Maria Ezcurra on the Everyday Life and Comic Relief

Interview by Dominique Fontaine

Figs. 1 & 2 *Liminal Beings* series, 2011, recovered images and sewed over cloth.
Images: Courtesy of the artist.

Humour as art can be subversive, in the sense that humour can disrupt our assumptions, emotions, thoughts, and ways of seeing the world. When artists use humour, as art critic Jennifer Higgie proposes, it is also 'to activate repressed impulses, embody alienation or displacement, disrupt convention and to explore power relations in terms of gender, sexuality, class, taste or racial and cultural identities.'[1] *Nowadays, many artists are reclaiming humour as necessary to address contemporary issues such as violence and the unpredictability of our times. In considering the role of humour in contemporary art, I spoke with Maria Ezcurra on the type of forms of humour and critical strategies that are present in her work. In most of Ezcurra's work, she explores and makes evident how the meaning of the everyday is mediated by our understanding of objects – mostly clothing. She based this on the idea that garments are an everyday, symbolic, aesthetic element that connects the body with social issues, while at the same time having the effect of isolating it. Her textile sculptures and installations are simultaneously attractive and critical, where the ethics and the aesthetics share the same territory, reflecting some of the internal contradictions of contemporary humanity and questioning the stereotypes of social conventions. Humour for Maria Ezcurra is subversive, critical and liberating.*

[1] Jennifer Higgie (ed.), *The Artist's Joke*, Documents of Contemporary Art, The MIT Press, London, 2007, p. 12.

Dominique Fontaine: My first question for you is related to the concept of lightness – as defined by Italo Calvino in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.[2] Calvino talked about life as a form of weight or inertia or opacity of the world (*pesanteur* in French). In that perspective, how art that is lightness can win over weight? Do you think that humour as lightness is a strategy in your work to address socio-political issues? What would you say is the relation in your work between humour and political engagement?

Maria Ezcurra: Lightness and humour are complex and rich terms that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In art, they can function as strategies that allow us to take distance from things, to see them from different perspectives, and understand them in new ways. Humour can be perceived as something superficial (or light), if not approached with an awareness of the power it has in our lives. But, as Calvino stated, it also allows a subtraction of weight that gives us access to a different perspective of things. Humour can be an effective way of dealing with an increasingly overwhelming reality. I believe that it can be used to explore critical issues, allowing new understandings of the reality around us. Usually encompassing wit and sarcasm, humour can promote sane social interactions, but it can also be damaging. What is seductive for some people might be offensive or upsetting to others. This line gets too thin sometimes. Through humorous art I provoke these already transgressive limits to redraw the line in my own terms. In popular culture, humour usually consists of jokes full of stereotypes, which we do not notice any more because we have become too used to them. The problem is that this kind of humour not only reproduces, but perpetrates and promotes classist, racist, sexist, and many other kind of offensive behaviours. That is why I use humour in my artwork: to explore and expose them [stereotypes], intending to create awareness and somehow change things. Precisely because the line between perpetrating and evidencing social stereotypes is too thin and fragile, I incorporate humour in my creative processes. Through ironic representations, I try to illustrate how easily visual culture and public pedagogy reinforce normative systems of domination (many times through entertainment jokes). I actually believe that humour can be a creative form to disrupt and challenge social norms. Playfulness and irony can be effective mediums to experience, expose and learn from our relation with certain social codes, to make evident

[2] Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988.

the popular uses and interpretations of sexist humour, and its consequences on the way gender is perceived and performed. In my artwork humour functions as a provocation. I see it as an invitation to laugh at things that are clearly not funny.

Figs. 3 & 4 (detail) *Social Net*, 2012, participative project, Montreal, Canada. Photos: Pedro Orozco. Courtesy of the artist.

DF: There are five forms of humour employed in the visual arts – parody, pun, paradox, satire and irony – which one of these strategies can effectively exemplify your use of humour as a critical strategy?

ME: There is a lot of irony in my work, as I perform or shape exactly that which I am trying to criticise. The exaggeration of a subtle gesture can completely change the way we usually perceive it, challenging it. Humour in Mexico is part of our daily life. It is an essential manner of relating to others, and enduring their jokes. I guess the double meaning that we learn to find in everything (*albur*[3]) ends up defining the way we relate with our own reality. Humour in my artwork involves different levels: sometimes it is quite subtle, while other times it is more overt and direct. Sometimes it is difficult to find the right balance between denunciation and amusement. But I use several strategies to create and activate my work, which relate to humour in different ways. Based on the clothes and textiles, I collect, assemble, deconstruct, recontextualise, exaggerate, and transform visual, material and ideological elements of my daily life. Humour is a mechanism that allows me to explore and represent personal experiences and social codes in new ways. It allows me to challenge and

[3] In Mexico, an *albur* is a pun, a play on words, or a double *entendre* which usually carries sexual undertones.

resist the meaning and implications of many cultural stereotypes. The meaning of clothes and of humour (both in my artwork and in daily life) are strongly connected to dominant cultural values and determined by their context. Clothes – like jokes – reflect the prevailing ideologies of our society. With humour I wear or transform clothes to explore and make symbolic connections between individual knowledge and culturally produced ideas, addressing not only personal, but historical, political, cultural, and social issues. I believe humour can creatively reveal some aspects of our circumstances that usually remain invisible, becoming an educative and empowering experience.

Figs. 5, 6, 7 & 8 (clockwise) *Guardarropa del ama de casa perfecta* Series (*The Perfect Housewife's Wardrobe*), 2008, with the collaboration of Pedro Orozco. Photos: Gerardo Montiel Klint and Maria Ezcurra. Courtesy of the artist.

DF: Your body of work includes a range of artistic practices – installation, performance, sculpture, etc. – that call attention to the potential of art as a critical instrument for the analysis of social, political and cultural issues. There are many examples of strategies that you employ that take the everyday and transform domestic actions into something comic. Is this a way to allow the viewer to reassess the state of our contemporary life? And, can you provide examples of your work that use humour to raise questions about the relationship between art and everyday life?

ME: Through my work I explore, represent and subvert female stereotypes, many times in humorous but still critical ways. I use garments to redefine normative women's roles while presenting diverse and reinvented femininities, many of which are reconfigurations of visual culture's representations. With pieces like *Guardarropa del ama de casa perfecta* (*The Perfect Housewife's Wardrobe*, Mexico City, 2008) and *Mesera* (*Waitress*, Mexico City, 2010; Montreal, 2011) I exaggerated traditional feminine stereotypes to generate new understandings of their relation to personal, political, cultural, and social issues. *Guardarropa del ama de casa perfecta* is a series of five photographs that document several actions in which I was integrated to my house through diverse textiles, attaching my body to the furniture while attending my husband [Figs. 5–8]. Similarly, *Mesera* was an amusing action performed wearing a table-dress for serving the canapés during the opening of an art show, functioning as an ironic comment on women's social roles [Fig. 9]. Presented almost as jokes, these pieces look at the fundamental operations of different social structures.

Fig. 9 *Mesera* (*Waitress*), 2010, Mexico City and Montreal, Canada.
Photos: Pedro Orozco. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 10 *Transfigurations*, 2011, Montreal, Canada,
with the collaboration of Tatiana Koroleva,
Jayme Schomann and Jess Aylsworth.
Photo: Scott McLeod. Courtesy of the artist.

When I think about humour, it does not only involve presenting something 'fun' to the viewers so they can laugh and become aware at the same time. Humour for me is an important aspect of the process of making the work, both individually and collaboratively. It is an intrinsic part of our relationship with others, and with ourselves. Humour has a great potential to create communities as much as to become a tool to criticise and resist certain aspects of our society. In this sense, *Transfigurations* (Montreal, 2011) was a collective action that I performed at Concordia University with the collaboration of several female graduate students [Fig. 10]. I cut their garments at the seams and then pinned them to the wall of the building. Ironically, the intention of this was to release us from our social skin while making evident the idea that we are trapped by cultural norms. This piece was strongly influenced by my *Body of Work* series, which presents women's clothes cut open and extended on the wall, like trophies made out of animal skins [Fig. 11]. I later expanded this idea into *Invisible* (2005), an installation made out of women's nylon stockings, initially exhibited in firstsite Gallery (Colchester, UK) [Fig. 12].

Fig. 11 *Leopard Leotard*, 2001, female garment and pins, 80 x 100 cm,
Essex Collection of Art from Latin America. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 12 *Invisible*, 2005–2008, structure made with nylon tights, 5 x 6 x 3 m.
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

My doctoral arts-based research project, called *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* (Concordia University, Montreal, Canada), relies on humour too. It is centred on the collaboration of 20 women living in Quebec who guided the artistic transformation of wedding dresses to represent their varied conjugal experiences or notions about marriage [Figs. 13–15]. We provided personal counter-narratives to the way that visual culture

participates in the creation of female stereotypes, challenging and resisting them together, many times through humour.

Figs. 13, 14 & 15 *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress,* 2013.
With the collaboration of: Jessica Hart, Norma Vite, and Gen Leclerc, respectively.
Photos by Enrique Uranga. Courtesy of the artist.

Later I did *Displaced* (2014), which consisted of several brides performing through their transformed dresses in diverse public spaces in Montreal. It was specifically concerned with the context in which the dresses were worn and how it affected their significance as well as the participating women's identities. Allowing the space around us and the human interactions it generated to shape the piece was a deeply meaningful and empowering experience for all of us. We exposed ourselves, probably feeling vulnerable as individuals, though not more so than we usually do performing as women in daily social situations. At the same time, as a group we felt connected, protected, excited, amused, and empowered, learning from the experience and from each other, generating awareness among visitors too, and having a lot of fun! Also, I have lately been working on projects that considered my identity as a woman in public spaces, resulting in a series of performative pieces ironically named *Uncomfortable* (2014). Through a sharp humorous approach, I aimed to look at situations in my daily life in which I do not feel 'adequate', either because I am expected to perform certain roles which I am not comfortable with, or because I simply do not fit into certain normalising social or cultural expectations.

DF: In *Art and Laughter*, Sheri Klein argues that 'all humour is subversive, that is, it aims to disrupt our assumptions, emotions, patterns of thinking, ways of knowing and the world as we know it';[4] while the art critic, Jennifer Higgie suggests that artists have made use of humour 'to activate repressed impulses, embody alienation or displacement, disrupt convention, and to explore power relations in terms of gender, sexuality, class, taste, or racial and cultural identities.'[5] Considering these two statements, where do you situate your work? Why is it that humour as a mechanism to convey ideas has been so important to the cultural politics of several avant-garde movements of the twentieth century – such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus – and still resonates more than ever in contemporary art practices? It seems that your work, as in the work of many contemporary artists, reaffirms the necessity for humour. Is it because of the context in which we live now, in a world that has become intensely violent and unpredictable?

ME: Yes, there are many artists who use humour as a critical strategy in their work. I consider the Guerrilla Girls an essential reference. Also, many of Sophie Calle's works, Patty Chang's *Melons* (1998) and Brown Council's *One Hour Laugh* (2009) are important works. Likewise, Sarah Lucas and her erotic bunny sculptures, Barbara Kruger and her captioned photographs, and Louise Bourgeois' *Femmes Maison* series are a few examples of artists whose comic but discomforting work is highly effective to denounce unequal gender roles and restrictive notions of femininity. Humour's disruptive approach into complex and unfair realities can be effectively used to destabilise current systems of representation and gender constructions through art. Moreover, it can be creatively applied to construct new knowledge and ways of knowing.

I critically embody humour in many pieces to explore the physical, emotional and cultural restrictions of the body, reflecting the social implications that femininity has today in diverse contexts, along with my own beliefs and condition as a woman. Often involving absurdity into participatory and public art practices, I use clothes to experience, expose, and learn from our relation with visual culture and the world around us. Moreover, I often use comedy to explore how public pedagogy informs and shapes both personal identities and

[4] Sheri Klein, *Art and Laughter*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2007, p. 132.
[5] J. Higgie.

social roles. Many of the projects I work on look at the complexities between the social and the individual, protection and image, beauty and comfort, materials and ideas, male and female, violence and indifference... I find these paradoxes useful, creating situations that are simultaneously humorous and critical as a form of making otherwise unnoticed aspects of our society visible. Comic solutions are not as light as they might seem. Actually, humour is usually loaded with overwhelming realities. We need to find ways of bringing some humour into the everyday, not to escape from it, but to understand and deal with it in bearable ways.

Figs. 16 & 17 From the *Domestic Mythology* series, 2010, drawings on domestic cloths. Images: Courtesy of the artist.

Maria Ezcurra was born in Argentina and raised in Mexico. She currently lives in Montreal, where she is concluding her doctoral studies in Art Education at Concordia University. She studied Visual Arts at the UNAM (Mexico), the Chelsea College of Art & Design (UK) and the San Francisco Art Institute (USA). A recipient of many prestigious awards, including the Fulbright-Garcia Robles Scholarship and the FRQSC Award, she is a member of the National System of Art Creators (SNCA) in Mexico. She has participated in more than 60 groups and 15 individual exhibits in Europe, Australia, Latin and North America and her work is part of several collections. She has taught art in a number of universities and schools over the past 15 years and is currently working as an Artist-in-Residence at the Faculty of Education of McGill University.

Dominique Fontaine is a curator and founding director of aPOSTeRIORI, a non-profit curatorial platform – researching, documenting, developing, producing, and facilitating innovation in diverse contemporary art practices. Fontaine graduated in Visual Arts and Arts Administration from the University of Ottawa (Canada), and completed De Appel Curatorial Programme (Amsterdam, the Netherlands). She was Curator for *Scotiabank Nuit Blanche Toronto 2014*. Since 2013, she has been contributing to *Of Africa*, a multi-disciplinary and multiplatform program, in collaboration with the Royal Ontario Museum and other partner organisations. Since 1992, she has curated and organised several contemporary art events in Canada and abroad including '*Images, Imageries, Imaginaires*' – International Photography Exhibition of the World Festival of Black Arts and Cultures, 2010, Dakar (Senegal); '*Forms and Topographies: African Cityscape in Flux',* 2009, Thessaloniki Biennale (Greece); '*Moshekwa Langa: Unlimited',* Art Star Video Biennial, 2005, Ottawa (Canada).