





Gerrit Rietveld Academie
Amsterdam
Art in Context program 2014-2015
In collaboration with the
Cobra Museum of Modern Art
Amstelveen





Laughter

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Art in Context is an extra-curricular art and theory program at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. The program offers students a chance to place their work within particular social contexts and to generate knowledge and experience in addressing social issues, which enables to prepare for their post-academic practice. They are invited to use their work as a means for questioning and re-imagining the state of social and political affairs. Its 2014-15 edition is dedicated to the topic of *Laughter*. Produced in close collaboration with the Cobra Museum of Modern Art.

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Mr. Rutte

LAUGHTER



The politics of laughter

Saša Karalić

*When the people are being beaten with a stick,
they are much happier if it is called 'The People's Stick'*
– Mikhail Bakunin

Inelasticity and redemption

In the third year of its existence, Art in Context, an extra-curricular program of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie focused on the topic of 'Laughter'. In difference to our previous topics ('Charity', 2012-13 and 'Public Relations', 2013-14), laughter cannot be assigned to a singular social context — it moves across all contexts and strata and, besides taking over the whole body, it utilizes the whole of society. Students and tutors of Art in Context started by addressing the social function of laughter — we discussed the significance of laughter in creating social cohesion or enabling distance, the potentials of it in questioning or confronting power, its elusiveness and free movement through rigid societal structures that is comparable to the ambition of works of art. What is the use of laughter in society? How it is produced and instrumentalized? Can it be disconnected from constraints of entertainment and applied to other social needs?

The French philosopher Henry Bergson points out: 'to understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society — laughter must answer to requirements of life in common, it must have a social signification'.¹ In his book *Laughter* from 1911,

Bergson identifies two complementary forces that life brings into play, 'tension' and 'elasticity':

If these two forces are lacking in the body to any considerable extent, we have sickness and infirmity and accidents of every kind. If they are lacking in the mind, we find every degree of mental deficiency, every variety of insanity. Finally, if they are lacking in the character, we have cases of the gravest inadaptability to social life, which are the sources of misery and at times the causes of crime. Once these elements of inferiority that affect the serious side of existence are removed, the person can live, and that in common with other persons. But society asks for something more; it is not satisfied with simply living, it insists on living well.²

Because of this, Bergson continues, society is suspicious of all kind of inelasticity — 'mechanical inelasticity' appears as one of the most laughable comic elements. Laughter functions as a corrective force and a social gesture in confronting that inelasticity and 'pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement - the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art'.³ Bergson detects the corrective function of laughter, its intention to humiliate and make a painful impression of the person against whom it's directed, yet he justifies it as a remedy for vanity and the way society avenges itself for the liberties taken from it:

Laughter is simply the result of a mechanism set up in us by nature or, what is almost the same thing, by our long acquaintance with social life. It goes off spontaneously and returns tit for tat. It has no time to look where it hits. It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life.⁴

The contemporary British philosopher Simon Critchley finds humor 'a nicely impossible object for a philosopher'. In his book 'On humor' from 2002, he acknowledges that philosophy might fall short in covering all aspects of humor and laughter and doubts that this might even not be necessary — a joke requiring explanation is a joke missed. Instead, Critchley is interested in the power of humor to reveal or change the situation, in its critical, messianic and redemptive function: 'humor does not redeem us from this world, but returns us

to it ineluctably by showing that there is no alternative. The consolations of humor come from acknowledging that this is the only world and, as imperfect as it is (and we are), it is only there that we can make a difference'.⁵ Bergson's bleak view on the corrective function of laughter that turns us into a collective judging body is in Critchley's work enlarged with the potentiality of laughter to change the situation:

By laughing at power, we expose its contingency; we realize that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor's new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed. (...) 'True' humor changes the situation, tells us something about who we are and the sort of place we live in, and perhaps indicates to us how it might be changed.'⁶

*

In his paper 'Mourning and melancholia' from 1917, Sigmund Freud finds a connection between melancholia, mania and humor. He writes that melancholia shares many traits with normal mourning, apart from one, namely the loss of self-regard and the accompanying feeling of worthlessness. The escape from the self-hatred of melancholia lies in its counter-concept, mania: 'the most remarkable characteristic of melancholia... is its tendency to change around into mania'. 'The narcissistic splitting of ego does not only produce alternating pathologies of melancholia and mania, with their endless to and fro, but also produces humor — dark, sardonic, wicked humor. Humor has the same formal structure as depression, but it is an anti-depressant that works by the ego finding itself ridiculous'.⁷

In the constant negotiation of political positions and subjectivities in today's world, Freud's concept of a narcissistic splitting of ego can be seen as a possible explanation of our ideological confusion. When we — and by 'we' I mean our hope of belonging to a specific community — regard ourselves as political subjects that could infuse change in our social realm, the ever-shifting political strategies and power relations constantly dilute our ambition and make us, as society, permanently oscillate between melancholia and mania. It's increasingly hard to apply Bergson's 'social correction' in societies

where the political responsibility is handed back to political subjects — ‘if you want to correct the world, start by correcting yourself’ goes the popular saying. This political strategy creates a general feeling of worthlessness and disillusion — the self-correction is the hardest task to complete but also the very thing that keeps us divided and complacent. Thus, it’s only logical to answer this attempt to over-psychologize political subjects by turning the game around and placing the whole society on the Freud’s analytical couch — if we are to correct ourselves, perhaps we should address wider political circumstances surrounding and causing our ‘malfunction’? When law becomes the rigid imperative that has to be followed by the majority of people and twisted and ‘adjusted’ by a selected few, it’s necessary to replace the individual responsibility by the collective introspection and questioning. Here is where laughter moves in — not as the Bergson’s corrective device but as an anti-depressant and a means in breaking constrains of the political manipulation since, to repeat Critchley’s quote once more, ‘humor does not redeem us from this world, but returns us to it’.

The research on laughter made by Art in Context this year and subsequent works and texts anticipate this return and attempt to mark our social sphere as a common space for work and play, the space that exists both inside and outside the political consensus. Through the lens of laughter, society loses some of its inelasticity and becomes open for a collective introspection. The laughter that appears in many of the works is seldom cynical, judgmental or merely entertaining but could be better described as a mirthless laugh. As Samuel Beckett writes in his ‘Watt’:

The mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout — Haw! — so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs — silence please — at that which is unhappy.⁸

School, museum, bank, theatre

This is the second year that Art in Context works with the Cobra Mu-

seum for Modern Art. Our last year's collaboration on the topic of 'Public Relations' resulted in a jointly produced publication and exhibition at the museum. This year we decided to venture together outside both the school and the museum and to produce an event at the Frascati theatre. The format of time-based event allows students to gain experience in addressing a live audience and having an immediate reaction on their works — the laughter is best addressed when it's collectively and publicly shared. Beside guest lecturers who contributed to this year's addition of Art in Context — Marianne Flotron and Stephanie Noach — we had two important meetings organized by the Cobra Museum. In November 2014, curator and director of 'If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution' Frederique Bergholtz and artist Maria Pask met with the students and discussed their way of working and connecting theory and practice through a particular and intuitive use of material. This was very important for students' understanding and rethinking of alternative ways of using theory in their work. In April 2015, students met Micha Wertheim, a Dutch stand-up comedian who shared his experience in live acting, producing his material and dealing with his audience. Students also had a chance to discuss with him their works in progress and moral and ethical issues surrounding the topic of laughter and humor. The guests of this year's edition of Art in Context offered an important and valuable input and I wish to thank them all for their contributions.

As mentioned earlier, the topic of laughter cannot be assigned to a singular social context. Thus, Art in Context students started the year by following individual trajectories. This created diverse readings of the topic — laughter appeared as a force that moves through different social strata and enveloping many of our daily actions. By the end of the first semester, we felt the need to choose one context that would unite different approaches and offer a testing ground for them. We decided to connect our topic to the corporate world since it appeared in several researches of our students. What is the position of laughter in today's corporate world? How does it effect the perception of efficiency, creativity and usefulness? Can it be used as a critical tool inside of an organization? Those were just some of the questions we asked while looking for the corporate partner to work with. To-

gether with Cobra Museum, we approached the Dutch bank ING who decided to open their doors to us. The results of our research at the ING were shown both at the ING to their employees and at the Frascati theatre in June 2015.

We wish to thank the Cobra Museum which contributed greatly to this year's edition of Art in Context, especially the museum's director Katja Weitering and curator Hilde de Bruijn. We also wish to thank the curator of ING's art collection Ellen Bertrams, its head curator Sanne ten Brink and the HR program manager 'Managers with impact', Bram Manck without whose help it would have been impossible to complete our collaboration with ING. In the end, we thank those who continuously support Art in Context, and to our students for their dedication and good work.

Notes

1

Henry Bergson: *Laughter*, Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, New York, 2005, p.4, originally published in 1911 by The Macmillan Company, New York

2

Ibid. p.9

3

Ibid. p.10

4

Ibid. p.97

5

Simon Critchley: *On Humor*, Routledge, 2002, p.17

6

Ibid. p.17

7

Sigmund Freud (1917), *Mourning and Melancholia*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): 'On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works', The Hogarth Press, London, pp.237-258

8

Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, Riverrun Press, New York, 1976, first published in 1953



The members of the Italian political counter-culture group '1977 movement': 'What interests us is the sense of bitterness that irony leaves us with, its flattening action. Irony opens spaces, it unhinges, it reveals what cannot be hidden anymore.'

LAUGHTER



The false laugh

Katja Weitering

‘Can that actually happen — not understanding a cabaret performance?’ asks the interviewer. ‘No, that is what is so great about cabaret. No one says, I had to think about it for an hour, and then I found it very funny. It’s not possible. With visual art, it may be that you have to get accustomed to it, but if people say that they need time to appreciate the work, in nine out of ten cases, it is nonsense.’ These words are from Micha Wertheim, the celebrated Dutch comedian. He is known for testing the limits of cabaret. In his performances, he makes razor-sharp analyses of himself and his weapon, which is humor. Despite the frequent layering of his shows, Micha Wertheim is unambiguously funny. You cannot help but laugh, although it is sometimes an embarrassed laugh. For years, cabaret has been immensely popular, but how do we see humor, satire and irony in visual art? In our world of visual arts and museums, do we actually laugh?

When Saša Karalić and Jouke Kleerebezem, the Rietveld Academie tutors for Art in Context, presented their 2014-2015 theme to us at the Cobra Museum, there was a marked, uncomfortable silence. ‘Laughter?’ curator Hilde de Bruijn and I both cautiously asked. ‘Yes, laughter as a strategy. How it is applied in humor, in a whole range of cultural situations, from empty amusement to disconcerting irony.’ It then slowly dawned on us that this was an exceptional and up-to-date theme, and it was a realization that was unfortunately soon underscored by the attack on the producers of the satirical weekly magazine, Charlie Hebdo.

As a museum, our collaboration with Art in Context and the students

at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy allows us to reflect on the various roles that we as an institute can have in our rapidly changing society, and how we continue to converse with the wider public. As I write these words, I have to think of the American artist Mike Bouchet. In 2010, the Cobra Museum invited him to present his first solo exhibition in the Netherlands. Bouchet uses a disaffecting form of humor as a strategy to ask critical questions of our capitalist society. The reactions of most of our visitors at the Cobra Museum were not very amused. People felt that they had been made fun of, and in some cases they actually became angry. There was no question of an 'immediate understanding' of Bouchet's art. Indeed, the prevailing tone was one of confusion. Was this because of the artist, or because of the audience? Was it the fault of the museum, or is visual art simply more complex than cabaret? The fact is that the strong visitor reaction came as a complete surprise to the curator of the exhibition.

This mismatch between an artist and their audience brings us back to the reception of the Cobra movement in its day, in the 1940s and '50s. The first Cobra group exhibition, held in 1949 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, generated a flood of outrage from both the public and the press. People experienced this new art as subversive and provocative. The call by young and experimental artists for a free and expressive art, rooted in life itself, went unheard. This was perhaps partly because of the presentation at the Stedelijk, where the artists had not shied away from a wink of the eye and a certain sense of the ludicrous. The poets stood like 'wild apes' in a self-made cage, slinging their slogans into the gallery. The works were also presented in an unorthodox way, either low to the floor or high up on the walls. Art critics were primarily cynical and ridiculed the Cobra artists in their reviews. This in turn was humor as the journalists' strategy to disarm the substance and content of the Cobra message.

In the Cobra Museum collection, there is a painting by Asger Jorn, one of the founders of Cobra, entitled *Le Faux Rire* / 'The False Laugh'. Hilde de Bruijn mentions this work in her interview in this publication with Asger Jorn expert Karen Kurczynski. The image shows a two-faced being with a crooked laugh, and a friendly, floating face in the background. Asger Jorn has here paired humor and hor-

ror. For him, it was a characteristic combination of emotions. The painting is not unambiguous, just as laughter in all of its forms is seldom unambiguous. From the fake laugh to the embarrassed laugh or the artificial laugh; from direct and honest emotion to a powerful political instrument.

The theme of this edition of *Art in Context* opens a wide and exciting terrain of literature, of experiences and of works of art, both existing and new. It is a true pleasure for us to make use of the collection and the expertise of the Cobra Museum to make a substantial contribution to this study programme. The museum arranged an introduction to ING Art Management, whereby students have been able to follow an intensive trajectory within ING, focussed on the subject of humour as a strategic instrument within corporate processes. The collaboration between the Cobra Museum and the Gerrit Rietveld Academy could not have been achieved without the engagement of Ben Zegers, Saša Karalić, Jouke Kleerebezem, the students, Micha Wertheim, and of Sanne ten Brink and Ellen Bertrams of ING Art Management. And as always, we thank the Mondriaan Fund for their support.

LAUGHTER



Regarding society

Sanne ten Brink, Ellen Bertrams

Art is an inextricable part of ING. Art inspires, divides and binds, takes people out of their comfort zone and sparks creative and critical thought. Art provides fresh insight. Hence the central importance given to art at ING — a tradition which, after 41 years, is still going strong. Last year's 40th anniversary of the ING Collection was an occasion for the 'Hidden Picture' exhibition held at the Cobra Museum of Modern Art and the publication of *RE: Society*, our new collection catalogue.

The initial purpose of the ING Collection was to foster a stimulating and inspiring office environment. This function is still important today. In addition, the collection — just like ING itself — has become more relevant in society. The social relevance of corporate and museum collections is increasingly touched on in the public debate. Yet what exactly is this social relevance? Given the recent trends in society and changes within ING, one cannot help wondering what role art plays or should play today and what role the collection can play in the future within ING and society.

It is that aspect which forms the background of our collaboration with the extra-curricular Art in Context programme of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. The programme, where art is literally placed within a broader social context, focuses on bringing the art world and the corporate world closer together. Awareness of being part of and operating in society is what gives this programme its relevance — not only for the artists but also for ING.

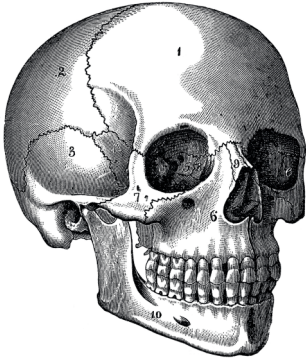
The connection between this year's theme of laughter and ING

might seem tenuous. What does ‘laughter’ mean within a financial institution? Is it merely the friendly smile of the receptionist when you pay a visit to an ING office? Is there a certain humor among ING colleagues, and how does that possibly reflect ING’s identity? Or does laughter function as a communications tool, perhaps to break the ice or to mask uncomfortable situations? Answers to these and other questions can be found by talking to ING employees, paying a visit to the offices and studying ING’s communications materials, resulting in an objective look at the institution of banking and ING in particular.

The project demonstrates that ING acts as part of the market rather than in reaction to it. The resulting artworks are not just there for their decorative aspect; they also spark awareness and provide food for thought by holding up a mirror for ING to reflect on its own identity and the society around it. As such, art reflects inward and outward at the same time. Just like the artist Christian Boltanski said, ‘You are confronted with a collective responsibility and your own conscience.’

We live in an era of responsibility. Much is expected of ING, and rightfully so. Our contribution to a healthy economy and stable society is our responsibility; but likewise, it is a privilege to be able to participate in that same society. Art and projects such as the Art in Context program can play a crucial role in acting on that responsibility. The fantastic result of this collaboration is something we as an institution can be proud of — a result which above all can be credited to the curiosity, open minds and creativity of the students and tutors of the Art in Context program.





Funny bones, laughing human skull

A sixth wit

Jouke Kleerebezem

*My five wits have I fondly misused and spent, in hearing, seeing,
smelling, tasting, and also feeling, which thou has given me...¹*

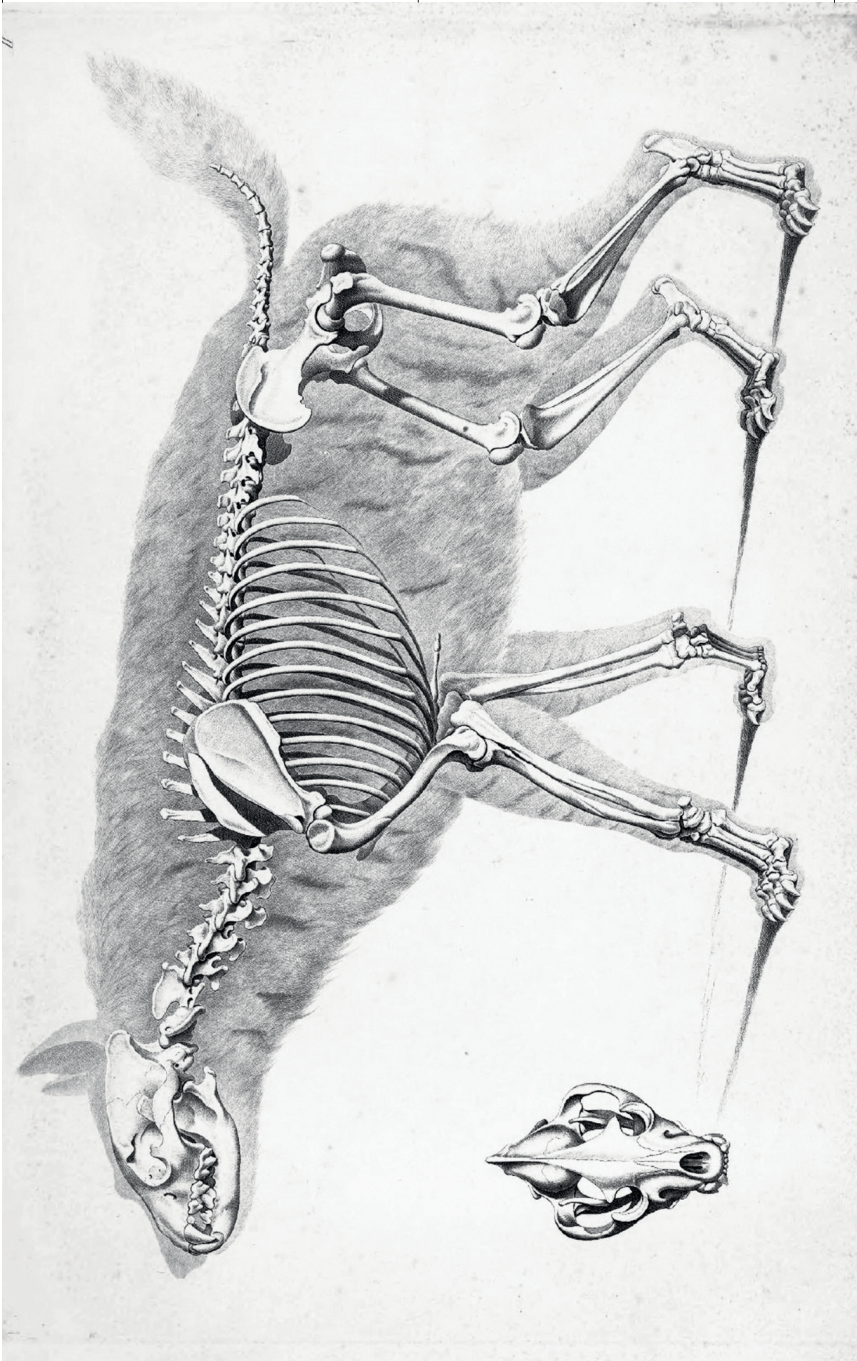
Stephen Hawes' poem 'Graunde Amoure' shows that the five (inward) wits were 'common wit', 'imagination', 'fantasy', 'estimation', and 'memory'. 'Common wit' corresponds to Aristotle's concept of the sensus communis, and 'estimation' roughly corresponds to the modern notion of instinct.²
– Wikipedia, 'Five wits'³

Ha!

In addition to the 'outward wits', currently known as the five senses, the inward wits historically marked the human faculties with which we value, anticipate, judge, remember and imagine — in other words, how we deal with sensory information in order to gain knowledge, to become of keen understanding, and as far as I am concerned, to develop a *sense of laughter*. Sense of laughter is the original sixth wit. We 'fondly misuse and spend' that faculty, at the cue of any disruption of sensory information that short circuits our common reasoning. Sense of laughter feeds a 'keen understanding' of irrationalities, ambiguities, absurdism, even of meaninglessness — in short everything that everyday life has in store for us to make itself more 'interesting', and us more 'interested'. Or to quote from the wit of artist Robert Filliou: "Art is what makes life more interesting than art." Which goes to prove that laughter shares at least one affordance with art.

Ha-ha!

While we commonly acknowledge the existence and possible sharing of a ‘sense of humor’, it would not mean much to speak of a ‘sense of laughter’, unless to a comedian. We all seem to have a *general* sense of laughter though — willingly or not experiencing it, or witnessing it with others, by its occasional uncontrollable release. We do laugh, we know what laughing feels like. To a certain extent we even know how to make each other laugh. Over time we learn how to evoke laughter, how to produce it with one another. The comedian has a special talent and training, which makes for the artist that s/he is. With a comedian the laughter ‘sticks to the ass’ (‘hangt aan zijn kont’), as a Dutch saying goes; the ass as a seat of laughter, meaning that such asses are the ones who have the funny bones, to stay with corporal localization. Our poor fragile bodies with their typical organs and functions serve as an inspiration for laughter. Laughter is defined anyway as a typical human faculty by multiple sources, most famously Aristotle: ‘no animal laughs save Man’.⁴ If other animals do not laugh, would this imply that they lack a sense of humor, or are they just more in control of themselves than us humans? Do they have stiffer upper-lips or upper-beaks than ours? We actually never see them laugh, other than in our interpretation of their grimace, bleating or body language. *He-he-he-he! The laughing hyena is funny!* squeaked one of my sons’ plastic toys, when its string was pulled. We do imagine animals having fun, because we watch them play ‘just like we do’. We imagine animals to have a general sense of pleasure, maybe even a sense of laughter, distinguishing it as a pleasant sensation, different from other pleasant sensations. Like they experience pain as an unpleasant feeling evoking bodily reactions, grimaces and cries. But animal sense of humor...? *No animal has a sense of humor save Man.*



Ha-ha-ha!

A sense of humor, as a precondition of laughter, can be addressed, it can be manipulated. This is how we make others laugh. We tickle their sense of humor. The social phenomenon of laughter happens between people who share, at least for the moment of laughter, an emotion. Laughter is produced at different occasions, emerging from a variety of observations and experiences. Hence it is expressed and undergone at different emotional levels. Reversely, with joy, shame, sadness, love, anger, embarrassment, resignation, pity, etcetera, laughter comes — if at all, if not tears or rage instead — in different flavors. Laughter and emotion pair in a shock of awareness, sparked instantaneously upon sensory information which upsets our anticipation of the course of events.

A sense of humor signifies patterns, in which emotions and laughter coincide in relevant pairs. If we share a sense of humor with someone, we share an emotional pattern when faced with situations that carry a promise of laughter. A sense of humor is shared with those who appreciate a specific pairing of *qualities of laughter* and the emotions that they are evoked with, and which in turn they strengthen. Sensory information is incidentally disrupted, our expectations are confused, the pattern of events or a narrative logic of cause and effect is turned upside down — we laugh out of surprise, enthusiasm, embarrassment, shyness or shame, joy or excitement. Every emotion is balanced by a proper quality of laughter. Laughter and emotion operate together by mechanisms of exaggeration, change of perspective, strengthening, denial, or generally of subverting any of our inward wits' sensory information processing powers. In other words, we laugh when our senses are fooled. The experience takes us briefly beyond the reasoning of 'common wit', 'imagination', 'fantasy', 'estimation', or 'memory'. It sends us uncontrollably into laughter, that darn sixth wit.

Ha-ha-ha-ha!

Laughter at social occasions is of a different quality and operates at a different emotional level than laughter in individual experience.

Individual laughter is already different when facing the same situation, but under different circumstances, like for example when (re-)viewing a theatre scene on a screen at home. The self-reflective part, present in any laughter — the laughing at one-self laughing — amplifies and resonates differently in common situations, wherein also social mechanisms are reflected in all of the attendants' experience and expression. If we laugh at ourselves in company, as a release of a shared emotional stimulus, we laugh at ourselves being part of that social gathering of laughing individuals who react to the same stimulus. Even exact same scenes could reach different emotional levels when witnessed under different circumstances, when we are in a different mood, or in different company.

That which is laughable may simply be the unknowable. In other words, the unknown nature of the laughable would be not accidental, but essential. We would laugh, not for some reason which, due to lack of information, or of sufficient penetration, we shall never manage to know, but because the unknown makes us laugh.

– Georges Bataille⁵

Within us and in the world, something is revealed that was not given in knowledge, and whose site is definable only as unattainable by knowledge.

It is, I believe, at this that we laugh. And, it must at once be said, in theorizing laughter, that this is what ultimately illuminates us; this is what fills us with joy.

– Georges Bataille⁶

When in company, part of the unexpected is how our own reaction, how our laughter resonates with the laughter of the others. To be the only one to laugh in company is always somewhat disenchanting. Likewise, not to have the impulse while ones company is overwhelmed with joy makes us feel equally uneasy. Meanwhile, if the unknowable brings us to laugh, we will never know what, and who, exactly, we are laughing with. We will never be sure about our laughter's resonance: in ourselves, in the others who we are laughing with. Therefor our sixth wit — the wit that reacts on life's interesting

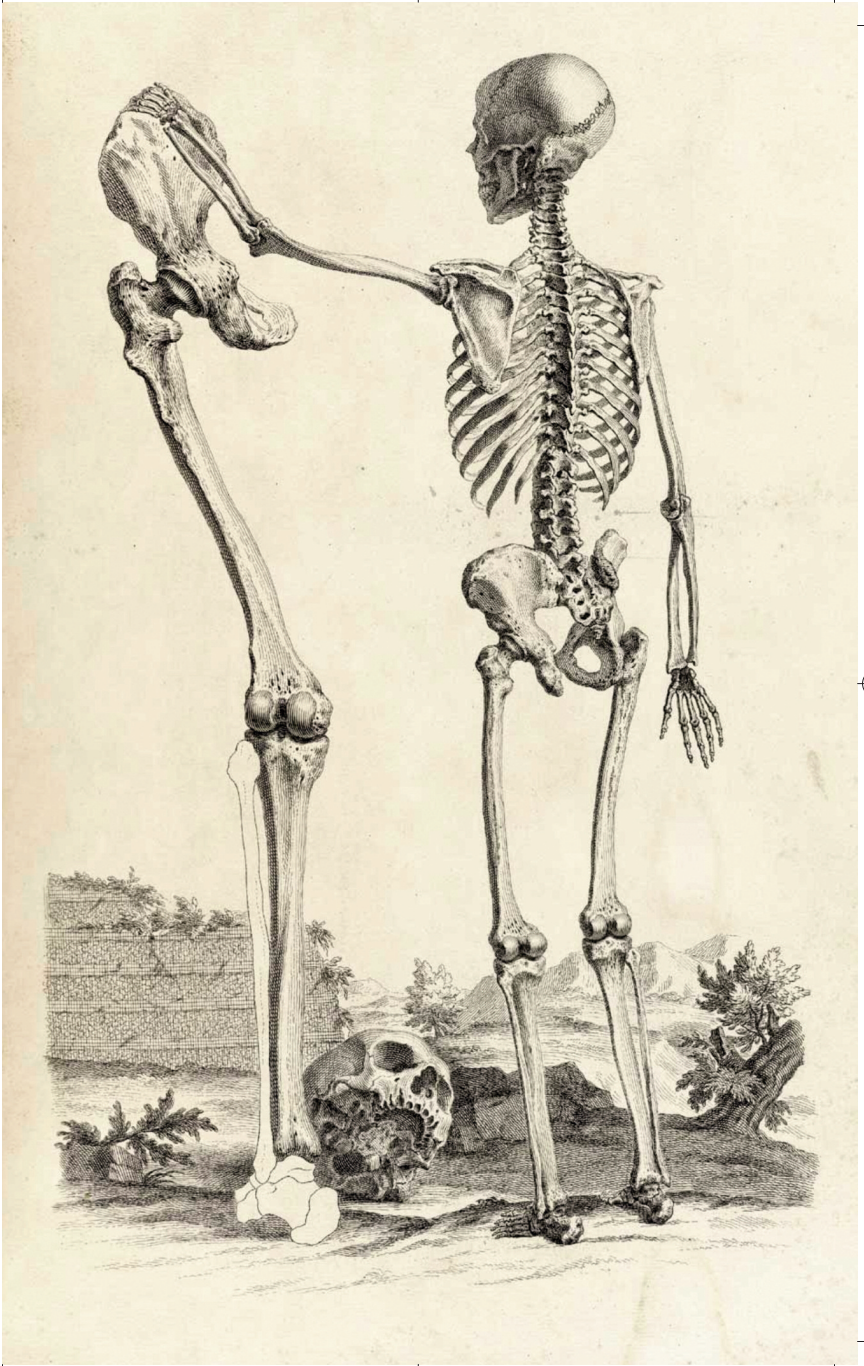
paradoxes, non sequiturs, ambivalences, inconsequences; in short life's veritable qualities — can also put us in a dubious relationship with others. Sense of humor and the laughter that it invites has the power to divide. In recent times this observation is only becoming all the more poignant, when different cultures' and religions' sensitivity to caricature and to what is or what isn't 'political' correct today produces more difference, manifesting itself in the form of intolerance, hate, violence or downright terror. The sixth wit of laughter with the unknown, that certainty of uncertainty, is culturally and politically informed, and challenged. Those to whom the unknown is unwelcome lack the sixth wit to reconcile them with it.

There's a laughing hyena in the Wunderkammer

While the five original inward wits make us more knowledgeable about the nature of the world and ourselves, the sixth wit of laughter balances that knowledge with a profound taste for the unknowable. It does not unveil the unknown — which would spoil our joy — rather it makes us aware of the unknown's existence. When the unknown comes sneaking upon us, we laugh in recognition of its sudden disturbing presence. Such laughter appreciates the unknown for being fundamentally different from everyday reality. We can count on our sense of laughter to fill us with emotion in the realization that the unknown is there to counterbalance our securities, to relativize our certainties, to sensitize us for every possible emotion that common wit, imagination, fantasy, estimation, and memory know nothing about. Laughter even ridicules these other wits: for their naivety and for the pretentious claims we make for and from them. In case we might lose our wits, laughter offers a last refuge. It saves us from panic and reconciles us with being out of control.

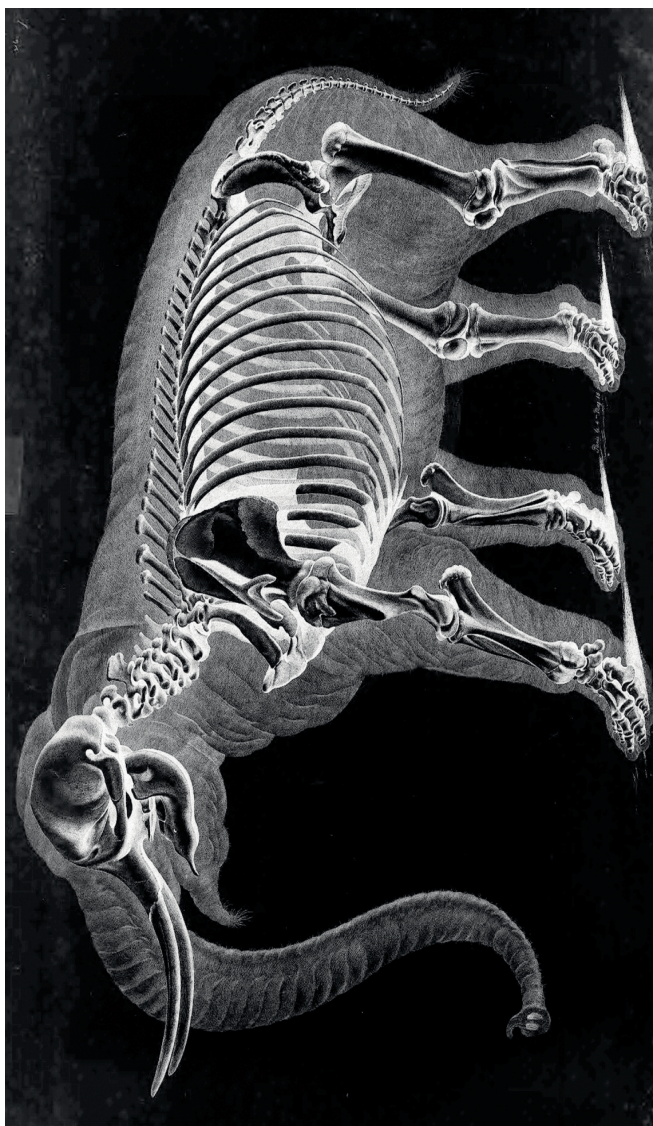
Just like the other odd animal in the room, that sometimes even coloured pinkish elephant, the laughing hyena's presence, while so obvious, is often ignored or unaddressed. While the elephant represents

Funny bones, laughing skeleton of an infant
Engraving by William Cheselden (1688-1762)
Osteographia, or the Anatomy of the Bones, London 1733



a known but denied fact, the laughing hyena represents that which is unknown but repudiated. The laughing hyena in the room takes us by the hand and leads us before the unknown. He connects us with experiences which we cannot grasp, imagine or fantasize about, unless we give up control over our understanding of the world and ourselves. The elephant does not laugh, it just sits there, being enormous. The hyena laughs at us and for us, with us. We know that she so does never for her own enjoyment, having no sense of humor! The hyena laughs to make us aware of the limits of our own constructions. Just while we imagine animals to have fun because we want them to do just like we do: having fun, making odd sounds, playing stupid games, displaying their asses and funny bones, in the laughing hyena we find a partner in laughter, a construction that ridicules our constructions. Promoting a position vis-à-vis all the world's knowledge, balancing it with an awareness of uncertainty, with sudden change and novelty, with illusion, lies and, like I proposed before, even with the possibility of meaninglessness, has a deep significance for our emotional understanding of life. Sense of laughter is the wit that does the trick. It operates at a level beyond the other five wits. It pulls a hyena out of a sleeve and makes it bare its teeth in laughter. *He-he-he-he!*

Even for those who are familiar with elephants in rooms, the laughing hyena is an altogether different species to deal with. It is there to see for everyone — in principle — a trickster energy that furbishes our everyday with diversion and shape changes, as it challenges our wits, all six of them. It is in art, it is in laughter, it is in ourselves. Everyone of us possesses a small clan of laughing hyena's for himself, together we have a huge population roaming around at every laughter occasion. The laughing hyena at the same time is the animal with the funny bone, and a bone gnawer, death devouring, with a constant craving. Besides, it lives in matriarchy and cubs are born with their eyes open, ready to focus on the seriously funny world of Man. The hyena has no sense of humor for itself, and it is as far removed from anything creative or self-reflective as any other animal, 'save Man'. At the same time it is the embodiment of our misunderstanding of all the con-



structions that we need in order to be occasionally comfortable with the world and our lives. Do we see art sneaking in through a previously unnoticed back door? Yes we do, definitely. For the finale of this short contemplation we look around to realize — and here I take the liberty to paraphrase visionary artist Robert Filliou, that the great benefit of what we know is that it makes the unknowable more interesting than the knowable.

All of our images of the world and of ourselves are self-made constructions, with which we, even temporarily, mean to fix our universe. *Our* universe indeed, a universe just for Man. We call those constructions images, maps, interfaces, emoticons, heavenly bodies, asses, funny bones, theater pieces, contemporary art, grains of knowledge, conversation, contextual pieces, ironies, lies, programs, observations, and so on and so on. Everything that we try to understand we ascribe a place. Of my unfinished infinite list every object has a place in the Wunderkammer of human epistemology. Laughing hyena's are marginal in that crowded, densely filled *Kammer*, but they surely are in the room, present for those who are blessed with the sixth wit, a sense of laughter. Our laughing hyena's race around in clans, disturb the peace and quiet of the five original wits, they hinder elephants, eat whatever they can get their claws and teeth on, as long as it has bones to gnaw clean. The funny bones of laughter are the sole supports for the meat of life. Only that, we know for sure. *Ha-ha-he-he-he!*

Notes**1**

From 'King Henry The Eighth's Primer' (1545), quoted in Horace Howard Furness, 'Romeo and Juliet', *Shakespeare 1* (10th ed.).

J.B. Lippincott Co. Philadelphia 1899, p.60. isbn 9-780-74265-2828

2

In Horace Howard Furness, 'King Lear', *Shakespeare 5* (7th ed.).

J.B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia 1880, p.187. isbn 9-780-74265-2866

3

Wikipedia (20 April 2015),

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_wits#cite_ref-Furness2_15-0

4

In Simon Critchley, 'On Humour'. Routledge London 2002, p.25. isbn 0-415-25121-4

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'Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears', 1953, *October* 36, 'Georges Bataille'; Ed. Douglas Crimp, Rosalind Kraus, Annette Michelson. MIT Press Journals, Cambridge 1986, p.90

6

ibid.

LAUGHTER



Authentic ironies

Hilde de Bruijn

An interview by Hilde de Bruijn, Curator at the Cobra Museum of Modern Art and freelance curator¹, with Karen Kurczynski, Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and author of the recent publication *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn — The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up*.²

HdB: The Danish experimental artist and thinker Asger Jorn (1914-1973) is well-known for being one of the co-founders of the postwar experimental artists' group Cobra (1948-1951), and the Situationist International (SI), a movement of artists and intellectuals who strove to achieve social change (1957-1972). Many of those who study Jorn's oil paintings, etchings, lithographies and other work, will find themselves smiling or even laughing about his puns and parodies, ironic or sometimes tongue-in-cheek humor. In your recent publication *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, the chapter 'Authentic Ironies' discusses the critical and expressive operations of Asger Jorn's mature paintings, including parody. Here, you identify irony, parody and related strategies as a key element to understanding Jorn's work, as "foundational to the social nature of Jorn's aesthetic as a whole...". Are you aware of previous art historical texts which attribute a similar value to Jorn's ironizing — including self-ironizing?

KK: This is an interesting aspect for me to consider now, as I work on an exhibition on Cobra for the NSU Art Museum in Florida

(which will end at the Cobra Museum). Because Cobra was not interested in irony at all — or at least, that is what Christian Dotremont writes in one of his key texts, ‘Par la grande porte’ (Reflex, 1948): “They are against ironic painting, which actually tries to express the organic joy of the universe, the historic joy of the world of 1949, but which is ashamed and which trims down the aesthetic impulse (...) with an elegant little intellectual penknife.” Jorn too was more interested in authenticity in the Cobra years: he associated irony with the ruling class in his large c. 1947 manuscript ‘Blade af kunstens bog’. He then explored irony along with humorous strategies more and more over the course of the 1950s. In fact he was always interested in humor in art and in writing, co-authoring a parodic article on a Functionalist named ‘Everclean’ in 1948. Already in his 1952 text ‘Held og hasard’, a very Nietzschean text, he rejects the idea of authentic expression. Then by the mid-50s, he openly espouses irony and ‘lying’. Historiographically, this is precisely the moment his art work begins to be celebrated on an international stage. The critics and curators like Werner Haftmann who wrote about it, however, emphasized it as a return to angst-filled expressionism.

Contemporary critics especially in the US, where Jorn’s work is less well known, have continued to dismiss his work as expressionist (or worse, neo-expressionist — ironic and therefore empty) until very recently, after 2000. There are not many art-historical texts that place a high value on irony per se or self-ironizing in Jorn’s work until very recently, when suddenly that issue is becoming ubiquitous. I can’t think of any writer or curator who took his irony seriously until the 21st century, and now I can’t think of any who don’t take it seriously. Those who knew Jorn personally, like John Lefebre and Lawrence Alloway, certainly commented on his humor. It is really the writers you and I know now, our colleagues like Helle Brønns and Axel Heil, who are bringing this aspect into sharper focus today. It’s also related to the evolution of art historiography in general. Jorn (and Cobra) were not taken seriously because their work wasn’t perceived as ‘serious’ — one of the most important key terms in postwar movements like Abstract Expressionism — so writers like Haftmann and Guy Atkins had to present his oeuvre as a serious engagement with major artistic themes. We are in a very different, much more inte-

resting moment now when artists contribute more writing on art and have helped influence art critics and historians to recognize the importance of humor and play.

HdB: Irony and parody could be looked upon as a highly self-defensive modes, allowing someone to avert responsibility, to be indirect. However in the title of your chapter the words 'ironies' and 'authentic' are happily married. This seems to be a contradiction in terms but reading the chapter reveals that you locate the actual criticality and complexity of Jorn's strategy in the dynamics between both elements. I would be curious to learn more about your perspective on the development of these dynamics. The 'Authentic Ironies' chapter discusses parody as a critical operation mostly in relation to work from the end of the 1950s into the 1960s but (as you also mention) the concepts of irony and artifice are part of the development of Jorn's aesthetic theory from the Cobra period onwards. May I ask why you felt it was necessary to make this chronological distinction?

KK: The chronological distinction is really just part of the structure of the book, which focuses each chapter around a theoretical issue (in this case, expressionism and irony) combined with a particular temporal and artistic focus (in this case, Jorn's mature painting ca. 1957-62). Jorn is interested in humor and play in art from the beginning, from his 30s Miró and Klee inspired works onward through Helhesten and Cobra. But I focused on different issues in my accounts of the earlier periods. Also, as I just mentioned, Jorn's humor and irony come out much more explicitly in his late 50s and early 60s work than at any other period.

Each chapter of my book has a title which is a deliberate contradiction, an oxymoron, in a Jornian spirit. It's the clash of Jorn's irony in a postwar age so obsessed with authenticity that gives his work such interest, and his position seems newly significant to us now as artists are returning to issues of abstraction and gestural painting but in an extremely sophisticated and sometimes overtly political way, combining abstraction and expressivity with some of the irony associated with pop art, appropriated imagery, and now digital mash-ups — when in the 50s and 60s those two approaches were strictly separated

by generation. Recent artists are more interested in combining the best of both generations — the spontaneity and human element in the gesture, but without making it too specialized or spectacular; the humor and sophistication of using appropriated imagery but without it being too easy or celebratory. Jorn's work does all of this. Today we have a much more sophisticated, 'situational' understanding of identity and authenticity in the internet age, and new recognition of the importance of play in the era of video games and 'gamification', that I think makes Jorn's work seem prescient and newly relevant.

HdB: The following question I have appropriated from a conversation with Jouke Kleerebezem, one of the tutors of the Rietveld Art in Context programme. He was wondering if we could touch upon the type of ambiguity that typifies humor in general, making the 'laughter' that results from it an acquired taste, always debatable between those who differ in their sense of humor. So humor as a strategy can score a bull's eye for one, as much as that it can backfire for another. So then I wondered if you think Jorn shoot himself in the foot every once in a while, or perhaps did not care?

KK: Did Jorn shoot himself in the foot sometimes? Yes. Did he not care? No he did not care. His hits were so on target that I think they excuse a lot of Mrs. that would stand out more in the work of an artist whose work was less complex and multifaceted. He always kept moving which is one of the fascinating things about his work and his artistic practice — it was also a source of heartbreak for those around him, from his wives and girlfriends to his kids, who suffered immensely, and his friends and gallerists. In terms of his humor, take a work like *Masculine Resistance* at the Museum Jorn, and you can see the retrograde gendered assumptions about the interaction of men and women that make its humor sort of fail from my own feminist perspective today (Helle Brøns has written about the gender confrontation in this work). But at the same time, the failure is by itself interesting. It has something to tell us about mainstream gender attitudes in Jorn's day, on the one hand, and it has a very critical message about the discourses of authenticity and transcendence that characterized art in his day, on the other. Its emphatic vulgarity in both how it was painted and the subject itself is a biting critique and a liberating

rejection of the abstract painting that was dominant at the time. So it's not humor as in a joke, which is always socially divisive (some of the best comics are the most offensive ones — Sarah Silverman for example). It's more like meta-humor because the humor is always embedded in multiple and contradictory discourses, both visual and textual/social/theoretical. Jorn's work is humorous in a way comparable to Richard Prince or Glenn Ligon's 'joke' paintings, which repaint a racist or sexist joke on a monochrome canvas, despite their radically different aesthetics. Whether you laugh at the joke is only part of the point — it makes you stand back and start thinking about what it means to laugh at it in different contexts, as well as (and this is key) the fact that the joke is always so culturally specific that it's immediately outmoded and, well, no longer funny. So even Jorn at his most sexist or short-sighted has potentially important meanings for us. At the same time, just to negate everything I've just said (another Jornian move), I think you can also find passages of sheer physical humor in Jorn's paintings that might be more universal — the way physical comedy appeals to a wider audience. You can also find references to carnivalesque themes and popular humor as seen in earlier painters like Bruegel and Bosch, and writers like Rabelais who Jorn loved. There are many different forms of humor present in Jorn's work.

HdB: In 1954 Jorn made an oil painting that literally depicts laughter: *Le faux rire (image tragi-comique)* which translates as 'The Fake Laughter (tragic-comic image)'. At the bottom of the painting we see a (literally) two-faced laughing character in a slightly awkward, half-reclining position while holding something up in the air with one arm. In the background above the laughing character hovers a smaller, friendly looking face. Although the painting is the representation of a fake emotion it funnily enough simultaneously brings across a genuine emotion, the mix of twisted feelings that potentially come with a fake laugh (discomfort? repulsion?). I would like to invite you to closer examine this painting from the perspective of 'authentic ironies'. In relation to Jorn's paintings *La double face* ('The Double Face') and *Le cri* ('The Scream') you for instance bring up notions such as multiplicity, clichés of the representation of human emotion, the understanding of complexity of the self as a social situation, and

Jorn's insistence on meaning-production as an active process.

KK: This is a great work to bring into focus the complexity and multiple dimensions of laughter we just touched on. The image strikes me as very grotesque in its combination of comic and tragic — humor and angst — in a particularly puzzling combination. The history of the grotesque from ancient times (when it was called the ‘monstrous’) to the present, as many scholars have demonstrated, typically combines humor with horror. So it relates to a prominent theme in human culture. We can all think of examples of situations that are horrible or harmful that, when considered at a remove, can also be really funny (though at the time it was still largely taboo in Europe to produce humorous imagery relating to the Second World War — Jorn's work plays with those taboos only indirectly).

This image features not just those two dimensions of tragedy and comedy, but also a third, the question of ‘fake’ laughter. The issue of something fake destroys any notion of authenticity and cuts through any attempt to securely define something. Then, Jorn began his painting *Stalingrad, le non-lieu, ou le fou rire du courage*, the same year — the first title of that painting was ‘Le fou rire’ (‘Mad Laughter’) and it may or may not have been a reference to history or history painting or the ‘mad laughter of courage’ in an epic battle at that point. It acquired the title *Stalingrad* a bit later. Jorn loved puns and I think it's likely that he linked *le fou rire* and *le faux rire* together deliberately. ‘Fou’ being a reference to an authentic expression; ‘faux’ indicating irony and inauthenticity. What strikes me about this image is that it seems more troubling than funny, so is it about laughter at all? Or really, it's precisely about laughter rather than explicitly funny. It is about the significance of laughter. Laughter and play are elements that rational society suppresses and they indicate a critical distance, a resistance to power. They are also intimately linked to creativity itself and the ideas of play and experiment so prominent in Cobra. Laughter indicates a double perspective. The main figure is not just laughing, but sticking out his tongue, which is a gesture of childishness, defiance, as well as disgust; a gesture referenced earlier in Cobra and examined in Jorn's later book *La langue verte et la cuite*.



Le faux rire (image tragi-comique), Asger Jorn, 1954. Oil on canvas.

The material fleshiness of the painting is also striking. Parts of figures evoke blood and bones, the mouth and the tongue, the eyes made grotesque as they multiply and roll in all directions. It's an image of illness (recalling Jorn's abstract portrait of his injured cousin Mads in the *Silent Myth* murals) and madness, so strongly linked to creativity. It's also a visceral painting that affects us in an almost physiological way. As it was made in Italy, this was part of Jorn's reaction against the sleekness of postwar design culture and his investigation of ceramics at the time. It's a great example of his interest in Bachelardian ideas of the 'material imagination'. It is grotesque because it fails to cohere as a recognizable group of figures. Instead it conveys the process of signification. Maybe it even conveys the process of creating humor itself, and its flipside, tragedy itself, out of the neutral facts of what happens in the world. There is also a recognition implicit here (but signified by the contradictions inherent in the title) that the process of signification is always social. So what one calls greatness, another calls tragedy, and yet another calls humor.

Notes**1**See www.hildegoesasger.org**2**

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LAUGHTER



Talk to ING

Linnea Langfjord Kristensen

Hej hej!

I believe it makes sense to start with introducing myself. My name is Linnea.

I am standing here because I would like to offer you something. Something, which is really not just “some thing”, but a quite important part of myself.

You see, I honestly found it very difficult being placed in this context of a bank.

There are several reasons for that, one being that banks, major banks (generally speaking), are if not the symbol, then at least one of the symbols of our current Western society, dominated by a capitalist way of thinking.

This is a space whose methods I am questioning a lot and whose values I find it difficult to identify with, if not being straight against them. It is a place I find it difficult to be within. I hope to be able to explain you why during this little talk.

Because I was curious about where these feelings of uncomfortability came from, I have found out that they have a lot to do with how language is used within the bank and around the bank.

The language is created and used for defining things within a context, but what happens when you take that language out of its context and impose it onto something else, somewhere else?

The thing with language is, that is has the possibility to make a reality which is not real, come true. Such happens in commercials, in the news or when we throw exciting words into the story we are

telling, to make the experience we had better than we originally lived it.

Though fun, maybe that night out was not the craziest night ever or maybe that waterfall I saw was not grand, magnificent and the most amazing natural phenomena - but quite large and pretty.

On the contrary, you can also erase an existing reality through language or by just simply not talking about it. "Everyone sees the drunk uncle at the family dinner having way too much to drink and embarrassingly keeps on dropping his trousers. He is too drunk to close them properly. At the next family fun fare, no one talks about it and Uncle even slips in the fact that he only had 1 glass of wine at the last gathering" - so of course this never happened.

So, to me at least, it feels like whatever action or gesture you do, language - a dominating language, can ultimately define the action more than the action itself can.

Are we a group of breathing, alive bodies in a room or are we delusional art students and money hungry bank people, separated by imposed and pre assumed definitions?

Small things, right?

Returning to the bank, different realities exists. In the banking world, the bank is:

"Empowering people to stay a step ahead in life and in business".

And

"(We) believe that the ultimate purpose of a financial institution is to support and stimulate economic, social and environmental progress leading to a better quality of life for people in society".

It is important to let you know, that these are not my words, but that they are taken from ING's website.

While at the same time, outside of the bank, the bank is often viewed as a big and evil institution who uses its customers and tries to extract as much money as possible from them. Sneaky and dishonest.

Here, it is important to let you know that these are not my words, but words from from various “I hate the bank” Facebook groups, a The Guardian article and www.Ihatemybank.com

Two quite different realities, but both can be true.

What you actually do within a bank, is something that is so abstract to me. Money is crazy abstract. Invisible capital flying around, creating more invisible capital which can grow. And it exists because we say so and it has value because we say it has?

So which language would be the right one to use around the bank and around you, I don't know. But I do know that the language used by the bank and the often hateful language used around the bank, are languages that does make me feel quite “yech”. Because, again, the language of the bank is so connected to a specific way of thinking and dealing with your surroundings. In ways I am doubting. And the hateful words, are just... Really hateful words.

But!

What I do have some idea about, is what we, as art students, (generally speaking) would do within this context of working with a bank:

We would enter the bank, look around for interesting subjects and locate them. Extract what is needed for our project and use it for our own good in order to work in the most efficient way towards our goal and create that final work.

Just looking at the language describing this procedure, it is close-to-exactly the same as what the bank is doing when described.

So, as I don't know the bank from the inside, but only from the outside, and as I am apparently using the same language to describe actions, as the context I would normally criticise and as I probably do a lot of the actions in a similar way as the bank - who am I then to just go in here and use and produce?

In the end, whatever I produce would be defined by the dominat-

ing language within this context, imposed by society and turn whatever action I do into a part of something I do not want it to be a part of.

As you can probably tell, I really got myself caught here.

Of course I am aware of the fact that ING also gets something out of working with us, because that is the deal.

We give something to you and we get something from you. You give something to us and you get something from us. I mean, when someone gives a present, the receiver of the present is put in the position of having to return that gesture at some point. Just imagine what it would say about you if you didn't!

SO, back to my offer (remember I started out by telling you, that I would like to offer you something, which is not just "some thing", but a quite important part of myself):

I would like to give you myself as a "Safe storage for future needed actions".

As the bank is a storage for goods and possible growth, I am a storage for actions and the possible release of them if/when needed. Just actions. Nothing of material existence, nothing defined by a language or described with words.

This is an attempt to liberate actions from "a" or several dominating languages imposed on them.

And offer a safe space for the actions.

(It is also a way to give up my individualistic self-concerned, using and producing self within a context I have so many assumptions and prejudice about).

Thinking about value, how do you measure the value of an action?

In 10 years time, you might be in need of an action that you executed today.

So if you are doing something and you think to yourself: "Wow, this is actually a really valuable thing I'm doing right now", you can contact me and store it in me for the future.

Teach me something which is valuable to you!

Can the value of an action grow when stored?

It is a possibility for you to store any needed action you want to preserve for the future.

And the promise of the preservation of it somewhere safe. You can trust in me.

I will not release the action or share it, until the moment when it is needed and you ask for it to be released.

“A safe storage for future needed actions”.

This is something I truly mean and I hope you will embrace this opportunity.

These are my contact details

Email: linnea.lk@gmail.com

Phone: 0642666254

Talk to ING, 2015. Personal address, 11'. 22 May 2015, 16:39-16:50hrs.

The above rendering of Linnea Langfjord Kristensen's talk to ING is an unedited copy-and-paste version of her original text, flown into this publication's lay-out template, truly representing her offer as it was read in front of ING personnel at their Amsterdam headquarters.

LAUGHTER



Attempt to fully grasp a context

Alexandros Zakkas

A young man with short black hair, around 30 years old, stands along the railing at the end of the glass staircase. His right foot steps on the tinted glass landing, his left foot on the concrete tiled floor. His feet point outwards, his legs are slightly open, his body posture is straight upright, his neck is tilted downward. His arms hang straight along his torso, his elbows bent at almost right angles and his forearms converge at the height of his belly. He is holding an iPad with both hands. His right palm with open fingers support the device from beneath, like a tray, while his left hand clamps it lightly from its side, with the thumb on the top surface. He is wearing a blue polo t-shirt, straight-cut blue jeans and black sneakers with white soles. Around his waist hang two objects. On the right side, a card payment device which consists of an iPhone connected to a card reader. On his left side, an intercom with an earpiece and microphone attached on a thin black cable which runs up his torso and is clipped on the collar of his shirt. His attention is on the iPad.

Across the landing, beside a thick rectangular column, another man is standing. His body posture mirrors that of his colleague. He too is standing straight, with his neck tilted downwards and his hands holding an iPad just below his chest. This man is slightly older, around 35, perhaps. He is taller and his skin is darker. He wears a short beard, sharply trimmed below his chin. His forearms are covered with tattoos. He wears a black wool hat on his head which only reveals the lower part of his scruff. He carries the same two objects around his waist: card-payment device on the right, intercom on the left. He holds his iPad with his left hand: wrist and palm under, fingertips clamping the tablet on the other edge. With his right index





and middle finger he is scrolling on the touchscreen. He seems concerned with something that is not going according to schedule.

A few steps aside the column, in the middle of the wide corridor that opens up to a spacious hall, a young woman stands facing the staircase. She wears her blue polo t-shirt tucked inside high-waisted blue-jeans with rolled up ankles, revealing a pair of white socks in black leather loafer shoes. She holds her arms behind her back, her waist is leaning to one side, her weight is supported by only her left foot as the right one bends and twists slightly in a casually rocking gesture. Her gaze seems fixed on an abstract horizon as she nods receptively to her interlocutor.

The man who occupies her attention is of medium height, but rather strong built. His wide shoulders, low neck and thick arms seem oddly contrived as he holds an iPhone with both hands very closely to his face. He is reading something, and occasionally recites parts with a mix of confusion and eagerness. He has now for the second time mispronounced the word “spreadsheets” and is sticking his tongue out in an attempt to redeem himself and regain self-control.

In the distance behind them, below a large lens-shaped chandelier casting warm white floodlight over a rectangular wooden table, a woman, around 60, is sitting with her legs crossed on a stool. She is holding a brown leather purse, a beige cotton shopping bag with a monochrome print of a hand-sketched pig whose body is divided in areas like different regions in a geographic map, each region containing the culinary name of the respective body part – Loin, Side, Ham, Boston Butt, Jowl, Picnic Shoulder, Spare rib, Foot – and a dark green cashmere scarf which lies partly on the floor. Her expression is serene and absorbed in contemplating her surrounding.

Next to the woman stands a tall, skinny man, about the same age as her. His short, salt-and-pepper hair covers only the sides and the back of his head, exposing a large, bold forehead. He is wearing thin round spectacles and a short-trimmed grey beard. He is slightly leaning over the shoulder of the woman with his right hand resting on her back. His left hand is stroking his chin as he stares into the distance. A small

step behind them stands a young man wearing a blue polo T-shirt loosely over sport pants. With his arms crossed in front of his chest, his iPad inside an apple-green case held firmly under his right armpit, and his legs slightly open, he also stares into the same distance.



The colours of the sky range from bright golden to pink, violet, purple and dark blue. A fluffy cloud brakes up the sunlight in shades of warm yellow and orange. This is the light during a sunset or a sunrise. A steep cliff rises almost vertically to the peak of a rocky mountain. Its summit is gently curved and naked. Only the top part of the cliff and the summit are illuminated by sunlight, the rest of the mountain remains in the shadow. The rocky slopes shape lighter and darker shades of granite-grey. Some trees are visible on a high plateau, their contours describe stark dark spots against the sky. A few more trees here and there, and then a small forest close to the foot of the mountain. The trees look minuscule in front of the huge cliff rising above them. There is no sign of humans in this sublime landscape.



Protest against the construction of the Sivens dam, France, 2014

The laughter of power; the power of laughter

Aurélien Potier

Laughter is perhaps what is unique to human beings. Aristotle noticed that considering all living beings, that he calls animals, only humans are able to laugh. Aristotle also defended that the human is a political animal, the only one capable of ‘logos’, which means the capacity to debate notions such as beauty, truth and justice. Laughter and reason (logos) are both part of the same human capacity of building signification. Both belong to the same activity that consists in translating everything that surrounds us, into signs and symbols, to establish analogies, create oppositions and make distinctions. They help us in building a world of significations — a world in which we can: navigate, communicate, evaluate, judge, have an identity — a world in which we lead thoughts and actions, dreams and desires.

From this activity and this world, laughter reveals the inner self. By playing with situations, reversing their value, making misinterpretations, pushing an idea to its limits, producing fake reasonings, emptying words from their meaning, the laughter addresses our intelligence, it is searching to wake up the ‘logos’. Taking this first conclusion into consideration, we could go further and admit that laughter is a necessary condition to political discussion and democratic society. By spreading doubts on what is considered as evidence, by showing what is ridiculous in what is judged respectable, laughter re-evaluates our significations, it forces our intelligence to question and debate. This leads to a shocking awareness of our condition, of the surroundings, of the ideas and actions — and can provoke a change of vision in the established order of conceptions. Laughter has then the ability to become a tool of power, and counter-power, that can have effect in the political society.

In 411BC during a period of war in Athens, a theatrical comedy is being played, written by Aristophanes, titled 'Lysistrata'. In the play, women decide to withhold sexual privileges from their husbands and lovers as a means of forcing the men to negotiate peace. After trying to take control of the situation, the men surrender. The play ends with a peace agreement. Laughter, in the form of a satire, has the power to give a voice to those whom usually can't speak up. In this period, only comedy could get women heard in a society where they couldn't take part in any of the political decisions. Women here are more brave than men, and it is also by them that the voice of reason gets heard. What was also unconceivable at that time, they introduced a new kind of politics and negotiation about war.

Laughter brings characters together and deletes the differences between them. The husbands have become equal again, lead by their primary needs, whatever their social rank is. This observation can be generalised into common comical situations, where masters are slaves to their servants, certitudes are derisions, vanity is grotesque and seriousness is faded away with corporal sounds. Moreover, the women of Aristophanes' play, from rival cities, get together behind their husbands' back. Laughter is the only thing that is capable to challenge such a situation, only comedy allows such freedom: to reverse a social order, to make audible what we don't want to hear. It is by laughter that we can counter existing structures, problematics and ideas. Laughter can at the same time be both the expression of a period, and its relevant and political critique.

One of the manifestations of counter-power is public demonstrations. The relevance of laughter as a tool of political critique is proven by the attention that the media dedicate to demonstrations in which humour is used. In November 2005 a group of clowns, naming themselves 'Brigade Activiste des Clowns' (Activist Clowns Brigade), its French acronym being 'BAC', which is also the name of a division of the French police, went to the city hall of Neuilly (a Paris suburb) and sprayed hot water on the building with a Kärcher pressure washer. This action referred to an utterance, by then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy, done a month earlier, declaring 'where the gangsters are, we need to clean out with a Kärcher', referring to criminality and

immigration in French society. The action of the clowns was actually pointing at a fact: the city of Neuilly (of which Sarkozy had been Mayor for twenty years) only had 2.5% of social housing, being under — and therefore not conform — legal regulations. Who are the real gangsters here? The clowns reversed the situation, the one who was supposed to hunt the ‘gangsters’ had become one himself.

More recently, clowns have played a big part in a fight against the building of the Sivens Dam, a project across the River Tescou, in Southern France, under construction until it was suspended on the 26th of October 2014. The project aims to build a water stock of 1,5 million m³, mainly for the irrigation of agricultural lands. It led to many oppositions, from different actors. The project is reported as over-dimensioned, a useless cost and dangerous to many environmental aspects. Many demonstrations were conducted against the realisation of the project. One of its young opponents (Rémi Fraisse, age 21) died when he was hit by a flash grenade, coming from police forces. In these demonstrations some of the opponents were dressed up as clowns. Many testimonies share the same conclusion: they favour the presence of this symbol of laughter in the demonstrations. The clowns took a place in the debate to relax the atmosphere, diminishing the violence of certain interventions. Whether activist or social, they have an important role in the fight: they are always in the first line of the demonstrations, even if these demonstrations are forbidden. They also put themselves between militants and police forces, even when this resulted in them being arrested or hurt.

Introducing laughter in, often very tense, public demonstrations has its origin in the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (or CIRCA) who participated in protests against George W. Bush’s visit to the UK in 2003 and demonstrations against the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This group uses clowning and non-violent tactics to act against corporate globalization and war, as well as other social and environmental issues. Their goal is very explicit: ‘Ridicule the power, to fight it better.’ Those demonstrations that used laughter as a tool to communicate and challenge, provoked a real mediatic awareness of the situations and problematics that they were pointing at. It proved how relevant corrosive and effective laughter can be in a context of out-

rage and contestation. As effective as it can be, the relevance of using laughter as a tool for political expression at all times, situations or ideas, remains to be carefully considered.

On the 7th of January 2015, two brothers entered the offices of the weekly satirical French newspaper Charlie Hebdo in Paris. Both armed, they killed 11 people, among them famous cartoonists, and injured 11 others. The brothers identified themselves as belonging to the Islamist Terrorist group Al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen, who took responsibility for the attack. Several related attacks followed in the Île-de-France region, where a further 5 were killed and 11 wounded. Charlie Hebdo is a weekly newspaper publishing cartoons, jokes, and polemics in a very free and corrosive tone. The authors, journalists and caricaturists of Charlie Hebdo were aiming to challenge all aspects of society. They were making fun of everyone, all political parties, every religion. According to them, their goal was to make their readers laugh, give them clues or themes of reflection. One of their targets was the Islamic fundamentalist movement. Charlie Hebdo cartoonists and authors showed the radicalization of certain Islamist movements, and certain Islamic States. To challenge this radicalization, they responded in an equally radical way: they drew pictures of the prophet Mohamed. Though images of Muhammad are not explicitly banned by the Quran itself, prominent Islamic views have long opposed human images, especially those of prophets. Some Muslims take the view that the satire of Islam, of religious representatives, and above all of Muslim prophets, is blasphemy, which according to Islam is punishable by death. The prophet drawn by Charlie Hebdo was making jokes, notably making fun of the Islamic extremists. Last drawing of Cabu, published in the last issue before the attack: the prophet sharing his wishes for 2015 and saying 'and there hasn't been any terrorist attack yet!'. In hindsight, a fatal premonition.

The publication's attack on this symbol of Islamic religion had already harmed Charlie Hebdo before. In 2011 their offices were set on fire. Refusing to give up facing terror they continued publishing. Since then, the editors were under police surveillance. The response to laughter, challenging a specific group and their morals, was brutal, the authors of Charlie Hebdo paying for it with their lives. Being of

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more than ever, rigor and reflection. It is indeed what
will be the question in the coming months and years :
revalidate the ridge line, be radically moved and
radically critical.

course a cruel and terrible response, there is no way whatsoever of justifying the act of those two brothers. Though we will try to look at this situation a bit more specifically, not at the tragedy of those deaths, but more at the mechanisms that it was subjected to. Using laughter as a way to express and challenge situations can have really violent consequences for the ones who are being targeted. The reactions provoked by the shooting were as big and shocking as was the attack. Millions of people gathered in public demonstrations, with the slogan 'Je Suis Charlie'. A certain national consensus was created. The testimony of Philippe Val, ex-director of Charlie Hebdo, on the radio during the evening following the attack is showing quite clearly how the public opinion tended to react and follow.

"I lost all my friends today, they were so alive, they gave so much of their heart to make people laugh, to give them generous ideas. They were good people. The bests of us, like everyone that make us laugh, that are for freedom. Silence shouldn't get installed, we need help. We need help, staying grouped, against this horror. The terror shouldn't prevent the 'joie de vivre', the freedom of expression, the democracy. It's horrible. Our country won't remain the same. A certain way of making journalism has been exterminated, all the people able to make us laugh with heavy ideas. Silence shouldn't win."

The attack is highly symbolic. A newspaper has been killed. Or as Philippe Val calls it, 'exterminated'. It is intended to shut up a certain way of expressing, because it is considered too dangerous. The population reacted strongly in response to the event. Western culture feared for one of its founding rights: freedom of expression — and had the will not to let terror invade it. This is of course a legitimate fight, as understandable as the fear felt by western nations. 'You are with or against us'. 'You are Charlie or you are Jihadist'. There is no real alternative other than the superior interest of the nation, of the occident, of the 'civilization'. Some people died because of the fact that a certain religious group decided those people had gone too far. According to the massive 'Je Suis Charlie' movement, they hadn't: they were within their right and licensed by freedom of speech, when using the power of laughter to mock Islamists, and more particularly Islamic extremists. After the attacks, they will continue, because according to

them, this is right and it is a right. Charlie Hebdo indeed continues to be published. It seems nevertheless important to critically interrogate the conclusions. Can we, Western citizens, laugh about a prophet whose symbolism most of us can't understand? Is our laughing at extremist terror a relevant way of counter-powering it?

It is important to become aware of those problematics, of such 'heavy ideas' that laughter is trying to reveal. Yet, using laughter in such a way may not always be that pertinent. Part of laughter's efficiency is in the shortcuts that it uses to be more corrosive. Those shortcuts are the ones provoking immediate reaction. Even when filled with good intentions, passion can result in the death of reflection. Can we laugh at everything? Does laughter have any limits at all? Sometimes effort, space and time need to keep on steering straight. Laughter and intelligence ('logos') are closely linked. By reversing the existing order, laughter is addressing our intelligence and guides it to re-evaluate our surrounding and its pre-conceptions. This becomes particularly efficient in a political context, where there is a need of counter-powering an aspect of society. Laughter can have an impact, as we have witnessed in the examples in public demonstrations, where it points at a certain problem sharply, while relaxing an atmosphere that is usually tensed. But this tool of expressivity can be challenging also in such a violent way, that it can provoke extreme reactions. Are there any limits to use laughter as a tool for expression — whether expression deals with public demonstration, political or social involvement or criticizes a religion, a belief, or even a culture? Do we have to fully understand what we criticize, in order to be able to laugh about it? Is it a right?

Is it that out of consensus that laughter becomes a part of our unconditional freedom? We are conscious that coming, sad times impose, more than ever, rigor and reflection. It is indeed that, what will be the question in the coming months and years: revindicate the ridge line, be radically moved and radically critical.



Laughter = alienation

Roman Ermolaev

Humor, laughter = alienation. This statement is the base for two plays that I wrote. The first Play is an analysis of a family relationship where dialogue is substituted by humor.

Humor is an obstacle in an attempt to make a connection. Humor is playing a defensive role where conversation is not possible anymore. The second Play is a reflection on the power of a humorist questioning. How strong can it be? How bewildered can it be?

I will include here some extracts from plays. But what is most important for me is to show a 'progress' in using the idea of laughter. If the first Play could be considered as a critique then the second Play could be considered as an exercise of using humor as a weapon.

Characters

Mother

Son

Ghost of the dead daughter

Act 2

Mom sits on a chair and knits. Son is standing in front of her.

Son: I saw a ghost of a little lady.

Mother: How young?

Son: My age.

Mother: She was weightless?

Illustration, photo Roman Ermolaev

Son: There were 5-6 centimetres between her and the floor.

Mother: Did you like her? Was she pretty?

Son: It is not about that; she wanted to have a conversation. At least that's something, what I could feel, what I could observe.

Mother: And?

Son: I first need to speak to you.

Mother: About ghost?

Son: And, not only about that!

Mother: I am very curious. It is interesting how we started this conversation. We started talking about the age of the ghost and I am sitting close to you as if I would be my own mother!

Son: Grandmother?

Mother: Did I deserve this?

Son: Did you deserve what? Memory, about your own mother?

Mother: It's painful to hear from your son

Something is giving him fun

Did I deserve it?

Look at the metal lips

5 fingers and hit!

Sign of an eclipse!

Act 5

Son: That is the rule of the game. Mother, you should lay here.

The lamp is going to light up and we are going to play the game 'true or false'. First you'll go, Mother. Then your daughter. The last is going to be me. The rules are: We will in turn ask you questions. And you will answer with words 'true' or 'false'.

Mother: It is a funny game!

Ghost: Let's start; I barely can wait my turn, Mother.

Son: She is your daughter.

Mother: False, she is a ghost of a dead daughter who is pretending to be my daughter.

Son: Mother, you can only say false or true!

Mother: I am sorry.

Ghost: You would be happy if the son recovers.

Mother: True.

Son: You are a woman

Mother: True.

Ghost: I'm your daughter now.

Mother: True.

Son: Your mother gave birth to you when she was old.

Mother: True.

Ghost: You are smiling.

Mother: True.

Son: Reducing vocabulary

Forbidding jokes

Asking constabulary

Calling closest folks

Playing the game

Finding a way

Reach the top

By singing pop

Act 6

Ghost: My turn.

Mother: Please, take my place.

Ghost: Thank you!

Son: You are a ghost of a dead daughter playing a daughter of the mother

Ghost: True

Mother: You like it, don't you? You like to be my daughter?

Daughter: Yes. I mean: true.

Son: But you are dead.

Ghost: True

Mother: And when the game comes to the end, you will get the role of the ghost of the dead daughter.

Ghost: True

Son: You would like to listen chorus from heaven now.

Ghost: True.

Chorus: Laying on the bed

Having hand on a forehand

Face is a bit sad

Trying to stand

Screaming 'Help, help!'

I am a ghost of a dead girl
 I am a ghost of a dead girl
 Playing a role
 Being small, small
 That is my goal

How did your mother help you in your career?

Character 1: I know that the grandmother gave birth to you in the seventh month of pregnancy.

Mother: Contrary, I'm trying to help you. As I always did!

Mother: I had my own life.

Character 1: I'm going to be frank and admit that all what you say to some extent relieves me from responsibility.

Mother: May I ask you: do you see yourself as a parent?

Character 2: I don't remember my grandfather so well.

Mother: You survived.

Mother: AAAAA!

Character 3: Sometimes you cannot control yourself.

Character 3: I found it.

Character 1: You still call your mother every day when you come back from work

Mother: I hope that you will buy me a house somewhere in Spain when I retire.

Mother: It would be nice if it would not be just from metal.

Character 1: I think that sometimes my hypochondria goes beyond all the reasonable limits.

Character 2: It is awful that in these times doctors would never tell you that you would die.

Mother: I was frightened but I really wanted you.

Character 3: How did you deal with me when I was a kid?

Character 1: I am afraid that situation in which I am now is radically different from the situation in which you have been when I appeared.

Character 3: My best childhood memories are associated with my grandmother.

Mother: You should not raise this topic again.

Character 1: If it was not for grandmother, I would not have survived.

Character 2: I inherited my sense of humor from you.

Mother: Don't be hypochondriac. It was not so scary as you imagine.

Character 1: I think I inherited it from you

Character 2: I am earning enough.

Mother: Don't shame yourself.

Mother: I think that sometimes your hypochondria goes beyond all the reasonable limits.

Character 3: I know that the grandmother gave birth to you in the seventh month of pregnancy. But with me, you made it in time.

Character 3: I hope you are not telling all this because you would like to refresh my sense of guilt?

Mother: I have never had such an intention.

Mother: You remember our summer tradition?

Character 3: Do you remember the time when I was very sick?

Character 2: Do you like to work?

Mother: Where is it?

Mother: You can smoke or take drugs but you can not to be gay. I still want my grandchildren.

Character 1: You should not be afraid.

Mother: You should do your best or...

Character 1: Maybe I am going to buy a ring and to wear it.

Character 3: Did you notice that we are having quite nice conversation now.

In the break between two pieces, I need to explain my choice of the form. The first play is made in the form of a dialogue that ends with a song. In a conversation form, I am free to explore the connections of characters and to build the hermetic world in which they exist. The song in the end is a kind of monologue. Monologue as a metaphor of alienation, where characters can express their feelings without being forced to be included into conversation.

The first Play is a conversation constructed as a critique. The second Play has a deconstructive function. In the first Play I use the conversation/dialogue as an example while in the second Play I am using dialogues as an instrument. Lines are not connected which allows the reader to start reading from whenever s/he wants. Or, rather, this form stops the reader from reading. In the second Play there is a semblance of dialogue. But this semblance is deceptive. In the first Play, characters cannot speak to each other because of the humor standing between them. In the second Play, the reader cannot communicate with the text because the humor is used as an instrument.



Illustration, photo Roman Ermolaev



The wall painting *Vragende kinderen* made by Karel Appel. Comissioned in November 1949 by the city of Amsterdam and finished on 14 March 1949. Currently in restaurant 'Bridges' of The Grand Hotel. Photo taken 31 April 2015

A visit to the Appel bar

Annelotte Lammertse

‘Hello Mr. and Mrs. Cobra, how are you today?’

‘Yesterday it was pouring down but now the colours are coming back in the sky.’

‘Is it already time for the apple harvest?’

‘This will be on a Friday, when the sky is blue.’

‘Let’s try to find back the pipe of freedom. With the scream of fear, smoking, writing and coughing the letters will appear.’

‘The artwork is born out of the imagination of the nation.’

– Baudelaire

Last week when I walked into the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the first thing that got my attention was that the mural of Karel Appel was gone. It had become a routine: my ticket was scanned, I walked up the stairs, I was inside and there on my right side I could see the wall painting by Karel Appel. A smile would manifest itself on my face. But this time it was not the case.

Why did I turn my head every time to the right and why could I not restrain my laughing muscles? Or at least, why did I get this feeling of joy? Is it the bright colour that gets my attention or the weird imaginary creatures that are depicted? Apart from that, every time I was surprised by the phenomenon of a mural in a contemporary art museum that would never be painted over. Because, also now, the museum had just put a temporary wall in front of Karel Appel’s wall painting.

‘Day in day out, sometimes warm, sometimes cold. Last time when

I was in the museum Boijmans van Beuningen the wall painting in the coffee bar, was again totally painted over and replaced', said Mrs. Courgette.¹

'A well received life', said Mr. Patat.

'And in the entrance of the ABN AMRO Bank they put a big TV screen on the mural of Sol LeWitt. But then they realized it was made by Sol LeWitt, so they took away the screen but now there is a big hole in the wall since I last saw it, followed Mrs. Courgette.'



Karel Appel painted in the 1950's one wall of the restaurant and the walls of the coffee bar of the Stedelijk Museum, that later was called 'de Appel Bar'. All the murals are still visible, and are an important part of the museum. Before these wall paintings, Karel Appel had already made a big mural for the canteen of the citizen's hall, which caused a lot of uproar.

After the end of World War Two, Karel Appel made a train journey through Germany with the final destination of Copen-

¹Karel Appel working on the Appel Bar in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 1951. Photo by Ata Kando, Amsterdam

hagen. At the stations, he saw children begging for food and money. This journey gave him the inspiration to make a series of paintings and drawings called *Vragende kinderen* ('Interrogative children'). These works were about the power to survive. He painted the series in a style inspired on children drawings, as a lot of Cobra artists did. The mural in the citizen's hall was part of this series, *Vragende kinderen*. Because of this style and the bright fields of colour, the painting gets a joyful appearance, and you could say (if you would not know better) that the mural is an artwork with a happy connotation. But the civil servants of the citizen's hall wanted the painting to be removed. At their lunch break, they did not want to be reminded of the hungry children and the Second World War. They were listened to: the city council covered the painting.

'But what if the workers would not have known anything about the background of the painting? Then they would have seen an almost abstract painting. And then the workers would have got a joyful feeling out of the painting.'

'Do you know if the mural of the *Vragende kinderen* is back now?'

'I don't know, we could go to the Grand Hotel and see for ourselves and have a nice lunch. In 1992 the city hall moved and the building was made into a five star Hotel.'

Nowadays the artworks of the Cobra movement do not give rise to any form of opposition. We see them as aesthetic works. We can even ask ourselves the question of how far these art works are separated from mere decoration. When you walk into the restaurant of the Grand Hotel, on your left side stands the mural, now covered with a glass wall and surrounded with flowers. The Interior-architecture of the restaurant is inspired by Karel Appel's wall painting. While eating your lunch or dinner, you can see the wall painting through a glass curtain, like the civil servants could before. For the luxurious hotel, the mural by a now famous artist heightens its prestige. The subject has become of no importance. Nobody would describe the mural as barbarian. But this is how Appel characterized himself at that time: "I'm painting as a barbarian from the barbarian time."

'You can say what you want, but I still think the painting has its qualities. It has not lost its total power with the new surrounding.' Said Mr. Patat. 'Just do not look in the mirror that is made out of the same shapes, in the hallway next to the painting.'

In a children's drawing or in the expression of a child, there is no aesthetic value. A child can only work out of his or her own expression of spontaneity. So, in this case, we cannot make a distinction between something beautiful and ugly, because there are still no aesthetic norms. And this counts not only for children but also for primitive cultures, where the spontaneity is the most important expression. But if grown-ups start to draw like a child, then can it ever be spontaneous? Because of this conscious choice, the style of children drawings became 'big' art and got an aesthetic value.

'Beauty is the primitive drive that we have arisen from. Creativity is the beauty and across this their can be placed no ugliness, ugliness is the lack of teaching', said the poet Louis Tiessen in his speech behind the painted totem pole by Karel Appel.

'I could never say that my child makes an ugly drawing', answers Mrs. Courgette. 'When I was young,' says Mrs. Courgette, 'nobody saw the beauty of my drawings.'

'In our opinion there is in this case — of course unwillingly — the regrettable mislead of the public, of causing confusion with the museum visitors, whom understanding of what art is, is already extremely unstable, Mrs. Courgette.' says the curator of the Cobra museum.²

But let's go back to the wall paintings before we jump to conclusions. A lot of Cobra artists made wall paintings. For me, it is above all this medium that attracts my attention. A mural can both be something extremely temporarily and something which wants to be eternal. Is the work going to disappear or will it stay there forever? There is no in-between; you cannot put it away for a while like an ordinary painting on canvas. Besides this, a mural is more than just a painting on canvas; it is made for a specific place. And, therefore, it always has a

deeper connection to the surroundings. The murals that Karel Appel made, are not only connected to the Stedelijk Museum, they form a physical part of it. And will always show the history of the museum more then another artwork.

Cobra made wall paintings for different reasons. The fashion for decorating buildings increased enormous at that time. It was part of the aim for 'total art' or 'Gesamtkunstwerk', as the Germans call it. Architecture, painting, sculpture and other art forms had to become a whole. Another reason was to become closer to the nation. The workers from the street would be sooner in contact with art. Here the artist is put into the role of an educator. In 1943-44, Jorn painted (with a few other members of the Cobra) the inside walls of a small cottage of Elna Fonnesbech-Sandberg with mythical creatures and the outside walls they decorated with cement reliefs, inspired by cabin paintings of primitive cultures; she was a collector and great admirer of Jorn's work. The house was called: 'Det abstrakte pandekagehus' (the abstract pancake house). Another example where architecture and decoration came together in a natural way was the house in Begnerød close to Copenhagen. In 1949 a group of Cobra members came together and painted, sculpted and wrote for more then a month, on and in the house. 'Geasamtkunstwerk' got in this way a second connotation. The wall paintings that Appel, Constant and Corneille made in November 1949 in the house of the ceramic artist Erik Nyholm are gone, as are the wall painting that Constant made together with Appel in his house in the Henri Polaklaan.

'But is it not weird, Mr. Courgette, that the Cobra artists worked in such a classical way? They declared the western art as dead but they used the most monumental western art medium. Think about the fresco's in all the churches. Dada would have never done that'

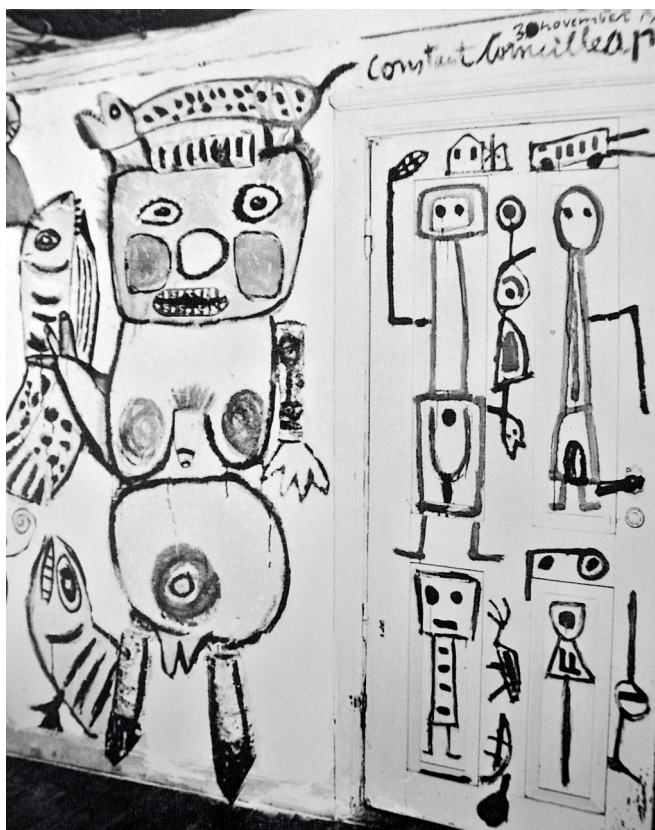
'No, but we can go further back to the prehistory, what kind of beautiful drawings they made!'

'The animal skins are alive ants crawl in my blood'³

'I took the rod on the red square and I hit RED WATER.

Out of tear and cement I was beating water.

It squirted the agents against each other; the stands fell down where



Wall painting by Karel Appel in the house of Erik Nyholm together with Corneille and Constant, in Funder Denmark 30 November 1949. Photo by Johs. Jensen



Wall painting by Constant in the house of Erik Nyholm together with Corneille and Karel Appel, in Funder Denmark 1949. Photo by: Johs. Jensen

the children were fighting postcards with oedema.’

‘Soon foams the vine-red CITY and drops in the wounds and wounds of wretches as juice from grapes.’⁴

Miss Cobra found some old newspapers from that time and quoted out loud the reactions on the famous exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum of 1949:

‘The Experimental artists are fighting their way’, ‘punching in the Stedelijk Museum’, ‘A communistic uproar’ and about the artists: ‘Delirium is rising up to art’, ‘gekled, geklats, geklodder’ and ‘unnecessary art: the flowering time of the Nihilism’⁵

‘We are soaked into the DELIRIUM of the world!’

‘You are pooping crazy’ shouted Mrs. Courgette.

‘Now you can smile about this, Mr. Patat, but nobody found it so funny back then.’

When the city hall was changed into the big Grand Hotel, Karel Appel was often found there to look his *Vragende kinderen* into the eyes and to reflect on the time that had passed. And while he is collecting old memories in the Grand Hotel, he hears the tram that Corneille designed, with the big wriggling snake, tinkling over the Rokin.⁶ Time has passed and moved into a new one but the wall paintings stay at their place (maybe covered with a glass wall) reflecting the culture of that time, much more than a painting in a museum will ever do. Within the murals time seems to flock together, like frescos in a Sienese church which seems to breath of the gothic period. The eyes of the *Vragende kinderen* will keep on staring at us and we will all see a different landscape in them.

Mrs. Courgette did not like to drive in the bus.

Mrs. Courgette and Mr. Patat will soon arrive in Amsterdam.



Karel Appel with a model Fokker F-100 airplane, in his painted decoration, in front of the twin towers, New York in the eighties. Photo by Nico Koster

Drawing by Noé Cottencin and Annelotte Lammertse.
With Mrs. Cobra, Mr. Patat and Mrs. Courgette. Made in October 2014

Notes

1

Muurschildering in de Espresso-bar van museum Boijmans van Beuningen van Pam Emmerik en René Daniëls, 30 augustus 2013

2

A quote from a newsletter article ('Experiment van Experimentele groep eindigde met ontruiming van de zaal'), written by: ('van onze letterkunde redacteur')

3

From *Paal & Perk*, poetry by Hugo Claus and drawings by Corneille

4

Goedemorgen Haan, writings: Gerrit Kouwenaar and drawings: Constant Nieuwenhuis.

5

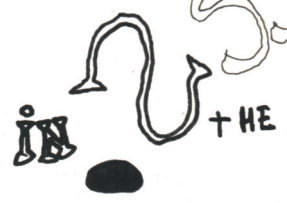
Quotes from newspaper articles in *De A van Cobra in Woord en Beeld*, by Ed Wingen 1997

6

Inleiding in De A van Cobra in Woord en Beeld, by Ed Wingen 1997



NOT ENOUGH EXPRESSION



But miss Cobra is not so fond of driving in a bus.
 MADAME COURGETTE ET MONSIEUR PATATE ARE SOON IN **AMSTERDAM**



Salvador Dalí trying to depict *claritas*, *agilitas*, *subtilitas* and *impassibilitas* in his *The sacrament of the last supper*, 267 x 167 cm, oil on canvas, 1955, Washington National Gallery of Art.

Hieronymus Bosch's version of the last judgment, focusing on punishments.
The Last Judgment (detail of the center panel), 164 x 127 cm, oil on wood, c. 1482, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna.

Hopes and disagreements about post-mortem appearance

Martina Turini

Introduction

In this short essay I will try to reflect on the appearance of the body after the resurrection according to the Catholic Church, using laughter as a starting point. I base my arguments on the possibility of resurrection as consequence of the Adamic Covenant. Resurrection regards our future, whereas laughter regards our present as imperfect beings. However, it is as well a consequence of the fall.¹ I am wondering how these two topics interact and also interchange: what about laughter in our future (and of course I mean the future of those who will be lucky enough to go to Paradise), and what about our desires for our bodies now? And if laughter has been discarded by the Church especially because it reminded of the lowest and impure parts of the body, because it's an incontrollable stimulus that comes from within, deforming the features of the face, it might be interesting to think why we have to be bodies again (in the hereafter), instead of getting rid of them.

'But laughter is weakness, corruption, and the foolishness of our flesh. It is the peasant's entertainment, the drunkard's license. Even the Church in its wisdom has granted the moment of feast, carnival, fair, this diurnal pollution that releases humours and distracts from other desires and other ambitions... Still, laughter remains base, a defence for the simple, a mystery desecrated for the plebeians.'² This is what monk Jorge says in the last pages of Umberto Eco's *The name of the rose*, summarising that point of view that the Church has been reputed to have. He expresses his (the Church's) despise of the laughter because of its connection to the body. Traditionally the despise

has been so much that the question whether Jesus laughed or not during his life used to be a serious problem debated by the early Church Fathers. The body though, in Catholicism, other than being an ‘abominable covering of the soul’³, is also instrument of salvation (it will be saved itself) and therefore it makes it possible to include laughter in Catholic soteriology. Taking into account that humor and the comic are not the same thing, we can say that humor is present in the Bible, but the comic element has been erased by the morals and the behaviour set by Christianity.

Rituals

Laughter within the Catholic Church is present as a theological aspect rather than as an everyday practice. There are, or actually there used to be, very few rituals that included the exasperation of joy in some Christian celebrations, such as the *risus paschalis* (meaning Easter laughter). It was a ritual laughter performed during the Easter masses in Middle Ages Germany, symbolising Christ’s victory over death. This seems quite unusual if we frame it in that specific time and in that specific context, but presupposing that this ritual may have a pagan origin, we could also try and think of what a ritual is and why, in this case, the use of laughter for a Christian celebration is not a contradiction. A ritual is a precise scheme of behaviours, performed in a specific time and place: when rules are set, the performed action is thereby carefully controlled, and nothing is left at random. In the case of the *risus paschalis*, the laughter is not real and it’s very important that it’s not: the actors are not acting the laughter, they are instead performing the performance, the faking, the lie. And it is very important that what is being faked (and therefore denied at the same time) is laughter.

The real joy

According to the theologian Guillelmus Parisiensis (13th century), the real joy is stern, rigorous and decorous, and must not be expressed by laughter. It’s something that lifts up rather than bending and shak-

ing and distorting the body. He applies his theories to his vision of paradise as well, in contrast to the Saracen idea of paradise as a garden of sexual delights. According to him, in Paradise the souls will not laugh for the reasons that I mentioned above, but will contemplate God and will feel a deep joy inside. *Non autem tunc risus erit corporis, sed risus cordis...*⁴ writes Gregorius Magnus about the phrase in Proverbs 31:25 *Ridebit in die novissimo*.⁵ According to his interpretation, laughter will overcome its bodily nature and will cease to perturb humankind. The eschatological laughter is the completion of the earthly laughter, and will become one with the benevolent laughter of God: *Non est maior laetitia cordis quam quod scimus deum ridere*.⁶

Sacred through profane

And here we come to the issue of laughter in paradise: will it be possible? Is that contemplated? Indeed laughter is an eruptive action and it's purely associated to the mouth, the bodily, the grotesque. It takes the inside of the body outside, just like ejaculation. It's from this point that springs the endless dichotomy body/soul, and then corporal/spiritual; the Church places itself in this struggle, which is more an ethic and aesthetic idea of the opposites, contributing with the ideas of profane/sacred, secular/religious.

The aversion of the churchmen against laughter has its peak in the Middle Ages. In order to prevent excesses, the Church developed a position that we can define hostile to laughter as an instrument of control. This results then in a semantic and ideological position, preferable to rules and coercion that would have been broken more easily otherwise. The morals inculcated by the Church led to ideal behaviour and seriousness that I believe are still very strong in Western society, and are taken as the norm in every formal situation and context.

As said before, the dichotomy sacred/profane reveals as the proper counterpart for the Church, in the so called carnivalesque. By this I mean that popular culture developed alongside the religious one, especially at the time when the Church was more powerful. The car-

nivalesque regards obscenity, inversion, subversion, drunkenness, excess and often it had religion as a subject. If we look closer though, we realise that the carnivalesque is nothing but the double of religion. It's serving the Church itself in the sense that it's consecrating it. The carnivalesque and the Church appear to be interdependent and necessary for each other's existence: the carnivalesque that inverts the social structure could not exist without the reassuring framework of the everyday habits and rules. And the sacred wouldn't be better reinforced by anything else than its parody.

Resurrection

Laughter is defined as an explosion, most of the time caused by a sudden external impulse. The body ceases to respond to the orders of the mind, causing no little problems to the rigorousness preached by the monastic orders. The moment you lose control of your corporality reveals how much you are outside of it already: as if you were able to look at it from above. As pointed out previously, these moments are nothing but glimpses of the ambivalence present in human life: the question of being a body versus having a body. If you suddenly start laughing or crying and can't control yourself, you become aware of the power of your own corporality, and how much you are it. But being able to acknowledge this, it means that a certain degree of introspection is connected, or caused, by the possibility of placing yourself outside of the body — and in this case you have it. The friction caused by this double feeling is the demonstration of a defect in which mankind has been floating since the first sin, after the loss of the privileges of Eden.

Laughter and weeping prove the ambivalence of corporal existence, the fable unity of body and soul, where subjectivity cannot place itself clearly. Therefore, laughter shows an imperfection within the subject (man), that is a consequence of the Adamic Covenant. If laughter is present in the human condition as a consequence of the fall, is it possible to include laughter in Catholic soteriology? How will the duality, expressed by laughter as we said, be solved?

According to St. Bonaventura, scholastic theologian and philosopher, a person can be called such only when formed by body and soul and he points out that the *personalitas*, the being a person, is linked to the *risibilitas*, the possibility of the laughter.⁷ We can argue that laughter is then caused by both the binomial disjunction of body and soul, but it is made possible when the two are together: the non-unity, but the togetherness. This point is quite crucial in relation to the topic we are finally moving towards: the resurrection of the flesh. After one dies, according to Catholic soteriology, he/she is pure soul but in the Judgment Day in which everyone, dead or alive, will be judged once and for all, corpses will resurrect and the flesh together with the soul are going to form one *personalitas* again. So indeed it seems that in paradise after Judgment day it will be possible to laugh, but no one really mentions it. Some argue that there will be no need for laughter since the joy felt will be spiritual, but indeed there will be dances, music, hugging and kissing.⁸

So why is all this allowed, but laughter is not forecasted? How come laughter is perceived as too bodily, when the bodies are there themselves? And if the laughter is not relevant, for sure the physical appearance of the resurrected body is. There is much more written about it than about laughter in paradise. The resurrected bodies are well described by Thomas Aquinas and by St. Augustine among others, and what appears is some kind of cleansed but improved version of man. Some scholars argued that women will happily turn into men, according to what is said in the Bible, that we will be conformed to the image of his Son⁹, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.¹⁰ Sure there will be no marriage or sex in paradise, but St. Augustine assures that women will not change, since they are also God's creatures.¹¹

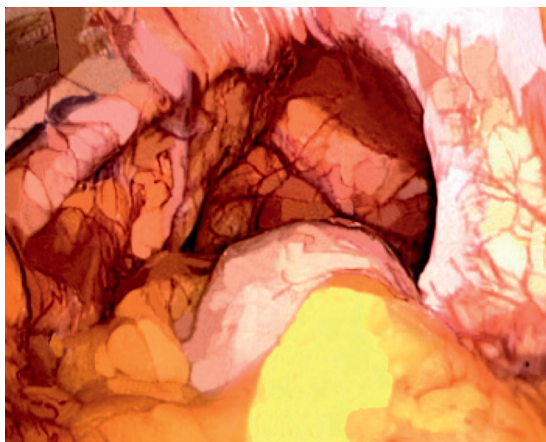
Thomas Aquinas identifies four categories of attributes that the resurrected body will have: *claritas*, *agilitas*, *subtilitas*, *impassibilitas*.

Claritas, meaning radiance, splendor, lightness of color, often translated as beauty. *Agilitas*, meaning the ability to levitate and to move more quickly and lightly. *Subtilitas* meaning not to be obstructed by material things, also walking through walls. *Impassibilitas*, meaning

stasis, freedom from passions and also the end of suffering. Apart from these attributes, St. Augustine writes that the body will be spiritualised and whole, complete with organs and every physical feature that one had when living, since even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.¹² Even though the features are not meant to change, their purpose is absent, or at least unclear; women for example will not instil desire into men, even if they won't be deprived of their sexual organs, and there shall not be procreation. Last but not least, St. Augustine is confronted with the problem of anthropophagy, sadly common during his times. What will happen to those who are eaten by their comrades? And more generally, what will happen to those bodies that were not born perfect, or died losing some body parts? According to him in the resurrection they will receive what they have been deprived of. This assumption by no means states that every cripple, dwarf, maimed etc. are wrong, and can aspire to be perfect only after they die.

Beautified imperfections

If we want to hazard one reading of the beauty industry today from a theological viewpoint, probably the ones who choose to modify themselves and actually do it, in the resurrection will either go back to their original features or maybe not, because they are experiencing something that has been impossible until a few decades ago: achieving a preview of how it will be like in paradise. Is it blasphemy? Is it only blasphemy for those who are unjust and don't deserve it? In February 2015, during the preparation of a meeting organised by the Vatican about female culture and the space of women in society, known with the hashtag #LIFEOFWOMAN, a long debate arose due to a text written by a group of women, that defined plastic surgery as a 'burqa made of flesh'. These women aimed to criticise the use of female bodies for commercial benefits and said that if used for this purpose, plastic surgery is betraying the true beauty of women, thus standardising their physical appearance. Cardinal Ravasi who had approved the text, had to defend this statement, considered too harsh by many; he was then accused of attacking plastic surgery himself. At the end of the press conference, he admitted that plastic surgery is indeed an



Beautifying sickness, Endometriosis, 2015
Beautifying sickness, Hernia, 2015

interesting issue and probably (in my opinion) it's not studied enough in connection to theology and to the literature that I mentioned here. The only other example of a churchman who handled the topic of plastic surgery was Pope Pius XII, in a speech that he held in October 1958. Here I quote: 'Now, there's no doubt that Christianity and its morals have never condemned self esteem and the neat care of physical beauty as illicit in themselves. (...) Plastic surgery, even being such a small department within the vast and admirable field of general surgery, is an art; not only in the generic sense that it's a well done work, but for that 'artistic sense' which is requested and is manifested in those who are applying themselves to finding ingenious solutions for ever-changing problems; and aiming for an aesthetic solution as well. For two illnesses are never alike, and every case needs an appropriate treatment, always patient and delicate, sometimes brilliant.'¹³ There are evidently no clear directives about plastic surgery from the Church, apart from some warnings regarding plastic surgery when used in order to enhance one's power of seduction, but such reasoning can be argued case by case. It seems that the Church is lacking an awareness of today's corporal practices and, in relation to this, is forgetting what we hope is awaiting us after we die. My aim is to highlight this lack of information, in the hope of having (soon?), an explicit clarification.

Notes**1**

'Il est certain... que le rire humain est intimement lié à l'accident d'une chute ancienne, d'une dégradation physique et morale.... Dans le paradis terrestre... le joie n'était pas dans le rire.' Charles Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire et généralement du comique dans les arts plastiques*, Le Portefeuille, 1855, p.5

2

Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa*, Bompiani, 1980, p. 507

3

According to Gregorius Magnus.

Jacques le Goff, Nicolas Truong, *Une histoire du corps au Moyen-Âge*, Liana Lévi, 2003, p. 20

4

'In fact, it's not going to be a laughter of the body, but of the heart'. (*Non autem tunc risus erit corporis, sed risus cordis. Risus enim nunc corporis de lascivia dissolutionis, nam risus cordis tunc da laetitia nascetur securitatis. Cum ergo electi omnes implentur gaudio manifestae contemplationis, quasi ad hilaritatem risus exiliunt in ore mentis*).

Pope Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Iob*, 595 AD

5

'She will laugh in the latter day', but often translated as 'She shall rejoice', or 'She smiles at the future.'

6

Luther in the sermon of 19 January 1528 on the wedding at Cana

7

C. Casagrande, 'Ridere in paradiso. Gaudio, giubilo e riso tra angeli e beati', in F. Mosetti Casaretto (ed.), *Il riso*, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2005, p.178

8

Ivi, p.188

9

Romans 8:29

10

Ephesians 4:13

11

St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, book XXII chapter 17

12

Luke 12:7

13

Comunicato stampa SICPRE, 3 February 2015. Translation of the author

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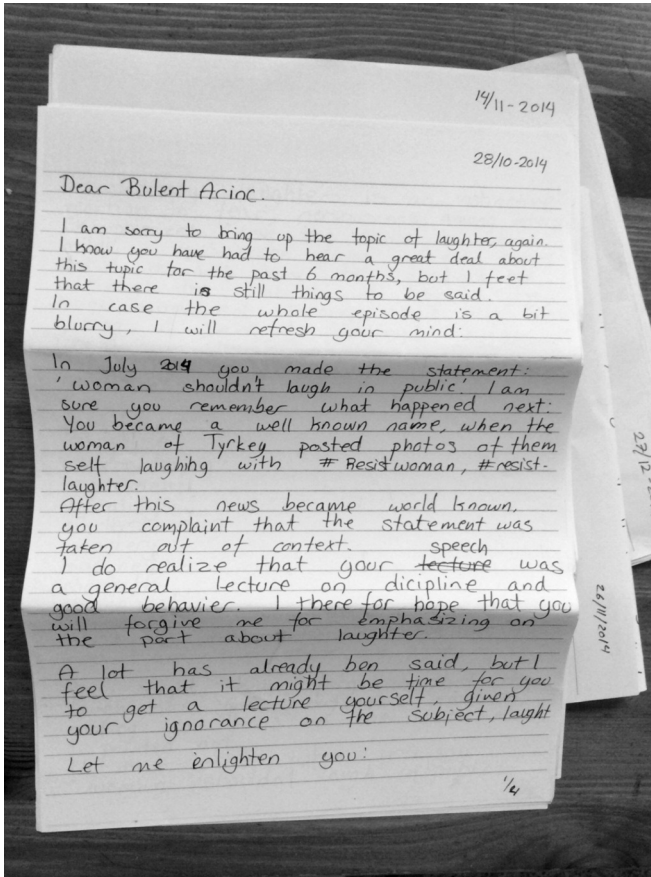
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Letter to a man

Ida Brottmann Hansen

The starting point of this project was the research of gender identities in laughter and female characters in comedy. Although through history most of the literature on the topic has been written by men, the research of the female character in comedy gives an insight to the way female identity is represented in laughter. I also tried to map my own laughter pattern and to relate it to theories of laughter and humor.

We can compare the response to laughter with other intuitive bodily reactions. For example, when we are confused or don't really understand something, we tend to tilt our head to the right. This intuitive reaction is also observed with dogs. Thus, when observed with humans, this movement is endowed with the meaning of innocence or ignorance — virtues that were for a long time highly appreciated with girls. The point I try to make here is: intuitive and unconscious reactions are products of social expectations and norms within gender identities. I will therefore argue that similar laughs have roots in similar social structures, which might explain the gender gaps in laughter. I've been looking into these gender gaps and trying to find out if they are remains of repression and what other factors play a role in their construction and existence.

In the summer of 2014, Bulent Arinc, the Turkish Deputy Prime minister made the gender gap very clear, when commenting negatively on women who laugh on the street. He held a one-hour long speech lecturing the Turkish people, (men and women), on good behaviour. To sum up: laughing on the street is bad behaviour, if you are a woman. I, as so many other females, was appalled and confused

by the statement and my first reaction was that this man didn't have enough knowledge on the theories of laughter. Thus, I decided to provide him with some:

28/10-2014

Dear Bulent Arinc.

I am sorry to bring up the topic of laughter, again. I know you have had to hear a great deal about this topic in the past couple of months. A lot has already been said, but not all. In case the whole episode is a bit blurry to you, I will re-fresh your mind: In July 2014 you made the statement; 'women shouldn't laugh in public'. I am sure you remember what happened next: You became a well-known name, when the women of Turkey used the modern media to turn you into a laughingstock; #Resistwoman, #Resistlaughter. After this went viral, you complained that that the statement was taken out of context. I do realize that this was a small part of an hour-long speech on general discipline and good behaviour. I therefore hope that you will forgive me for emphasizing this particular statement.

As I said, a lot has already been said, but still I feel that you might need a lecture, due to your obvious ignorance on the subject of laughter. Let me enlighten you:

- Involuntary laughter is an instinctive reaction to fear, nervousness, among others.

- Chimpanzees use the smile to show mildly submission during, or even before battle. Humans have this instinct too, although the context of laughter has been modified throughout evolution, giving it several meanings in today's world.

- To laugh can mean:

Nervousness

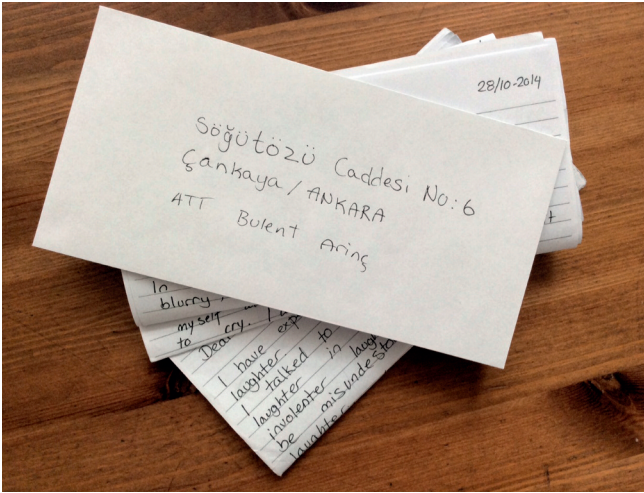
Mild fear

Surprise

Surrendering

Agreement

Equality



Understanding
 Mockery
 Openness
 Warmth
 Excitement
 Confidence
 Superiority

You might have forgotten that laugh has gone through an evolution, as you focus only on one of its many meanings. Maybe you are only focused on the last meaning on my list in which case you might actually mean: 'Women shouldn't mock or be mocked in public spaces', when you say: 'Women shouldn't laugh in public'. Once again, I ask you to forgive me for pinning words on you, what you actually said was; A man should be moral, but a woman should be moral too. She should know what is decent and what is not decent.' 'She should not laugh loudly in front of all the world and should preserve her decency at all time.'

Okay, so laughter isn't decent. I just don't understand why? I would like to ask whether you are holding on to an ancient idea of laughter, or if you are using your remark as a demonstration of power? Maybe your presumption of laughter hasn't developed with the rest of the world. Maybe you share the idea of 17th century men. Back then, when it was a well established fact that only people who smiled broadly in public life and art, was the poor; the loud; the drunk and the entertainers.

*Till the next time,
Ida*

I came across a quote by Lisa Perfetti, summing up the complexity of gender identities through laughter: 'I dedicate this book to the memory of my grandmother Oma Hager Perfetti, who told some of her best jokes after the men had left the room.' This illustrates the complexity of gender identities in laughter. In literature, women are given roles in which they laugh only to please the man. The fact that the grandmother only tells her best jokes when the male company is gone shows that this was not only the case in literature but also the general understanding of the female role in society. The fact that she did tell good jokes shows this was only a social projection and the males are no more funnier than females. The fact she waited until the males had left the room, indicated the roles were very much divided between genders. A woman joking in male companionship would most probably equally appall both men and women. However, in early literature about laughter, there is no difference between genders, but it's generally frowned upon and viewed as an uncivilised reaction². It seems to have always been quite clear that laughing can be aggressive and used as a sanction for breaking social rules. Typically, a group laughs at someone whom, by this act, is temporarily excluded from the group. The members of the group consider themselves being in conformity with a certain norm accepted by the group, whereas the laughed-at-person is considered as having violated this norm, being unable to meet its requirements. Being laughed at causes shame, a typical reaction to a loss of social acceptance. Although I doubt that the ridicule and the shame is the reason for the gender gap in laughter.

14/11-2014

Dear Bulent

You might find it interesting to read a passage from ‘Philebu’, in which Plato wrote about the enjoyment of comedy. Plato treated laughter as an emotion that overrides rational self control. I suspect that you might share the same ideas as ancient philosophers, that laughter is a scornful and mocking act. In the ‘Republic’, Plato says that guardians of the state should avoid laughter; when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction. Am I going too far in suggesting that this is the view you share with people (women) who are giving into laughter? You might say that laughter goes against your religion; people (women) should therefore withhold the laughter. This is also a point of view you might share with Plato who found a passage in which ‘Mount Olympus is ringing with laughter’, very disturbing I can find even more similarities between you and Plato: he also imagined the streets as laughing hostility. Socrates even tried to ban entertainment all together, arguing that entertainers were lying and therefor did not belong in his ideal state. Neither of these ancient thinkers made a difference between men and women. But maybe, you also think that laughing is the same as lying?. We all know that lying isn’t decent! Let’s for argument sake quote Plato:

‘The ridiculous is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice. That vice is self-ignorance: The people we laugh at imagine themselves to be wealthier, better looking or more virtuous then they really are. In laughing at them, we take delight in something evil — their ignorance — and that malice is morally objectionable.’

Dear Bulent,

I am sorry that you have become the object of laughter. In this case, you are the ignorant one and therefore you have become the reason for laughter on the streets. The silver lining is that Plato would disapprove of this laughter (the one where you are the subject). He would claim that people take delight in something evil, that is you being evil. When you read this, I ask you to remember that Plato lived 400 B.C., 2400 years ago. Any argument that old can hardly be used anymore. When I compare you to a great man like Plato it is really not meant as a compliment, but a way of arguing that your views are outdated. In fact

they are so outdated that they are shared with men who lived even before the beginning of the Christian era.

Let me come back to something I said before; you have become an object of laughter in the entire world — well the western world. You have even become the victim of mocking laughter. I can understand from the responses you give, that you do not understand why. Well, the reason is that you tried to control an instinct. You tried to control an emotion and a natural part of human behaviour. You tried to ban a universal language that existed before humans could talk. In our age, what else can you do but laugh at such a request. What else can you do but post it online for the world to see. They made you a joke. Pointing out the absurdity of your demand. The Turkish women made a clever move protesting with laughing photos on twitter.

You should be proud of your people.

Kindly,

Ida

The problem with studying the female character in literature (in order to give an indication of women's role in society) is that the most of literature older than fifty years is written by men. Looking at the female role will therefore give an idea of the expectations of that time and not the picture of the actual conditions. We will therefore also include the study of literature dating back to medieval times.

Not only men, found it ill fit for women to be humorous. There was also a general idea among women that those who belonged to the female gender should not draw too much attention. This is shown in a warning written by Christine de Pizan, a female medieval author: 'She never will be coy, but will speak well-considered words, soft and rather low-pitched, uttered with a pleasant face and without excessive motion of the hands or body, nor facial grimaces. She will avoid excessive or uncalled-for laughter... Her humor also will be discreet.'³

Dear Bulent

Yesterday I didn't laugh, not once. I was too tired and occupied to think that anything could be funny. I behaved exactly like you want me to behave. I was

quiet, without dragging attention to myself all day. In the evening I wanted to cry. Yesterday, I was constantly worried. Now it is only 10:00 in the morning and I have already laughed three times; the first time when I spilled coffee, the other two while watching 'New Girl' with a roommate — 'New Girl' is a TV show that you would probably feel encourages loose behaviour. For some reason, it gave me a good start to the day. I have the exact same problems today as I had yesterday, but now they seem less overwhelming

It is said that laughter is the best medicine. According to Freud it is used as a valve. It's an emotional relief that can't be expressed in any other way. I am not sure of how familiar you are with Freud's theories, but surely you must know about the Id, the Ego and the super ego. According to Freud, joke happens when the conscious allows the expression of thoughts that society usually suppresses or forbids — the superego allows the ego to generate humor. A generous superego allows a light and comforting type of humor, while a harsh superego creates a biting and sarcastic type of humor. A very harsh superego suppresses humor altogether. Freud followed the ideas of Herbert Spencer who said that energies were being conserved, bottled up and then released, thereby giving the image of a valve preventing an explosion.

Yesterday my superego was very harsh, causing me to explode at the end of the day. I hope that you let your superego be generous.

*All the best,
Ida.*

The differences in the roles and expectations of genders opened up the use of the gender role models in comedy. When the roles were switched, chaos occurred due to the 'unnatural' changes in everyday life⁴. It is not only in medieval comedy literature that we get an idea of gender identities. If we look at the entertainment of our time, we get the insight to the same social expectations that we unconsciously maintain. Although much had happened with the gender identity since the medieval comedy literature was written, I will argue that we still cannot be completely unaffected or without regard to those old gender standards. I mentioned before that women act accordingly to norms of gender identities, without even being aware of it.

I'll give you an example: It was commonly known in the Middle Ages that women were created by God to please men — she was in his service, as were her laughs. The author Erasmus was a highly praised author and did not shy away from commenting on the woman's silliness in many of his texts. In the *Praise of Folly*, the woman is described as 'a stupid animal, God wot, and a giddy one, yet funny and sweet.'⁵ Erasmus was not alone in his beliefs concerning women and laughter. Joubert's wrote that women should avoid excessive laughter, lest she disfigure the naturally feminine beauty of her pleasing face with 'such opening of the mouth, from which come many wrinkles in the face.' Implicating women's laughter is welcomed by men if it enhances the pleasure she gives him, but discouraged if it diminishes such pleasure.⁶

Although it is not any more the general idea that women exist only to please men, when we look at the laughing pattern of both sexes we spot traces of these beliefs — all girls know the feeling of laughing more when trying to impress a guy. If we go a bit more general, there are studies showing that women laugh more when in company with men than with other women.⁷ The pleasure principle takes us, of course, directly to Freud, who discusses the phenomena in question in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, as well as in a short article published in 1928 in *Imago*. Freud advances the following definition:

'The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an economy in expenditure upon ideation (upon cathexis) and the pleasure in humor from an economy in expenditure upon feeling. In all three modes of working of our mental apparatus the pleasure is derived from an economy. All three are agreed in representing methods of regaining from mental activity a pleasure which has in fact been lost through the development of that activity (Freud 293).'

Dear B,

Is it okay if I call you B? Or should I call you Mr B? I can do that.

Dear Mr. B,

I read an article suggesting that females are leading laughers, but males are the greatest laugh getters. In the article the writer kept referencing a book by professor Provine called 'Laughter: A scientific Investigation'. You should read it, supposedly it is really good.

Speaking of books and laughter, you should also read: 'Gender and Laughter: Comic affirmation and subversion in traditional and modern media.' I have read parts of it. It deals with the social relation of the main male character and the main female character from the 1970's till now, as well as to how they communicate with the audience.

Back to the point of this letter: What really got my attention was the above-mentioned article. Professor Provine spent three years researching relations between the speaker and its audience. Overall, the speaker out-laughed their audience by almost fifty percent. What is even more interesting is that the pattern varies enormously according to gender. When a woman spoke to a female audience, she laughed seventy percent more often than her listeners. When she spoke to a male audience, she laughed more then twice as often as the men listening to her. When a man was speaking to women, he laughed a little more than the female speaker did. But when he was speaking to men, the male speaker laughed twenty percent more than the audience. In the same article there was another study mentioned, which showed that among children watching cartoons, girls laugh more when they were with boys than when they were with girls. Furthermore, the girls reciprocated boys laughter more than the boys copied girls laughter. Does this mean that boys are simply more fun than girls? A more likely explanation is that laughter is used to please or to show kindness (the pleasure theory). Girls use laughter to show that they are impressed with what the male just said. All girls will recognise having laughed at non-funny jokes just to impress a guy. A friend of mine even told me that if you make a girl laugh on a date, there is a 90 percent change that she will sleep with you. Probably these intuitive laughs show some social hierarchy that we are not aware of. My point is that maybe you shouldn't be so offended when a woman laughs on the street. Maybe she is just trying to impress you.

*With regards,
Ida*

As I already mentioned, the 'Laugh' has been modified and altered throughout evolution, giving it several meanings in today's world. The Laugh can therefore be used to obtain several different goals based on the reason for the laughter. This is where the explanation for the gender gap in laughter probably resides: since the beginning of human kind, men and women have had different roles supported by the social hierarchy that suggests that men are superior to women. Although this specific idea has been erased in a big part of the world, there are many indications that this idea is still buried deep within us. This is why women dress more masculine when they want to be taken serious; why long loose hair is considered sexy and not intelligent; why the word 'girlie' is used to describe something naïve and superficial; and why there are gender gaps in laughter. Most importantly, this is why the pleasure principle is still a valid explanation to the gender gap in laughter.

Notes

1

Lisa Perfetti, *Woman and laughter in medieval comic literature*

2

Plato: *Philebus*. Persons in the dialogue: Socrates, Protarchus, Philebus:

Soc. – Is not envy an unrighteous pleasure, and also an unrighteous pain?

Pro. – Most true.

Soc. – There is nothing envious or wrong in rejoicing at the misfortunes of enemies?

Pro. – Certainly not.

Soc. – But to feel joy instead of sorrow at the sight of our friends' misfortunes — is not that wrong?

Pro. – Undoubtedly.

Soc. – Did we not say that ignorance was always an evil?

Pro. – True.

Soc. – And the three kinds of vain conceit in our friends which we enumerated — the ain conceit of beauty, of wisdom, and of wealth, are ridiculous if they are weak, and detestable when they are powerful: May we not say, as I was saying before, that our friends who are in this state of mind, when harmless to others, are simply ridiculous?

Pro. – They are ridiculous.

Soc. – And do we not acknowledge this ignorance of theirs to be a misfortune?

Pro. – Certainly.

Soc. – And do we feel pain or pleasure in laughing at it?

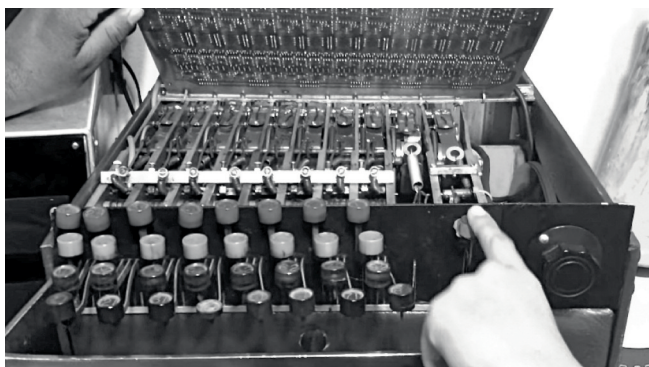
Pro. – Clearly we feel pleasure.

Soc. – And was not envy the source of this pleasure which we feel at the misfortunes of friends?

Pro. – Certainly.

Soc. – Then the argument shows that when we laugh at the folly of our friends, pleasure, in mingling with envy, mingles with pain, for envy has been acknowledged by us to be mental pain, and laughter is pleasant; and so we envy and laugh at the same instant.

Pro. – True.



Laff box, video still, 2013
BEWARE OF SHYSTERS
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCUCBkVG-Dw>

Something funny happened

Linnea Langfjord Kristensen

A mechanical laughter

Something funny took place in the big grey space which caused everyone to laugh. The laughter quickly spread from one person to the next. It kept on changing, going from a surprised laughter, as a result of the situation in which it was produced, then slowly evolving into a nervous laughter, because of the awkward unease of the changing situation. This last change caused you to have the feeling of not being a part of the fun, but merely ‘looking at it’ from the outside. Quickly, as a reaction to the awkwardness of the situation, the laughter changed into a hearty one of relief, sigh! The situation had changed again and everyone was a part of what was funny in the big grey space. Whether the last action made room for the hearty laughter to exist, or the nervous laughter made space for the last action created, in order for the hearty laughter to happen, I do not know.

‘Laughter is a bodily reaction to external or internal stimuli, caused by contractions of the diaphragm.’¹

Reflecting on the situation, it does feel like the laughter was not just a product of the situation, or a bodily reaction created from the situation. It had an agenda of its own, and it changed the situation in order to be produced again. Functioning as a ‘smoother’ and a ‘sweetener’ to the nervous tension that arose.

¹1300-50; Middle English (h) umour < Anglo-French < Latin (h) ūmōr- (stem of (h) ūmor) moisture, fluid (medical Latin: body fluid), equivalent to (h) ūm (ēre) to be wet (see humid) + -ōr- -or²

Laughter equals humor equals a defence mechanism for making hard reality more liquid and bearable. Besides being a (re)action, containing functions and possibilities, laughter also has a mechanical notion to it. It can be a manufactured laughter. Even in our non-social hours of the day, when we are alone, it can present itself as an outer source for us to consume. Specific laughter can be altered, or turned off, stretched out and continued forever, even killed. You can be a God of laughter. Silent laughter. Loud laughter. The sound of laughter. Inappropriate laughter. The language of laughter. Culture, gender, education, situation, context, age, time, space bound.

Can laughter exist on its own?

In the 1950s Charley Douglass invented the 'laff box' for TV shows and comedies. It was a little box of infinite fun, making sure that you knew when to laugh, making it possible to create and tailor the entire audience's reactions afterwards. I think most of us are familiar with this: 'Canned laughter'.³ When reading about this kind of laughter, one quickly gets the impression of it not being very popular though: 'Canned applause and laughter makes me wanna barf... proof that TV is geared for morons (...)', 'I fucking hate tv shows that use canned laughter.'⁴ Because of the negativity surrounding this laughter, often producers will not be honest about using it and the sound engineers creating and working with it are forbidden to tell which shows they are using it for.⁵

Why is it that we do not like canned laughter? Or maybe, why will we not admit that we do? A kind of laughter that makes some people laugh and some people use a very hateful language. The death of laughter. How to kill a laugh? If the laff box would not be used in the recordings of a show, you would have a live audience creating the sound reactions. In this situation the audience would have to attend an audition because the producers had to know beforehand that the people in the audience would laugh at the jokes they were supposed to laugh at. As we experienced in the big grey space, laughter can make you change from being outside something into being part of it. The live audience were no longer just a group of spectators, they

were participating in the act of laughing which would determine other people's laughter later on. Through the use of another's laughter, mechanical or 'live-created, set bound ones', one can decide that people later on will find specific situations funny. The frame for the laughter-to-come is already set. The situation in which the comedies are to be watched at home in the living room is already directed. Not only are the TV show directed, but you are as well. Though this kind of laughter is a manufactured laughter, can it also be conceived of outside of the context of TV shows? When it is entering the living-room, it is creating a new context by itself. The people who created the mechanical laughter are dead. The people laughing in the live audience are dead, but the laughter is still laughing. 'Have the last laugh' — meaning to prove ultimately successful after a seeming defeat or loss'.⁶ What would happen if you took the functions, and only the functions, of this laughter out of the TV world and into another context? Can the functions of 'smoothen-out' and 'sweeten', determine what other situations are going to be like? Can laughter exist on its own while we are being nothing but containers for the laughter to manifest itself through? Such a big part of our lives which we cannot give a physical form to, because it is not an object you can place somewhere and say: 'Here is laughter.' When thinking about giving laughter a physical form, the laugh box is an obvious object of choice, but then again it is merely a container for the laughter to function through. Like we are. A mediator for the laughter's functions as a context definer and situation maker. Maybe laughter does not have to be a sound or a bodily reaction?

A box of infinite fun

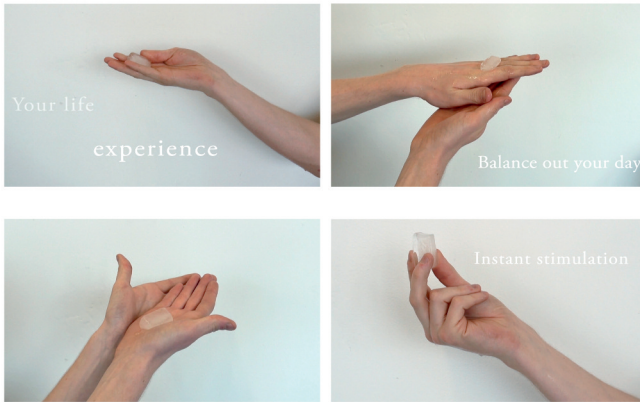
The people in the frame are happy. They are moving around in their kitchen with a product they purchased, which is being used everyday now. As a sign of their happiness, they are laughing. Can the people in this commercial be viewed, as canned laughter? It seems like they have the same purpose as the canned laughter in the TV shows. They are functioning as sweeteners for the product which we should purchase in order to also achieve and be a part of this lifestyle — ultimately providing us with happiness.

Like with the canned laughter though, we consider it to be fake. We do not always like or trust the smile, because we believe it is only put there in order to make us buy something. It is functioning as a disguise for the product (or the bad joke). Bringing together canned laughter and TV commercials is almost too obvious, as they are a part of the same consumer culture. In the tv-schedule there's even made space for them to replace each other when one of them needs a break. Commercials are trying to predetermine what kind of lifestyle we would like to have and hence which objects to purchase for this lifestyle. Canned laughter is trying to predetermine the living room situation in which the TV show will be watched later on. The smile is functioning as a sweetener to the product in the commercial, while the product is functioning as a sweetener to our stressful life — even though we might not need the product. The canned laughter is functioning as a sweetener to both the jokes in the show but also to smoothen our stressful life, which we will forget about for a while, when watching the TV show. Can you make canned laughter physical and graspable and sell it as a product? Can you make commercials for it? Money is a commodity, informations about our lives and what we shop are commodities — can laughter be as well?

Laughter on the go to smoothen every situation you may encounter today!

Through the definitions and functions of the words 'laughter' and 'humor', the possibility of taking these definitions and functions out of their words, and placing them somewhere, something new happens. In a tryout, created in order to get a feeling of these functions given a physical form, I made sugar filled ice-cubes. When people hold the cubes in their hands, they melt and become liquid. Filled with sugar they sweeten your hands and the things you touch — 'they sweeten the situation'. In addition, commercials for the ice cubes were created, in order to create a reality for them and turning them into a product. It is an instant and easy fix, though while they melt, you would have to buy a new one pretty soon.

Through the use of language and images, there is the possibility of making a reality which does not exist, to come true. This product, this ice cube, is a way into the lifestyle that you want to have. When



I say, the ice cube is a box of infinite fun, it becomes a reality. It is true. On the contrary, the choice of not talking about something which does exist, makes it disappear. When the producers make the choice of not saying: 'Yes, we are using canned laughter', as a consequence this laughter simply does not exist. As this is so present in almost every area of our society, it raises the question of who has the opportunity for a voice which affects the people it is talking to?⁷ What does it mean for your actions if language defines the reality of them more than the action itself does?

Safe storage and future needs

A new space has been introduced at this point; the big white space of the museum. Inside this space, we and a major corporate bank were present for a certain amount of time. As much as something happened in the big grey space, something happened here which made people laugh, but I am not sure if it was actually funny. In this new space, something happened with language. In a presentation

held by representatives from the bank, some very deliberate choices were made when it came to language and which vocabulary to use. Specifically the words 'bank' and 'money' were excluded from the talk, which is quite interesting when you think about the fact that we are dealing with a bank. When asking why these words were excluded, a very hesitant atmosphere arose and a slightly nervous laughter, made by blowing a bit of air through the nostrils, was uttered. What does canned laughter and the bank have in common, since neither of the people working with the subjects want to talk about them? One thing they have in common are people like us. The consumers of the functions that they hold, their services and their actions. We do not trust the bank or the canned laughter, even though we make use of, and consume both of them everyday. It makes the people who are working with these instruments hide the fact: they do. Neither the bank nor the canned laughter are visible, none of them have a physical form you can (feel) touch.

When approaching the bank, it would make sense to approach it, as far as possible, in the same way as the laughter. The definition of the word 'bank' is very broad and it involves both geological banks, medical banks, institutional banks and nature related banks. When you weave the definitions together you get something like: 'a storage/enclosed space for future needs'. The bank is obviously one of the major symbols of our capitalist society, but the definition does not sound as harmful and evil as the words we would normally be quick to associate with a bank. The language used by people against an institution like a bank is very hateful and there are entire websites dedicated to 'hating the bank'.⁸ On the contrary, the language used by the bank to describe itself to the world, is both very polite and humble, and extremely large and empowering, depending on who it has to connect with, outside itself.

'(...) further striving for operational excellence, enhancing the performance culture (...) expanding (...)', and

'(the bank's) focus is on service to customers, generating capital, growing profitability and improving efficiency'.⁹

We recognise the words in this description and through them, the bank is living up to the ideas we have about it. Capital, growth, expansion — we all know this. But instead of looking at the bank, I find it interesting to look at us in relation to the bank, and how we approach it. In this case, ‘we’ are art-students, who have been placed in the context of a major, corporate business which is active in 33 countries.

The procedure would probably be something like this: We would go to the bank and extract information for our own usage. The bank would be a space of resources for us to use. We would use the gathered information to build a foundation for a work-to-be. This work would probably be critical of the bank or exploit it somehow, because, as we all know, they are big and evil. We would set a goal. We would work towards this goal. We would produce, perform and in the end reach our goal. Extracting from a source, then adding it to the world. But what are we actually doing, when we are doing this? Even though we come from outside the bank, we are a part of the same society and we are using the exact same vocabulary and procedures as something so different from us as a bank. Whatever critique we do, it is already predetermined from a position governed by capital (in other ways than economical).

Again I have to ask what it means, if language and a specific vocabulary imposed by our society defines our actions and the reality of them, more than the action does itself? How can you address something, without using a specific language which ultimately defines every action that you do? As a way of trying to do this, I will offer myself to the bank as a ‘safe storage for future needed actions’. A body which will store and possibly do, but not extract, use or produce. The bank is a storage for needs — maybe I can be as well?

When people teach an action to someone, there is the possibility to relive this action later on, in the future, in a new context. Like storing the actions and functions of canned laughter in the ice cube, which will be activated through people’s usage, others can store actions and functions in me, which can be activated later on when they are needed. Through the act of teaching and storing, the actions can be

liberated from the language that defines them. They become liquid, they can change and create a new context for themselves. The action is taken outside of the space of one person, their context and the language within that context and passed on to an empty space where it will lie until a possible activation of it arises. It is not important that it is me, in who the actions are being stored, it could be anyone, but as a try-out it makes sense to use myself.

As space affects people and their actions within that space. A bank is definitely a space loaded with ideological and political actions and ideas, I find it necessary to be within that space and not just commenting on it from outside. This also raises some important questions: How do you approach and work with a space you feel so disconnected from, without just holding up a mirror from the outside and show the bank to itself? When everything within you just screams: 'It is big and evil, it is a bank!' When giving up yourself for a while, in order to be curious and open, how do you know that you are still working within your own ethical space? Which tools are we using to understand and not-understand? What does a 'big and evil' corporation contain, that I can learn from? What do I contain that the company can learn from? How do I actually do something in this context, without merely getting caught up in it and repeat the exact same procedures?

This will be a way of trying to 'be with a space' that contains a philosophy and language you are very much against and have a lot of doubt about. It will be a way of dealing with a symbol which stands for so many things you question. It opens up for the possibility of being nothing but a body which contains a promise of storing for the future, instead of compulsively adding and producing. Maybe, I am trying to introduce a moment of trying to re-configure how one could be at this particular moment within a specific situation. If an activation of the stored actions will ever happen, I do not know. What a future needed action is — I also do not know.

So, as I do not know where anything is going, I will leave this 'becoming' open. The non-knowing is a somewhat conscious deci-

sion, if it is possible to know 'not-to-know', as it is a tool for creating an opportunity for making the actions autonomous and not predefined or predetermined.¹⁰

We have been through canned laughter, context creators, commercials, language, a corporative bank, actions ...and all of sudden you have an exchange with a space you are fundamentally against in so many ways.

Notes

1

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laughter>

2

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/humor?s=t>

3

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laugh_track

4

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<http://www.ing.com/About-us/Profile-Fast-facts/Profile.htm>

10

This is written with strong references to thoughts within Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, 1994: 'Non-knowing is not a form of ignorance but a difficult transcendence of knowledge. This is the price that must be paid for an oeuvre to be, at all times, a sort of pure beginning, which makes its creation an exercise in freedom.' (p.3)

Complete source list

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'Our strategy aims to create a differentiating customer experience, enabled by simplifying and streamlining our organisation, further striving for operational excellence, enhancing the performance culture within our company and expanding our lending capabilities.' and 'NN Group's focus is on service to customers, generating capital, growing profitability and improving efficiency.'

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LAUGHTER



Zen and the corporation

Ildikó Horváth

Many have written about the nature of laughter and many theories have emerged. This essay therefore will not be original. This is not a scientific, but rather a fictional investigation on the connections between the already existing theories relating to — the game of language.

I choose to set my fictional story in a corporation; an office divided into cubicles, long working hours, deadlines, trainings and endless meetings; possible promotions, success, failures, repetition of movements; reports, deadlines, trainings, endless meetings, possible promotions, success, failures. Mobility. A new announcement on the screens, says: ‘As of tomorrow, employees will only be able to access the building using individual security cards. Pictures will be taken next Wednesday and employees will receive their cards in two weeks.’¹

‘The superiority theory of humor traces back to Plato and Aristotle it is also found in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. The central idea is that a person finds humor in the misfortunes of others (‘Schadenfreude’), because these misfortunes assert the person’s superiority on the background of shortcomings of others. Socrates was reported by Plato as saying that the ridiculous was characterised by a display of self-ignorance. For Aristotle, we laugh at inferior or ugly individuals, because we feel a joy at feeling superior to them.’²

The setup is described dramatically, so that I can conclude with more effect. Anyhow, I will continue. There are also characters in the story, the employees of the corporation. Hundreds of people get up in the

morning; drink their coffee and head towards the company. Once there they drink another coffee, sit behind their desk and start working; numbers, facts, a new project; deadlines for reports of the new project, a meeting in the afternoon, and another one immediately afterwards; muted conflicts; competition and overtime. Performance, performance, performance.

The monotony, the stress and expectations of work I describe have a negative impact on the wellbeing of my characters. Anxiety arises in the reader.

Relief theory maintains that 'laughter is a homeostatic mechanism by which psychological tension is reduced'. Humor may, for example, serve to facilitate relief of the tension caused by one's fear. Laughter and mirth, according to relief theory, both result from this release of nervous energy. Humor, according to relief theory, is used mainly to overcome sociocultural inhibitions and reveal suppressed desires. It is believed that this is the reason we laugh whilst being tickled, due to a build-up of tension as the tickler 'strikes'.³

In order to escape from this dramatic setting, I offer my characters the possibility of having fun. The afternoon meetings are cancelled, and the subordinate workers (those with the most monotonous jobs), are invited to group training. Besides, they all know each other and I suspect they can spend more quality time together. A professional from The Coaching Institute comes in; she is going to give them a one-hour long release from the office. People walk to the main hall, coach is ready, mass starts — an hour with laughing yoga.

The employees go back to their desks with a smile on their faces. I am pleased to see that my characters feel better again. They return to work, the sound of their repetitive movements suggests a balanced atmosphere.

My starting point was my initial thoughts about laughter. It is very much related to an acceptance of the meaninglessness of life shared with other human beings. We can never be sure of the world that surrounds us, nor can we ever really know it, but there is a common understanding of this helplessness that can be expressed by laughter.

Afterwards I read many books and theories about humor, which reshaped my ideas. Nietzsche claimed that it is in laughter that human beings are most alike to gods, it is when we get on the same level with existence.⁴ It is the point when we can acknowledge and then transcend our situation. It is the occasion when we do not identify ourselves with our situation or, moreover, with our bodies. Humor is an instrument to practice the self and social critique, and in this, it has a paradoxical relationship with acceptance.

Second floor, PR department. Front-desk manager comes in remarkably tense. 'Deadlines are not fulfilled, workflow is not satisfactory' he complains. The meditative drone of the keyboards beating, suddenly breaks, faces look up with bewilderment.

'The Computer Model of a Sense of Humor theory was suggested by Suslov in 1992. Investigation of the general scheme of information processing shows the possibility of a specific malfunction, conditioned by the necessity of a quick deletion from consciousness of a false version.'⁵

Continuing the narrative in this direction would result in a scene that is unpleasant to read. But this moment the front-desk manager receives a call, he is called to room 501 by the Head Officer. He hurries up, enters the room, where he finds a group of his manager colleagues. A presentation starts:

Zen training ensures mental fitness of managers⁶

The representative of a Zen training company is explaining the managers precisely how they can avoid being overstressed. This way they are able to keep calm, and control any uncomfortable situation. In case they would still have difficulties, in spite of the intense training, they are always welcome in the Zen Healing Centre after working hours, for some recovery.

'The incongruity theory states that humour is perceived at the moment of realisation of incongruity between a concept involved in a certain situation and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept.'⁷

Deep ecology.⁸ As I remember, its main concern is the connectedness of beings. It raises the problem that we mostly perceive very clear boundaries between each unit of a being. The way I describe it here just proves this idea. Humans are distinct from animals, plants and other substances and it is language that makes this distinction. The idea of disconnectedness encourages us to think and act only for the sake of ourselves.

‘According to this theory, humor has a pure biological origin, while its social functions arose later. This conclusion corresponds to the known fact that monkeys (as pointed out by Charles Darwin) and even rats (as found recently) possess a sense of humor.’⁹

The laughing Buddha, The Zen approach to humor, corresponds to the release theory. A significant non-functional aspect of Zen humor is that after it has collapsed logic, reason, categories and united opposites, it helps release tension. Thus, it can be seen as an expression of liberation, and is analogous to enlightenment.¹⁰

While engrossed in my work for the story, I notice that a few of the characters are gathering at the coffee machine. This makes me curious, so I take a look. They are smiling and chatting loosely. Suddenly they burst out laughing. Today nobody took care of this group of people, no positive feedback, no extra breaks. There was not even a morning off. I go closer to listen.

They are an informal group of friends from different departments. They are laughing at the vegan one drinking cappuccino; a discussion about politics follows, and a rumour about ‘some Buddha’ that had visited the managers. I decide to leave them alone and end my story. I believe that through humor we share a common (mis)understanding of the human condition and existence. Through an unconscious experience of connectedness, our perceived boundaries dissolve subliminally in laughter. A community having fun is practicing Zen.

Notes

1

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2

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Relief theory, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theories_of_humor.

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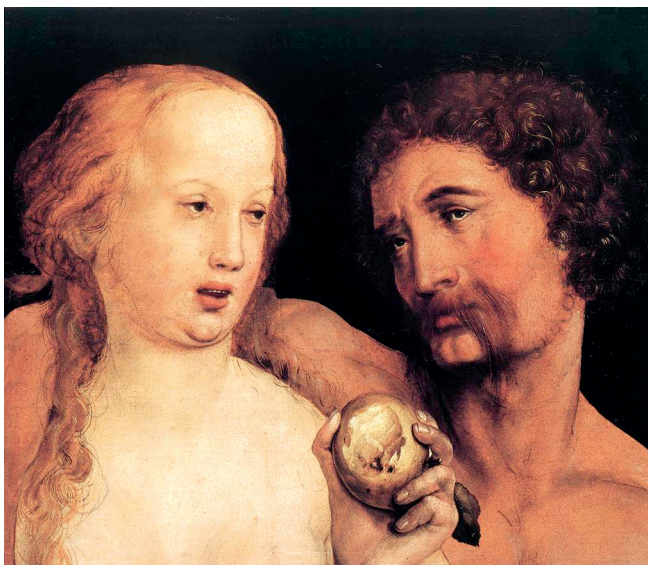
On deep ecology, see Naess, A. 1993. *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecology*, trans. David Rothenberg. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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Hans Holbein, 1517. Oil on panel, 35,7 x 30,2 cm, Germany

Baubo and me

Salomé Roodenburg

*Nature does not speak, it does not use language and it does not know
it is named nature. It does not see itself, it just is.*

– Suzanne Bernhardt

The quote above is taken from last year's Art in Context publication.¹ While I was flipping through the little yellow book, I imagined what this year's publication would look like and in particular my contribution to it, of which the form and context were still far from definite. Inspiration, Yes! This first line of one of the texts was applicable to my project and ideas. It was applicable to the list of subjects that I wanted to write about. I'd had this written down for a long time already. Several versions of this same list, jotted down when I thought: 'now it's time to start'. Now it's time to start. 'Nature does not speak, it does not use language and it does not know it is named nature. It does not see itself, it just is.'

Rather than elaborating on our distancing from nature by language, like Bernhardt does, I would like to talk about what came before that. Before we distanced ourselves from nature; before, when we were still in paradise. Because then we were still nature and not able to reflect upon ourselves, then we also 'just were'. And if we can say that we could not reflect upon ourselves, we might also conclude that we could not laugh. If we take a look at what Henri Bergson says in his *Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* we can see that for laughing we need self-reflection: '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... Several have defined man as 'an animal which 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.' So we are the animal that laughs, but also the animal that is being laughed at.

Enter Baubo? No. Enter shame. Enter a *character* on the stage. A play is being performed, but the *actor* forgets his lines. The 'uhm...uhm' that is uttered, stops the play short. The *character* that was on stage is all of a sudden replaced by the *actor*.

'A man laughs at a judge in a morning coat, and yet he would quake with dread at the mere sight of an attorney in his gown. F-form, all a matter of f-form.' (Henri Bergson)

The actor recomposes himself, and continues. But for a moment his own self was exposed, which caused unrest in the audience, and laughter. The actor is ashamed, but the audience as well: the person who cannot suppress a grin quickly glances around to check if anyone saw.

Shame and laughter go hand in hand. According to Michael Titz and Rolf Kuhn shame even is the 'negative modus' of laughter. As they describe in their article 'When Laughter causes Shame: The Path to Gelotophobia' this is because both shame and laughter overcome us. Even if you don't feel like it, or the situation calls for something really different, laughter and shame can overcome you mercilessly. 'It is as hard to control an outburst of shame as it is to stop a laughing fit'. But the difference of course, is that an outburst of shame will happen inside of you, covered up, it is an implosion. An outburst of laughter will be an explosion. You cannot hide it, it



happens on the outside. And added to that, 'shame reflects an emotional state of inferiority, whereas laughter is a powerful signal indicating feelings of superiority.' (quotes from Titzte and Kuhn)

So what happened during 'the Fall'? If we take the Fall to be the moment that we started to reflect upon ourselves, then as Adam and Eve took a bite from the forbidden fruit, there must have been an implosion of this feeling of defeat, of being less worthy, of shame. Were they afraid that they would be laughed at? Laughter they had never heard before. But it is what seems to be most plausible. Because if shame was introduced, probably its positive pole would have been generated too, at the same time, which would make sense since poles always go together. Yet, since shame and laughter go together, how about *shamelessness* and laughter?

Enter Baubo. Baubo has been fascinating me for quite a while now. Maybe because she is not ashamed. She has the laughter without the shame. Or at least she takes the risk. The risk of feeling ashamed but enjoying the laughter. Let me introduce her to you. According to mythology, Demeter, Goddess of the harvest, was in terrible grief when her daughter Persephone was abducted by Hades, God of the underworld... Nothing and no one could console her. Hiding in the city Eleusis, she sunk into inertia, and with her, the earth did too. In that age it was always summer, but now everything became dark and winter came for the first time, and it came to stay. Then Baubo, who showed up as a servant of the king, tried to cheer up Demeter, and unlike the others who had tried, she succeeded. Baubo's strategy proved to be an unusual one though. She lifted her skirt in front of Demeter, and this evoked uncontrollable laughter in Demeter's belly. This healthy session of laughing encouraged Demeter to go to Zeus and to demand that he talked to Hades. A compromise was made. Persephone was allowed back for half of the year, the other half she would spend in the underworld with Hades, that half year it would be winter on earth, the other it would be summer. What was under Baubo's skirt that was so funny and that could cheer up someone so sad? It was probably just her shamelessness that evoked the laughter.

If there is such a thing as Baubo-power it is a amiable thing to have.



Some people seem to have it, and everything they do or say is humorous, even if it is about very serious matters. They give you this constant feeling that something hilarious is about to happen. Usually there is one person out of ten with this quality, the rest is the type of people who are afraid to be the subject of laughter. Prepare, laugh along, try to not be ashamed. Also me, being one of the latter type of people, have taken the precaution in this text to reveal myself in advance, to start writing as the real me, not as a character, whose lines can be forgotten thus exposing the actor. Baubo is not afraid of being exposed, she acts enthusiastically.

In some versions of the myth, Baubo is called Iambe, and probably the Iambic metre (cadence of sound in poetry) derived from this name. The metre goes like this:

Short-Long Short-Long Short-Long (meaning short and long sounds).

Whether it is called the Iambic metre because its rhythm is similar to the rhythm of roaring laughter; or that of something more vulgar remains the question, but it is known that this metre was often used for erotic texts and songs.

Ha-Haa Ha-Haa Ha-Haa

Since this metre is about laughter and erotics, it is about life. These things reveal the very basic joy in life. During a laughing fit the body comes alive without the person being able to control it. This stands opposite to the ashamed person who tries to control every part of his or her body in an extreme way, which makes him look less alive. The back and shoulders become stiff, the face motionless, and the gestures of the hands are repetitious, in a machinelike manner. All of this is called 'the Pinocchio Syndrome', and the sad thing is that it can look very comical. While controlling all body parts, this person has the feeling of losing control over what is thought or projected on him. The fear of being 'objectivized' (for he feels that people can do whatever they want with him) makes him into a lifeless Pinocchio stumbling about. After stumbling out of Paradise, some people were put



up with more fear and shame than others. But consider this: without it we wouldn't have a good laugh every now and then. If I go on stage I will tremble with fear, but when I get off again I will hopefully at least feel very alive.

Notes

1

Art in Context 'PR', Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam 2014

References

'When Laughter Causes Shame', by Michael Titze and Rolf Kühn. Published in *Psychology of Shame* (ed. Lockhart): New Research, Hauppauge NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2014, page 2 and 4

An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, by Henri Bergson, published by The Macmillan Company in 1911, Page 11 and 32

Illustrations

Acrylic paint and paper, 20cm x 12cm





To rest and leisure

Rafael Romero

When I think of laughter, many stereotypes come to mind; the one I will address in this text concerns the painfulness of humour and irony. The laughter generated by contrasting points of view, different perspectives or challenging moralities, occasionally could be misunderstood or seen as mockery, but what actually addresses, often goes beyond only the offensive purpose.

Different moralities are conjugated by cultural backgrounds, and humour is something directly connected to a personal gaze. Cultural backgrounds are an important factor when one looks at social behaviours. In the field of tourism, for instance, different preferences are taken into account in order to identify and define a possible customer standard — it is a matter of desire and satisfaction. When the goal is to attract or captivate any profile from the diverse touristic demand, the analysis of the tourist stereotype becomes the main source for success. The aim to fulfil such demand entails a meticulous analysis that reveals valuable patterns. I could point out several stereotypes: the French are not very social because of their difficulties with speaking English which limits their interaction with tourists from other nationalities; the Germans all have attributes of thoroughness, quality services and are focused on empathy. These stereotypes are generalizations emerging from common traits of the members of a group; common behaviours giving shape to the image of the collective. Thus, stereotypes are mental structures able to draw a social profile, and these profiles are handy when one tries to captivate the willing victim.

Let's take a look at article 24 from the UDHR (Universal Declaration

of the Human Rights): ‘Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.’¹ This specific article can be seen as ironical in some countries and profitable in others. The Universal Declaration of the Human Rights is a general agreement founded in 1948, after the Second World War. This reaction to the catastrophe has still rather interesting points worthy to discuss. Focusing on this specific article and the irony of its manifestation, I would like to focus on one city in Thailand, Pattaya. Pattaya is a well-known tourist city for its sex industry and nightlife. Prostitution is apparently illegal but the law slides by it in a ‘promiscuous way’. The law defines prostitution as any act done to gratify the sexual desire of another in exchange for money or any other benefit, but only if it is done ‘in a promiscuous manner’.

Title IX, Section 286 of the Penal Code states:

Any person, being over sixteen years of age, [sic] subsists on the earning of a prostitute, even if it is some part of her incomes [sic], shall be punished with imprisonment of seven to twenty years and fined of fourteen thousand to forty-thousand Baht, or imprisonment for life.

Solicitation by a prostitute is prohibited under Section 5 of the Prostitution Act:

Sexual intercourse, or any other act, or the commission of any other act in order to gratify the sexual desire of another person in a promiscuous manner in return for money or any other benefit, irrespective of whether the person who accepts the act and the person who commits the act are of the same sex or not.

Section 9 of the Prostitution Act imposes penalties for human trafficking for purposes of prostitution:

Any person who, for the purpose of prostitution, solicits, induces, introduces herself or himself to, follows or importunes a person in a street, public place or in any other place in an open and shameless manner or causes nuisance to the public, shall be liable to a fine not exceeding one thousand Baht.²

Terms or expressions like ‘promiscuous manner’ and ‘in an open and shameless manner’ are not specified nor explained. That’s when one of the most questionable aspects of the UDHR comes to light:

If we look at tourist attractions like Pattaya or even much closer: to Amsterdam, the irony in the Article 24 of UDHR can be a trigger for mockery. According to statistics, Amsterdam tourism has been increasing through the last years due to the re-opening of museums, the coronation of the new King and other events. Thus, Amsterdam hosted in 2014 more than 11 million tourists. ‘The tourism sector includes the following industries: hospitality, culture and leisure (incl. museums, entertainment), passenger conveyance (incl. taxis), travel agencies, retail of souvenirs, etc. Tourism has an undeniable stimulating effect on the number of jobs in these industries, although they are not always the direct result of tourism. According to figures from TNO for 2012 the added value from the tourism sector in Amsterdam is €1.5 billion. The sector accounts for 10% of the total number of jobs.’³ On the other hand, a considerable percent of tourists landing in Amsterdam are undoubtedly attracted only to the nightlife sphere. The legalisation of soft drugs and its’ merchandising became the main attraction for foreigners. Although, the Dutch government announced in 2011 to restrict tourists and natives from buying the soft drugs by the end of the year as part of a nationwide program to promote health and minimise crime. This never came true. However, the social alarm generated in the sector, provoked an avalanche of new tourists.

North Holland is the top destination for foreign tourists, given the fact that most of the tourist attractions related to nightlife, are in Amsterdam. The majority of foreigners are visiting coffee shops and the red light district, the government displays a set of restrictions and advices to ashore a right performance. In November, 2014 two British nationals died in Amsterdam after sniffing white heroin that was sold to them as cocaine. A drug dealer (according to the Dutch police report) did not know about the content of this substance, had sold the white heroin in the streets of Amsterdam. 14 more tourists had fallen sick a few days afterwards, apparently after using the same drug. The news went quickly through the media. The alarm generated in the media was crucial to determine a fast and efficient campaign from the Dutch city council, to protect tourists from the white heroin sold in the streets. The city installed numerous displays of ‘matrix signs’ — led signs which flashed headlines saying: ‘last No-

vember 3 tourist died' or 'ignore street dealers' aiming to warn tourists about the risk of buying drugs in the streets. The city council also provided informative flyers, posters and drug tests to many touristic establishments — like smart shops and youth hostels — to inform about the danger of buying drugs from street dealers. On the flyers one can read: 'You will not be arrested for using drugs in Amsterdam,' The Public Prosecution Service even offered the reward of 15,000 euros for information leading to the perpetrator. The repercussion of the alarm became renowned worldwide:

You will not be arrested for using drugs: What a sane drug policy looks like

(The Washington Post website)

The Netherlands Just Did Something to Fight Its Drug Problem That the U.S. Would Never Do

(mic.com)

Amsterdam Warns Tourists White Heroin Being Sold as Cocaine

(The New York Times website)

Heroin test kits for tourists go on sale in Amsterdam after death of Britons who snorted drug they thought was cocaine.

(The Daily Mail website)

In early January 2015, the campaign was ended in phases. The emergency services, the hospitals, the Public Health Service and its Red Alert Team, the advisory body (Adviesbureau Drugs) and the narcotics research and information centre (Jellinek) continued monitoring the situation. The police remained alert and continued actively to seek the suspected street dealer. In addition, it was agreed to reinstate the campaign in the case of new incidents with white heroin. On the 25th of February, three Danish tourists were hospitalised for the same reason and afterwards released for further treatment, and the scary campaign was launched again:

Killer cocaine Back in Amsterdam — Danish tourists unwell

(www.simplyamsterdam.nl)



Amsterdam Pub Crawl, 2014. Nightclub tour

On the 4th of April a man turned himself to the police alleging to be 'the killer dealer'. According to De Telegraaf, the Dutch daily newspaper, the 42-year-old man decided to surrender to the police after seeing images on television, apparently of himself. His lawyer declared: 'He did not know that it was white heroin'. He also added; that his client 'had the shock of his life'. At the moment, he is only accused of selling drugs to the Danish tourists, police has no proof and didn't press charges for the previous cases.

Dutch magistrate gives police two weeks to question drug dealer over deaths.

(The Guardian website)

A few days later, on the 9th of April, GGD Drugs-alert has reported on its website the end of the awareness campaign in the city of Amsterdam. The reasons to terminate the campaign according to GGD Drugs-alert are: 'The immediate reason for this decision is the arrest last Saturday of a suspect who may be linked to selling white heroin to three Danish tourists in February 2015. This arrest is not a guarantee there will be no new incidents, but according to the police the risk has decreased. A second reason for the decision is that, over the past six weeks, no new incidents have occurred and there have been no reports of white heroin for sale. The third and final argument is that a warning campaign by definition is temporary and should be used sparingly. Such alarm does not help to tourism sector.'

As part of this article, I will include a series of short comments from tourists of different nationalities. I ask them about the warning campaign in the streets and its repercussion. The interviews were made in a youth hostel visited daily by nationalities such as Canadian, American, Australian or English.

Steve 34-years-old, Canada:

'Quite shocking and attractive in some way. I heard about it in Prague before coming here. I didn't see it too crazy [...] to me Europe is already crazy enough [...]

Craig 22-years-old, England:

‘It was scary to see, especially when it’s the first thing you see when you walk out of the airport [...] we thought that we came the wrong day [...] this would never happen in England, it will be way too loud for England [...] they will never do it like that [...].’

Clare 27-years-old, United States:

‘Honestly, at first I thought it was in the airport [...] When I got to know what actually happened in Amsterdam last month, I saw it really responsible and efficient! [...] definitely, they wouldn’t do it in the U.S.A.’

George 26-years-old, Australia:

‘It was alarming for sure! [...] I think it’s good to prevent [...] people will come to get on drugs anyway [...] in Australia they will never do it, they will reinforce the drugs laws for people.’

The alarm generated in Amsterdam during the last months has echoed around the world, creating a dread among tourists coming to the city. At the same time, the generous warning campaign has fulfilled its purpose using its media presence. A dread and a campaign that are both ironically using headlines, have reached their goals.

Notes

1

UDHR www.un.org

2

IMPOWR, International models project on women’s rights
www.impowr.org/content/current-legal-framework-prostitution-thailand

3

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www.os.amsterdam.nl/assets/pdfs/2014_factsheet_tourism.pdf

LAUGHTER



A massive cement playground

Noé Cottencin

*Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created
a massive cement playground of unlimited potential.*

But it was the mind of 11 year olds that could see that potential.

– C.R. Stecyk¹

In principle, the working world is the one which appears the most distant from the amusement, it would even be talking about two completely opposite things. When you are working, it is pretty clear that you are not there to have fun. Besides, it is rather advised to work as efficiently as possible, so to get the time to rest afterward. Resting and leisure time are allowed by the working time, and unfortunately you cannot just have a whale of a time every day.

In his book entitled *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois gives this definition: ‘Games are innumerable and of multiple species: board games, games of skill, games of chance, outdoor games, games of patience, of construction, etc. Despite this almost infinite diversity, the word game calls for the same ideas of easiness, risk or ability. Moreover, it inevitably brings an atmosphere of rest and amusement. It relaxes and amuses. It evokes an activity without constrain, but also without any restriction for the real life. It opposes itself to the seriousness of this latest and therefore finds itself qualified of frivolous. On another hand it opposes itself to the work, as wasted time is opposed to time well spent. Indeed, playing doesn’t produce anything: Neither goods nor works. It is essentially sterile. At each new game, and would they be playing all their life, the players find themselves back at the zero point and in the same conditions as in the first beginning.’²

The confrontation of the play and of the work asks a major question: How to play in the city? This environment of concrete, tall constructions, trees planted geometrically one after each other, people walking, cars passing, traffic lights at which one has to wait... How to answer by amusement and inventively to such a dull environment?



The members of the Situationist International answer with: ‘Never work.’³ Municipality, obviously with a different approach, nonetheless asks itself the question, and answers it by designing ‘playgrounds’. Places, or should we say surfaces, especially reserved to play. In other words, any other kind of place outside this reserved surface is not to be seen as an invitation to play. Parks, in a more open way, are also part of these reserved surfaces, where it is possible and allowed to play in a safe way inside the city. But to play in the street abruptly makes a conflict appear: which is that the city, from all the places, is the one the least adapted to play, at the difference of the seaside or the countryside for instance. The city is the place where those who work, live. And, as Raphaël Zarka says very precisely in his book entitled *The Forbidden Conjunction*: ‘to play in the world of those who work, is to expose oneself to judgments of the type: They have fun while we are working.’ (p.16)⁴

As Zarka writes: ‘The spaces of the play are, classically, separated from the spaces of life. Only children play in the space of life itself. They transform it fictively or detour it through the invention of arbitrary rules. For the adult, the gap between the world of the play

and the one of life is real. The life of the responsible adult is a following of events which one has to either face or avoid, whether it is pleasant or not. The play is the kingdom of the free arbitrary by excellence. For the play to remain play, one must be able to choose at any moment between playing and not playing.' (p.15)



Of all the activities called under the name of 'leisure time', only one is specifically proper to the city: skateboarding. Through its practice, skateboarding is an answer to the question 'how to play in the city?' Skateboard practice begins as soon as you come out of your house. It couldn't be shown in a better way than in the video *Wheels of Fire*⁵, in which the door barely closed yet, Natas Kaupas is already riding above his outside staircase. If skateboarding directly comes from surfing, which Gilles Deleuze describes as 'living in the folding of the wave'⁶, then the difference is that one is exploring surfaces created by nature, while the other surfaces created by men. And precisely this consists in the city. Therefore skateboarding, although still marginalized, is the only practice depending and entirely coming from the city.

On a pile of sand left by the machines and the workers at the end of the day, stands a sculpture made out of bricks in the shape of an A, as the first letter of an alphabet to come, designed by materials left aside. Noé Cottencin, 2015.

As Stacy Peralta says it so well, the city is made of a constant chaos: cars and people, the rumble of the street... But suddenly skateboarding allows us to 'reevaluate surfaces and materials ordinarily left as such.' (p.7) The practice of skateboard 'galvanizes and destabilizes shapes and objects designed for rest or comfort (benches, staircases, handrails...)' (p.13).

Ordinarily, whether it's a sidewalk or a sculpture in the public space, the elements shaping the urban environment are answering practical reasons and are therefore used in such way. For example, we look at a traffic light in order to know when to wait and when to cross. Not to ponder on the nuance of color. This being said, perhaps a passerby will be more attracted towards a sculpture installed in the public space rather than towards the sidewalk. A sculpture, more than other elements constituting the city, responds to some sort of aesthetic and dynamic factors. Therefore it is in general, regarded differently, or not regarded at all. But for the skater everything is considered in the perspective of the movement, suggested by the shape. Hence the remark of Craig Stecyk: 'Was there ever a skatepark designed that was as good as an average sewer or a curb?'⁷ Definitely, nothing replaces a good water pipe.

With skateboarding, energy circulates through shapes, exactly in the way the energy dome does it, as the members of Devo wear it on their head.⁸ Energy and dynamic passes through shapes and are bounced back to the body. Skateboarding approaches curves and surfaces in terms of movement and transfer. It's an exchange of forces synthesized to perfection in the half pipe. Therefore, when the municipality designs the terrains reserved for skating, it's often catastrophic. This is how George Powell describes skateparks, as it was in the early 1980's: 'The physics were wrong, the curves were wrong, distances were wrong.'⁹ The definitive playground for skateboarding is the city. And if skateboarding disposes of this alternative vision towards the modern environment, can any other activity get inspired by this way of looking at things? In terms of sculpture, and temporary sculpture in particular, if we look at the city as a giant playground, a place in demand of response to material and activity as skateboarding does, the possibilities are endless.

The city is a place of transformations. For constructed spaces of the public environment, there is nothing to wait for to enjoy. All their rules and restrictions only beg for an infinite set of new rules to be provided by the different users, to condition the approach. Furthermore, places under construction, precisely construction sites, offer a range of raw materials waiting to be used and put together. It is not rare that skaters conceive their playground themselves. While using the elements which constitute the city, they assemble materials in order to extract from them an activity, a function specific to them. For instance, a simple plank of plywood put leaning against a wall and there you go (hopefully) into a 'wall ride'. That's when language comes in. Through the action that is given to objects and materials, skateboarding redefines the elements of the city and names them in relation to the activity they propose. Everything is there: a handrail, a curb, the roots of a tree lifting the sidewalk are used as a springboard, a staircase is a long jump challenge, a wall is a vertical challenge. Everything is there and asks to be used in all possible ways.

To conclude, the city is like the mountain depicted in the first film by Jean-Luc Godard, *Opération Béton* ('Concrete Operation').¹⁰ This pile of earth on which we pour tons and tons of concrete. Once everything is put into shape, a city is an established platform resembling a sort of moving sculpture, suggesting not only a movement, but a dynamic, a transfer, a calculation. Like this work from Pol Bury that art historian Bob Claessens shall present to us: 'I am showing you first a series of eleven little wooden spheres, on four inclined planes. Look closely. Do you see them moving?' We are the little spheres.

And as I made notice of it once again by stepping on my skateboard recently, metal is far too slippery and cities are not made out of wood. Therefore concrete is the only friend left for the skateboarder and their meetings take place in the streets. Now we will end this short essay on this note with Stacy Peralta: 'You know the place to skateboard is in a skateboard park, and hum, not the streets. It's in a safe place.'



A massive cement playground

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In the background, a little head appears in the square window, glancing down on this former water pump. Seen from the outside, the building resembles a construction made by Gerrit Rietveld. Whereas on the inside, tubes, monitors, control panel, valves and cylinders are scattered across, going in all directions. Ideal place for any kind of explorer of shapes.

Notes

1

Craig R. Stecyk, 'Aspects of the downhill slide', *Skateboarder Magazine*, vol.2, n°2, 1975

2

Roger Cailliois, original title: *Les Jeux et les Hommes, le masque et le vertige*, coll. 'Folio essais', n°184, Paris, Gallimard, 1958

3

Guy Debord, 'Programme préalable au mouvement situationniste', *Revue Internationale Situationniste*, 1953

4

Raphaël Zarka, original title: *La Conjonction Interdite*. All the page numbers between brackets refer to the book: *La Conjonction Interdite*, Éditions B42 & Raphaël Zarka, Paris, 2011

5

Wheels of Fire, Santa Cruz, 1987

6

L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze, with Claire Parnet, produced by Pierre-André Boutang and directed by Michel Pamart, 1988

7

Stacy Peralta, *Bones Brigade: An Autobiography*, 2012

8

Devo is a band formed in 1972 by Mark Mothersbaugh, Gerald Casale, Bob Lewis and Alan Myers

9

Same as 7

10

Jean-Luc Godard, *Operation Béton*, 1954



Language and forms on a Kazimir Malevich catalogue.
Noé Cottencin & Annelotte Lammertse, 2015.

LAUGHTER



Laughter in art

Nora Papp

Laughter is a physical reaction of the body in response to an action, or to a subject. But what exactly happens with our mind before we start to laugh? What is the logic of laughter? How does this logic operate in terms of art? How do we identify laughter in art vis-à-vis the corporate world?

Laughter is a physical and emotional reaction of the body upon experience. Such experience can consist of another experience, a perceived reality, an emotion or other content. So the laughter of our body refers to an identification with our surroundings or environment. Since laughter reflects the way we perceive our environment, it also includes our social sense. Or as Simon Critchley sees it: 'However, the thesis that I would like to pursue is that humor is a form of *sensus communis*, common sense. That is, jokes are the expression of sociality and possess an implicit reasonableness. I will give the grounds for this claim presently, but the essential point here is that humor is shared.'¹ In analogy to this, it appears that art is also primarily a shared context. How does this shared context function in relation to a corporate world? Identification with the arts also happens in the context of the corporate world. More specifically, an identification (of the contemporary corporation) with the arts will do the following:

- a) Improve the image of the company by making your public more aware of what you are doing in the community
- b) Assist in developing a more fully rounded personality for your corporation by adding a cultural dimension
- c) Provide a bold, unique and exciting element in the presentation of your products and services

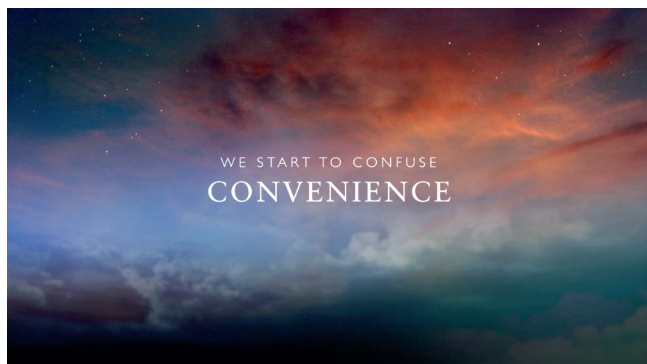
d) Promote greater public acceptance of your corporation and its products and services by making yourself more attractive and visible in the marketplace. (Seth Siegelau, 1967)²

The above assumes already some facts of how art can be related to the corporate world. Can we use art in the same way as design is used, as part of a corporate product? Take Apple for example: who uses its objects, which on the marketplace are called 'products'? Their products capture an inner personality through their identification as being Apple. The company creates a product with a certain design. The design of the object, as expressed through its visual language, should give us an ideal experience, that wants to achieve individual identification. But the visual appearance is so limited that there is almost nothing to experience. In fact the only real experience is the use of the item's technology.

How does art connect people in society, being part of human culture and reality? If the conception of art could be described as a question (like for example science is conceived to contain answers), then the character of art could be described as part of our dialogue within a social context. Art's content involves society, ethics, and dialogue. Art reflects how we perceive and think. Its statements declare their content as being a shared context among a community of spectators in society. But art's questioning provides also a mirror for the experiences of how we perceive our surroundings. Laughter in art is mostly formed through irony — an irony which expresses ambiguous reality.

We can express laughter through art, not as a utility but as a form of expression, in the use of irony. In art, laughter is expressed through irony rather than through humor. Of course art is full of humor but it functions as irony. Within art, irony breaks deliberately with existing conditions. For example artists in the Fluxus movement reflect on the absurdity of life, not as a state of mind but more like a celebration of being alive. Danish artist Asger Jorn explores philosophically how form and image in art are juxtaposed. He describes how

This is it, text source Apple Inc.
What matters, text source Apple Inc.
Convenience, text source Apple Inc.



an artist creates a certain experience, yet in content or form the experience can face an oppositional value. He questions artistic reality. 'What an artwork represents is quite insignificant. What the artist believes it represents is also insignificant. The effect the artist wanted to achieve is in itself without interest. What the observer believes he sees in the artwork is in itself insignificant. The effect he believes it has had on him is insignificant. The only thing that means something is the objective and real effect that the art has exercised on the observer. That is the artistic reality.'³ What in fact is reality after all? The state of things as they really exist? A thing that exists in facts? This statement, of what artistic reality is about, is quite ironic, isn't it?

Maybe Asger Jorn wants his readers to believe that artistic reality should be considered a state of mind, since an artist is also concerned with her or his own state of mind. In order to know what kind of relation an artist has with society, the artist questions herself or himself constantly about what is reality. And sometimes things that we see and understand in life are not matching, but are still coexisting with each other. Thus an artist is juxtaposing them, in order to show the threshold range towards those elements that we see and understand, but which don't match. Trying to find a certain form to this mismatch. The choices of form and material by the artist make us laugh or bring us laughter. Such choices don't need to be beautiful or aesthetically attractive, or useful to the perceiver. Their values should just give a reference towards reality.

Reflecting on the logic of laughter in art it appears that art and laughter share many common values. Both laughter and art are human reactions, both are set up in our mind, both reflect on the way that we construct our world view, so both connect us to society, both reflect a temporary state of mind. For an artist it is about questioning reality. To quote Simon Critchley again: 'Such laughter insists that life is not something to be affirmed ecstatically, but acknowledged comically.'⁴

Notes

1

Simon Critchley, *On Humour*; Thinking in Action, Routledge USA, p.79

2

Quoted in Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, MIT Press, Boston, MA/London 2003, p.14

3

Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn; The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up*, Ashgate.com; ISBN 978-1-4094-3197-8; p.201

4

Simon Critchley, *On Humour*; Thinking in Action, Routledge USA, p.106

LAUGHTER



Talking about twists, is there anything more twisted than today's world?

Antrianna Moutoula

I am afraid of terrorism.

I am afraid of flying.

I am afraid of meeting strangers.

I am afraid of the dark.

I am afraid of the economical crisis.

I am afraid of the future and I am afraid of all these things because somebody keeps reminding me everyday what a dangerous place the world is. That's why I have some questions, if you'll excuse me.

I would like to know when being polite went out of fashion.

I would like to know when policemen stopped protecting the citizens. I would like to know when pilots started forcing planes to crash. I would like to know when entertainment became a battlefield, and most of all I would like to know when real life tragedy became porn. Porn has a certain spiciness, it's something some reveal they enjoy it only to themselves. It has something mystic and something forbidden which probably comes from the fact that it is not politically correct, when in the same time it is part of a politically correct system.

How could it be otherwise, porn is such a huge business, and now that the word business came up I have one more question; when did tragedy become business? I mean, tragedy happens. Pilots do force planes to crash, policemen do harm citizens, airplanes do fall, children do commit suicide because they were being bullied, bombs do explode next to innocent people, relatives do kill each other, and pointless wars do happen. We know that, we hear it, we

protest about it, we get sad for it. In the end we accept it. I would just like to know when all these became entertainment? Why is it necessary to know all the details about the moment the second pilot screamed to the co-pilot who was forcing the plane to crash, why do we have to feel his desperate hands hitting the locked door? Why do we have to hear the scream of the mother when she realised her young boy committed suicide? In a few words: why did we start confusing reality with entertaining (for some, not for me) suspense movies?

Being on Facebook I got trapped in this game many times. Let's read this article that is supposed to have the most inclusive details about the pilot's family past.

Or WAIT! WAIT! lets read the other one revealing how many young people visiting their family died in this plane crash. Or the other one about how the recent break up of the co-pilot connects with his depression, or how he spent the night before going to the airport.

Did he write a letter?

Didn't he?

Oh wait!, did he write anything on Facebook that revealed what was going to happen.

Now I am getting curious, did the pilot have a Facebook account?

Let me search, oh shit what was his name.

Easy, I'll scroll down 5 seconds and I'll find a relevant post.

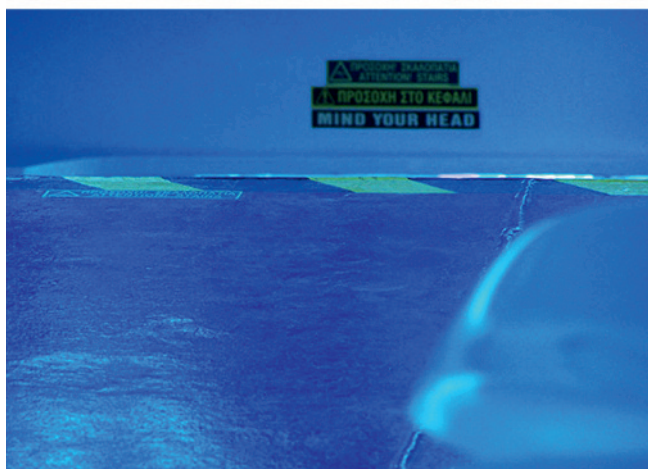
On the way I met another interesting article: **BREAKING NEWS!**

GREECE OUT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN TWO DAYS.

RUN TO THE BANK AND GET ALL YOUR MONEY.

But anyway that's in two days so it can wait.

So oh yes, here is another article about the airplane. Oh, by the way, did you hear the co-pilot had a psychological test some months ago and everything seemed to be fine, then hhhhhhhhhh what happened in these two months? I'm getting pretty sure it was his ex-girlfriends' fault, shit how can I find her on Facebook? And strangely the closer by the tragedy happened, the more details will be forced in front of your eyes. And of course at least the first time,



or shall I pour some tragedy on it?
HEAD YOUR MIND

your ‘curiosity’ (or any psycho-sadistic-I don’t know what feelings) will let you watch them.

In the beginning your eyes are naked, you go to the platform, you and your open brain and by pressing ‘enter’ you press the ‘turn on’ button of a huge vacuum cleaner waiting in your head to inhale everything that will appear on its way. And some (too smart — or too greedy) felt, early, this vibe of society and grabbed the chance to be the ones offering the dirt around for our hungry, unstoppable vacuum cleaners.

In the end that’s what makes for good business, right?

Some people, feeling at the right moment what the rest of us are hungry for, and offering it to us as fast as possible and as delicious-looking as possible. Well, this business is served good. You just go on Facebook, where you know, normally, you would see your friends’ photos of what-they-did-last night-not so interesting-but anyway-everything can seem interesting when you are drinking your coffee still half sleeping but NOW (it’s been happening for quite some time but let’s call it ‘now’) there is something new to see. Now you can feel the pleasure of being informed, and not just about something, but for the hottest tragedies in the world.

It starts with one click and then you are driven into the world of tragedy, you try to know everything (I mean everything that will make you feel a bit terrorized, a bit sad but in the end a bit happy, because you know, you are still safe and let’s not forget: ‘European’) you feel almost like you were part of it, like the tragedy happened to you. It affects your mood and your energy, you know what your friends think about it (and if their opinions are against yours, maybe they end up not being your friends anymore). After hours, days, weeks (well the duration part is based on geography, the closer to Europe the tragedy happened, the longer the conversation is going to last, the more scary and terrorising details you’re going to get). Anyway, so after hours, days, and weeks, you feel ready enough and fed up enough, to express your well informed opinion in an article-like post on Facebook in order to join your friends article-like posts and

all together to form the most multi-sided, open, free newspaper (well, is it really? I wouldn't say so) and of course this newspaper has to be quite dramatic (I know of course it is about a tragedy but let's admit it, it seems like we tried a little bit to make it quite catchy and quite hot in order to attract somebody else's hungry vacuum cleaner.

And let's not forget the extra gift.

After you press 'post' if you are lucky enough to have many friends dealing with the same tragedy, and of course ready enough to express their own well informed opinions, soon on your page a huge, really intense discussion will be formed. It will pass from many stages, some of your friends who you have seen sometimes in your life will address you personally, something like:

– Good morning Bob, I think what you wrote about the co-pilot planning to crash the plane, for a long time is not right, I read an article saying that it was a decision he made when he entered the airplane, and he was not sure until the last second.

And then you can reply defending your information but then another virtual friend is going to come up saying:

– Hey guys isn't it a bit unfair to talk so much about this plane and not for the other ten cases that happened outside Europe?

And it depends a little bit on your mood but probably this discussion will end up in a fight of constant insults from all sides saying:

– You asshole, how uneducated and stupid you must be, you didn't even read my whole comment, just get the fuck out of this conversation and go yell in the street.

And if it is a sunny day probably it will go kind of like:

– Hey please let's relax, isn't it too bad to fight like animals because of such a tragedy? Please, let's respect the lives that were lost and appreciate ours. Have a nice day :)

So that's how the mission finished, you got informed, you made sure others are informed, you all discussed your opinions and now you can live happily ever after (and of course scared and terrorized ever after, because who knows how close to you, the next tragedy is going to be?).

By the way, some days ago I searched the word 'ENTERTAINMENT' on Wikipedia. Please do it as well and check the two first pictures that appear in the article.

Did you?

Oh wait didn't you?

Please please, do.

Funny right?

Though I still don't get why.

P.S.

Trying to be sarcastic about something that is purely tragic makes you (or at least me) feel uncomfortably inhumane, and a bit cruel. But, you know, I am trying to find my way out of this newspaper.

Or wait, WAIT, WAIT...

Shall I post this on Facebook?



my fridge, violent enough?

About the contributors

Ellen Bertrams
Curator of the ING Collection

Sanne ten Brink
Head Curator of the ING Collection

Ida Brottmann Hansen

Art is a way of learning and asking questions. It is a language used to communicate issues that for me is best told through art. I use the media that best communicate the story that I want to tell. Language, movements and sound play a big role in the finalizing of my work.

Hilde de Bruijn
Curator Cobra Museum of Modern Art

Noé Cottencin

I like skateboard since Rodney Mullen until Robert Morris. Flowers since Mien Ruys. Photography according to Peter Parker. Jean-Luc Godard according to X and Y. Deerhoof for the disorder.

Roman Ermolaev

The subjects I am interested in, reside in the realm of; limitations, masochism, cynicism, humour, and the power dynamics in groups and couples. I want to transmute my writings into moving images and further analyze the borders in between spectatorship and artistry.

Ildikó Horváth

Living in society, most of the times we take notions that have been created already for granted. I am interested in how one can understand and re-think these notions in a way that has a practical influence on everyday life itself. In general, I aim to turn the diverse media I use against themselves. Though I have an attraction to sound and ceramics, these do not dominate my practice.

Saša Karalić

Head of Art in Context

Jouke Kleerebezem

Art in Context tutor

Annelotte Lammertse

I mostly work with painting and drawing and I like to photograph. The use of language plays a big role in most of my works and interests.

Linnea Langfjord Kristensen

Time, space, people, language, nonsense. Audio recordings, sound, performance, video, text, sculpture.

Antrianna Moutoula

I am interested in performance as being the director but also the participant, in writing text or collecting text as a performative medium, in realizing experiments involving different groups of people mostly by giving them simple instructions, in documenting or not documenting or how to document live acts and mostly in how all these can be combined.

Nora Papp

I am born in Zürich, Switzerland and study at the Rietveld since 2013. I am interested in everything and use everything to express that interest.

Aurélien Potier

Born in France in 1992, currently living in Amsterdam. Background in graphic design. Working mainly with installations mixing sculptural and painted elements. Interest in notions as values, surrounding, existence, matter.

Rafael Romero

A practice based on the skinny line between us and I, from a personal gaze to an open window showing somebody's life experience. Including humor, cliches and cheesiness as a tool for the embodied purpose.

Salomé Roodenburg

Currently student at the Rietveld Academie, working with various media, but very rarely with performance.

Martina Turini

I am a 24 year old student of jewellery. I am interested in researching technical possibilities for materials as a way to think about value and perception. I therefore like to work mainly three-dimensional but also use photography and videos. I am interested in anthropology, mythology, history, literature and try to combine these interests in my practice.

Katja Weitering

Director Cobra Museum of Modern Art

Alexandros Zakkas

I am interested in patterns of interaction and codes of behaviour that appear in daily experiences. I use any media unstable enough to capture and communicate my observations.































