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Article: The significance of authorial play spaces for seriously funny art.

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Introduction

I began this piece during troubling circumstances – both personal and global – in 2020. These issues remain un-funny but during this ongoing, strange era, I have heard countless times of the importance of the arts and entertainment. It is with this that I have revisited some of my research through a different lens, re-evaluating the agency of comedy in art practice, specifically concentrating on artists that challenge patriarchal and capitalist systems of the Euro-American artworld and its discourse.

The humanities cannot make a vaccine or advise us on social distancing, nor cure my medical condition or stop a war, but they can help distract, entertain, and highlight political matters. One means of doing this is via comedy. Laughing is fun, it is cathartic, it is disarming. Art that contains humour or which makes us laugh is charged with the same agency. The latest redesign of *frieze* was launched with a statement by Andrew Durbin (2020), its new editor at the time, claiming:

Humour, like great art and a great magazine, has the power to connect you with the world, whether you are stuck at home or far from it. Art and comedy produce a profound sense of recognition: that we are almost never really alone, even in our hardship.

I also took for granted a certain power in humour when I first researched artists that subverted typical notions of authorship. When I looked at the trajectory of artists working under pseudonyms, collectives, anonymously or, in some cases, all three guises, each worked with different strategies of humour as part of their jibes against the patriarchal art system so invested in the singular genius (McCartney, 2018). This was a

tactic, medium or genre of their practice that I enjoyed observing but almost as an aside. Here, I want to pick up on the potential of humour in their work to advocate for change and the agency of authorship in seriously funny art.

Laughter has been analysed in social anthropology, philosophy and psychology but less so through the discipline of art (Klein, 2007: 2 & 130; Lionis, 2021: 606, Morreal, 1983: 89), where I believe it has previously been taken for granted as part of the artists' powerful tool kit. For example, Sheri Klein claims that "Through humour, the artist is able to accomplish the three Es: enlighten, elevate and educate" and "Art that is entertaining through its abilities to incite laughter enables us to be kept in the midst of the most current and pressing issues facing us on the planet." (2007, 13:128). But so often humour can fall 'flat' and comedy, like art, is subjective. Therefore, I'd like to posit that humour, in itself, is not sufficient to make a work powerful and, moreover, shouldn't be used as a superficial comparable facet of artworks as part of a genre. I am not the first to observe that intersections of art and comedy deserve more academic attention. Lionis, a contemporary scholar working prolifically to fill this gap, also makes a call for "more nuanced and complex engagement with humour in contemporary art." (Lionis, 2021, 616). She argues that 'political aesthetics' work differently to other cultural forms of output and that there is a particular agency to humour employed by contemporary artists as a tool of cultural resilience (Lionis, 2021). Some curators have attempted to collate 'funny' works of art but, in its relative infancy of understanding, this still seems a rather tenuous survey for a methodology of artmaking and risks undermining the specifics of each work's humorous-operandi or varied politics.¹

Instead, I believe that for ‘funny’ artworks to contain a sense of agency they first need to create a kind of play space in which the viewer of the work can enter more freely and experience them as uninhibited as possible. John Morreall touches upon this in his 2020 article, ‘An Ethics of Humour’, when he notes humour as “playful relaxation” through Aristotle (1949, cited in Morreall 2020: 637).

Morreall discusses the historical resistance to comedy but also the virtues of it: “Psychologists have shown that a good sense of humour is correlated with intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness, tolerance for diversity, resilience, critical thinking, and creative thinking.” (Rod Martin, 2007, cited in Morreall 2020: 646). But one is more likely to laugh when they are relaxed and comfortable or taken by surprise. “The artist and the humourist, if they are doing their job well, will surprise us” (Morreall, 1983:91). While it is difficult to assess a job ‘well done’ in art, political or activist art, as considered here, will, according to Morreall, be more convincing or challenging, if it surprises us. This form of surprise takes us out of our current mind set. The artist who is therefore able to take the viewer out of their usual habitus, to generate a space in which the audience can react more freely or involuntarily to their work might therefore be more ‘successful’ in conveying their intentions.

A play space has more potential to make someone laugh and reconsider a perspective they might not have otherwise. A play space also has the potential to shift or subvert the repressive, ‘seriousness’ of the artworld (that is often not conducive to comedic artworks), which one so often enters in order to engage with art. This ‘serious’ space might be a mind-set or physical, it might be something or somewhere one enters that has been constructed for them, like a museum, or a habitus, socially constructed

and engrained through one's education, a perceived or presented cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1981). "James Elkins in *Pictures and Tears* (2001), discusses how we have been socialised through education and training to be unemotional about art and rely on 'experts' about art to tell us what art means." (Elkins cited in Klein, 2007:27). Chrisoula Lions also observes that contemporary art, of the last few decades, has focussed on aspects of identity politics, authenticity, and that "crisis and precarity has been compounded by the globalisation of the artworld", (Lionis, 2021: 617). Thus, much of contemporary art's content is not a laughing matter.

In a play space, "The tension often associated with serious criticism is thus reduced and the person is more likely to consider the reasonableness of the complaint." (Morreall, 1983: 116). While Morreall offers this in support of the 'jocular gripe' one might have with a friend, asserting the effective role of humour, it serves to set out the landscape needed for change to occur. When the art is not a friend, and the complaint might be a form of activism, artworld criticisms are better received when made jocular and on more familial terms with its viewer. One way to induce this is with a play space, but how can the artist create or sustain one?

I did not previously understand the significance of the relationship between authorship and humour but I've since learned that the authorial dissidence employed some artists help generates a play space and thus a more 'successful' form of comedic practice; one that contains a sense of agency and which disrupts a viewer's preconceptions. When one cannot so neatly conceptualise, historicise or 'know' the artist, one is forced into a new space that invites imagination, less reverence and more active engagement with the art – all forms of play. There might be other ways to create

a play space but, using incongruous forms of authorship – pseudonyms, collectivity and anonymity – are tactics that I have identified as doing so which are analysed here to compliment funny but political art.

Methodology and Terminology

I will demonstrate this through a series of artistic case studies, from the early 20thC onwards, who use humour to shift attitudes or challenge the “art system so beloved of the star system” (Reckitt, 2012:12). These include the practices of Euro-American artists Duchamp and Man Ray, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, the Guerrilla Girls, Bob and Roberta Smith and Monster Chetwynd. The British artist Monster Chetwynd’s performances, for example, are so chaotic and irreverent, even using a puppet carrot to represent the ‘great’ artist Giotto, that they are hard to document or define, challenging the financial infrastructures and canon of the capitalist artworld. It is also absurd that she has taken on three different names during her art career, thus far, in a system so obsessed with attribution and the signature. Authorial dissidence is what narrows down the selection of case studies. That they use satire, puns and sarcasm is a bonus to the comparison, but not the starting point. For, as I will demonstrate, humour is not sufficient *enough* to draw more nuanced or deeper political connections across artworks.

Taking up a dissident position within the commercial artworld, however, has its costs. The artists discussed here often (deliberately) lose the value of a single ‘signature’ and museums sometimes do not know how to frame such practices. London-based Bob and Roberta Smith, for example, often recycles their own sign paintings

multiple times, generating new works, but which can't be sold. That they are one man using a duo-pseudonym for their practice is also confusing. Therefore, these artists might also not be exhibited or discussed in academia as much as other more 'identifiable' artists, which equates to less sales/commissions/income.

The artists themselves, then, I posit, take up the position of artworld 'jesters'; liminal positions that mean they straddle both the inside and out of artworld infrastructures. This special, liminal position is what allows the artists to poke fun at the 'court'. "Certainly, temporary clown/artists draw upon moral, social, political and aesthetic issues, and in doing so, they embrace the role of rebel." (Klein, 2007: 129). The Guerrilla Girls, for example, use their anonymity and pseudonymous guises to jibe the artworld, creating satirical posters, while using puns – not least in their collective 'rebel' name – which highlight sexism. However, while jesting gives them a certain level of objectivity as outsiders, it simultaneously means they might sometimes be preaching to the converted insiders, something to be considered when praising the inherent role of comedy.

This research is written from the perspective of being a practitioner and as someone who went to art school, some years ago, which is when I first encountered these artists and their works, as a fan. That each of the case studies represents a protest to the subjective, unfair and hegemonic artworld system is exciting to me. I also approach this research as a feminist art historian and as someone teaching in the discipline of Cultural Studies; many of the works have an investment in dismantling power structures. It is through my personal politics and pedagogy that the works are analysed, but with a new perspective of comedy studies. In applying this additional layer

to theories of authorship and art history, as part of a case-study approach, this work aims to contribute to ‘the need for a more refined framework for understanding the role of humour in contemporary art.’ (Lionis, 2021: 606).

Throughout, I will use the terms humour, comedy and laughter interchangeably. Klein asserts that there are five forms of humour employed in the visual arts: parody, pun, paradox, satire and irony (2007). I do not wish to counter this or to debate the difference but to assert that there will also be many overlaps. The discipline of comedy studies might offer more insight into how ‘humour’ can be better broken down or divided by such terms, and there are varying degrees of research into the wealth of wider visual culture and comedy. Comic strips or satirical prints, for example, have a deeper independent scholarship to contemporary art and laughter. Here, I would like to take an inter-disciplinary approach, and to view the different ‘forms’ of humour, art practices and their results – laughter, smirks, smiles, empathy and more – as attempted comedy and comedic or humour and funny. As Lionis too has observed, “there is a distinct benefit in applying the term “humour” as a ‘catch-all’ to describe content registered as ‘funny’. Doing so allows for a greater emphasis on what humour says or does, rather than ‘how’ it works.” (Lionis, 2021, 615).

I am employing theories of laughter to support the argument that funny art can be serious and ought to be taken more seriously, but also using theories of authorship and art history to demonstrate that ‘funny’ art needs a play space. John Morreal asserts that art and laughter have ‘play’ in common (1983: 89). The examples here show that authorship fosters a play space that supports both phenomena.

Art & Laughter

Jokes are subjective and 'of their time'. What one might have found funny in the 19th-century may now be considered outdated or rude; what one culture laughs at, another may not. "It is important to keep in mind how our unique personal and cultural backgrounds influence our abilities to understand and appreciate the varieties of humour that may be discovered through looking at visual art." (Klein, 2007:11). Thus, humour, like all culture, is a form of Foucauldian discourse or social construction. In philosophy, Charles Baudelaire considers laughter to be founded on the feeling of superiority of one over another or of one being ridiculed (Baudelaire, 1956). Indeed, for centuries, laughter has been deemed immoral because of its capacity to incite a loss of control and as a form of asserting power (Morreall, 1983: 85-88).

Theodor Adorno (2001) considers culture an industry and laughter almost as mass-produced, therefore losing its agency. Consider, for example, live audiences in the theatre, cinema or televised shows, where unified laughter is encouraged, 'pushing pluralism into monism, obliterating individuality for the sake of eliminating fear' (Coulson, 2007: 147). In this instance, humour lacks the ability to protest. Shea Coulson analyses the ability of laughter in 'art' – in the wider sense, not necessarily 'fine art' – to affect change using Adorno's theories of laughter. The author argues that "The comic in art must remain mute, for otherwise it would succumb to the culture industry's dominating laughter." (Coulson, 2007: 150). In other words, the joke must remain somewhat outside of societal norms to retain its agency. Otherwise, art's straddling of nature and commodity falls prey to the 'industry' (Coulson, 2007: 149), which they consider a negative infrastructure constraining society. It would be pertinent to

remember that the artworld too is a capitalist infrastructure, and art is often a commodity. One way of remaining an outsider, yet accepted in the mainstream, is to become a form of court jester who is employed by the powerful and thus allowed to make fun of them. “Both the clown and the eccentric are ‘excluded from instrumental regulation’ and as such pose an affront to reification by either anarchistically refusing to join society (the clown) or purposefully remaining apart from it (the eccentric)” (Coulson, 2007: 147). Duchamp poked fun at the artworld with his gender-bending pseudonyms; the Guerrilla Girls critique artworld infrastructures from within with their satirical posters, their gorilla masks might also be understood as a form of clowning; Bob and Roberta Smith are similarly embraced by the artworld because of their eccentric behaviour, from making absurd works to their own pseudonym; Chetwynd’s multiple pseudonyms evade traditional notions of attribution. The cost of being the ‘eccentric’ or ‘clown’, however, can also come at the price of becoming a joke; the comedy is perhaps, and somewhat ironically, not taken seriously by society as a real threat or the artist as an authentic form of anarchy. In both cases, they might also not be considered a competitor among their peers, esteemed or ‘valued’ by the artworld. This is perpetuated by the fact that humour in art hasn’t yet been taken more seriously.

One way of tying these varying forms of humour might be the idea that all comedy is a form of ‘norm-violation’ (Cochrane, 2017). It’s worth noting that Morreall previously defined humour as that which was ‘incongruous’ (1983). There are examples of violations that are not funny, like murder, but the key is that, even with dark humour, the audience is not expected to endorse the norm-violation behaviour or empathise with it (Cochrane, 2017: 58). So, when something goes against the grain, it possesses the

ability to be funny. Cochrane (2017: 56) argues that surrealism also falls into this category. But while we understand Frida Kahlo's works displaying her tragedies, for example, cannot possibly exist in the same plane or make sense perspective-wise, and are thus technically and visually 'norm-violating', they are not necessarily funny. There is also the argument that we might enjoy art for its own sake. This is an old formalist debate, but Cochrane cites Mike Martin who argues that surrealism might benefit the same 'reading' and why one might not find surreal 'norm-violations' funny (Martin cited in Cochrane, 2017: 58). I would like to add that the history of 'fine art' is so bound up with taste, in the way that Bourdieu wrote about in 1979, that the 'readings' of artworks are stifled by one's expectations and desire to 'understand them' as part of demonstrating a cultural capital. We thus lose the ability to be in a playful state when we encounter most art and the artist; their identity or celebrity-like status by the time the public encounters them is rarely 'mute', as Coulson would say.

In 1949 the comic artist H. M. Bateman gave a talk to the Royal Society of Arts on the subject of 'Humour in Art'. He proposed that humour in art came to "full force only when quick and cheap methods of reproduction by photography were first instituted" (Bateman, 1949: 632). He is largely referring to the genre and medium of satirical prints. Bateman (1949: 637) continues to argue that the drawing – or artwork, for the sake of this research – must not be too literal, else it isn't funny. Bateman cites Rabelais or Swift as great satirists, which I will later cite as influences upon Monster Chetwynd.

While echoing the sentiment that comedy is a product of its time, a social construction with the analogy, "...the ingredients and methods of preparation, cooking and serving are everlastingly changing." (Bateman, 1949: 632), Bateman also argued

for it to be taken seriously as a genre (1949: 638). Comedy, he argues, is a record of “daily manners” and, as such, represents social history. It should therefore be collected and exhibited “among the treasures of museums and galleries devoted to serious art.” (Bateman, 1949: 638).

A permanent collection of some of the best examples should be got together and housed under one roof, forming a sort of National Gallery of Humorous Art. It is a fine art and a big industry, but it has no central home or headquarters, as every other art and industry on the same scale has, where the best is preserved and made available to the student and the general public.” (Bateman, 1949: 638).

Bateman’s call was specifically for the satirical print but I want to highlight that humour is a form of social history and its call to be taken seriously was made some 70-plus years ago. Yet, to this day, curators have struggled to collate humour in ‘fine art’. For example, when reviewing the exhibition ‘Knock Knock’ at South London Gallery, Martin Herbert (2018) observed that the works were too loosely brought together. What Herbert noted is that the real potential is when humour is used as “tactic, a disarming element that opens onto other registers”, and these should not be conflated with “art that uses humour, or that ponders humour” (Herbert, 2018: 421). The selection processes, in other words, are often superficial. He concludes with the question, “if an artwork does make you laugh, can you also take it seriously?” (Herbert, 2018: 421). For the purposes of this research, and the politics of the artists presented, it is important that we do take these artworks as both humorous *and* seriously; each, to some degree, is invested in affecting change through comedy. But we must also remember that humour might be best analysed as a tactic, not a genre, of art.

Cochrane (2017: 51) posits that if “a humorous work reveals the absurdity of something, we can either find it funny and not have our attitudes significantly influenced, or else be significantly influenced but not find it funny. We are thus stuck in a quandary over the purpose or agency of humour in art. For example, if we understand and empathise with the absurd works of Chetwynd, we are laughing along with them, and thus the works are ‘preaching to the converted’, those that already perceive the problems with the patriarchal infrastructures of the art system. If, however, we are invested in this system – as a collector, curator, CEO or board of trustees – that a work critiques with its humour, such as the ‘Banana Bites’ section of the Guerrilla Girls short-lived magazine *Hot Flashes* that revealed the ‘insider trading’ of the US art system, then “the less it is for me to regard its wrongness as amusing.” (Cochrane, 2017:66). Thus, “the conditions under which the individual can laugh entails that the ways in which he or she could be affected is strictly limited in significance.” (Cochrane, 2017: 66). We must therefore become more conservative in proclaiming funny art as inherently powerful and consider the ways in which humorous art is presented as part of its ability to ‘affect’. One way of doing this might be through the use of alternative authorships, which helps create a play space or ‘condition’ for Cochrane’s ‘affect’.

Theories of Artistic Authorship

Throughout the history of art, we have been conditioned to examine the artist’s biography to better understand their works of art. While this can be a useful tool for interpretation it is generally accepted that a biography is subjective and socially constructed. Yet we are still overwhelmed with monographs and

retrospectives – a history of artists and encyclopaedias of names rather than a history of art. (McCartney, 2017: 58)

For example, Griselda Pollock has argued that the artist's monograph might not even be considered a proper biography and the discipline of art history not a history at all, but an isolated genre of writing, tracing the artist's life "within the narrow limits of only that which serves to render all that is narrated as signifiers of artiness" (1980: 63).

Beginning with the Hellenistic era, through to Vasari's *Lives* (1550), we began to see the first types of artists' personalities shining through encyclopaedias as the rationale for their canonical works. As such, 'great' works were attributed to their makers' creative 'genius'. The artist's singular name often brings in the most profit, from which the private sector gains. A single author, even though we understand there to be a social history to art making (Wolff, 1993) – such as the influence of peers, the studio, tutors and collaborations – is also easier to insert into a teleological art history and, in the Romantic era, this 'genius' maker became gendered male.² It is also the singular author that one might turn to, and their biographies, for meaning in a work. But if it is agreed that the concept of the singular maker, and the reliance upon their socially constructed biographies are problematic, then this mode of reading work is also fraught with issues.

The name of the author becomes a limiting prism through which we engage with their art. Twentieth-century critical theorists, such as Barthes and Foucault, did challenge this notion of the author but with reference to literature. In Barthes' critical essay, 'Death of the Author' (1977 [1967]), he argues that the author's text is only ever a string of quotes with the author's role merely that of one who selects various

permutations of a pre-existing cultural repertoire. Barthes insists that the author cannot be relied upon as the sole originator of meaning and, in order to give the reader more credit for their role in interpretation and bringing a work to 'life', he concludes, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes, 1977 [1967]: 146). Foucault challenges this in 'What is an author?' (2003 [1969]), and argues that, rather than eliminating the author, we ought to view them as a discursive function whose role has changed, and continues to, throughout history.

A biographical approach to reading works of art therefore needs to be critically questioned as fraught with myth and adversary intent but it is nonetheless still a significant aspect of artistic interpretation. If we were to completely ignore the biography of the author, we are left with a strictly semiotic or formalist approach. On top of this, if we don't acknowledge the impact of art's wider social production or indeed even acknowledge the ongoing significance of identity politics, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, we fail to recognize art not made by the default white male, who continues to represent and comprise the taught canon. For example, how does one interpret work made by an artist whose history of oppression is a significant part of their art, whose culture has fought for recognition, only then to be considered irrelevant under this theory? This is an ongoing debate among artists who disagree on whether to identify with or under the category of 'women's art', for example.³ One's artistic authorship is thus political but the decision to 'violate the norm' (Cochrane, 2017) of how it functions in the artworld can also be humorous.

The Birth of Laughter

In 1917 Duchamp famously signed his urinal R Mut, when he submitted it to the Society of Independent Artists, who promptly rejected it. When he turned the urinal upside down for exhibition, he did so too to the art world. It has become a serious part of history but can also be viewed as a joke on the artworld's cultural gatekeeping. He took on another pseudonym of 'Rose Sélavy' (1920) when 'she' mysteriously signed Picabia's artwork, but Rose was also photographed by Man Ray. While the act of drag is highly political and, at times, sexist, Duchamp's guise was also fun. Rose Sélavy was to become a kind of joint, joke venture between Duchamp and Man Ray, a life-long, playful artistic partnership that toyed with the art world. In 'her' mimesis of adverts of the time, Rose became a kind of satirical performance. Over in Jersey (C.I), artists Lucy Schwab and Suzanne Malherbe were photographing Schwab in varied costumes under the names Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. These weren't necessarily meant for public viewing, but with some of them exaggerated, highly poised or eccentric, they convey a sense of humour between the couple. For example, in one, Cahun's top reads "Do not kiss me, I am in training", while assuming a 'masculine' pose. Both partnerships are associated with Dada and or surrealism, genres that, while charged with wit and absurdity, are heavily engaged with the politics of their time. As this edited volume proposes in its introduction, one must be able to laugh in an emergency, not least because it might engage an unassuming audience. Indeed, Duchamp and Cahun's gender-deviant authorships are charming but sincere in their attempts to rebuke the artworld of its seriousness. In doing so, their collaborations and non-commercial works also challenge patriarchal infrastructures to do with concepts of the artistic genius and

gendered notions of the 'singular' author that perpetuate myths of melancholy and madness.⁴

[INSERT Fig 1. Caption: *DO WOMEN HAVE TO BE NAKED TO GET INTO THE MET MUSEUM*, Guerrilla Girls, 1989. © and courtesy of Guerrilla Girls.]

This trajectory of authorial dissidence, accompanied by humour, is continued in contemporary art. The Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous collective of artists who take on the names of dead female artists. The Guerrilla Girl's content and purpose is far from amusing; they continue to point out inequality in the art world, the underrepresentation of women and artists of colour. Their take on Ingre's *Odalisque* (1814) is used in their recurring and updated poster citing data on women's underrepresentation at various large museums (see fig 1). Their work has already been likened to satirical politics by Joel Scheeter (1994) when he compared their language and anonymity to Jonathan Swift's letters. As previously mentioned, the *Hot Flashes* piece highlights insider trading and nepotism in the artworld. That this is done within the framework of a fold-out newspaper using menopausal symptoms as a pun further highlights the politics of their feminist comedy at work. While the Girls use gorilla masks, puns and satirical humour, this tactic of laughter was a proactive change on their behalf, having grown tired of the ineffective 'serious' forms of protests prior to their inception in the 1980s: "We've discovered that ridicule and humiliation, backed up by irrefutable information, can disarm the powers that be." (GuerrillaGirls.com, 1995). This might echo the superiority theory of humour (Morreall, 1983), but their tactics of satire, puns and irony inversely invite laughter from the public at the expense of the superiority figure.

However, the Guerrilla Girls' have, over the years, gone from being a nuisance on the New York art-scene to being embraced by public institutions all over the world. In fact, their work might be seen as a credit to the institution which agrees to be critiqued by them. This might sometimes be a superficial reconciliation between the outsider and the 'machine', or even a part of the 'culture industry', as Adorno would say. Because their jokes are no longer 'mute' – the Guerrilla Girls are now 'mainstream' – the 'reader' knows they ought to laugh along, it is the 'right' thing to do.

So, how then, can the jokes sustain 'affect'? What remains disarming – or incongruous — is the Guerrilla Girls' anonymity. This imbues a seriousness in their work; they remain true to their anarchist status or intention to refute traditional narratives of authorship. They do not profit from individual celebrity status and monies are split. In this sense, because the author is 'dead', the 'reader' must also engage with the content rather than its author. For example, the Guerrilla Girls cannot be dismissed as individual bitter artists or not 'genius' enough. Instead, as court jesters, they have used their authorship to remain both inside and outside of the institution. Moreover, they do not always rely on invitations or commissions to work; the audience might be unwillingly reached through their larger more public campaigns. That they are anonymous also adds to their 'muteness' as artists; their personalities or 'genius' do not get in the way of engaging with the politics of their work.

This liminal position and authorial dissidence are also forms of ambivalence toward their audience, which gives them a certain power. When encountering the Guerrilla Girls the 'reader' is thrown from their usual engagement processes into a more ambiguous play space. Cochrane describes the unusual laughter born from play

fighting: “We manage to shift into a playful mode of thought, where we are no longer practically, emotionally engaged with the world in the same way.” (2017: 58). It is in this play space that one is more likely to break down their own prejudices or sense of humour that would otherwise interfere with an ability to ‘take the joke’.

The Girls’ authorship encourages the reader to cast aside the museum’s all-too-serious narratives and the reliance on, or likeability, of the comic to lead one’s laughter. It is therefore not ‘monism’ in response, it is a process of learning by being forced into thinking for oneself; one laughs at their own pace. And, often, once the audience is past the amusing masks and puns of these avenging ‘clowns’, the sexism and racism highlighted by their work isn’t funny. This operates in a similar vein to political comedians who lure you into a play space only to make a serious point; humour as a tactic. But here, the ‘gag’ isn’t timed, there isn’t a ‘staged’ audience in the same way and we do not ‘know’ the comic. Their work is often on the fronts of museums or on billboard posters and thus sometimes unavoidable, not intended for a voluntary, already converted, audience. Authorship, here, remains seriously funny and thus has the ability not to be swept aside as ‘my humour’ or not.

Another artist who uses their authorial dissidence and humour as part of critiquing the artworld is British-based Bob and Roberta Smith. This is a double-gendered pseudonym that began as a joke, because Bob was such a generic name that the artist began to win awards under. Bob and Roberta Smith are concerned with art and advocacy, the belief in art as an agent of social change, through play, text and signage. Their practice often involves collaboration, performance, champions participation and takes the shape of music, DIY projects and even cooking. They use

this hobby-like practice as a form of subversive humour to seduce the viewer and attract a wider audience, to engage the public in a more serious political debate. For example, in 2013 Bob and Roberta Smith initiated The Art Party, which eventually ran against the UK Conservative politician Michael Gove. The ‘speech’ against Gove was painted in 2011 as a letter on wooden planks and included several jokes at Gove’s expense, a bit like Baudelaire’s sense of humiliation. Read out by one man, under the name of two artists, not a ‘mobile’ script at all, the performance is absurd and chaotic but also sincere.

[INSERT Fig 2. Caption: The Art Party Conference 2013, presented by Bob and Roberta Smith on Saturday 23 November at The SPA, Scarborough. Photograph taken by Nicola McCartney at the event.]

Bob and Roberta Smith cite Spike Milligan as an early influence, explaining how they would rehearse Milligan’s routines from *The Goon Show* and *Q9* on the way to school. They say, “What I liked about it was that it was a mess but very clever and stupid at the same time I inhabited a world of nonsense, which has still got me in its grasp.” (Smith, 2011: 20). But what makes the absurd a powerful political weapon? Jerry Palmer (1987) asserts the significance of implausibility to a joke. There is a fine line between Bob and Roberta Smith’s insult of a politician’s sense of dress and the ‘implausibility’ that Gove’s dress sense might actually reflect his policies on the national curriculum. Taking this one step further, Palmer argues that “the sheer implausibility of what is attributed disarms criticism” (1987: 199). For example, should Gove respond to the Letter with any regard to the ‘joke’ about his dress sense, he would be ridiculed again, perceived as not able to ‘take the joke’. Gove, in Smith’s arena, cannot ‘win’.

This is complemented by the artist's absurd authorship, asserting a conceptual play space at the beginning of the encounter with their work, like we saw with the Guerrilla Girls. The spaces – physical and conceptual – in which we encounter the artist and their work are norm-violating, encouraging a suspense of seriousness, thus enabling a more instinctive response to the message of the politics involved.

Smith's own identity is a parody of the authorship mythology and one that they have consciously constructed to dispel with out-dated notions of the author. If Smith's personality isn't so present, in the Barthesian sense, the viewer has the space to digest the political jokes without Adorno's critique of monism. Also like the Guerrilla Girls, Smith straddles both inside and outside the institution, like a court jester, but they are far more than being the butt of the joke. Smith has been on the board of Trustees for the Tate, the Royal Academy and received an MBE. To that end, their comedic critiques are also embraced into the 'mainstream', but their authorial dissidence gives birth to a potent laughter that cannot be so easily dismissed as such. Moreover, as Klein surmises of her own survey of comedic artists, "Their celebrity status as clown/artists gives great credibility to the role of humour in art." (Klein, 20007:129)

Authorship and genius are implicit concerns, though less frequently discussed, in association with performance artist Monster Chetwynd's practice. Chetwynd changed her name last in 2018, is represented by Sadie Coles gallery in London, UK, and was previously nominated for the UK's Turner Prize in 2012. In 2007, the artist organised a performance titled *Giotto's Play* for the Migros Museum in Zurich. 'Humanzees' dressed in chimp costumes puppeteered the famous discovery of Italian artist and architect Giotto di Bondone (1266/7–1337). The canonical tale is mocked through its re-

enactment by a troupe dressed in chimp outfits, and by using a theatrical arena within which the props and set are obviously put-together with a DIY aesthetic. Giotto's genius therefore becomes even more unrealistic – 'staged' and constructed – and the parody is further ridiculed by the fact that he is played by a carrot.

[INSERT Fig 3. Caption: Installation view, Migros Museum (24 February - 22 April 2007). Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich.]

It might be worth considering Chetwynd's performances as part of the historical trajectory of visual artists working with elements of Theatre of the Absurd, from Dada to now, which contains its own agency.

Once drawn into the mystery of the play, the spectator is compelled to come to terms with his experience. The stage supplies him with a number of disjointed clues that he has to fit into a meaningful pattern. In this manner, he is forced to make a creative effort of his own, an effort at interpretation and interrogation.

(Esslin, 1980: 403)

Other visual artists in this lineage would include Martin Kippenberger, Mike Kelly and John Bock. Theatre of the Absurd problematizes authorship through its subversive and de-skilled presentation, comedic sense of confusion and collaboration, and debunking the idea of the all-important artist-author. These chaotic performances, often lacking in beginnings or endings, ask us not to question, 'what is next?' but instead 'what does this represent?' When Morreall advocates for humour in pedagogy, I see a parallel between the 'teachings' of subversive, absurd and funny artists and the power of debunking authorial intent, as Barthes and Foucault critiqued: "a teacher who integrates humour into the learning experience, ... will no longer be able to present his

or her own material as neat chunks of knowledge which can be understood in only one way, nor to present trains of thought which move inexorably from a given point to a preestablished conclusion.” (Morreall, 1983, 98). For example, even when Chetwynd gave an ‘artist’s talk’ for the Tate Britain gallery when nominated for the Turner Prize (2012), the artist decided to roll on the floor for a duration of the time while discussing her practice, presumably to evade the usual ‘Author-God’ status (Barthes, 1977 [1967]: 146), deferred to for all artistic meaning.

Several of Chetwynd’s characters are also deliberately funny or grotesque – from Jabba the Hut of *Star Wars* to Cousin Itt of *The Adam’s Family* – to puncture tradition and authority with their subversive humour. The grotesque body undermines traditional notions of beauty. It is also associated with base-level humour; anything to do with the gullet and orifices. The belly is prominent in folk humour and the grotesque because the abdomen is associated with laughter and the digestive system (Bakhtin [1941], 1993). This is also a means of breaking with seriousness and the constraints of imposed civility upon society by higher powers. When Klein discusses humour in performance art, they propose that, “Other kinds of public spectacles that rely on the visual and are more conducive to laughter include the circus and parade.” (2007:121). For the duration of Chetwynd’s chaotic and irreverent performances you might also consider the work ‘carnavalesque’, in the Bakhtinian sense. For the suspended period of time that the parade/carnival of her work exists, the world is turned upside down, authority is punctured and the public are free to laugh at the expense of institutional powers, again inverting the superiority theory.

Chetwynd has changed their own name from Lali to Spartacus, to Monster, and has also worked under the name Marvin Gaye Chetwynd. This act is irreverent and challenges traditional concepts of authorship, attribution, and provenance that the private artworld thrives on. Like the other case studies discussed here, Chetwynd's norm-violating authorship, or guise, provides a complementary play space through which to 'enter' their work. Who wouldn't at least smirk at visiting the work of an artist called 'Marvin Gaye Chetwynd'? In so doing, the artist encourages play from the get-go so that subsequent laughter can become a disarming political weapon.

Conclusion

Lionis reminds us that 'Where previous analyses of the role of humour have relied on the three dominant theoretical frameworks (superiority, relief and incongruity theories) of why it is we laugh, or whether (following the legacy of Mikhail Bakhtin) humour challenges or ultimately reinforces the status quo, recent scholarship is moving towards framing humour as a political and aesthetic category.' (Lionis, 2021: 617). It is hoped that this chapter's intersectional lens of feminism, authorship, art and comedy studies, employed in the analysis of the case studies discussed, has contributed to the author's call for a more nuanced framework for humour in art practice, but also supported their own study of the capacity of humour to operate as an intersectional political strategy. (Lionis, 2021: 606).

From Duchamp to Cahun, the Guerrilla Girls, Bob and Roberta Smith and Monster Chetwynd, it is demonstrated that humour is important to the politics of these artists' work. Absurd guises mock the perceived melancholy, authoritative or genius

notions of artistic personality. Puns, satirical humour, parody, irony and wit encourage laughter, but not in monism or because the audience are necessarily already in agreement with, or 'like' the comedian, because we do not really know who these artists are. They are liminal artworld jesters able to critique its infrastructures from their unique positions. Lionis, citing Gregory Sholette, argues that "It is humour that thus allows artists to perform a central tenant of contemporary art: the demand that artists critically engaging with political subject matter do so while being both 'complicit and resistant' to market demands." (Sholette, 2017: 12 in Lionis, 2021: 622). While humour might be part of this, the varying authorial strategies discussed here are what enable humour to be better heard and seen and thus used as a weapon of political resistance. This is due to the jester-like positions that the artists take up, in assuming dissident artworld identities. This straddling of the inside and out of the artworld, 'complicit and resistant' to its market and discourses, articulates, through play, the paradox of contemporary art practice demands to be seriously politicised but not 'preaching to the converted'. I want here to note that Duchamp and Cahun were engaging in tactics of authorial dissidence and humour prior to post-structuralist scholarship and comedy studies, and to use this to also highlight the significance of art *practice* being at the fore of art-politics. Using incongruous authorial strategies, these artists seek a more direct and shared relationship with the 'reader', over a laugh. The play spaces created for the 'reader', disarmed by the norm-violation of their identities, encourages us to consider the work and its politics for ourselves, reducing preconceptions and generating a more accessible politics, bypassing institutional agendas.

The ability to 'play' and experiment similarly removes the symbolic importance, and inhibiting, perceived cultural capital of the artworld, its 'serious' art history and ontology. That Duchamp and Man Ray, Cahun and Moore, the Guerrilla Girls, Bob and Roberta Smith and Monster Chetwynd are simultaneously embraced by the 'mainstream' artworld is testimony to their accessibility and ultimate success as political jesters. It also demonstrates that "humour does not operate in competition or opposition to the turn toward the 'real' or the 'historical' in contemporary art." (Lionis, 2021: 617). Instead, these case studies, stemming from the early twentieth century, before this 'turn', show that humour through authorship supports real and authentic activism regarding gender inequality (Cahun and the Guerrilla Girls); capitalism and arts-education cuts in governmental policies (Bob and Roberta Smith); outdated modes of art appreciation (Duchamp and Chetwynd), and far more.

Evaluating their practices also shows that it is possible to move beyond previous claims for humour's inherent 'transformative' qualities, but also that humour isn't always 'superior', humiliating, or inciting a loss of control. Lionis draws on resilience scholarship to demonstrate that a closer analysis of contemporary art and humour also resists an "overly positivist view of the power of humour in the face of oppression or trauma." (Lionis, 2021: 621). Indeed, we should not take it for granted that humour in art is inherently political, that funny artists are happy as a result of their work, that comedy is always a 'successful' tactic, or that humour, recognised here as a culturally constituted social function, is sufficiently similar enough to draw comparisons as a 'genre' of art. However, because of the authorship of the artists and their works presented here, the audience is freer to interpret meaning at their own pace, giving 'birth' to a laughter that

is more affective. Finally, if humour is a discourse documenting social history, these artists demonstrate that authorship is still pertinent to the patriarchal politics of art. That they use humour and generate laughter is a common tactic, but their authorial dissidence is what makes their work seriously funny.

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¹ Klein lists a set of these in her thematic book *Art & Laughter* (2007) on page 2.

² See Christine Battersbea's, 1989, 'The Clouded Mirror' in *Gender to Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, 32–40. The Women's Press: London, 1994.

³ See, for example, the exchange between Peggy Kamuf and Nancy Miller, 1990. 'Parisian Letters' in *Conflicts in Feminism*, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, 121-33. Routledge: New York.

⁴ See Griselda Pollock, 'Artists Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History' in *Screen* 21:3 (1980), pp. 57–96.