



Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
MAX AND IRIS STERN INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM 10
SANS BLAGUE / NO JOKE
THE MATTER OF HUMOUR IN CONTEMPORARY ART
Friday, April 1 and Saturday, April 2, 2016

BIOGRAPHIES AND ABSTRACTS

Mélanie Couture

Mélanie Couture began her career as a sexologist for five years before leaving her profession in 2005 to join the ranks of the École nationale de l'humour. Known for her charisma and her infectious laugh, she offers us comedy without complexes, prompted by her thoughts about humanity and sprinkled with self-mockery. We have seen her on stage on many occasions, including three Juste pour rire galas and numerous appearances at the ComediHa! Comédie Club as well as on television on the weekly show *Selon l'opinion comique*. The creator of the Web series *Vendredi Vino*, she is also the author of the best-selling novel *21 amants, sans remords ni regrets*, which was such a hit with the public that a second printing was ordered less than a month after it was released. Alongside her solo career, she is a founding member of the collective *Les filles de l'humour* which garnered the *Nez d'or Coup de cœur* award at the Grand Rire de Québec in 2013.

Fred Dubé

Often described as the most engaged comedian of his generation, Fred Dubé holds a unique niche in the world of Québec humour. A graduate of the École nationale de l'humour, class of 2005, he finds comic material in politics, power, the media and everything that speaks to his civic soul, and proposes a clearly defined, uncompromising vision of the world. The Rimouski native presented caustic segments on *Un gars le soir* on V television for three years, then on *Brassard en direct d'aujourd'hui* and *GROStitres* on MAtv. His shows *Terroriste blanc d'Amérique*, *L'ignorance fait plus de victimes que le cancer* and *Radical pouding* have earned him acclaim, including the media choice award at Zoofest in 2015. Dubé also sharpens his incisive pen for the issue-oriented newspaper *Le mouton noir* and the Montréal edition of the *Métro* newspaper. He was seen in the documentary series *Les 5 prochains* on ICI ARTV, which showcases rising stars of comedy.

Louise Richer

A psychology graduate and a teacher in her previous life, Louise Richer is the founding director of the École nationale de l'humour. This institution, established in 1988 and today recognized internationally, is considered a mainstay of Québec's cultural ecosystem. A well-known spokesperson and emblematic figure in the world of comedy, Richer has spurred discussions on the place and role of humour in society by organizing events such as Québec's first symposiums examining this subject and by creating the Observatoire de l'humour. Winner of the 2014 Prix femmes d'affaires du Québec, NGO category, and the Germaine-Gibara Leadership award, SME category, at the 2015 Mercuriades, she completed the McGill-HEC Montréal EMBA—for which she received a scholarship—in January 2016. She was also made a member of the Order of Canada in 2016 “for her contributions to the development and dissemination of the performing arts as director of the École nationale de l'humour.”

CREATING COMEDY: PRACTICE AND INTENTIONS

Discussion moderated by Louise Richer

Mélanie Couture and Fred Dubé, who are both busy comics well known in the Québec comedy world, as well as graduates of the École nationale de l'humour (ÉNH), will talk about their personal artistic practices in order to shed light on their creative process and the distinctive characteristics of their means of expression. Mélanie Couture ventures joyfully into the subject of self-assertion and female assertiveness, in tones that range from introspective to resounding. Displaying definite audacity as he readily opens up topics that are buried, hidden away or pushed aside, Fred Dubé is a comedian who is not just funny, but whose words prick our consciences without lecturing. These artists, who both stand out for the originality of their work, will present the underlying motivations and the objectives that have guided their paths and their career choices. They will describe their respective worlds and their favourite topics in this discussion moderated by Louise Richer, founding director of the ÉNH. As active players on many different creative platforms—stage, television, the Web, print—they are in a position to reflect the environment for creating comedy, an artistic discipline that is fast diversifying and bubbling with excitement, particularly in Québec.

Anna Dezeuze is Lecturer in Art History at the École Supérieure d'Art et de Design Marseille-Méditerranée, where she is also involved in developing a research project called the Bureau des positions. She edited *The 'Do-it-yourself' Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media* (Manchester University Press, 2010), on spectator participation from the 1960s to the present, and co-edited, with Julia Kelly, *Found Sculpture and Photography from Surrealism to Contemporary Art* (Ashgate, 2013) on the relationship between found objects, chance and photography. Her latest book offers an analysis of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Deleuze Monument* (Afterall, 2014). Dezeuze's other publications cover art in the 1960s and 1970s, including Fluxus, assemblage, kinetic art and the practices of such artists as Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Bruce Nauman and

Richard Wentworth. Her forthcoming book is titled *Almost Nothing: Observations on Precarious Practices in Contemporary Art*.

THE DEADPAN INERTIA OF THE BODY/SCULPTURE

Can the inertia of sculpture be comical? That is what some contemporary artists suggest when they place sculptures and the human body in humorous situations: holding a pose to turn their body into a sculpture, for example, or trying to interact with sculptures as if they were people. From the *Singing Sculpture* by Gilbert & George (1969) to Nice Style, “The World’s First Pose Band,” created by Bruce McLean in 1971, and the filmed falls of Bas Jan Ader around 1970, the body has been used, through performance, as a sculptural material. Fraught with absurdity, these performances revolve around the physical qualities of sculpture, such as weight, immobility, verticality and autonomy. More recently, these qualities have been revisited in the filmed performances of young artists like Ana Navas and Dominic Watson, which show them trying to communicate with modern sculptures. In the age of social networks, might a new generation of artists now be updating the investigations begun by their predecessors? To answer that question, I propose to explore this trajectory from the 1970s to the 2010s through the lens of the hypothesis formulated by Alex Potts in 2000 that the fundamental inertia of sculpture may hold out some resistance to an increasingly omnipresent “image-based consumerism.”

Julie Dufort is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Her thesis deals with the boundaries between humour and politics in comedy-related controversies in the United States. She teaches Humour and Politics at UQAM and Humour and Society at the École nationale de l’humour (ÉNH). Among her recent publications, she co-edited, with Lawrence Olivier, the collective work *Humour et politique: de la connivence à la désillusion* (Presses de l’Université Laval, 2016) and, with Roseline Lemire-Cadieux, a chapter on the film *The Big Lebowski* and the concept of irony in Kierkegaard’s work, in *The Big Lebowski and Philosophy: Keeping your Mind Limber with Abiding Wisdom* (Blackwell Publishing, 2012). She is a member of the ÉNH’s Observatoire de l’humour.

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN HUMOUR, ART AND POLITICS

Because humour seems so ordinary—everyone laughs and can make people laugh—it is not generally perceived as a topic for political science research. Yet if we think about it, the connections between politics and humour are striking in their complexity. This presentation will be an opportunity to reflect on the places where they come together. Is humour subject to political approval? For some, humour puts the crowds to sleep and avoids politics with its inherent cynicism. For others, laughter is the weapon of the powerless, since it allows political actions and preconceived ideas to be denounced. That said, is it possible to see humour in a different way by considering it as a form of symbolic, “politically

correct” violence? The frequent debates over freedom of expression and the increasing legislation of humour will prompt us to re-examine the rules of this language play by advancing one of its founding principles, namely that of being an art form. This approach will also enable us to consider the research program that can emerge at the meeting point of political science and humour studies.

Casey Jane Ellison is a comedian and artist. Born and raised in Los Angeles, the bicoastal bisexual writes, directs, animates and performs. She is the creator, writer and host of *Touching the Art*, a web talk show featured on Ovation TV. She recently completed writing, directing and starring in a “branded content sitcom”—something she invented—called *The Right and Left Brains of Casey Jane’s*, for the clothing label BB Dakota. She was a selected artist in the New Museum's 2015 Triennial. Ellison performs stand-up comedy across the United States in clubs, galleries, museums, events and outdoor areas. Her videos have been shown at MoMA PS1, the Museum of Arts and Design and The New Museum in New York, MAMA in the Netherlands, and MOCA in Los Angeles, among others. Her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian* and more.

THANK ME VERY MUCH:

A GUIDE TO LAUGHING EVERYWHERE WITH CASEY JANE ELLISON

Ellison is essentially a writer. Yes, she makes and directs beautiful images and videos, but all of her work begins and stands on the concepts, stories, truths and jokes she writes. Her entry point to any world is comedy, because she finds most things hysterical and can only pay attention if she can find it funny. It should be stated that she pays a lot of attention and/or aspires to pay attention, because she finds humour in most things, because existing on earth is chaotic and uncomfortable and bizarre and exciting. She's interested in many things: survival, inequity, God, food, sexuality of political figures, kindness, ecology, rage against machines, apathy, crushes, and everything else. She is driven by both paranoia and curiosity, two paradoxical urges that make her a fearful and warm host of any show, panel and/or party. This view of the world does keep her on the outside looking in and this alienation is how she inserts herself into the discussion. She hopes you find humour in her alienating but dead true statements. If you do, she and you complete the circle.

Dominic Hardy is a professor of historiography and art history in Québec and Canada before 1900 in the Department of Art History at the Université du Québec à Montréal. A specialist in the history of Québec caricature, he co-edited, with Annie Gérin and Jean-Philippe Uzel, the issue of *Revue d'art canadien/Canadian Art Review* (RACAR) devoted to the theme of *Humour in the Visual Arts and Visual Culture: Practices, Theories and Histories* (2012); and, with Micheline Cambron (in collaboration with Nancy Perron), the collective work *Quand la caricature sort du journal. Baptiste Ladébauche 1878–1957*. He is the

author of articles and chapters in books devoted to caricature as it relates to art history, including “Caricature on the Edge of Empire: George Townshend in Quebec, 1759” (*The Efflorescence of Caricature, 1715–1838*, ed. Todd Porterfield, Ashgate, 2011); “Une grande noirceur: splendeurs et mystères de la caricature au Québec, 1899–1960” (*L’art de la caricature*, ed. Ségolène Le Men, Presses universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2011); and “The Idea of Hogarth in American Print Culture, from the Revolutionary Era to the 1830s” (*Hogarth’s Legacy*, ed. Cynthia Roman, Yale University Press, 2016).

ART HISTORY AND VISUAL SATIRE. TOWARDS AN UN-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Just how much is (or not) art history altered by studies of the satirical? To what extent can it also be a field of investigation for behaviours that could be said to have lived through the different ages of this discipline, from its monographic “foundations” (Vasari) to the institutional reincarnations it has undergone since the twentieth century? Here we are referring to the elements of visual satire (its allegorical structure, its dualities, its use of caricature or the grotesque) that have called into play the whole range of figuration in the visual arts. Also at issue are forms and media: drawing, print, installation, monument, performance, and more—all manifestations that can be brought together under the heading of a satirical vein that runs through the visual arts. While this vein has been primarily associated with the sphere of the print culture, it can also be observed in large-scale museum and public art projects, not to mention furtive practices and street art, which have shaken up the parameters of the discipline of art history for over a century, in a way un-disciplining it. I will attempt to lay out some guidelines (or base lines, or horizon lines) by speaking of two public art projects presented in London in the “Fourth Plinth” series in Trafalgar Square: *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, 2005, by Marc Quinn, and *Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle*, 2010, by Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA), while examining them with a frankly anachronistic, heterotopic eye, which will also encompass Montréal by looking at the exhibition of works by Shonibare presented here in 2015 by the DHC/ART Foundation, a mere stone’s throw from the Montréal monument dedicated to Nelson (1808).

Ruba Katrib is curator at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, New York, where she has produced the group shows *The Eccentrics* (2015), *Puddle, Pothole, Portal* (2014) (co-curated with artist Camille Henrot), *Better Homes* (2013) and *A Disagreeable Object* (2012). Recent solo shows include exhibitions with Rochelle Goldberg (2016), Anthea Hamilton, Gabriel Sierra, Magali Reus, Michael E. Smith and Erika Verzutti (all 2015). In her previous post as associate curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), North Miami, she organized several acclaimed solo and group exhibitions, including *The Reach of Realism* (2009), which explored the traditions of realism within the digital age, as well as the first museum retrospectives of Cory Arcangel and Claire Fontaine (both 2010). Katrib has contributed texts to a number of publications and periodicals such as *Art in America*, *Parkett* and *cura. magazine*. She also co-

curated, with Tom Eccles, *Visitors*, a group exhibition of public art on Governors Island, New York (2015).

SLAPSTICK, TECHNOLOGY, AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Slapstick and gags emerged in early twentieth-century popular entertainment as a new type of humour that, in part, responded to an increased reliance on machine technologies. This talk examines the humorous collision and intertwining of bodies and machines in early cartoons, film and circus entertainment in the early twentieth century, and posits parallels in contemporary art practices. The implications of bodies in contact with machines shifts with digital technologies, and this is a discussion of the potentiality of exploring the comedy in the fissures and breaks that occur when new technologies are incorporated into daily life. The proposed seamlessness of technologies is questioned through forms of humour, which can reframe ideas around power and expertise. Looking at historical avant-garde practices and popular media, as well as contemporary art, different modes of challenging the efficiency, speed and mastery that new technologies promise will be examined in the transitory industrial periods of the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Miriam Katz is a New York and Los Angeles-based curator, writer and performer. She has organized exhibitions and performances for MoMA PS1, The Kitchen, Art21, Columbia University and The Artist's Institute in New York, and MOCA in Los Angeles. Several times a year Katz also curates and hosts a stand-up show at David Lynch's arts club, Silencio, in Paris, France. Her curatorial work has been reviewed in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The Village Voice*, *Bomb Magazine* and *Le Monde*. Katz has guest-lectured at Bard College, New York University, Columbia University, the Tate Modern and the Centre Pompidou, among other places. She writes regularly about art and comedy for *Artforum* and *Bookforum* magazines. Katz studied Comparative Literature at Barnard College, Columbia University, and Art History in the Master's Program at Hunter College. She is a comedic actor and recently starred in the films *Good Morning* and *Far From the Tree*.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF COMEDY

Miriam Katz has worked in the art world for the past fifteen years, and for much of that time, she has also been involved with the sphere of contemporary comedy—teaching and writing about it, organizing shows, performing and even doing studio visits with comedians. During her talk, Katz will describe some of the approaches she has used to bring together the realms of art and comedy, and argue that a relationship between these two media greatly enhances both. She will explain why humour, with its power to engender empathy and elicit social change, is so beneficial and essential to our culture. The lecture will be illustrated with audio and video examples from the works of visual artists and comedians.

Michael Portnoy has a background in dance and experimental comedy, but switched camps to the field of visual arts around 2006. His performance-based practice is realized in a variety of media, from participatory installation and sculpture, to video, painting, writing, theatres and curating. He has presented internationally in museums, art galleries, theatres and music halls, including Witte de With, Rotterdam (2016); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2015 and 2010); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2014); Cricoteka, Krakow (2014); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2013); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2013); The Kitchen, New York (2013); dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel (2012); Objectif Exhibitions, Antwerp (2011); Taipei Biennial (2010); De Appel, Amsterdam (2014 and 2010); Performa 07, 09, and 11 Biennial, New York; Kadist Foundation, Paris (2009); SculptureCenter, New York (2008); and Kunsthalle Basel (2008). His first book, *Script Opposition in Late-Model Carrot Jokes*, was published in 2011 and he is a visiting lecturer at Malmö Art Academy.

Dropped jokes, Broke jokes, Pause jokes, Tone jokes, Jokes that strangle each other to sleep...

Michael Portnoy will share some of the many experiments he has performed on jokes over the years in the realms of visual art, performance, pedagogy, etc. From terrorizing “alternative” comedians in the mid-1990s, to creating a dance piece about the funniest sound in the English language (*The K Sound*, 2006), to organizing conferences with Polish and Belgian humour theorists (*Carrot Jokes and Cognitive Linguistics*, 2010), to directing the *Experimental Comedy Training Camp* residency at The Banff Centre in 2012, to running an absurdist game show at the last Documenta, to improvising five hours of beautiful jokes at the Stedelijk Museum (*100 Beautiful Jokes*, 2014), to skewering the prevalent breeds of po-faced, minimalist dance presented in museums today (*Relational Stalinism - The Musical*, 2016), it has been Portnoy’s project to immerse viewers in an emboldening confusion, stretching jokes to their breaking point, using them as containers for types of experience and poetics far outside the realm of stand-up.

Alain Vaillant is a professor of French literature and director of the Centre des sciences de la littérature française (CSLF) at the Université Paris Ovest. A historian of romanticism and a theorist of historic poetics, he has also maintained an ongoing interest in literary humour. He is the author of *Le rire* (Quintette, 1991); *La poésie* (Colin, 1992; 2nd ed. 2008); *Histoire de la littérature française du xix^e siècle*, in collaboration with Jean-Pierre Bertrand and Philippe Régnier (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1998; 2nd ed. 2007); *1836. L’an 1 de l’ère médiatique*, in collaboration with Marie-Ève Thérénty (Nouveau Monde éditions, 2001); *L’amour-fiction. Discours amoureux et poétique du roman moderne* (Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2002); *La crise de la littérature. Romantisme et modernité* (ELLUG, 2005); *Baudelaire poète comique* (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2007); *L’histoire littéraire* (Colin, coll. “U”, 2010); *Le veau de Flaubert* (Hermann, 2013); and the forthcoming *L’art de la littérature* (Garnier, 2016). He has edited a dozen collective works, most recently, at

Presses universitaires de Paris Ouest, *L'esthétique du rire* (2012) and *Le rire moderne* (2013). He has just submitted a work on the general theory of laughter (*La civilisation du rire*) to CNRS Éditions, to be released in fall 2016.

ARTISTS' LAUGHTER

At least since the *fumisme*, a movement blending irreverence and nonsense in late nineteenth-century France, and the avant-gardes of the next century, very great artists have made a speciality of laughing and eliciting laughter; they have combined artistic invention and humorous provocation to produce aesthetic, political or social challenges or for the infinite pleasure afforded by pure fantasy. But these specific, historically dated intrusions of humour into the realm of creation would be inconceivable if there were not independently existing forms that it can adopt, a fundamental, essential affinity between laughter and art. This affinity will be the particular focus of our discussion. It first arises out of the anthropological origin common to both the comical and to artistic emotion; I even hypothesize that all art stems from the mood that originally characterized the person laughing. It is then explained in concrete terms by the psychological mechanisms—conscious or unconscious—shared, up to a certain point until they diverge, by laughter and art. Finally, it is true that modern art, through its power of abstraction and subjectification, has gone the furthest in this comparison. When the artist has a sense of humour, laughter and art then seem to be as one. And even if it is devoid of humour, art appears like a mutant form of laughter, of which it has kept the best part—though perhaps without knowing it.

Gregory H. Williams is associate professor of contemporary and modern art history at Boston University. He has written art criticism for periodicals, including *Artforum*, *frieze*, *Art Journal*, *Parkett* and *Texte zur Kunst*, and has published essays on Rosemarie Trockel, Martin Kippenberger, Imi Knoebel, Cosima von Bonin, Franz Erhard Walther and Alexander Kluge. His book, *Permission to Laugh: Humor and Politics in Contemporary German Art*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2012.

COMIC MISTRANSLATION: MARTIN KIPPENBERGER'S TRAVELS

As seen in numerous exhibitions, publications and symposia, the past two decades have witnessed a growing interest in the role of humour in the visual arts. This has taken place during a period in which globalization has emerged as a dominant critical paradigm for contemporary art following the exhaustion of postmodernism in the 1990s. This talk focuses on the role of locally inflected wit and vernacular wordplay in the mobile and multifaceted career of Martin Kippenberger. The German artist's international popularity might seem surprising, given that his combination of visual humour and verbal jokes often propels comedic language (in its material, conceptual and pictorial forms) to the point of incomprehensibility. Kippenberger's practice will be discussed in relation to the work of other internationally active artists who employ humour in order to critique a facile notion of globalization that aims for universal understanding and

inclusivity. Instead of the fluid mobility of language and form, these artists stress the situatedness of jokes, highlighting the opportunities for missed signals and semantic gaps as works of art (and the artists who make them) travel around the world.