

Preface

*In my view the best humour brings about a change of situation,
a transient but significant shift in the way we view reality.*

–Simon Critchley

Humour is reason gone mad.

–Groucho Marx

Humour is what soup, chickens and symphony orchestras lack.

–Aragon cited by André Breton

Humour features prominently in the history of contemporary art. From painting to photography, from conceptual to mixed media and performance art, humour has been a common strategy deployed by artists within a wide range of art practices. In spite of the extensive tradition of humorous manifestations in art and the recent upsurge of exhibitions and public discussions on this matter, the topic of humour has been largely overlooked in the study and criticism of artistic productions.

Humour is an exemplary practice because, although relative and context-specific, it is a universal human activity. While Sigmund Freud's view of humour as a release of repressed desires and thoughts played a key role for the avant-garde (André Breton), many contemporary artists have explored the wide range of possibilities that humour offers. Some artists have researched the cognitive potential of humour and its relation to language through puns, word games and comical pairings of text and image. Others have used strategies of defamiliarisation to explore how humour shifts the way we perceive reality and ourselves. As proposed by Simon Critchley, the humanity of humour is being able to laugh at oneself, in finding oneself ridiculous.

In its ludic dimension, humour introduces an element of uncertainty and disruption which counterbalances the structure provided by ritual (law). Many artists have used the body as a tool to resist dominant culture, often employing the carnivalesque through strategies of the grotesque such as displacement, exaggeration, and the creation of hybrid symbols (Mikhail Bakhtin). The body has also been used in authoritarian regimes, such as dictatorships, to potentiate collective enjoyment against oppression and fear. In this sense, laughter, as a bodily expression of humour, follows an ethical project (Georges Bataille).

Feminist and queer artists have relied on wit, satire, irony and play to challenge and transgress white patriarchal hegemony by questioning gender roles, unequal gender and racial representations, as well as notions of femininity. Similar deployments of humour like the absurd, ridicule, parody, and sarcasm have been used by artists against the formality and elitism of the art world, to question art history's male dominated discourse, and to unsettle the acceptable limits of humour within institutional structures. However, while humour may have a subversive potential, it can also be used as a form of coercion and/or to reproduce power structures. Is humour used to perpetuate the normative system or rather, to defy it?

This special issue of ARARA contributes to the scholarship on this topic by exploring some of the ways in which humour operates within contemporary artistic practices in the context of the Americas.

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Marina Barys Janer, Valeria Paz Moscoso & Iberia Pérez