

tionalties within the system and operation of the arts, including the set of established stereotypes in both “capital” and “provincial” vernaculars regarding the center-periphery relationship and notions of exclusivity, accessibility, and community.¹⁴ While “Cringe” was a “consensual” event with an audience that was in on the joke, *PFI*—which was actually closer to what is described as cringe comedy¹⁵—unsurprisingly stirred up emotions through its inversion of social dynamics and the “misplacement” of an overtly instrumentalized discursive mode into a pronouncedly non-academic context.

Inspired by the conversation hosted and moderated by Westphalen at the Royal Institute of Art following the “Cringe” night, *Dysfunctional Comedy: A Reader* likewise attempts to unpack some of the defining elements, issues, and questions of humor and comedic practices. Israeli American artist Roe Rosen’s text discusses his experimental stand-up comedy show *Hilarious* through his research on anti-humor, negative humor, and the humorless and “the potential of a situation in which we are forced to laugh, when there’s nothing to laugh about.” Olav Westphalen provides an introduction to the matrix of comedic genres as well as a glossary of terms while tracing an alternative route through the history of modern art and the avant-garde by way of their comedic aspects. London-based writer and curator Sally O’Reilly focuses on the smallest unit of comedic practice—the pun—and with amazing eloquence analyzes its linguistic capacity and the critical power of humor. Finally, Swedish professional comedian Aron Flam addresses the amorality of humor through the lens of his own practice.

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Westphalen, in correspondence with the author.

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Cringe comedy is all about the painful laughs derived from awkward social interactions and from people’s lack of self-awareness. Its primary building block is the painful silence that hangs in the air after a thoughtless remark. For some prime examples, see Gary Susman, “Discomfort Zone: 10 Great Cringe Comedies,” *Time*, May 12, 2013, <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/05/13/discomfort-zone-10-great-kringe-comedies/>.

TOOLS FOR FOOLS

DYSFUNCTIONAL COMEDY AND CRYPTO-COMEDY

Olav Westphalen

Art history repeats itself. First as comedy, second as academy.

If contemporary art were to have a creation myth, it would be Western avant-garde experimentation. Its every move is studied and revered like sacred scripture. Any genealogical link to the avant-garde ancestors bestows a glow, an instant nobility and gravity, to whatever work of art. Yet many of the most consequential acts of the avant-garde could be read as comical maneuvers, even jokes, with established art serving as the setup and each subsequent avant-garde move as the latest punch line. You're in a sculpture show? Send a urinal. Give a piano concert, but don't make a sound! Take your audience to a garbage dump instead of the gallery! More often than not, these operations were carried out with an attitude of utter seriousness. What little of the artists' wit still shone through has been subsequently sanctified, sanitized, academized. There is a history of comedy in art, and it is buried under a mountain of portentousness. There is a related history of busy trade between art and comedic entertainment, with entertainers providing the ideas for high-art innovations.

Marcel Duchamp referred to his short stay in Munich in 1912 as "the moment of his total liberation." Art historians regard it as the most transformative period of his artistic life, during which he made the transition from cubist painting to using technical drawings and dressmaker patterns. But Duchamp's stay also prepared the ground for an even more far-reaching innovation: the readymade. In Munich, Duchamp encountered Karl Valentin, a comedian who was beginning to gain wider notoriety. Valentin's nonsense dialogues and slapstick sketches were quickly becoming a mainstay in the cabarets and movie houses. Today, Valentin is also known for the comical objects he produced. These were common, mass-produced objects rendered funny by subtle interventions, such as an added label, a slight modification, etc. A half-filled flask of water labeled "cold steam from an express locomotive," for example. It is unclear whether some of Valentin's objects



Karl Valentin, *Ein Nest ungelegter Eier und Liegender Stehkragen*, date unknown

could have predated or influenced Duchamp's readymades. Their similarities might have been purely coincidental. But it is worth noting that Valentin's works never escaped the confines of entertainment, simply by virtue of being issued by a comedian, while Duchamp's readymades—in structure and concept nearly identical to Valentin's concrete comedy (a term coined by the American artist and critic David Robbins)—were deployed in the context of art, and thus never fully identified as jokes. The refusal to frame these objects as comedy, it seems, helped ensure their impact and durability as modern art.

In November 2015, experts at Moscow's State Tretyakov Gallery revealed the results of the X-ray analysis of Kazimir Malevich's seminal *Black Square*, painted almost exactly one hundred years earlier. Underneath the top layer of black and white paint they found two previous paintings: a cubo-futurist and a suprematist composition. They also uncovered a handwritten note or caption by the artist on the painting's lower left-hand corner, which is still in the process of being deciphered. However, preliminary investigations have found that the text says, "Negroes battling in a cave." This is very likely a reference to an engraving by the French writer and humorist Alphonse Allais from 1897 titled *Combat de Nègres dans une cave, pendant la nuit*. Allais's print shows nothing but a black rectangle in an ornate frame.

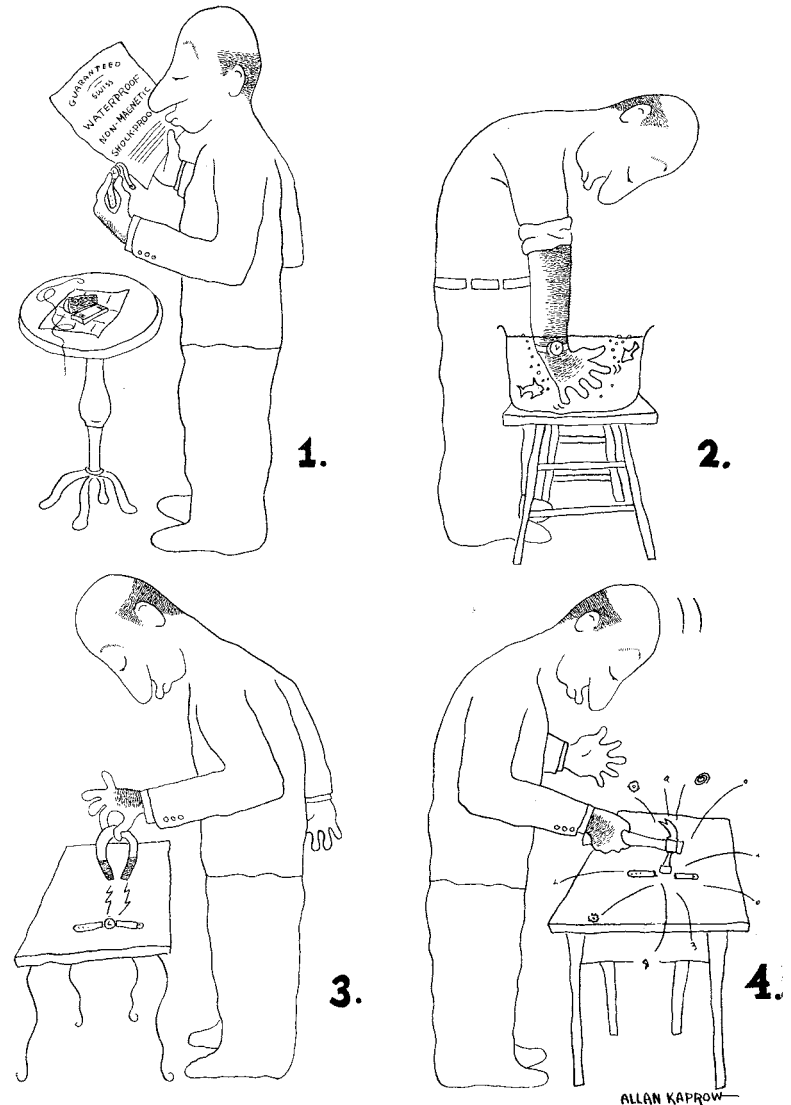
Legend has it that one day in 1961, Roy Lichtenstein's son asked his dad if he could come to career day at school, where parents were supposed to talk about their professions. Lichtenstein, then an abstract painter, was not sure what to do about that. He thought his son would be embarrassed if he brought one of his paintings to class. Lichtenstein's friend, Allan Kaprow, trying to help, asked him what kinds of pictures his son liked. Lichtenstein said he liked Donald Duck. "So, why don't you paint a picture of that?" asked Kaprow. And that's what Lichtenstein did. The painting, *Look Mickey* (1961), shows Donald Duck fishing on a pier, his hook caught on his own coattail. He is shouting excitedly to Mickey, who is watching on in amusement, "Look Mickey, I've hooked a big one!" Career day went off without a hitch, and months later, the art dealer Leo Castelli

supposedly saw the painting in Lichtenstein's studio and said, "That's what you should do."

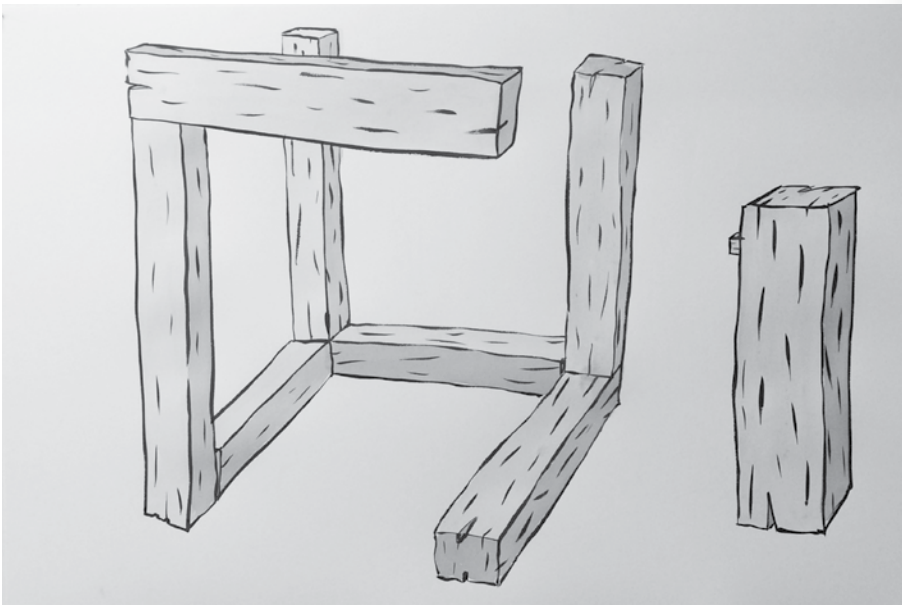
In a private conversation with fellow artist Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt conceded that his minimalist grid structures were initially not meant as artworks at all, but that he had been planning out a jungle gym for his cats. Today, they inhabit a range of utterly respectable contexts, as public monuments, as Holocaust memorials, as highly valued museum art.

In the early 1980s, the comedian Andy Kaufman introduced a new feature to his stand-up routine. He would challenge random women from the audience to wrestle him. What began as a comedic stunt quickly got out of hand. A year after his first inter-gender fight, Kaufman was widely reviled, not just by feminists and progressive media but equally by the world of pro wrestling and the entire state of Tennessee, where he staged the majority of his fights. Through his stubborn insistence to keep fighting women—and later male pro wrestlers—over and over, long after it had stopped being funny, Kaufman accomplished something very rare. He created conceptual slapstick, something one can already glimpse earlier in, for example, Buster Keaton's acrobatics, but which shed all circusy and plot-related ornament and came into view pure and in all its glory when Kaufman got his hands on it. His fights had all the attributes of slapstick comedy: grotesque and outrageous movements, sadistic manipulations of bodies, complex, well-staged accidents, etc. But his enduring refusal to either stop wrestling or acknowledge that he was, in fact, joking, turned these fights into deadpan conceptual art at the same time.

The majority of current, contemporary art is comical, either knowingly or unwittingly. It is comical because it is paradoxical. It traces back its roots to the modern, European avant-garde, to a motley crew of rebels, individuals, and groups who were aggressively anti-academic, anti-traditional, anti-conventional, and who radically upended the prevalent notion of what art was and did. But somehow, even though it makes little sense, these radical transgressions have become academic standards. Of course, you can cross a line twice, but the second time will mean something entirely different. What is first a transformative



Allan Kaprow, cartoon, *Variety*, New York City, 1946



Olav Westphalen, *Public Art*, 2015, from the series *The Tunnels*

act becomes a tradition immediately afterward. By now we know that some lines can be crossed a million times. We have somehow managed to create an academy of anti-academism, a thoroughly conventional system that nevertheless rotates around tropes of transgression, exceptionality, risk taking, unconventionality, and radicalism, albeit a radicalism that somehow has always already been conventionalized by earlier generations. This contradiction is the source of deep and lasting comedy. It also makes contemporary art interesting.

Art that embraces its paradoxical roots doesn't have to come in the form of open jokes or comedy. It can just as well be manifested as deadpan seriousness, tedium, boredom, nerdy narrow-mindedness—in other words, as crypto-comedy. Artists who produce crypto-comedy are usually well aware of this, and at least in private they are quite happy to acknowledge the humorous aspects of their work. When contemporary art ignores its inherent contradictions—or, worse, is oblivious to them—it becomes unintentionally comical. This can be just as interesting, but in such cases it is wise to not tell the artists that you find their work funny.

Crypto-comedy is comedy that lays low, that does not appear to be funny unless you are keyed in. Dysfunctional comedy, on the other hand, is comedy that may look and feel like comedy, but that fails at being funny. It is not always easy to distinguish between the two. In a comedy club or on the pages of a comic book, comedy has one primary function: to be funny. If it isn't, it won't get printed, performed, remunerated. In contemporary art, things are rarely that functional. Humor is commonly veiled, denied, not even self-aware, or, on the other hand, too exaggerated, inelegant, and ham-fisted to be functional. Dysfunctional comedy is out of sync and out of time. It produces utterances that are either too little or too much, or in the wrong place. It prompts us to say, "That's not even funny!" or "That's not funny anymore!" What all forms of dysfunctional comedy have in common is that they derail funniness and deny the viewer the experience of a comic release. But dysfunctional comedy can also give those failed jokes a staying power that few proper jokes ever attain.

There is an underexposed tradition of artistic jokes that purposely fail as comedy and remain fairly unfunny. They are joke-like actions, objects, and texts that don't respect the recipients' shared reality or their expectations, and therefore communicate poorly. Dysfunctional comedy is made up of phenomena that might be jokes, but could also be equally dysfunctional poetry or nonsense or accidents or tragedies or ruminations of the demented. It usually doesn't give us the same type of pleasure as a well-scripted, professionally delivered gag. It's rarely as entertaining as functional comedy, but it makes the time and space to attract other, potentially more complex and layered, types of signification. Meaning oscillates and fluctuates across it eternally, or at least for a long time. We still don't have a "reading" on many of the avant-garde jokes that we so dutifully replicate in academies around the world. Dysfunctional comedy is the Aurora Borealis of meaning: deeply disorienting and hard to photograph, but when you see it, you won't forget it. With dysfunctional comedy, you can never be sure whether it's comedy at all, and if it is, who's laughing at whom or what?

2

Jokes are subject to some kind of uncertainty principle. Looking closely at them will change them. It takes away what made them jokes in the first place, their funniness.

If analysis kills funniness, then the attempt to instrumentalize jokes for some greater good destroys the very thing that attracts us to funniness: the emotional experience, the pleasure it gives us. Don't forget, there's "fun" in "funniness."

Nestled at the core of most conversations about contemporary art lies a blurry idea of its usefulness. Art educates, addresses, investigates, engages, and critiques, all in the service of a better world. Art is here to help. On the face of it, there's not much space for skeptics, cynics, grumpy curmudgeons, hedonistic fun seekers, or depressives (or depressive fun seekers). Even melancholia, that solipsistic mainstay of nineteenth-century sensibility, is not really a thing anymore. Artists can give voice to suffering and in-

justice, but always with the implicit assumption that this articulation will serve as a step toward actual betterment. The importance of contemporary art, it appears, lies in its contribution to society.

Entertainment doesn't seem to have a need to assert its usefulness to society. People want it anyway.

Recently, there has been renewed interest in comedy and humor in contemporary art. Gone is the moralizing disdain of the post-9/11 era when, for example, law professor Jedediah Purdy's vehement indictment of irony as a reprehensible, socially noxious stance reverberated equally with the cultural mainstream and within the cloistered circles of contemporary art. After myriad disappointments suffered by so many engaged artists, once discredited forms of irony, parody, satire, and even good old caricature are now enjoying a heightened credibility. The artist's stand-up comedy routine has become a veritable genre. (How do you know it's an artist doing stand-up and not a comedian? Because nobody laughs, but everybody applauds anyway.)

This coincides roughly with an increase in religious and state censorship of satire, as well as with outright acts of violence against humorists and satirists. Being the target of repressive violence apparently constitutes some kind of certificate of relevance and efficacy. (As if the violent had ever been so rational as to only terrorize those who pose an effective threat to them and not all the others, whom they can abuse without repercussion, as well. In that sense, attacks on satirists may as well be a testament to their defenselessness as to their relevance.) With this assumption of a heightened political relevance of the comical comes a new credibility as relevant contemporary art. But it is still rather unclear what notion of comedy, which of its mechanisms and pleasures, is underlying the art world's reassessment of humorous practices. Is comedy understood as a tool, as a reprieve, or as a lure?

One much-repeated line of thought posits that jokes are useful weapons in the service of critique because of their power to disrupt semantic contexts. Political reality itself could be one such context. It is tempting to buy into this argument, as it gives artists permission to crack jokes and still pass as critically engaged. But the idea that comedy is a

tool employed for a higher purpose ignores what makes us want to produce and consume comedy in the first place. We obviously don't primarily tell jokes to level a more effective critique of "capitalist realism," as cultural theorist Mark Fisher, channeling Sigmar Polke, would have it. We seek out comedy because we enjoy it. We enjoy laughing at the world instead of toiling in it. When laughing, the laugher, even if they are inextricably entangled in everyday problems, steps away from the world and rejects the urgency of practicalities, ethics, insurance payments, a greedy ego, social injustice, a failing body, etc.

"There is no solution, because there is no problem," goes one of Marcel Duchamp's more nonchalant mottos. Read like this, on a white page in an art book in 2016, it smacks of lazy Buddhism. But a laugher in the moment knows exactly that: there is no problem. They reside in a state of profound irresponsibility.

Jokes may have productive side effects. But to put them front and center in a discussion of comedy would be like claiming that the Apollo program was hatched to give us the Teflon pan. You don't build a space program so that, decades later, your breakfast eggs won't stick. And, more importantly, if someone actually were to build a rocket for the express purpose of coming up with better kitchenware, there's a good chance that it would never make it to the moon. Just like jokes penned to make the world a better place often aren't that funny. (That doesn't mean that people won't laugh at them, for there are different types of laughter. At times, laughter marks an appreciation of the comic, at other times it is about joviality, bonding, group identity, or the permission to indulge one's resentments.)

So if comedy is not primarily a tool for us to use, is it then just an escape from reality and responsibility? That would make it, at best, a day spa for the weary forces of rational critique, at worst, some form of restorative technique enabling us to resume and endure our alienated existences instead of rebelling against them. Along those lines, one could think of the laugher as some type of linguistic opium eater and the comedian as their pusher. Comedy as a drug might of course offer the added benefit of "opening our minds" and showing us glimpses of other potential realities,

thus returning us to our everyday lives more enlightened and better equipped. But, then again, that might be forcefully reframing a side effect as the main purpose.

Perhaps comedic pleasure is just a lure, a carrot dangling in front of the donkey's muzzle. We know other instances of powerful rewards motivating us to do things, to set processes in motion, that down the line lack any conceivable connection to the initial carrot. Let's just say, the reason that people frequently desire sex is not necessarily that they all want to have bundles of offspring. The considerable pleasure we derive from comedy may point to the fact that what happens during a comical experience is of such significance that some mechanism or agent has made it enormously rewarding. The question, then, would be who or what dangles the carrot, and what could be important enough to make comedy that much fun? Catholics and satanists would have conflicting ideas here. Evolutionists would have yet another take on it.

As soon as theories of humor sidestep questions of causality and finality to focus on modality instead, they become surprisingly compatible. There seems to be general agreement that the comical arises from the collision of irreconcilable semantic contexts. Jokes, for example, are minimal narratives, which take us from one meaningful setting to another, completely contradictory context, from setup to punch line, as efficiently as possible. They are blatant violations of logic and meaning. The funniness of a joke depends on the level of surprise we experience when the new context hits us. The level of our surprise is the result of the complex relationships of several factors: the degree of contradiction between the two contexts; the speed, elegance, and wittiness with which we are transported from one to the other; our expectations and prior knowledge of the semantic fields that the joke activates; and of joke mechanics in general. Of course, the tendency of the joke, how charged or taboo its content is, is another major factor of funniness. There are countless methods to achieve comedy, but the underlying principle is always the collision of comprehensible, internally consistent, yet mutually exclusive meanings.

The instant we realize we are suspended between opposing truths can be quite violent and physical. We are forced to undergo a practical exercise in logical typing. If two logically irreconcilable contexts can coexist in our awareness, there must, by necessity, be another context of a higher logical order where we have to be situated at the very moment of such a realization. We never planned to go there, but are forced by the mechanics of the joke to take up a position outside the regime of either of the familiar contexts called up by the joke. The new context is usually beyond our comprehension. It is also outside of ourselves. We are split into two entities, one still inhabiting reality and another that is catapulted out from the familiar to a higher level of abstraction, looking in from the outside. We have most likely left our bodies back there. All this has nothing to do with the content or tendency of a joke. It is merely related to the fact that we witness in real time the collapse of our faculties for making unified meaning (which are also our faculties for making a world or a reality). We get to see truth with its pants down. We are physically aware—through our spastically oscillating diaphragm, our heaving lungs, wheezing throat, and tear-blurred eyes—of the all-powerful edifices of culture and mores, of civilization and self, as just that: edifices, things of the mind, things made up from ideas and words that can and will be taken apart again at some point. And somehow, perhaps because these structures are truly monumental, the work of a hundred generations, this collapse fills us with giddy excitement, with awe, with terror, with a dark kind of pleasure. We enter the realm of the sublime, the place where we behold in wonderment our own feebleness and impotence.

There is a sentence in the writings of Meister Eckhart, the German medieval mystic: “Break a twig, and there is God.” I am not sure I understand it, but I imagine bending the twig. Elastically, it conforms to the pressure exerted by my hands, describing at first an agreeable curve, an elegant expression of a complex set of physical variables, until it suddenly snaps. That moment, that sound, is not unlike comedy.

Profound humor is indiscriminately destructive, not just to our opponents’ ideology, but to our own attempts at making sense as well. Using it as a tool for a purpose is like using a stick of TNT to unclog a toilet. It *could* work.

One more, entirely speculative thought: What if comedy were neither a tool for us to use, nor a therapeutic distraction, nor a lure? What if pleasure were the active agent? How else than by means of trickery—through logical manipulations that leave us dumbfounded, through schizogenesis and discorporation—could pleasure enter a world of truth and pain, of identity and shame?

If art is sincere in its newfound appreciation of comedy, it might be time to think of pleasure as a quality of art again. After all, there’s “come” in “comedy.”