

rachel uffner

Joy Quarterly

SARA GREENBERGER RAFFERTY, ARTIST

Interview by KEVIN ZUCKER

Sara Greenberger Rafferty was born in 1978 in Chicago. She lives and works in Brooklyn. Her first solo exhibition, "BANANAS," was on view from January 9 – March 7, 2009 at The Kitchen in New York. She will have an exhibition with the Rachel Uffner Gallery in Fall 2009 and is currently working on a book about comedy LPs.

KZ: I remember a few years ago there were these guys uptown who were trying to do street advertising for some stand-up club, and they would come up and ask, "Hey, do you like comedy?" which seemed to be a question with no good response. You can say no, in which case you're an asshole without a sense of humor; say yes and you buy into a painful dialogue about whatever they're selling. Because of the ambivalence and complexity in the way your work addresses humor, performance, failure, neurosis, etc., I'm finding myself wanting to ask you the same awful thing: do you like comedy?

SGR: Yes, I know those guys. They're not funny, and I don't like their attitude. This is a really difficult question to answer. Those "Do you like comedy?" dudes are kind of like the Chabbad guys that would always ask me "Are you Jewish?" The answer for me, to each (related?) question, is the same: yes and no. But, the best way to ruin something funny is to talk about it and to pick it apart and discuss it. The quote-unquote comedy those guys refer to is already dead as a dead horse. There are two ways of relating my work to comedy. On the one hand I'm referring to forms and formats that are coded as the purview of the comedian. This is very different than being funny or being "into" comedy. These works are all quite serious, sad, and decidedly unfunny. The second way of relating to comedy, which is not formal or conceptual, is on the level of the artworks as jokes, meaning that the artworks are attempting to have the pacing and unexpectedness of a joke. This is something I've been introducing only recently, and in this mode I'm asking the works to elicit laughs and deliver punch lines. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't.

KZ: So, next... are you Jewish? No, not serious. One of the major subjects of your work is performance. What are some of the specific kinds of performance you're interested in dealing with in the work? Are there film, performance art, or

theater references that are particularly important to this show? To your work in general?

SGR: After the show opened, I saw the new print of Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). This film, impeccably photographed by Babette Mangold a few years before I was even born, was a huge influence on me, and its resonant quotidian feminist imagery is still very strong. Another work that was foundational was Adrian Piper's *Cornered* (1988). And basically anything that William Wegman did with a Sony PortaPak. All of this performance was photographed of course. In terms of live performance, the most relevant work is what Erving Goffman called "the presentation of self in everyday life," or the ways in which we perform as people in our social universe. Another model is musician Jon Brion, well known for his film scores. When he performs live, he takes requests and then "builds" the song out of looped individual instrumental tracks he records in front of the audience. The entire process is very transparent and clear, and yet the end result – a swelling overture version of 99 Luftballons, for example – is quite transformative and very magical. I am also very fond of live stand-up comedy audio recordings, which I prefer over going to see comedy.

KZ: Any particular favorites? A friend of mine had me listening to Bill Hicks in the car recently, which was sort of a revelation - I had basically forgotten about the genre after my Eddie Murphy *Delirious* cassette was confiscated in elementary school.

SGR: Bill Hicks is an absolute favorite of mine, especially his theory of the dick-joke loving nightclub audience [I think there may be some parallels there with the art audience.]. Other stand-up comics I love are Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, Phyllis Diller, Richard Pryor, of course, Joan Rivers. More recent comics I follow include Zach Galifianakis and Patton Oswalt. And, while I mostly collect stand-up records, I absolutely loved the 2008 *Matador* release of Earles and Jensen's *Just Farr A Laugh Vol. 1&2: The Greatest Prank Phone Calls Ever!*

KZ: Your current solo show is at The Kitchen, a space with a deep history in performance art,

experimental theater, music, and dance going back to the 70s. Can you talk about some ways in which the context informed the choices you made in the show?

SGR: I was completely humbled by the opportunity when the curator Matthew Lyons proposed the show. I knew I could make a strange and experimental show, so that was very liberating, especially in a world where "debut solo shows" are supposed to be tour-de-force statements of artistic and material mastery that also earn money for the venues that present them. Everything I do is in some ways site-specific, so I can't really think of things I would have done differently, because the work was made with the space in mind.

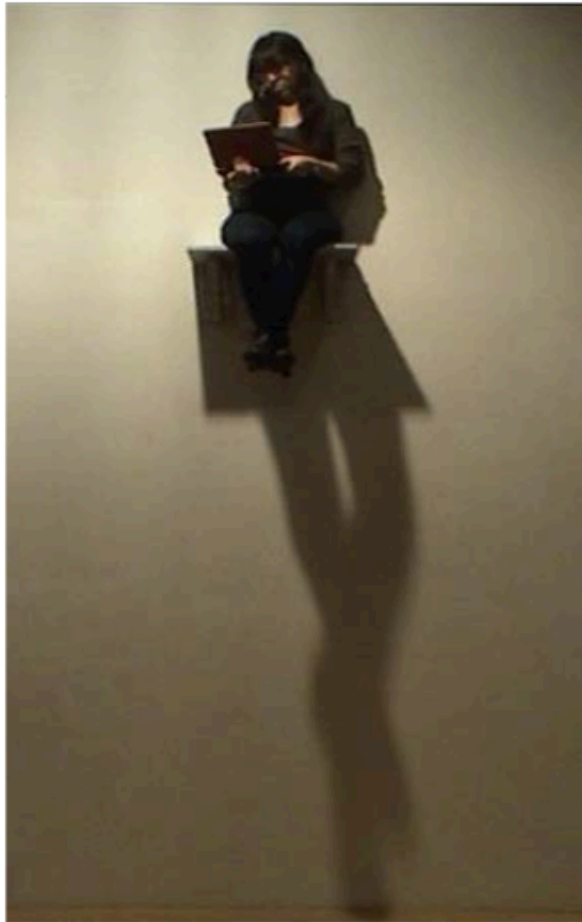
KZ: The show is called "Bananas," and there are allusions to Looney Tunes, psychoanalysis, and food in the show - can you talk about the various connotations of the title as they play out there? Is the Woody Allen reference key?

SGR: Yes, well first of all, with a three word, 25 character name, I've already used a lot of real estate by just showing up, and I wanted to fit on the card, so a one-word answer was kind of in order. But after coming up with a few possibilities, this was the most resonant with all of the themes and imagery that shows up in the exhibition. I would have probably given it a more obfuscating title, because I'm a big self-saboteur, but in the end I think "Bananas" is a generous title that allows everyone to access an interpretation that "works" immediately. Bananas is a wonderful word, just in how it sounds. But of course there is its synonymous association with being "crazy," the association with slipping, phallic form, the palindrome contained between 'B' and 'S,' the yellow color, association with monkeys, etc. On a nutrition note, bananas are actually very helpful in regulating mood in depressive subjects. Regarding Woody Allen, yes, of course, one of his funniest movies. If you wanted to, you could activate the wrapped Strapped chair [a sculpture in the exhibition] by imagining the courtroom scene where Mellish is bound to his chair and gagged (by order of the court) and then proceeds to cross-examine a hysterical witness.

KZ: Something I'm interested in is why is the

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All art by Sara Greenberger Rafferty

Left: *SHELVED*, 2008 looped video and shelf, courtesy of Rachel Ufner Gallery.

Top: *LAUGH IN*, 2009 archival injet print and album printing, courtesy of Forth Estate editions.

Bottom: *STRAPPED (SANITORIUM CHAIR)*, 2009 painted galvanized steel and bandages, courtesy of Rachel Ufner Gallery.

performer-protagonist is always either missing from your work or replaced by stand-ins or surrogates. Is it to create a space for the viewer to project herself, or is there an element of self-portrait-in-absentia there, or both? I'm curious about this from the standpoint of someone who's interested in performance in the abstract, but when I'm actually in attendance at a live performance my empathetic stage fright makes it almost impossible to bear. Not to get too far into it, but my mother's an actress and did lots of theater work when I was a kid. A shrink could have a field day... I have an early memory of seeing her get "shot" on stage.

SGR: I had forgotten that your mother's an actress. Because Woody Allen's on my mind, somehow I'm picturing Diane Wiest in *Bullets Over Broadway*, but I think your mom's a blonde. My mother is a shrink, so maybe an actress could

have a field day with that! In answer to your question, it's both. But in my exhibition you do have a performer high on the shelf in the video (*Shelved*, 2008), acting as a little devil on the shoulder of the whole show and keeping watch at the same time.

KZ: I'm curious about your personal experience as a performer, anything interesting or traumatic?

SGR: It feels so self-indulgent to answer this. There are three childhood experiences that are particularly germane: 1) When I was eight years old we had family joke night at a reunion, and I performed Bill Cosby's "The Neanderthal Man" off of the record *I Started Out as a Child* (1964) for 25 people. This was when I learned that the joke-teller's body and its encoded gender, race, age, etc. was essential for completing the meaning

of the joke. [See also episode 2, "Diversity Day," from the first season of the *American Office*.] 2) When I was twelve years old, I was in a school production of *Cinderella*. I got the part of one of the mice that danced around in the background while Cinderella was being beautiful and fair-skinned and lovely. I decided to go off-message and stuff my costume with pillows and be a fat mouse who clowned and fell down behind Cinderella, making a general distracting comedic ruckus and therefore being a dick to the pretty girl who was singing her solo as Cinderella. 3) I was in a dance concert in high school, and I ended the whole thing with a (choreographed this time) prat-fall, but I'm already bored of hearing myself talk about this! Beyond these childhood anecdotes, I am currently a full-time teacher, which is both traumatic and interesting in terms of performance.

