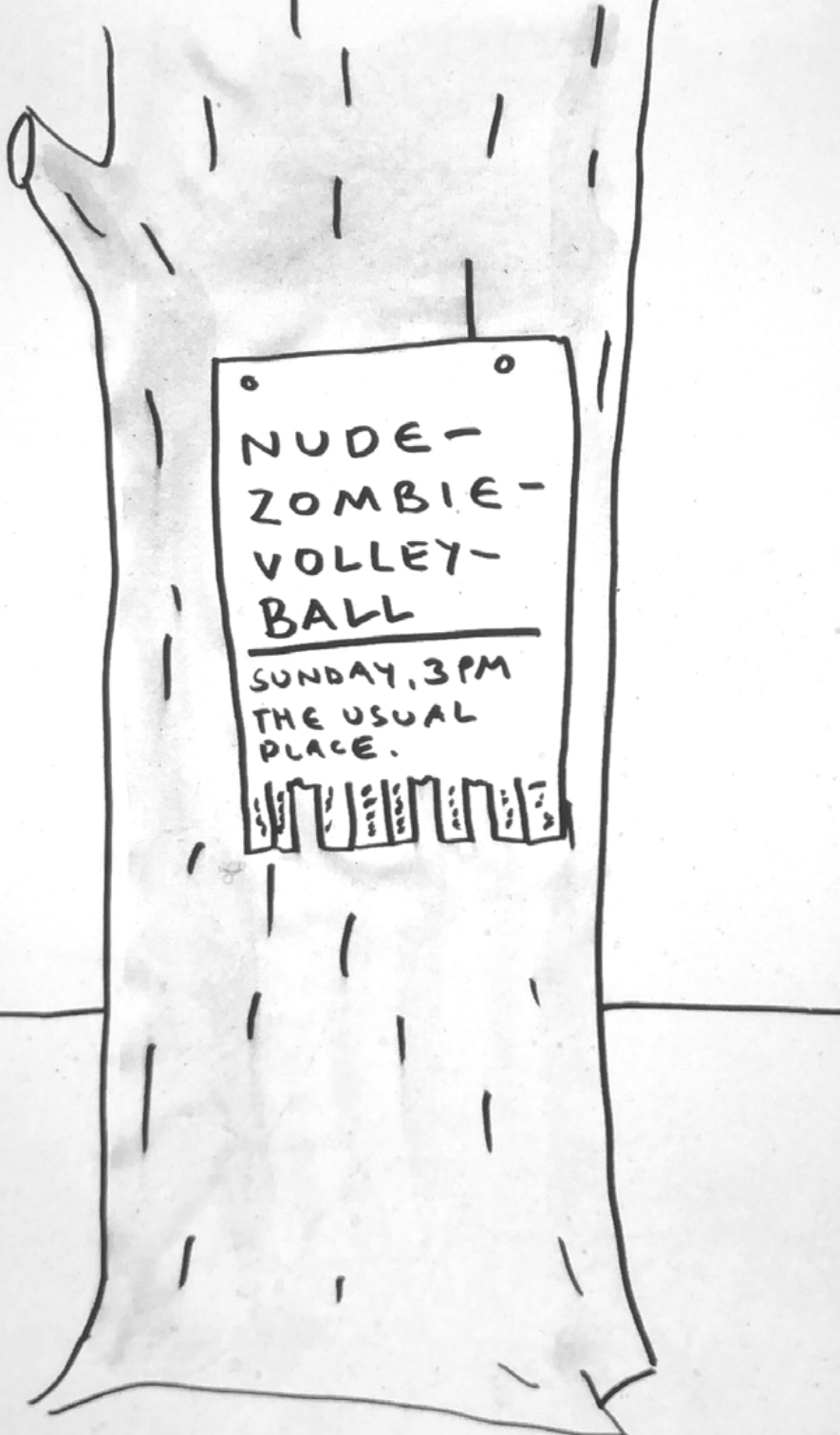


Sensitivity Training



NUDE-
ZOMBIE-
VOLLEY-
BALL

SUNDAY, 3PM
THE USUAL
PLACE.

Themed exhibitions on art and humour can be tricky. You know before entering the gallery that the art is supposed to be funny, but comedy feeds on surprise. In a jokey context, joking is what's expected. If someone farts loudly in church, it can be pretty funny. If everybody in church were to fart all the time, praying would be hilarious. Context is crucial.

*

Popular attitudes towards comedy are changing. Much of what used to amuse mainstream audiences only a few years ago is now found to be problematic and offensive, both in content and form. As someone who has frequently worked with aggressive forms of humour, I am annoyed by this. But the erstwhile convenient defence that "it's just a joke" no longer convinces me, either. Comedy is having to learn accountability, and it should. It is not easy, though, to navigate this paradigm shift. There is tremendous nervousness around all things funny, and this leads to largely predictable, pointless, highly polarised debates.

This text argues tentatively and extremely subjectively for a less binary, more fine-tuned engagement. It suggests the cultivation of sensitivities and comedic acuties that would allow for a different kind of dialogue about comedy's operations and transgressions. In most discussions, comedy is treated as if it were just a tool, like a chisel or a shovel, that serves a purpose which we may or may not approve of. But humour is more complex than that: in comedy, a shovel can be a tool, but can also be the theme, content, and meaning of the shovel. Humour is not just a rhetorical method. It is a way of facing the world, a posture, a philosophical attitude.

*

In Western high culture, humour has long been contested. It goes through waves of being praised as critical and liberating, and of being vilified as cynical, superficial, and irresponsible. Currently, for several reasons, it has low standing in the high arts. Here are a few of them:

1. Satire and political humour have lost much of their potency. Those in power, it appears, have either become immune to ridicule or, worse, it helps them. Trump is funnier than Alec Baldwin.

So Nervous

2. Comedic strategies that used to be associated with criticality—such as irony, parody, and satire—are now being employed by “the other side.” Art theorist Ana Teixeira Pinto has, for example, traced the role of irony in the internet memes and online propaganda of the alt-right movement.¹ Joking provides a low-risk entry into right-wing ideology for those she calls “fascist-curious.”

3. On social networks and in other online media, funny material spreads far more widely and swiftly than ever before. And, it is often removed from its original context, which opens the door for innocent, or wilful, misinterpretations. This has made comedy far more volatile and unpredictable. The Australian comic Hannah Gadsby now asks her live audiences—sometimes numbered in the thousands—to hand in their cell phones, to prevent bits of her routine from being recorded and circulated out of context.

4. We are seeing a general turn towards faith-based world views, not just religious fundamentalism. It is occurring across the entire societal spectrum (though the reaction to the cartoons of Mohammed published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 stand out as instances in which religious war was declared on cartoonists). Everywhere, people are withdrawing into unprovable belief systems, isolated from any critical exchange. To them, humour is the enemy, because humour sees their blind spots. And it laughs at what they hold sacred.

5. Finally, there is a sense that we are living in “interesting times”—a period of great danger and risk. Many people seem to think that dangerous times require only seriousness and authenticity.

*

That comedy is not to be trusted and should thus be shunned in any important context is a widely held idea. The charge goes back to Aristotle, probably further. The word *irony*

1 Ana Teixeira Pinto, “Artwashing: On NRX and the Alt Right,” *Texte Zur Kunst*, July 4, 2017. <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/artwashing-web-de/>

derives from the Greek *eirōn*, which means the “dissembler”: one who wears disguises, who deceives and hides. The idealist argument against comedy, which is also more-or-less the Christian argument, is that comedy doesn’t speak truth—doesn’t even try to do so—but that it instead erodes truth, along with order, virtue, and meaning. God is not funny. Neither is the constitution or the tax code.

At the same time, it is easy to picture situations where it would be more honest to disguise yourself than to show a face which you know to be deceiving; situations where it is more truthful to assert that there is no knowable truth, but only an ambiguous oscillation of many competing meanings. And what do you do when reality itself is dissociated, fragmented, and contradictory, and thus structurally funny? Humour is a distancing device. But is it always wrong to distance yourself from authentic experience? Does it, for example, make a difference whether you use comedic detachment to avoid compassion and authenticity in the first place, or if you use it, following a traumatic experience to survive?

*

Here’s an overused formula, said to be one of the fundamental laws of joking: comedy = tragedy + time. It came into full view in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Without anybody having to spell it out, there was an agreed-upon time frame within which stand-up routines mentioning 9/11 were not acceptable. The spontaneously-shouted audience response “too soon!” is said to have first appeared in comedy clubs in the United States during that period. But after some time—about two to three months, according to most accounts²—jokes about 9/11 were accepted, in principle. While there was still a heightened level of sensitivity around the topic, “too soon!” was no longer the issue.

I’d like to expand on this concept. I believe that comedy = tragedy + time and/or distance. I watched on an old television set in a student lounge in Odense, Denmark, as the World Trade Center fell to the ground. I was visiting the local art academy, where I had just done a comedy perfor-

2 Giselinde Kuipers, “Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?” Public Discourse, Digital Disaster Jokes, and the Functions of Laughter after 9/11,” *The Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 1 (March 2005): 70–84.

mance. My home, at the time, was in Lower Manhattan, a fifteen-minute walk from what would come to be known as Ground Zero. My partner saw the first tower disappear from her office window before she grabbed her bag and her colleague and rushed uptown. I could see nothing comical in the images of the collapsing buildings, but around me, the Danish art students were howling with laughter. They were not bad people. For them, this was not about people they loved and a city that was their home being threatened and possibly annihilated, but about an arrogant, far-away superpower being spectacularly humiliated on live television. Every situation that includes someone or something with which we can empathise can—and will—be funny to someone, somewhere, sometime. Again, context is of paramount importance.

*

Today, comedy is being held accountable for the damage it causes. It is asked whether the pain it metes out is justified. But how can one make that judgement? The most common answer to this real problem is to put forth the concepts of “punching up” versus “punching down.” If humour is launched from a relatively weaker position against a more powerful one, it is acceptable. That seems like a solid principle, but it is not always so simple.

I believe that all humour represents a form of violence. To be funny, a joke has to be directed against something, usually something impressive, such as a religion, language, the state, reason, expectations, parents, or money; something which cannot be attacked head-on without considerable risk. This targeted aggression can take radically different forms. There is humour that wants fundamentally to destabilise, that is interested in a state of flux and play and relative disorder, where power hasn’t congealed and categories are still up for grabs. This is the humour of the fool, the clown, the court jester, the insane. It tends towards the grotesque, the absurd, the anarchic. And then there is humour that believes in order, only perhaps a different kind of order than the existing one. It has an idea of the proper distribution of power, of truth. Comedy and power are indivisible; why else would people—as has been scientifically studied and documented—laugh significantly louder

at their bosses’ jokes than those of their colleagues?³

In terms of humour theory, that first type of comedy would be associated with Freud and Deleuze, who thought of humour as a liberating force; while the second form would be closer to the kind of humour that Henri Bergson described as a disciplining device—as a method to enforce social order—where we collectively laugh at others to keep them in line. This is the laughter of the bully, the torturer, the fascist, and their cronies. But it is possibly also the laughter of the socialist collective or the online activist. Most political satire does something like this. It is a form of aggressive othering of perceived opponents.

Both of those models—humour as liberation and humour as discipline—are accurate descriptions of how humour can operate under certain circumstances. They seem to be in opposition, but I don’t think that they truly contradict each other. I believe that they are two manifestations of the same mechanism. What they share is aggression, directed against something supremely powerful. Now, how can I claim that both types of comedy are directed against superior power? How can the sadistic laughter of the powerful at the expense of the weak be the same phenomenon as the anarchic laughter of the oppressed? What oppressive force does the all-powerful torturer need to counter with humour? Aren’t they themselves power personified?

And here comes what may be a snippet of an original thought: the victorious fascist needs humour, not to combat real-world oppression (they are, after all, the oppressor), but to keep at bay psychic forces: namely, the deep human capacity for compassion, the powerful need to empathise, the attendant horrors of guilt and shame, the thought of what their mothers and fathers would say. In this sense, the mere existence of fascist humour is a hopeful sign, because it testifies to the inherent resistance almost all of us have against inflicting suffering on others. I doubt that a truly psychopathic killer would feel the need to joke. So, psychologically speaking, the bully punches up as well.

Those two modes of comedy—the comedy of control and of critique—exist side by side and blend constantly. They can be simultaneously present in the work of one

3 Robert R. Provine, “Laughter: A Scientific Investigation,” *American Scientist* (January–February 1996): 38–45.

comedian or artist, or even in a single joke. This makes the discussion of whether someone is “punching up” or “punching down” extremely complex. When dealing with jokes about race, for example, it is quite often impossible to state with certainty whether a joke is racist or if it performatively raises the problem of racism. It is therefore understandable that people would prefer to avoid these deliberations and stay clear of entire ranges of sensitive topics (especially in the age of social media, where jokes are routinely posted out of context). Another common strategy is to judge a joke based on the assumed identity of the teller, and thus some implied notion of whether it is being told from below or from above. But as I have explained, in some way, every joke is told from below. And to calculate this relative position, when it is not brutally simplified to mean just hard power or quantifiable wealth, requires advanced formulas. Think of the obvious categories that might account for competing hierarchies in any given relationship between real human beings, such as race, class, gender, sexual identity, and education; but also able-bodiedness, attractiveness, intelligence, mental health, charisma, social-connectedness, sexual fulfilment, etc.

In this logic of above and below, what would happen if a joke correctly launched from below were really good—so good that it managed to upend the balance of power and changed who’s on top? Would it stop being acceptable after it succeeded? And if so, wouldn’t that imply that comedians not only have to punch up, but also be bad at it? Don’t forget, most bullies have had to punch their way up and through bigger bullies first. So, in this complex arbitration of hierarchies, there is always the potential that we end up catering to the sensitivities of the next bully-in-the-making.

I personally believe that it can, at times, be right to avoid a topic out of respect and consideration. Also, the prevalent connotations of certain tropes and issues can be so overpowering that comedy simply cannot steer against them. I do not think, though, that we can fairly judge a joke based solely on its topic, or on the author’s identity. What if a truly reprehensible person tells a good joke? Does this change the joke? And what if an admirable person hears the joke and retells it? Is the joke then OK again? And I don’t believe either that discomfort is reason enough to

dismiss a joke. Instead, what I would propose, whenever discomfort arises, is a detailed and attentive conversation—if possible, with the teller themselves—about context, form, author, audience, and content, and the complex, real-time triangulations of these. The meaning of a joke is a product of all these factors, and they fluctuate constantly.

For my own practical use, I came up with two simple questions to help me get a sense of the type of comedy I am dealing with at any given time:

1. Do I know, without a doubt, where the teller of a joke stands on the issues raised in the joke? If so, I am probably looking at comedy that is in the service of a stable position; at simple satire, propaganda, or the humour of social control.
2. Is the author implicating themselves? Are they, at least to some extent, also the butt of their joke, or are they joking safely from the outside? If the pain a joke inflicts is solely at the expense of others, it is probably the sadistic variety, which I try to avoid.

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