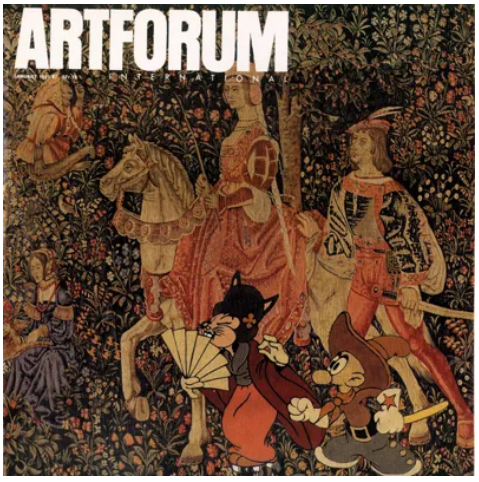
TART WIT, WISE HUMOR

By Donald Kuspit

Mr. Furniss has shown that the one thing lacking in [the Royal Academicians] is a sense of humour, and that, if they would not take themselves so seriously, they might produce work that would be a joy, and not a weariness, to the world. Whether or not they will profit by the lesson, it is difficult to say, for dulness has become the basis of respectability, and seriousness the only refuge of the shallow.

—Oscar Wilde, "The Rout of the R[oyal] A[cademy]," 1887



Meyer Vaisman, *The Noble Amazon* (detail), 1990, silk and ink on cotton, 73¼ x96 ¾".

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For all that however we would still like to ask whether the

savage's belief in his holiest myths is not, even from the beginning, tinged with a certain element of humour.

—Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1944

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AVANT-GARDE ART has been taken very seriously, and has been described in a variety of serious ways. I want to suggest, seriously, that it be taken comically—that at its core it is an eloquent rearticulation of the comic spirit. The violence that avant-garde art does to the modern view of things is basically comic, for it opposes the weariness and misery that modern seriousness has made of life—the inward catastrophe and shallowness that life has become. The cunning tools of the opposition are wit, humor, and an upbeat sense of the comedy of it all. To be avant-garde is to pursue, through the deliberate development of a comic sensibility, psychic rebirth—optimism rather than pessimism, despite recognition of the world's unpleasant reality.[1]

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The comic interpretation of the world has the last word on it, a view that thinkers as different as Marx and Kierkegaard shared, honoring the understanding of life embedded in Greek and Elizabethan drama. Every Greek tragedy was followed by a lewd and funny satyr play, and Elizabethan tragedy, almost always, by a comic jig. (Sometimes the comedy was included in the tragedy.) And these plays end not, or not only, with the tragic individual's fated death, but with a comic return to social normalcy. It is as though their message were that the real task of life is not heroically and fatally to assert oneself against impossible social odds, but ingeniously to endure, even to flourish, in society, while seeing all its faults and failings, indeed while burdening one's conscience with them. In both style and substance—if the two can be separated—avant-garde revolt has more to do with this subtle kind of courage than with the nihilistic and oddly naive heroism usually attributed to it. Otto Freundlich, in fact, called avant-garde art a "laugh-rocket," differing "from the usual rocket in its shrilly howling laughter while climbing." He thought its sporadic, unexpected occurrence allowed it to accomplish the purpose of its ephemeral existence: to provoke comic terror. Its carnival consciousness illuminates the world.[2]

DIARY

FULL CIRCLE

To treat the inhumane world with ridicule is to make it emotionally tolerable. The self sustains itself through its comic sense of things. Indeed the clown is a witting survivor, as the tragic hero is an unwitting suicide. The self that experiences life as comic, even to the extreme of perverse farce, is not traumatized by the world. Comedy is a way of rolling with the world's shocks rather than meeting them head-on. Tragic heroes are brilliant and conceited, but doomed, and profoundly unfulfilled, as their premature deaths suggest. The unheroic heroes of comedy may seem dumb in comparison, and hardly as proud and provocative, but they have the ready wit and good humor to outsmart the world and enjoy life. Comic unheroes are brilliant in practice, tragic heroes only in theory, and their theory lets them down, especially in its conception of their own importance. The comic unheroes know that nobody is important to the world, which is why they won't die for it, and why they play the nobody, getting out of harm's way.

The world, of course, has always been harsh and indifferent, as the tragic vision has protested at least since Job. But the 20th century's avant-gardes are a response not only to the built-in hardships of the human condition but to the particular social form of modern living—to the bourgeoisie. By "bourgeois" I mean a state of mind, an attitude, not membership of a class, and I refer to the "miserabilistic" life created for us through bourgeois "mathematization," that is, through reification of the world by the rationalizing and demystifying of every aspect of existence.[3] Simply put, avant-garde art has responded to the unconscious need for comic relief in a society that has tried to compel its members to take everything seriously.

Bourgeois seriousness is epitomized by Comtean positivism, which assumes that coldly, unimaginatively, "objectively" facing the facts is the only authentically adult attitude, the only real maturity. But such behavior is actually lopsidedly serious—unbalanced in its seriousness. Through the perversity of hilarity, the avant-gardes have tried to restore society's balance.

If, as Horace Walpole said, "the world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel," then avant-garde art treats the world as a comic idea despite feeling it to be a tragedy. Avant-garde art triumphs over tragic feeling by comic thought. A comic attitude is obvious in Dada's antic sense of absurdity, but it also exists, if covertly, in the best nonobjective art. Strange as it may seem, Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian—even Mark Rothko and Robert Ryman—have a comic dimension, or, rather, we see in their work the struggle to transcend a tragic sense of things with a comically refined art, an art in which formal relationships are both objectively and subjectively ironic. These artists' esthetic, mystic, and idealist revolt against bourgeois materialism—so powerful an avant-garde motive in general—is a search for refuge from the world, and an oblique revenge on it. It is comic to want a coign of vantage on the tragic banality of bourgeois life, a place from which to mourn it in irony.[4] The result is ambivalent—abstract art, tragicomically, is ambiguously bourgeois and antibourgeois, physically profane and inchoately transcendental—but it is nonetheless a determined effort to rise, through good humor, above depression. Indeed, abstraction offers a subtle articulation of the inner struggle between the bourgeois and antibourgeois components of the contemporary self, a struggle evident in Modern art from the first—from Courbet, Manet, and Impressionism on. Later, this struggle is enacted explosively in the best post-Modern comic art.

There is a strange restlessness to avant-garde

development. Its rapidly changing theories and means, one successively replacing the other, bespeak a kind of despair, with nonobjective sensation, the readymade, the collage, the stylized unconscious, the colorless or colorful flat plane, all serving as ultimately failed refuges from and assaults on banality. But these attempts to undo profane, authoritarian objectivity are in the end comic. They try to transform the profane and commonplace into the marvelous through art's comic white magic—an antidote to the tragically effective black magic of bourgeois alchemy, decried by Marx at the start of the Communist Manifesto. When Marcel Duchamp, for example, turns a banal readymade object into art, debunking the conventional ideas of both, he gives it an illogical preciousness quite outside its mundane functional purpose. Avant-garde antagonism—aggression—has been much commented on, as though the avant-garde critique were a kind of all-out, ruthless attack on modern life.[5] But that aggression has a farcical aspect. In 1912, Apollinaire described Pablo Picasso's "sometimes cruel jokes."[6] Picasso is hardly alone in making jokes on the world, and the avant-garde joke comes to us with the force of a liberating revelation. However temporarily, we feel relieved.[7] The spell of rational seriousness is lifted, and we see the world with comic freshness.

Whether taking a bird's-eye or a frog's-eye view on the world (the distinction is Nietzsche's), the avant-garde joke upsets our sense of it by seeing it differently from the way it sees itself. Indeed, to take an incongruous view is implicitly to be skeptical. The frog's eye sees the bourgeois world from below, as Expressionism and Surrealism do, calling attention to "low" truths about it, realities it has kept hidden even from itself, such as the aggression that underlies its seriousness and the sexuality it fears will undo it. This kind of vision reminds the bourgeois that their seriousness does not make them superior to life. The

bird's-eye view from above locates the bourgeois *sub specie aeternitatis*, as it were—as in abstract art, which imagines a higher plane and a more ideal existence (if only inwardly) than the world allows. Such a view suggests that seriousness is not a means of transcendence, as we tend to think.[8]

The numerous, conflicting theories of comedy, taken together, suggest a continuum of at least five phases: irony, buffoonery, caricature, wit, and humor. In distinguishing between them, I follow in part Freud, who wrote that humor has "something of grandeur and elevation. . . . The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than merely occasions for it to gain pleasure."[9] I suggest that in humor the capacity for affectionate feeling, lost in the wounding world, is recovered.[10] "The aim of wit," on the other hand, "is either simply to afford gratification, or, in so doing, to provide an outlet for aggressive tendencies."[11] And irony, buffoonery, and caricature are all components of wit, stages in its development. Freud thinks that the least humorous kind of humor, irony—"representation by the opposite"—is "no longer a joke,"[12] but remains comic, as the "ironical man who seemed to be less than he was" in comedy of all periods suggests. The ironical man coexists at the beginning of the comic continuum with the buffoon, who "also pretended to be less than he was" and who helps the ironical man play "tricks on everybody." Both types attack the "man who pretended to be more than he was"—the "'impostor,'"[13] debunking this bourgeois pretender through jokes that puncture his surfeit of self-esteem.

One such joke is to de-idealize the impostor by turning him into his opposite—artistically tricking and trivializing him, as when Daumier represented King Louis Philippe as a homely pear, in 1833. A more famous example is Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, which suggests that however ideal Mona Lisa seems to be, she is a sexual creature and has a vulgar side. (All Duchamp's blasphemies are attempts at de-idealization, whether of women or of art.) As the 18th-century philosopher Frances Hutchison said, ridicule is an attack against "*false Grandeur*" and interferes with "excessive Admiration." Humor restores honesty. The result is a caricature, funnier than irony and more pointed than buffoonery, an instrument of honest realism: the impostor is shown as more banal than he thinks he is. At the top of the comic continuum is humor, but genuine humor is difficult to achieve; most avant-garde art tends toward wit.

Actually most comedy in general begins and ends in wit, because wit is a readier "comic resolution" than humor. It is also more public, easier to share. Wit is a kind of regression in the ego's service: by convulsively repeating and discharging the childhood traumas that are reactivated by the wrong done us in the world, the witty joke purges those traumas by projecting them outward. (Freud saw Charlie Chaplin as a great comic because he played to perfection the timeless child hurt by modern life, his films thus functioning like the audience's own screen memories.) But there is no regression to infancy in humor. Wit is an aggressive reaction to a world that threatens to infantilize and humiliate us; it is a defensive response to an implicit attack. The humorist, on the other hand, infantilizes the world without for a moment questioning his or her own adulthood. Wit resomatizes the self into a pratfall where humor reconceptualizes the world as folly. Indeed, humor is a kind of perverse praise of the world's foolishness.

In keeping with its basically conceptual character, humor tends to be largely verbal. But wit involves acting out, a kind of instinctive body language, and even its clever words are often quasi physical in their allusions to bodily functions. The language of wit is the instrument of an enactment. (Rabelais' witty infant Gargantua is the perfect example.) And wit often resorts to the body language of the infant—because an infant lacks the words an adult might use to rise to the occasion. It is significant, then, that Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Suprematism, and Abstract Expressionism, in their different ways, have something of the infant's uncertain, uncoordinated, off-balance but dynamic movement about them. As Baudelaire suggested, the best art restores the magical freshness and strange reflectiveness of peripatetic childhood perception. When avant-garde art loses its awkwardness and becomes sophisticated, of course, it can hardly be called avant-garde any longer, and is unlikely to be witty. Avant-garde art is at its best when it reinstates the comic tentativeness of the infant. The infant is excited about movement, which supports its curiosity about the world. In contrast, the adult moves in a practical, businesslike, bourgeois way.

The bourgeois regard their "mathematical" attitude as truly adult, and thus superior to everybody else's "poetic" attitude to life, which they dismiss as childish. Avant-garde

poetic side. Humor transcends both wit and the bourgeois, for it dialectically integrates them: the humorist is a poetic self who is mathematically clear about the world. If wit is a manic, aggressive attempt to recover from a depressing regression, humor creates a self strong enough to deal with the world without denying it or backing down from it. More subtly, humor generously forgives the world for being the bad thing it is. Humor conveys gratitude for life despite recognizing its hardships and injustices. Yet humor is finally more critical of the world than wit is, for in

turning the tables on the world, humor never turns against the self; humor is beyond hurt. Freud's ironical recommendation of the Gestapo to everyone, after it almost killed him and forced him to leave his home, was an act of humor. To say the truth to the enemy's face, as he did, is to show rare strength and freedom.

IN ITS WITTY REBELLION, much avant-garde art is chaotic and irrational in appearance. It lacks decorum, or comically dissolves it. Kurt Schwitters' Merz pictures, Analytical Cubist caricatural portraiture, Jackson Pollock's allover paintings, Willem de Kooning's caricatures of women—all are a kind of ritualized, ironically indecorous chaos. In general, the fragmentation and violence of avant-garde art from Cézanne on are directed, however unwittingly, toward the same end: it is as though to be baptized in quasi-infantile, poetic chaos were the only chance one had to renew oneself in the claustrophobically closed bourgeois world.

Bourgeois pretensions are comically represented by their opposites throughout avant-garde art. Duchamp's ironic indifference is a subterfuge of self-importance. Dadaist disgust is bourgeois hostility turned inside out, or taken to its logical and absurd conclusion. The representation of sexuality as mechanical, in Dada, and as putrefying, in Surrealism—in Salvador Dali's decaying objects, Hans Bellmer's broken dolls, the tacky instinctiveness of the exquisite corpse—subverts the bourgeois pretension to erotic idealism and to an exaggerated potency. The pansexual gesturalism of Expressionism, on the other hand, both representational and abstract, implies the bourgeois' lack of sexual intensity, even of desire.

Avant-garde wit attacks the dishonesty not only of bourgeois existence but of bourgeois art. This is the gist of the readymade, an unpretentious object that is declared an artwork, making it pretentious—bourgeoisifying it. But to

intimidate us into believing that the readymade is art is to suggest the absurdity of the conception of art as ideal. Similarly, Expressionism's and Surrealism's revelation that disruptive sexuality and aggression can never be transcended—that the self can never rise above them—subverts the bourgeois pretension to pure, unperturbed, godlike selfhood. In general, avant-garde wit aims to demoralize the bourgeois impostor by shattering the defensive pretense of being superior to life. The bourgeois are revealed in all their ironical nakedness.

One reason for avant-garde art's constant changes of strategy is its failure to rise to the height of humor, and to humor's psychic security. Also, of course, wit is inherently short-lived—famously, brevity is its soul. Wit always risks becoming one-dimensional and mechanical. This often occurs in post-Modern art, which tends toward specious irony—irony cynical, stylized, and affected. (Examples abound, from David Salle to Jeff Koons, from Meyer Vaisman to Mike Bidlo.) In post-Modernism, wit cannibalizes art itself. Many appropriationist works end up as labored, pseudowitty treatments of past art. Wit made "epic" loses its lyricism and flexibility. It becomes a caricature of itself, a joke that turns on its maker. This kind of artmaking is cruelly cannibalistic, and cannibalism has been analyzed as the ultimate infantilism, for it involves a literal internalization of primary objects or their surrogates.

Modern joke-playing on past art began in earnest with Picasso's 1957 caricatures of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. Bidlo's more recent caricatures of Picasso's and other Modernist works are hardly as comic. They are too didactic, too concerned to make a theoretical point: to privilege reproduction over invention in artmaking, declaring the obsolescence of originality. The phony-elegant works of Sherrie Levine and Philip Taaffe, among others who "copy" or make "assisted copies," fall into the

same category of facile, pseudosubversive caricature. Indeed, copying is a kind of dumb wit—a readymade ironic way to make art inauthentic. It is also profoundly melancholy, for it indicates that copyists are haunted, inwardly dominated, by artist parent-figures.

Picasso's melancholy is not absolute. Transposing the work of his artist elders into the terms of his own art, he reveals his insecurity, but does not completely abort his identity by submitting to that of his sources. Indeed, the insecurity evident in Picasso's protean changes of stylistic identity bespeaks his comic genius. In his art, as in no other in this century, the comic transcends a depressing sense of tragedy. In contrast, contemporary copyists lack a style of their own that could transform their sources. No doubt they avoid such a style as much as fail to achieve one, in the belief that identity is a social construction they do not need—a belief that sanctions them to become parasites on the hard-won identities of other artists. But the truth is that their sense of self is insufficient for them to realize that the struggle for individuation is a major issue of artmaking. Perhaps they are more masochistic than sadistic, for quotation art involves submission, however ironic, to the host art. Can we say that Modernist wit tends to be sadistic and post-Modernist wit tends to be masochistic? The classical distinction between copying and assimilation is very much to the point of recent quotation art.[14]

The copyists (along with the deadly serious protest artists) are the Royal Academicians of today, but a sense of humor, happily, is alive and well in some quarters. As Johan Huizinga said, art takes the holiest myths with a grain of humor. It reminds us that we have been duped by our own beliefs, including those about artists, many of whom have themselves become bourgeois impostors pretending to be more than they are. One of the pleasures of the successful post-Modern wits is that they are not inflated by

seriousness. Indeed, they eschew the excessive self-belief expected of artists since the Renaissance. The current time has introduced a modest, ironical sense of what it is to be an artist—a kind of clown, rather than a tragic hero in the Pollock or Rothko mold. Such unpretentiousness is a welcome relief, as is the sense—presaged by Duchamp—of art and society as farce.

The contemporary humor undoes both credulity and cynicism. Often when we look at art we willingly suspend disbelief; otherwise there is no magic to art and life. As Huizinga said, "one chooses to be the dupe" so that the "sorcery" will work.[15] But the new comic art says that we have come to believe too blindly. By investing our all in an art, we project into it our desire for an intrinsically meaningful life. The art or ideology—and much art today seems little more than ideology, in handsome but thin disguise—becomes the medium of self-legitimation, and of unconscious communion with fellow believers. The trouble is that this fantasy is a narcissistic game—from which the new comic spirit delivers us by renewing our skepticism. But this art also debunks blind disbelief, debunks the playfulness about belief that makes us unsure what we believe, what we stand for, what is holy to us. This secular cynicism is credulity's other side, for it is only the general lack of belief that makes us grasp at the straw of blind faith. Yet it is faith that makes the world emotionally endurable. The new comic spirit tells us that we can believe even while disbelieving, that we can think out of a true sense of play.

The best post-modernist wit is less serious than Modernist wit, which, in the vehemence of its attack on bourgeois attitudes, ended up as solemn as what it opposed. Post-Modernist wit has no belief system, but shows the interplay of belief and unbelief. The ultimate coolness, after all, is neither to believe nor to disbelieve, but to study the way belief and unbelief work together—how one

inevitably evokes the other. In the Modernist world, belief in the self meant disbelief in the other, expressed as alienation; in the post-Modernist world, both belief and disbelief in both self and other coexist in every self. We post-Moderns are cynical not just about the other, but about ourselves. We are a sum of anxious dialectical relationships, with ourselves and with others, that add up to no whole. Post-Modernist wit articulates this peculiarly farcical self.[16] Post-Modernist humor does the same, but it also mythologizes that perversely distraught self, with a fine irony. It elevates and degrades the self all at once, as in William Wegman's works. The self becomes a kind of joke, but also seems to have integrity.

MARTIN KIPPENBERGER'S *Wenn Sie mit der Freiheit nicht klar kommen, versuchen Sie es doch mit Frauen* (If you can't figure out what freedom is, give it a try with women, 1989) is an impetuous piece of witty buffoonery, equally obscene and hostile. The casualness of this group of photographs—blown-up or inflated snapshots of ordinary scenes and objects are held toward us by a face-making, clowning artist/impostor—harshly mocks the artist as well as the audience. Everyday life becomes deliberately pretentious art. We are in effect invited both to believe and to disbelieve what we are shown: a credible, all-too-actual world — a dumbly secure Germany in which life has no risks—is shown to us through the medium of phony-looking, naively realistic images. To take this work as serious art is to dissolve the world it presents in the laughter of nihilistic exhibitionism and idiosyncratic crankiness, and to take the world pictured seriously is to do the same to the art. In either case the work becomes a laughable disaster. You just can't win, is Kippenberger's message.

A similar sense of irony appears in Peter Fischli and David Weiss' works, especially their film *Der Lauf der Dinge* (The way things go, 1986–87). There, a suspenseful but

pointless Rube Goldberg process of chemical and physical chain reaction is set in quasi-perpetual motion, describing and spoofing both the banal course of things in the bourgeois world—and also artmaking, the "work" of art. Like Kippenberger, Fischli and Weiss use the apparently unpredictable to state the predictability of banality, and to debunk it; and like his, their irony tends to buffoonery.

Post-Modernist wit in general falls into two categories. One group of works takes off from the banality of the mass media, following the example of Pop art, which at its best was transitional from Modernist to post-Modernist wit. Other works show avant-garde art itself as a familiar and predictable habit. The point is to use the banal perversely, undermining it from within. The former category includes, among many others, works by Glen Baxter, Steve Gianakos, Keith Haring, Mike Kelley, Kenny Scharf, Julie Wachtel, and Robin Winters—all of whom have used the comic strip or cartoon in a pointedly satirical way, wresting it from its conformist purpose; and by Guillaume Bijl, Sandy Skoglund, and Boyd Webb, who take the everyday furniture of the world and make it into a witty furniture of the mind (a notion implicit in Duchamp and in the later Marcel Broodthaers). In the latter category there is the work of John Armleder, George Condo, Vaisman, and Pino Pascali, all of whom have caricatured clichéd avant-garde styles or images. The work of Laurie Anderson, Jenny Holzer, and Barbara Kruger also has a caricatural element, in the second category. The one uses performance art, the other Minimalism, the third clichéd Modernist fragmentation to achieve an effect of solemn wit. Cindy Sherman's caricatures—lately involving takeoffs of the wise old men portrayed in old master art—and Richard Prince's spoofs of abstraction are more insidiously malevolent in their wit, while Sigmar Polke's and Gilbert & George's work hovers between self-mocking grandiosity and ironic ingenuity. All these works vigorously counteract not only the social insults of the present but what the

artists see as the artistic insults of the past. As Ad Reinhardt's clowning diagrams of the art world—almost like a patient's charts—and Fluxus' general irreverence show, the art world has always been able to take itself with a certain amount of laughter, as though the refusal of seriousness were a creative act in itself.

One distinction between post-Modernist and Modernist wit is that much of the latter, with exceptions in Dadaism and elsewhere, plays its irony straight. Indeed, Modernist wit is often so deadpan it isn't funny. (Jasper Johns' early work is extraordinarily witty, especially in its Magrittean incongruities, but his comic sense has been neglected, as though to acknowledge it would detract from his intellectual seriousness.) Post-Modernist wit, on the other hand, is explicit. Kippenberger and Fischli and Weiss may convey a sense of the seeming insurmountableness of dullness, but they overcome it by presenting what is dull as actually perversely amusing. Banality is finessed when made blatant. A defender of the post-Modern copyists might argue that this is what they do too—respond to the banalization of avant-garde art by quoting it, at once admitting and overcoming its dullness. I would respond, however, that in much of this work, whatever is quoted tends to relapse entropically into its unexciting prequoted state.

Dullness is the problem of our fin de siècle post-Modernist sensibility. The early Modernists of the 19th-century fin de siècle also sensed the dullness of the world, but their ennui was subjective—its artistic victims blamed themselves for the banality overtaking life. The contemporary dullness, however, seems to be objective. The world seems matter-of-factly banal, the self is bored, and the subject falls absent. In 19th-century ennui, the subject is present, and secretly enraged, and ennui can be uprooted when it openly changes to rage. The current sense of dullness can never be erased, only joked about. It is part of bourgeois

truth. Furthermore, behind the ennui of the last fin de siècle was the belief that the self could never completely become bourgeois, that some kind of refuge and resistance would always survive. The post-Modernist wit, on the other hand, knows that the self has in fact become bourgeois, that its inward life is in dull earnest, that it believes in the world more than it believes in itself. Behind the morbidity of post-Modernist wit is the dullness of the completely manipulated self—so successfully manipulated that it does not know it is, though it suspects. Post-Modernist wit taps into that irony, beyond good and evil.

The contemporary avant-garde tries to irritate the bourgeois world—to get on its nerves like a rash. The point is to get under its skin, not to confront it directly. That would never work; it would be dull. The world today is too confident to think twice about itself, to recognize its banality, as Modernist wit forced it to do. The bourgeois world never questions itself now; it thinks history has proven it right. But it can be unconsciously irked, and given bad dreams. Post-Modernist wit aims to poison the well of the bourgeois impostor's self-belief, to make him a hypochondriac. This is as much self-doubt as can be induced in him. There is no escape from banality in this comedy, then, only a softening of its blow.

Humor is another matter. When Wegman treats his dogs like human beings, he creates an ironic reversal: our best friend displaces us, indeed becomes us, or at least dresses like us, and is made to look as foolish. But Wegman's dogs at the same time look more dignified and honest than most people posing for photographers. Humans become impostors simply by sitting for the camera, but whoever heard of a dishonest dog? The Rays, Man and Fay, of the family canine, cannot help but be sincere. Yet they too are impostors, affected ham actors theatrically gotten up to be people. Wegman gives us dogs who keep their integrity but are also incredible poseurs, pretending to be more than

they are—playful hybrids of human and beast. In none of their different roles can they be said to be themselves. Yet they are truly dogs. This is sublime humor. It gives us a nonbourgeois role model—no matter how pretentious the dogs become in costume, they remain comically honest—but admits we can only escape the bourgeoisie by changing species. The process works in the other direction as well, for the ambitiously attired dogs in these pictures are undeniably genuine selves. Wegman shows the self as a compliant actor, a false self, but also as somehow true to itself at the same time.

Wegman's photographs play on the narcissism aroused by the camera, which makes impostors of us all, and makes us wonder whether our honest selfhood can ever be pictured. Cindy Sherman is as expert at this as Wegman, but in her portraits no true self seems possible. Every figure is false to itself and to the audience—the figure pretends to be a self it will never be. Photography turns us all into unhappy role players, not knowing our true selves even as we try to appear as we really are. The camera makes clumsy narcissists of everyone: it creates the illusion that it can capture our true selves, when all it does is confirm our falseness. Perhaps only animals can be true to themselves in front of it.

Yet post-Modernist wit never unequivocally shows us as impostors. It may not name the truth, but it is ironically true, and its playful suggestions subvert bourgeois modernity's tendency to banality. Because we are all post-Modernists, preferring the facade to the truth behind it (Modernism was a kind of stripping of the facade to get at the truth, but post-Modernism has busily reerected it), we are sensitive to the equivocal character of these works, to their simultaneous doubtfulness and seduction, implausibility and persuasiveness. Indeed, they suggest that the truth is always equivocal—a modern idea, which post-Modernism can live with.

The avant-garde, in acting out bourgeois ambivalence about art, generally acts out its own ambivalence about itself. It would not exist unless the bourgeois existed. If it consciously believes in itself, then, it unconsciously believes in the bourgeois. It may play the perverse child to the adult world, but it implicitly accepts and believes in that world. Avant-garde art exists at the largesse of power. Nonetheless, the novel styles of Modernism are emblematic of novel, nonbourgeois attitudes. The question that the triumph of the bourgeois mentality raises for art is whether the avant-garde has been reduced to preying playfully but wittily on banality, or whether, instead of humoring us, it will bring us back to humor.:

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NOTES

1. Norman N. Holland believes that “tragedy . . . is only the first half of the death-and-rebirth pattern.” Comedy is rarely given its due, Holland says, because of the social prevalence of narcissistic pathology. See Holland, *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor*, Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1982, pp. 36–37, and Nancy McWilliams and Stanley Lependorf, “Narcissistic Pathology of Everyday Life: The Denial of Remorse and Gratitude,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 26 no. 3, July 1990, p. 431. Comedy expresses gratitude for rescue from the tragic flaw, and represents the psychic force that counteracts grandiosity—the unconscious illusion of omnipotence, which is what entraps and defeats the tragic hero. Society has a vested interest in pathological

narcissism, for many people are unable to function without a sense of grandiosity. They lack drive unless they are narcissistically deluded. Capitalism encourages the pathologically grandiose self because it encourages the conspicuous consumption of possessions, which symbolize one's grandiosity.

2. Otto Freundlich, "The Laugh-Rocket," in *Dadas on Art*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., a Spectrum Book, 1971, p. 136.

3. See André Breton, "Away with Miserabilism!," 1956, in *Surrealism and Painting*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Icon Edition, 1972, pp. 347–48; and Charles Baudelaire, "The Salon of 1846," in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Jonathan Mayne, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1956, p. 39. Here Baudelaire distinguishes between a mathematical and a poetic approach to art, which I would extend to life. He also describes art as a means of restoring "the equilibrium of the soul's forces" in the bourgeois.

4. Richard Sheppard's "Dada and Mysticism: Influences and Affinities," in Dada Spectrum: *The Dialectics of Revolt*, ed. Stephen C. Foster and Rudolf E. Kuenzli, Madison, Wis.: Coda Press, inc., 1979, pp. 91–113, makes a compelling argument for the mystical intention of Dadaism in particular and by implication of Modernism in general. It should be noted that T. W. Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc, 1984, p. 466, suggests that the distinction between tragedy and comedy is merely "scholastic" today. For neither they, nor their synthesis in tragicomedy, are equal to the task of articulating the profoundly complex, ironic intertwining of suffering and the frantic pursuit of happiness, at the expense of others, in our society. At the same time, Adorno speaks of the tragic fate of the comic genre in our time—its appropriation and abuse by the entertainment industry—

and of the need to rescue it by creating comedies about the tragedy of comedy. (He thinks Beckett's plays are about this.) As he suggests, this is the comic form appropriate to the recognition that the world is tragically unfunny. Adorno in effect grants tragedy and comedy validity as comments on the inadequacy of each, rather than as ends in themselves.

5. See Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Icon Editions, 1971, pp. 30–40.

6. Guillaume Apollinaire, *Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews 1902–1918*, New York: The Viking Press (The Documents of 20th-Century Art), 1972, p. 260.

7. As Holland remarks, there is a large class of incongruity-and-relief theories of humor, whether the incongruity is conceived of as cognitive or formal in character. That is, a situation or statement, including a work of art, has a comic effect if its incongruities lead to the relief of laughter. There are tragically constricting incongruities, of course, which can be relieved only by anxious tears. See Holland, pp. 21–29.

8. Another major theory of humor holds that, as Holland says (p. 44), the humorist is "really laughing at his own superiority." The idea was first articulated by Thomas Hobbes (1650): "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly." Ernst Kris thought that Hobbes was "more akin to Freud than any later psychologist." However, 1 and others think that Freud combines incongruity and relief with superiority theory. For him, the traumatic experience of incongruity generates either the relief of witty laughter or a humorous sense of superiority to the experience, depending on ego strength.

The psychic energy-saving aspect of Freud's theory, while justly famous and undoubtedly important, seems to me secondary to the state of the ego that faces the incongruity. I believe abstract art claims a superiority that implicitly laughs at the inferiority of the concrete world, let alone the attempt to represent it. As such, abstract art shows art at its strongest, that is, with the most self-believing ego.

9. Sigmund Freud, "Humour," 1927, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1961, 21:162.

10. See D. W. Winnicott, "Playing and Culture," 1968, *Psychoanalytic Explorations*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 203. In a sense, Winnicott is arguing that cultural play at its best keeps intact the capacity for affectionate feeling that tends to become worn down in ordinary, humorless social and practical life.

11. Freud, "Humour," p. 162.

12. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1905, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1960, 8:73. Freud distinguished (p. 97) between "a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence)" and "an obscene joke (serving the purpose of exposure)."

13. Holland, pp. 37–38.

14. See E. H. Gombrich, "The Style *all'antica*: Imitation and Assimilation," *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, London: Phaidon, 1966, p. 122–28.

15. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, p. 23.

16. José Ortega y Gasset, in *The Dehumanization of Art and other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1955, pp. 47–48, relates the idea of farce to the Modern avant-garde: it would be "a 'farce,' in the bad sense of the word . . . if the modern artist pretended to equal status with the 'serious' artists of the past, and a cubist painting expected to be extolled as solemnly and all but religiously as a statue by Michelangelo . . . instead of deriding other persons or things—without a victim no comedy—the new art ridicules itself."

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