Comic turns

Contemporary art is usually regarded as funny peculiar, rather than funny ha-ha, but is this unfair? Are some of the artists who seem abstruse simply trying to make us laugh?

By Robert Barry

I first noticed The Queue on the Friday, around tea time. It snaked past the Co-op round the corner, all seeming rather jolly. People were chatting, laughing. One guy swigged from an open bottle of cider. It felt more like the queue for a ride at a theme park or some new nightclub than for the viewing of the casket of Queen Elizabeth II. Only later did I realise I could see The Queue from the flat – or from the balcony, at least. Stepping outside to smoke, a little after 11 o'clock, I could see that the mood had definitely turned more sombre. People shuffled along relentlessly in grim silence. I couldn't leave home in any direction without at least catching a glimpse – either of The Queue itself or else the steady stream of people on their way to join The Queue. It was everywhere. I was surrounded.

The whole experience started to feel very much like John Smith's short film *The Black Tower* (1987). This consists of little more than a succession of static shots of a tall, dark building in East London, as viewed from different angles. It's the accompanying monologue that makes it. The unseen narrator keeps encountering the titular edifice. It seems to be inescapable, intruding even into his dreams. By the time we get to the film's breezily psychedelic climax, the Tower has taken on the phantom quality of a villain in a slasher movie. 'I kept running and taking different turnings,' the voiceover relates, 'but whenever I looked up, I saw the Tower. Whichever way I ran, it was always in front of me.'

Smith's film works as a horror story, an eerie slice of Lovecraftian weird fiction. But beyond that, it shows how more-or-less innocuous images, when anchored by words and sound, can bamboozle the viewer into accepting any absurdities. *The Black Tower* is also very funny. There is something effortlessly comic about Smith's dry, rather dour delivery, the contrast between the uncanny presence of the Tower itself and the narration's steady accumulation of mundane details. The humour doesn't undercut the film's nightmarish qualities, but only emphasises them.

I used to be a bit sniffy about what I once insisted on referring to as 'video art'. The one artist film that I did like was Smith's classic early work, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976). The premise is simple. Most of the film consists of a shot of an ordinary London street (in Dalston, near De Beauvoir Town) anchored by a voiceover (Smith himself again), which seems to be conducting the movements of people (and sometimes animals and inanimate objects), like a director shepherding extras across a movie set. Like *The Black Tower*, the film leads you up the garden path before, as trivial details build up, it flips over into absurdity. ('I want the long hand [of the clock] to move at the rate of one revolution every hour and the short hand to move at the rate of one revolution every twelve hours. Now, two pigeons fly across,' demands the unseen director). It's also very much a film about film-making (taking its lead from a scene in François Truffaut's *Day for Night*) that asks serious questions about how we habitually make sense of the world. There are, of course, other artists' films that ask the same question, but most of them aren't very funny.

It was around the same time I first saw *The Girl Chewing Gum* that the British press decided to throw a collective tantrum about the winner of that year's Turner Prize. Rarely has a piece of art attracted quite so much gall as Martin Creed's *Work No. 227: The lights going on and off* (2000; Fig. 1). For the usual parade of bores, from the *Times* to the Stuckists, Creed's work represented the acme of pretentious obscurantism. But when I met Creed a few years later, he seemed the very opposite of pompous or aloof. 'I work because I want to feel better,' he said, rather sweetly. Watching Creed's performances, whether solo or with his band, always feels like watching stand-up comedy – closer to Steve Martin than Marina Abramovic. It's a scream. Seen in a certain way, perhaps a huge empty gallery in one of Britain's most august institutions that goes dark every five seconds and lights up again could be, too. Like a child's game, it bypasses most aesthetic categories and digs deep into all sorts of primal satisfactions.

I've even started to wonder if all the art we have been taught to disdain as abstruse and out of touch might be better grasped through the lens of the comic. Take Yoko Ono, an artist long demonised by a certain strain of misogynist music criticism as the sour-faced killjoy who broke up The Beatles' all-boy party. Her book *Grapefruit* (1964) includes the following score for a musical performance: 'Imagine one thousand suns in the sky at the same time. / Let them shine for one hour. / Then, let them gradually melt into the sky. / Make one tunafish sandwich and eat.' Or Marcel Duchamp, the artist who has been accused probably more than any other of draping himself in the emperor's new clothes, but whose contribution to the Dada magazine *391* consists of a moustache drawn on to a postcard of the Mona Lisa, titled *L.H.O.O.Q.* (a phrase homonymous with the French for 'she has a hot ass').

'What is laughter?' Henri Bergson once asked. The philosopher's first principle was that 'the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human'. Even when we laugh at an animal or a felt hat, Bergson insists, there is an anthropomorphic operation at work. It is not the fabric itself that amuses us, 'but the shape that men have given it – the human caprice whose mould it has assumed'. Viral online cat videos inevitably provoke a smile because the pet in question is acting in a way that feels somehow human (likewise, the clock and the pigeons in *The Girl Chewing Gum* are funny

2. Video still from *No Tomorrow*, 2022, a six channel video installation with sound by Ragnar Kjartansson, Margrét Bjarnadóttir and Bryce Dessner

because Smith directs them like any human extra – and they appear to respond in kind).

Bergson's reflections might be applied to a recent work by the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson. For the opening night of the 2017 edition of the London Contemporary Music Festival, five pianists and five singers spread out across a hall to play Schubert's song 'An die Musik' (1817) over and over again for seven hours straight. The venue is big, and Schubert's melodies were quickly swallowed up in its swirling reverberations as the different performances merged into a languorous soup of sound. But the real joy of the piece lay in how the sheer challenge of its length gradually eroded all the conventions of classical performance. As the hours passed, the rigid demeanour and dramatic projection slowly collapsed into something else, evoking less the concert hall than the rehearsal room or the bedroom. The sublime transformed into the pathetic. 'You should never underestimate the power of the pathetic,' Kjartansson told me later that year (the phrase may come across as rather high-sounding on the page but he was laughing when he said it).

A lot of Kjartansson's work – like all the best gags – is a study in repetition. I always liked the story (told by Caleb Kelly in his book *Gallery Sound*) that, in May 2013, after the band The National finally finished playing their song 'Sorrow' for the umpteenth time, having performed it continuously for six hours for Kjartansson's *A Lot Of Sorrow*, the audience at MoMA PS1 all screamed for an encore. The band obliged by playing 'Sorrow' one more time. As an old friend of mine used to say, a joke just isn't funny until you've heard it too many times. Kjartansson is basically the comedian Andy Kaufman singing 'I Trusted You', transposed into an art gallery context. It's funny, and then it's not funny – in fact, it's pretty tedious – then it starts to get awkward, and then it gets really funny (and also, somehow, oddly profound).

But the Western mind has long exhibited a bias against the comic. As the British theorist Simon Critchley points out, the 'tragic paradigm' in which philosophy has found itself since Kant leaves little room for the exploration of the humorous, as if the things that make us laugh have nothing to tell us about who we are. We might recognise that novels by Austen, Dickens or Proust are funny, but we tend to treat that funniness as if it were somehow epiphenomenal to their greatness. It is possible to trace an alternative tradition which takes comedy seriously. In many of Plato's dialogues, we find Socrates wielding irony as a dialectical tool. (Granted the *Laws* and the *Republic* are not very funny at all, but *Euthydemus* and *Cratylus*? Definitely.) Shakespeare granted his fools a clear-sightedness denied to his heroes. Freud saw in the language of jokes a path to the truth of unconscious desires.

It may, however, be expecting too much of comedy to expect it to speak truth to power – or perhaps we are looking in the wrong place. In a piece for *Red Pepper* in 2020, Juliet Jacques argued that British comedians had consistently failed to meet the challenges of the contemporary political moment. Mainstream comedy, she wrote, had been 'gradually de-radicalised' to the point where many satirists had started to feel apiece with the establishment they once skewered. Perhaps, today, artists are not only better equipped than professional comics to reveal truths about the contemporary moment, they may be funnier at it, too. Kjartansson told me that his choreographic work, *No Tomorrow*, for eight blue-jeaned dancers with acoustic guitars (Fig. 2), was written in response to the inauguration of Donald Trump. Few grasped the absurdity of the British government's response to the pandemic better than John Smith, in whose *Covid Messages* (2020), the repeated incantation of 'hands, face, space' is presented as a magical spell doomed to failure. It's funny, as the old saw goes, because it's true. Ⓐ

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