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Between Authority and Pretense

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**Abstract**

**Between Authority and Pretense**

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Humor calls into question collectively held truths, whether real or imagined, emergent or engrained. Through costume and studied speech, the performance artist as pundit makes permissible a self to which we may otherwise be afraid of confessing. Acknowledging that, “...visualities are the great legitimizers<sup>1</sup>”, the camera is a powerful tool for the artist interested in mining the gap between authority and pretense in the art and the world writ large. The projected

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Schneider, “Archives: Performance Remains.” *Performance Research* 6, no. 2 (2001): 100-08. Anthologized in Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds. *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*. London: Intellect Ltd., 2012, 137-50.

image, acting as a stand in for the post-modernist canvas, mediates between performer and audience, transmitting and transmuting signal. Through the presence of the screen, the audience is given visual reminder of the distance between self and other, encoded in space and time. This thesis explores similar conceptual and thematic material found in much of my work, however, it is intended to exist as an independent creative research output, theorizing on the laws of emotion, repositioning the equation:  $F=MA^2$ .

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<sup>2</sup> MFA (Master in Fine Arts), or Newton's law that force (F) acting on an object is equal to the mass (M) of an object times its acceleration (A).

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## Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

Welcome, everyone. My preferred personal pronoun is “We”. We would like to say a few things, in no particular order, as we don’t see hierarchy. Let me put my glasses on:

1. You belong here.
2. This is a safe space.
3. No one is an expert; we are here to learn as we go.

As a woman of C62, M52, Y72 and K41 <sup>3</sup>color value, we have taken the liberty of appropriating this text from others; and by the *others*, I do not mean Said<sup>4</sup> academicians. Plagiarism<sup>5</sup>, defined as the “wrongful appropriation” or “stealing” of another’s work, is a problematic hegemonic notion of power, having originated in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. From the Latin *plagiarius*, literally, “*kid-napping*”- it may be a trigger for survivors of childhood narcolepsy<sup>6</sup>.

Academia is a sanctuary for the sound and ultra-unsound ideas of all conceptual entrepreneurs, insulated within our VCO-free, walls. We believe in tolerance towards a diverse group of like-minded peers. We will be unapologetic when it comes to sweeping statements about bigots and transgressors. The truth is that history is a personal re-telling of various subjective narratives. To those who would assert that there is *a universal*, or *shared* human experience, we would interrupt your metanarrative to call you a colonialist and ask you to critically examine your beliefs

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<sup>3</sup> Caucasian skin tone “recipe”: <http://jaredheinrichs.com/caucasian-skin-tone-cmyk-recipe.html>

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said. See postcolonial studies.

<sup>5</sup> See “linguistic styling”

<sup>6</sup> A joke.

according to a reading of a few select theorists. We will now collapse the grand narrative and come down to your level so that we are talking at you in closer proximity. (*Dismounts.*) We will call this the *form* of criticism, *sans* the rigid structuralist approach of the *circle*, shall we? <sup>7</sup>

## 1.1 SPORT

In *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler discusses the combinatorial nature of creativity, coining the term *bisociation*: a clash of two mutually incompatible codes, or contexts, which explode tension<sup>8</sup>. In combining two or more *seemingly oppositional* ideas, duality is bisected. For Freud, this collision of two often-sublimated ideas produces a third outcome that subverts norm or expectation<sup>9</sup>.

Comrade, your statement is factually incorrect.

Yes, it is. But it is politically correct.<sup>10</sup>

Playing<sup>11</sup> with words and worlds, punning interrupts the purpose at hand by introducing another variation on a theme, moving the discourse to another place. This logic of parallel and intersecting lines of thought symbolically mirrors the relationship between reality and perception. Highlighting inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies between competing ideologies, Ego,

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<sup>7</sup> Halpine, Clare. Performance text. *Dispatches of a Microaggressions Scout*. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Koestler, A. (1964). *The Act of Creation*. London: Hutchinson & Co.

<sup>9</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Pelican Books: London, England, 1976.

<sup>10</sup> A common political joke from the Soviet Union. Telling a political joke was regarded an extreme sport, given that under Article 58 (RSFSR Penal Code), “anti-Soviet propoganda” was a potentially capital offense. Similar jokes reference economic theories and systems of oppression: *Question: Will there be KGB in communism? Answer: As you know, under communism, the state will be abolished, together with its means of suppression. People will know how to self-arrest themselves.*

<sup>11</sup> Action or manner of engaging in a sport.

Ids and isms, the single level and the singular meaning is splintered. Complicating what is often oversimplified for the sake of easy compartmentalization and cultural digestibility: left or right, progressive or regressive, pro or anti, capitalist or Marxist, etc., ad infinitum, humor dissipates and re-distributes anxiety, to say things that can otherwise not be said. Eschewing the immediate, logical read or reason, humor as scapegoat affords the performative subject the freedom to take greater social risk.

Performing humor can highlight the oftentimes religiously<sup>12</sup> dogmatic invocation of theory in contemporary art. Like a renewal of baptismal vows, the contemporary hypercritics ask:

*V. Do you renounce art that looks like art? chias*

*V. Do you reject the lure and oeuvre (i.e., the Louvre) of audience accessibility?*

*V. Do you reject the evil of historical painting?*

*V. Do you believe in Chris Burden, who crucified himself on a Volkswagen, died and whose work is now seated at the right hand sidewalk of the LA County Museum of Modern Art (LACMA)?*

*V. Do you believe in Jacques: Derrida, Lacan and Ranciere, do you participate in the community of semiotext(e), and the discursivity of Badioiu, Barthes, Baudelaire, Butler and Bishop?*

*V. Do you believe in the dialectical challenge of biopolitics and the epistemological breach between Foucault and Marxism, madness and civilization, questions of labor, women on the verge of a nervous breakdown, cannibalism, neo-liberalism and post-Fordian economics<sup>13</sup>?*

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<sup>12</sup> Religion is an illusion but we're in this postmodern hell together, discussing and dissecting the anxiety of the body, of fluids and falling apart, the body as machine, as pastiche; the body fragmented, confused, obscured, cut, veiled and unveiled; the body as object and abject, of guilt, shame, anxiety, and annihilation.

<sup>13</sup> Halpine, Clare. Performance Text. *Semicollonade*. 2017.

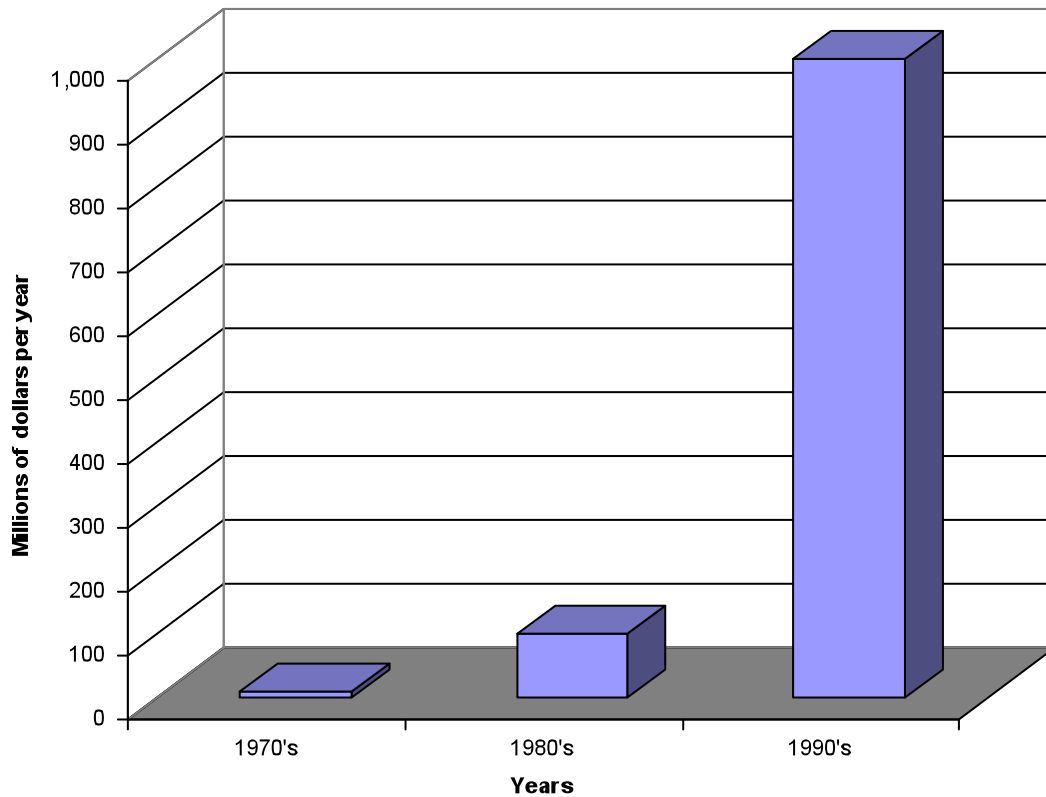


Figure 1.1 Increase in cost of dollars and cents of humor in the United States<sup>14</sup>

Holding space for the possibility of performance as documentation *and* theatre, video art recognizes its infallibility, operating in the chiasmus. Performance as documentation is prone to fail in precision. Live or in playback mode, the exact message is always difficult to locate as signification is veiled via F-stop or viewfinder. Here lies the ontological power of the image: admitting its lens, the means of performance is self-conscious in its end.

<sup>14</sup> Halpine, Clare. Exhibit A.

Referencing and parodying the canon of art historical theory, performing the self through video highlights gendered notions of mastery, toppled by the Sisyphean struggle, disputing superficial characterizations of “weakness” ascribed to the feminine. Through, with, and in humor, the performative subject is buoyed by the knowledge that any failed attempt at humor will only shine a brighter light on the insecurity of what it means to be human. “...To become human or learn what it means to be human does not come that easily,” wrote Soren Kierkegaard. The truly ironic stance is existential, the occasion for disruption and disorientation: a pause, a crack in the veneer, and a way of *not* being perfectly sure. The Kierkegaardian view of irony is more than a merely derivative form of positing a witty remark or posing as detached or indifferent. Irony immerses us in the conflict with the real, bringing to light the flaws, failings and shortcomings of being human. In this way, irony is not the *exclusion* of earnestness, but a serious commitment to the pursuit of dismantling pretense<sup>15</sup>. Humor and irony help us to understand and portray the reality of who we are. The relentless search for this reality, can uncover commitments, ideologies and contradictions that are otherwise too painful to address.

*Do(n't) let me make a fool of myself,  
You know I'm good at that*

*“Point to your head and say the letters, M, T”  
“Empty.”*

*Being, easily dismissed,  
could be a gift*

*Don't laugh,  
I mean it!<sup>16</sup>.*

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<sup>15</sup> Lear, Jonathan. *A Case for Irony*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Halpine, Clare. This is not a poem. *This is an arrangement of words*. 2017.

Portraying the social anomie of alas and alack – of usual feminine decorum - performance affords the opportunity to co-opt misogynist theory that all creation stems from a desire to possess the phallic scepter<sup>17</sup>. Depicting the emotive *and* cerebral, humor often serves to bring together what is type cast as separate and unequal. Combining the documentary and theatrical, performance in video lends itself to the portrayal of the edited version of the unedited self, blurring the line between fiction and (alternative) non-fiction. Video proposes to offer a true® account of the self-aware subject, acknowledging the irony of in/authentically performing the self in everyday life<sup>18</sup>.

## 1.2 FIGURES

Questioning the incontrovertible notion of progress, drawing from figures of the past in performing feminine cliché in the present is a means of mining the confidence gap. Portraying something more essential than the essentialized sexual image - masking and unmasking vulnerability re-writes rather than writes-off forms of self-knowledge (“too sensitive” or “too emotional”) that have long been pejoratively labeled problematic throughout history. To insist on the ever-present role of women throughout history is not to turn a blind eye to grievous inequalities and injustices, but to realize that the state never *granted* our *personhood* but merely recognized our inalienable right of that reality. This subtle distinction in language throws into relief a host of other questions, but doesn’t play victim to validation from the often unjust. To state “historically women had no power” is a feigning of patriarchal flagellation while in effect fanning patriarchal congratulation (offering men credit for single-handedly perpetuating and developing the whole of civilization). The unabashed and brazen contributions of women

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<sup>17</sup> Stern, Karl. *The Flight from Woman*. Paragon House Publishers, 1985. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959.

throughout all societies and cultures - if quietly, not passively - should only serve to call into question the very rubric and presuppositions constituting our theories on the definition of power itself.

Feminism as a brand runs the risk of sanitizing the complexities of a glass half-full and a glass ceiling left intact. While the dominant narrative might suggest that success is a high-powered career, earned by cloying<sup>19</sup> one's way to the top, the inference remains: to be a powerful woman is to play like the men and to be a woman is a drag; playing house and dress-up is a transgressive artistic act for men only<sup>20</sup>. Aiding the emotional activation of the viewer, song and soundtrack engage alternative modes of being and knowing, which includes the poetic, the contemplative and the intuitive. Opaque, obscure and fragmentary, the surreal staging of the feminine reality is left (un) ambiguously open to interpretation.

*Article 4.*

*Save a dizzying list of coders and co-dependents, she doesn't need anyone. If she does not have a high-powered career, it is because she lives in a world of binaries, or has not yet read Lean In.*

*Article 5.*

*To Destiny's Child, she is an independent woman; as a child of destiny, she is a dependent rational animal. If she could say anything, it would be everything. But she is not a virgin martyr, nor the Virgin Mary; when it comes to consent, she is in the driver's seat; her Fiat, a Coupe d'état<sup>21</sup>.*

*Article 6.*

*As of the dawning of eve from atoms, all is a Galerie de Glaces.*

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<sup>19</sup> An excess of sweetness or sentimentality

<sup>20</sup> See Marcel Duchamp. See Allan Kaprow's *Household*, 1964.

<sup>21</sup> Halpine, Clare. *Womynifesto*, 2015.

## Chapter 2. COMPLETE YOUR DISSERTATION

Humor assists the process of scanning for idiosyncrasies in the canyon between the real and the ideal. Performing through the lens of video holds the potential for the cultural ubiquity of the medium to be used as a destabilizing tool, subtly subverting cultural norm and audience expectation. Attempting to re-write the unwritten rules of engagement, the intimate and complex process of art attempts to represent what we see, feel, hear and think – in order to assist in making personally subjective sense from nonsense. Admitting one’s own overwhelm in the midst of conflicting ideas and ideals within contemporary culture is a method of attempting to understand and validate the response of others. The adage that there’s “some truth to all humor”, rightly provokes concern in some academic circles, triggering age-old and relatively new questions of “truth, what is truth? And, *whose* truth?” In an effort to address issues of the personal and political, the fact that humor can serve as an opaque multi-function tool to subvert and/or reinforce existing norms is one of the reasons it so effectively can serve to address delicate subject matter (for better or worse), by delicately flying under the radar.

In attempting to navigate the complexities of Marxist-feminist-post-neo-liberal-anarchist-utopian-identity politics of the contemporary [art] discourse<sup>22</sup>, the performative subject employs humor as a means of acting as both polarizing and imposing, frivolous and foolish, makeshift and maudlin, in trespassing the status quo. Born of negotiation with discomfort, the court jester’s ability to mock and revile even the most prominent is a fragile position characterized by the

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<sup>22</sup> See history of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Shakespearean phrase, “wise enough to play the fool<sup>23</sup>”. Performing feminine potency with comic tension, the artist as subject re-presents that which is dispossessed.

*Strip down to the essentials (What is essential?)  
All experience teaches the heart*

*To be more or less  
vulnerable*

*To bare or not to bury  
(That is the question I think Shakespeare was asking)*

*Chafing under the weight<sup>24</sup>  
Like a delicate seed pushed deep in to the earth<sup>2526</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup>Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night*. Norton's Anthology of English Literature. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: 2010.

<sup>24</sup> \*Wheat

<sup>25</sup> \*Hearth

<sup>26</sup> Halpine, Clare. This is not a poem. *This is an arrangement of words*. 2017.