

A DAY WITHOUT LAUGHTER

1.

What triggers laughter? What kind of joke induces hilarity? Very often, the accident does. As when a gesture or behaviour goes wrong, causing something unexpected to occur. When a moment strays and upsets the ordinary run of things. Certainly there are also thoughtful forms of humour, light and as if caressing, such as that of the very fine papier-mâché of the dress in Kiki Smith's sculpture, *Seated Girl with Owl*. But let's start with the most violent, the most radical: mad laughter, crazy laughter—full-throated, noisy, thunderous laughter. Laughter can be a form of excitement, an uncontrolled discharge of energy, a phenomenon linked to surprise. Laughter can seize you, more often in a very bodily, convulsive way. And everyone knows from experience: the more we run away from this laughter, the more strength it finds, the more it ravages us inside, looking for a way to show everyone its roar. Try to hold it down, it will catch up with you. This laughter, this coarse laughter, this uncontrollable laughter, devoid of reason, without manners, almost always seems to be linked to an accident. Accidents in the style of those short shows on television that used to kick off our evenings in the 1980s or 1990s—blooper reels filled with skiing, cycling, and skateboarding mishaps, people veering off course, mortifying clumsiness, overambitious plans to negotiate obstacles, subverted goals of heroism, frustrated boldness, the pie-in-the-face, falling objects, trays of food tipping onto customers' shirts, burlesque slips, etc. We would also laugh at children who could barely walk yet, at their unbalanced gait, at their unexpected falls into a flowerpot.

For the philosopher Henri Bergson, laughter occurs when living beings lose the agility with which they adapt and adjust to situations. Laughter is provoked by the surprise of one's rigidity or lack of skill. It is even a kind of punishment: the punishment of a group that observes rigidity in others. The person who has fallen is almost considered guilty, a laughing stock, in the eyes of the spectators, and is thus punished by their laughter at having forgotten to be agile, to adapt or adjust as life *normally* requires. The accident is seen as the result of a mechanical, rigid behaviour that is tacked onto reality, disconnected, when you might have expected a more fluid choreography. It is not life that makes us laugh, but that which, in it, becomes rigid, wanders off course, goes crazy.

Contemporary art is full of accidents, either because it causes them or results from them. We can find funny situations in which an object, an individual or a gesture does not fit the frame, or upsets the coordinates of what is expected. A body in a strange position, an object's weird place in a scene, an element's apparent non-functionality when neither in its place nor used as it usually is, the isolation of a motif that is usually well integrated into a whole, and more generally the novelty that disturbs our habits—all this can be funny. *Circumstantial Evidence*—Mac Adams photographs a pot plant that has fallen over on the floor that is next to a chair dripping milk from an overturned cup, on the wall beside which, in a penetrating montage, is a photograph of a cat. Vehicles, too, are prone to accidents:

Arnold Odermatt's partially atrophied car; Martin Parr's car caught on its side; or those in the landslide photographed by Joël Sternfeld, one of which narrowly escapes disaster, while the other is doomed. Whatever the humorous charge of all these falls (you decide in accordance with your nerves), the accident-provoked laughter that ensues sometimes sounds a worry: will the world come right again?

Let's take the following hypothesis as a starting point: Laughter is an immune reaction to disorder. A reflex that would have the effect of putting things right to protect us from their collapse. A person stumbles, throwing their body onto the pavement, as it does our reflex to laugh. We laugh impulsively before we even offer to help the person. This probably occurs for simple reason: laughing already helps to lift the person who falls. We laugh at this tear in the order of things. Laughing allows us to recapture a system of norms that otherwise falters. Because with the accident, the normative markers of our common life temporarily crumble. Laughter is therefore not without social significance. On the contrary, it expresses a social vigilance. Those seized by laughter signal to others that they are not fooled, that they have understood the impact on norms of the world as it is. Irreverence makes people laugh. A *faux pas* makes you laugh. Provocation makes you laugh. Disobedience makes you laugh. Vices make you laugh. And anything that disturbs shared norms. Laughter responds to and corrects these deviations—it is a “shaming” and a “corrective,” as Bergson said. We laugh to point out deviations. Sometimes, too, we can laugh at people who fit the normative frame too perfectly, who are so perfectly docile and mechanical that it becomes caricatural. People can be so right and proper that they seem strange. Like in Karen Knorr's portraits, where the subjects are a little too willing, a little too straight, a little too rigid, as in royal settings. Like Martin Parr's tourists, standing in good, orderly fashion in front of the Acropolis for a *cliché* (in French, both a snapshot *and* a stereotype). Like everything with an air of being false, or too true.

These are some of the conditions under which we laugh. But laughter is not humour. Humour is an explicit work of upsetting norms, which provokes laughter. To exercise your sense of humour, including artistically, you must be a craftsman of disequilibrium, constantly flirting with the possibility of toppling over.

2.

We have always been taught that laughter is a specifically human trait. Humour, even more so. Whatever this latent human exceptionalism, the artists give us something else to sink our teeth into. Since they use a concrete, direct, effective and visual funniness. You might say that they practice the *humour of materials*—the capacity of matter to frustrate our expectations. Isn't this what art is all about in the contemporary era? We may observe that all the norms once holding together the system of the Beaux Arts have been destabilized by impertinent geniuses who did not conform to the rules. The philosopher Jacques Rancière shows this well. Where the Academies established the ways of doing things very precisely (detailed protocols defined the practices of sculpture or painting), and based them on a hierarchical vision of the nobility of the materials (marble, stone, canvas, etc.), contemporary artists transform the field of possibilities. They use coarser, more fragile materials, or those borrowed directly from the prosaic world. Vulgar, precarious, light, even ephemeral materials. Three coloured Tupperware boxes photographed like stars.

The works chosen here defend the idea of a *plastic humour*. You might think that humour is plastic by definition: it twists reality in all directions, looking for modulations and subterranean meanings. But there is also a humour specific to the world of forms, which is always a living world. The slightly deflated balloon in Webb Boyd's *Mezzanine* montage, presenting itself in a half-softness that frustrates our desire for well-formed shapes. We would only have to blow into it three times to fix this formal approximation. Sol Lewitt's sculptures are incomplete. Incongruities of proportion (the dog no higher than two pairs of shoes photographed by Elliott Erwitt), of perspective (Philippe Ramette's recumbent man), of reflection (in Mac Adams's *The Toaster*), of focus (in Martin Parr's photograph with the blurred woman in the foreground)—all these incongruities tear us from the strict geometry of the rational world. Pistoletto's bentwood painting is similarly surprising. This play of forms is permeated by a fundamental *disequilibrium*, which constantly tips the viewer off balance.

The body disobeys the usual codes with humour. The body bends, twists, jumps, bends over backwards. Suddenly, hands make faces they are not supposed to make—in a joyful choreography (Bill Viola) or in slightly unusual poses (this hand of Louise Bourgeois in her portrait by Charbonnier). Bruce Nauman's lips and cheeks stretch and distort, because the body is also plastic. The body becomes burlesque, the facial gestures clownish. Dressing up, pulling faces, wearing a mask, a red nose: so many ways of humorously subverting norms and expectations. Always a reversal.

3.

Humour defines a certain relationship to oneself and to others. On the surface, laughter might seem to be a sign of relative indifference or temporary insensitivity. One laughs at the embarrassment of others, heartily, as they say, but without much heart in reality. If we laugh, a priori, emotion is held at bay (otherwise it would be too present for us to have the indecency to laugh). Laughter can be protective, serve as a barrier. We laugh at what we manage to grasp with great acuity. Those who have a sense of humour generally have such a keen grasp of things that it almost hurts. It is the harsh, voracious, frank laughter that catches us in the act of laziness. It makes us jump in the air, because the laughter rumbles and reprimands. A mocking and tender laugh, which raises eyes to the heavens, which protects us from our easy ways out. Please, no complacency, no laziness, no poses. Stop with your good manners. Laughing, with finesse, also means taking things seriously. Laughter teaches us to take ourselves seriously with joy. It is a requirement, even a political requirement, and yet not a kind of coldness. Laughter protects us from emotions that are too obvious and sudden.

But not always, right? Laughter can also be a vehicle for strong emotions. Because humour is infectious, and is not quite the same as irony—which is a frank distancing from the other. Laughter magically becomes, at times, the means by which we become attached to others, by which we let ourselves be touched by them. It grabs the heart. Laughter is soul-stirring. It makes you want to love. We are overcome by a gentle affection for the elderly people photographed by Carl de Keyzer during a Christmas show, like somewhat chubby little angels, smiling like children with their wings frozen in the shape of hearts. We don't laugh at them, we soften. We extend our open hearts.

Laughter can always be turned on its head. It is commonly called self-mockery. The word is strong, too strong, because it's not really about ridiculing or despising oneself. But we are amused by the fact that we ourselves are caught up in what we look at with intransigence, sometimes with distrust. Our eyes like knives, our rigour, our demands are also part of who we are. We must include ourselves in what we suspect of being rigid, over-coded. We play with norms. The humour that takes itself as an object, then becomes a weapon of anti-narcissism. A slight detachment from oneself, a departure from the easiness in which we would be likely to luxuriate, a wink to others: I am graspable, fallible, I expose myself to you, just as I am. Laughter is turned on its head. It is no longer an offence, or a punishment, but a way of creating something shared and joining with it. Certain settings are suited to these forms of reversal. Organizing an exhibition on humour has allowed for gestures of this nature. Because art also allows for an *outré* representation of the world of work and business. Luc Delahaye's large photographic tableau of gestures captures the viewer with their agitation, their plastic stress, their abstract urgency, their nervous rush. You can break out in a sweat just looking at it.

And the art world? Laughing about oneself—about one's codes, tics and peculiarities—is not a taboo. The woman carrying a Picasso sculpture photographed by Louise Lawler seems to be holding a ramshackle, inappropriate object, since it is clear that only dissonance can emerge from this dysfunctional musical instrument. This strange visual scene where life and art are abruptly superimposed on one another does not seem to favour art. It is a shock: the sculpted work is desecrated. Things no longer seem to belong. The installation *168 Plaster Surrogates*, beyond the fact that it concretely highlights the drudgery of hanging art (think about it!), humorously talks to its viewer about the relationship to art—about intense collectionism, greedy consumption, the risk of saturation. Urs Lüthi's sculpture *I'd like to be a cubist sculpture* is perhaps the most subtle case of humour turning in on itself. The artist chooses a playful, poetic title that sings of absurd, offbeat ambition, plays with art-world references, and under this title presents a very subtle piece, a gem of precarious equilibrium, always threatened with falling.

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