from maintaining primary narcissism; in fact, he offers motherhood as a way for the narcissistic woman to overcome this condition and learn to love on the masculine model. It is not until the essay *On Humour*, written in 1927, that we begin to see the *potential* of narcissism for women. Now narcissism, rather than merely being a vehicle to elicit the admiration or envy of men, has become a laudable quality in its own right. What Freud calls the 'triumph of narcissism' occurs as a result of 'the grandeur' of humour. 'Humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation ... The grandeur in it clearly lies in *the triumph of narcissism*, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than the occasions for it to gain pleasure' ('Humour', 1927: 162).

We recall that the human beings who are able to maintain this primary narcissism into adulthood include women, criminals and humorists. The importance of this grouping becomes clearer when, to illustrate the dynamics of the humorous gesture, Freud gives the example of a criminal, about to be hanged on a Monday, who remarks, on the way to the gallows, 'Well, this week is beginning nicely.' A certain rationale for narcissism now becomes apparent. The

criminal, like the narcissistic woman, is outside the law; both are attempting to evade its effects, if only for a moment, by asserting pleasure. Freud assures us in the essay on narcissism that the theory was not developed out of 'any tendentious desire on my part to depreciate women'. ('On Narcissism: An Introduction', 1914: 89). Freud is not, in fact, discussing biological imperatives, but rather social structures, the constraints they impose upon the individual, and the psychic mechanisms the individual develops to evade these constraints.

At the end of Marleen Gorris' film *A Question of Silence* (1983) we are given an instance of how humour may be used by women to evade the law. Three female criminals on trial for murder begin to laugh at the questions put to them by the prosecutor. This is the type of laughter Freud describes as capable of displaying a 'magnificent superiority over the real situation'. ('Humour', 1927: 162). Their laughter 'breaks up' the courtroom and, by extension, the law. It is infectious, spreading to other women in the courtroom and then out into the film audience. The women file out of the courtroom laughing and, in turn, the women in the movie theatre leave laughing. This is an example of the revolutionary power of women's laughter.

In his short essay on humour Freud comes very close to delineating a political strategy for those without access to power: '*Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious.* It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstance.' (op. cit., 1927: 163). We are reminded here of Leonardo's mother whose real circumstances were made even more unkind when her infant son was 'torn' from her and given to her 'better born rival'. Are we then able to read in the expression portrayed in so many of Leonardo's paintings the faint outline of a case study of primary narcissism, a characteristic that enabled the young mother to refuse to suffer and transcend her real circumstance? Was Caterina possessed of this 'rare and precious gift' – rebellious laughter? Was it because Leonardo was so successful in portraying the potential of this expression that later men looking upon this work have recognized in it something they both desired and experienced as a threat?

In suggesting that women have a special purchase on laughter as a strategy of liberation, Freud anticipates a number of contemporary theories linking the calculated optimism explicit in the feminist project with pleasure – particularly a sensual or erotic pleasure associated with the body. If, as Walter Benjamin suggests, 'there is no better start for thinking than laughter. And, in particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul' (*Reflections*, ed. Edmund Jephcott, 1978: 235), this laughter or *jouissance* may be a catalyst that could enable a break or subversion in the established representational and social structure.

A number of contemporary women artists are conducting an epistemological investigation of the reality that, as Roland Barthes rather bluntly put it, 'has already been written for us'. In the only way available to them, in the guise of an amusement, they are *instancing* the continual discovery of ways to interrogate the generative nature and generative bounds of representation, making it dis-*play* through its own playful lapsus its structural elements, its inviolable conventional limits, its immanent possibilities. In this strategy the conventions and power of language are a disrupted by a witticism or a pun, operating like a meta-language athwart the text – annihilating, for an instant, its domination by the challenge of non-sense.

These strategies are related to a much older and more overtly political theory of laughter: Rabelais' theory of laughter as misrule, a laughter with the potential to disrupt the authority of church and state. Such ideas may have 'influenced Barthes' and Julia Kristeva's notions of laughter as libidinal license, the *jouissance* of the polymorphic, orgasmic body. While investigating the revolutionary potential of the workings of the avant-garde text Barthes was pleased to discover what he called an 'admirable expression' – the 'body of the text'. The expression stresses the corporeality of language, rather than its instrumentality or its meaning. 'Does the text have a human form?' Barthes asks. 'Is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body.' (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 1975:17). For Kristeva and other French feminists this erotic body is the territory of the mother, what Kristeva terms the 'semiotic', verbal play, not controlled by symbolic conventions. It is the language that experimental writing liberates, absorbs, and employs, a 'pre-sentence making disposition to rhythm, intonation, nonsense [that] makes nonsense abound with sense: makes one laugh.' (*Polylogue*, 1977: 25).

Subsequently, in *Desire in Language* Kristeva suggests it might be necessary to be a woman to explore the potential insurgency of this heterogeneous body, to take up what she calls 'that exorbitant wager of carrying the rational project to the outer borders of the signifying venture of men'. (*Desire in Language*, 1980: x). Whenever an attempt is made to establish a visual practice that escapes patriarchal specularization or a specifically feminine mode of writing that is not female mimicry of male discourse, the vexed question of essentialism arises. The fear is that such theories, as Terry Eagleton puts it, 'may be no more than a high-falutin version of the sexist view that women babble'. Eagleton's defence of Kristeva is important to our understanding of the work of artists engaged in disruptive play: 'It is important to see that the semiotic is not an alternative to the symbolic order, a language one could speak instead of "normal" discourse: it is rather a process within our conventional sign-systems, which questions and transgresses their limits ... On this view, *the feminine* – which is a mode of being

and discourse not necessarily identical with women – *signifies a force within society that opposes it.*' (*Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 1983: 190). Michèle Montrelay goes even further and suggests that it is one thing to desire, but to realize this desire, to engage in a maternal rather than a paternal identification, to enjoy Jocasta, results in the 'ruin of representation'. In this enjoyment 'repression is no longer anything but a gigantic pantomime, powerless to assure the throwing back into play of the stake of desire. We know that, for want of a stake, representation is not worth anything.' (in *The Woman in Question*, 1990: 259). Perhaps the women artists discussed in the following chapters are able to take that risk and enjoy it more readily because, as Montrelay suggests, femininity does not know repression, even though, as she reminds us, 'it is femininity, not women, that can take on such a status'. (ibid.: 260). Or perhaps, as women, they have nothing to lose when the 'fictive' props of the social structure are removed. [...]

Jo Anna Isaak, extract from introduction, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 11–16.

Dave Hickey
Frivolity and Unction//1996

The darker side of channel surfing: I was ensconced in a motel in the heartland on a Sunday evening. Abandoned by my keepers at the local university, I was propped up on the bed, eating a burrito and swooping through the channels when I realized that I had just flipped past a rather bizarre primetime option. Reversing my board into the curl, I flipped back a couple of channels, and, by jiminy, there it was: the auction room at Sotheby's, in the teaser for *60 Minutes*. I was teased, naturally, so I 'stayed tuned' for what turned out to be a televised essay on the fatuity and pretentiousness of the art world. Morley Safer played Gulliver in this essay. Various art personalities appeared in the role of Houyhnhnms. I just sat there frozen, like a deer in the headlights. Then I caught the drift, relaxed, and tried to get into it. No one was being savaged about whom I cared that much. Nothing very shocking was being revealed. It was just the same old fatuous, pretentious art world, and nothing confirms me more strongly in my choice of professions than a good healthy dose of sturdy, know-nothing, middle-American outrage at the caprices of this world.

Over the years, I have become something of a connoisseur of mid-cult portrayals of the art world. Among my favourites are the six or seven 'art episodes' of *Perry Mason*, with their egregious fakes and heartless frauds, their felonious art dealers, patronizing critics, vain artists, and gullible collectors. I also keep a warm place in my heart for Waldo Lydecker, the psychopathic art critic and connoisseur played by Clifton Webb in *Laura*. For a kid like me, stranded out in the big bland, beguiled by glamour and hungry for some stylish action, the image of the effete Waldo in his posh Manhattan digs, reclining in his perfumed bath, shattering someone's reputation with a whisk of his poison pen, was a deftly alluring one – and remains so, in fact.

No more alluring, however, than the rough, improvisational world that I inferred from Luce Publications' sneering coverage of Jackson Pollock's unruly triumph and Andy Warhol's apocalyptic opening at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia – where they took down the paintings to make room for the party. For myself, and for many of my friends, these news magazine stories provided our first fleeting glimpse of something other – of something braver and stranger. We recognized the smirky, condescending tone of these stories, but kids are expert in decoding this tone, which invariably means: This may look like fun, but don't do it. But it still looked like fun, and thus, far from retarding the progress of peculiar art and eccentric behavior, poor

Hank Luce inadvertently propagated it, seeding the heartland with rugged little paint-splashers and frail, alien children with silver hair.

The world portrayed in Morley Safer's essay on *60 Minutes* did not look like fun. No matter how artfully decoded, the piece was not going to lure any children out of the roller-rink in Las Cruces. It was obsessed with money, virtue, and class-hatred – issues ill-designed to put your thumb out in the wind. Safer's piece did, however, fulfil the conditions of satire: It was unrepresentative, ungenerous, and ruthlessly unfair – but it was not wrong. It was wrong-headed, ignorant, and ill-informed about art, as well, but if these afflictions disqualified folks from commentary, more than half of the art community itself would be stricken mute. So I was cool with Safer's jibes. It's a free country and all like that, and who the hell watches *60 Minutes*, anyway, unless they're stranded in a motel out by the highway in the middle of America?

Also, Safer's piece did present some possibilities. It was not going to lure any loonies out of the woodwork, but what a delicious *straight* man Safer was! – what an exquisite target for dazzling *repartie*, for manifestations of *élan*, demonstrations of *panache*, and other French attitudinal stratagems that might constitute a lively and confident response to Morley s mid-cult unction. 'Morley who?' 'Sixty what?' 'You watch TV on Sunday night?' 'Don't you have any *friends*!?' Even rudimentary dish like this would have been welcome, but it never materialized. In fact, a great many of my colleagues just lost it. What seemed routinely unfair to me was construed by them as cruelly *unjust!* – and this 'injustice' was quickly transformed into 'oppression', conjuring up, once again, the fascist heel, stomping down upon the frail ladybug of 'the art community'.

In the following weeks, people who should have known better filled the air with self-righteous bleats of indignation and defence – no easy task since one could hardly attack Safer without seeming to defend the perspicacity of West Side collectors, the altruism of Sotheby's auctions, and the *gravitas* of Christopher Wool. Even so, the art world just capitulated. Far from exhibiting magisterial disdain, the director of a major American museum even appeared with Safer on *The Charlie Rose Show*. Challenged by Safer with the undeniable fact that contemporary art lacks 'emotive content', this director of a major museum insisted, in effect, that 'It does *too* have emotive content!' confessing that he, personally, had burst into tears upon entering Jenny Holzer's installation at the Venice Biennale. *Well, didn't we all*, I thought (there being tears and tears), and at that moment, had there been an available window or website at which I could have resigned from the art world, I should certainly have done so.

I couldn't believe it. Within the year, I had seen similar and even more acerbic pieces on the music business and the film industry in primetime, and the

members of *these* communities had somehow managed to maintain their composure – had kept their wits about them and simply refused to credit the Church Lady standards to which they were being held accountable. None of my colleagues (excepting the redoubtable Schjeldahl) quite rose to this challenge, and it occurred to me that their pedantic squeal was not dissimilar to the aggrieved hysteria with which the French Academy responded to the father of my profession, La Font de Saint-Yenne, when he published the first *Salon* in 1737 – a tract that is no less entertaining, ignorant, and ill-informed than Safer's. So I found myself wondering why the music and film communities could respond to bourgeois punditry with such equanimity, while the French Academy and the contemporary art world went certifiably ga-ga. I came up with one answer. Music and movie people are not in denial about the frivolity of their endeavour, while the contemporary art world, like the French Academy, feels called upon to maintain the aura of spectacular unction that signifies public virtue, in hopes of maintaining its public patronage. It was like a *Brady Bunch* episode: 'Accused of frivolous behaviour and fearful of losing their allowance, the Brady kids take Holy Orders and appear on *Charlie Rose*. 30 min. Colour.'

So here's my suggestion: At this moment, with public patronage receding like the spring tide anyway and democracy supposedly proliferating throughout the art world, why don't all of us art-types summon up the moral courage to admit that what we do has no intrinsic value or virtue – that it has its moments and it has its functions, but otherwise, all things considered, in its ordinary state, unredeemed by courage and talent, it is a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do. We could do this, you know. And those moments and those functions would not be diminished in the least. Because the presumption of art's essential 'goodness' is nothing more than a *political fiction* that we employ to solicit taxpayers' money for public art education, and for the public housing of works of art that we love so well their existence is inseparable from the texture of the world in which we live.

These are worthy and indispensable projects. No society with half a heart would even think to ignore them. But the presumption of art's essential 'goodness' is a conventional trope. It describes nothing. Art education is *not* redeeming for the vast majority of students, nor is art practice redeeming for the vast majority of artists. The 'good' works of art that reside in our museums reside there not because they are 'good', but because we love them. The political fiction of art's virtue means only this: The practice and exhibition of art has had beneficial public consequences in the past. It might in the future. So funding them is worth the bet. That's the argument; art is good, sort of, in a vague, general way. Seducing oneself into *believing* in art's intrinsic 'goodness', however, is simply bad religion, no matter what the rewards. It is bad *cult* religion when professing one's belief in art's 'goodness' becomes a condition of membership in the art community.

So consider for a moment the enormous benefits that would accrue to us all, if art were considered bad, silly, and frivolous. Imagine the *lightness* we would feel if this burden of hypocrisy were lifted from our shoulders – the sheer *joy* of it. We could stop insisting that art is a 'good thing' in and of itself, stop pretending that it is a 'good thing' to do – to do 'good' – and stop recruiting the good, serious, well-educated children of the mercantile and professional classes to do it, on the grounds that they are too Protestant, too well-behaved, too respectful, and too desirous of our respect to effect any kind of delightful change. We could abandon our pose of thoughtful satiety, reconceive ourselves as the needy, disconsolate, and desiring creatures that we are, and dispense with this pervasive, pernicious, Martha Stewart canon of puritan taste with its disdain for 'objects of virtue' and its cold passion for virtue itself.

We could just say: 'Okay! You're right! Art is bad, silly, and frivolous. So what? Rock-and-roll is bad, silly, and frivolous. Movies are bad, silly, and frivolous. Basketball is bad, silly, and frivolous. Next question?' Wouldn't that open up the options a little for something really super? – for an orchid in the dung heap that would seem all the more super for our surprise at finding it there? And what if art were considered bad *for* us? – more like cocaine that gives us pleasure while intensifying our desires, and less like penicillin that promises to cure us all, if we maintain proper dosage, give it time, and don't expect miracles? Might not this empower artists to be more sensitive to the power and promise of what they do, to be more concerned with good effects than with dramatizing their good intentions?

What if works of art were considered to be what they actually are – frivolous objects or entities with no intrinsic value that only acquire value through a complex process of socialization during which some are empowered by an ongoing sequence of private, mercantile, journalistic, and institutional investments that are irrevocably extrinsic to them and to any intention they might embody? What if we admitted that, unlike seventeenth-century France, institutional and educational accreditation are presently insufficient to invest works of art with an aura of public import – that the only works of art that maintain themselves in public vogue are invariably invested with interest, enthusiasm, and volunteer commitment from a complex constituency that is extrinsic both to themselves and to their sponsoring institutions?

If we do this, we can stop regarding the art world as a 'world' or a 'community'or a 'market' and begin thinking of it as a semi-public, semi-mercantile, semi-institutional agora – an intermediate institution of civil society, like that of professional sports, within which issues of private desire and public virtue are negotiated and occasionally resolved. Because the art world is no more about *art* than the sports world is about *sport*. The sports world

conducts an ongoing referendum on the manner in which we should cooperate and compete. The art world conducts an ongoing referendum on how things should look and the way we should look at things – or it would, if art were regarded as sports are, as a wasteful, privileged endeavour through which very serious issues are sorted out.

Because art doesn't matter. What matters is how things look and the way we look at them in a democracy – just as it matters how we compete and cooperate – if we do so in the sporadic, bucolic manner of professional baseball, or in the corporate, bureaucratic manner of professional football, or in the fluid, improvisatory manner of professional basketball. Because, finally, the art world is no more a community than Congress is a community, although, like Congress, it is in danger of *becoming* one and losing its status as a forum of contested values where we vote on the construction and constituency of the visible world. Works of art are candidates, aspiring to represent complex constituencies. So it is important that the value of art, *as* art remains problematic – and equally important that none of us are disinterested in its consequences, or involved just for the 'good' of art, which is not good. So consider these three benefits.

First, if art were considered a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do, works of art could fail. They could do so by failing to achieve a complex constituency – or by failing to sustain a visible level of commitment and socialization – and this failure would be public and demonstrable, since everyone involved would be committed to their own visual agendas and none to the virtue of 'art'. Such failure, then, would constitute an incentive to quit or to change – with the caveat that works of art with any constituency at all may sustain themselves in marginal esteem until, perhaps, their time has come. The practice of maintaining works of art in provisional esteem simply because they *are* works of art and art is good, however, robs artists of the primary benison of mercantile civilization: certifiable, undeniable, disastrous failure.

In warrior cultures there is no failure. There is only victory and death. In institutional cultures there is neither failure nor success, only the largesse or spite of one's superiors. Failure, however, is neither death nor the not-death of institutional life; it is simply the failure of one's peers (or the peer group to which one aspires) to exhibit any interest in or enthusiasm for one's endeavours. And there is no shame in this. In fact, such failures constitute the primary engine of social invention in Western societies, because these failures mean that you are wrong or that your friends are wrong. If you suspect that you are wrong, you change. If you think your friends are wrong, you change your friends, or, failing that, become a hobbyist. There is no shame in this, either.

Second, if art were considered a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do, art professionals, curators, museum directors, and other bureaucratic support-

workers might cease parading among us like little tin saints – like Mother Teresa among the wretched of Calcutta – and our endeavours would be cleansed of the stink of their unctuous charity. Because if everyone's involvement in the frivolity of art were presumed to be to some extent self-interested, these caregivers would have to accept the obligation of taking care of *themselves* in pursuance of their own ends, and if these ends were just to hang around with artists and put on shows out of which nothing can sell, they could finance these purportedly public-spirited self-indulgences themselves.

This would abolish a fiction that is nowhere confirmed in my experience: that the art world is divided into 'selfish commercial people' and 'selfless *art* people' – the selfish commercial people being the artists, critics, dealers, and collectors who take the risks, produce the product, and draw no salary – the 'selfless *art* people' being the disinterested, public-spirited, salaried support-workers, who take no risks, produce no product, and dare not even *buy* art with their art-derived salaries, lest they be guilty of 'conflict of interest'. The truth is that *everyone* is interested and self-interested and should be. Everyone waters their own little flower (although some do so at less risk than others). Moreover, *everyone* is public-spirited: Everyone who waters their little flower tends the garden, as well, because no one is such a fool as to imagine their flower might flourish if the garden goes to seed.

Yet we continue to presume that honest virtue somehow inheres in those art functionaries who receive salaries, ideally from public sources, and that vice just naturally accrues to those who must live by their wits. Through the exquisite logic of Protestant economic determinism, virtue is ascribed to those who can afford to live nice, regular middle-class lives as a consequence of their submission to whatever authority dispenses their salary, and those who disdain such authority are, well, problematic. For the first time in history, in American art circles, the term 'commercial artist' does not designate a guy who draws Nikes for *Sports Illustrated*. It designates an artist without a trust fund who has been unable to secure a grant or a teaching job.

If everyone declared their own self-interest, however, brought their own little flowers out of the hothouse and took responsibility for acquiring the wherewithal to water them, artists, critics, and dealers, who get paid by the piece, could stop parenting their self-appointed parents by donating their production to be frittered away or auctioned off by the support systems that supposedly support *them* – which, in fact, only erodes the market for the work donated and almost certainly ensures the need for continued charity. Having said this, we must remember that presumptuous demands for theatrical gratitude by self-appointed caregivers are not local to the art world; they are the plague of this republic. The police complain that citizens don't support them;

museums and alternative spaces complain that artists don't support them; radicals complain that workers don't support them; feminists complain that women don't support them. Nobody will do anything for anybody anymore, it seems, without a big hug in return. Yet, if such voluntary care constituted genuine advocacy, these demands would not be made. Thus, when they are made, they may be taken as self-serving and ignored. Making and selling and talking about art is simply too much fun and too much work to be poisoned by that perpetual begging whine: 'We're only trying to help!'

Finally, if art were considered a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do, I could practise art criticism by participating in the street-level negotiation of value. I might disregard the distinctions between high and low art and discuss objects and activities whose private desirability might be taken to have positive public consequences. As things stand, my function as a critic is purely secondary unless I am writing or talking about work in a commercial gallery. Otherwise, I am a vestigial spear-carrier in aid of normative agendas. In commercial galleries and artists' studios, the value of art is problematic by definition; and in these spaces, dealers, collectors, critics, and any other committed citizen who is willing to risk something enter into an earnest colloquy about what this silly, frivolous stuff might be worth.

If I praise a work in a commercial space, I invest words in it and risk my reputation. In doing so, I put pressure on the price by hopefully swaying public opinion. If I praise an exhibition in an institutional space, however, I am only confirming public policy. And since no art is for sale, I am really doing nothing more than the institution itself: giving the artist 'exposure' (which should be a felony) and reinforcing the idea of art as a low-cost, risk-free spectator sport when in fact it is a betting sport. Thus, my institutional bets are nothing more than fodder for grant applications and resumes – a fact that becomes clear when I choose to detest an institutional exhibition, since, in doing so, I am questioning the fiduciary responsibility of expending public funds on such an exhibition and undermining the possibility of future funds. This, I have discovered, is taken very seriously indeed, although it has *nothing* to do with investing art with social value and everything to do with art's presumed, preordained virtue and the virtue of those who promote it.

So, I have been thinking, if art is 'good' enough to be deserving of public patronage, just what does it do? I would suggest that since such work must be designed in compliance with extant legislation and regulatory protocols, it can only work on behalf of this legislation and those protocols. It can encourage us not just to obey the laws that we all fought so hard to pass, but to *believe* them, to internalize the regulatory norms of civil society into a 'cultural belief system'. Unfortunately, art that aspires to this goal is nothing more or less than *tribal* art,

a steady-state hedge against change and a guarantee of oppression in the name of consensus, however benign.

To cite an instance: a young art professional, in aid of this tribal agenda, actually had the gall to use Robert S. McNamara's Vietnam-era expression 'winning their hearts and minds' in my presence. When I recovered from my flashback, I told her that, in my view, if you catch their eye, their hearts and minds will follow. She didn't even get the reference, and I could tell that it seemed perfectly reasonable to her that artists would subordinate their endeavours to the norms of 'right-thinking people'. This is good tribal thinking. In mercantile democracies, however, the practice of secular art, from Edouard Manet to Cindy Sherman, has invariably been the product of 'wrong-thinking' made right. Because such works represent more than what they portray. They represent us in the realm of the visible, and if they represent enough of us, and if we care enough, yesterday's 'wrong-thinking' can begin to look all right. It's a dangerous game, but it's the only one in town.

So, I'll tell you what I would like. I would like some bad-acting and wrong-thinking. I would like to see some art that is courageously silly and frivolous, that cannot be construed as anything else. I would like a bunch of twenty-three-year-old troublemakers to become so enthusiastic, so noisy, and so involved in some stupid, seductive, destructive brand of visual culture that I would feel called upon to rise up in righteous indignation, spewing vitriol, to bemoan the arrogance and self-indulgence of the younger generation and all of its artefacts. Then I would be really working, really doing my thing, and it would be so *great!* And it is *going* to happen, is already beginning to happen. The question is whether or not we will recognize it when it catches our eye.

Dave Hickey, 'Frivolity and Unction', *Art Issues*, no. 43 (Summer 1996), reprinted in Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997), 199–209.

Dan Cameron
The Mirror Stage//2000

[...] The world at large became aware of Paul McCarthy at a pivotal moment, 1992, with the exhibition 'Helter Skelter' at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA). McCarthy's contribution to that survey of the dark side of Los Angeles art was a full-scale staged environment titled *The Garden* (1991–92). Realized in part thanks to the artist's serendipitous discovery of the prop trees made for the 1960s television show *Bonanza*, the piece discloses its 'secret' only after the viewer is in close proximity to the raised grove of trees and rocks. Life-sized, mechanized father and son figures, whose pathetic efforts at copulating with a tree and a patch ground, respectively, are both humorous and frightening discoveries and become archetypes for a primal violence that is uniquely American. Left by themselves in a wilderness that is implicitly understood as a fragment of paradise, the figures defile both the landscape and the sacred bond between generations. Not only has McCarthy ventured onto the highly charged terrain of interfamilial sexuality in this work, he also makes us uncomfortably aware of our corporeal relationship to the father and son figures. As visitors to an art museum, our position is located inside a building, where our visual access to a full-scale representation of an outdoor space is partly obscured, resulting in an ingenious metaphor for thwarted desire. The aloofness of the two figures, combined with the brutality of their actions, makes us voyeurs: our complicity with the behaviour view is directly tied to our physical distance from it.

With *The Garden*, McCarthy was able for the first time to transmit the ephemeral qualities of his performances into a permanent construction that could be experienced without the artist's presence. This breakthrough also paved the way for a dramatic surge in the artist's productivity. During the next few years he would create an impressive number of mechanized works, some freestanding and others installation-based, which combine his commitment to the idea of performance with the expanded sense of site that video and installation artists had brought about. As McCarthy's technical capacities expanded, his sense of subject matter became more focused, resulting in freestanding works like *Cultural Gothic* (1992), as well as highly complex installation works like *Bossy Burger* (1991). A kind of sequel to *The Garden*, *Cultural Gothic* extends the father-son theme into a psychic territory that seizes on bestiality as a metaphor for hidden family violence. A suburban-looking father, his young son, and a stuffed goat stand in ascending order on a raised

platform; the father's hands are placed protectively on the child's shoulders, as the boy's hands rest on the animal's haunches. At the beginning of the cycle, the father looks around, then signals for the boy to begin. The boy looks at the father for approval (as does the goat), then, after nodding to the goat, begins thrusting his hips repeatedly at the goat's ass while the father looks on. When the boy has finished, the father's head bobs up and down in approval; after a pause, the cycle begins all over again. As with *The Garden*, the jerky, mechanized movements of the figures, while emphasizing their absence of realism, actually work to heighten the quality of horror transmitted by the action. By revealing the concealed violence implicit in American family life, McCarthy eliminates the possibility of psychologically distancing oneself from what is taking place; the viewer laughs and recoils at the same time. [...]

As the first installation that relocates McCarthy's performance methods inside the place where the action occurs, *Bossy Burger* is one of McCarthy's most successful works and a milestone in installation art of the 1990s. Constructed using cast-offsets from the defunct television series *Family Affair*, in which cozy American values were delivered with saccharine sweetness, *Bossy Burger* is first encountered as a seedy, open-ended structure in which decomposing carnage mutely testifies to a strangely comic, even naive, violence. Destroyed furniture and walls, violated appliances and rotting foodstuffs can be easily viewed through each of the set's windows and doors, but this rubble only seems real in relation to the action in the accompanying video, which plays continuously on two monitors. The artist, wearing a chef's uniform, clown shoes and a mask of the grinning face of *Mad Magazine* icon Alfred E. Neuman, stars in a riveting hour-long video performance, beginning as his babbling but jolly persona prepares to demonstrate how to cook a meal. McCarthy's methodical transformation of the mundane ritual of a cooking show into an incoherent sequence of increasingly violent and erotic stunts becomes a hypnotic exercise in applied madness. As he drags a Styrofoam container of hamburger meat, a turkey leg, a gallon of milk, and huge quantities of mayonnaise and ketchup into the action, along with furniture and cooking utensils, the apparent fact that McCarthy's character is thoroughly deranged does not seem to diminish his sense of focused self-possession, which in turn lends the video a strangely relaxed pace. In fact, the most surreal aspect of *Bossy Burger* stems from the chef's oblivious pleasure in the chaos he creates, as if everything is unfolding just as it should in some parallel universe where he is the sole inhabitant. Drawing out this aggravated clash between decorum and madness, McCarthy returns to the fundamental distinction between outside and inside: the ordered world that we inhabit, which operates as a sort of perch from where we gaze transfixed into the opposite realm of fantasy run amok. We feel safe in part

because we know that the chef cannot escape the confines of his set (although he does make repeated attempts). But this safety is challenged by the character's howling buffoonery, which strikes a disturbing chord of familiarity in a society where unspeakable acts of brutality and violence are increasingly committed by individuals with little or no awareness of the consequences of their actions.

Channelling the energy of his 1970s and 1980s performances into an installation format has enabled McCarthy to overcome the most demanding technical and aesthetic hurdles found in his earlier work. The first and perhaps most important of these involves the evocation of a specific place. Although a number of artists working in video have successfully transformed the viewing environment through the use of expanded projection or installation techniques, and others (including McCarthy) have created powerful statements with no more than a single monitor, very few have been able to merge the video's content and its viewing conditions with such intensity as McCarthy. As we watch McCarthy's installation videos, our viewpoint constantly oscillates between what is taking place on screen and the charged aftermath that serves as backdrop for its documentation. Despite the fact that all our senses indicate that the scene we are witnessing took place in this same environment, the degree of transgression embodied by each character's behaviour is so extreme that it is difficult to assimilate this awareness. Our natural disappointment at not having been present at the actual performance is tempered with relief over the buffering effect of video, which may well be the main reason we can bear to watch the performance at all. This charged ambivalence in turn imbues the set with an acutely surreal sense of place, overflowing with equal degrees of violence and comedy.

Another important obstacle overcome by McCarthy's distinctive variation on site-specific video installation in the 1990s involves his use of props to amplify the power of the accompanying narrative. While the set in *Bossy Burger* functions as a way of anchoring the activity to a quasi-naturalistic place, succeeding works like *Heidi* (1992, in collaboration with Mike Kelley), *Pinocchio Pipenose Householddilemma* (1994), *The Painter* (1995), and *Santa Chocolate Shop* (1997) use settings in which the specificity of the location does not take on the same degree of importance as the lingering presence of the objects that have been left behind. The double-decker domestic setting of *Heidi*, based on a generic image of a Swiss cottage on one side and Adolph Loos' American Bar on the other, seems tame in comparison with the grisly presence of the attendant dolls, which lie alongside each other in bed like hastily arranged corpses. The box-and-tunnel structure of *Pinocchio*, which is predicated on the rambling narrative of the video, enables the transfer of identity from masked actor to life-sized Pinocchio doll to take place symbolically, in part by giving the absent

human an escape route which the abandoned doll (also in bed) cannot use. The assumed role of the artist as perpetrator, who has fled the scene without covering up his traces, partly explains why, in both examples, the charged presence of the props offers such a marked contrast to the less dramatic design of the set itself. As the narrative complexity of the accompanying videos increases, McCarthy no longer requires that the setting be recognizable or functional, merely that it suggest an easily transgressed barrier between the spectator on the outside and the artist's disturbing activities within.

With his more recent works, *Painter* and *Santa Chocolate Shop*, McCarthy shifts the spatial emphasis even further, in the first example permitting viewer access to the darkened studio set to view the video, and in the other bringing spectators into close proximity of the set while projecting the previously recorded videos onto the perimeter walls. Both works also involve multiple performers, a development that seems part of McCarthy's current incursion into films created for multiple projection within customized settings (1997's *Saloon Film* being his most ambitious creation to date). With *Painter*, we enter the dishevelled studio of a third-rate abstract expressionist painter, littered with half-finished canvases, where we sit and watch a video that has been recorded using the same paintings as props. As we behold the degrading and fetishistic behaviour carried out by the characters (artist, dealer, collectors) in the video, it strikes us that it differs from the sharply denned hierarchies of the art world more in degree than in substance. Also, because *Painter* is that rare example of McCarthy's recent work in which the performance artefacts are also art objects of a sort, our inability to examine them closely only serves to emphasize that the myths McCarthy is exploring are much more important than their more celebrated by-products. The opposite effect takes place with *Santa Chocolate Shop*, in which the set for the previously recorded action also functions as a projection box. As with *Bossy Burger*, the viewer is able to peer inside the structure, but the absence of a video component invariably places the viewer outside the centre of the action. We are not trapped in the aftermath of *Santa Chocolate Shop* so much as we are put in doubt as to whether the activities on the accompanying video really occurred in the same place.

With the gradual introduction of new possibilities for linking spatial and behavioural concerns, McCarthy's work over the past few years has achieved a conviction and acute grasp of psychic trauma which few if any of his contemporaries can match. There is no shortage of artists willing to peer closely at the dark underside of the American psyche, but McCarthy does so from a unique perspective; he does not believe himself to be separate from what he perceives. The images and texts that suffuse his art are drawn directly from both media-generated ideals of behaviour and the depths of his own psyche; his

characters and settings are a universal repository of the fears, obsessions, and conflicts that face the human species at an evolutionary crossroads. The irony made clear by McCarthy's art is that we have reached a point where people can be instantly in touch with the furthest reaches of the planet, yet we are beset by increasing sectarian violence, prejudice, intolerance, and mutually assured ignorance of what makes us different from one another and from other species.

Without parroting the triumphalist call that has brought us repeatedly to the brink of extinction, McCarthy lets us know how seductive the call to cultural entropy really is. He shows us sides of the American character few of us can endure at sustained close quarters, and he does so at enormous risk. Rather than offer yet another vision of liberation through attainment, he reveals the horror that lies on the other side of the mirror of American strength and prosperity. One of the key implications of his work is that this entire facade of well being and harmony must be shattered before we can ever articulate a credible vision of who we really are. It is a far from impossible task, but it requires coming face to face with a reality that is as terrifying as its opposite is seductive.

Dan Cameron, 'The Mirror Stage', in Dan Cameron and Lisa Philips, eds, *Paul McCarthy* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art/Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000) 57–63.

Gregory Williams
Jokes Interrupted: Martin Kippenberger's Receding Punch Line//2006

There is one point on which most interpreters of Martin Kippenberger's legacy seem to agree: it is only through recourse to the anecdote that we are capable of gaining any significant purchase on his work. [...] Kippenberger was well aware of the anecdote's draw for both artist and audience; it gives the impression of dialogue and shared ideas, appearing to produce a bond, however tenuous, between producer and recipient. His vehicle of choice for weaving an ever-expanding web of anecdotes was the joke, or *Witz*. Many of his works possess an aesthetic residue left behind by the verbal jokes that were partially recorded within the space of the image and in the appended title. Run-of-the-mill jokes tend either to be up to date, preying on current political or social ills and mocking those responsible, or they fit into classic categories, such as ethnic or profession-based themes. Regardless of the format, the telling of traditional jokes has long been a relatively tired narrative form, despite its resurgence during the age of the Internet and email message forwarding. According to one joke theorist, the form has suffered from a loss of the ability to edify, one of the key virtues associated with the *Witz* of the Enlightenment. Carl Hill writes that from the eighteenth century onwards the 'punch of tendentious jokes often contained a far-reaching yet immediate critique of repressive social structures'.[1] Hill blames the jargon of post-structuralism and theory in general for trapping the joke within a 'protective theoretical hypostatization'.[2] While not wanting to claim that Kippenberger knowingly sought to rescue comedy from repressive theory, he surely recognized a moribund narrative device that could be exploited to register the cultural pessimism felt in the late 1970s by members of his generation in West Germany.

Kippenberger belonged to a group of artists who turned to joking partly as a way of dealing with the postmodern predicament of occupying a position of secondarity, or late arrival. The joke's very blandness, its conservatism, held appeal for Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Georg Herold, Werner Büttner and others as they emerged in the art schools and gallery scenes of Berlin, Cologne and Hamburg in the wake of the so-called *Tendenzwende*, or change of socio-political tendency, of 1973–74. This term was used then, and would be used again in 1982 following the election of Helmut Kohl as Chancellor, to describe the rightwards shift within West German politics that for many signalled the permanent demise of the idealistic projects of the 1960s. Artists who came of age after the onset of post-1960s pessimism often chose semantic obscurity and

linguistic play over direct political messages that others like Joseph Beuys and Jorg Immendorff had still circulated throughout the 1970s. This is not the same as claiming that politics were excised entirely from this group's practice (as if such a thing were possible, or even desired). Rather, the political is referenced obliquely through the crab-like movements of visual and textual jokes spawned by well-known images from the media. [...]

Kippenberger and his colleagues occupied the space between incisive criticality and what Diedrich Diederichsen has termed the 'Coming of Cynicism', which he, perhaps ironically, considers to be a 'genre' in itself.[3] In the process, the artists have experienced both the advantages and pitfalls of humour and irony: they can function as highly valuable tools, affording a degree of conceptual flexibility that allows conflicting meanings to be communicated with great subtlety, but they can also quickly lead to complicity with the object of critique, or collapse into mere stylistic hybridity. The joke as I am considering it here is less a formula than a metaphor, a fallback solution that could take on a wide variety of forms. In the most straightforward cases, a gap emerges between the image and the work's title, many of which read like a punch line. More complicated on an aesthetic level are those pieces in which words find their way onto the terrain of the picture, with pictorial and textual components competing with the title for the viewer/reader's attention. A wide field thus opens up within which the works oscillate between excessive legibility (pictures lifted from porn magazines, for example) and the aesthetic of the in-joke, itself reliant on the power of the anecdote.

Like jokes, the anecdote has suffered in an age when oral history traditions are obsolete as primary transmitters of information. Walter Benjamin recognized this development already in his 1936 essay on the figure of the storyteller, whose position was jeopardized in the aftermath of the First World War, a time when 'experience [had] fallen in value'.[4] Jokes and anecdotes are at their best in verbal form, which retains all the facial tics and bodily twitches lacking in the textual or pictorial version. It is thus not surprising that so many writers are drawn to the original scene of spoken exchange in the studio or pub, where the joke was first told. One of many former Kippenberger assistants, the English artist Merlin Carpenter, has aptly described the crucial role of studio help in translating the in-joke to a wider audience. What he calls the 'secret explainer' is the intriguing idea that a great number of work titles and concepts derived from the assistants, implying that a public element was built into the artist's working method.[5] But despite any gestures towards comprehensibility that such a process suggests, Kippenberger is the member of the group who most thoroughly pursued the alienating effects of a work of art that provides an abundance of clues but no clear answers. The negativity at the heart of much of

his work is partially mitigated by the initial sense of freedom granted by his open narratives. One can enjoy getting lost in the cross-references or coming up with possible thematic threads. Yet for many members of his general audience, especially those not privy to his particular sense of humour or fluent in German, the groups of paintings and drawings can represent an excess of options, a total lack of guidance that can finally seem overwhelming. The sense of freedom is short-lived; Kippenberger's observer is subsequently struck by the absence of a coherent conceptual framework, like a joke without a punch line.

With certain works, it is more accurate to say that they are all punch line and no joke. A representative example is the 1982–83 series *Schade, dass Wols das nicht mehr miterleben darf* (*A pity that Wols isn't alive to see it*), which features six individual works – each with its own longish title – that hang in a block. One can read the group in any direction, allowing for various narratives or points of connection to unfold. The two most consistent formal motifs are walls and orifices, opening up linkages among the images, but in general narrative transparency is denied. Looking to the titles for clarification does not necessarily provide any help. The upper-left painting, for instance, is called *Zurück vom Meer ist das Scheckbuch leer, am Samstag hat der Arbeitslose Ruh, da hat das Arbeitsamt zu* (*Back from the sea and the checkbook's empty, on Saturday the unemployed have their repose, since the job centre's closed*). We do see two ship silhouettes in one painting, as if through a porthole, but otherwise the relationship between picture and title is tenuous. Similarly, the upper-right painting is titled *Zelle von Andreas Baader* (*Andreas Baader's cell*), making reference to charged political events of five years before. A brush sweeps dust from the rim of a hole in what looks like a concrete wall that may or may not be a prison cell, but no explanation of the orange and yellow monochrome fields making up the remainder of the picture is readily available. And finally, while the agitated surface treatment of the lower-middle painting (*11.11 elf Uhr* [*11/11 eleven o'clock*]) might vaguely bring Wols' painting style to mind, little else serves to link the single picture to the series, nor to the older German artist.

Kippenberger's preference for indirectness did not, of course, make his works any less humorous, but a certain element of surprise was usually kept intact. Within the visual space of his paintings and drawings he rarely announced that his intention was to make you laugh. An exception that proves the rule is found in his 1993–95 series of drawings on hotel stationery, in the exhibition *Über das Über* (*About the About*). Here Kippenberger included a rendering of fried eggs and bacon bracketed by the words *eine Witzigmann Kippenberger Creation* (*A Funnyman Kippenberger Creation*). Printed in a typeface with an old-fashioned look, it is one of the few instances where Kippenberger deliberately spelled out his self-appointed role as jokemeister. Instead of telegraphing his jokes, he

usually had them enter through the back door. We may recognize that we have encountered something amusing, but often the exact source of the humour is tough to locate. This is partly a result of how Kippenberger favoured a comedic mode that hid its provincial inspiration behind the transparent banality of foodstuffs, celebrity, the media and popular culture in general, i.e., the wide world of consumption. In this instance, he draws on the story of the Austrian Eckart Witzigmann, star chef and founder of Aubergine, a Munich restaurant that in 1979 received the first 3-star designation given to a German establishment by the Michelin guide. Witzigmann's well-publicized fall from grace in a 1993 cocaine scandal was too good for Kippenberger to resist; the word *witzig* (funny) begged to be appropriated. Typical of Kippenberger's approach, the *Witzigmann* drawing relies on current events to imply that there is enough in the local press to laugh about without having to come up with too many new ideas.

Just what ultimately defined the core of Kippenberger's comedic project is difficult to pin down today, despite its having taken place in the recent past. It was plainly not his priority to develop methodological coherence; he was far more interested in exploring how a picture could convey a speedily hatched concept, how specific forms are required in order to enable, as Roland Schappert has put it, 'the rescue of the quick joke'.[6] The seductive manoeuvrability of the simulacrum was in the air in the 1980s, so the question becomes to what extent Kippenberger's coded allusions to lived experience were part of a conscious strategy or an accidental product of his working method. In a photograph printed on a poster advertisement for a 1987 exhibition at the Galerie Grässlin-Erhardt in Frankfurt, an out-of-shape and exhausted-looking Kippenberger stands trapped in a forest of signs. Words, mostly single, are written on pieces of cardboard cut into the shapes of arrows pointing to the right or left, all of which hang from lengths of string that dangle in front of a sheet-covered wall. We try vainly to discern a pattern or set of connections among the terms; several varieties of fish, people's names (Oehlen, Ernst Jünger), and other fairly random verbs and nouns compete for our attention. The title of the exhibition, printed below the photo, is *Einfach geht der Applaus zugrunde* (*The Applause Simply Dies*), a play-on-words since the arrows move from the wall onto the floor (*zugrunde gehen* literally means 'to go to ground'). Detached signifiers with no obvious correlation to each other, they recall Jean Baudrillard's labelling of simulation as a 'descriptive machine';[7] any potential contact with the 'real' is left to the viewer's imagination. Here Kippenberger takes on the role of poster boy for an aspect of the postmodern condition.

With other works of this period, such as the painting *Kaputtes Kind* (*Broken Child*) from 1985, language invades the image itself, plastering its surface with

textual fragments. An assortment of self-made bumper stickers in the then-ubiquitous 'I Love ...' format (they appear in many works by Kippenberger from the mid-1980s, arising from an initial collaboration with Oehlen) covers the face of a crudely grimacing child. Placed over the eyes, the phrase 'I Love Eternety [sic]' threatens to blind this member of a younger generation, her vision obscured by an explosion of empty catchphrases that invoke the slogans of advertising. The broad spectrum of accessibility is on display here: From the topicality of 'I Love Mad Max' to the crass suggestiveness of 'I Love Durchbruch von hinten' (breakthrough from behind), from the self-referentiality of 'I Love No go home' to the ironic fatherly glorification of 'I Love Polke + Baselitz', virtually any viewer can find something to latch on to. Most of them are not laugh-out-loud funny, but all of them are at least awkward and inane enough to be recognized as having been produced in a fit of laughter on the part of the artist/s. That we might somehow still find our way back to the original context of their amusement is a more doubtful prospect.

Ultimately, the unstable output of the joke machine that churned relentlessly in Kippenberger's studio did not prevent him from occasionally offering a picture composed of a more traditional set-up/punch line structure. Perhaps the best example of such a work is the legendary 1984 painting *Ich kann beim besten Willen kein Hakenkreuz entdecken* (*With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika*). A medium-size canvas painted in oil and silicone, it forms a clear separation between the picture itself, which stands in for the narrative background, and the title that provides the punch line. Consisting of a jumble of intersecting and overlapping cubic rectangles in grey, white, yellow and red against a dark grey/black ground, it suggests Cubist spatial 'deconstruction' as well as the outward-directed motion of a Suprematist composition. The nods to modernist abstraction are tempered by a slightly cartoonish linearity, with some of the forms more drawn than painted, and the loose swirling lines of clear silicone gel that overlay the whole image seem to mock the rigidity of the geometry. Without a title to provide context, this picture would likely remain stranded in the realm of pastiche, one more example of Kippenberger's talent for stylistic quotation. Yet the text, with its reference to West Germany's attempts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) in the 1980s, lends the picture a strong element of topicality and critical focus.[8] From an art-world perspective, he takes a dig at German artists like Markus Lüpertz and Georg Baselitz, who denied that their militaristic motifs (boots, helmets, guns, eagles) were meant to be read as anything other than empty formal supports for the practice of painting. Kippenberger responds indirectly to the dubious claim by Baselitz that he sought to 'create no anecdotal, descriptive pictures'.[9] In doing so, Kippenberger conveys an unmistakable sense of comedic timing, assuming one

first examines the image before turning to read the wall label. [...]

Writing in the late 1980s about the joke's lack of relevance in an era when most taboos had already been broken, the literary theorist Otto F. Best wrote: 'In a world without faces, the joke also has no face.'[10] Kippenberger understood this and, aside from a few moments of renewed faith in its powers of persuasion, took pleasure in reenacting the death of the joke as a fait accompli. At the same time, Kippenberger *needed* the joke in order to work through his issues of failure, compromised authenticity, second-order status, etc. Paradoxically, he relied on the joke's lifelessness to keep moving. Like a good comedian, he recognized the necessity of constantly offering new material. It was not his job to determine whether it held up under semantic scrutiny – that could be left for others to decide.

1 Carl Hill, *The Soul of Wit: Joke Theory from Grimm to Freud* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) 227.

2 Ibid.

3 [footnote 4 in source] Diedrich Diederichsen, *Sexbeat* (1985); revised ed. (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2002) x.

4 [5] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 83–4.

5 [6] See Merlin Carpenter, 'Back Seat Driver', in *Gitarren, die nicht Gudrun heissen. Hommage à Martin Kippenberger*, ed. Thomas Groetz (Berlin: Galerie Max Hetzler, 2002) 27–30.

6 [7] Roland Schappert, *Martin Kippenberger: Die Organisationen des Scheiterns* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 1998) 33.

7 [8] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulacra', trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton, in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984) 254.

8 [9] For a discussion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in relation to the visual arts, see Andreas Huyssen, 'Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth', in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 209–47.

9 [10] Georg Baselitz quoted in Wolfgang Max Faust and Gerd de Vries, *Hunger nach Bildern: Deutsche Malerei der Gegenwart* (Cologne: DuMont , 1982) 37.

10 [12] Otto F. Best, *Der Witz als Erkenntniskraft und Formenprinzip* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989) 141.

Gregory Williams, extract from 'Jokes Interrupted: Martin Kippenberger's Receding Punch Line', in *Martin Kippenberger*, ed. Doris Krystof and Jessica Morgan (London: Tate Publishing, 2006) 39–47.

Peter Fischli and David Weiss
The Odd Couple: Interview with Jörg Heiser//2006

Jörg Heiser You began working together in 1979. When did it become clear that this would become a permanent arrangement?

Peter Fischli We have never made an explicit statement on this. *De facto*, of course, it is the case, but the joint projects themselves are what actually justify it for us, not merely the desire to work together.

Heiser Beginning by making staged sausage photography, followed by a film featuring yourselves in furry rat and bear costumes, I guess you quickly gained a reputation as a comedy double act? It's an old motif in slapstick and cartoons: the odd couple. By using the pseudonym R. Mutt, Marcel Duchamp was alluding to the newspaper cartoon 'Mutt & Jeff' from the 1910s – a tall, thin guy and a small, chubby one, both totally crazy. Are Fischli and Weiss the Tom & Jerry of art?

Fischli These two types exist not only in comedy but also in novels, in Flaubert and Dostoevsky – the trope of the odd couple. But even as far as the 'comedy double act' idea is concerned, we weren't much worried about it being interpreted like that.

Heiser For her exhibition in 2005 at the Kunsthalle in Zurich, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster wanted you to appear in the rat and bear costumes again. Not in a film but as a performance.

David Weiss Yes, she wanted the rat and the bear as philosophers who conduct dialogues – not necessarily funny ones. Although the situation is funny, if the animals say something intelligent.

Fischli It was a spontaneous suggestion. But one is not obliged to comply with such proposals to the letter. We did the opposite: instead of appearing as clowns, we hung the costumes in dark Perspex vitrines and celebrated them as fetishes.

Heiser Deliberately confounding the expectations of a 'comedy double act' ...

Fischli We do take steps to show things in their true light. Which is also what makes it interesting: we don't want to be rid of it altogether, but we don't want

to leave it as it is either. That's true of many of our works: we want to take things out of the niche where they belong and transport them somewhere else, but without denying their origins. It is about taking but also about giving back.

Heiser So there is a strategy with regard to possible expectations?

Weiss But not from the outside, not as a concept. It just gets corrected, for example by simply mothballing the rat and the bear.

Fischli And by doing nothing more than that.

Heiser At the time were the rat and bear pieces mainly perceived as just amusing incidental entertainment?

Fischli Yes, of course.

Heiser So your attitude towards conventional discussions about art was to use not outrage or taboo but something subliminal, beneath the radar of 'seriousness'.

Fischli In Los Angeles, where we were living at the time, one was of course confronted with Disneyland and the entire movie industry, and we discovered this costume hire place, and things like that were still not being used much in art then.

Heiser Did you know Paul McCarthy's work?

Fischli No. We were more familiar with people like John Baldessari or Ed Ruscha.

Heiser In any case, the difference between you and McCarthy and his references to Disney, is that he emphasizes the dark side whereas your works always include a barrier of normality, or decency. Where does that come from?

Fischli I'll stick my neck out – this is very speculative – but I would say that for McCarthy there's an entirely different justification for doing it, because American mass culture – and much of Pop art – represses all that to quite a degree. In European culture it's a different story, through psychoanalysis and Viennese Actionism. For us it had already been dealt with. And it's not as if we avoided these issues. But we thought our task was a different one.

Weiss It was simply more in keeping with our temperament for the rat and the

bear to be discussing some major issues which they can never do justice to. Instead of cutting these animals open and having paint and blood coming out ...

Heiser So the emphasis is not on showing people that popular cultures repress sex and violence but on showing that they give rise to viable cultural techniques.

Fischli Correct. [...]

Heiser In the 1980s, discussion on art, in the German-speaking world at least, was dominated by catch-phrases such as 'intensity' and 'neo-Expressionism'. Against this backdrop did you experience not being understood? And did this make you more determined, like Duchamp, when his *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) was judged not serious enough by the Cubists and he went on to make the readymades in the following years? Was this why you decided: right, now for some funny little pottery sculptures.

Fischli In 1981, when we showed the clay figures (the series *Plötzlich diese Übersicht/Suddenly This Overview*) in Zurich, although many people liked them, we still didn't feel that we were taken entirely seriously. For many people it was nice jokes and anecdotes, nothing more. Many people reduced it to a narrative level. But we knew what we were doing, and that appealed to us. On the one hand, you do something against the others, and on the other, you do something for yourself. It always works a little both ways.

Weiss That was in keeping with us and our temperament. We didn't want to fall into the pathos trap of our artist friends [...]

Heiser A similar thing happened with Martin Kippenberger. Many people thought he was just this nutcase ...

Fischli And it was a bit like that with *Suddenly This Overview*: many people felt that these stories spoke to them, but ...

Weiss ... can it be trusted? ...

Fischli ... does it have meaning? People denied us that, I felt at the time.

Heiser Adopting the hobby approach – was that where it started?

Weiss No, it was the simplicity. Taking photographs is easy. To start with, you

just press the button and then see what comes out. Clay is an incredibly soft, congenial, patient material. It is the first step. It poses no obstacles. It doesn't complain.

Fischli In the late 1970s and early 80s, working with clay as your material was taboo, relegated to the category of handicraft, domestic creativity. It had a bad image, at least in high culture; it was considered unserious. So it was like adopting an amateur technique. Like our photographs for *Visible World* (*Sichtbare Welt*, 1987–2001): there is the parallel with normal tourists, who go to the same places and also take photos.

Heiser At the same time this sympathy for 'normal' activities was far from the norm. Among latter-day hippies, early punks and bohemian artists, nothing was more despised than the petit bourgeois and their narrow-minded habits.

Fischli That makes them attractive to us, doesn't it? It wasn'the the central point, but of course it is a kick. When we made videos on *vaporetti* in Venice, we were with thousands of tourists who were doing the same thing. It's just that at that particular moment, one is doing it oneself as an artist. There sure are some nice sides to what we do that we are aware of. [...]

Heiser In the 'Equilibrium' series (*Stiller Nachmittag/Quiet Afternoon*, 1984–85) and in *The Way Things Go* (*Der Lauf der Dinge*, 1987), slapstick features not only in methodological terms but also directly – the physical comedy of objects. How did one lead to the other?

Weiss First there were the 'Equilibriums'. We were sitting in a bar somewhere and playing around with the things on the table, and we thought to ourselves, this energy of never-ending collapse – because our structure stood for a moment and then collapsed before we built it up again – should be harnessed and channelled in a particular direction. That was also the original idea for *The Way Things Go*, [...] the creative process was not funny at all. I've always found that astonishing anyway – the way people always laugh when the next thing falls over. Because for us it was more like a circus act, trained objects. And the ones that didn't do it were badly trained or badly positioned. It required considerable patience.

Fischli Strangely, for us, while we were making the piece, it was funnier when it failed, when it didn't work. When it worked, that was more about satisfaction. And that the film created the impression that the things move about on their own, without human help, that they become spirited, living beings.

Heiser These stories of failure and collapse and then not failing after all – that's also the heroic theme of slapstick: the hero who accidentally breaks something, but in doing so brings about a stroke of good fortune and knocks over the villain, etc. In *The Way Things Go* you laugh because something that cannot really work actually does work. It's a kind of triumph.

Fischli And there's an element of comedy in your identifying this heroic theme in the pathetic falling-over of objects. I see it too, and I think you're right, but if that is the case, then it has an element of comedy in itself. [...]

Gerhard Richter once said something I really liked: a lottery ticket with six out of six winning numbers marked on it can only be good. Only an idiot would say: 'But the crosses aren't nicely distributed.' And the same is true with the 'Equilibriums': if it stays up then it can only be good.

Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Jörg Heiser, extract from 'The Odd Couple', interview, *frieze*, issue 102 (London, October 2006) 106–206.

Strips down to a

Gucci thong, bra, and high-heel shoes.

I'm not a person today.
I'm an object in an artwork.
It's about emptiness.

Andrea Fraser, *Official Welcome*, 2001

INFINITE JESTS

Sarah Lucas
A Nod's as Good as a Wink: Interview with Carl Freedman//1994

Carl Freedman [...] Besides the aggression there's also a lot of humour in the things you do, which acts as a counterweight and provides a balance.

Sarah Lucas Yeah, well I like to have a laugh.

Freedman It's a particular British humour in the tradition of Tony Hancock, Monty Python, Peter Sellers ...

Lucas Yeah, I'm completely into that, because that's what I can really understand. It's clear to me and it's also very rich. Having been here all my life, that's what I understand. And that's the one thing that anyone's got – what they know themselves. Look at James Joyce. He didn't get where he was by trying to be international.

Freedman You approach sex in a humorous way a lot of the time. Your dick pieces, the visual puns with vegetables.

Lucas Yeah, that's the way I think most people think a lot of the time. If I go down the Chapel Market one day and buy a cucumber, the guy I'm buying it off winks when I'm buying it. Life's imbued with this continual innuendo, especially here. If you're walking along with this bloody great marrow, especially in the summer, people will be winking left right and centre, nudging the person they're with.

Freedman Is this a way to reduce sex, to normalize it, to turn it into a joke?

Lucas Well it's not just 'Carry On'. What stops it from being slapstick is that I'm actually making things and you have to consider formally what kind of an object it is, to which other people don't pay a lot of attention on the whole. I pay attention to what kind of an object it is, and if it works as an object. All the usual concerns, which I do bend a lot. But I stick to certain rules, a sense of truth to materials, that a sculpture should be whole. If you look at *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* I think it's a perfect example of really whole sculpture, it's complete. My approach is a defence mechanism as well, I suppose. If I make *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* it's because I live with remarks like that all my life. And I think, well

yeah, I can make that same kind of remark just like you can, and I make it look fucking good into the bargain.

Freedman You seem to have a fascination with dicks, which is only normal, I guess.

Lucas That fascination with dicks is a formal one as well. It's interesting in terms of the current debate about sexuality, the whole intellectual presence and absence thing. A dick is present, and masculinity is defined in terms of being present, being an artist is a macho activity because it deals entirely with what is present. And funnily enough, as it turns out, a dick with two balls is a really convenient object. You can make it and it's already whole. It can already stand up and do all those things that you'd expect any sculpture to do. In that way it's really handy, I mean I could start thinking about making vulvas but then I'd have to start thinking about where the edges are going to be.

Freedman What kind of an audience do you want?

Lucas My idea of an audience is as broad as possible, as broad as the public. I believe the public does like art, and their stance against it is a part of how they like it – they enjoy having a go at it. And I make my work with that in mind. It plays on that – that people are not going to like it, or they're going to laugh, or they're going to think it's a load of bollocks.

Freedman There seems to be a certain degree of madness in making art. Did you begin to wonder if you were not a little insane frying eggs every morning for *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab*?

Lucas Not really. I thought it was pretty funny really. I treated it a bit like a performance. A heck of a lot of people came and stood looking in the window and I'd tell them to come in, but they'd just scuttle off. I don't know ... it was good frying the eggs, I felt a bit like a dirty old man.

Sarah Lucas and Carl Freedman, extract from 'A Nod's as Good as a Wink', interview, *frieze*, issue 17 (London, June/July/August 1994) 28–31.

Anna Tilroe
The Laugh of No. 13//1994

1994. A summer day, sunny but cool. A northern wind blew over the wide Dutch landscape of rivers, polders and dikes, sending a shiver through the group of people who stood waiting near the circular, nineteenth-century fort. How many were there? Three hundred? Five hundred? It was a mixed audience of art enthusiasts, as you might expect for an opening on a Saturday afternoon in a recreation area. But as it later turned out, Leigh Bowery only saw two types of people: children and wheelchair-bound elderly (my mother). Not a bad characterization of the art world, in my estimation.

The group waited in front of a heavy curtain that opened only after a sullen-faced elf in a gorgeous, wide tutu had altered the entire character of the fresh but indistinct country air by rigorously treating it with 'air freshener' from two large spray cans. The concentrated fragrance from hundreds of plastic pine trees now opened the brain for a marvellous spectacle that, in the best tradition of performance, can truly be called a *rite de passage*. Behind a large, vertical glass plate an almost naked man hung upside-down, a thick rope firmly tied around one of his club feet, which were wrapped in hip-length black stockings. His head was covered in black make-up, his penis transformed into a cockscomb made of clothes pegs.

The man sang. His harsh voice told of taboo, lust and ecstasy and made no attempt to harmonise with the sounds that another naked man, standing beside him and surrounded by clouds of blue balloons, was coaxing from his electric guitar. He was alone, confined within an astounding body suspended upside-down, from which he loudly reflected on his feelings of the moment in a song: 'No embarrassment at all! Oh, my God, this fantastic feeling.' The perfect text for a No. 12!

Bowery responded with immediate enthusiasm when I explained to him the idea behind *The Laugh of No. 12*. We had been introduced by the American film and video maker Charles Atlas, who, at my request, would work with the artists Tony Oursler and Irene Grundel to transform Fort Asperen into the inner life of the 12th card of the Tarot deck, known as 'The Hanged Man'. The card symbolises a person whose life has run aground, who is no longer able to progress or retreat, and who must see himself and the world in an entirely new way, from a different perspective, not angry or rebellious, but accepting his situation with a smile.

Each of the three artists had been assigned a third of the body of the Hanged Man and one of the three floors in the circular fort. Atlas had the top floor: the

legs and the genitals. Without hesitation he nominated Leigh Bowery as the perfect personification of his share of *No. 12*. I had never heard of Bowery but shortly afterwards I saw him appear with his rock band Minty at the Roxy, a club in Amsterdam known for its wild parties and performances. And I was deeply impressed. If anyone had a feeling for symbolism it was Leigh Bowery.

The Birth, which was what I saw that evening, was and is the most dazzling performance I have ever seen: extravagant, hilarious and poignant at the same time. Bowery had transformed himself into an enormous female figure who, surrounded by the audience and accompanied by the band, lay on a raised table and wrestled with her contractions like one possessed. When the mother-to-be, with groaning song and much thrashing about, actually squeezed out a 'bloody' human creature (Nicola Bowery, who had hung under his skirt like a rolled-up baby kangaroo), a cheer rose up in the hall: behold the man! A body that splits in two and creates new life!

But there was yet another layer of meaning, a meaning that dovetailed with the end of the *No. 12* performance and whose significance could be detected by no one at the time except Bowery. Only a few months later when he died quite unexpectedly of AIDS, a disease he had kept secret for years, even from his wife and his best friends, did it become clear how much his symbolism had been characterized by the theme of transgression: advancing from one state to another.

In the drawing of the set-up that Bowery had made for *No. 12*, the glass plate hangs above the stage like a gigantic panel. Behind the plate are the Hanged Man, the guitarist and the steps leading into the fort. What you don't see is that from his theatrical position the Hanged Man has no direct contact with his surroundings. Between him and the world – between him and the others – there is a gulf, a glass plate, which only he can penetrate by putting his life at risk. He will have to release himself from that to which he has been most attached up until now, but which has also put him in this awkward situation: his idea of himself and his own identity. Naked, without a face or a name, he will have to overcome his fear of losing himself by performing an act that bridges the gulf. And that is exactly what he does. At his signal, the guitarist stops playing and starts pulling him back by means of a rope, after which the counting begins: one, two ... By the twelfth count the rope is released and No. 12 swings through the glass, meeting the world head-on.

Bowery was bleeding from several wounds after the performance. It wasn't serious. Thanks to a special trick the glass was cracked a split second before he passed through it, but he had been hit by shattering shards. He laughed, brushed aside any gestures of concern and beat a hasty retreat to a quiet place with his wife Nicola (the elf) and Richard Torry (the guitarist). Later on, when he appeared in a suit and short wig, downing a soft drink amidst the invited guests,

no one recognized him. Who could have suspected that hidden inside this inconspicuous, corpulent young man was an artist who overstepped every boundary, especially the boundaries of the body?

For Bowery, overstepping the physical was a philosophy of life, with the hilarious as a point of departure. The hilarious was his own body. Not only did he design wild costumes for it – costumes that are now being studied by many young fashion and theatrical designers – but he regarded his body as material, too. Face, genitals, anus, breasts, feet, rolls of fat: every aspect of his body was transmuted and distorted in such a way that it became an integral part of his costume, a costume that at the same time was a totally outrageous persona. It lived, it demonstrated human traits and points of reference, but you could never identify with it because it always succeeded in eluding every concept, every interpretation. The mind crumbled before it. But not the eye. The eye saw much more than bizarre bulges of the chest and abdomen, a mouth pinned to the cheeks, a mop of tulle in place of the head and hysterical poses. It saw a complex form that may have consisted of scores of absurdities but, by means of some remarkable inner logic, managed to come across as a whole entity: an *image*.

The images that Bowery made of his body are a theatre of the absurd. Each one suggests a story, but a story from which the language has been disconnected. The forms, the material and the poses have taken over the job of language – they don't tell, they *show*. They show flesh that is not flesh, a head that is not a head, genitals that are not genitals, by indicating, not by naming. They put the words on hold, as it were, and thereby free us from our fear of the body.

That fear is characteristic of Western culture. We cherish the young, strong, vital body because it is not yet stained with the irrevocable. It shows no sign of what awaits each one of us, but what we try to deny as much as we can: the black hole in the earth containing our coffin. 'It's always the others who die', Marcel Duchamp once remarked. An apt characterization of a culture in which the mutability of existence is experienced as offensive, and age, sickness and decay are for losers. That's why the body is a source of fear and shame, and we fight it with all the resources of medical science, biotechnology, fitness culture and plastic surgery. It's their job to turn the body into an invincible machine, a *terminator* of the greatest Evil: Death.

Bowery must have known the fear and shame of the physical and studied it well, because he experimented with his appearance even as a child. He never strove to fit in with the prevailing ideals of beauty, but mocked them by seizing at whatever opposed them, whether it was hair styles, clothing, facial expressions or physical attitudes. From the very beginning, that mockery was mixed with a big dose of hilarity: there had to be laughter, for laughter is the most beautiful form of boundary transgression. It desecrates, shocks and liberates.

The most important target was sexual identity. Bowery was gay, but for him that was no reason to celebrate his manhood in his work or to venerate the feminine. That form of defining did not interest him. His transvestism had nothing to do with searching for or creating a sexual identity, nor with acting out clichés. On the contrary, with their flagrant display of breasts, buttocks, anus or vagina, his personae blew up hetero- and homosexual stereotypes to hysterical proportions, making it that much easier to smash them to smithereens – by salvos of laughter, the most effective weapon.

Yet it would be incorrect to regard Bowery's dressing up as a hilarious form of sexual rebellion and nothing more. There is great wonder in it, too – the wonder of the artist for the expressive possibilities of his material. For the sake of that wonder, Bowery laced up his body, wrapped it up, lengthened it, widened it and painted it. The pain of the belts, safety pins, clothes pins, prostheses and poisonous substances was something he was quite ready to put up with. Pain was important for him, as Nicola Bowery later would say, 'Because that made it more exciting to go out. He always had to be extreme in order for it to be worthwhile.'

The extreme manipulation to which Bowery subjected his body placed him outside the existing order and at the same time reinforced his presence. You cannot look at his personae without feeling the alienation of his ill-treated body, but you also feel his mockery of a culture that reduces the body to an efficiency machine, an object that, as Michel Foucault writes in *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison*, 'has been made a part of a power apparatus that studies, dissects and reconstructs it'. That form of social and political manipulation must have struck Bowery as perverse. For him the body was not an object, but something with a compelling, unique autonomy that must be fought as well as celebrated. He alienated it by imposing his ideas on it, but shaped it at the same moment into an exceptional vehicle for communication, a medium by which he could express his amazement about himself and the world, and could amaze that world in turn.

It isn't at all surprising that Bowery's intense physicality should have attracted the attention of painter Lucian Freud. In Freud's studio, Bowery exchanged the poses of the performer for those of the painter's model, and displayed the nakedness of his body in its most pure state. Freud is the master of the flesh. His eye, sharp as a butcher's knife, analysed the globes of muscles, the fat of the belly, the slack skin of the penis, the blue of the veins and the transparancy of the skin. And for the umpteenth time, the body rendered by his brush appeared as a cocoon of personal intimacy: inaccessible, majestic and absolutely autonomous.

Bowery was his body. He knew that, as he also undoubtedly knew that he would die when his body died. But with his way of life, Bowery demonstrated

that the body means transformation, a continuous passing from one state to another, and that fear of that passing can be overcome. So he swayed unflinchingly through the glass as the Hanged Man, laughing at the next card in the deck: No. 13, the card of destruction, change and renewal, otherwise known as Death.

Anna Tilroe, 'The Laugh of No. 13', trans. Nancy Forest-Flier, in *Take a Bowery: The Art and (Larger than) Life of Leigh Bowery* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004) 120–8.

Michael Bracewell
Jesus Doesn't Want Me for a Sunbeam//1995

Come to me those who labour or are heavy laden and I will give you rest
and a nice hot cup of tea.
– David Shrigley, from *Book-mark*, 1995

David Shrigley's sculpture and drawings, like Thomas Pynchon's early fiction or the illustrations to some contemporary 'Pilgrim's Progress', describe an arcane and dangerous world in which the smallest of incidents present moral crises and the best intentions of sanity or innocence are challenged by the forces of evil. With the acuity of a moral philosopher, Shrigley externalizes the doubts and fears of the human condition in comic scenes and objects, the sincerity of which is reinforced by the seemingly painful amateurism of their author's style.

Unlike the professionalism and apparent erudition of much contemporary art, Shrigley's dominant aesthetic is the crude vernacular of graffiti, doggerel, doodles and vandalism. The humour in his work conceals a vision of humanity which is derived from religious allegory and the deep absurdities which accompany notions of moral edification or social conditioning. To say that Shrigley is a religious artist would not be strictly true, but to suggest that the comedy within his work is a comment upon the workings of religion does much to distinguish him from satirical cartoonists such as Gary Larson or his precursor Kiblan, with whom he could be compared. These are the desperate notes, projects and observations of an untrained outsider whose conflict with moral legislation lends a kind of semi-formed authority to his pronouncements. Like a person who sends officious or incomprehensible letters to the editor of a local newspaper, expecting engagement or dialogue on their own terms, Shrigley's drawings exist in the singular world of their own sealed vision.

Shrigley studied Environmental Art at Glasgow School of Art, having taken his Foundation year at Leicester, collecting materials for his sculptures in a small pizza delivery van. The course at Glasgow had an emphasis on community outreach projects and civic sculpture, but it was the urban context that informed Shrigley's work more than its subject or audience. His unlocked studio, situated near a struggling job club, was often raided by vandals who amused themselves by making additions to his paintings. Acknowledging the comedy within the discrepancy between the miscreants' anti-art attitude and the claims of fine art to instruct or enlighten, he developed a graphic style in which the banal or the absurd could be used to make statements about the capriciousness of fate,

producing anecdotal drawings and sculptures in which the punch lines described the irony of moralising in situations which made no moral sense.

There is a dialogue between Shrigley's drawings and his sculpture in which the notion of reconsidering banal, daily situations and objects as tests of our moral sense is sustained. In a piece entitled *Charity* (1994) Shrigley took an archaic charity box in the form of a crippled child and gave it an extra head, matching pathos with absurdity and questioning the nature of casual good deeds. In *The Contents of the Cap Between the Refrigerator and the Cooker* (1995) he extended Rachel Whiteread's concretization of negative space in domestic interiors by making a small isthmus of brightly coloured, cartoon-like creatures and objects modelled out of 'Fimo' clay. The result is a mesmeric loaf of stratified, fantastic detritus, the tiny elements of which blink up at the viewer with round, complacent eyes. This piece extends the old comedy routines of decaying items in shared fridges, and reinforces Shrigley's interest in describing the evidence of what Shakespeare called 'deeds that hath no name' – the abandoned scenes of seemingly illogical events.

Shrigley's books, *Merry Eczema* (1992), *Blanket of Filth* (1994) and *Enquire Within* (1995), trace a gradual move away from traditional cartooning and a honing of style towards narrative sequences and confessional fragments. The landscape of the later drawings is the towns and provincial cities of Britain, weighed down by the apparatus of retail culture and democratic consumerism, and filled with the nervous energy and boredom of high streets, precincts and sinister suburbs. Superficially, there is a similarity between Shrigley's vision of Britain and that described by *Viz* comic's ubiquitous town of Fulchester, but where Fulchester is the cleverly observed venue for various comedies of recognition, Shrigley's annotated maps and empty horizons are a mixture of abstraction and emblems, articulating modern life by the reduction of a community to a series of quasi-journalistic ciphers. In *Burn Out* (1995), we read: 'Experimental rock music came and went. Girlfriends picked up their clothes and left. There was no milk and no bread. I noticed people coughing and vomiting by the bins. The pox had come to town and it was having a good time. We all took a bus to the centre of town, bought some petrol and burned down the hotel, the hospital and the orphanage. Nothing is or ever was sacred.' This is the Britain of small town riots and local atrocities; it is a realistic description of the social and moral collapse often reported as 'senseless', confounding mediation and somehow rendered mute by its very familiarity.

Many of Shrigley's drawings and sculptures are concerned with the unreported tragedies of everyday life, or with the confines of daily routine which breed a kind of autism. Time and again Shrigley will conclude his pieces with a pessimism which must be taken as thinly-coded despair: 'They eventually

found him hanging beneath the bridge.' (*Small Town Blues*, 1995); 'Failure to complete what one has started' (*Failure*, 1995); 'The hopes and dreams of worthless losers' (*Things in Bits*, 1995). And yet there is a morbid fascination in following the narrative logic of Shrigley's drawings, partly because the despair is delivered with unique comedy, and partly because the blatancy of his tragic pronouncements is wholly recognizable as an articulation of our darkest moods or fears. Shrigley's notion of the brute indifference of fate towards the frailty of lives and communities provides a paradoxical frisson of pleasure when it is described with neither saving clauses nor intellectual qualification: we seem to experience the enjoyment of having our worst fears justified.

The Devil makes several appearances in Shrigley's drawings, usually causing pain and disruption for his own casual amusement, but his presence is always suggestive of the reduction of life to a constant battle between good and evil. The final drawing in *Enquire Within, Result*, shows Good versus Evil as a football match, with a nil-nil draw but Evil winning 5-4 on penalties after extra time. Shrigley's art, alternately despairing and hilarious, reveals the evidence of failed endeavours as the ultimate proof that we live in a hostile world because of the varying degrees of laziness and evil within ourselves and within the doctrines of organized religion. This does not necessarily mean that there is no chance of redemption, and Shrigley's comedy appears to confirm the belief of great humorists (from Laurence Sterne to Woody Allen) that laughter is synonymous with hope. In the arena of contemporary art, Shrigley's work maintains a dualism which is rare, rewarding and ultimately generous.

Michael Bracewell, 'Jesus Doesn't Want Me for a Sunbeam', *frieze*, issue 25 (London, November/December 1995) 50–1.

Hamza Walker
Kara Walker//2000

[...] As black paper cut-outs adhered directly to the white walls of the gallery, Walker's work is put forth in no uncertain terms. Her world is quite frankly black and white. In fact, it is shameless. The work's refusal to acknowledge shame when dealing with issues of race and desire set within the context of slavery, allows Walker to challenge, indeed taunt, our individual and collective historical imaginations. From James Baldwin's generation to Walker's, the issue as to how to come to terms with a painful past persists. How does one write oneself into a painful history without first inquiring into the human capacity for lust, disgust, and violence? And if one is African-American, as is Walker, where does one begin this task amidst the pickaninnies, sambos, mammies, mandingos and mulatto slave mistresses depicted on sought after flotsam and jetsam hiding in the back of antique stores, bric-a-brac that goes by the name of bygone Americana? As bizarre, beautiful, or violent as her imagery may be, Walker understands that an historical imagination is a prerequisite for genuine ownership of the past. And if the task of writing oneself into history is conducted at the level of Baldwin's paradox of what it means to be human, then this task must take into account pain, parody, pleasure, poetry and ultimately the perverse.

Although her cut-outs have been likened to the literature of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara, Walker's work actually shares more in common with dimestore historical romances that use the ante-bellum as a backdrop. With human chattel as part of the historical *mise en scène*, it begs to be asked to what extent a romance could follow conventions of decency before the spectre of perverse power relations would come into play. For Walker, this extent certainly is not great. Her vignettes are designed to upstage the entire genre. But Walker's work exceeds parody. Using her artistic hindsight, slavery could just as easily have been dubbed 'the perverse institution' by Sigmund Freud as it was 'the peculiar institution', by Frederick Law Olmsted. Her vision is a skewed triad of race, history and desire, that when it avails itself to a reading, avails itself to one of such surreal and psychological dimension that perhaps it is better to call it a diagnosis.

Shame, the psychic force of prohibition, is a good place to begin. Walker's work is shameless three times over. In her choice of imagery, she has abandoned the historical shame surrounding slavery, the social shame surrounding stereotypes, and finally a bodily shame regarding sexual and excretory functions. To put it bluntly, as the legibility of her imagery warrants, Walker's installations are a freak

scene à la Sade. Lick, suck, devour. Prod, poke, puncture. Shit, fuck, bludgeon. They are a psycho-sexual mess of Looney Toons proportion. Needless to say, it is the two-hundred-year history of a shameful act conducted squarely within our consciousness that makes it possible for Walker to not only refuse shame but to blur the distinction between forms of shame. Even more important, Walker is aware that to speak of shame is simultaneously to speak of disgust, the overcoming of which is a prerequisite for sexual pleasure. Given the volume of shame, it is no wonder that the pleasures derived by her characters are often sadistic in nature. Even her victims victimize, as is the case with a detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, in which an amputee stabs one child and through some perverse polymorphous gluttony is attempting to ingest another whole. The psychology behind this perpetuated cruelty recalls a scene cited by Frantz Fanon, from the film *Home of the Brave*, in which a Pacific War veteran turns to an African American and says 'Resign yourself to your colour the way I got used to my stump; we're both victims.'

Walker, however, is capable of more subtle forms of confounding, as is the case when the economy surrounding slavery is overlapped with that surrounding sex. As Walker's baby plopping pickaninny in her 1994 installation *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* suggests, slavery was a labour force meant to reproduce itself. If sex is theoretically defined as an economy whose poles are reproduction – read work or utility – on the one hand, and pleasure – read play or surplus – on the other, then slavery would fall into the former category. The tier of breast suckling from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, depicts the transition of sex from reproductive utilitarian ends to an erotic surplus that stands outside the ends of slavery. In short, sexual pleasure becomes the locus of an individual bodily sovereignty, pleasure as a form of power. But pleasure should not simply be equated with power. As theorist Michel Foucault would have it, this is 'power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. Capture and seduction, confrontation and mutual reinforcement; parents and children, adults and adolescents, educators and students, doctors and patients.' And for Walker, this list would include the slave mistress and her conscripted lover. Liberation is not in the form of the plantation rebellion or the runaway slave in search of the underground railroad. Instead, it is the naughty tongue of a slave mistress tickling the barrel of a kneeling soldier's rifle, or the chicken drumstick, wilfully abandoned in favour of his tender sexual advances. Did Walker's suggested forms of bodily sovereignty exist in spite of slavery? Or were they more so the case under the confines of slavery? Although Walker seems to leave very little to the imagination, the spaces she does leave blank are reserved for

questions such as these. With historical accuracy effectively suspended, her cut-outs, for all their clarity, in the end become a Rorschach test whose highly subjective readings are consciously over determined. In avoiding Walker's conclusions, however, it begs to be asked, where does our imagination go? Does it lapse into a moralizing tone? Or does it allow for more complex human relations to emerge, relationships which for better or worse either hurt, haunt or simply hover over us today, whether these spectres be relationships between blacks and whites or simply our relationship to the stereotypes Walker employs?

Walker does not control these spectres as much as she wields them. Violently humanized through acts involving the grotesque, Walker's characters are violently racialized through her use of stereotypes. Her stereotypes, however, exceed the immediate pain associated with demeaning images of African Americans. Her images encompass the obverse, the fear that one's actions will correlate to a stereotype. Under these circumstances, the onus is to prove what one is not rather than what one is. While the stereotypes a group creates of itself fall under the category of parody, the dilemma arises when a group, because of pre-existing imagery, is unable to parody itself before others. Filled with a shameless humour, the early careers of Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx and Rudy Ray Moore for example, involve African Americans parodying themselves to themselves through the exploitation of stereotypes. Walker likewise embraces, even exaggerates stereotypes. But Foxx, Pryor and Moore's exploitation of stereotypes was at the service of humour, while Walker's work moves toward anger as her attempts violently to humanize stereotypes only lead to the creation of even more questionable stereotypes. Walker's recasting of stock black ante-bellum characters is an exchange of one stereotype for another as the sexual sovereignty of her mammies, sambos, pickaninnies, and slave mistresses is eclipsed by the myth's surrounding black sexuality, myths which contemporary reality has only further confounded. For proof, one need only refer to the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, the confessionals of Magic Johnson or Wilt Chamberlin, or the psychosocial, psychosexual drama of O.J. Simpson; these examples corresponding to myths of black hypersexuality and the evils of miscegeny. Again, the fear being that one's actions fulfill rather than negate stereotypes. [...]

Animal Nature/Human Nature, Life/Death, Pleasure/Pain. Walker, however, unlike Bruce Nauman, is concerned with the cruel aspects of human nature set within an historical context as the anachronistic character of her medium suggests. Skiagraphy, Decoupure, Shadowgraphy, Papyrography, Scissorgraphy, and Black Shade, these are some of the names that black paper portraiture has had throughout its life from the mid seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. Although he did not invent black paper portraiture, the name and indeed the word silhouette were taken from Etienne de Silhouette 1709–1767, Louis XV's

miserly minister of finance who apparently practised the art. The word was brought to England and popularized by the most famous practitioner of cut black paper portraiture, August Edouart 1789–1861. Edouart's career represents the height of the genre's popularity which was between 1770 and 1850. Although it was destined to become a poor man's portraiture, silhouettes gained their dignity by having been used to capture the aristocracy and the haute bourgeoisie. Mechanized, however, within the first decade of the nineteenth century, silhouette portraiture lost most of its prestige shortly thereafter. Not only was photography a mere four decades away, but silhouette portraiture had been deemed a craft rather than an art form, securing for it a place at carnivals and in classrooms devoted to the training of 'good ladies'.

To say that Walker has exploited the irony inherent in the medium is an understatement. With respect to the dates that cut black paper portraiture was practised, the form certainly reinforces the content. Slavery was practised in the United States from 1619 until the end of the Civil War in 1865. Walker's genuine historical affinity, however, is with the slave narrative, an autobiographical genre unique to the slaves of North America. Although there are only estimated to be a hundred or so full length book accounts by former slaves, according to scholar, Marion Wilson Starling, all in all, some 6,000 slaves recorded their tales through interviews, essays and books. The invitations Walker has designed for her exhibitions, including the one for this show, were done after a combination of typographical designs for posters announcing eighteenth and nineteenth century spectacles as well as the designs for the title pages of slave narratives. In this instance, Walker has aimed her wit directly at the audience. By extending this invitation under the assumption that you are indeed one of 'our Negro Brethren', Walker, with all the playful antagonism of Fats Waller, is asking 'Is you is, or is you ain't.' Perhaps less subtle is the blurring of her own name with that of W.E.B. DuBois and Madame C.J. Walker, an early entrepreneur in the black beauty industry and inventor of the hot comb. Maybe the issue is not whether some imaginations are more active than others but what some imaginations are willing to wield and therefore yield. Needless to say, in Walker's mind, a Harlequin Romance becomes a deadly weapon. As Lou Rawls put it, 'A mind is a terrible thing to waste'. In Walker's case, however, he would probably have cut it short to 'A mind is terrible thing'. The mind can be a terrible thing, a frightening thing, only because it is a powerful thing; a thing, as Walker proves, capable of breaking the shackles of history.

Walker, Hamza, first published as 'Nigger Lover, or Will There Be Any Black People in Utopia?', *Parkett*, no. 60 (2000) 152–60.

David Sedaris
The First Six Moments from Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist//2000

One: At an early age my sister Gretchen exhibited a remarkable talent for drawing and painting. Her watercolours of speckled mushrooms and bonneted girls were hung with pride in the family room, and her skill was encouraged with private lessons and summer visits to sketching camp. Born with what my mother described as an 'artistic temperament', Gretchen floated from blossom to blossom in a blissful haze. Staring dreamily up at the sky, she tripped over logs and stepped out in front of speeding bicycles. When the casts were placed on her arms and legs, she personalized them with Magic Marker daisies and fluffy clouds. Physically she'd been stitched up more times than the original flag, but mentally nothing seemed to touch her. You could tell Gretchen anything in strict confidence, knowing that five minutes later she would recall nothing but the play of shadows on your face. It was like having a foreign-exchange student living in our house. Nothing we did or said made any sense to her, as she seemed to follow the rules and customs of some exotic, faraway nation where the citizens drilled the ground for oil paint and picked pastels from the branches of stunted trees. Without copying anyone else, she had invented her own curious personality, which I envied even more than her artistic ability.

When Gretchen's talent was recognized by teachers, both my parents stepped forward to claim responsibility. As a child my mother had shown a tendency for drawing and mud sculpture and could still amuse us with her speedy recreations of a popular cartoon woodpecker. Proving his to be a latent talent, my father bought himself a box of acrylic paints and set up his easel in front of the basement TV, turning out exact copies of Renoir cafés and Spanish monks brooding beneath their hooded robes. He painted New York streetscapes and stagecoaches riding into fiery sunsets – and then, once he'd filled the basement walls with his efforts, he stopped painting as mysteriously as he'd begun. It seemed to me that if my father could be an artist, anyone could. Snatching up his palette and brushes, I retreated to my bedroom, where, at the age of fourteen, I began my long and disgraceful blue period.

Two: When painting proved too difficult, I turned to tracing comic-book characters onto onionskin typing paper, telling myself that I would have come up with Mr Natural on my own had I been born a few years earlier. The main thing was to stay focused and provide myself with realistic goals. Unlike my

father, who blindly churned out one canvas after another, I had real ideas about the artistic life. Seated at my desk, my beret as tight as an acorn's cap, I projected myself into the world represented in the art books I'd borrowed from the public library. Leafing past the paintings, I would admire the photographs of the artists seated in their garrets, dressed in tattered smocks and frowning in the direction of their beefy nude models. To spend your days in the company of naked men – that was the life for me. 'Turn a bit to the left, Jean-Claude. I long to capture the playful quality of your buttocks.'

I envisioned the finicky curators coming to my door and begging me to hold another show at the Louvre or the Metropolitan. After a lunch of white wine and tongue-size cutlets, we would retire to the gentlemen's lounge and talk about money. I could clearly see the results of my labour: the long satin scarves and magazine covers were very real to me. What I couldn't begin to imagine was the artwork itself. The only crimp in my plan was that I seemed to have no talent whatsoever. This was made clear when I signed up for art classes in high school. Asked to render a bowl of grapes, I would turn in what resembled a pile of stones hovering above a whitewall tire. My sister's paintings were prominently displayed on the walls of the classroom, and the teacher invoked her name whenever discussing perspective or colour. She was included in all the city- and countrywide shows and never mentioned the blue ribbons scotch-taped to her entries. Had she been a braggart, it would have been much easier to hate her. As it was, I had to wrestle daily with both my inadequacy and my uncontrollable jealousy. I didn't want to kill her, but hoped someone else might do the job for me.

Three: Away from home and the inevitable comparisons with Gretchen, I enrolled as an art major at a college known mainly for its animal-husbandry programme. The night before my first life-drawing class, I lay awake worrying that I might get physically excited by the nude models. Here would be this person, hopefully a strapping animal-husbandry major, displaying his tanned and muscled body before an audience of students who, with the exception of me, would see him as nothing but an armature of skin and bones. Would the teacher take note of my bulging eyes or comment on the thin strand of saliva hanging like fishing wire from the corner of my mouth? Could I skip the difficult hands and feet and just concentrate on the parts that interested me, or would I be forced to sketch the entire figure?

My fears were genuine but misplaced. Yes, the model was beefy and masculine, but she was also a woman. Staring too hard was never an issue, as I was too busy trying to copy my neighbour's drawings. The teacher made his rounds from easel to easel, and I monitored his progress with growing panic.

Maybe he didn't know my sister, but there were still plenty of other talented students to compare me with.

Frustrated with drawing, I switched to the printmaking department, where I overturned great buckets of ink. After trying my hand at sculpture, I attempted pottery. During class critiques the teacher would lift my latest project from the table and I'd watch her arm muscles strain and tighten against the weight. With their thick, clumsy bases, my mugs weighed in at close to five pounds each. The colour was muddy and the lips rough and uninviting. I gave my mother a matching set for Christmas, and she accepted them as graciously as possible, announcing that they would make the perfect pet bowls. The mugs were set on the kitchen floor and remained there until the cat chipped a tooth and went on hunger strike.

Four: I transferred to another college and started the whole humiliating process all over again. After switching from lithography to clay modelling, I stopped attending classes altogether, preferring to concentrate on what my roommate and I referred to as the 'Bong Studies Programme'. A new set of owlish glasses made pinpoints of my red-rimmed eyes, and I fell in with a crowd of lazy filmmakers who talked big but wound up spending their production allowances on gummy bricks of hash. In their company I attended grainy black-and-white movies in which ponderous, turtlenecked men slogged the stony beaches, cursing the gulls for their ability to fly. The camera would cut to a field of ragged crows and then to a freckle-faced woman who sat in a sunbeam examining her knuckles. It was all I could do to stay awake until the movie ended and I could file out of the theatre behind the melancholy ticket holders, who bore a remarkable resemblance to the pale worrywarts I'd seen flickering up on the screen. True art was based upon despair, and the important thing was to make yourself and those around you as miserable as possible. Maybe I couldn't paint or sculpt, but I could work a mood better than anyone I knew. Unfortunately, the school had no accredited sulking programme and I dropped out, more despondent than ever.

Five: My sister Gretchen was leaving for the Rhode Island School of Design just as I was settling back into Raleigh. After a few months in my parents' basement, I took an apartment near the state university, where I discovered both crystal methamphetamine and conceptual art. Either one of these things is dangerous, but in combination they have the potential to destroy entire civilizations. The moment I took my first burning snootful, I understood that this was the drug for me. Speed eliminates all doubt. Am I smart enough? Will people like me? Do I really look all right in this plastic jumpsuit?

These are questions for insecure pot heads. A speed enthusiast knows that

everything he says or does is brilliant. The upswing is that, having eliminated the need for both eating and sleeping, you have a full twenty-four hours a day to spread your charm and talent.

'For God's sake', my father would say, 'it's two o'clock in the morning. What are you calling for?'

I was calling because the rest of my friends had taken to unplugging their phones after ten p.m. These were people I'd known in high school, and it disappointed me to see how little we now had in common. They were still talking about pen-and-ink portraits and couldn't understand my desire to drag a heavy cash register through the forest. I hadn't actually *done* it, but it sounded like a good idea to me. These people were all stuck in the past, setting up their booths at the art fair and thinking themselves succesful because they'd sold a silkscreen of a footprint in the sand. It was sad in a way. Here they were, struggling to make art, while without the least bit of effort, I was *living* art. My socks balled up on the hardwood floor made a greater statement than any of their hokey claptrap with the carefully matted frames and big curly signatures in the lower left-hand corners. Didn't they read any of the magazines? The new breed of artist wanted nothing to do with my sister's idea of beauty. Here were people who made a living pitching tents or lying in a foetal position before our national monuments. One fellow had made a name for himself by allowing a friend at school to shoot him in the shoulder. This was the art world I'd been dreaming of, where God-given talent was considered an unfair advantage and a cold-blooded stare merited more praise than the ability to render human flesh. Everything around me was art, from the stains in my bathtub to the razor blade and short lengths of drinking straw I used to cut and ingest my speed. I was back in the world with a clear head and a keen vision of just how talented I really was.

'Let me put your mother on', my father would say. 'She's had a few drinks, so maybe she can understand whatever the hell it is you're talking about.'

Six: I bought my drugs from a jittery, bug-eyed typesetter whose brittle, prematurely white hair was permed in such a way that I couldn't look at her without thinking of a late-season dandelion. Selling me the drugs was no problem, but listening to my increasingly manic thoughts and opinions was far too much for one person to take on a daily basis.

'I'm thinking of parcelling off portions of my brain', I once told her. 'I'm not talking about having anything surgically removed, I'd just like to divide it into lots and lease it out so that people could say, 'I've got a house in Raleigh, a cottage in Myrtle Beach, and a little hideaway inside a visionary's head.'

Her bored expression suggested the questionable value of my mental real estate. Speed heats the brain to a full boil, leaving the mouth to function as a

fulminating exhaust pipe. I talked until my tongue bled, my jaw gave out, and my throat swelled up in protest.

Hoping to get me off her back, my dealer introduced me to half a dozen hyperactive brainiacs who shared my taste for amphetamines and love of the word *manifesto*. Here, finally, was my group. The first meeting was tense, but I broke the ice by laying out a few lines of crystal and commenting on my host's refreshing lack of furniture. His living room contained nothing but an enormous nest made of human hair. It seemed that he drove twice a week to all the local beauty parlours and barbershops, collecting their sweepings and arranging them, strand by strand, as carefully as a wren.

'I've been building this nest for, oh, about six months now', he said. 'Go ahead, have a seat.'

Other group members stored their bodily fluids in babyfood jars or wrote cryptic messages on packaged skirt steaks. Their artworks were known as 'pieces', a phrase I enthusiastically embraced. 'Nice piece', I'd say. In my eagerness to please, I accidentally complimented chipped baseboards and sacks of laundry waiting to be taken to the cleaners. Anything might be a piece if you looked at it hard enough. High on crystal, the gang and I would tool down the beltway, admiring the traffic cones and bright yellow speed bumps. The art world was our conceptual oyster, and we ate it raw.

Inspired by my friends, I undertook a few pieces of my own. My first project was a series of wooden vegetable crates I meticulously filled with my garbage. Seeing as how I no longer ate anything, there were no rotting food scraps to worry about, just cigarette butts, aspirin tins, wads of undernourished hair, and bloody Kleenex. Because these were pieces, I carefully recorded each entry using an ink I'd made from the crushed bodies of ticks and mosquitos.

2:17 a.m. – Four toenail clippings

3:48 a.m. – Eyelash discovered beside sink

Once the first two crates were completed, I carried them down to the art museum for consideration in their upcoming juried biennial. When the notice arrived that my work had been accepted, I foolishly phoned my friends with the news. Their proposals to set fire to the grand staircase or sculpt the governor's head out of human faeces had all been rejected. This officially confirmed their outsider status and made me an enemy of the avant-garde. At the next group meeting it was suggested that the museum had accepted my work only because it was decorative and easy to swallow. My friends could have gotten in had they compromised themselves, but unlike me, some people had integrity.

Plans were made for an alternative exhibit, and I wound up attending the museum opening in the company of my mother and my drug dealer, who by this time had lost so much hair and weight that, in her earth-tone sheath, she resembled a cocktail onion speared on a toothpick. The two of them made quite a pair, hogging the wet bar and loudly sharing their uninformed opinions with anyone within earshot. There was a little jazz combo playing in the corner, and the waiters circulated with trays of jumbo shrimp and stuffed mushrooms. I observed the crowd gathered around my crates, wanting to overhear their comments but feeling a deeper need to keep tabs on my mother. I looked over at one point and caught her drunkenly clutching the arm of the curator, shouting, 'I just passed a lady in the bathroom and told her, "Honey, why flush it? Carry it into the next room and they'll put it on a goddamn pedestal."'

David Sedaris, 'The First Six Moments from Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist', in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000); reprinted in *Situation Comedy: Humour in Recent Art*, ed. Dominic Molon and Michael Rooks (New York: Independent Curators International, 2005) 60–5.

Andrea Fraser
Official Welcome//2001

Official Welcome is *a monologue that was commissioned by The MICA Foundation and first performed during a reception at the home of Barbara Morse, the president of the Foundation, and her husband, Howard Morse, on 28 November 2001, before an audience of invited guests. The script below was first published in the* MICA Foundation Newsletter, *1, no. 2 (Fall 2001).*

Introduction

Good evening. Hello everyone.

I do know many of you, but I'll introduce myself anyway. I'm Andrea Fraser, and I'd like to thank you for coming to this presentation of my project for The MICA Foundation. It's called 'Official Welcome' and, as most of you have probably guessed from the cameras and the lights, this is it. This is 'Official Welcome'.

So, I'm happy, I'm pleased, I'm honoured, I'm privileged, I'm really thrilled, really, to welcome you, officially, to Barbara and Howard's living room. (This is, of course, a site-specific project.)

I'm going to have a tough time topping Colin de Land's remarks from last year, but I'll do my best.

I have to begin by saying that I've known Barbara and Howard for many years – more than a decade. For most of those years, Barbara and Howard were my only collectors. Even when I didn't want collectors, when I was against the whole idea that art was bought and sold, they were there, trying to buy.

But Barbara and Howard have always been supportive in other ways as well and this commission is only the most recent example of that support. When I wrote up the first *Prospectuses* for my artistic services in '93, it was for a show they organized, and Howard helped out by lending his expertise in preparing corporate prospectuses. (Howard? Where is Howard? I just saw him a minute ago.) Later, I gave a talk about my first prospectus project, with the Generali Foundation, in this very room. Some of you may remember that event, when I started sobbing for no apparent reason and couldn't stop. It's true.

Points to someone in the audience.

I know you remember that.

Well, I can't guarantee that it won't happen again this evening but ... not now. I'm not choking up, really. I'm ... just a little dry.

Takes a sip of water, then clears throat. Reading:

The mission of the MICA Foundation is to sponsor projects by artists that are positioned critically in relation to the production, exhibition, documentation, promotion and distribution of art, and the conventional roles of artist, patron and audience. It aims to provide crucial support for artists whose work has been rendered invisible because of political content, lack of marketability, or its challenging enquiry into the nature of art institutions.

The MICA Foundation's newest project is a perfect example of its commitment to critical and challenging art.

For its second commissioned project, MICA has selected an artist who is a leading practitioner of the genre. Her work is inventive, poignant and brazen as well as humorous. She's an artist who takes no prisoners, even when she works in the belly of the beast. Her performative critiques are meticulously researched portraits of institutions, revealingly appropriated from original sources, yet they're often, they're often also tantalizingly ambiguous. And she's also succesfully explored innovative models for artistic practice that would liberate artists from the strictures of traditional object production.

By engaging her to develop a text relevant to a private nonprofit foundation – and to deliver it here as well – The MICA Foundation is endorsing Andrea Fraser's role as an institutional critic.

And we're really very, *very* happy – we're privileged – to have been able to work with Andrea. We've followed her work for years. She's a phenomenal artist and it's just a, it's a terrific project. It's very smart and very funny.

Turns to right and gestures to come to the podium.

Andrea?

Artist

Turns to left, nods gravely, then reads:

This evening represents the conclusion of a very satisfying project. It is the appropriate moment to thank the Foundation for its support. My hope, however, is that such thanks are unnecessary. I was commissioned by the Foundation to do a certain job. My hope is that the Foundation has found that job well done.

What do I, as an artist, provide? What do I satisfy?

The immediate answer to those questions can be found in the function of the Foundation. But if I serve those functions, it's not because I have defined my activity as a service. Those functions are generally fulfilled in the exchange that constitutes any kind of patronage. They are fulfilled because the professional prestige I, as an artist, augment when my name is publicized by a patron is identical to the prestige they acquire by being associated with a particular kind of art. It's the same quantity of the same currency: a profit in moral legitimacy generated by activities with 'higher' aims; a profit in social legitimacy generated by association with exclusive tastes and practices; and a profit in professional

legitimacy generated by demonstrations of competence in our respective spheres of activity.

Takes deep breath to continue –

1.

Supporter

Thank you ...

Turns to right.

... Andrea, for an exemplary presentation.

It is difficult to imagine what a critical art practice could be at the beginning of the new millennium. One factor in the demise of radical practice may be art's own collaboration with the forces of spectacle culture. If visibility has become art's primary horizon of aspiration, then for any radical aesthetic practice to be historically convincing it must now define itself in opposition to that culture.

Tonight we are considering an artist whose project meets this criterion, an artist whose interventions invite the viewer to recognize the fundamental conditions of art and its inability to resolve its contradictions. As a radical contestation of the hegemonic ordering of experience, his practice demonstrates that the desire to commemorate – which he inscribes as a grotesque echo of the fate of radical critique – is inextricably bound up with forms of culturally engineered adulation operating at the very centre of artistic production and reception.

He thus inverts and counters all of the artistic fallacies that hindsight and history have made evident. Indeed, it would be difficult to conceive of any practice that could surpass his as a synthesis of the most complex and radical artistic projects of the recent past as well as the early twentieth century.
And it's a pleasure to introduce him this evening.

Looks to right.

Artist

Um...

Turns quickly to left.

... thank you. Um, I don't want to sound coquettish – this could easily come off the wrong way – but as an artist I'm always disappointed. Even though I say the end result isn't important, I'm never satisfied. But I guess that's why I keep trying. As an artist, I try to create an autonomous space in which a critical position can be made clear. People come to see my work, maybe they spend some time. I hope I can make people feel involved, but it's not about interactivity. I give something to people, but I don't expect communication. I hope I can make people think, but I don't want to be didactic – I don't want to make political art, I don't want to intimidate or exclude people. I want to

implicate people in my work – I mean, in the world. That's my political statement. What's most important is not what people see in my work, but what they see when they confront reality again. I work in reality. So, why am I an artist? I guess it's because I take a critical position toward the world. It's not about hope. It's about showing my disgust with the dominant discourse.

2.

Supporter

Shaking head.

How much information can you receive from one artist in a few minutes?

Usually, when an artist explains his work, it lessens the allure. But that's hardly the case in this case. His friendly bombardment is an art experience in itself. The simultaneity of thoughts passing through the brain is never easy to capture, especially if the brain in question is brilliantly hyperactive. Well, he's in possession of just such a remarkable organ. No critic can possibly keep up with it. But I'll try.

Let me say that even while his words do offer a compelling explanation for the enduring impact of his work, they modestly underestimate its beauty, intrigue, pathos and wit.

Simply put, his work is magical. And the best part is, you don't have to worry about the meaning of it all. Unlike so many artists, he doesn't preach.

If he is the most important artist of his generation – and I believe he is – it's because his imagination is so very big.

If masterpieces still can be made, he has managed to make them: full, exquisitely realized works of power, vision, and extraordinary beauty; works that rise to a level of humanistic allegory significant for all of us, even while we may not know exactly what they mean.

Looks to right.

I think we're all extraordinarily lucky to be able to honour him here this evening.

Artist

Looks to left.

Thank you, it's, uh, uh, thank you, uh.

Speaking in a painfully slow, almost stuttering voice.

If I, uh, if I, uh, if I, uh, deserve, uh, any of this, uh, I think that it can only be because, uh, because I have, uh, finally arrived, uh, at a point where, uh, my work has become, uh, has become, uh universal. It's about, uh, it's about, the desire, uh, of all human beings, uh, to be free and, uh, to achieve, uh, to achieve, uh, to achieve a kind of, um, self-realization; uh, to achieve, uh, to achieve, uh, to

achieve … something. It's about achievement.

And, uh, all of my work, uh, investigates, uh, different possibilities, uh, of what it means, uh, to imagine yourself, uh, within the broadest possible parameters.

And, uh, um, that's why I, uh, I don't like to, uh, to talk about my work. I made it, and, uh, and, uh, I hope, I hope, uh, that's enough.

Supporter

Oh, it is enough. It is so much more than enough. It is so much more than I or any single person or the most devoted public can reckon with.

Arma virumque cano. Of arms and the man I sing.

Tonight we render homage to a man who fought and struggled for long years in solitude, years of tremendous ambition and investment, labour and attention, with no reinforcement or recognition, but with unshakable integrity and dedication to task, motivated, not by anything outside, but by an inner need, a compulsion, an obsession, by an intransigent artistic faith that transformed anew our vision not only of art, but of the world.

For opening doors on new realities and reawakening our dreams, it is my privilege to confer on you the very highest honour. As an artist, and as a friend of France –

3.

Artist

Oh stop it! Stop it! You're embarrassing me!

Supporter

That's what I love about the guy: his modesty!

You know, the last time I went to his studio, he'd been *working*. It was full of new work. But I was at a loss. It was so different, it was so new. So I asked him to give me a little guidance. Well, he paused for a minute and then he said, 'I have to think because I don't want to give you the propaganda.'

This is an artist who never says stupid things!

I remember him one night at the Odeon acting like a fly on the wall in swell company. Well, now you're all his good friends and here tonight. And that shows just how far he's come since those early days. Make no mistake: he was timid.

I've never seen anyone grow into his shoes so fully. I used to tell him, I used to say, you're going to have to learn how to be a big artist – and I don't just mean making *big art!*

Well he did it. He's big. He's very big. He's just, he's big opera. He's big art and a great big heart, and it's my great pleasure to introduce this modern master, my great friend –

Artist

After a long pause:

Wow, that does sound like a charmed life.

Well, at least he didn't say that I'm a great big FART. Really, that's what I thought you were going to say!

Look, if you're going to laud somebody, this kind of back-scratching won't do! You really gotta beatify 'em. 'Modern master', my –

What do you mean, 'I'd been *working*'?! Just because you read about me in the columns, you think all I do is go to parties? I'm working parties!

No, I'm not shy anymore. I learned a very simple social strategy. The trick is to say as little as possible to as few people as possible and to keep moving. That way, it looks like I'm circulating when I'm actually just walking away.

Breaks into a big smile, waves, and pretends to leave the podium.

No, seriously, I'm honoured – really, I'm honoured – to be, ehem, *honoured* here this evening.

You know, 'remember me' is what all artists whisper in their work. It's a mark you want to leave in the world. It's still you even when you're not you anymore. When you're gone. If my work really has brought me love, that's what it means. If not, it has failed me at the deepest level. So, remember me.

4.

Supporter

Well, we do love you. We love you for all you've given us, for giving us your all. You have reminded us that art is a joyful industry, neither difficult nor painful, but easy as breathing and redolent with pleasure. Yours is an art of courageous beauty. It is a fragrance, an essence that, in its finest and most artful moments, is like strolling through the most elegant beauty salon in the universe.

I want to make a confession: On the night of her opening, catching glimpses of her work through the glittering throng, I was smitten, just dazzled by the sexy modern flair of it all. It was so right, so now. I wanted to take it home.

We want various things of art – to reflect the world, to perfect the world – and of artists – to be one of us, to be better than us. Well, the fact is, she is better than us. She's more beautiful than we are, she's more successful, she's a much better artist with a much more interesting life.

She's our fantasy. She lives our fantasies for us.

Artist

Strips down to a Gucci thong, bra, and high-heel shoes.

I'm not a person today. I'm an object in an artwork. It's about emptiness.

Steps away from the podium and stands motionless for 15 seconds.

5.

Supporter

Moving back to the podium:

That's great! Isn't she great?! She's great! Exciting work.

It's fun to sell a big artwork, and it's profitable. In the end, a good artist is a rich artist and a rich artist is a good artist. But my relationships with artists are the most rewarding part of my profession. I'm responsible for their careers, their ranking in art history – and that's the bottom line for my artists. But for me, it's also about creating space for freewheeling people with the guts to invest in their dreams.

Well, he's just about the gutsiest artist around. He may be obsessed with death, but only because he has such an incredible passion for life. I love that kind of vision. I think we all do. The thrill, the fantasy, the sleek world where everything falls into place.

Well, he's done it again. He's back, and he's bigger and better than ever. He's staggeringly corporate, breathtakingly professional and eager to entertain. And I do hope he'll say a few words to us this evening.

Looks to right.

Artist

Yeah, I'll say a few words.

I used to think that I was changing the world.

Laughs.

No, I'd just like to say that, um, I think the only interesting people are the people who say, 'Fuck off' Yeah, that's what I think.

I really like that piece Nauman did – you know that piece? Um, *The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths.* And you go, oh, yeah, great. And then you go, oh God, oh fuck, you know, what is this shit.

No, I love saying a few words at events like this.

Okay, here're a few more words. How about, 'Kiss my fucking ass!' That's a great statement anywhere, right?

Right?!

Well, why don't you all kiss my fucking ass!

Steps away from podium and moons audience, then turns around and throws arms up.

I love you all.

Okay, how about, 'Kiss my tits!'

Hey, I'm not being funny. You know that, don't you? Look, I'm just trying to do my fucking best.

Where's my cheque?

6.

Supporter

Back behind the podium.

Yes, yes and you always do do your, your fucking best.

You were our first major purchase when we started buying art, and we considered it an act of sheer courage. It was 'difficult' work – it was totally grotesque! You cooked part of the piece on our barbecue and we had to get a microbiologist to make sure we weren't breeding anything lethal.

Most of the art we collect is about sex or excrement – we like to think of ourselves as connoisseurs of art subculture – and we always love her work, even when it makes us want to throw up.

Reading:

Reviled *and* acclaimed for her confrontational, confessional style, she was raped at sixteen, had abortions, drug problems and attempted suicide. She's an artist who knows what she's saying with her art. She lives it. And she lives with a raw intensity that most of us can't even dream of: the chemical highs and gut-wrenching lows, the passionate loves and tragic losses. She makes each and every one of us feel like we've shared profound intimacies. I for one worship her like a goddess and eat up even the most banal details.

It's really a special thrill to have her here tonight.

Artist

Yeah, well, you know I really do appreciate the support. It gets harder and harder to be an artist. Attention can be incredibly cruel, from critics, and even other artists, who think they're so superior.

I mean, if I'm such shit and my work is such shit, then why don't you just leave me alone?

Yeah, the art world likes 'bad girls'. But if you're really bad you tell the truth and people don't want to hear the truth. If you're honest about how stupid and fucked over life is, you end up in the tabloids. I don't go looking for. It just comes in a big stinking tidal wave.

Removing bra, then shoes and thong.

I'm used to it. It's boring.

I just want to say that my real achievement is getting up in the morning; staying alive and not giving up. Sure, I've had a few good moments workwise, but nothing I'd consider a masterpiece. Let's keep things in perspective. The level here is pretty minor. But at least I haven't fallen in with the system. I should probably also say that my current project does not rely on public funds.

7.

Supporter

Steps out from behind the podium.

It takes a lot of courage to do what she does. She goes far beyond where most artists have the intelligence or audacity to operate. It's a place of commitment and depth and honesty at the very limits of our capacity to know ourselves.

Her work has the power to change lives. It changed mine.

Art with both emotional depth and real political belief is anathema to an art world as cynical as ours. If mainstream artists (and critics) often reproduce the values they claim to oppose, then perhaps only those artists who have been forced to remain on the margins can reveal the true nature of power.

She's an artist who has uncovered structures so pervasive and profound that no one is innocent in her work – not her characters, not her viewers, not even herself. She even performs her own artistic identity and her relationships with the people who seek to support her.

Some people think she's sacrificed her body for professional success. I personally see her success as a triumph, an instance where the art world has broken past its prejudices.

Artist

Back behind the podium.

Recognition is really weird.

I used to spend a lot of time hanging around people who had absolutely no respect for me as a human being. I don't know if that's really changed.

At first I thought it was just really ironic. I got a kind of giddy satisfaction out of knowing that someone had work of mine that was going to offend people. I mean, of course my work's going to go to rich, white collectors and they're going to be proud of owning me and I'm going to be, you know, corrupted by the man. And now they're trying to get rid of me. I think that's why they gave me that MacArthur! To shut me up! Because now I have nothing left to aspire to.

So, I just want to say, thank you for taking hold of these last years of my life and raising my hopes for the future.

8.

Supporter

Well, thank *you*. Thank you for your dedication, for your vision, for your life.

I think we all must dare, as artists do, to break free of the past and to create a *better* future, rooted in values that never change. That's the great lesson our artists teach us.

Putting dress and shoes back on:

I want to say again to our guests how very, very much we enjoy having all of you here for this celebration and tribute and recognition and absolute delight in an artist who represents not only the best of the arts, but truly the very best that comes from within the human spirit.

Artist

And, uh, I just want to say, I guess, I just want to say that, you know, I wanted to be an artist since I was, like, four, because my mother was an artist, a good one, who never got any recognition.

Starting to cry.

And I loved to make things. I lost that love, unfortunately.

But, I just want to say that despite all the ambivalence it helps, it just, um, it really helps, to know that there are people who are following what you're doing and who think it's important enough to try to understand and, um, to support.

Sobbing.

That's all really.

Supporter

Drying face with a tissue:

Thank you so very, very much. You were wonderful.

Can I ask everyone to give her a big hand? Isn't she terrific?

You were wonderful. Please come back.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, there's only one way that we can end this magical evening. I think we should end – I think Bob Hope should sing *Thanks for the Memories.* It's the only way we can end!

Thanks again to everyone and especially to our wonderful pianist.

Thank you, and good night.

Exit.

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Stuart Horodner
Working and William//2002

I'm trying to come to the point.
I refuse to give up my obsession.
America stop pushing I know what I'm doing.
– Allen Ginsberg[1]

I first heard about him at Rutgers University. He had graduated a few years before I arrived. Teachers told stories about Bill Pope, a legendary grad student who reportedly slept in his studio and wrote like mad. When I finally met him, he was William Pope.L, a pleasant but wary black man wearing construction boots and prescription glasses. Modest Afro, moustache and beard. Resonant voice. Pope, period, L.

For ten years, first as a dealer and now curator, I have presented his sculptures and performances whenever possible. Why? His work is connected to everything at once: race, politics, economics, history, and of course, other art. William is always relevant, always brings an intelligent inquisition and a disarming humor. He's a Pop artist and a conceptual expressionist. He's a Fluxus guy, sending mail art about maleness (accumulated postcards bear the rubber stamped message: *MY PENIS IS FINE. HOW ARE YOU?*). He puts himself at risk and he endures, rendering racism and confounding contexts. Another postcard repeatedly claims, *I AM STILL BLACK*, and then the date. Joseph Beuys had his fat and felt, Dieter Roth had his chocolate, and Hannah Wilke, her chewing gum. William Pope.L has had over the years, a shopping cart full of consumer items, including underwear, hot dogs, onions, mayonnaise, Pop Tarts, crackers, pizzas, and a little bottle of Milk of Magnesia. He uses them to create an everyday art best defined by Claes Oldenburg's manifesto of 1961 – an art that can be 'put on and taken off, like pants, which develops holes, like socks, which is eaten like a piece of pie, or abandoned with great contempt, like a piece of shit'.[2]

Carl Andre said that 'anything worth doing is worth doing again and again.'[3] As object maker and social critic, William remakes and re-masters his productions over time. This practice (and I use this word to stress not only the rigours of a profession, but to conjure the notion that practice makes perfect) involves honouring the built-in obsolescence of his materials. He eschews permanence. 'He chews what?' you ask. 'Eschews', I say. 'But he also chews *The Wall Street Journal*.' 'Do you mean he doesn't care if the thing lasts?' 'Expiration Date', I say.

In the winter of 1992, Pope.L filled my SoHo gallery[3] with a variety of ephemeral food based works, thereby setting the stage for his endurance performance called *Levitating the Magnesia.* The exhibition included a ten foot square fresco entitled *Harriet Tubman Spinning the Universe*, with the slave-freeing heroine pictured as a frantic Shiva in action, arms all a whir of activity. Painted in the span of a few hours, his palette included peanut butter, acrylic paint, joint compound, latex paint, charcoal, crayon, and a news clipping. If Willem de Kooning believed that oil paint was invented to paint flesh, then William must have a theory about peanut butter. Its smell can initiate a Proustian episode, and he applied it like a master mason. Dr George Washington Carver probably could have told me that its oils would seep into my Sheet-Rock wall with such tenacity that months later, several coats of stain killer, primer and latex paint would barely control it. I like to think that William's work just keeps on coming.

Continuing around the gallery were *Breakfast Treat #1 (close-up)*, *Breakfast Treat #2 (medium shot)*, and *Cracker.* All three of these works feature drawings of nooses, rendered in black magic marker, acrylic paint and correction fluid on Pop Tarts and Cracked Wheat Biscuits. You eat these works with your eyes, but also take note of the language – cracker is both a dry wafer and a Southern slang term for a white racist. Correction fluid is known by the popular brand name 'Wite.Out', which might also be understood as White Out! Leaning into a corner, was *Broken Column*, a collapsed Brancusi-like tower of stacked mayonnaise jars, the glass cracked and the oozing mayo held in place with clear packing tape and aluminum foil. On another wall were four *Blackheads*, cellophane wrapped, frozen ready-to-eat pizzas on which Pope.L painted exaggerated cartoon portraits. In their doughy countenance these discs remind us that skin often yields 'blackheads', clogged pores which, upon being discovered, are promptly removed. William then put a glue trap for catching rodents at the base of the three gallery walls, each with a notational American Flag drawn on it. He called them *Symbols.*

Then he placed himself at the centre of the gallery, seated in an Archie Bunker-like armchair with a short pedestal (actually a milk crate with a white-washed plywood top) in front of him. On top of this base, sat a small plastic bottle of Milk of Magnesia. Beside him was some food, water, and a bed pan. A poster in the window facing the street clearly stated his intentions:

> I will sit in a chair for 3 days (from Thursday to Saturday) and attempt to levitate a bottle of Milk of Magnesia. On Saturday at 5:30 I will stand up.

And so he did. Sat in the white cube trying to raise a blue bottle. A blue bottle filled with a laxative that helps to loosen the bowels. Can one be sociologically

constipated? Christmas was a week or so away, and William chose to wear a red Santa Claus cap. People entered the space and immediately quieted down. They focused on the man who was focusing on the task at hand. He did not speak and rarely noticed visitors. He was in a zone. At night, my partner Paul Romley and I would lock him in the gallery, leaving the lights on so that passersby could watch him into the wee hours. In the morning, William would hand us a filled bedpan for cleaning. I don't know if William levitated the bottle, but I know he tried. Effort is often his subject and his medium.

Pope.L participates in a continuum of story-telling art made by such African-Americans as Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Robert Colescott and Adrian Piper. Their works are nothing if not critical, but are equally poignant, funny, and well crafted. His practice is perhaps closest to that of David Hammons, a master of bricolage whose installations and outdoor actions court a broad citizenry, people on the street as well as the most refined gallery and museum goers. In the winter of 1983, Hammons held a *Blizzard Ball Sale*, selling variously sized snowballs on a blanket outside the Cooper Union alongside peddlers hawking more traditional utilitarian goods. Several years later, William would try a more altruistic activity, attempting to hand out money to motorists stopped at a light on the Bowery. Anxious drivers would quickly roll up their windows as William approached, waving him off like another annoying squeegee man. And several years after that, while chained to the door of a midtown bank by a length of sausages, he tried to bestow funds again, this time from a skirt made of dollar bills. His generosity was stopped by police almost immediately, proving that in William Pope.L's America, he can't give money away.

Such efforts locate William as a kind of errant economics professor, researching the flexibility of production and consumption, trust and trepidation. As the freewheeling lecturer Mr Poots in *Eracism*, his theatrical work begun in 1992, he posits that, 'We don't eat each other. We defeat each other. Always longing for that invisible Nabisco ... The melting pot's just a channel on the TV. Buy some cable and you're as American as you'll ever be.'[4]

In a forum on 'Creativity and Community' in the May 1994 issue of the journal *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, Pope.L wrote, 'In the US the relationship between art and life is confused, not because the relationship between the two is inherently confusing, magical or difficult, but because we are blinded by the aura of the art-work as commodity. We think: "It is a thing. I can sell it." We tend not to think: "This is my labour. This is my choice. This is another brick in the foundation of my house of destiny. How do I want to build it?"'[5] William builds his 'foundation' using soft and malleable commercial materials that get hard, dry and brittle over time; or else they just 'go bad'. This requires constant upkeep, and like his multiple *Crawls* or the re-staging of his theatrical works, he repeats and refines his

sculptures when new presentation opportunities arise. Is perfection possible? Mr Poots says: 'The ultimate masterpiece is getting out of bed every morning.'[6]

This is not to say that he does not attempt to make more permanent items, as his 2001 installation at The Project indicates. The exhibition featured a plastic banner offering the complex compliment 'Race Becomes You', and a grid of 56 framed texts on paper that explored the nature of Caucasians, asserting that among other things, 'White People Are the Coins beneath the Cushions', 'White People Are the Dent in My Left Testicle', "White People Are Good to Eat', and 'White People Are My Family'. Such works allow Pope.L a way of incorporating into a variety of sculptural objects the satirical writing that makes his performances so effective, adding to the history of language based art that includes Nancy Spero's appropriation of texts by Antonin Artaud, Ed Ruscha's word/environment paintings, Barbara Kruger's silk screens (*'I SHOP THEREFORE I AM'*) and Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* (*'YOUR ACTIONS ARE POINTLESS IF NO ONE NOTICES'*).

Occupying the entire floor of The Project was an array of soiled and stiffened underwear, laid out like a mine field that must be carefully negotiated. This ensemble developed from a 1993 sculpture called *God Gave Us ...* that featured the phrase, 'God gave us memories so that we might have roses in December' written on a single pair of briefs pinned to the wall. *Broken Column (for Eva)* (2001), updated the single column from the Horodner Romley Gallery installation in 1992. This time there were nine mayonnaise stacks leaning against the wall, each one protected by a plywood container/casket.

William continues to use cheap foodstuffs that are tinged with political possibility. His *Map of the World* (2001), included dozens of brown hot dogs with mustard and ketchup, nailed to the wall in the shape of the continental US. Can you imagine this map positioned alongside the canonized one painted by Jasper Johns in 1963? Johns' canvas depicts the fifty states, a bit of Canada plus the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, all rendered in charred reds, blues and blacks, with shifting borders and stencilled names. His canvas was painted with encaustic, a pigment in wax suspension that is prepared by heat and applied slowly. Pope.L's America is a caustic territory, with the accumulated wieners crucified in place like so many severed cocks or pinched turds or stand-ins for black bodies that are malnourished and economically thwarted.

Philosopher Cornel West could have been describing William Pope.L when he said the following about Russian playwright Anton Checkov: 'He is able to force us to wrestle with inescapable disillusionment, disappointment, disheartenment, and yet still be able – like John Coltrane – compassionately to endure. To look at the nullity of who and what we are, to look at the absurdity of so much of the history, and still sustain ourselves as struggling, shuddering,

suffering agents in the world."[7] William's ongoing productions (objects, installations, performances, writings) do this. He engages in what West calls 'the grand calling of a Socratic teacher – which is not to persuade and convince students, but to unsettle and unnerve and maybe even un-house a few so that they experience that wonderful vertigo and dizziness, and recognize even for a moment that their worldview rests on pudding."[8] This aptly recalls the performance for the video *Syllogism* (1997) in which Pope.L attempts to balance a never ending supply of pudding pies on his own 'worldview', each of them falling off the tip of his erect and frustrated penis.

Among the papers and postcards in my William file are his handwritten notes for use in crafting the press release for the *Levitating the Magnesia* performance. At the bottom of one page is this joke:

'Why did the black man cross the road? Because some black woman blew up the Seven-Eleven and he wanted to feel the fire.'

Now I ask you, if William Pope.L is the 'Friendliest Black Artist in America', doesn't that depend on friendly to whom, in which America, and what the definition of 'is' is?

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Frances Stark
I Recently Helped Repair the Broken Horn of Pan//2003

I live in a basement in the house of an elderly gay man, my landlord. He has invited me into his library on several occasions, which is where I learned about his obsessive reading habits. He is currently reading 52 books about Alexander the Great that he is dutifully annotating in the distinctive cramped cursive of people born before 1940. He also orders Greek statues from mail order catalogues; recently I helped repair the broken horn of Pan.

The artist T.J. Wilcox told me that he was working on a film about the love story of Hadrian and Antinous, about whom I know nothing. To flesh things out for me, T.J. recently gave me a copy of Hadrian's memoirs, not written by the second century AD Roman emperor, but a French woman in the 1950s – Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1954). Ancient history is not a subject that captivates me, and so, like a lazy schoolgirl, I was looking forward to a fleshy narrative that would bring a dry history to life, like those short films they would show in English class where recognizable TV actors were featured in dramatizations of Stephen Crane or William Faulkner stories (which is not to say that Faulkner and Crane are dry). I can't say I was dying to read the book, but before I could get into it, my landlord called from the hospital. He could very well be dying, literally; he desperately wanted some reading material. I perused my library for something appropriate. I grabbed Will and Ariel Durant's *Caesar and Christ*, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (you never know), and I thought I'd better include *Memoirs of Hadrian*.

My landlord didn't even want the Durants' book in his hospital room because he resented them for assigning Alexander such a small plot of historical real estate, claiming that Alexander's contribution to history was his practice of shaving his beard so as not to provide the enemy with something to yank on during battle. Alexander and Antinous left beautiful corpses, I presume, while Hadrian, at least according to his memoirs, lived to experience swollen limbs and ruminate on the decay of his body – 'faithful companion and friend, truer and better known to me than my own soul'. Because it had been suggested that I address love and sex as a topic in this particular issue, I planned to enter the foreign territory of Hadrian to see what I could come up with, but as you can see, I had to sacrifice the book to someone who needed and wanted it more than I did. This left me in a panic. I am happy to wind up at love and sex eventually, but faced with the prospect of starting point-blank with them, I was suddenly confronted with my own frigidity.

There's no getting around love and sex, but once they've been suggested, or worse yet, requested, getting right to them feels like an impossible and irritating demand. Sadly, those last remarks sound like the typical lament about lack of foreplay. I kept seeing, but never reading, articles about a young, first-time novelist, Lucinda Rosenfeld, who wrote a book, or memoir called *What She Saw ...* (Random House, 2000), about all the men in this thirtysomething-year-old's life. I thought why not go with the flow, and read the book that everyone's talking about, which is probably an extended version of Tracy Emin's tent or shack that everyone's talking about. I confess I couldn't go with the flow which, rather than a decided commitment to a contrarian stance, is starting to become a point of contention I have with myself. As far as I can tell, being contrarian does not promote either inner feelings of sexiness or outward feelings of horniness. But never mind sex, what about love? I decided to surf the Net, where sex is plentiful but love is a little out of place.

In any case, that's where I learned that bell hooks had recently written a book called *All About Love: New Visions* (William Morrow & Co., 1999). I figured I was destined to read this book that I didn't want to read when I saw it at a friend's house the following day. It's the kind of book that could very well be on Oprah Winfrey's reading list: it aims to heal. In the chapter called, 'Clarity: Give Love Words,' hooks criticizes popular self-help literature for not providing clear enough definitions of love, and for reinforcing sexist culture. The author admits to having bought many self-help books, which of course contributed very little in the way of actual change in her life. In the last several years, you have probably noticed that the self-help section of just about any bookstore has become gargantuan, and you may even have purchased one or two of the books stacked there. Whenever I spot those types of books in people's studios or homes, it's like seeing a porno magazine that has been inadvertently left in view. Most people know that it's a useless folly, or a guilty pleasure, to sit alone poring over their flawed characters while indulging fleeting hope in strategies for relief from same. (I wonder if they have an Idiots Guide to Curbing Masturbation). hooks notes that no vehicle exists in our culture for readers of self-help books to talk back to their authors, to let them know whether they have been useful, and goes on state, 'Using our consumer dollars to keep specific books on bestseller lists is no indication that these books actually help us.' I was totally surprised to see that in the very next paragraph she gets the definition of love she utilizes throughout her entire book from Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (Simon & Schuster, 1997), one of the biggest-selling self-help titles. So I was hating, not loving, that I chose to read this book, and squeamishly plodded through each short yet broad, encouraging sentence.

By Chapter 5, hooks had referenced Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving* (Harper & Row, 1956), which was the first book that popped to my head when searching for love – as subject matter – became a necessity. The tone and scope of Fromm's text, written almost fifty years ago, is surprisingly similar to hooks', except she is more explicitly feminist, whereas he has been criticized for letting his usual critique of gender roles go soft in this particular book. Fromm, who was a member of the Frankfurt school, wrote in extremely accessible language. As with hooks, though, that accessibility is not merely about finding the lowest common denominator. I started to feel like a jerk for my initial squeamishness, which really is cynicism, kind of intellectual chilliness. As I read through the last chapters of *All About Love*, I started to warm up. I started to open my mind to hooks' voice, which made it difficult to want to find fault. I remember right when I was starting to thaw, and to appreciate the goodwill of her authorship, a typo appeared in a sentence I didn't agree with. All at once I felt like a garden-variety neurotic, turned off during sex by the awareness of an insignificant blemish. Then I fully surrendered, and the rest is mostly private, even spiritual, and has to remain off the record.

When my landlord found out I would be travelling to Munich he asked if I could please visit the Glyptothek so I could take photographs of a very special sculpture of Alexander. When I arrived at the museum, I was completely shocked and disappointed to find out that they had mounted an exhibition about the history of the fig leaf, which meant that the genitalia in all the statues had been concealed. My documentation of Alexander would have to be incomplete.

Frances Stark, 'I Recently Helped Repair the Broken Horn of Pan', *Frances Stark: Collected Writings* (London: Book Works, 2003) 64–5.

Suzanne Cotter
The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning//2003

ART
It makes you ill.
What use is it? since it can be replaced by machines that do it better and faster.

ARTISTS
You have to laugh at everything they say.
All jokers. Boast about their disinterestedness.
Are astonished that they are dressed like everyone else.
Earn ridiculous amounts of money, but throw it all away.
What they do can't be called 'working'.
Often invited out to dinner.
– Gustave Flaubert, 'The Dictionary of Received Ideas'[1]

Visiting an exhibition of work by Jake and Dinos Chapman can be one of those life-changing experiences after which looking at art is never quite the same. Mannequins with erect penises for noses; anuses and vaginas for mouths; epic installations of twentieth-century horror – their work is not for the faint-hearted. Amazing in its invention, it teases and shocks, a Gargantuan outpouring that tests the limits of acceptability. This is no armchair art; it keeps you tense, walking a fine line between irreverent laughter and moral indignation.

Attempting to locate meaning in the work is a slippery exercise. Word play, references to psychoanalysis, art theory and history abound, are sucked in and reconfigured to create monstrous hybrids: Picasso meets Freud meets the libidinous excesses of Sade and Bataille; Bosch's *Last Judgement* meets the Holocaust; Christianity meets Ronald McDonald; Romanticism meets porn meets Toys 'R' Us. It is an opus of scrambled misreadings and re-readings, a Tourettic torrent of ambiguity and ambivalence, an exquisite corpse of visual referents.

Self-confessed nihilistic misanthropes, the Chapmans are intensely serious about their work and its place within the terrain of cultural production. They refute the idea of art as redemptive, playing instead on the ways in which art, meaning and value are caught up in a self-perpetuating economy, one in which the artists also play an active part. Authenticity and originality are central to recent work in which the character of the artist is both tortured figure and fugitive, caught up in a theatre of the absurd, of defacement and duplicity.

The sculptural installation *The Rape of Creativity* (2003) is a scaled-up version

of an existing sculpture made with toy models. A caravan, set up on bricks, with an adjoining corrugated lean-to, sits amidst a landscape littered with dog turds and detritus. Pornographic images line the inside of the van, from which emanates a dull light and the sound of music. Visible through the yellowing lace curtains at one end is the figure of a woman modelled in clay. The top of the van is emblazoned with the golden arches of a recuperated McDonald's sign, the booty, perhaps, of a nocturnal wander back from town. In the foreground, a giant Aphrodite figure in pale lime wood emerges from the base of a tree stump. Charcoal marks on her back delineate buttocks and spine yet to appear; the right hand is still a heavy block holding the arm against the torso in inverted salute. At the base of the sculpture lies an axe, while a dog with a sheep's head (a wolf in sheep's clothing?), a bloody hand hanging from its mouth, directs itself away from the scene. It is a fairytale allegory of the artistic process as perversion set amidst the Freudian battleground of sex and death. While the 'work of art' awaits its liberation, the artist has gone to bed.

The narrative of artistic process as regression is especially evident in the Chapmans' drawings, watercolours and works on paper. They range from the crude and elementary, with scatalogical outbursts of biro, pen and watercolour on crumpled sheets of typewritten paper, to the grotesquely elaborate, seething with tumescent forms, eyeballs, insects, intestinal outbursts, swastikas that garland fairy tale figures of grotesque benevolence. Some are like a child's vision of the world, others contain notations of pseudo-precision: 'Would it be possible to flatten head, cast it and turn it into conveyor belt (i.e. Reverse interiority/exteriority)'. Excessive and full of black humour, they are also visually compelling in their graphic intensity. Many of them relate to their three-dimensional work but not always in the traditional way of the sketch. They attest, instead, to a volatile interconnection of ideas, reflected in many of their titles: *Primitive McRubbish*; *Flogging a Dead Horse*; *Tantric Rubbish*; *Disasters of Yoga*.

A leitmotif of a number of sculptural and graphic works by the Chapmans is Francisco de Goya's print series *Disasters of War* (1810–20). In an earlier sculptural work of the same name (1993), the artists reenacted in miniature all 83 scenes with hundreds of model figures which they meticulously crafted and painted. The work was followed up with a life-size fibreglass sculpture based on one of the most harrowing scenes in the series, *Great Deeds Against the Dead*, using mutilated shop mannequins. In 1999, the artists made their own suite of *Disasters of War* etchings, this time more loosely based on Goya's, in which the hallucinatory force of their imagery was unleashed.

Whereas the Chapmans had only ever looked at reproductions of Goya's *Disasters of War* for earlier works, *Insult to Injury* (2003) involves the real thing. The artists acquired and subsequently reworked a complete set, printed in 1937

from the original plates, adding ghoulish masks to the faces of the victims of the Napoleonic invasion graphically depicted by Goya. Exquisitely coloured in gouache and lilac and rose watercolour, these ghostly clowns emerge as if from a dreamlike story book. The work raises a host of questions that tumble over one another in the first panic of encounter: Is it vandalism or Oedipal attack? More cynically: does this make the work a double original? It is a frightening proposition for anyone in the habit of revering a great master's art, an act of wilful defacement that throws into turmoil the reverence accorded to artistic auras and the mission of conservation so dear to the ideals of cultural heritage. Once over the auratic precipice of Goya defiled, however, it is possible to believe that the Chapmans' interference heightens the scenes of cruelty, unspeakable brutality, hypocrisy and despair.

The Chapmans' relationship to art history is an ambiguous one. Criticized for their often hubristic subject matter, they are paradoxically admired for their old-fashioned technical skill as draughtsmen and object makers, and their work is increasingly positioned with reference to art history.[2] It is a game they gleefully control, luring the potentially appreciative viewer into a contradictory and fraught engagement. However, unlike the posture of studied sophistication and ironic detachment adopted by artists in the wake of Pop, the Chapmans' engagement with cultural and aesthetic confusion is a kind of entropic levelling – a visual perversion of the drive towards quiescence of Freud's pleasure principle – in which semiology and postmodern discourse are also part of the cultural rubble.

For their show 'Works from the Chapman Family Collection',[3] the artists carved more than thirty wooden figures in which they crossed the iconography of the global fast food chain McDonalds with images of African tribal sculptures, presenting them in a faux-ethnographic display. Playing on the idea of fetishism in primitive and Marxist terms, the work also toys with attitudes of neo-liberal engagement and post-colonialist guilt. The Chapmans have since made *Unholy McTrinity* (2003), a profane altarpiece in which a crucified Ronald McDonald is flanked by a tribal Big Mac and a masked Andy Capp figure – Hamburglar.

Unholy McTrinity looks as if it is made up of painted wood carvings but is, in fact, painted bronze. Similarly, two new bronze sculptures, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* (2003) and *The Clown Who Lost His Humour* (2003), are painted bronze casts of a painting on an easel and a modelled clay sculpture on its stand. A parody of painting and sculpture and the outdated idea of the artist working earnestly in his studio, they are also perfect replicas. As with so many works by the Chapmans, artistic references spring to mind – Jasper Johns' Ballantyne cans, Sherrie Levine's photographs after Walker Evans. But the Chapmans' fiction is not an appropriation of 'low' art into 'high art', or a

meditation on the loss of aura through reproduction. These works are pure parody: monuments to meaninglessness.

The writer and critic Dave Hickey has talked about value in art in terms of consumer and supplier practice, defining consumer practice as being 'the constituency of the beholders who find the values that they value', and supplier practice as one that pretends to resolve cultural dissonance.[4] It takes up Clement Greenberg's discussion of subjective artistic values in his 1939 essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', where he explains why a Stalinist worker prefers a Socialist Realist painting to a Picasso.[5] Whereas Greenberg was writing from the perspective of the progressive modernist 'supplier', Hickey sides with the 'consumer' who is both artist and viewer. The Chapmans play both sides, constantly flaunting all values and effecting acts of sabotage amidst the insatiable consumption of contemporary culture. Whether consumer or supplier, enthusiastic or dismissive, it is impossible to remain impartial to the Chapmans' game.

Welcome to the mud-wrestling league.[6]

1 Gustave Flaubert, 'Le Dictionnaire des idées réçues', in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881) (Paris: Gallimard, 1979) 489–90. Author's translation.

2 See in particular the essay by Jennifer Ramkalawon, 'Jake and Dinos Chapman's *Disasters of War*', in *Print Quarterly*, XVIII (2001) 64–77.

3 Jake and Dinos Chapman, 'Works from the Chapman Family Collection'White Cube^2, London, 31 October–7 December 2002.

4 Dave Hickey, keynote lecture at the conference on Abstraction held at Tate Modern, London, 19 October 2001.

5 Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', *Partisan Review*, Fall 1939; reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 5–22.

6 In their first show in London after graduating from the Royal College of Art, the Chapmans stencilled an 'anti-manifesto' directly onto the gallery wall that they smeared and spattered with brown paint in mock expressionism. In it they declared: 'Our future remains excluded. But sometimes against the freedom of work, we phantasize emancipation from this liberal polity, into a no-holds-barred all-in-mud-wrestling league.' *We Are Artists*, Hales Gallery, London, 1992; reproduced in *Unholy Libel*, Gagosian Gallery, New York, 1997.

Suzanne Cotter, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning', in *Jake and Dinos Chapman. The Rape of Creativity* (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2003) n.p.

Alex Farquharson
Sean Landers: Art and Language//2004

My original idea was to make conceptual art entertaining, sloppy, emotional, human and funny. Over the years I got so far out on this conceptual limb that I went around full circle until I was a traditional artist again. I tried to be ironic about it but eventually became sincere. Now I'm a happy victim of my own charade. I figure that it's better to be a sucker who makes something than a wise guy who is too cautious to make anything at all.
– Sean Landers[1]

In the early 1990s Sean Landers was the guy with logorrhoea and the masochistically high embarrassment threshold making text works and videos about his naked self. Text and lo-fi video is seen as the preserve of Conceptual art. That association seemed accentuated in the aftermath of a decade of muscular figurative painting and high-finish objects. Despite the wonderfully inappropriate anomaly of clowns, clouds, oceans and breasts appearing within and behind his fields of text, and clay chimps and humanoids circling his television monitors, Landers was still down as a conceptualist, albeit one prefixed by 'Neo'.

Beyond the media he used, there was some mileage in the association. Much of the time this was art about art, which made it Conceptual art of sorts. The writing – on canvas, on sheets of yellow legal paper, in his novel *[sic]* (1993) – alluded at length to its own characteristics, to the contexts in which it was made, to the contexts in which it might be seen. Reflexivity of this kind was a hallmark of Conceptual art: an artist might begin exploring what art was, or could be, by revealing how the structures around it acted on it, and how it acted on its surroundings. By appearing in his videos Landers seemed to be keeping another common conceptual conundrum in the air: What is art? Something made by an artist ... What's an artist then? Someone who makes art.

Like Conceptual art before it, Landers' work has the tendency to occupy spaces beyond the framework of the traditional artwork – spaces that frame both its production and reception. The studio, for example, is very evident in all his videos. Landers also interferes directly with the reception of his work by writing his own press releases. (Recently he even reviewed his own work!) One thinks of all those Minimalists and Conceptual artists who wrote criticism that appropriated or pre-empted the work of the critic (Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Smithson, Mel Bochner, etc.) and, less directly, those that used art magazine pages as sites for works (Dan Graham, Douglas Huebler,

Smithson, Bochner, Kosuth). *[sic]*, and the writing that appears on his paintings, continually makes reference to the infrastructure of the art world: its participants (critics, dealers, curators, collectors, artists, viewers) and its institutions (galleries, magazines, art schools, biennials, museums). Prior to the 1960s, we were supposed to ignore such things – except, that is, when confronted by the proto-conceptual enigmas of Marcel Duchamp.

Besides the cloudy skies and choppy seas, the fulsome but disembodied breasts, the sadistic chimps and battered clowns, it takes less than a minute's reading of his early text paintings to realize that Sean Landers' reflexivity deviates radically from these conceptual precedents. While subjectivity is rarely acknowledged in Conceptual art, the majority of his sentences feature the word 'I'. Furthermore, critics and viewers are directly addressed as 'you', as if he is literally in the room with us, breathing down our necks – almost like an imaginary Vito Acconci performance. When he refers to the art world, the reflexivity isn't the analytical sort we've come to expect of Conceptual art and 'institutional critique'. Instead it takes the form of emotional outpourings of triumph, rage, despair, envy and humiliation. As such, these responses to art's contexts are inseparable from the apparently unfiltered continuum of his life.

In this he has taken the confessional mode to new extremes. By comparison, notorious confessionalists as various as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Woody Allen, Kurt Cobain and Morrissey seem coyly self-censorious. As if on a truth drug, there's nothing, seemingly, Sean Landers won't divulge, however embarrassing and self-indicting: we read of his masturbatory fantasies, his religious hang-ups, his professional jealousies, his personal relationships, his faltering belief in his genius, the agony he suffers on receipt of negative reviews, and much more besides. This is high stakes stuff, but Landers, in his portrayal of himself, comes over – like the unreliable narrators of modernist novels – as a little too naïve to have realized its full implications. We find ourselves not knowing whether what we are reading or hearing is the whole truth, half the truth, or complete fiction. This ambiguity is especially effective in an intellectual context – post-Barthes, Derrida and Foucault – that is skeptical of authorial presence. By seemingly adopting a strategy of full disclosure, Landers not only transgresses art-world etiquette through many of the things he divulges, he also rattles its philosophical coordinates.

The verisimilitude of his representations of his emotional life is such that we find ourselves wondering, for a moment, if we might be in the presence of the real thing – i.e. the outsider or 'idiot savant' whose conspicuous talents have been embraced by the art world (his *I'm a Clown in a World of Chimps* seems to toy with that idea). Reading between the lines, though, we can begin to detect the games being played by a sophisticate well versed in the rules of the art world. It's

not transgression itself that makes Landers unique – 1990s art is particularly notable for transgression. What makes his practice unique is the impression he manages to maintain that these transgressions are done involuntarily – that he just can't help these aspects of his life flooding into his art.

It's this performative aspect that lends continuity to the many apparently contradictory forms his work has taken – paintings and bronze sculptures on the one hand, text works and videos on the other. It's also what has made his works amongst the most engaging and entertaining of the last fifteen years. In Landers' case, those qualities contribute to the works' complexity. The laughter and empathy which they give rise to defer and frustrate our will and ability to interpret the practice as a whole. Its performativity runs rings round us: the work is always two or three steps ahead of our ability to process it. We find ourselves letting go of our critical guard. It's his audience, rather than Sean Landers himself, who, momentarily at least, find themselves 'happy victims' of his 'charade'.

Bruce Nauman's early videos show what art can look like if you remove the object: we are left with the artist alone in his studio, an image both profound and absurd. Stripped of all received notions of art-making, we view Nauman at the zero degree of the creative act, reduced to bouncing balls, pacing the room in an exact square formation, and other apparently worthless tasks. Bereft of an object, Nauman's studio loses definition, and in the process becomes infinite – a kind of universe. At the same time his studio is a prison cell – after all, what's the use of a studio if you're not going to make objects? Stuck here, seemingly without purpose, killing time as we imagine a prisoner would, Nauman, like Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka before him, implies that the calling of the avant-garde is a life sentence.

While Nauman's studio is virtually empty, Landers' studio in *Anyone's Orgasm* (1992) is full of art materials and one or two works-in-progress: some kind of head, perhaps, made of clay, on a plinth, under wraps, and a large text piece on a sheet of paper that covers an entire wall. Their presence is enough to problematize the status of his actions in the film. While the pointlessness of Nauman's actions can be considered conceptually and existentially profound, however casual they appear, Landers makes it that much harder for us to decide whether the pointlessness of his actions adds up to anything. This problem is emphasized the one time we see him at work on his text painting. In light of this short sequence, what are we to make of the actions that fill the rest of the sixty-minute video – the monologues, the singing, the dancing, the face pulling? Any one of these actions alone, sustained for the full duration, might just evoke seventies performance-based video (Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Paul McCarthy, Andy Warhol or William Wegman, for example), but together in one film, seemingly performed at whim, they begin looking like the behaviour of an

artist with severe motivation problems. Instead of dematerializing the art object, Landers creates the impression that he can't seem to get round to doing the materializing. His activities ask to be taken for the diversion strategies of an indolent procrastinator. Nauman, Beckett and Kafka come to mind, but so do the attention-seeking dimwits of reality shows that now crowd television schedules. We're left in an interpretative dilemma.

The constant din of the radio doesn't help. While we know that most art gets made to some kind of soundtrack, I can't recall another artwork other than *Anyone's Orgasm* that gives the radio such prominence. Its prominence in the piece suggests Landers doesn't know what's involved in making video art, since the first thing any other artist would do, once the camera is rolling, is turn it off. It also contributes to the sense that we aren't so much viewing the documentation of a performance as witnessing the artist's down time – the bits we shouldn't see, the bits all other artists would edit out of the work. By showing us the 'life' around the 'art' Landers introduces a new level of uncertainty between those terms just when we thought the issue was a dead one in the aftermath of the 'dematerialized' practices of the sixties and seventies. Ironically, Landers achieves this by reintroducing traditional media in the middle of it all (the clay head and the canvas on the wall).

Perhaps it could be argued the radio in *Anyone's Orgasm* does what the palettes, easels and models do in Picasso, Matisse and Braque's reflexive compositions. Perhaps it also follows on from the coffee tins and brushes Jasper Johns rendered in bronze. It's harder to make such a claim, though, when we've heard what Landers is listening to. While we might like to imagine Pollock listening to Charlie Parker, Rauschenberg to John Cage, the British Pop artists to The Beatles, and so on, soft rock rules chez Landers, an association he uses to offend our sense of art's respectability. 'I want to know what love is/I want you to show me', 'I want to know/have you ever seen the rain?', 'Never get caught between the moon and New York City', 'The albatross and whale are my brothers', and other ridiculous pomp wafts through his studio, stimulating and accompanying his activities in *Anyone's Orgasm*. The singing, dancing and mugging to camera is done as if showing off to friends – very good friends – rather than for the approval of gallery visitors, an impression that seems to lampoon the sacrosanct white rooms used to show it in. When he sings, he adopts a grotesque croon, like a dreadful lounge act, or a mock pious chant, as if singing the Eucharist. On several occasions he repeats a phrase over and over as if identifying with sentiments resembling some of the more self-parodic passages in his prose, or, alternatively, as if imitating a teenager imitating an avant-garde composer dismembering a popular song. When he plays with the interference between radio stations, his grimaces imply that he knows that we

know that he knows he is indulging in a received notion of experiment rather than the actual thing.

As such Landers is playing with the notion that he might be someone simply doing what's expected of him, instead of striving to develop an artistic path of his own. The studio in his videos doesn't symbolize art's new frontier. Instead, Landers seems to imply that he's there because he's supposed to be, as if to say 'what else do you expect me to do now that I've got my MFA?' Watching his videos we always have the sense that the creative spell, such as it is, is about to be broken by a loft-mate wanting to borrow some sugar, or a call from a creditor chasing a late instalment on a student loan. By hiring a chimpanzee (dressed like a human, as in television adverts and family movies) and letting him loose in the studio for half an hour, Landers deliberately implies that he is inadvenently suggesting that the monkey might make better use of these four walls than he does. *Singerie: Le Peintre* (1995) looks like a Bruce Nauman video speeded up: the loveable primate body surfs on a skateboard, darts up and down step ladders, and sprints back and forth from one end of the space to the other, accompanied by a soundtrack, sentimental and spirited by turns, that includes *Moon River* and the theme to *Mission Impossible*.

If we were to go on the specific references Landers makes to other artists, he wouldn't seem that interested in the recent avant-garde anyhow. Whereas artists like Warhol and Nauman were role models for Landers' generation, his many homages to artists date back to an era before art took the forms many of his works take. This enhances the performative evocation that he is writing, performing and shooting videos simply because that's what an artist of the nineties does, in the same way that renting a whitewashed loft in Manhattan and going to gallery openings in Chelsea is what's expected of him. Even when his videos get closest to performance precedents, they have pretences to be among more elevated company. *Remissionem Peccatorum* (1994) and *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture* (1993) are reminiscent of the endurance feats on camera of Marina Abramovic and Vito Acconci, yet the poses are designed to evoke Michelangelo and Bernini. The effect of the conflation is an image of the artist as narcissist, appearing as his own muse – more Morrissey, were he ever to appear on stage naked, than Dying Slave or avant-garde masochist. Rather than simply quoting art history, as many first generation postmodernists in the eighties did, Landers literally makes the references his own.

With the exception of a group of paintings featuring clowns, naked hippies, aliens, robots and pink rabbits in various landscapes, nearly all Landers' paintings that don't feature writing are pastiches of great art-historical works or portraits of great artists. The former include series by William Hogarth and Pablo Picasso. The latter come in two forms: famous artists as ghosts of themselves and

famous artists in various disguises. Both are portraits of what popular publishers now call 'modern masters' of an era contemporary artists rarely refer to.

Ghost 1 (Ernst), *Ghost 2 (Duchamp)*, and *Ghost 3 (Picabia)* (all 2003) resemble grisailles, old photographs, and spectres. Together, the series is a seance which we as viewers witness or, by implication, participate in: Landers attempts to channel the spirits of his forebears through oil on canvas, a medium which itself has since reputedly died. In this, Landers' use of the medium, with the exhibition context in mind, is as performative as his videos – an agency painting rarely has.

It's harder to determine what Landers intends by the other portraits, which feature clowns' face paint and garish costume. Why is Dalí a king, Braque an elf, de Chirico a Viking, Ernst a devil and Picasso a soldier from the American Civil War? And why, with the exception of Dalí, would they appear in costume at all? The point of all these artists, and presumably their appeal to Landers, is that they embody uniqueness. Why the uniforms then? Why the obvious but inappropriate personifications? Although we recognize everything we are looking at, Landers manages to make paintings that resist categorization and remain enigmas.

Virtually all Landers' gallery of modern masters were related to Surrealism. His version of the Surreal, however, looks deliberately off target. Instead of being bizarre, his 'masters' simply look odd, like pantomime dames in the wrong costumes. Landers' other attempts at Surrealism seem similarly contrived. The chimps, clowns, aliens, robots, bunnies and naked hippies that populate his first series of paintings devoid of writing were generic before Landers got to them: despite backdrops that hark back to Romanticism, the slightly anachronistic figures that populate them look as if they've strayed from the comforting world of post-war American entertainment: Disney animations, family sitcoms, theme parks, and children's picture books. His aliens are green and egg-headed, of course, while his robots are so tinpot they seem like they never saw the back of the fifties or the Yellow Brick Road. Their appearance in his art suggests a mind crowded with cultural hand-me-downs, so much so that it's unable to summon up individually persuasive characters of his own.

That accusation is harder to level at others. A recent series of bronze busts of anthropomorphic animals could have sprung from the eccentric and unhinged Victorian imaginations of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear were they to resettle in 21st-century America: *Football Duck* (2003) is, as implied, a duck whose head is shaped like a US football, while *Peanut Head*'s (2003) head is indeed modelled on the shell of monkey nuts. A series of figurative paintings that feature writing, made between 1998 and 2000, feature all manner of mutants: among them a sad balding man with three droopy red noses (*Three Nose Guy*), a man with an erect penis for a nose and giant scrotum for a chin (*Le Domaine Enchanté a.k.a Monsieur Saucisson*), and a woman with teddy bear faces on her breast and trees

where her head, left arm and waist should be (*Apollo and Daphne*). Still, we don't shudder in the face of these anatomical aberrations as we might before a strange creature in a Surrealist painting. Instead of actually looking dreamlike, they look as if they have been contrived to seem dredged from the unconscious: the hybridization is forced, the sexual allusions absurdly clichéd, and the characters' symbolic roles all too apparent. Those characteristics set up a fictitious sense of authorship. We feel they are the works of a Sunday painter aiming at some received idea of Surrrealism filtered through more immediate influences of B movies and soft porn. The technical sophistication of several of these works – the inappropriately beautiful Tiepoloesque light that bathes Monsieur Saucisson and the breast he stands on, for instance – reveals the gap between this fictitious creator and the actual artist who assumes his identity. The effect, again, is analogous to modernist novelists' use of 'unreliable' narrators.

The combination of writing and image on these paintings comes across as especially wrong: in terms of the avant-garde, figurative painting was regarded as obsolete by artists employing text; in terms of the Western tradition, writing on the painting would disrupt the illusionistic coherence of what it represented. The appearance of illustrations by famous artists in works of literature are these paintings' closest forebears. In Landers' works, though, writing and image are fused on the same canvas, which compounds their fundamental incompatibility. Often, though, the imagery bears no more relation to the subject of the writing around them than traditional English pub signs do with the conversations occurring indoors. In some, Landers makes a quick reference to the image and title on the top left hand corner and then ignores it in the rest of the text, like the proverbial elephant in the room. *Bubble Boy* (1998), for example, begins, 'I feel like painting a picture of a 1970s boy with no arms, big hair and blowing a bubble sitting on a hillside stareing [sic] blankly into space. Voila.' (Thanks Sean.) Bar a couple of brief reappearances, *Bubble Boy* doesn't get a look into the comically lugubrious monologues that follow and we are left none the wiser. Instead Landers opines on posterity; how being alive is better than being dead; how he got a critical hiding when he dropped his 'shtick' of writing on his paintings in previous shows; how he's returned to it because it means his paintings would sell; how as a consequence his dealer likes him again; how great this particular painting is; how we really should buy it if we can afford it so that he and his family can have a better lifestyle. It's hard to know what this has to do with *Bubble Boy* any more than any of his other creations from the series – *Plank Boy* (2000), *Career Ego* (1999), *The Booby* (1998), et al. – which is, of course, precisely the point.

The images in these paintings operate the way themes do in many stand-up comedy routines. Landers on Landers as entertainer: 'People think I'm a fucking

comedian. Hey, I'm a serious artist for God's sake, look at this painting ... Okay this painting isn't a good example, but I've made lots of serious art before, right?' (*Football Duck*, 1998). A routine may purport to be about a comedian's experiences of hitch-hiking, a bus journey home one day, or the relative merits of the various emergency services,[2] but these prosaic themes merely act as pretexts for a sequence of wild digressions. Occasionally the theme comes back in view, as if the comedian has just remembered what it was he or she should be addressing. The effect of these 'mistakes' is of following the non-linear train of their thoughts.

Usually, of course, most of what seems like free association is scripted. When the writing is good, the effect is astonishing, like witnessing a movie of the workings of the mind, which is the impression we have reading *[sic]*. Because stand-up comedy is happening before us in real time, often we're not sure whether we are witnessing actual free-association or its representation.

Many of literature's modernists shared this aim of representing the flux of consciousness realistically. None, however, have surpassed Lawrence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, published between 1759 and 1767 in nine volumes shortly after the heyday of Hogarth and English literary satire (John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, et al.), amusing and bemusing its contemporary readership in equal measure. As *Tristram Shandy* reveals, consciousness behaves in an endlessly digressive manner, obstructing the progressive path the novelist is expected to take. As a consequence, the book's apparent hero, Tristram, remains *in utero* for the first two volumes while he expounds on a whole range of subjects other than the events of his life. By the end we still know next to nothing about him, yet we've become familiar with the obstetrician who delivers him, the local parson's sermons, the progress of the Williamite wars in Flanders, Uncle Toby's meticulous real-time enactments of these wars on his bowling green with his sidekick Corporal Trim, contemporary French Catholic opinion on baptising children before birth, Pythagorean mathematics, and much more.

Sean Landers' writing, especially in *[sic]*, is as digressive and absurd as *Tristram Shandy*, except that his 'life and opinions' remain the constant subject of these digressions. Written out by hand, it resembles speech, as it cannot be edited, except by crossing words out. In this respect *[sic]* is a performance with a set length – 1,000 pages – which he fails in the end to achieve, despite threatening himself with the death of his mother if he doesn't. As with *Tristram Shandy*, much stand-up and a lot of his other work, the writing is full of references to the task at hand, what he's written so far, and the anticipated response of the reader:

Naturally by the time you read this in Grenoble the thousand pages won't be

> done, I guess I should set a time limit of some kind. Let's say by the date of my opening at Andrea Rosen Gallery in Sept. or October of 1993 if my 1000 pages are not done by then the thug will execute my mother and I shall be to blaim. God save me and for my mother's sake don't let me get writters block. Shit. 992 pages to go. Maybey I got in over my head here. 1000 pages it's a lot you know it'll be a piece about as long as Crime and Punishment, probably about as important to litterature too [sic].[3]

Its performativity and reflexivity is echoed in one of many passages by Sterne:

> I will not finish that sentence till I have made an observation upon the strange state of affairs between the reader and myself [...] I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month; and having got, as you perceive, almost in the middle of my fourth volume – and no farther than to my first day's life – 'tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out ... at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write – It must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write – and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read.[4]

While *[sic]* and the writing on Landers' early paintings tends to read as unmediated stream-of-consciousness, the writing in the recent paintings seems increasingly self-parodic: 'Hey, I'm that guy that writes on his paintings. Accept no imitations. Especially English ones' (*Football Duck*). Landers does Landers as consciously, as he's done Hogarth and Picasso. His most recent paintings feature melodramatic short phrases or single words drawn from what we've come to know as his lexicon: 'masterpiece', 'cynical', 'finish me', 'struggle', 'give in', 'my work will function better when I'm dead', 'I know I worked hard I really tried' in *There Was a Time ...* (2004) and 'I know I'm great', 'sometimes I can suck', 'I have greater range and talent than anyone' in *It's up to You* (2003). Each word and phrase is repeated as if it's an echo returning from his earlier work, as if its author now suffers from compulsive repetition, and as if Landers is offering us the prospect that he has become the monster he created.

The bronze 'confederacy of dunces' that accompany the paintings evokes no less than Rembrandt, Narcissus, Sisyphus, Icarus, and the Minotaur, according to his own triumphant review of the exhibition in *Friezes*. They're 'his progeny for his progeny', 'irreverent fantasy creatures' intended to 'entertain his kids'. Finally, despite the rabbit ears, the reptilian skin, the elephant trunk, and walrus tusks, they are no less *Sean Landers*, he claims, than the Landers we know from his apparently unmasked monologues. Referring to himself in the third person,

as if 'I is another' (Arthur Rimbaud), Landers ends the review-cum-obituary, 'And last, they are a record of his performance on this stage, one at times warped by delusion and fantasy and fig leafed by occasional fiction but ultimately, it is him. He is this person.'[5]

Free for once of the anxieties all artists are prey to, but none have dared or thought to include in their work – 'Why, for instance, have I never shown in an American museum? I'm America's best artist yet I've never had a big show' (*I Lived/Monkey and Gnome*, 2000) – he projects a mock-heroic image of himself in the afterlife, in the manner of Shelley's Keats in *Adonais* (1821), in the company of the great dead masters, far from the petty malice of the everyday art world. Failure, as a strategy – what one could call 'secondary failure' – connects Sean Landers with many of the other most significant artists of the last fifteen years. The contemporaneity of John Currin's portraits, for example, is attributable to their 'flaws' when held up against art historical precedents. The apparent slightness of many of Martin Creed's neo-Conceptual works derive from his anxieties around his ability to add anything new to art or the world. Maurizio Cattelan has gone to a doctor to get a certificate excusing himself on medical grounds for not having come up with a work in time for an exhibition, and the police for a certificate to state the work he didn't make was stolen from his car. Carsten Höller turned a car into a mobile *Laboratory of Doubt* (1999), equipping it with a logo and a public address system. The work, however, remained silent when he failed to find ways of articulating doubt.

Mike Kelley and Martin Kippenberger, two of these artists' immediate predecessors, have since come to be seen as two of the most influential figures of the eighties. At a time when art works acted iconically and the artists that made them were stars, Kelley cast himself as a museum janitor and Kippenberger showed photographs of himself having been badly beaten up. Kelley has since become best known for deploying lowly craft techniques against Modernism and masculinity, while some of Kippenberger's most powerful late works were actual-size subway entrances, in various architectural styles, that led nowhere.

It is significant that all these artists are white and male, and that all come from either the United States or Western Europe. Since the early nineties there has been much discussion around identity, especially from post-colonial, post-feminist and queer perspectives. At the same time, the art world has undergone a process of globalization, with curators eager to identify emerging art centres in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.

While in works related to these contexts difference tends to be celebrated and injustices denounced, Landers, like Cattelan, Currin, Kelley and Kippenberger, for example, takes a completely different approach to identity. Since Landers and these artists aren't acting from a distinct position of

'otherness', their means of exploring identity have more to do with ambivalent and nuanced relations between the self and society, than issues of visibility and representation. Identity, in the representational sense, does enter Landers' work via his conflicted feelings about his Catholic and lower-middle class upbringing, his Greek and Irish roots, and his dyslexia, but he makes no attempt to offer himself as a representative of these demographics.

In many ways, however, his can be considered a parallel and progressive project, the bad behaviour notwithstanding. In the past, few straight white male artists felt the need to question their own relationship to the kind of art they made or the contexts in which it was received – not in public at least, and not in their works. That unselfconsciousness arose from a sense that their role as artists was naturally theirs. By contrast, Landers makes his conflicts, doubts, humiliations and anxieties the subject matter of his work. Even when the tone of the works turn to expressions of his genius, we know that the artist behind the persona knows that this is an embarrassing faux pas, and that these proclamations come at a time when the term is discredited.

We know this because we understand that Landers' portrayal of his emotional life is as performative as it is comic. In this it is related to overt aspects of self-portraiture in the works of Cattelan, Kelley and Kippenberger and implicit aspects of self-portraiture in Creed, Currin and Holler. As with Landers, they construct a sense of persona in their work that is often mocking or self-deprecating: the cruel prankster (Cattelan), the angry adolescent (Kelley), the maudlin drunk (Kippenberger), the agonizer (Creed), the womanizer (Currin), the slightly malign scientist (Holler). In Landers' work, this staging of the self is developed in many more directions and to much greater extremes. While the personae these other artists adopt are quickly recognizable, it's more difficult to determine what *Monsieur Saucisson* and *Football Duck* stand for with any degree of certainty and to what extent they and Sean Landers are interchangeable. Obviously they don't resemble the artist physically, but are their words a direct transcription of the artist's thoughts at the moment they were written, or, alternatively, do the words themselves form different caricatures of Sean Landers? If the latter, what is there more of, fact or fiction? Rarely do we find ourselves with such disorientating doubts before art works.

Humour is often closely related to performativity and 'secondary failure'. In Landers' practice it runs far deeper than most. With the exceptions of Dada and Fluxus, some Surrealism and some Pop, comedy is not something we associate with Fine Art. Generally, we associate it with art forms involving the written or spoken word (film, theatre, novels), comedy being far harder to achieve through images, especially non-moving ones. Landers' works – especially, but not exclusively, when writing is involved – often attain true comic brilliance. As in

Woody Allen's films, we find ourselves laughing out loud with the artist at the picture of *Sean Landers* that emerges in the confessions in his writing, the actions in his videos and choice of imagery in his paintings and sculpture while we are in the act of absorbing them.

As with Woody Allen, Landers' staging of the self is part of a metafictional game. We are aware, throughout, that he operates both inside and outside the work as both its protagonist and author. This means that we always have the sense that Sean Landers is stepping in and out of the frame of the work – be it painting, video, or memoir – much as Allen literally enters and exits the cinematic frame he is simultaneously directing.

This is what distinguishes Landers' works from historical precedents they appear to resemble or pay homage to. The Picasso paintings are a case in point. In one, the Picassoid forms spell 'Sean Landers', while in another they spell 'Genius'. In the monologue that accompanies them, Landers meditates, mock-heroically, on the relation between this noun and proper noun. As parodies, the paintings are innately resistant to the claims his performative self makes on his behalf. On the other hand, the soundtrack undermines the autonomy of Landers' paintings and the famous paintings they are based on. With Landers' speech and Holst's epic music resounding in the gallery, his Picasso paintings verge on becoming props in the performance of his elaborate metafiction, despite the authority of their compositional virtuosity.

Metafiction has a particularly contradictory relationship to Surrealism. Instead of plumbing the depths of the self, it suggests that the self, when apparent in any works, is a construction. Portraiture, since it belongs to the world of appearances, would be the last strategy a surrrealist would employ to convey the unconscious self. André Breton wouldn't have tolerated Landers' representations of his circle, which of course is part of their irony. Nor would he have appreciated the deliberate absurdity of the various pop cultural borrowings in his neo-Surrealist paintings: the aliens in a rowing boat on a wild sea at night, the chimp in the astronaut suit at an easel on what looks like Mars, and so on.

Landers' text works and performance-based videos also deliberately fail in respect to the criteria of Conceptual art. In general, anything that could be taken as a subjective statement was excised from these precedents in the sixties and seventies: the language employed a quasi-scientific objectivity, while the artist's body was treated as abstract material. In this way Conceptual art made what came before and after the art object, and the structures around it, the content of the work itself: the artist's body, the space of the studio, the politics of the exhibition space, the world beyond these spaces, the publications used to represent it, etc. Landers incorporates many of these contexts into his works. At the same time, he has incorporated a whole range of contextual material into his

work that Conceptual artists neglected, which is what creates the impression that he is getting Conceptual art wrong. That material belongs to the subjective, emotional sphere and is shared by all artists. By making his artistic and professional highs and lows the main subject of his work, Sean Landers hasn't just provided an ongoing commentary on his own practice, he has also, indirectly, provided a commentary on every other artist's.

1 Sean Landers, 'The Booby' (1998).

2 The subjects of three acts I've seen lately.

3 Sean Landers, *[sic]* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) 8.

4 Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford University Press, 1993) 228 (vol. IV, chapter XIII).

5 Sean Landers, 'Sean Landers', Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, *frieze*, issue 83 (May 2004) 108.

Alex Farquharson, 'Sean Landers: Art and Language', in *Sean Landers*, ed. Beatrix Ruff (Zurich: Kunsthalle Zurich, 2004) 97–103.

Raymond Pettibon
Punk's Unofficial Artist: Interview with John O'Connor//2005

John O'Connor [...] You said you have an illustrative-comic style. Comics and cartoons have obviously had a big influence on you, but your work is also different from both. How do you see your art as distinct from traditional comics?

Raymond Pettibon I wouldn't want to be defined so much by comics or cartoons. My work is more narrative than that. If you take your basic cartoon, there's always a punchline or a joke at the end. My drawings don't depend on that so much. Though recently I've done some work that has multiple panels in a comic-book style, and that form has a lot of appeal for someone like me. It tends to get dismissed because of the quality of the bulk of the work that is done, which is something that most art forms have to go through. But there's no inherent reason why you can't do something with the form. And that's not to say that something of quality hasn't been done with it already.

O'Connor It seems like comic artists are getting more mainstream attention these days than ever before, and drawers are starting to be considered 'legitimate' artists, in the same realm as painters or sculptors. Do you have any theories about why that is?

Pettibon They should get attention. But I don't think it's because the drawing has gotten any better. You look at someone like George Herriman and *Krazy Kat* and you see better work than in just about anything that's done today. I think it's audience more than anything. The audience is growing. The problem with comics is that there's a million of them, and there's this whole tradition behind it, so that the creators are all aspiring to become professionals in the mold of their heroes. There are people who can tell you in detail beyond belief everything that ever happened in Superman's universe. Now, that's fine. But it's for a really particular audience of juvenile interest. That's not to say they're all bad either. Comics are often dismissed out of hand for that reason, as being worthless, or for children only, or even harmful to children. That's not what I mean. I think it's amazing that there are all of these new people finally taking this form seriously and properly, as it should be. But even when I was a kid I just couldn't read comics, and it wasn't because I looked down on them. It's just that you really have to become emotionally and intellectually involved in them, if not

challenged by the whole universe they create. Without trying to sound dismissive, it's just not what I'm trying do.

O'Connor I'm surprised you didn't read comics as a kid.

Pettibon Don't get me wrong. I was very influenced by them. The drawing style, definitely, I was interested in. My style of drawing is largely a comic style, but it's also much more obvious than comics. In the sixties, to do anything in art that had recognizable figures in it was considered an attempt to have the work draw attention to itself. Lichtenstein did it with Ben Day dots and dialogue balloons. It drew so much attention to itself, it was so perverse, that it became begrudgingly accepted. That's not meant as a putdown of him. But there should never be any apologies in art, or any overt attention-drawing in that way. What I felt I was doing was making my work as transparent as possible, without equivocations, without calling attention to itself, without apology. There's a lot of conventions in the art world that are not to be transgressed, but my economy of means doesn't abide by those strictures. There's no reason to abide by them. I don't have any vested interest in it. [...]

O'Connor Some of your drawings – and I'm thinking of works like the one of the pistol with the caption 'My bout with depression lasted five chambers', or of the old woman with the words 'My mother was a monster who ate children' – have a sinister quality, or maybe it's just dark humour. In any case, there's this disjuncture between the drawings and the text that adds a lot of humour.

Pettibon That's true for the most part. Usually it's because the image and the text are at such a complete disjuncture from each other, or unrelated, almost random, so that one has nothing whatsoever to do with the other. But I don't know how much I can say that's conscious on my part. I've never been good at planning or directing my work towards specific things. Also, these sorts of things tend to get internalized to the point where they become second nature. It's a technique for setting up conflict and resolution, perhaps, but I'm not filling in punch lines, like with cartoons. Eisenstein's stuff was all about that clash of images, with montages and snippets of this and that. But that can become trite if it's taken too far. [...]

O'Connor With writing and drawing, does one bring out the other for you?

Pettibon It's not that exact, as if I dream in images and my waking thoughts are in text, or as if my daydreams become my captions and illustrations. I don't know

if it's good to separate the two too much actually. But yeah, one depends on the other. There's always a latent or inferred image in my writing. And I can almost always assume if I do a drawing that it will eventually have text. Now, I can only take this so far, because it's almost starting to sound like an apology for writing, as if it's this impurity imposed on the visual image. In art, impurity is not a mortal sin. You have to navigate through it. I say that only because there's not too many of my drawings that don't have text. There are some, but not many. If I were doing cartoons it would be a lot easier. [...]

Raymond Pettibon and John O'Connor, extract from 'Punk's Unofficial Artist', interview, *The Believer* (December 2004/January 2005), 62–9.

Annika Ström
Interview with Jörg Heiser//2005

Jörg Heiser A lot of your work contains references to people inside and outside of the art world. And then you make a piece like *This piece refers to no one* (2004), the text piece on paper that you did for 'Funky Lessons'. Isn't the irony that this piece still refers to something; for example, the history of text pieces that refer to many things?

Annika Ström I'm very against making empty references. I am bored with all these empty references. I can tell you about how *This piece refers to no one* came about. I did it especially for 'Funky Lessons', but before that work a friend of mine was advising me to refer to other artists in my work, for example in a press release, because so many of my films have been a collage of images and impressions, and often people don't recognize certain references implied, although they're not necessarily supposed to know. So my friend was saying that I should really try to give people a hint, so my work ends up in public collections one day. So the next day, I went to the studio, and I made *This piece refers to Joseph Kosutt* (2004), and gave it to my friend, as a joke. But later that piece was shown in the Athens Art Fair, and Joseph Kosuth came by. They took a picture of him, as far as I know he was amused and didn't mention that his name was spelled wrong. I don't make fun of Joseph Kosuth.

Heiser You make fun of the people who *refer* to Joseph Kosuth.

Ström People who refer to Joseph Kosuth with no real connection or dialogue.

Heiser A lot of contemporary artists seem to be 'fishing for references', like 'fishing for compliments'. They're trying to create a history for themselves by referring to history.

Ström Yes, there's all this 'homage here' and 'homage there', like artists are showing off with their knowledge. It's sort of a lack of imagination, or a lack of personal expression.

Heiser But on the other hand, it's almost impossible, and not necessary, to avoid making references. For example, your text pieces can obviously be referred to Conceptual text pieces from the 60s. And you like to refer to yourself, right?

Because the piece obviously was referring to your own work.

Ström Yes, but I am allowed. And yes, because it is relevant to refer to myself, as I have a constant dialogue with myself.

Heiser What I found striking about the video piece *All my dreams have come true* (1:40 min, 2004) is that it appears at first to be dealing with Conceptual art or performance art, because your uncle is repeating this poetic sentence, 'all my dreams have come true', as if it were a performance. At the same time, it deals with your family members, and the everyday reality of people around you. Art is referring to itself here, but also to 'real life'. But that's of course our perception as an art audience, but your mother and your uncle, who appear in the piece, must also be aware that there's something going on – a sub- or meta-level to the work. How do they deal with this juxtaposition of real life and art, for themselves? And how does that affect the way you do the work?

Ström Actually, they haven't seen this. My uncle has been in some of my other videos, but he's very sick now. I don't know if he would like to see it. But my mother has taken part in many of my films, and she is very interested in art. And she has opinions about how I should do art, as well. But she's very flattered that she can take part in it, whether she understands it or not. In this film they have an everyday casual conversation; it's not until I make a film out of it that we give second thoughts, and I am sure they would notice the beauty in the discussion if they see the film ...

Heiser But aren't there points when she might say, 'I'm not going to do this'?

Ström No way, she loves it. She thinks she's a superstar. But personally, the reason why I have done so many things with my mother and family is because this is the perfect way to handle them when I go and visit them. Somehow it's easier to keep a distance with the camera around.

Heiser Does your mother see you as a kind of trickster, then? Or does she really have a sense that this is serious work?

Ström She notices that I make a living out of her. So I think she's happy.

Heiser The way art functions seems to have a lot to do with how meaning, audiences, validity and importance are created. Especially the text pieces can be seen as different approaches to tackling that and breaking it up.

Ström I wouldn't do these text pieces that make fun of making references, if I were not amused by it. Many of the works are making fun of myself, and the fact that I feel helpless in the situation, or that I'm so dependent on these art world hierarchies and structures for financial reasons. [...]

Annika Ström, Interview with Jörg Heiser, in *Funky Lessons* (Vienna: BAWAG Foundation/Frankfurt am Main: Revolver. Archiv für aktuelle Kunst, 2005) 111.

Tom Morton
Maurizio Cattelan: Infinite Jester//2005

Maybe I'm just saying that we're all corrupted in a way; life itself is corrupted, and that's the way we like it.
– Maurizio Cattelan[1]

In Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000) three anonymous men sit on a bench in the grounds of an American Liberal Arts college, debating the fall-out of the Monica Lewinsky affair. They're brassy guys, with brassy manners, and one of them offers up the opinion that 'If Clinton had fucked her in the ass, she might have shut her mouth. Had he turned her over in the Oval Office and fucked her in the ass, none of this would have happened.'[2] His companions concur; yes, this would've been the President's best course of action. After all: 'You give somebody something they can't talk about. Then you've got them. You involve them in a mutual transgression, and you have a mutual corruption.'[3]

Since the late 1980s Maurizio Cattelan has been making art that's tough to talk about, or at least with much rigour or much candour. There's plenty of *noise* made about Cattelan, sure (few of his contemporaries share his profile), but this is mostly composed of gasps of *faux* astonishment, or of a frenzied clapping that, while it applauds the artist's work, also attempts to fend it off. The critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud has written that, faced with a new piece by the artist, 'one is always tempted to say: "No, it's not possible. He can't exhibit that, what audacity"', and then leave things there, as though the sheer effrontery of Cattelan's art militates against further thoughts or feelings. This position, as Bourriaud implies, is untenable for anybody with a brave heart or mind and does a disservice to the work, which should be no more or less difficult to discuss than the world it inhabits. (The artist has said 'I actually think that reality is far more provocative than my art'.) Maybe, though, this is precisely the problem, the blockage in the conversational U-bend. Cattelan's oeuvre, like the art world bubble, or the public sphere, or our blue planet itself, embroils us in a series of mutual corruptions. Confronted with, say, *Unfitted* (2004), three wide-eyed, waxwork child suicides hanging from a tree in a Milanese public square, we become implicated. Bad thoughts begin to roll in ('Why am I entertained by this piece? Who are the victims of my everyday pleasures?'), and the artist buys our blushing silence.

Read any text about Cattelan and it's likely to describe him as a 'clown', the art world's 'court jester'. As careworn by repetition as this is, there's some truth to it. The clown's job, after all, is to hold up a mirror to our pomposities, foibles

and fears, and this is something the artist does with aplomb. upping the comic ante with each new work he produces. Like Shakespeare's fool Yorick, he is 'a fellow of infinite jest', with all the lightness and weight that this suggests (it's worth reflecting here on how unbearable a life of 'infinite jest' might actually be, and on the fact that Yorick's immortal smile is that of a lipless, choiceless skull). For all this, though, there's something about the analogy that rings false. While Cattelan's art is at pains to entertain – and sometimes comes close, cosmetically at least, to big top populism – it's also characterized by a desire for escape, for emancipation from the art world's customary mechanisms. This is not part of the clown's narrative. After all, who ever heard of a performer running *away* from the circus? Circus folk have nowhere else to go.

Perhaps it's better to think of Cattelan as an escapologist, a Houdini figure caught up in an endless loop of stage-managed imprisonment and flight. The most obvious evidence for this is *Una Domenica a Rivara* (*A Sunday in Rivara*, 1992), a piece the artist made for an exhibition at the Castello di Rivara, Italy. Comprising a number of knotted bed-sheets dangling from the venue's top-floor window like a prop from a movie prison break, it's a work that at once refuses institutional authority, while simultaneously embracing it (if this were truly an attempt to avoid participating in the show, the fleeing Cattelan would have pulled his makeshift rope ladder down after him and squirrelled it away in some quiet. hidden spot). Similar works have appeared in other spaces, with similarly paradoxical results. Take *Unfitted* (1996), a rectangular grave-cum-escape-tunnel dug into the gallery floor of Le Consortium in Dijon, France, the loamy leavings of which formed a Robert Smithson-like earthwork, as though not making art were somehow an impossibility, whatever the artist's efforts. Or take *Unfilled* (2001), another tunnel, this time hacked into the floorboards of one of the rooms housing the Boijmans Museum Rotterdam's collection of seventeenth-century Dutch masters. Here a waxwork Cattelan proxy peeked up out of the cavity at the heavyweight paintings, as though he were taking a last, lingering look at a canon he couldn't hope to compete with, while all the while knowing that by backing away from the museum (and its teleological tug), he was writing himself into future art history. Although each of these three works speaks of emancipation, they're ultimately dependent on its opposite. Like an institutionalized prisoner, what they really want isn't liberty at all but rather a bigger cell, a better tobacco allowance and more accommodating wardens. Cattelan's point (directed at least partly at himself) is that if the prison bars are spaced far enough apart, even the shrewdest inmate will begin to believe that he is free.

If Cattelan's practice has drawn on the notion of incarceration, it has also drawn on its precursor, the criminal act. For him crime seems to be one solution to the problem of labour, and the way it robs us of time. (The artist has said that

'I hated working [...] and then came art which seemed like a territory of freedom. In the end I realized that with art you also have to work all the time.')[6] Invited in 1996 to participate in the group show 'Crap Shoot' in De Appel, Amsterdam, Cattelan stole the entire contents of the nearby Galerie Bloom, packed the art works, fax machines and filing cabinets in plastic bags and cardboard boxes and then exhibited them as his own work under the title *Another Fucking Readymade*. Leaving aside the piece's doubtful status as an unfettered collection of found objects (all that flagging and boxing-up might be interpreted as a purposefully bungled attempt at a Duchampian readymade, a perfidy of Modernism, an imperfect art-historical crime), what it foregrounded, in the end, was not itself but a particular type of cultural policing that allowed the curators at De Appel to reframe a real theft as an act of 'appropriation'.

If Cattelan here made an art institution his accomplice in a crime, he did something similar with the Italian police in his *Unfitted* (2002). Having failed to make a new work for an upcoming exhibition, the artist went to a local police station on the night before the opening and reported that a non-existent sculpture had been stolen from his car. Defeated long ago, perhaps, by the efforts of a thousand small-fry insurance fraudsters, the duty officer duly typed up a report, which Cattelan then framed and hung in the gallery the following day. A fiction begat a fiction, a verbal image of a crime begat a textual one and, by and large, the twin bureaucracies of police work and Conceptual art went undisturbed. Procedure, after all, had been followed in each case, and, as any bureaucrat will tell you, this is much more important than the phantom stuff of truth.

Looking back at much of Cattelan's work from the 1990s, it can sometimes seem as though he's willing the art world's powerful to tire of his impudent, needful fun-making; to turn around and say, 'that joke's not funny any more'. He dresses one of his gallerists (Emmanuel Perrotin) up in a pink prick-like rabbit costume to mock his well-known womanizing (*Errotin, le vrai lapin*; *Errotin – A True Rabbit*, 1995) and brings the house down. He tapes another to the wall of his own space (*A Perfect Day*, 1999) and provokes little more than laughter and a few prêt-a-porter, infinitely shrug off-able pieties about the market. What's a guy gotta do to piss someone off around here? Cattelan has said that 'you try to move the borders a little bit further, and then you realize how easily the art world can absorb any blow. But that's okay, I guess that's part of the game [...] Wasn't the dream of the avant-garde to become completely mainstream?'[7] There is mainstream, though, and mainstream, which is why, since the late 1990s, Cattelan has produced a number of works that are primarily concerned with what happens to difficult objects when they (and their media-reproduced images) enter the wider public sphere.

First shown at London's Royal Academy as part of the exhibition 'Apocalypse',

La Nona Ora (*The Ninth Hour*, 1999) is a life-size waxwork of Pope John Paul II. Stricken by a meteorite that's come crashing through the gallery skylight (fragments of shattered safety glass litter the red-carpeted floor), things don't look too good for the Holy Father. Blind with pain, unable to buck the alien boulder from his broken legs, he lifts up his crucifix in a desperate appeal to God. The Pope's timing, however, is terribly, terminally off. This is the Ninth Hour, the moment at which, in Mark 15: 33–35, the crucified Jesus cries out 'Father! Father! Why hast Thou Forsaken Me?' If there's anybody up there, then They are not listening. For all practical purposes, Friedrich Nietzsche was right – God, in *La Nona Ora*, may as well be dead.

Despite (and also perhaps because of) its Pop immediacy, Cattelan's installation is a complicated work to unpack. With its high production values it eschews the *Arte Povera* provisionalism of much of the artist's earlier work – like the Pope himself, the piece is buffed to a news photographer-friendly sheen. Gone too is any sense of marginality, of getting into an institution (nervous and a little grudging) by the back door – this is a work that confidently fills the exhibition space from floor to ceiling. Seemingly no longer concerned with the power plays of a petty cultural elite. Cattelan turns his comedic weaponry on the boss man of a billion hypnotized souls. Or perhaps he doesn't. Looking at the Holy Father's face, with its human frailty, its flicker of doubt and fear, we might interpret the piece as a second crucifixion, a fresh covenant that will restore faith in a Church run to worldliness and fat. At the precise moment when Cattelan promises a partisan image, he destabilizes it with an exhibition of sympathy. This restiveness, this irresolution, is the strength of *La Nona Ora* and what, more than anything else, makes it good art. Like the best of Cattelan's work, it involves us in a series of transactions and trade-offs, not only with the artist but also with the different factions in the internal war we call ourselves.

It is harder to feel sympathy for *Him* (2001), a waxwork of Adolf Hitler made for the Farfagbriken, Stockholm, although the piece does its best to summon up that emotion. Kneeling in worship, prayer or penance, his hands clasped tightly together, the Führer appears oddly vulnerable, a little boy lost in a vast universe. The horror of the piece comes at a slow creep. Questions begin to buzz about our heads – the sort that children ask before being hushed up. What exactly is Hitler praying for, and what if those prayers were heard? Does he pray to the same God as you or me, and if so, does he not test His infinite forgiveness? Is there any difference, in the end, between the Führer and the God that allowed him to perpetrate such evil on His watch? Cattelan's Teflon aesthetic offers no answers, and we're left to work things out on our own. Few of us do this, however, preferring to respond with a sophisticated chuckle ('how amusing of him, how daring!') – the death rattle of feeling, the sound of a mind slamming *shut*. Like

Roth's vision of Clinton, Cattelan knows that moral courage can make us look dumb or banal, and that it risks the scorn of others. He knows too that we are vain and risk averse. This, it seems to me, is the comic pivot of the artist's work. We can't produce the cosmic-scale laughter, tears and rage that Cattelan's art asks for, and so instead we applaud him for the act of asking itself. Rewarded, he becomes even more demanding of our faulty faculties, and we respond as we did before, becoming complicit in a spiralling economy of production and reception in which – brilliantly, brutally – the work itself becomes an unpaid debt, a bill pushed to the back of a dark, forgotten drawer.

Back, for a moment, to the notion of escape. While a number of Cattelan's works (including *Charlie*, a mechanized sculpture of a young boy bearing the artist's adult face that pedalled a bicycle about the 2003 Venice Biennale, ponder bids for freedom and their impossibility, there is a very different type of liberty at play in his collaborative projects. One of the first of these was *Blown Away: The Sixth Caribbean Biennale* (1999), a St Kitts-based event conceived and produced with the curator Jens Hoffmann. Replete with an exotic location, a list of usual-suspect artists (including Olafur Eliasson, Rikrit Tiravanija and Pipilotti Rist) and an energetic publicity and press campaign, it would have been an almost too perfect example of the biennale form but for the fact that it didn't feature a single work of art. Instead, *Blown Away* functioned as a tropical holiday for its participants (another example of Cattelan's avowed allergy to work?) and as a swipe at the proliferation of essentially undifferentiated biennial exhibitions that are easy to assemble as flat-pack furniture, and about as tuned into local context as a KFC franchise. Looking back at the event, what's perhaps most interesting about its legacy is that the critique it offered now comes built into almost every biennial on the planet in the form of publications or hand-wringing symposia which, while they probe the problems of such exhibitions, seem always to fall short of radically reforming them. This, though, is the way our corrupt world often works. You set out to blow a powerful idea away, and you end up (because power is a spongy, absorbent thing) providing it with an alibi. What you're left with is memories of small freedoms – building a sandcastle instead of an installation, chatting over cocktails instead of sweating it out in a panel talk. These are the things we cling to; the only life rafts available to us, whether they can bear our weight or not.

Since 2002 Cattelan has been co-Director with Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnick of the Wrong Gallery, which was housed in a space on New York's 20th Street that recently closed, although the gallery will continue to exist in various forms. A white-walled, metre-square exhibition nook behind a permanently locked glass door, its signage was a nearly identical copy of that of the neighbouring Andrew Kreps Gallery, a design decision that from time to time

caused inattentive visitors to Kreps' place mistakenly to try the wrong (or Wrong) entrance and, finding it shut, perform a confused double-take. Run by an artist, a curator and a critic, this not-for-profit space (whose exhibition programme included Martin Creed, Elizabeth Peyton, Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhoades) was a closed-shop, near-Utopian art world in itself, in which the buyer, and by extension the whole problematic business of the art market, was left standing on the sidewalk, able only to lick the window in a show of frustrated desire. If the Wrong Gallery was a model of the art world as we'd like it to be (in our more down-on-commerce moments). Cattelan and his collaborators have tested this model over the last two years by taking a booth at the Frieze Art Fair, conforming to the logic of corporate 'growth', while all the time refusing that logic's purpose: making a fistful of bucks. Like *Blown Away*, the Wrong Gallery resembles a familiar art world institution, but it isn't – not quite. This, though, is of a piece with Cattelan, Gioni and Subotnick's practice – if something looks like a fish and smells like a fish, it is almost certain to be something Wrong. The trio also publish *The Wrong Times*, a newspaper that features interviews with artists exhibiting in the space, and co-edit *Charley*, a magazine that changes format every issue. On top of this, since 1996 Cattelan has been editing and publishing *Permanent Food*, a magazine comprised of images borrowed from other publications.

One wonders what they'll do with the Berlin Biennial, an event they're curating in 2006. For now, the Wrong Gallery remain tight-lipped, the only visible output of their efforts being a promotional bumper sticker featuring a photograph of Pope Benedict XIV (an image that speaks of the 2006 Biennial's German-Italian axis, while also echoing *La Nona Ora*). Cattelan has said 'Could you have a surprise that lasts forever? That's what I would love to do.'[8] Probably not. Surprises, like much of his art, depend on silence. With Berlin the time will come when he must speak.

Thinking about Cattelan's decision to work as part of the Wrong Gallery, it seems to be a way of freeing himself from the struggle for freedom, of escaping his past escapes. While his practice as an artist is often concerned with crises of the self – consider, say, *Rivoluzione Siamo Noi* (*We are the Revolution*, 2000) in which his wax effigy hangs from a clothes hook wearing a Beuysian felt suit, as though he'd been left dangling and half-forgotten in the wardrobe of art history – the Wrong Gallery is a trinity, an unholy three-in-one in which the self becomes blurred and mobile. (Gioni habitually stands in for Cattelan when the artist is asked to give interviews or gallery lectures, and has on at least one occasion donned a wig and played Subotnick's part.) Maybe working collaboratively is Cattelan's ultimate refusal, the ultimate act of absconding. As part of the Wrong Gallery he is no longer a clown, or a criminal or a prisoner. He is rather a true escape artist – an escaped artist – although one who remains

bound by the belief that 'no matter how badly you want to be hated, somebody will come and love you. And no matter how much you want to be loved, somebody will always hate you in the end.'[9] As Cattelan's work has always demonstrated, it is in this hazard zone, in the corrupted spaces between love and hate, that all of us must live.

1 Interview with Nancy Spector in *Maurizio Cattelan* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000) 34–5.

2 Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York and London: Vintage, 2000) 146.

3 Ibid., 149

4 Nicolas Bourriaud, 'A Grammar of Visual Delinquency', *Parkett*, no. 59 (2000) 34.

5 Francesco Bonami, et al., 17

6 Email to the author (possibly written by Massimiliano Gioni), 2005.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

Tom Morton, 'Maurizio Cattelan: Infinite Jester', *frieze*, issue 94 (London: October 2005) 150–7.

Heike Munder
Humour: The Secret of Aesthetic Sublimation//2005

He who has a sense of humour is a good person. For someone who has humour does not take himself so seriously. When someone in power has a sense of humour he cannot be such a terrible master as one without.
– Knarf Rellöm[1]

Humour is not an easy subject. As everybody knows, arguing about humour is difficult, because like taste it is a social strategy and, according to Pierre Bourdieu, it is an expression of our social background and position in society.[2] The implication here is that humour requires its context in order to be understood. Otherwise it misses its mark and the recipient may feel insulted or out of place. We have already arrived at the most sensitive point of humour – where it becomes painful – where humour is laughter at someone whose state of exclusion is driven to the edge by our joke. We manifest our superiority and demonstrate it with relish. Both elements are contained within humour: distancing from others and from oneself. At its best, this distancing from oneself contains a good dose of self-criticism, which by means of protest and subversion, aims at destabilising the status quo and some of the basic values of society. The actions are born of the hope that renewal and acceptance will be generated on the way: factions of the feminist and gay movements, amongst others, have made gains using humour. This form of humour only hurts those who feel attacked. The most intelligent form of humour is subversive – that of the 'Snipers' – and here infiltration occurs from within the ranks, affirmatively, not inciting revolutions, but incurring subtle, incremental changes instead.

Humour has always occupied a difficult position in art and is barely to be found in art history. This changed at the beginning of the twentieth century with the outbreak of World War I and the expansion of mass industrialization. The Dadaists appropriated humour, both because it bolstered their self-confidence over a long period, and because of the potential it carries for a sublime criticism. Moreover, it could focus on the alienated reality brought about by the new production conditions of the factory. These conditions seldom gave occasion for laughter as they made communal work and everyday storytelling possible. Later, the Surrealists were to use humour like a distorting mirror. Works by the filmmaker Luis Buñuel and the writer Jorge Luis Borges are examples of how social unrest can be incorporated into films and literature.

The totalitarianism of the emerging fascist systems and the post-war period

permitted no space for humour in high culture. A silence reigned around humour. After the holocaust it was socially forbidden, and deemed inappropriate to the imposed bearing of atonement and mourning. As a result a vital tool that could have assisted in the processing of those events was significantly absent. Only in the 1950s, and extremely shyly, was it to find its way again. The Fluxus movement used it as a life elixir with which to look away from the burden that society had assumed. Much later at the beginning of the 1970s, George Maciunas, the 'Pope of Fluxus', created the *Flux Smile Machine* (1971). But the machine actually served to freeze the laugh – as if in this period there was less to laugh about than before. Perhaps Maciunas perceived the hippy generation and the women's movement as too 'concerned' and the Left equipped with too little humour. On the other hand, the machine reminds us that we can process the dark shadow of the past better by fracturing reality and laughing aloud. But not everyone can warm to this strategy. The sober, protestant attitude of the conceptual artists had some difficulties with humour and sublimated it in homeopathic doses.

Body Limits and Pain

One form of humour is self-persiflage [self-questioning/self-mockery] – a self-persiflage that draws strength from its own vulnerability. A humour that is subversive does not permit the fronts to strengthen, but instead utilizes travesty to shine through the system and expand itself into liberated spaces. A faction of the feminist movement has been attempting this since the end of the 1960s in works such as *Meat Joy* (1964) by Carolee Schneemann or *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper* (1971) by Mary Beth Edelson. They were joined in the 1980s and 1990s by, amongst others, the Guerrilla Girls.

The self-persiflage of the 1970s went so far that art attempted, as in Vito Acconci's performance *Conversions II* (1971), to carry questions of gender to the extreme and took on forms of castration. Jürgen Klauke also applied himself to the subject of gender transformation in a less painful but nonetheless grotesque manner. In his work *Transformer* (1978) Klauke attaches additional body parts such as breasts, bottom and a vagina made of finely sewn cloth bags, and mimes a feminine feeling of the body, like a big child playing with the contents of his mother's wardrobe; but he is also aware that gender limits will not be exceeded by this. He plays with genitals made of cloth as if with Lego pieces, and acts out various poses. The aesthetic of his work is 'camp à la Warhol' – at least in terms of its parody and flippancy. According to Susan Sontag, camp is a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. Camp, as the triumph of style over content, is a 'dethroning of the serious' by means of exaggeration.[3] Its distinct purpose is to turn the hierarchy of taste on its head and accelerate the break

with convention – but all of this comes under the mantle of the aesthetic and not the political. The question remains as to where the border between affirmation and subversion actually runs? Where can one nestle comfortably in the niche, and where can one turn the social structure on its head?

Work carried out on one's own body exhibits, in the most succinct manner, personal pain boundaries as well as those of society, and puts them to the test. The body is the object where our social and sexual codifications are most clearly manifested. Body language, sexual preferences, clothes and conduct allow us to belong to a group and social stratum: the body and its behaviour contextualize it. Jürgen Klauke's *Formalisierung der Langeweile* (Formalization of Boredom, 1980–81) also confronts gender relationships. A woman and a chair are objects and two bored men stand opposite as active agents. This work is a series of small format photographs hung like an altar piece. The naked woman is seated on the chair and one of the men in a suit mimes an act of oral sex. But these images contain nothing sexual and instead deliver a bored repetition of role patterns and presentations. Since the 1970s Klauke has been an important representative of those artists who engage themselves with the transformation of representation discourses about the body and identity, using highly subversive humour. His bodies are actors on a social stage and the roles appear to be swapped or combined at will.

Painful humour hits its mark most accurately when it is negative, when the destructive element comes into its own – as is witnessed in the work of Martin Kippenberger and Peter Land. They work with a heterosexually connoted self-destruction mechanism, in which they deal with the excess of their bodies within a thoroughly male dominated world concept. In so doing they become comic heroes, a combination of the tragic and the funny. In his drawings *Bar Songs* (1998), Peter Land illustrates the world of alcoholic inebriation and does not hesitate to reveal his protagonists in the most humiliating and pathetic situations, although men would show great alacrity in shrugging them off as mere peccadilloes. Commenting on his work Land said that he put his identity to the test on various stages, often grotesquely caricatured or driven to the most extreme point, for with exaggeration one obtains far better 'sharp focus'. It is a distancing from the acquired sense or idea of dignity.[4] The moralist essence is tested for its potential for liberty. Martin Kippenberger is another artist who, with vitriolic mockery, illustrates the excess and subsequent decay of his ageing and alcohol impregnated body in self-portraits on canvas or in drawings. It is the emphasis on one facet of the human character as a fat-bellied lantern in *Ohne Titel* (Untitled) (1993–94) that provokes laughter, and through this cynical laughter a kind of typecasting is accomplished. Klara Liden is the feminine equivalent of Kippenberger. In her video *Paralyzed* (2003) she mimes a drunken

female hooligan in an underground train compartment. In 'doggy trousers' she sings and strips through the train compartment – additionally characterizing modern dance and the exaggerated feminine body image. It is refreshing precisely because within this peccadillo the female protagonist allows herself the freedom to live out her intoxication. Sigmund Freud described humour in the following terms: 'Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability.'[5] To scale that unending exaltation and to resist alienation from oneself is no small undertaking. Kippenberger, Land and Liden demonstrate this through their intoxication, when they feel at one with themselves and their environment, from which, for a moment, they are able maintain the necessary distance. The surroundings sink into fog; only they themselves stand for a brief moment at the centre, before everything again breaks down into disillusionment. [...]

1 Knarf Rellöm, 'Was ist Humor', in *Testcard: Beiträge zur Popgeschichte. Humor*, Band 11 (Mainz, 2002) 36.

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984).

3 Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp' (1964) in: *Against Interpretation, and other Essays* (New York, 1964).

4 Peter Land, 'Einige Anmerkungen zu meinen Arbeiten', in *Peter Land* (Esslingen: Villa Merkel/Ostfildern-Ruit: Stadt Galerie Kiel, 2000) 136.

5 Sigmund Freud, 'Humour' (1927) in *The Standard, Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* vol. XXI (1927–1931) *Future; Illusion; Civilisation* (London, 1961) 163.

Heike Munder, extract from 'Humour: The Secret of Aesthetic Sublimation', in *When Humour Becomes Painful* (Zurich: Migros Museum/J.R.P. Ringier, 2005) 12–16.

Slavoj Zizek
The Christian-Hegelian Comedy//2005

A patient in a large hospital room with many beds complains to the doctor about the constant noise and cries other patients are making, which are driving him crazy. After the doctor replies that nothing can be done if the patients are like that, that one cannot forbid them from expressing their despair since they all know they are dying, the patient goes on: 'Why don't you then put them in a separate room for dying?' The doctor replies calmly: 'But this is a room for those who are dying ...' Why does anyone who knows a little bit about Hegel immediately discern a 'Hegelian' flavour in this morbid joke? It is precisely because of the final twist in which the patient's subjective position is undermined: he finds himself included in the group from which he wanted to maintain distance.

Since one is dealing with Hegel here, one is immediately tempted to conceive of this joke as the first term of a triad. Thus, since the basic turn of this joke resides in the inclusion in the group of the apparent exception (the complaining patient is himself dying), its 'negation' would be a joke whose final turn would, on the contrary, involve exclusion from the series, i.e. the extraction of the One and its positing as an exception to the group. In a recent Bosnian joke, for example, Fata (the proverbial ordinary Bosnian's wife) complains to the doctor that Muyo, her husband, makes love to her for hours every evening, so that, even in the darkness of their bedroom, she cannot get enough sleep – again and again, he jumps on her. The good doctor advises her to apply shock therapy: she should keep at her bedside a strong lamp so that when she really gets tired of sex, she can all of a sudden blind Muyo and this shock will for sure cool off his excessive passion. That same evening, after hours of sex, Fata does exactly as advised – and recognizes the face of Haso, one of Muyo's colleagues. Surprised, she asks him: 'But what are you doing here? Where is Muyo, my husband?' The embarrassed Haso answers: 'Well, he is there at the door, collecting money from those waiting in the line ...' And the third term in the Hegelian triad would be here a kind joke-correlative of the 'infinite judgment', the tautology as supreme contradiction, as in the joke about a man who complains to his doctor that he often hears voices of people who are not present in the room. The doctor enquires: 'Really? In order to enable me to discover the meaning of this hallucination, could you describe to me under what precise circumstances you usually hear the voices of people who are not present?' 'Well, it mostly happens when I talk on the phone ...'

As is often the case, Kierkegaard is here unexpectedly close to Hegel, officially his greatest opponent. Kierkegaard insists on the *comical* character of Christianity: is there anything more comical than Incarnation, this ridiculous overlapping of the Highest and the Lowest, the coincidence of God, creator of the universe, and a miserable man?[1] And again, the point is that the gap that separates God from man in Christ is purely parallactic: Christ is not a person of substances, immortal and mortal. Perhaps this would also be one way to distinguish between pagan Gnosticism and Christianity: the problem with Gnosticism is that it is so serious in developing its narrative of ascent towards Wisdom, that it misses the humorous side of religious experience – Gnostics are Christians who *miss the joke* of Christianity. (And, incidentally, this is why Mel Gibson's *Passion* is ultimately an anti-Christian film: it totally lacks this comic aspect.)

For Hegel, the passage from tragedy to comedy is about overcoming the limits of representation. While in a tragedy the individual actor represents the universal character he plays, in a comedy he immediately is this character.[2] The gap of representation is thus closed, exactly as in the case of Christ who, in contrast to previous pagan divinities, does not 'represent' some universal power or principle (as in Hinduism in which Krishna, Vishna, Shiva, etc. all 'stand for' certain spiritual principles or powers – love, hatred, reason). As this miserable human, Christ directly is God. Christ is not *also* human distinct from being a god; he is a man precisely *in so far as he is God*, i.e., the *ecce homo* is the highest mark of his divinity. There is thus an objective irony in Pontius Pilate's 'Ecce homo!', when he presents Christ to the enraged mob. Its meaning is not: 'Look at this miserable tortured creature? Do you not see in it a simple vulnerable man? Have you not any compassion for it?', but rather; 'Here is God himself!'

However, in a comedy, the actor does not coincide with the person he plays in the sense that he plays himself on the stage, that he 'is what he really is' up there. It is rather that, in a properly Hegelian way, the gap that separates the actor from his stage persona in a tragedy is transposed into the stage persona itself. A comic character is never fully identified with his role; he always retains the ability to observe himself from outside: 'making fun of himself'. Recall the immortal Lucy from *I Love Lucy*, whose trademark gesture when something surprised her was to bend her neck slightly and cast a direct fixed gaze of surprise into the camera – this was not Lucille Ball, the actress, mockingly addressing the public, but an attitude of self-estrangement that was part of 'Lucy' (as a screen persona) herself. This is how the Hegelian 'reconciliation' works; not as an immediate synthesis or reconciliation of opposites, but as the redoubling of the gap or antagonism – the two opposed moments are 'reconciled' when the gap that separates them is posited as inherent to one of the terms. In Christianity, the gap that separates God from man is not effectively

'sublated' directly in the figure of Christ as god-man, but only in the most desperate moment of crucifixion when Christ himself despairs ('Father, why have you forsaken me?'). In this moment, the gap that separates God from man is transposed into God himself, as the gap that separates Christ from God-Father. The properly dialectical trick here is that the very feature that appeared to separate me from God turns out to unite me with God.

And this brings us back to comedy: for Hegel, what happens in comedy is that the Universal *appears* directly. It appears 'as such', in direct contrast to the mere 'abstract' universal which is the 'mute' universality of the passive link (common feature) between particular moments. In other words, in a comedy, universality directly acts. How? Comedy does not rely on the undermining of our dignity with reminders of the ridiculous contingencies of our terrestrial existence. On the contrary, comedy is the full assertion of universality, the immediate coincidence of universality with the character's/actor's singularity. Or to put it another way, what effectively happens when all universal features of dignity are mocked and subverted? The negative force that undermines them is that of the individual, of the hero with his attitude of disrespect towards all elevated universal values, and this negativity itself is the only true remaining universal force. Does the same not hold for Christ? All stable-substantial universal features are undermined, relativized by his scandalous acts, so that the only remaining universality is the one embodied in Him, in his very singularity. The universals undermined by Christ are 'abstract' substantial universals (presented in the guise of the Jewish Law), while the 'concrete' universality is the very negativity of undermining abstract universals.

This direct overlapping of the Universal and the Singular also imposes a limit on the standard critique of 'reification'. While observing Napoleon on a horse in the streets of Jena after the battle of 1807, Hegel remarked that it was as if he saw there the World Spirit riding a horse. The Christological implications of this remark are obvious: what happened in the case of Christ is that God himself, the creator of our entire universe, was walking out there as a common individual. This mystery of incarnation is discernible at different levels, up to the parents' speculative judgement about a child that 'out there our love is walking', which stands for the Hegelian reversal of determinate reflexion into reflexive determination. The same happens with a king when his subjects see him walking around: 'Out there our state is walking'. Marx's evocation of reflexive determination (in his famous footnote in Chapter 1 of *Capital*) also falls too short: individuals think they treat a person as a king because he is a king in himself while effectively he is a king only because they treat him as one. However, the crucial point is that this 'reification' of a social relation in a person cannot be dismissed as a simple 'fetishist misperception'; what such a dismissal itself misses is

something that, perhaps, could be designated as the 'Hegelian performative'. Of course a king is 'in himself' a miserable individual, and of course he is a king only in so far as his subjects treat him like one. However, the point is that the 'fetishist illusion' which sustains our veneration of a king has in itself a performative dimension – *the very unity of our state, that which the king 'embodies', actualizes itself only in the person of a king.* Which is why it is not enough to insist on the need to avoid the 'fetishist trap' and to distinguish between the contingent person of a king and what he stands for. What the king stands for only comes to be in his person, the same as with a couple's love which only becomes actual in their offspring (at least within a certain traditional perspective). And it is not difficult to see the extreme proximity of the sublime and the ridiculous in these cases: there is something sublime in stating: 'Look out! The world spirit itself is riding a horse there', but also something inherently comical.

Comedy is thus the very opposite of shame: shame endeavours to maintain the veil, while comedy relies on the gesture of unveiling. More closely, the comic effect proper occurs when, after the act of unveiling, one confronts the ridicule and the nullity of the unveiled content – in contrast to encountering behind the veil the terrifying Thing too traumatic for our gaze. Which is why the ultimate comical effect occurs when, after removing the mask, we confront exactly the same face as that of the mask. A supreme case of such a comedy occurred in December 2001 in Buenos Aires, when Argentinians took the streets to protest against the current government, and especially against Domingo Cavallo, the Minister of Economy. When the crowd gathered around Cavallo's building, threatening to storm it, he escaped wearing a mask of himself (sold in disguise shops so that people could mock him by wearing his mask). It thus seems that at least Cavallo did learn something from the widespread Lacanian movement in Argentina – the fact that a thing is its own best mask. And is this also not the ultimate definition of divinity – God also has to wear a mask of himself? Perhaps 'God' is the name for this supreme split between the absolute as the noumenal Thing and the absolute as the appearance of itself, for the fact is that the two are the same, that the difference between the two is purely formal. In this precise sense, 'God' names the supreme contradiction: God – the absolute irresponsible Beyond – *has to appear as such.* What one encounters in tautology is thus *pure difference,* not the difference between the element and other elements, but the difference of the element *from itself.* This is why the Marx brothers' 'This man looks as an idiot and acts as an idiot; but this should not deceive you – he is an idiot!' is properly comical. When, instead of a hidden terrifying secret, we encounter behind the veil the same thing as in front of it, this very lack of difference between the two elements confronts us with the 'pure' difference that separates an element *from itself.*

According to an anecdote from the May '68 period, there was the graffiti on a Paris wall that read 'God is dead. Nietzsche'. Next day, another message appeared below it: 'Nietzsche is dead. God'. What is wrong with this joke? Why is it so obviously reactionary? It is not only that the reversed statement relies on a moralistic platitude with no inherent truth; its failure is deeper, and it concerns the form of reversal itself. What makes the joke a *bad* joke is *the pure symmetry of the reversal* – the underlying claim of the first message ('God is dead. Signed by [an obviously *living*] Nietzsche') is turned around into a statement which implies 'Nietzsche is dead, while *I am still alive*. God'. There is a well-known Yugoslav riddle-joke: 'What is the difference between the Pope and a trumpet? The Pope is from Rome, and the trumpet is made from tin. And what is the difference between the Pope from Rome and the trumpet made from tin? The trumpet made from tin can be from Rome, while the Pope from Rome cannot be made from tin'. In a similar way, one should redouble the Paris graffiti joke: 'What is the difference between 'God is dead' and 'Nietzsche is dead'? It was Nietzsche who said: 'God is dead', and it was God who said: 'Nietzsche is dead'. And what is the difference between Nietzsche who said: 'God is dead' and God who said: 'Nietzsche is dead'? Nietzsche who said: 'God is dead' was not dead, while the God who said 'Nietzsche is dead' *was himself dead*.' Crucial for the proper comical effect is not difference where we expect sameness, but, rather, sameness where we expect difference,[3] which is why, as Alenka Zupancic pointed out, the materialist (and therefore properly comic) version of the above joke would have been something like: 'God is dead. And, as a matter of fact, I also do not feel too well ...' Is this not a comic version of Christ's complaint on the cross? Christ will die on the cross not to get rid of his mortal shell and rejoin the divine; he will die because *he is God*. No wonder, then, that, in the last years of his intellectual activity, Nietzsche used to sign his texts and letters also as 'Christ': the proper comical supplement to Nietzsche's 'God is dead' would have been to make *Nietzsche himself* add to it: 'And, as a matter of fact, I also do not feel too well ...'

1 See *The Humour of Kierkegaard. An Anthology*, edited and introduced by Thomas C. Oden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

2 I rely here heavily on Alenka Zupancic's unpublished manuscript on comedy.

3 This is why the 'What is the difference between ...' jokes are most efficient when difference is denied, as in: 'What is the difference between toy trains and women's breasts? None: both are meant for children, and it's mostly adult men who play with them.'

Slavoj Zizek, 'The Christian-Hegelian Comedy', in *When Humour Becomes Painful* (Zurich: Migros Museum/J.R.P. Ringier, 2005) 52–8.

Nathaniel Mellors
1974 Reflections. / Kinski Eats God & Vomits Man//2006

'And during these times I was working with Kinski and Kinski did eat NOTHING BUT BARK AND CHEWIES for 18 months before shooting. This resulted in his developing an impervious, waterproof skin that CHEWIESCHEWIES was horrible to behold. He often liked to pull parts of himself off, and he would yell and shout and throw these pieces at the Native American and Mexican members of the crew to frighten them away. They were quite superstitious you see. One day a bear came into the camp and Kinski, ravenous with hunger, shot and killed the bear and ate it with CHEWIES. He later made socks out of the bear's ears and would put them on and stomp around screaming down at the socks "Do you hear me, do you hear me now, bear?"

'It had been quite a strange, small bear; I would say about one foot one inch in diameter, also unusual in that it was able to communicate in lyrical tones with the Algonquin-Wakashan, Athapaskan, Hokan-Siouan, Penutian and Ritwa non-union film-workers. Kinski maintained that the socks made him irresistable and that when wearing the socks he could speak any language and command a sexual response in anything he encountered. I never saw any evidence of this however apart from once,, when he impregnated 27 Uto-Aztecan prostitutes in a hotel bathroom while they were having a conference. After that he became obsessed with his own bodily functions, something I have always found unpleasant and view as an expanded form of egotism. He was like a 2 year old with this. He invented a society called 'Poo Club', which only had one rule – no member would ever go to the toilet again. He took a child-like delight in his 'society', of which he was Chairman and in fact the sole 'member'. He would skip around laughing, and then collapse in terrible spasms of pain. It ended with him hospitalized, and he saw this as his great triumph of will and method.'

Nathaniel Mellors, '1974 Reflections. / Kinski Eats God & Vomits Man'. Film Script, 2006, unpublished.

Dan Fox
Poisoned Pen//2006

In 1999 the now-disbanded British artist group BANK began a project entitled *Press Release*. Publicity information released by galleries was corrected with handwritten comments about the use of language and grammar. A mark out often was given, and the document was faxed back to the relevant gallery, rubber-stamped with the slogan 'THE BANK FAX-BAK SERVICE; Helping You to Help Yourselves!'

Many of the remarks highlighted inanities or contradictions. In correcting a sentence describing one artist's work as 'portrayals of characters from the realms of everyday life and fantasy', for instance, they observed that 'this would seem to cover the whole of human experience – BE MORE SPECIFIC!' The criminally common pairing of adjectival opposites got many a kicking too: '"at once appealing and disconcerting" – your press releases always use these opposites [...] This technique just means you have nothing to say about the work.' But they were also catty and rude: 'this last sentence is completely meaningless: CONGRATULATIONS!' Some galleries were livid. Christine Rose Gallery in New York, for instance, replied without an inkling of irony: 'we're really blown away [...] that somebody in that pitiful little island called England would take the time out of their life to do something so absolutely insignificant [...] y'know karma's a boomerang and it'll come round and smack you in the face some day, so I hope you have a miserable life.'

I first came across *Press Release* six years ago, around the same time as I began writing about art, and it has remained in my memory like a stubborn carpet stain after a party. I wouldn't say it's a particularly original idea; moaning about bad art-speak is not a new sport. Essentially it's a vital piece of satire, one that belongs to a particular sub-genre of art writing, often appearing in self-published 'zines, that performs a deliberately Rabelaisian role in biting the hand of art-world systems of which it simultaneously desires to be a part. There is something about the way *Press Release* targets language and the mannerisms of art-writing – specifically the terms used by a specialist sector of the culture industry to frame information about exhibitions for the public or media – that made me stop and think. Here was a hilarious piece of work that attempted to agitate core questions about the ways in which language, when used by the systems that support art, not only perpetuates certain power structures but also obfuscates or undermines the efficacy of critical discussion.

Art works, films (such as this summer's release of the film *Art School*

Confidential) and books that satirize the art world are nothing new. Well-known artists and writers from Mark Twain through Ad Reinhardt to Sean Landers and David Robbins have deftly used a kind of self-reflexive humour as a strategic tool with which to analyse cultural production. Satire, as classically defined, falls into two types: Horatian, which tends to be gentle and urbane, or Juvenalian – bitter and vitriolic. One of the salient features of the sub-genre that *Press Release*, and also bank's parody tabloid newspaper *The Bank*, belong to is that – as opposed to the Horatian tone of Reinhardt or Landers – it's largely Juvenalian, with a lineage that could be traced back to Wyndham Lewis' *The Apes of God* (1930). An acidic, barely disguised attack on Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury set, Lewis' novel describes the journey of a wide-eyed Irish poet named Daniel Boleyn – loosely based on Stephen Spender – through the London art world of the 1920s. The book, which unsurprisingly made Lewis even more enemies than he already had, features such luminaries as Jean Cocteau (who appears in the book as 'Jacques Coq d'Or'), the critic Lytton Strachey ('Matthew Plunkett') and the painter Dora Carrington (as 'Betty Bligh'). *The Apes of God* is apoplectic with hatred, envy and bitterness (and at over 600 pages hardly an easy read, given Lewis' idiosyncratic way with syntax).

Much of satire's bite comes from its proximity to its subject. The fact that it is written from the 'inside', and that its targets are thus easily recognizable, lends satire a frisson of danger. The element of parody often functions as a form of permission, a humorous convention that allows that which cannot be said to be said. In terms of traditional political satire this is not such a risk – politicians expect to be lampooned. However, for satire to operate as a form of cultural criticism the humorist has to risk potential isolation from the much smaller and politically powerful communities of the scene in which he operates. This is fine if you don't care about those social structures, but a good deal of people do care more than they let on. Part of the thrill of reading a dig at the cultural sphere you're part of is – as with gossip – the dangerous possibility that the joke may be on you. *The Bank* made use of this, with headlines ranging from funny to nasty, including 'Artangel Realistic Road Project!' and, at the height of 1990s yBa hype, 'London is Over'. So too the Los Angeles-based publication *Coagula*, started in the 1990s, much of which is not satirical but status-obsessed, crass and abusive. As its editor, Mat Gleason, wrote: 'if we can unnerve just one trust-fund kid's grasp on taste and sentiment, we will have done our job.'

To some extent this form of brute art-world satire feeds off exclusion and paranoia. With its cut-and-paste Punk aesthetic, *Pig Magazine*, edited by Jon Lekay in the early 1990s, self-consciously played with artists' and critics' perception of themselves within the art-world hierarchies; something akin to what it might be like inside the mind of someone who spends an unhealthy

amount of time reading artforum.com's 'Scene and Herd' blog. A piece in issue 1, for instance, read: 'I want to be in all the shows everyone else is in. And I want all the good reviews. And I want to be liked by people of different backgrounds and colours. I want to be collected and saved and adored and treasured. I would like to be so independent that none of the above was true [...] or at least not so true that I thought about it as much as I do.' *Stellar* magazine, based in Manchester, devotes each issue to a different UK artist, curator or gallery. Collaged press clippings that mention the artist in question are accompanied by a psychopathically cheerful commentary that is so unrelenting as to re-purpose sycophancy as a weird form of criticism. *November*, published earlier this year, takes a more direct parody form, targeting – you guessed it – *October*. On inquiring where they could get hold of a copy, news website artnet.com received the following, all too plausible reply: 'The matrix *of November's* current distribution is constructed largely from the result of aleatory scatterings and (re)inscribed focus groups in an attempt to maintain the dialectical tension between preserving a revolutionary aura of objecthood in this age of debased mechanical inauthenticity and self-reflexively completing the text's projected feedback loop by having others recognize our own editorial subjectivity.'

At best these kinds of publication caution against the devaluation of language. 'Official' or 'formal' registers of discourse can be forced to be more transparent (or at least to stop being so lazy). Satire highlights the ways in which linguistic complacency only serves to perpetuate bad habits of thinking about art or the structures that support it, narrowing and weakening the terms in which we can talk about or evaluate them. As Terry Gilliam said, when interviewed this year about the controversy generated by *Monty Python's Life of Brian* on its release in 1979: 'I can't believe what a timid people we have become. Offence is good. Offence makes people think. It makes people argue.'

Dan Fox, 'Poisoned Pen', *frieze*, issue 100 (London, Summer 2006) 31–2.

The matrix *of November*'s current distribution is constructed largely from the result of aleatory scatterings and (re)inscribed focus groups in an attempt to maintain the dialectical tension between preserving a revolutionary aura of objecthood in this age of debased mechanical inauthenticity and self-reflexively completing the text's projected feedback loop by having others recognize our own editorial subjectivity

Hugo Ball (1886–1927) was a German poet and dramatist, who after studying philosophy in Munich moved to Switzerland at the beginning of the First World War and became one of the co-founders of the Dada movement at the Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, in 1916. He helped establish the Galerie Dada in 1917, where he and others performed sound poetry. In the same year he left the Dada group. His books include the memoir *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (*Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary* , 1927).

Henri Bergson (1859–1941) was a French philosopher whose work on time, consciousness, memory and creativity influenced a number of artists and writers in the early twentieth century. His key works in this context are *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (*Time and Free Will*, 1889), *Matière et mémoire* (*Matter and Memory*, 1896), and *L'Evolution créatrice* (*Creative Evolution*, 1907).

Michael Bracewell is a British writer, novelist and cultural commentator who has also written on contemporary artists for *frieze* magazine and exhibition catalogues. His novels include *The Crypto-Amnesia Club* (1988), *Divine Concepts of Physical Beauty* (1989) and *Perfect Tense* (2001). His non-fiction includes *England is Mine: Pop Life in Albion From Wilde to Goldie* (1997) and *The Nineties: When Surface was Depth* (2002).

André Breton (1896–1966), the French poet and intellectual, worked in a psychiatric ward for war-traumatized soldiers in 1917. There he and fellow medics and writers Philippe Soupault and Louis Aragon first encountered the states of altered consciousness – delirium, hysteria, absurd and violent delusions and hallucinations – that were formative to the investigations and politics of the Surrealist movement they co-founded with other writers and artists at the start of the 1920s. His *Anthology of Black Humour*, the culmination of research begun in the early 1930s, was published in late 1940 but in early 1941 withdrawn from circulation by Vichy regime censors. It was distributed after the liberation in 1945 and republished in an expanded edition in 1950 and 1965.

Dan Cameron is an American curator and critic who has contributed essays on international artists to numerous catalogues, monographs and journals such as *Artforum*, *Parkett* and *frieze*. Major group exhibitions he has curated include 'Art and its Double' (Fundacio 'la Caixa', Barcelona, 1986); 'Aperto', Biennale di Venezia (1988) and 'Cocido y Crudo' (Museo Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 1994–95). Formerly Senior Curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1995–2004), he curated the 8th Istanbul Biennial (2003) and is founding Director of the international biennial Prospect.1, New Orleans (2008).

Leonora Carrington is a British-born novelist and surrealist painter who has lived and worked in Mexico and New York since the Second World War. Her books include *La Maison de la Peur* (1938), with illustrations by Max Ernst; trans. *The House of Fear* (1988), *El Mundo Magico de los Mayas* (1964), *The Oval Lady: Surreal Stories* (1975) and *The Hearing Trumpet* (1976).

Hélène Cixous is a French philosopher, literary critic, writer, poet and playwright. She is considered one of the founders, alongside Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, of poststructuralist feminist

theory, although she habitually avoids the term 'feminist' and explores notions of sexual difference embodied in language through investigations of the 'feminine'. At the University of Paris VIII in 1974 she founded France's first and only postgraduate course in *Études féminines*.

Suzanne Cotter is Senior Curator at Modern Art Oxford, where she has curated and written on the work of Monica Bonvicini, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Mike Nelson, Angela Bulloch, Cecily Brown, Fiona Tan, Jannis Kounellis and Daniel Buren, and curated the group exhibitions 'Real World. The Dissolving Space of Experience' (2004), 'Out of Beirut' (2006) and 'Seth Price/Kelley Walker/Continuous Project' (2007).

Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) was an independent French artist, thinker and chess player who was closely associated with and at times collaborated with the Dadaists (in New York, 1915–22) and the Surrealists. From the Dada period onwards puns and other forms of wordplay and linguistic humour became a significant element in his work, which was an important catalyst for Fluxus in the late 1950s and later for aspects of Pop and conceptual art, after his first retrospective at Pasadena Art Museum in 1963.

Marlene Dumas is a South-African born Dutch painter based in Amsterdam who originally studied psychoanalysis. Her paintings, ink and wash drawings and watercolours are usually based on photographic sources and have been described as a form of conceptual expressionism, exploring relationships between painting and intimacy, eroticism, taboos and double-edged humour. Major solo shows include Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (1998), Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp (1999) and The Art Institute of Chicago (2003).

Alex Farquharson is a British art critic and curator who teaches on the Curating Contemporary Art course at the Royal College of Art, London. He has published numerous catalogue and monograph essays and is a regular contributor to *frieze*, *Art Monthly* and *Artforum*. Exhibitions he has curated include the British Art Show (with Andrea Schlieker, 2005) and 'If Everybody Had an Ocean', Tate St Ives (2007).

Peter Fischli and David Weiss are Zurich-born artists who have collaborated since 1979. Their work explores the poetics of the banal and everyday and encompasses installation, sculpture, photographic series, performance, film and video. Major solo shows include Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1992), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1996, touring) and retrospective, Tate Modern, London; Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris; Kunsthaus Zurich; Deichtorhallen, Berlin (2006–8).

Dan Fox is a London-based critic, musician and filmmaker, and Associate Editor of *frieze* magazine. Since 2003 he has been co-curator, with Steve Mackey (Pulp), of the Frieze Music programme of new and experimental music, in tandem with London's annual Frieze Art Fair.

Andrea Fraser is a New York-based artist whose best-known works involve her performing in the role of a museum guide, or more recently as herself 'the artist', combining aspects of institutional and feminist critique, sociological fieldwork, mimicry, ironic humour and satire to reveal and set up resistances to dominant social structures. Her collected writings, an intrinsic part of her practice, are published in *Museum Highlights* (2005).

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, published two works specifically on

the psychology of humour: *Jokes and Their Relation To The Unconscious* (1905) and *Humour* (1927). His works are collected in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (24 vols).

Guerrilla Girls are a feminist collective group based in New York who from the mid-1980s have conducted 'guerrilla' campaigns employing posters, flyers, advertisements, or actions while disguised in gorilla masks, to draw attention to patriarchalism, chauvinism and social injustice perpetuated through public and private art institutions. In addition to the public gorilla disguise, members preserve their anonymity by assuming the names of deceased artists such as Lee Krasner or Kathe Kollwitz. Their website is www.guerrillagirls.com

Jörg Heiser is an art critic and curator who lives and works in Berlin. He is Associate Editor of *frieze* and a regular contributor to *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. His numerous publications include the catalogues *Contextualize!* (Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2003) and *Painting at the Edge of the World* (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2001), and a monograph on Richard Artschwager (2002). Exhibitions he has curated include 'Funky Lessons' (Büro Friedrich, Berlin; BAWAG Foundation, Vienna, 2004–5) and 'Romantic Conceptualism' (Kunsthalle Nürmberg, 2007).

Dave Hickey is an American art critic, writer and curator who has often defended against their detractors unfashionable notions such as beauty and individual creativity. In 2001 he curated the SITE Santa Fe Biennial. His books include *Prior Convictions: Stories from the Sixties* (1989); *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (1994); and *Air Guitar: Essays on Democracy* (1997).

Hannah Höch (1889–1978) was a German artist who was instrumental, with Raoul Hausmann, in forming the Berlin Dada group in 1918. Her photomontages and writings, often concerned with the life of modern women in the city, formed a significant element of the political critique within German Dada. Solo exhibitions include Kunstzaal de Bron, The Hague (1929) and Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (1976). Retrospectives include Berlinische Galerie, Berlin (1989) and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1996).

Stuart Horodner is an American curator, artist and writer who since 2006 has been Director of Programs at The Contemporary, Atlanta, Georgia. He has curated critically acclaimed solo exhibitions of Leon Golub, Melanie Manchot, William Pope.L and Jessica Stockholder, and has regularly contributed to journals such as *Bomb*, *Sculpture* and *Art Issues*.

Jo Anna Isaak is an American art historian and curator whose influential touring group exhibitions have included 'The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter' (1983), 'Laughter Ten Years After (1996) and 'Looking Forward Looking Black' (1999). She is the author of *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (1996). She has been Professor of Art History at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York, since 1984.

Mike Kelley is a highly influential Californian artist whose work encompasses installation, performance, sculpture, video, writing and curating. In the late 1980s and early 1990s he became associated with areas of practice described by critics at the time as abject art. He has also worked on significant collaborative projects with artists such as Paul McCarthy and Tony Oursler. Solo exhibitions include the Whitney Museum of American Art (retrospective, 1993) and Gagosian Gallery, New York (2005).

Martin Kippenberger (1953–97) was among the most influential of the German artists who emerged in the early 1980s. Humour and social critique unify his diverse work, centred on painting but also including projects such as installing a Museum of Modern Art in an unused abattoir, or using a Gerhard Richter painting as a coffee table. Retrospectives include Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva; Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Castello di Rivoli, Turin (1997), Kunsthalle Basel (1998) and Tate Modern, London (2006).

Barbara Kruger is an American artist and cultural critic based in New York. Since the early 1980s her work has drawn on photomontage and graphics to subvert and question the ideologies and subject positions of mediatized culture. Retrospectives include The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2000).

Sarah Lucas is a British artist whose work includes assemblage, installation, photography and video. Sexual politics and addiction are among the subjects addressed through her skilful use of visual puns and double takes. She was included in 'Freeze', curated by Damien Hirst, PLA Building, Surrey Docks, London (1988). Solo shows include Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (1996), Kunsthalle Zurich; Kunstverein Hamburg (2004) and Tate Liverpool (2005).

Nathaniel Mellors is a British artist whose work, encompassing writing, video and installation, often takes the form of elaborate, satirical pastiches of TV programmes and other products of popular media. He was included in the Venice and Istanbul Biennales (2003). Solo exhibitions include Matt's Gallery, London (2001; 2004) and Modern Art Oxford (2004).

Tom Morton is a London-based critic, Curator of Cubitt Gallery, London, and a contributing editor of *frieze*. Among the numerous exhibitions he has curated are special projects for the Athens and Lyon Biennales (2007).

Heike Munder has since 2001 been director of the Migros Museum fur Gegenwartskunst, Zurich. Exhibitions she has curated include 'It's All an Illusion' (2004), 'When Humour Becomes Painful' (2005) and 'It's Time for Action – (There's no Option) about Feminism' (2006).

Bruce Nauman is an American artist based in New Mexico whose sculpture, drawing, photography and video performance works have been highly influential since the late 1960s. Touring retrospectives include Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1972), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1994) and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1998).

Claes Oldenburg is an American artist based in New York who was a pioneer of Happenings and installation art at the start of the 1960s. Known since the Pop art era for his sculptures of everyday objects enlarged to giant proportions or soft sculptures representing hard objects, from 1985 he has worked collaboratively with his partner, the critic and artist Coosje van Bruggen. Retrospectives include The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1969) and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1996).

Raymond Pettibon is a California-based artist whose expressive ink-wash drawings, reminiscent of cartoons and graphic novel illustrations. have had a wide following since the early 1990s Solo exhibitions include The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (retrospective, 1994), Philadelphia Museum of Art (1999) and Whitechapel Gallery, London (2001).

Francis Picabia (François Marie Martinez, 1879–1953), the French painter and writer was, like

Marcel Duchamp whom he first met in 1912, an independent figure venerated by the Dadaists and Surrealists. He participated in the New York and Paris Dada movements from Barcelona where he moved in 1916, editing the periodical *391* (1917–24). Retrospectives include Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (2002).

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), the Spanish painter, sculptor and poet, was also highly regarded by André Breton and the Surrealists. Humour figures overtly mainly in his poetry of the mid-1930s, influenced by the Surrealist practice of automatic writing, first developed by Breton and Philippe Soupault in 1919.

Richard Prince is an American artist who from 1975 was a pioneer of rephotography, exhibiting rephotographed images from magazines and advertising posters. In 1987 he began his series of *Joke Paintings*, based on sources such as newspaper cartoons. Solo exhibitions include Whitney Museum of American Art (retrospective, 1992) and Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel; Kunsthalle Zurich (2001).

Arnulf Rainer is an Austrian painter who was influenced by Surrealism, Informel and Art Brut in the mid-1950s, when he began his lifelong practice of effacement, erasure and over-drawing and painting, often in relation to portraits and representations of the body. In the 1960s he was associated with Viennese Actionism. Retrospectives include Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1989).

Ad Reinhardt (1913–67) was an American abstract painter, teacher and writer, whose writings continued to be influential on artists of the late 1960s and 70s. Retrospective exhibitions include Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1980) and The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1991).

Peter Schjeldahl is a distinguished American art critic and poet who since the mid-1960s has written for *ArtNews*, *The New York Times* and *The Village Voice*. In 1998 he became the art critic of *The New Yorker*. His books include *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978–1990* (1991).

Carolee Schneemann is an American artist and writer who was a pioneer of performance and installation art at the beginning of the 1960s, centring on her own body and her position as female subject and object in a number of influential works such as *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions* (1963) and *Interior Scroll* (1975). Retrospectives include New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (1998).

David Sedaris is an American playwright and humourist, and a regular commentator for National Public Radio. His books include *Barrel Fever* (1995), *Holidays on Ice* (1997), *Naked* (1998) and *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000).

Robert Smithson (1938–73) was an American artist whose work intersected with conceptual art, Land art and Minimalism, and whose wide-ranging writings made a significant contribution to art discourse in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Retrospectives include Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (1982) and Centro Julio González, Valencia (1993).

Frances Stark is a Californian artist whose work includes painting, installation and writing, in which a central concern is the creative act. Solo exhibitions include Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

(2002), Galerie Daniel Buccholz, Cologne (2004), CRG, New York, NY (2005) and Marc Foxx, Los Angeles (2006). She is Assistant Professor of Painting and Drawing at San Francisco State University.

Kristine Stiles is Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of Art, Art History and Visual Studies at Duke University. Her writings include 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions', in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979* (1998), and 'Performance', in *Critical Terms for Art History* (2003). With Peter Selz she co-edited *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (1996).

Annika Ström is a Swedish-born artist who has lived and worked in Denmark, Germany and Britain. In her photography and video works she explores a hinterland between the artificially staged and the real-life documentary. Solo exhibitions include Rooseum Museum for Contemporary Art, Mälmo, Sweden (1997), Wiener Secession, Vienna (1999), c/o – Atle Gerhardsen, Oslo (2000) and Berlin (2001; 2005).

Anna Tilroe is a Dutch art historian, critic and curator based in Amsterdam. As well as numerous exhibition catalogue essays and articles for the Dutch art press, she is the author of *Het Blinkende Stof, op zoek naar een nieuw visioen* (2002).

Sheena Wagstaff is Head of Exhibitions and Displays at Tate Modern, London, where exhibitions she has curated include retrospectives of Edward Hopper (2004) and Jeff Wall (2005). In 1987 she organized 'Comic Iconoclasm', a major survey of the influence of comics and cartoons in twentieth-century art, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

Hamza Walker is Director of Education and Associate Curator for the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, where exhibitions he has curated include 'Black Is, Black Ain't' (2007). He has written numerous catalogue essays and is a regular contributor to journals such as *Trans*, *New Art Examiner*, *Parkett* and *Artforum*. He was a selecting curator for the Phaidon publications *Vitamin P* and *Cream 3*.

Andy Warhol (1928–87), the Pop artist, filmmaker and writer, was among the most influential artists of the 1960s. Humour in a wide range of registers – from morose and tragi-comic to deadpan, kitsch and camp – underlies much of his work. Retrospectives include The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum Ludwig, Cologne (1989) and Tate Modern, London (2002).

Gregory Williams is Assistant Professor of Art History at Boston University. He received his PhD in Art History from the Graduate Center, City University of New York, in 2006. His dissertation examines humour and jokes in the work of West German artists of the late 1970s and 1980s, including Martin Kippenberger and Rosemarie Trockel. An editor-at-large of Brooklyn's *Cabinet Magazine*, he has published art criticism in numerous periodicals, including *Artforum* and *Texte zur Kunst*.

Slavoj Zizek is a Slovenian psychoanalytic philosopher, sociologist and cultural critic, based at the University of Ljubljana. Among his prolific writings on many subjects, those most relevant to visual studies include *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (1991), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan ... But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (1993), *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997) and *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (2000).

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