

"Laugh-In: Art, Comedy, Performance,"
MCA San Diego exhibition brochure
by Jill Dawsey

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SAN DIEGO



LAUGH-IN

ART, COMEDY, PERFORMANCE

JANUARY 23 THROUGH APRIL 19, 2015



Tammy Rae Carland's photograph *I'm Dying Up Here (Strawberry Shortcake)* (2010) ¹ offers a portrait of the artist as a comedian: Carland sits spot-lit on a stool near a microphone, a pink towel draped over her head. The towel turns her into a phallic form—the embodiment of a dick joke?—yet this impression is subverted by the feminine cartoon character covering her face. The photograph courts a tension between the artist's vulnerability and an underlying sense of transgression. Carland, like many of the artists in *Laugh-in: Art, Comedy, Performance*, finds an affinity in the figure of the stand-up comedian, who evokes the pressures and risks of performing, but also a sense of possibility and permission.

The twenty artists featured in *Laugh-in* make use of the strategies of stand-up comedy as a means to reframe questions surrounding artistic performativity and audience participation, as well as public speech. If stand-up evokes the image of an isolated figure on stage, this form resonates with contemporary artists today precisely for its direct, if uncertain, relationship toward its public. Stand-up offers a model of audience engagement, one that not only captures attention and entertains, but that also opens onto a more direct and perhaps intimate conversation.

Stand-up comedy itself is in the midst of a renaissance, as a field expanding to include more experimental and formally inventive acts—which may more closely resemble performance art—as well as increasingly diverse voices.¹ Yet artists are drawn to stand-up today for reasons beyond this new formal kinship or the currency of stand-up in the cultural zeitgeist. Artists embrace the format for its emphatic embodiment, and its ability to use laughter to upend hierarchies and power relations. Indeed, stand-up offers a forum in which comics (and artists alike) may examine stereotypes and taboos, testing the possibilities of what can be said and what can be heard. It forms a space in which performers can resist structures of social compliance. It affords a chance to go off-script: common sense can be abandoned and established orders inverted. Furthermore, stand-up creates a context in which it is tolerable to examine sites of pain and collective trauma, especially with respect to questions of race, class, gender, and power inequalities broadly.

Many of the artists in this exhibition engage stand-up as an enunciative strategy, in works that foreground voice, linguistic play, and inevitable breakdowns in communication. Cory Arcangel's *Continuous Partial Awareness (PDF)* (2008-09) features a printed list of ideas for prospective artworks, which reads like so many one-liner jokes and a sneak into the artist's mindset. The title evokes a state of diffused attention induced by multiple forms of information—which may be the condition of the artist in the midst of his creative process, or that of the audience, subjected to his barrage of ideas. Scott Reeder's word paintings ③ carry the comedic potency of punchlines, along with the brevity and currency of internet hashtags. His related series of white aluminum sculptures, *Bad Idea* (2013) ④ appear as crumpled sheets of paper: wry symbols of the frustration that often attends the artistic process. Jonn Herschend employs formats associated with corporate communications and instructional media as unexpected vehicles for narratives that inevitably go awry and unravel, revealing emotional confusion and human failing at their core. Kasia Fudakowski makes sculptures that occupy space like human actors, yet for her performance *Smile* (2011) ⑥, she put herself on display in a lecture-cum-stand-up routine exploring the fine line between artistic and comedic success and failure.

Central to stand-up comedy is the public performance of personal identity, often through candid revelations of a comedian's life. A number of artists in *Laugh-in* create personas that exaggerate this performance of selfhood, exploring the roles they play as artists and the constructed nature of identity more broadly. Michael Smith ⑦ often performs as fictional artist "Mike Smith," a bland but optimistic Everyman whose hapless adventures poke fun at the self-serious art world. In a related vein, Jayson Musson's YouTube video series *ART THOUGHTZ* (2010-2012) ⑧ features the artist in the guise of Hennessy Youngman, a hip hop-style art pundit who dispenses advice to aspiring artists, along with irreverent critiques of the art world and its exclusionary structures. (It is worth noting that Musson exemplifies a trend among performers today, who locate new audiences through the platforms of the internet and social media.) Jibz Cameron's persona Dynasty Handbag—typically clad in out-of-fashion workout attire with clownish make-up and teased hair—is possessed by a frantic energy and seems out-of-sync with the world around her ⑨. The character fails to achieve, or perhaps resists, physical coordination and personal coherence, suggesting a more general resistance to heteronormative structures. The work of Tim Lee explores how the formation of a public persona is inextricably linked to larger narratives of race and cultural identity. Posing as a young Steve Martin rehearsing before a mirror ⑩, Lee highlights Martin's whiteness and points to the ways Martin satirized his own position as a white male—donning a white suit and performing a flamboyant bravado.



Comedy's apparent lack of seriousness allows it to contend with subjects that are taboo, troubling, or perhaps ahead of their time. Eric Garduño and Matthew Rana's *The People v. Bruce (parrhesia)* (2011) ⑪ pays homage to Lenny Bruce, whose comedy embraced social commentary and anti-establishment politics. The installation revisits the comedian's 1964 trial for obscenity charges, mixing elements of a courtroom and a comedy club to question both spaces as arenas in which confession and truth-telling may take place. Comedy also offers a way to survive and talk about pain, in ways that were exemplified by Richard Pryor, who is conjured in a number of works in the exhibition. Edgar Arceneaux's installation *The Alchemy of Comedy... Stupid* (2006) ⑫ features video of David Alan Grier describing his fraught relationship with his father. Arceneaux's drawings suggest an alternative patrilineage for Grier in the figure

of Pryor, invoked through a large-scale drawing of a wheelchair. Glenn Ligon's *No Room* series (2007) ¹³ features a single, repeated joke from Richard Pryor's 1971 performance *Live & Smokin'*. The repetition of the joke across multiple canvases serves to enact its punchline—"No room for advancement." If Pryor's comedy was radical for giving expression to the traumas surrounding race in America, Ligon's reiteration suggests the irresolution of such traumas and the persistence of the problem in the present. Carter Mull's *Worker's Clock* series (2013) includes images of deceased comedians Pryor and Patrice O'Neal in photo-collages that meditate on mortality and our collective imagination of time.

Other touchstones for artists in *Laugh-in* include a generation of breakthrough female comedians like Phyllis Diller, Gilda Radner, and Lily Tomlin, who struggled for a place in the male-dominated stand-up world. Sara Greenberger Rafferty appropriates photographs of such figures ¹⁴, manipulating her prints with liquid until the colors run. The results appear distanced and damaged, as if registering the vulnerability of the bodies depicted—bodies that subjected themselves to the audience's gaze and to ritual humiliation for the sake of entertainment. Yet there is resilience in the images, too: these figures appear as icons and survivors. Comedy as survival mechanism also emerges



in Stanya Kahn's video *Lookin Good, Feelin Good* (2012) ¹⁵, in which the artist dons a giant foam penis costume and wanders the streets of a Los Angeles neighborhood. This footage is intercut with shots of Kahn in the same costume performing in a stand-up comedy setting; instead of jokes, however, she relates a traumatic childhood memory. As the piece oscillates between the personal and the "ridiculo-political" (as Kahn has

put it), humor emerges as a crucial strategy for negotiating untenable situations, past and present. Similar impulses emerge in the work of Chan & Mann ¹⁷, who stylize a personalized iconography of political and cultural sources as they grapple with feminist and familial histories. Calling themselves "post-backlash feminists"—an acknowledgment of survival—their work combines elements of agitprop theater, motivational speech, and stand-up to revive feminist legacies, even as they advocate for a more inclusive feminism that intersects with broader questions of inequality and social justice.

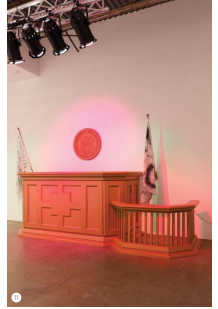
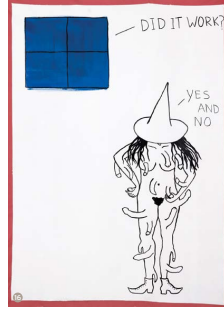
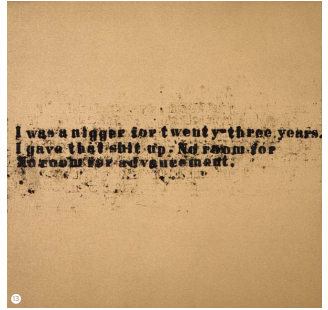
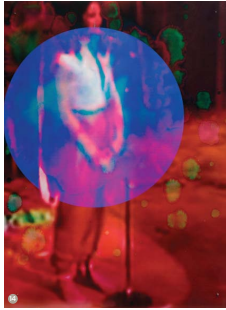
In a moment of political polarization that appears to foreclose possibilities for dialogue, perhaps such tactics allow negotiation with power structures that otherwise seem immovable. *Laugh-in* suggests that the format of stand-up makes sense as artists—like citizens everywhere—are seeking new modes of public address (consider the widespread use of social media or the emergence of the human microphone within the context of the Occupy movement). Indeed, the title *Laugh-in* conjures the period of the late 1960s and early 70s, and, as in its original iteration as the title of a comedy television program,² resonates with its cultural climate of "sit-ins" and "be-ins." That period not only saw the rise of stand-up comedy to mainstream prominence, but also crises of political legitimation that find echoes in our own time. The works in *Laugh-in*, then, engage comedic performance as both an analogy and a lens onto the increasingly complex role artists occupy with respect to their audiences and within the broader public sphere today.

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¹See, for example, the comedy of Maria Bamford, Kate Berlant, Tig Nataro, and Reggie Watts.

²Rowan & Martin's *Laugh-In* was a sketch comedy television program that aired from 1968-1973.



COVER: SARA GREENBERGER RAFFERTY, LILY (DETAIL), 2009, C-PRINT MOUNTED TO PLEXIGLAS, 24 X 20 X 1/8 IN., PRIVATE COLLECTION, CHICAGO, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND RACHEL UPFINGER GALLERY, NEW YORK © SARA GREENBERGER RAFFERTY.

1) TAMMY RAE CARLAND, I'M DRIVING UP HERE (STRABERRY SHORTCAKE), 2018, CHROMOGENIC PRINT, 30 X 40 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO 2) TAMMY RAE CARLAND, I'M DRIVING UP HERE (MOP HEAD), 2018, CHROMOGENIC PRINT, 30 X 40 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO 3) TAMMY RAE CARLAND, I'M DRIVING UP HERE (SALAD), 2018, CHROMOGENIC PRINT, 30 X 40 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO 4) TAMMY RAE CARLAND, I'M DRIVING UP HERE (SALAD), 2018, CHROMOGENIC PRINT, 30 X 40 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO 5) SCOTT REEDER, BAD IDEA, 2013, PAINTED ALUMINUM, 10 X 14 X 1/2 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LISA COOLEY, NEW YORK 6) SCOTT REEDER, I AM A POWERPOINT PRESENTATION FOR AN ANTI-DEMENTIA FUND RAISE, 2005, POWERPOINT PRESENTATION CONVERTED TO DIGITAL VIDEO, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND STEVEN WOLF FINE ARTS, SAN FRANCISCO 7) JOHN HERSCHEND, KASIA FODOROWSKI, SMILE, 2018, VIDEO DOCUMENTATION OF PERFORMANCE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SHEET GALLERY, BERLIN 8) KASIA FODOROWSKI, MICHAEL SMITH, FAMOUS QUOTES FROM ART HISTORY, 2010, VIDEO, PRODUCED BY PALMS DE TOKYO, PARIS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST 9) MICHAEL SMITH, ART THOUGHTS WITH PHENESSY YOUNGMAN, HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL ARTIST, 2010, YOUTUBE VIDEO, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND FLEDSHEROLDMAN GALLERY, PHILADELPHIA AND SALON 94, NEW YORK 10) JAYSON MUSSON, HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL ARTIST, 2010, YOUTUBE VIDEO, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND FLEDSHEROLDMAN GALLERY, PHILADELPHIA AND SALON 94, NEW YORK 11) JIBZ CAMERON (IDYNTASTY HANDBAG) AND MEDIA MARION, THE QUIET STORM, 2001, VIDEO, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS, NEW YORK 12) JIBZ CAMERON AND MEDIA MARION, 10) TIM LEE, UNTITLED (ERIC MARTIN), 1972, 2004, CHROMOGENIC PRINT, 60 X 48 IN., COLLECTION OF ANDREW LESLIE HEWARD, PARIS AND LONDON 13) LEE, 1) ERIC GARDUÑO AND MATTHEW RANA, THE PEOPLE & BRUCE (PARALLEL), 2011, CARDBOARD, THEATER LIGHTS, VARIOUS DIMENSIONS, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS, SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO AND GÖTHEBERG, SWEDEN 14) ERIC GARDUÑO AND MATTHEW RANA, 1) EDGAR ARCEBNAUX, THE ALCHEMIST OF COMEDY, STUPID, 2006, NINE CHANNEL VIDEO INSTALLATION, WOOD, CARDBOARD, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES 15) GLENN LOGSON, 1) SARA GREENBERGER RAFFERTY, FIG. 8007 TYPE OIL, 2010, DIRECT SUBSTRATE PRINT ON PLASTIC, 65 X 48 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND RACHEL UPFINGER GALLERY, NEW YORK 16) SARA GREENBERGER RAFFERTY, FIG. 8007 TYPE OIL, 2010, DIRECT SUBSTRATE PRINT ON PLASTIC, 65 X 48 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND RACHEL UPFINGER GALLERY, NEW YORK 17) STANYA KAHN, I LOVE YOU GOOD, FEELIN' GOOD, 2011, HD COLOR VIDEO, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMEYER, LOS ANGELES PROJECTS 18) STANYA KAHN, YES AND NO, 2014, GESSO, ACRYLIC, AND INK ON CANVAS, 75 X 34 X 1/2 X 2 1/4 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMEYER, LOS ANGELES PROJECTS 19) STANYA KAHN, YES AND NO, 2014, GESSO, ACRYLIC, AND INK ON CANVAS, 75 X 34 X 1/2 X 2 1/4 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMEYER, LOS ANGELES PROJECTS 20) STANYA KAHN, YES AND NO, 2014, GESSO, ACRYLIC, AND INK ON CANVAS, 75 X 34 X 1/2 X 2 1/4 IN., COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SUSANNE VIELMEYER, LOS ANGELES PROJECTS 21) CHAN & MANN, CHAN & MANN'S NEW FANTASY (THE VIDEO), 2013, HD VIDEO, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS, LOS ANGELES 22) CHAN & MANN, CHAN & MANN'S NEW FANTASY (THE VIDEO), 2013, HD VIDEO, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS, LOS ANGELES

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