

# HUMOR, IRONY, AND SATIRE: Strategies of Critique in Modern Art and Culture

How many times in your daily life have you encountered a cartoon, comic, or television skit that causes you to laugh, but also makes you stop and think?

While we tend to associate visual humor with the pleasures of escapism, it also frequently serves as one of the most effective (and entertaining) modes of social criticism. Jokes can have the uncanny ability to catch us off guard, rendering us quite literally speechless. And in that moment of laughter, we often experience a shift in attitude or understanding. By creating a new sense of awareness, humor has the power to impact or, at the very least, challenge the way we come to see the world.

This exhibition explores the ways that artists have embraced the disruptive power of humor to shape public opinion, advance critical discourse, and question boundaries and conventions. It features works that employ a range of comic strategies, many of which depend on the body as a key site of social meaning. Several, for instance, transform the body through caricature, perhaps to mock leaders (who can act as potent symbols for the nation itself), or to comment on the modern condition. Others utilize performance strategies, such as “drag,” to critique gendered power relationships, or employ appropriation, parody, or wordplay to break down artistic barriers or call attention to incongruities in modern life.

Caricature—a mode of stylization that relies on reduction, distortion, or exaggeration of a subject’s features or attributes—is one of the most widely used comic strategies in modern art. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to communicate complex ideas quickly through a collective vocabulary. In “Une femme comme moi... remettre un bouton?... vous êtes fou!...” (“A woman like me... sew a button?... you’re crazy!...”) (1844), from the series *Les Bas bleus*, for example, Honoré Daumier distorts body language, dress, and composition to invert gender types. Even if we cannot read French, based solely on these exaggerations we can understand the artist’s mockery of Parisian women who tested conventional gender boundaries.

Caricature has also been a particularly effective political weapon, since it can reach a mass audience far more rapidly than a written document. It takes no more than a few seconds, for instance, to recognize that Charles-Joseph Traviès de Villers is criticizing the French monarchy in his lithograph *Théâtre royal des marionnettes (Royal Puppet Theater)* (c. 1830–35), which depicts King Louis Philippe I controlling his government officials, all comically reduced to wooden puppets.<sup>1</sup> While caricature operates in these instances as a mode of humor that invites us to laugh at someone else’s expense, it has also been used for more sympathetic ends. Such is the case in Leopoldo Méndez’s small woodcut, *Lucha por el carbón (Fighting for coal)* (1944), a purposefully crude depiction of the poor struggling for survival; here, the artist employs grotesquery not to mock individuals but to make visually manifest the cruel conditions of modern life in Mexico.

Eleanor Antin’s *The King of Solana Beach* (1974), a documented performance piece, features “drag” as its primary mode of expression. This comic strategy, in which the artist assumes different identities through cross-dressing, calls attention to the artifice of gender through the incongruity between the posing body and its costume. In Antin’s work, the artist takes on the persona of not just any male, but a king who interacts with his “subjects,” the residents of a small beach town near San Diego. While the performance opens up new, more open-ended possibilities of selfhood for Antin, it challenges the values and attitudes of those she encounters.<sup>2</sup>

Many twentieth and twenty-first century artists have been especially attracted to comic strategies that exploit the multivalence of signs and symbols in our increasingly visual culture. Through parody or ironic juxtapositions, artists can recontextualize objects and images, challenging us to think about categories of meaning. Take, for example, Man Ray’s *The Father of Mona Lisa* (1968), an amusing print

This Teaching Gallery exhibition is organized by Bryna Campbell, PhD candidate in the Department of Art History & Archaeology at Washington University, in conjunction with the course “Caricatures, Comic Strips, and Beyond” offered by Washington University’s Department of Art History & Archaeology and University College in summer 2010.

TEACHING GALLERY

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that parodies Leonardo da Vinci's self-portrait by inserting a Freudian cigar in its mouth. By transgressing symbolic boundaries of "high" and "low," this work invites us to consider not only artistic hierarchies, but also the value systems we place on them. In *Foot on Hand* (1964) and *Crying Girl* (1963), Roy Lichtenstein considers similar issues, drawing connections between art and consumption through an appropriation of the comic book idiom, an essentially commercial language of representation.

Whether satirical or ironic, corporeal or conceptual, for all the artworks in this exhibition, humor serves as a vital means of critique. Comic strategies allow these artists to put form to their critiques, in the process providing what the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer has defined as "perspective through incongruity." Because of its accessibility and directness, humor is a potent if seemingly innocuous tool. This exhibition invites us to look beyond the apparent simplicity of visual humor in order to consider not just why, but how, it can make one stop and think.

- Bryna R. Campbell

### Further Reading

Bataille, Georges. "Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears." In *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall, 133–50. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Baudelaire, Charles. "On the Essence of Laughter," 1855. Reprinted in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne, 147–75. London: Phaidon Press, 1955.

Butler, Judith. "From Parody to Politics." In *Gender Trouble*, 181–90. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Hannoosh, Michele. *Baudelaire and Caricature: From the Comic to an Art of Modernity*. Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1992.

Mainardi, Patricia. "Why Is Caricature Funny?" *Persistence of Vision* 14 (1997): 9–24.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. "On the Theory of the Ludicrous," 1814. Reprinted in *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 91–101. New York: Dover Publications, 1966.

On Thursday, June 24th, Bryna Campbell will present a gallery talk, free and open to the public, on *Humor, Irony, and Satire: Strategies of Critique in Modern Art and Culture* at 5 pm, in the Teaching Gallery at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.

<sup>1</sup> The effectiveness of this popular genre is precisely why the French government attempted to censor caricature in this period. See Elizabeth C. Childs, "The Body Impolitic: Censorship and the Caricature of Honoré Daumier," in *Suspended License: Censorship and the Visual Arts*, ed. Elizabeth C. Childs (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 148–81.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Antin's motivations, see Howard N. Fox, "Waiting in the Wings: Desire and Destiny in the Art of Eleanor Antin," in *Eleanor Antin* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999), 59–63.