
Editorial Introduction

Humour in the Visual Arts and Visual Culture: Practices, Theories, and Histories

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This issue of *RACAR* originated in the panel *Graphic Satire in Canada, Before and After Contemporary Art* that Annie Gérin and I presented at the November 2009 UAAC conference. In this panel we explored the ways in which Canadian visual culture—from private journals and letters to broadsheets and political publications—had been enriched by graphic satire from the late Victorian era to the advent of the Cold War. We also proposed that strategies borrowed from graphic satire gained centre stage in contemporary Canadian arts, particularly those with a strong political and critical engagement. In this special issue on humour, in which we are joined by a third guest editor, Jean-Philippe Uzel, we broaden the scope of enquiry beyond Canadian caricature and graphic satire to take in the overarching question of the role of humour in visual arts and visual culture and, by extension, in art history. The seven scholars represented here focus on questions of artistic production, distribution, and aesthetics in relation to theories of laughter and humour in historical and contemporary art practices from the last two hundred years.

Humour and graphic satire

The first three papers take us from the print markets of 1790s London and Restoration Paris to the state-mandated production of satiric images in the first years of the Soviet Union. The sets of images examined in these papers appear as traces that draw their legitimacy from these images' keen referencing of the public sphere as a living archive. In this view, "the public" is both source and horizon of satiric imagery, since shared understandings and visual recognition of the individual subjects or collective types satirized are the very condition for a given image's legibility. When satire disrupts or reconfigures the representation of a subject or type, the image shifts toward humour, the purpose of which is to trigger individual and social experiences of laughter. What is remarkable in this shift, as far as historians of visual culture are concerned, is its relationship to the wider realm of images that have currency in a given historical period. The public of observers is not simply busy looking at, reading, thinking about, discussing, and quite likely re-enacting the satiric images that it sees, buys, and perhaps keeps; it is also positioned by those images and the contexts in which they are presented—single-sheet prints, illustrated weekly papers, city street windows. Satiric imagery is thus a key element in a print culture that is busy invading the wider culture of its time. It also appears to show us a self-satirizing imagined community, one that is a walking catalogue of its own social articulations—dress, comportment, and behaviour—and that understands and interprets itself through its own exhibited and printed imagery. The structuring artistic genres of

Western culture—notably portraiture and history painting—are embedded too in the public's performance of its relationship to social and political structures. Yet, as these three papers taken together make clear, social and political structures do not simply arise of their own volition: individuals and groups are at work planning for the social habits of laughter around the image. We need to take into account the decisions made by artists and writers and printer-publishers, and, indeed, by the commissioning figures (if not the commissars) of the satiric image. These are the political men (and women), the strategists and theorists who endeavour to further specific social and political aims by harnessing visual imagery to the physiological experience of laughter. Remarkably, the very diverse imagery studied across these papers shows us that this harnessing works because society nurtures a relationship with its own history and memory, out of which it forms expectations that the humorous image disrupts and attempts to defeat. It turns out that the satiric image is very much a part of the *régime d'historicité* described by François Hartog, that is, the relationship of a period to its past as demonstrated by its cultural productions.¹

Christina Smylitopoulos's "Portrait of a Nabob: Graphic Satire, Portraiture, and the Anglo-Indian in the Late Eighteenth Century" and Peggy Davis's "Le Serment des Horaces face à la satire graphique" both expose the role played by satiric images in the structuring of the public understanding of visual arts as "fine arts" in later Enlightenment Europe. Portraiture and history painting were emblematic of national narratives because of their prominence in the exhibitions of key artistic institutions (the Salons at the Louvre, the Royal Academy in London). That these institutions were themselves from the outset open to public questioning, and that the genres should, in short order, be parodied or even maligned, is evident enough, even as British institutions and artistic strategies were developed in rivalry with their French counterparts.

In her examination of the figure of the nabob in British portraiture and graphic satire, Christina Smylitopoulos shows us the ambiguity of the relationship between Britain's swiftly expanding infrastructure of imperial commerce and the culture it supported. This relationship was prey to constant shifts, as were the relationships between "metropolis" and "colony," and between academy portraiture and the satiric versions that arose as portraiture was released into public print culture. Humour is shown to have been a vital component in the configuration of British art in the eighteenth century, through a parallel realm of graphic satires where the validity (and vocabularies) of imperial pretension and representation were consistently tested. Smylitopoulos's paper gives us a case study of what happens when the power invested in figural re-presentation is distributed

across an imperial structure and the metropolitan is reconfigured by its colonial mirror. We see, then, how the categories of both art *and* art history are transformed by the humorous practices that at once undermine and extend the authority of specific images, subjects, genres, and stylistic practices, especially when these are held to be revealing of national characteristics. When the consensus supporting this process seems to eventually wear out, the schema that supports both portrait and caricature as practices, as well as the individual subjects of certain portraits and caricatures, begin to lose validity.

The sense of what is at stake if we do pay attention to graphic satire as a form of critique of an authoritative image is patiently set forth by Peggy Davis in her paper “*Le Serment des Horaces face à la satire graphique*.” Although this title appears to place Jacques-Louis David’s iconic painting in opposition to graphic satire, the author makes it clear that history painting and graphic satire, at least in the context of the pre-revolutionary Salons, can be usefully considered as two sides of the same coin. Davis examines a group of printed satires dating from the turbulent period in which Napoleon fell twice from power in a dance of withdrawal and return alternating with the Bourbon monarchy—a sequence of repetitions that seems to rehearse Marx’s later comment that historical events occur first as tragedy, and then as farce.² Davis shows how questions of political affiliation and identity were closely negotiated through reference to an image that had been widely mediated since its initial presentation at the Salon of 1785.³ The *Oath of the Horatii* had become so emblematic of the difficult stages of the subsequent French national narrative that it became a prime object of the processes of parody and travesty. Davis describes a highly complex set of intertextual and intermedial effects attendant on the *Oath’s* circulation in a cultural context marked by rapidly succeeding ruptures and political realignments. She reminds us that the history painting of this period had been understood early on in its relationship to caricature: it set up, almost inevitably, the conditions for its own (seemingly inexhaustible) *détournement*, because its vocabulary, especially as reconfigured through Davidian aesthetics, was already that of caricature and graphic satire.

By the time of the Soviet revolution a century later, the implementation of modern mass media allowed this conflation of politics and aesthetics to be programmed on a vast scale. In “On rit au *NarKomPros*: Anatoli Lounatcharski et la théorie du rire soviétique,” Annie Gérin documents the Soviet state’s use of satiric representations in support of its revolutionary social and political programmes. Gérin shows us how Lunacharsky developed concepts of laughter as a political tool by studying satiric practices and theories of laughter from Jonathan Swift to Herbert Spencer, James Sully, Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, and others. Lunacharsky effectively introduced a new figure into the history of humour in art: the image commissar, a sort of state

curator of iconography (or, more perversely, an updated Abbot Suger) who organizes state resources to enable the widespread circulation of satiric imagery. At the very moment when Mikhail Bakhtin was developing his ideas about the carnivalesque as a form of laughter that should be seen as a direct expression of the people,⁴ his compatriot Lunacharsky was effectively deploying his strategies for programming the people’s laughter. In the dynamics of Soviet political organization as mediated by strong political actors, there proved to be limits to the authorization given to this concept of laughter. Just as portrait and history painting models could function in satiric imagery only within certain limits and according to precise conditions, as Smylitopoulos and Davis have shown, so was Lunacharsky’s experiment circumscribed by specific decisions taken in the Soviet hierarchy. Gérin prompts us to consider anew the historical construction of periods in graphic satire, and gives us a methodology for doing so. At the same time, her interest in the rhetoric of humour raises the question of the theoretical bases for humour practices in a given time. Finally, we understand how the critical, almost dialogic relationship of graphic satire to the art it satirizes is grounded in language, gesture, behaviour, dress, and speech, to name just a few of the innumerable cultural signs that make up an imagined community. In a sense, Gérin examines a culminating point in a community’s print culture: its adoption of humour as one of the most visible, architectural signs of political and social structure, an element given not only the responsibilities of representation but also of agency for transformative action.

Humour and contemporary art

The first three papers address a traditional preserve of the study of humour in art, the upheavals of a European era marked both by revolutions and by shifts in visual culture towards the mass production, consumption, and circulation of images. The second set of papers addresses dominant late modernist artistic and institutional practices through humorous approaches that effectively satirize these practices. This is the realm of Neo-Dada, Fluxus, and conceptual art, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s in Canada and the United States. In the first two papers of this section, Katie Cholette and Marc James Léger focus on the practices of individual artists, respectively Greg Curnoe and Robert Filliou. These case studies are followed by Heather Diack’s essay on the importance of humour in the strategies of conceptual art, notably in the debates between John Baldessari and Joseph Kosuth.

In “Derision, Nonsense, and Carnival in the Work of Greg Curnoe,” Katie Cholette revisits the question of periphery and centre opened up by Curnoe. He and his colleagues worked from a regional position (London, Ontario) to set up a critique of the centralization of art institutions in Canada’s major cities

(Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal) at a time when Canada's post-war nationalism led to comprehensive and critical assessments of its relationship with the powerful (or overpowering) neighbour to the south. Curnoe emerges as an attentive reader and interpreter of art history and as a theorist-practitioner who deployed a diverse set of humorous strategies, many recovering the initiatives of early twentieth-century Dada and others drawing on performative, literary, and visual practices pervasive in Europe and the Americas. The *régime d'historicité* of this relationship with ancestral humorous practices is telling; for the category of nonsense alone, an artist of Curnoe's generation could look back to Dada, but also to Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, and, perhaps, *The Goon Show*. Cholette engages with the notion of the carnivalesque—anachronistically, as she reminds us, since Bakhtin's ideas were only introduced into Western (read: largely French and Anglo-American) intellectual life in the late 1960s, following closely on the rediscovery of Bakhtin by young Soviet scholars.⁵ She convinces us that carnival, as well as derision and nonsense, must be lurking as much in the institution as in the image, as shown by Curnoe's send-ups of institutions and representations alike, which expose their co-infiltration.

Marc James Léger's "A Filliou for the Game: From Political Economy to Poetical Economy and Fluxus" demonstrates how the new economy of artistic production opened up by Fluxus artists through the creation of parallel, often derisory networks of venues goes beyond institutional critique. From a position found somewhere under the long shadow cast by Marcel Duchamp, Léger thinks through the question of *where is art?*—as much as the question of what it might *be*. He finds answers in Filliou's *Breakfasting Together, If You Wish*, the 1979 video work that becomes the organizing meta-narrative of his paper. The *where*, in this case, appears to be actively distributed throughout the public sphere, according to revolutionary parameters common to many 1960s art movements. This distribution is performed as self-consciously as any Lunacharsky might do, but without the trappings of state or committees that summarily remove agency and power. Instead, it is the wider, unrelentingly messy continuum between public and private spheres that emerges in the regimes of subject, object, and representation. Once established, this continuum mocks and collapses the fictitious limits between art and life, and in the process accords priority to derisive and nonsense practices familiar to Greg Curnoe. Like Cholette, Léger calls to mind an era in which Curnoe and Filliou were touchstones for the work of countless contemporary Canadian artists, critics, and historians. As Léger shows, any separation of legitimate art from an art that must perforce be considered illegitimate becomes meaningless. The humorous praxis at work inevitably worries away at the legitimacy of the institutions of art and art history, what one might refer to, then, as Donald Preziosi's *museography*. Léger establishes the

theoretical underpinnings of this artistic position with reference to two other key intellectual forces of the 1960s, the Marxist Henri Lefebvre, and the ur-marxist Karl Marx himself, whose ghost is heard wandering through Filliou's 1970 *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*.

Heather Diack's "The Gravity of Levity: Humour as Conceptual Critique" closes this section with an account of the neglect of humour in scholarly accounts of conceptual art: neglect that Diack refers to as a repression. She speaks directly to the choices made by the art critics and historians who were among the first observers of conceptual art. Setting up the conundrum of the mind/body split in Western academic disciplines, Diack tracks conceptual artists' critical work in relation to humorous practices, overt and covert, that also inhabited Duchamp's long shadow across the twentieth century. These critical endeavours, if applied to works made before the Duchamp moment,⁶ can be seen as being parallel to Jacques-Louis David's aesthetics, which, as Peggy Davis shows, are virtually at one with the caricatural vocabulary through which David's procedures became so rapidly lampooned. In this respect, a comparison between the *Oath of the Horatii* and Bruce Nauman's *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* might well be instructive. In each image the human body is given to reach a near-impossible apex within an almost abstract, unspecifiable space. The observer gazes lingeringly through states of apprehension and awe before musing on the underlying ridiculousness of a scene whose humour is perhaps unintended, and thus all the more contagious. There is no way out, except through an imitation that will inevitably devalue and deflate the original. Diack informs her paper with an inquiry into the self-imposed limits of an art history still under the influence of Immanuel Kant. She argues that conceptual art effectively establishes the limits of its operability, thereby (and paradoxically, perhaps) using the process of *critique* in a perfectly Kantian fashion. Diack traces conceptual artists' adoption of photography and language as defining elements in relation to the intertwined philosophical and art historical engagement with humour as subject and context, however peripatetic.

In the call for papers for this issue of *RACAR*, we had asked how it might be possible to account for what we saw as historiographical ruptures in research on humour in the visual arts and visual culture, and how to account for what might be missing in art history's methodological and theoretical framework. Our final essay, Jean-Philippe Uzel's "L'humour comme combinaison des contradictions. Une approche esthétique" proposes that it was humour itself that had been missing all along from art history. The artistic productions of the twentieth century, and in particular since the 1960s, became emblematic of what one might call a *humoristic turn*. Paradoxically, this correlation between contemporary art and contemporary artwriting, notably

in their recourse to philosophical frameworks, has ably hidden away the importance of humour which, argues Uzel, has marked the full breadth of what Jacques Rancière defines as the “régime esthétique de l’art” in place since the late eighteenth century—precisely the timespan covered by the papers collected here.⁷ Uzel reassesses the importance accorded to humour in the work of two key philosophers of the early nineteenth century, Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (known as Jean Paul) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. These philosophers contributed to the development of the idea of the autonomy of artistic practice. Rancière revisits this autonomy, which he sees as having been historically instituted in partnership with what he calls a heteronomy, a paradoxical relationship in which the prevailing aesthetic regime abolishes the distance between the lived world and its representation. But, says Uzel, Rancière forgets to account for the humour that is present in Jean Paul’s and Hegel’s conceptions of art history and aesthetics. For Jean Paul, this conception is made clear in his idea of *Witz*. For Hegel, humour was a concept both central and troublesome. This troubling reads as a pulse heard throughout cultural productions in the early nineteenth century and the late twentieth century alike. Rancière integrates this troubling to his model of indecidability. In Uzel’s view, this model is productive; and yet, by being bereft of humour it misses out on a notion that is equally useful. Perhaps this absence has to be understood in the importance that has been accorded to Bakhtin over the past forty years, especially insofar as the Soviet scholar’s ideas of the carnivalesque and of dialogism are bound up with the notions of polyphony and unfinalizability, both easily adduced to an interpretive model for contemporary art and historic graphic satire alike.

Our issue ends, then, on the challenges offered to our practices as art historians. From graphic satires to the strategies of contemporary artists, the operations of humour in art (or of humour *and* art, or of humour *with* art) tease us into working willingly with paradox and contradiction. They do so in ways that always keep us worried about unmasking ourselves, and thereby appearing, who knows, a little foolish, while our aim is ostensibly the serious critical work on visual culture and on lived social experience through visual culture. According to François Hartog, our own *régime d’historicité* is one that tethers us not to the past but to a worrying *présentisme* in which our present is always the convergent horizon of our relationships to history and experience. In terms of art history, our horizon finds us nervous about releasing the laughter attendant on our experience of images, both inside and outside a satiric perspective. Our propensity for humour leads us, as art historians, to prefer to keep a straight face as we too attack our relationship to the image by pointing up, through a distorting re-enactment, what always becomes the image’s fundamentally ironic purpose as it shifts (or even drifts), quoted, translated, and reformulated,

through society and history (and back again). Ours might be a fundamentally ironic regime, or perhaps a *régime d’ironicité*—or, then again, *d’ironie citée*.

Notes

- 1 François Hartog, *Régimes d’historicité, présentismes et expériences du temps* (Paris, 2003).
- 2 Marx writes,

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the nephew for the uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances of the second edition of the Eighteenth Brumaire.

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1852], edition established 1995–2010 at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire> (accessed 12 May 2012).
- 3 An anonymous reviewer of the 1785 Salon asks,

Is it not criticism that, in relentlessly groaning at the huge numbers of obscure portraits, puerile *bambochades* and at worthy genre paintings that stifle genius, has awakened the government’s zeal, provoked its munificence and given birth to that host of history painters that is the pride of the French school today?... Is it not criticism that is responsible for producing the current Salon, cited as the most magnificent and by all accounts the most impressive Salon in its history? No trivialities, no fripperies, no grotesqueries, no caricatures, none of those feeble and effeminate scenes the usual effect of which is to debilitate the taken while corrupting the heart.

“On the paintings, sculptures and engravings exhibited in the Louvre Salon on 25th August 1785,” trans. Kate Tunstall, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1648–1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, p. 699. This excerpt has been taken from Bernadette Fort, ed., *Les Salons des ‘Mémoires secrets’ 1767–1787* (Paris, 1999), p. 283.
- 4 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* [1929] (Ann Arbor, 1973).
- 5 For one account of the state of Bakhtin studies, see Carol Emerson, “The Next Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin (The View from the Classroom),” *Rhetoric Review*, 19, 1/2 (Autumn 2000), 12–27.
- 6 Art history has apparently conferred a generative status on Duchamp. A critique of this position has been led notably by Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, 1995).
- 7 “L’humour est la vertu dont les artistes se réclament le plus volontiers aujourd’hui: l’humour, soit le léger décalage qu’il est possible de ne pas même remarquer dans la manière de présenter une séquence de signes ou un assemblage d’objets.” Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (Paris, 2004), 76.