

# CENTER for EXPERIMENTAL LECTURES

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<http://experimentallecures.org>

## ***Comic Relief*** ***On Art, Film, and Television*** by Jamillah James

Hi, can you guys hear me okay? Oh geez...it's crowded... Stop laughing, okay so, I'm doing a presentation today called Comic Relief: On art, Film and Television, part autobiographical, part professional, and part, well you'll see. Hi, I'm Jamillah James, age 32, and for all intents and purposes I'm a curator, this is typically how I look after 6 pm every day, except I'm usually wearing sweat pants.

I can say with some confidence, seeing some familiar faces in the crowd, that barring going to some openings after work that this is what curators look like after six.



Alright, that's me at age 23, and age 12, (don't laugh) before I became a curator, I was a number of things, a musician, a concert organizer, a grocery store clerk, a wig tamer for drag queens, a lab rat for medical training, a seven year college student, the list goes on forever. Before all of these things I was a slightly overweight precocious only child growing up in New Jersey. This is me at 9 ½, and that's my Mom.





Okay, as was the case for many children of the 80's, especially for kids from working single households such as mine, I watched a lot of television. From ages 5 to 10, I would spend my afternoons at my babysitter's house, an older woman that I lovingly called Grandma Anna who was a longtime neighbor of my actual grandmother, in the summer I was there all day, reading, eating, talking to myself, harassing my cousins and watching television. From ages 11 until I left for college I was a latch-key kid, which amounted to a fair amount of snooping around, smoking and snacking in secret, waiting for my dial-up to cooperate, talking on the telephone, and watching TV while doing all of the above. My junior and senior years in high school I was in television production class, which produced content for the local public access station. I was also for a brief while on a public access show, modeled after MTV's Squirt TV called Popcorn, where I had a segment called Rawk Nerd, Rock spelled RAWK, where I wax pretentious about records and shows in New York I never went to because I had curfew.



Long story short, a lot of who I am today and things I'm interested in come from being an easily bored totally weird kid growing up in god awful New Jersey, who had to learn how to entertain myself early on.

When I left school, well, when I left home to go to school in Boston in 1998, I entered as a creative writing major who minored in media studies, my major changed approximately seven times before I graduated, and the only constant was my interest in film, video and TV which has now parlayed itself into the things that interest me today like art, video and performance in particular, though I admittedly spend more time looking at paintings these days, and this all, in a roundabout way, has informed some of my projects as a curator.

I came to curating around 2004 but I didn't actively start working on projects until 2008. The first show I did after a long break, was a show in Baltimore called *Agenda: Queer Popular Media*. This show featured about 25 LGBT artists, and as the title suggests it was about queering media. Edie Fake, my lecture buddy today was also a participant in this show. Some borrowed critically from television format, such as K8 Hardy and Wynne Greenwood's *New Report*.





Others set up autonomous television production studios, such as shown in the DVD documentary *Pilot TV* which was a trans, feminist, queer media conference that took place in my old house in Chicago, led by Wu Tsang, Latham Zearfoss, and Dylan Mira.



Then there was of course Ryan Trecartin and his *I-Be Area* and *A Family Finds Entertainment*, and to this day, Ryan is the only artist who I have had to contact by YouTube.



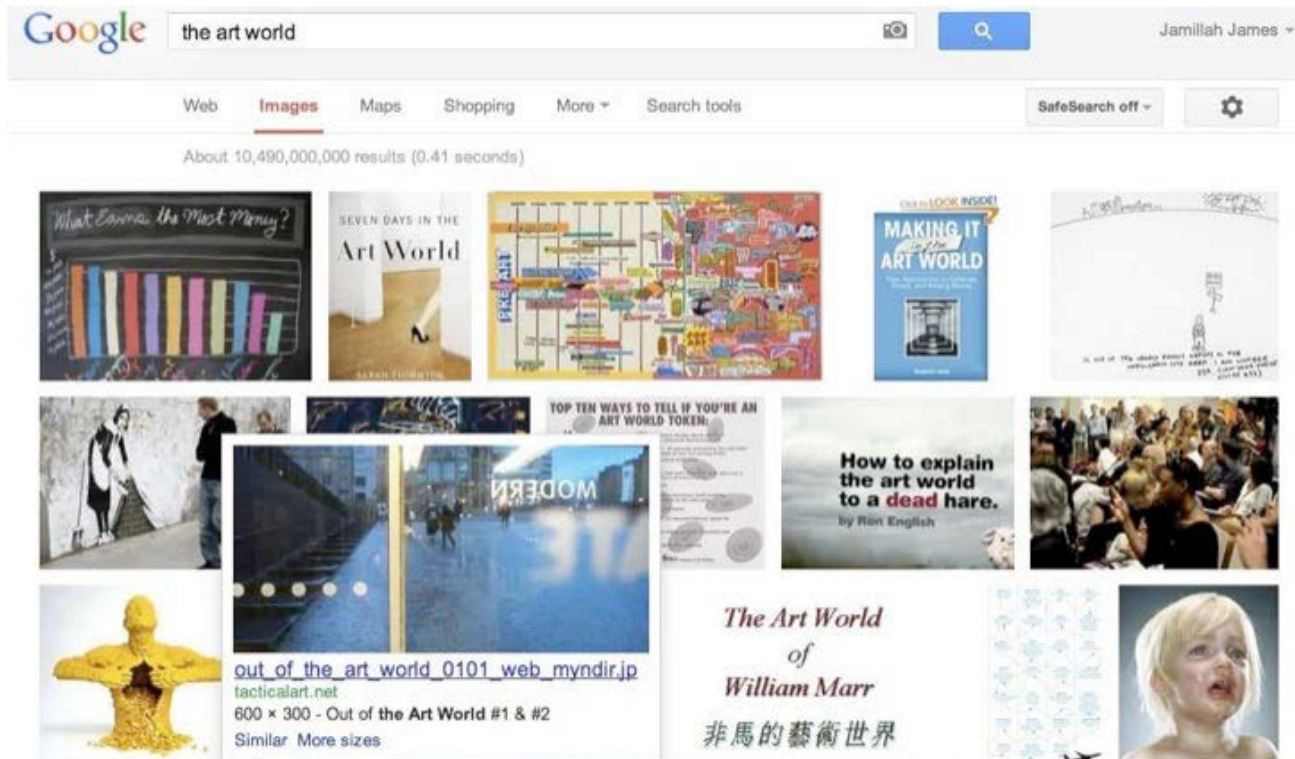
A more recent project called *Not the Way You Remembered* at Queens Museum in 2010, was about material history, memory, and the sentimental and emotional associations and relationships that we have with objects, and also the marking and passage of time that happens through collecting.



When I was putting together the exhibition, I wasn't just thinking about Bergson, or Broodthaers's museum or Mike Kelley's stuffed animals, or Felix Gonzales-Torres's candy. I was also, in equal parts, thinking about A&E's *Hoarders*, *Antiques Roadshow*, and the breakdowns people have on *Pawn Stars* and *Hardcore Pawn*.



My real world decision making as a curator is occasionally informed by television. I am not unusual or special in this regard. There have been a number of exhibitions in the last few years that have dealt with television and its influence particularly on video making, such as *Broadcast* at the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore and *Television Delivers People* at the Whitney.



The art world exists within the real world, as does the world of television, both fictional and dramatic and reality-based. The art world can be a dramatic fiction removed from reality at times, or it can be really, really real. There have been countless moments of overlap and people speaking to the power of popular media—television, film and now the internet.

Earlier critical interventions into television and its production, primarily living in museums and galleries, such as those of Dara Birnbaum, Antoni Muntadas, General Idea, Chris Burden's *TV HiJack*, the "stand-up theory" of Joan Braderman's *Joan Does Dynasty*, and *Paper Tiger Television* meet up with the recent performative hijackings of reality television as undertaken by Nao Bustamante on the *Joan Rivers Show* and Bravo's *Work of Art*, (I don't know why they had a performance artist with bottles of tempera, but it's okay). And also Narcissister on *America's Got Talent* and getting name checked on *Absolutely Fabulous*, and Kalup Linzy on *General Hospital* as seen on national television.

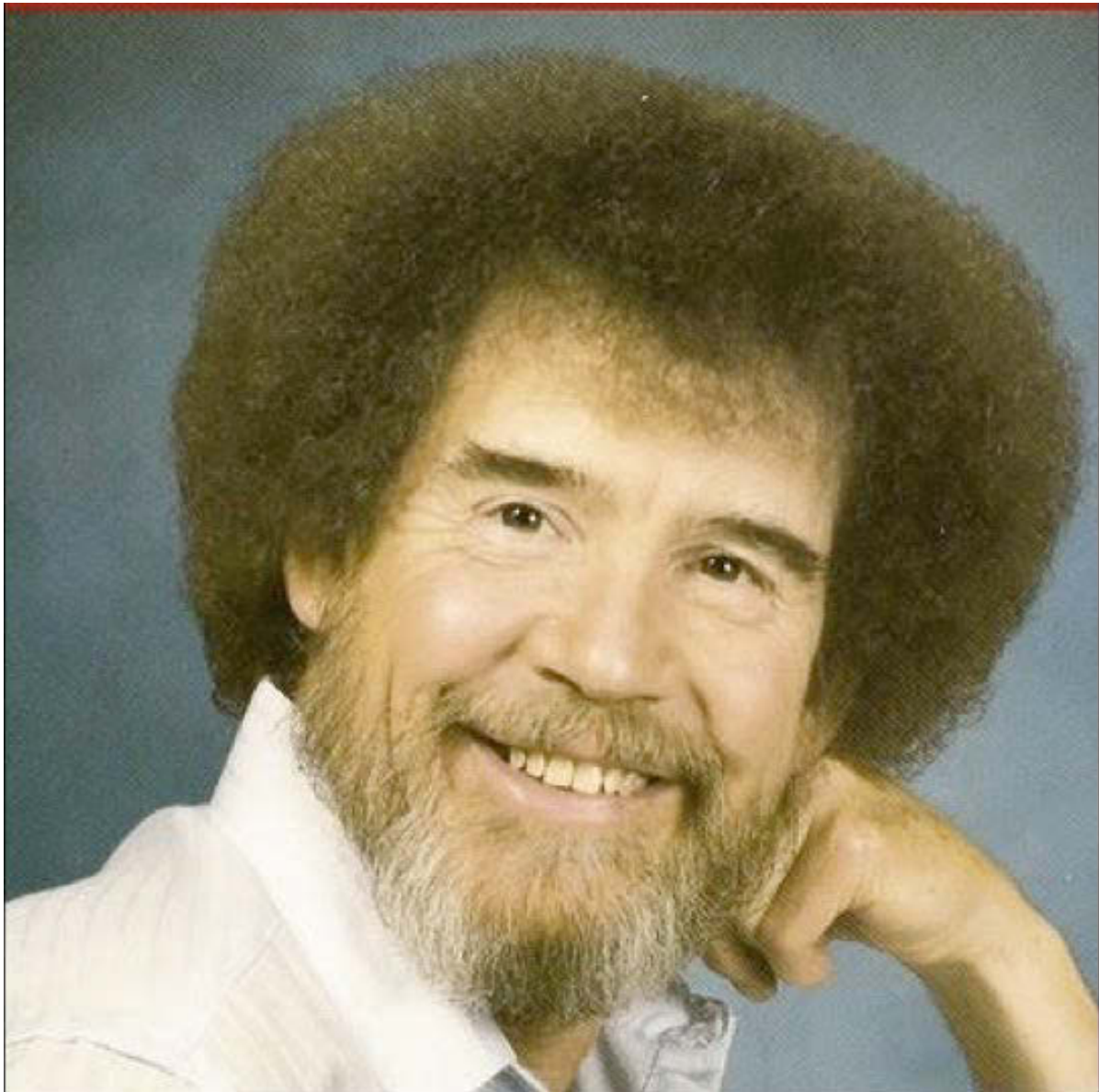






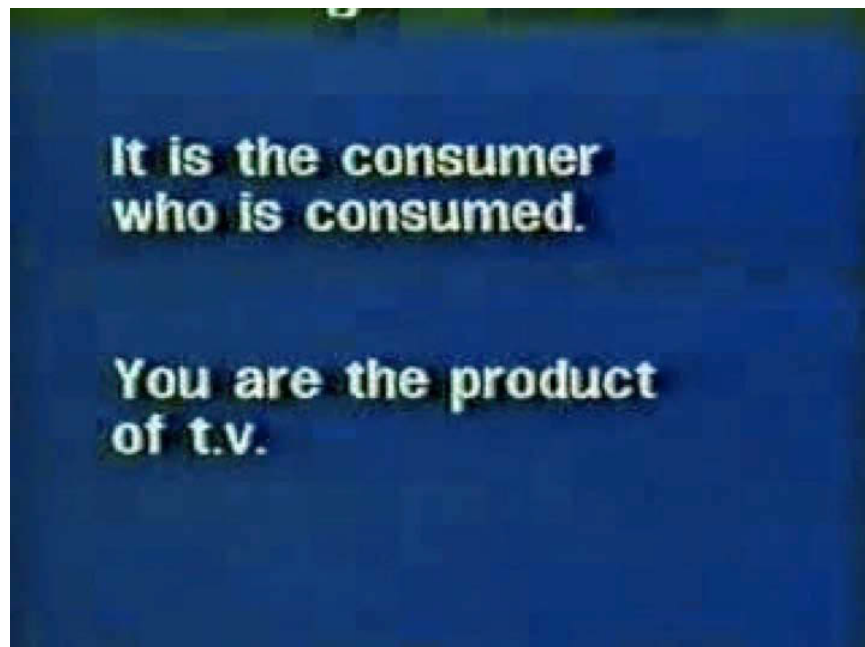


You also have PBS's *Art21*, MTV's recently revived *Art Breaks*, critically acclaimed movies about artists such as *Basquiat* and *Pollock*. You also folks like Banksy getting nominated for Academy Awards, Hennessy Youngman talking relational aesthetics on YouTube, actor James Franco working on thirty MFAs and yet another *Bravo* show loosely based on the art world called *Gallery Girls*. Which is all to say we've come a long way from Bob Ross being the most recognizable artist personality and representation of artistic production in American homes.





However, there is another side of this coin that has less to do with artists using the screen, which is really why I'm here today. At some point in the 18 hours I'm awake everyday doing art world labor, as Gordon so accurately stated in the press release for this, I like to chill out. Being a curator, looking at art until I'm cross-eyed, using the old brain to work out conceptual problems probably only I care about, drinking for free at openings, eating snacks in artists' studios, it's all very hard work. I need a break, and so I return to television.



It was Richard Serra who made a work called *Television Delivers People* in 1973, which has a line that scrolls on the screen that reads, "You are a product of television". Things are generally and obviously quite cyclical. Something to note are the instances within the sphere of popular media that are independent of those examples stated earlier—the attempts to articulate what the art world is, the roles we play and our cultural by-products.



Even in the moments when I'm trying to escape thinking about what it is I do with my time, I'm sucked back in. My one-stop-shop for therapy collapses into itself. I am a 32 year old junkie for the opiate of the masses, and I've never been able look away, no matter how mangled the wreckage. Talking here about my engagement with this segment of popular media that, as a plot device or narrative quirk, tries to represent and have dialogue with my activities as a cultural producer and as an agent in this weird alternate universe in which some of us live and work. Let's see what we can learn from the following clips.





**[Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/r-e-h-gordon/law-and-order-clip>]**

This is an episode of Law and Order Special Victims Unit, and I don't have a video clip, but you can listen to the audio.

It's blood!

Alright, back to this one over here, so about that clip, At the right, at the left actually, you have a dude in a crumpled shirt and hair gel playing Andreas, the "artist," with his awful generic paintings, and at right you have Countess LuAnn from the *Real Housewives of New York* fame, cameoing as Cindy. Cindy/LuAnn is talking at Andreas about this "painting" in the storage room but it's not a painting, as you'll find out, it's blood on the wall! We also find out later in the episode and this actually has very little to do with what happens in the episode, but Andreas, being ever-edgy begins using blood that he collected from the crime scene in his paintings, which makes him not only an unscrupulous creep and a total asshole, but also absolutely, utterly derivative. On a side note, I have no idea how LuAnn did not win an Emmy for this performance, but no one asked me for my opinion on anything.

The next clip is a portrayal of an art dealer in a scene from Beverly Hills Cop.



**[Watch at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHZWFFmaFcI>]**

And the look of longing, okay, in that clip there's a great deal of pretention and foolishness, chiefly, the selective snobbery, the kinetic rotating heads in the dinner table, and a lemon twist in espresso. I don't know anyone that actually does that.

Some of the most comical material for me comes from the depiction of critics, or people talking about art critically. I, as a curator, come from the school of thought that everyone should have an opinion and must have an opinion of about these spaces in which we work and speak critically about those experiences and encounters. In the world of TV it can go either way—it could be dismissive or disdainful, frivolous or reactionary, or contrarian for no good reason. Here are two examples of art criticism at work.



**[Watch at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tIoPZB4kSk>]**

That clip is from the sketch comedy show, *In Living Color*. It's interesting to note that David Alan Grier is quite a supporter of the arts. The *Men On* skits are of course problematic for a host of reasons, but are also amazing in their succinct assessments of our cultural milieu as well as a reinforcement of what is broadly understood as mastery or garbage.

All right, so here we are my other favorite example of art criticism here is Andy Rooney on art. All right here we are.



[Watch at <http://youtube.googleapis.com/v/bsfX6xqCBks>]

There we have Andy Rooney, ever insightful. If there's one thing I've learned about artists from television that I may not have learned from studio visits with artists is that they're intense, special, and always crazy, (this is television speaking-not me). These are the ideas that float into public consciousness, whether or not we want them to. Artists apparently live life passionately and are self destructive, according to television. As someone who has never, well only once, fancied myself an artist, I can't speak to the accuracy of that idea. I can only speak on being a curator, but no one ever plays us on TV. There is nothing really that glamorous about being a curator, and so, on to depictions of tortured artists.



[Watch at <http://youtube.googleapis.com/v/bs5hQQi1K6I>]

And then there's this:



[Watch at <http://youtube.googleapis.com/v/67lU1KGDpik>]

And this is over Liquitex Basics paint, which is like \$2 a tube...and it goes on for like another 10 minutes after that with Meatloaf freaking out over student grade paint.

All right I'll skip this, I'll just play these things in the background, okay.



[Watch at [http://youtube.googleapis.com/v/zoaEkz5oF\\_U](http://youtube.googleapis.com/v/zoaEkz5oF_U)]

So one of the main criticisms lodged against artists and artistic production is that we are not of the real labor world, and we're just operating outside of the real world. Generally, decadence and art are portrayed as mutually exclusive on television, sometimes this is accurate, a lot of times it's not. It's also portrayed time and again as a dangerous place in which to operate. This I'll never understand beyond there being competition, as is the case in any field.



I would like for people to engage in this world as I do, as a space for play and experimentation. I think a lot of us are in this to make a difference, to change things, to open the proverbial can of worms. In part, the commercial television world gets that, and tries to relate the things that are going on within our microcosm to a broader audience.

It's an important project to get people on the periphery to both relax and take what we do seriously. Comedy especially has done a remarkable job of sending up and parodying the art world when possible, making this relaxation a little bit more possible. I think there are many opportunities to learn from these representations—think of it as an earnest form of institutional critique from outside the institutions.





So, in these clips and in doing my research for this presentation, there are a few things that I've learned, and I'm going to share this knowledge with you in conclusion.

- 1) Be accessible, and if you can't be accessible, at least be engaging. If all else fails, be weird.
  - 2) People enjoy accents and flamboyance.
  - 3) Rich people love everything.
  - 4) Old people hate everything.
  - 5) Always offer beverages and snacks.
  - 6) Nudity never hurts. Sex is helpful.
  - 6) Superficiality is frowned upon, but pretension is forever.
  - 7) Using big words is only impressive once in a conversation.
  - 8) If you use actual blood, sweat, or tears, be sure they're your own.
  - 9) If you fuck up, it's ok and it's expected.
  - 10) Learn to relax, but not too much.
  - 11) Don't touch paintings. Even if it seems like a good idea, and you think you're making it better, just don't do it.
- And lastly,
- 12) If you're crazy, that's cool, just don't kill anyone.