

When there is no Laughing Matter, Laughter Matters

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Morgan Bassichis, Vanessa Conte, Hamishi Farah, James Krone, D'Ette Nogle, Nadia Perlov, Kameelah Janan Rasheed

curated by Hendrike Nagel and Elena Setzer

When there is no laughing matter, laughing matters – this is the ambiguous mantra imparted to readers of Sarah Ahmed's guidebook, *Living a Feminist Life*. The goal of this humorous lesson is the successful transformation of her reader into the figure of the feminist "killjoy", who is made up of the very prejudices with which she is confronted, – and who has fun with them.[1]

The reflection on life's realities in cultural genres is also observed by Lauren Berlant in their affect-theoretical analysis of late capitalist societies. Berlant coins the term "situation tragedy" to describe the psychological mode of affective adaptation through humorous-optimistic self-regulation in the face of the structural experience of social, political, and ecological crises and existing notions of upward mobility.[2] This hybrid, all-too-real genre, is a play on the usual "Sitcom [Situation Comedy]", and thus, like the world of that genre, is defined by the recurrence of precarious situations, as well as a limited set of options for action, which lead, in turn, to finite possibilities for reaction. Henri Bergson's theory of humour locates comedy in moments lacking social "elasticity" – precisely those moments in which the adaptation to socio-economic conditions fails, and a supposedly human "mechanic" emerges.[3] Contemporary approaches, on the other hand, emphasise the normativising effects of this fundamentally (anti-)social practice, based on the performance of stereotyping representations, the marking of affiliations to a social group, and psychological influences.[4]

This play with assigned and fixed roles – in which only particular improvisations are possible – is explored in the exhibition through visual, verbal, theatrical tilting figures. Tracing the boundaries of humour, the artistic practices illuminate the forms in which comedy frequently becomes an arena in which the politics of representation is negotiated.

James Krone often recycles Modernist gestures within his practice. With *Somebody Else* (2019) he employs one of the proto-genres of comedy – pantomime – and allows representational mechanisms to run exhaustively into the void. In the video sculpture – consisting of an automated miniature piano alongside a film – Krone, himself, embodies the figure of the sad, mute clown, Pierrot. His gesticulations are an expression of a supposedly universally comprehensible form of non-verbal language, on which the art of pantomime is based. The tragedy of Pierrot, who in Romanticism and Modernism was often staged as both an outsider and an artistic figure alienated from the world, is condensed in Krone's fragile video loop by the compulsion to always use the same semiotically readable expressions. In the increasing drifting apart of various signifiers – bodily expression, cheap joke article (the miniature piano), moving image and sound – universalist assumptions grown from the historical are inverted into a distended sketch.

In their video work *Pitchy 1,2,3,4* (2020) Morgan Bassichis uses improvisational techniques that were established in *commedia dell'arte* and later refined in contemporary stand-up comedy to liquefy social scripts.

Arranged as an interview in four acts that promises the audience a voyeuristic behind-the-scenes look at a series of “coming outs” [5] we are presented with Bassichis’ comedian alter-ego in intimate settings, being bombarded by serious questions from an off-screen interviewer who always remains invisible. Bassichis virtuosically transforms questions about biological and artistic “family” into spontaneous vocal interludes that defy identity attributes and meaning. In Bassichis’ orchestration of a musical call-and-response score, in which they themselves set the tone, identity is presented as a relational situation that is constantly recreating itself.

Speech acts also form the starting point for Kameelah Janan Rasheed’s poster series *How To Suffer Politely (and Other Etiquette)* (2014/21). In it, she assembles and varies various idioms circulating in US usage that urge a “sense of humour” and “levity” despite the experience of suffering. Blown up to poster size, backed with signal paint and permeating the interior and exterior of the Halle für Kunst, Rasheed transforms the practice of reading into a public corporeal act. With this dislocation, she distils the mechanisms of a social “guidance system” in which humour as a coping strategy becomes part of a normalisation of systemic oppression.

Hamishi Farah’s practice also revolves around “comic alibis” [6] and practices of representation and imitation. In *Untitled* (2021), Farah takes on the role of the British painter Merlin Carpenter, whose artistic practice combines the appropriation of existing artistic gestures with in-jokes in service of a critique of the art system. Farah’s painted apology letter with spidery handwriting refers to Carpenter’s exhibition *Children of the Projects* (2003) utilizing stereotypical depictions of African-American youths, as well as its further discursive processing by art magazines and gallerists. The content of the letter itself reads like a press release for Carpenter’s next, self-ironic exploitative project. Without figurative depiction, Farah creates a satirical group portrait that reduces Carpenter and his network to representatives of a strategically-acting art world, whose transactional logic is further spun in the medium of painting.

In D’Ette Nogle’s video work *Stand up* (2019), it is the performance of a professional comic that is explored in its social dimension through personal and spatial displacement. In the living rooms of various friends, Nogle adopts the role of the American stand-up comedian Louis CK, who lost his show in 2017 due to sexual abuse in the form of public masturbation in front of female comedians. A situational comedy arises in the incongruity between Nogle’s own (gender-identifiable) embodiment, the domestic environment, and the vulgar machismo of the stage show, which continuously self-deprecatingly laments the restriction of one’s privileges because of changing socio-political norms. The audible success of Nogle’s skilful “incongruity performance” through the laughs of an audience that remains invisible thereby draws attention to another aspect; Nogle, who also works as a teacher, points to the structural analogy between feminised reproductive work in the field of education and publicly “masturbatory” stand-up performance, which resides in the production of social dynamics and constant feedback loops. [7]

Nadia Perlov’s sculptures resemble tricksters that roam the room and occupy their spaces like seemingly harmless game characters. Displayed on white pedestals, some of Perlov’s chirpily-coloured plush objects are reminiscent of shoddy versions of desirable luxury handbags from boutiques, while the vertical sculptures instead invite associations with miniature models of a colourful Disney skyline. Tony, Jenny, Renata and Roxanne (2021) anticipate their future multiplication through varying shape, size and detail, seeming to become gimmicky stand-ins for their potentially human agents in a Western capitalist system. Perlov uses this humorous foreshortening and metonymy to address “soft” manifestations of imperial techniques as they appear in globalised architectures, commodities and pop cultural surfaces. [8]

Visual genres of objectification also form the starting point for Vanessa Conte's work *Stuffed* (2021). Borrowing from the explicit depictions of so-called hentai - pornographic mangas - and the narrative form of comics, Vanessa Conte lets her archetypal female figures stumble into brutal, clearly ambiguous quotidian scenes. In places of entertainment and consumption balloon-like breasts and buttocks are worked and deformed in these sequences by female allies acting in concert. Slapstick effects arise especially in the clash between the numerous accessories of the opponents (high heels, roller skates, tennis rackets, etc.). Here, women's bodies and converted instruments of torture merge into an erotic grotesque, seeming to compete with each other in their dinginess.

By imagining this female-dominated consumer world, Conte allows different pop cultural representations of femininity to collide: On the one hand, Conte invokes the trope of the "mean girl" – the figure of the predominantly white, affluent high school queens who terrorized their less privileged classmates in school hallways and shopping malls in U.S. teen films of the 1990s and 2000s, while themselves being both the product and the "currency"[9] of a patriarchal "pharmacopornographic" system.[10] At the same time Conte destabilizes precisely this internalized male-coded, hetero-normative gaze and mobilizes a queer reading as well as non-normative sexual practices (such as fetish and BDSM) in which logics of superiority and inferiority are overcome in playful - quite comical - transgression.

[1] Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke University Press 2017, p. 261.

[2] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press 2011, p. 11.

[3] Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Rockwell: Arc Manor 2008, p. 13.

[4] Matthew Kotzen, *The Normativity of Humor*, in: *Philosophical Issues* 25 (2015), S. 396-414; Kobena Mercer: *Carnavalesque and Grotesque. What Bakhtin's Laughter Tells Us about Art and Culture*, in: Angela Rosenthal (Hg.), *No Laughing Matter. Visual Humor in Ideas of Race, Nationality, and Ethnicity*, p.8/9; Jessyka Finley, *Black Women's Satire as Postmodern Performance*, in: *Studies in American Humor*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition*, p. 236-265.

[5] Vgl. Rick McCormick, *Coming out as Jewish. To be or not to be, 1942*, in: *Ibid.*, *Sex, Politics, and Comedy. The Transnational Cinema of Ernst Lubitsch*, Indiana University Press 2020, p. 299.

[6] William Cheng, *Taking Back the Laugh: Comedic Alibis and Funny Fails*, in: *Comedy has Issues*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017), p. 528.

[7] Vgl. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories. Zany, Cute, Interesting*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2011, p. 208.

[8] Vgl. Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, in: *Comedy has Issues*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017), p. 466.

[9] Tiqqin, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, Los Angeles: Semiotexte, p. 88.

[10] Paul P. Preciado, *Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, New York: The Feminist Press 2013.

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