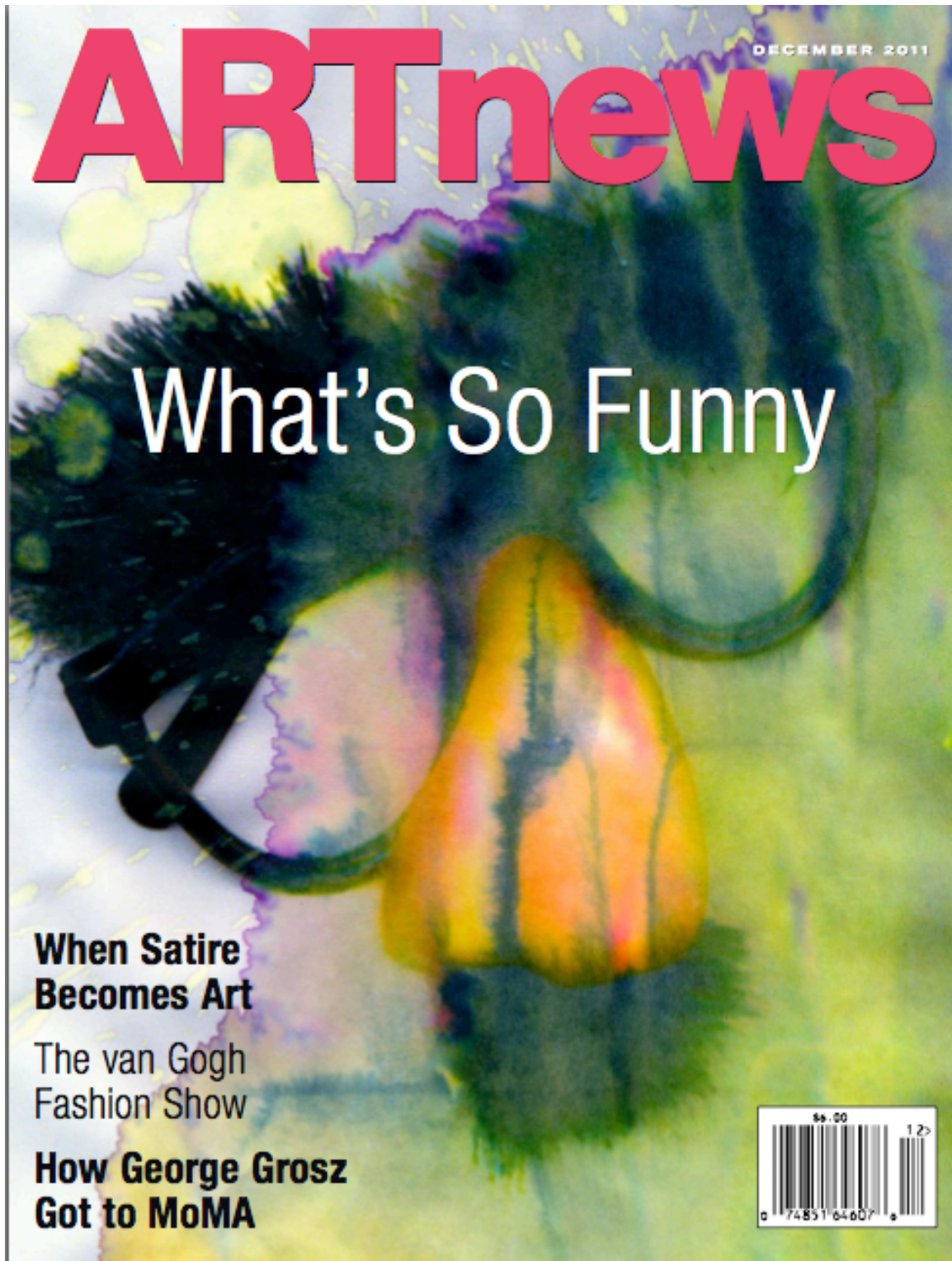


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THE JOKE'S ON US

Scholars are looking at the history of modernism
through the history of its pranks

BY ANN LANDI

During a panel called “The Art of Pranks”

at the College Art Association (CAA) conference in New York last February, a participant identified as Clark Stoeckley, “artist,” maintained an impassive demeanor as his scholarly copanelists delivered papers on Dada, Fluxus, and other notorious movements past and present. Stoeckley stood out on account of his cop’s uniform, and when he got up to speak on the topic of New York City pranksters, identified himself as a member of the NYPD Vandal Squad Task Force. He explained that he was a former undercover detective in the East Village who became a “street-art archivist” and was eventually promoted to the rank of lieutenant for his insider knowledge of graffiti crews and activist groups.

Stoeckley’s talk covered the gambits of street artists from Banksy and Shepard Fairey to the Guerrilla Girls and the artist known as Mat Benote (Make Art That Benefits Everyone Not Only the Elite). Although he seemed a bit awkward in front of an audience, he punctuated his stories with wry observations that drew appreciative laughter. “This is the stuff that really brightens our day,” he remarked about the graffiti, “and in many cases teaches cops like me a lesson about the Constitution.”

The presentation was so entertaining and unexpected that this reporter wrote it up for ARTnews—only to be informed by editors that “Lieutenant” Stoeckley had no affiliation whatsoever with the NYPD and was himself an artist with a long history of performance-based work. It was like getting rooked into buying a line of cosmetics from Rrose Sélavy.

But even after this revelation, one was still left wondering, What exactly is an art prank? And why has the past century in particular been rich in jokes, hoaxes, forged identities, subversive graffiti, and mass and solo performances with an aim to shock or annoy, as well as shenanigans that some would be loath to qualify as art?

As some art historians take pains to point out, pranks and jokes are not the same thing. Merriam-Webster defines a prank as “a mildly mischievous act” and a joke as “something said or done to provoke laughter.” In his introductory remarks, panel chair Beauvais Lyons, professor of art at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and curator of the “Hokes Archives” (the name gives a clue to his endeavors), made a PowerPoint presentation on a slew of artworks and activities, and performances that fall under the rubric of “pranks.”

These included Hugo Ball’s recitation of his nonsensical “sound poems” at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916; Duchamp’s Fountain (1917) and his application of a mustache to a postcard of the Mona Lisa; George Maciunas’s Fluxus street theater; works by Manzoni, Klein, Beuys, Warhol, and Hirst; and Andrea Fraser’s impersonation of a museum tour guide. As part of his presentation, Lyons made a pitch for academics and critics to consider the possibility of what he called “prank theory”—a theory that would enable scholars to study and put an official seal of approval on art history’s great pranksters. “I’m hoping people will reconsider the history of modernism through prank theory,” Lyons remarked later.

But are all these examples truly pranks? Wasn’t Damien Hirst deadly serious when he floated that shark in a tank of formaldehyde? And wasn’t Warhol, when he presented his Brillo boxes and soup cans in an art gallery? Does Reverend Billy, whose comic performances critique consumerism and corporate greed, qualify as an artist, when he has never defined himself as such (nor has any art establishment)? Were Joseph Beuys’s “social sculptures” intended as pranks? Is trompe l’oeil a joke? What about most forms of urban graffiti?

Pranks in art turn out to be as richly varied and diversely resonant as their distantly analogous verbal and written equivalents, which might include puns, shaggy-dog stories, bon

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Man Ray photographed Marcel Duchamp posing as Rose Sélavy, 1920s. Lulu the donkey ("Joachim-Raphaël Boronali") paints an entry, *Sunset on the Adriatic*, for the Salon des Indépendants, 1910. Sara Greenberger Rafferty, *Target Practice*, 2006.

TOP RIGHT: ©2011 MAN RAY TRUST/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/ADAGP, PARIS/CNAC/MNAM/DIST. REUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK; TOP LEFT: BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/ROGER-VIOLLET, PARIS/PRIVATE COLLECTION; BOTTOM: TOM POWELL, IMAGING/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RACHEL UFFNER GALLERY, NEW YORK

mots, satire, doggerel, and funny lyrics. But there is a world of difference between a knock-knock joke and Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (which suggests that the starving Irish eat their own children), as there is between most of Banksy's street art and Duchamp's upended urinal. The former is usually good for an amused double take; the latter asks us to think hard about how we look at art and how it is presented.

To some, Fountain is not a joke or a prank at all. Duchamp's porcelain urinal, signed "R. Mutt" and submitted in 1917 to the Society of Independent Artists (which promised to exhibit anything accompanied by an application and a five-dollar fee), "had a higher purpose than whatever a joke is," says the art historian and dealer Francis Naumann. "A joke usually has that one quick response, for the laugh, and not much more. If it was for that purpose, then it failed miserably, because it influenced generations of artists after it."

The real jokesters, in Naumann's way of thinking, include the "excessivist" artist who signed his work Joachim-Raphaël Boronali and showed a picture that was painted by a donkey's tail at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris in 1910. ("Boronali" was actually a trio of jokesters, the donkey's name was Lola, and the painting was called Sunset on the Adriatic.) Another example is the Society of American Fakirs at the Art Students League of New York City, a group of students who, between 1891 and 1906, annually produced parodies of the works of artists they were supposed to revere, like John Singer Sargent and Thomas Eakins. These pranks had no serious repercussions for the future course of art, and we haven't heard much about them since.

But Duchamp's pranks reverberated down through the decades. One of his most powerful was the invention of the femme fatale alter ego known as Rose Sélavy (the name is a pun on "eros, c'est la vie"), who emerged in photos taken by Man Ray in 1921 and spawned generations of gender-bending antics. Think of Hannah Wilke posing provocatively in men's clothing or the British performance artist Genesis Breyer P-Orridge and his wife, who went through extensive plastic surgery to turn themselves into matching blond bombshells. They were so "into" each other that they wanted to be each other. Which raises the question of when the prank stops and the pathology kicks in.

In the realm of performance, the degree of prankishness can also be difficult to measure. When Hugo Ball, wearing a Cubist costume designed by Marcel Janco, recited his "sound poems" at the Cabaret Voltaire, he gave birth not only to Dada but to decades' worth of superficially nonsensical acts by artists, from the Happenings of the late 1950s to Gilbert & George's performances as singing sculptures. Yet these were all very different in content and impact.

Ball's performances can be seen as a response to an incomprehensible political climate. "A logical system of European alliances made all the sense in the world until the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, and then everything seemed to have a domino effect," says Naumann, referring to the event that triggered World War I. The performers at the Cabaret Voltaire, he says, were "intentionally going for something primitive," a provocative act in response to the tensions of a world at war.

Many street performers today, although they may not think of themselves as artists, are also making veiled critiques of the political and socioeconomic climate. The Reverend Billy stages

interventions to urge people to turn the tide of consumerism and stop spending money on junk. Those who do prank in the name of art also often have a more serious message—witness the Guerrilla Girls' campaign to draw attention to institutional gender biases in museums and galleries.

Indeed, many artist "jokes" seem designed to tweak or critique the art establishment or the marketplace. Jasper Johns's cast-bronze beer cans were reportedly crafted in response to Willem de Kooning's remark about the dealer Leo Castelli: "That son of a bitch Castelli. You could give him two beer cans and he could sell them." Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* (1961), a numbered edition of 90 cans of the artist's feces, pokes fun at the avidity of some collectors. "If collectors want something intimate, really personal to the artist, there's the artist's own shit, that is really his," Manzoni wrote to the artist Ben Vautier.

In 1989, New York-based performance artist Andrea Fraser posed as a histrionic tour guide at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; a highlight of the tour was a lecture on a drinking fountain (shades of Duchamp). It was, she told her audience seriously, a work of "astounding economy and monumentality."

Sara Greenberg Rafferty mines the esthetics and sensibility of stand-up comedy for her performances and mixed-media pieces. She riffed on the venerable tradition of slapstick in her 2006 piece *Target Practice*, a wall covered in smashed pie tins that was shown at MoMA PS1. Her recent show at her New York gallery, Rachel Uffner, featured manipulated and collaged photographic portraits of famous comedic personalities like Bill Cosby and Goldie Hawn, as well as props including Groucho glasses, a rubber chicken, and a whoopee cushion.

Pranks and jokes can reveal deeper truths, says Lyons, echoing Freud's observation in his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* that "the effect of a joke comes about through bewilderment being succeeded by illumination." In the art of the last 100 years, pranks and jokes have gone from sophomoric donkey-tail peinture to ever more sophisticated foolery, assuming many of the permutations of art making today: performance, activism, and street art, subversive gestures and in-your-face challenges to the status quo.

Why the last century has been an especially fertile one for mischief is an open question. Perhaps artists started responding more to the onslaught of disaster and mayhem in the larger world. Art historian Simon Anderson, from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and one of the panelists at the CAA convention, observed that we know very little about the jokes and pranks of earlier eras. "I think there are jokes going on throughout the history of painting," he says.

According to Sarah Archino, another CAA panelist and an art-history graduate student at the City University of New York Graduate Center, "In order for a prank to really function as art, you have to have the possibility of a lowbrow aspect in art, and if that really existed before the 20th century, it's been obscured by history."

So if academics do puzzle out a "prank theory" to interpret such varied manifestations as a painting made with a donkey's tail, a mustache drawn on the Mona Lisa, and all manner of impersonations, they will have plenty of material. And the first to systematize the tenets of this theory, in a style perhaps reminiscent of a rank-and-file deconstructionist or a Marxist art historian, may prove the lowest prankster of the bunch. Because a joke that has to be explained is not much of a joke at all. ■