



Disruption Through Laughter? *Sans Blague/No Joke* at the MAC

**“Sans Blague/No Joke: The Matter of Humour in Contemporary Art”
Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, Montreal, Canada.
April 1-2, 2016**

Reviewed by Jake Bagshaw

The tenth Max and Iris Stern International Symposium, which takes place annually at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, was entitled *Sans Blague/No Joke: The Matter of Humour in Contemporary Art*. The symposium, which featured a variety of scholars, curators, and artists working within the realm of comedy and its relation to the production of art, was organized to coincide with the MAC’s exhibitions *Ragnar Kjartansson* and *Ryan Gander: Make every show like it’s your last*. Comprised of over thirty multi-disciplinary works, Gander’s show sought to provoke reconsideration of the act of gazing upon, and engaging with, art inside the gallery space by using visual gags to provoke reflection upon modes of viewing.¹ Installations such as *Magnum Opus* (2013) epitomized this approach; the work is constructed out of a large, sculpted cartoon pair of eyes and eyebrows, which followed visitors around the gallery and created expressions to react to what it saw using these limited features. Another visual gag was the arrangement of furniture-like objects obscured by large white sheets, as if they were not to be seen or were being protected from dust. *Make every show like it’s your last* played upon the artist’s desired interpretations of common symbols and objects in conflict with how they may tend to be visually recognized and processed within gallery spaces.

Kjartansson’s work deals more directly with the artist’s involvement with the ongoing practice of producing art, and similar to Gander, reflexively queries this phenomenon with flashes of comedy.² *The Visitors* (2012), which constituted a major part of Kjartansson’s exhibition, featured nine video projections of musicians playing disjointed parts of the same song. While the overall tone of the piece was rather melancholic, a viewer might have been more inclined to gaze into the odd scenery of each panel—in which Kjartansson plays a guitar in a bathtub, while other participants play their instruments in separate rooms of a desolate building—than to listen intently to the moody, atmospheric original song. Both Gander and Kjartansson’s exhibitions correlated to the theme of the symposium, particularly the notion that comedy’s relationship with art is a tenuous, and often very tongue-in-cheek, facet of the artistic process.

¹ Wanda Palma, “Ryan Gander at the MAC.” Press Release. *Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal*, 2016. Accessed 11 August 2016. <http://www.macm.org/en/communiques/ryan-gander-at-the-mac/>.

² “Ragnar Kjartansson.” *Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal*, 2016. Accessed 11 August 2016. <http://www.macm.org/en/expositions/ragnar-kjartansson/>.

The symposium's timely interest in comedy's relation to contemporary art could be linked to recent re-emergence of comedy within popular media. While the symposium presentations primarily focused on art within the gallery setting, separate discussions between academics and artists increased the complicated nature of comedy's status within art today. After opening with presentations from scholars from Anglophone and Francophone universities in France, Canada, and the United States, the symposium then departed from critically engaging with art texts to welcome contemporary comedic artists whom, as I soon found out, performed during their presentations.

I would like to focus this exhibition review primarily around the presentations that diverted from typical scholarly analyses often found at Humanities conferences and symposiums. Indeed, one characteristic aspect of *Sans Blague/No Joke* was the organization of curators and performance artists' presentations after the more conventional academic presentations. The placement of these more humour-focused pieces disrupted prior presentations aimed at conceptual arguments; it was itself a spectacle, suggesting the audience reflect on the ostensibly consistent mode of academic inquiry in contrast to the ever-evolving and at times baffling performance art featured in the symposium.

Professor Anna Dezeuze of the École supérieure d'art et de design Marseille-Méditerranée, for instance, presented "The Deadpan Inertia of the Body-Sculpture." Dezeuze discussed sculpture's inert lack of movement as not only a key aspect of its form, but also how the mimicry of this facet has contributed to modern comedy in established Western performance art. One memorable example Dezeuze provided was British artist Dominic Watson's video *Are You Not Entertained?* (2013). In it, the artist, garbed in glam rock clothing, plays air guitar to Henry Moore's minimalist sculpture of a seated couple, gesturing towards the couple as if awaiting their reactions to his performance. The obvious joke of the piece is rooted in the understanding that on the outset of the video, Watson will never get an answer to his titular question. Among the several works that Dezeuze cited as indicative of this quality, what remained consistent in her discussion was the notion of sculpture's "inertia," or passivity in tension with human interaction and movement. Dezeuze's paper proved to be a concise discussion of traditional aspects of sculptural form and their correspondence with contemporary visual humour showcased in performative art.

American actress, comedian, and Artforum curator Miriam Katz' presentation "The Transformative Power of Comedy" dealt more directly with emergent forms of comedy in contemporary art and media. Katz' presentation questioned the role of professional comedians in relation to artistic performance in a gallery context. Noting her organization of a panel of well-known comedians, including actor and comedian Tim Heidecker at the MoMA PS1, Katz described the panel's presence as indicative of a reflexive move, meshing writers and performers working in mainstream media alongside the environment of a conference typically tailored towards artists working within the museum system. Katz argued that this growing interest in comedy is partially substantiated by digital multimedia platforms' advancement of varied programming. The digital turn has enabled a growing variety of video productions (particularly comedy) that work to equalize both access and interest in the consumption and subsequent participation in comedy.

Katz also briefly discussed her own work within acting and comedy, and suggested that multidisciplinary approaches to understanding and working in comedy and art, or rather, comedic art, foster a wider and richer network of the two often-separate professions. Increasingly popular media platforms of comedy, such as YouTube vlogging, streaming television on

demand, or web-based meme culture allow these interstices of comedy and scrupulous social commentary to indeed enter artistic circles both within academia and galleries. One needs to look no further than Concordia University's own student-run galleries to observe similarly interdisciplinary works toying with contemporary media, often including artworks that sarcastically (and humorously) reflect on the artist's own relationship with their work.

American performance artist Michael Portnoy's "Dropped jokes, Broke jokes, Pause jokes, Tone jokes, Jokes that strangle each other to sleep..." was an obviously more performance-oriented presentation consistent with Portnoy's artist persona. Best known for his "Soy Bomb" incident at the 1998 Grammy Awards in which Portnoy, originally hired as a backup dancer, crashed the stage when Bob Dylan was playing. Tearing off his shirt to reveal "Soy Bomb" written on his chest, Portnoy danced aggressively towards Dylan for less than sixty seconds before he was removed. Portnoy's presentation focused on his recent installation work, featuring an aesthetic he termed "relational Stalinism." Tongue planted firmly in cheek, Portnoy explained that the perplexing "gambling tables" devised for his installations, which demand audience participation, parody complex political and philosophical concepts commonly found in contemporary conceptual art. The lengthy titles of his works, coupled with their absurdist designs ("schizopoetics") at once clearly ridicule and bring introspection to extant works by other artists. Bringing further sarcasm to his praxis, Portnoy maintains an earnestly 'serious artist' persona that is comically at odds with the absurdist angles of his work. This persona seemed to have transferred to the symposium as well: Portnoy prepared an extremely long PowerPoint to accompany his presentation. After getting several minutes to conclude, he quickly described each panel and explained if he was allotted more time to speak, only *then* would we fully comprehend the complexity of his body of work. While Portnoy's presentation was clearly more of a performance than a conventional conference paper, the adherence to his esoteric artist character was especially remarkable given the often incoherent concepts alluded to within his work. Thus, Portnoy's presentation was an example likeable to Katz' interest in bridging comedic intervention into the space of lauded art and performance. Portnoy's stage character used vocabulary mimicking art theory language such as Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, while also (to a hazy degree) explaining his own practice as an artist. The strategic humour of "Dropped Joke" slyly mocked the concept of the conference presentation while simultaneously placing itself within the same model of presentation.

In line with Katz and Portnoy's presentations, this section of the symposium concluded with American artist and comedian Casey Jane Ellison's "THANK ME VERY MUCH: A GUIDE TO LAUGHING EVERYWHERE." Accompanied by a minimalist PowerPoint displaying the title of the presentation, Ellison's deadpan, professedly disinterested stage persona diverged from Portnoy's energized discussion. Throughout, Ellison's phone kept ringing (an obvious gag) while she refused to answer it. Then, she asked the audience to applaud for her being on stage. The general structure of Ellison's presentation was that of a stand-up comic, with Ellison speaking about her daily failures, such as a strained relationship with her mother while frequently pausing for laughter or applause that she often demanded to hear. More than arouse laughter, Ellison's stoic persona and monotonous demands were instead directed towards inciting discomfort in the audience. "THANK ME VERY MUCH" was an explicit parody of both stand-up comedy and was a disruptive performance in the face of usual conference presentations. Opposing the standards of an academic paper as well as a comedic routine, Ellison's character left the audience at once interested and somewhat confused as how to respond to the performance, especially in regard to the progressively performative works it followed. Ellison's

devoted stage persona was not as well received in its comedic rhetoric as Katz' or Portnoy's presentations. Rather, Ellison's character's bluntness ("my fucking mom is calling me again") and apparent disinterest in contributing to the ongoing dialogue of art and comedy (either directly or indirectly given Portnoy's obvious satire of art talks) failed to punctuate the symposium's overall thematic interests.

The organization of the symposium distanced the artist presentations from typical academic papers, revealing instead the—at times productive—lack of understanding between comedic performance art and the scholarly engagement seeking to explain it. Ironically, such interest in performance was never brought into discourse by the academic presentations as much as it was suggested and hinted at by the "stand-up" routines. The contrast of the performances with the papers given conveyed a gap of research that has yet to be explicated within academia. More explicitly, the curatorship of the symposium presentations, and namely the emphasis on performance, hinted to this writer that academia lacks a firm grasp of the disruptive potential comedy within contemporary art. Nonetheless, such gaps provide abundant potential for locating comedy's role within the professional art world, and, perhaps, vice versa.

Jake Bagshaw is a Master's student in Film Studies at Concordia University.

References

Palma, Wanda. "Ryan Gander at the MAC." Press Release. *Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal*. 2016. Accessed 11 August 2016. <http://www.macm.org/en/communiqués/ryan-gander-at-the-mac/>.

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