

Carry a Big Shtick

For artists inspired by sketch comedy, off-the-wall characters who can say and do anything are a way to explore weighty political and social issues

BY RACHEL WOLFF

Meet Taiwan, a he dressed as a she with high hopes of becoming a superstar diva. And Jonathan Gross-malerman (German for “big painter guy”), an egomaniacal twit who, after inexplicable art-world success, turned to stand-up comedy and pop music. You’ll also find a naked, jail-bound Martha Stewart; a bald and middle-aged Harry Potter; crotchety Scotsmen droning Madonna lyrics; a nun with a Hello Kitty head; a sexpot cheerleader; and a woman in a Valkyrie helmet, clutching a giant foam wedge of cheese.

The lineup may seem more late-night than high art. But these characters are popping up in galleries, museums, and alternative art spaces around the world via video and live performance. Their creators—playing dress-up or directing others to do so for them—use off-the-wall personae as surrogates through whom they can say or do anything. And like the characters on *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, the current cast of comically inflated archetypes conjured by artists offers an exaggerated look at pop culture and politics.

“Artists who work in the performative vein see the ways in which the performers who work this way have an effect through the physical, the verbal, the narrative,” says Studio Museum in Harlem director Thelma Golden. “They’ve looked at how audiences respond and have seen it as an effective tool in which to imagine their own work. Many of the artists dealing

with sketch and humor are making work that’s also political. It’s a different way of exploring these deep and profound themes.”

Museums and biennials are catching on. Performa07, the second installment of New York’s biennial of performance art, included live pieces by Kalup Linzy as Taiwan and Tamy Ben-Tor as an eccentric quartet of women. This year’s Whitney Biennial featured the sharply satirical videos of Swiss artist Olaf Breuning and the California-based duo Harriet “Harry” Dodge and Stanya Kahn. Last year’s sweeping humor survey at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, “All About Laughter,” included memorable characters created by Ben-Tor, Breuning, the Blue Noses Group, and Japanese artist Makoto Aida. And earlier this year London’s Hayward gallery mounted “Laughing in a Foreign Language,” with videos by Linzy, Dodge and Kahn, and Aida. *The Video of a Man Calling Himself Bin Laden Staying in Japan* (2005), by Aida, portrays Osama Bin Laden gorging on sake and tempura: “It’s not like I dig the Japanese,” the subtitle reads.

Saturday Night Live premiered in 1975, about the same time that artists like Michael Smith (see p. 132), the Kipper Kids, and Carmelita Tropicana were debuting similar characters onstage at the Kitchen in New York and other venues. “I think that *Saturday Night Live* and *Second City TV* really understood art in some sense,” says Kirby Gookin, who teaches critical

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TAXTER & SPENGLMANN, NEW YORK (4)



In *Conversations wit de Churen II: All My Churen*, 2003, and *Chewing Gum, SweetBerry Sonnet*, 2008, video and performance artist Kalup Linzy portrays (from left) the cross-dressing diva Taiwan, as well as his mother, his sister Nucuavia, his grandmother, and his club-hopping friend Jada.



studies at New York University and the School of Visual Arts. In 2006 Gookin curated the show "... but I was only acting," inspired by a 1985 Jon Lovitz sketch on *Saturday Night Live*, for the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid. Gookin says, "With Mike Smith's characters, it wasn't that he was just doing something like *Saturday Night Live*, but they were doing some things like Mike Smith. The two have merged somewhere. As we become more and more a media culture, people are more and more willing to participate in different media forms. Everything ends up on YouTube."

A still from the Blue Noses Group's *If I Were Harry Potter*, a sketch from their 2003 video series "25 Short Performances about Globalization."



The wide presence of video on the Web and the ease with which it is distributed have contributed to this trend. Videos by many of these artists can be found online; most have the homemade haphazardness once associated with early video art and now synonymous with YouTube.

"Usually, artists who do sketch comedy do it 'badly,'" says Ralph Rugoff, director of the Hayward. "There's an amateurish quality to it. That, in a way, is how they distinguish their activity from professional sketch. But I like the kind of lo-fi, do-it-yourself esthetic. If something feels homemade, you associate it more with a particular person and less with a general statement. You can see through low-tech. You're not awed by the sophistication of either the language or the production. So, in a way, you're able to deal more freely with the ideas."

Linzy has kept the art world entertained since 2005, when he introduced his cast of melodramatic alter egos in the group exhibition "Frequency," cocurated by Golden and Christine Y. Kim at the Studio Museum. His characters' misadventures, documented in a series of low-budget shorts titled *Conversations wit de Churen* (a play on *All My Children* and other soap operas), touch on sexuality, homosexuality, gender, identity, culture, and family. Linzy, who last year received a Guggenheim Fellowship, plays most of the characters himself, electronically changing the pitch of his voice from squeaky to alto to baritone, donning wigs, mindresses, or spandex leotards, depending on the character. Linzy's most recent work, the music video suite *SweetBerry Sonnet* (2008), was purchased by Miami collectors Don and Mera Rubell, who plan to screen it at Art Basel Miami Beach later this year.

"I could always tell when Kalup's video was playing in the gallery because I could hear the laughter—I'm talking full-on hysteria," says Golden. "And I love that as being part of the museum experience. It's the experience I have with Chris Rock."

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Everything he says is so deeply truthful and so deeply funny. It doesn't make the truth easier to swallow, but it does create different ways to engage different issues in this world. It provokes conversations, but conversations that begin with laughter."

"Adopt a Latin artist" beckons the slogan for the Martin Sastre Foundation for the Super Poor Art. Sastre, whose work was included in the 2005 Venice Biennale, negotiates his path as a Uruguayan artist seeking acceptance in the art world by using



ing Hollywood movie about anti-Semitism and it might explore some of the same issues that appear in her work, but it would feel very different."

In the first installment of *Performa*, in 2005, Ben-Tor performed *Exotica, the Rat and the Liberal* in gallerist Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn's Upper East Side home. Transforming from the rich, self-important "Exotica" to a blond-bobbed Nazi youth to a European intellectual to, finally, a Long Island Jewish woman rapping, "The Holocaust, the Holocaust, how can you deny it?" Ben-Tor embodied an incongruous cast of characters to explore ignorance and ideology. She continues to probe these ideas in her more recent work. In *Judensau*, presented at *Performa07* (and reprised earlier this year at the Kitchen), Ben-Tor played an Orthodox Jewish dwarf, a brainwashed German woman, and an ailing Swede.

In *Gewald*, 2007, Israeli performance artist Tamy Ben-Tor plays an ailing Swedish man wearing a crown of thorns.

"With Tamy's work, it's avoiding taking a didactic position on something and addressing all of the different complicated sides to the story," says Matthew Lyons, assistant curator at the Kitchen. "She's implicating everyone equally and using character to get all sides of the story across."

Ben-Tor and Sastre are indebted to comedians like Eddie Murphy and Sacha Baron Cohen (a.k.a. British thug-talk show host Ali G), whose characters tap into the discomfort of talking about race and religion. Olaf Breuning, who works with sculpture, installation, and photography, in addition to video, examines this discomfort in his work. His controversial film *Home 2* (2007), featured in this year's Whitney Biennial, follows a thick-skulled American abroad as he navigates Papua New Guinea and Tokyo. The tourist, played by the hilarious Brian Kerstetter, a New York-based writer, can't fathom the people

a visual language that is both farcical and familiar (think Britney Spears or *E! True Hollywood Story*). In the video *Latins Do It Better (Madonna Meets Sor Kitty)*, 2008, Sastre stakes out the singer's London town house dressed as a nun with a Hello Kitty head. Waving signs to passersby, "Sor Kitty" uses the most circular of logic to conclude that Madonna is in fact a Latin American artist. She emerges, flanked by assistants. "Adopt a Latin artist," the video concludes. "You'll never regret it."

"These artists are not doing method-acting shtick, and they're not trying to disappear," says Rugoff. "They're not trying to make you forget who they are or identify so intensely with the story or the characters that you forget what it's about. It's another way of allowing you to have the freedom to read it in a different way—maybe it feels less official."

Katarzyna Kozyra tries to attract attention in *Cheerleader*, 2006.

Rugoff points to Israeli performance artist Ben-Tor as an example of someone who strikes this balance between actor and artist. She has become known internationally for videos and performances featuring her chameleon-like portrayals, which range from a bumbling office worker to a mustached woman rambling about "the führer." Rugoff says, "You could make a really big, sweep-



and traditions that he encounters. His only touchstones are those of Western culture, making him the American incarnation of Borat, Cohen's clueless Kazakh.

"Look at this city!" he exclaims. "It looks like the remake of a Disney film!" Seeing a boat floating in a Papua New Guinea

bay, he remarks, "Look! There's a boat! It looks like a floating condominium in Miami Beach!" Kerstetter's character speaks with enthusiasm and deluded self-confidence, describing the raised scars on natives' backs as "little alligators"; he poses

signature circular glasses. As a dramatic score swells in the background, the Blue Noses use playfully low-tech effects to teach "telekinesis for blockheads" and "elementary cloning." "Potter" stares blankly into the camera as the objects in front of him jerkily appear, disappear, move, and multiply. Soon he's eradicating crime, poverty, social inequities, and drug addiction, waddling over to addicts and criminals (played by Mizin) and making them evaporate with a touch of his wand.

In Olaf Breuning's film *Home 2*, 2007, his doltish protagonist bonds with locals in Papua New Guinea.

The Blue Noses' Harry Potter, Ben-Tor's Orthodox dwarf, and Linzy's fleet of bewigged divas and drag queens are

more extreme than late-night TV characters like Mike Myers's "verklemt" Jewish talk-show host Linda Richman and Eddie Murphy's self-important Gumbo. But what further differentiates an artist's sketch from a skit on *Saturday Night Live* is that

these videos and performances are "made specifically to be in a dialogue with other pieces of art—paintings, sculpture—rather than in a dialogue with TV and other mass media," says Phillips. Sometimes that dialogue is embedded in the work itself.

Harriet "Harry" Dodge and Stanya Kahn introduced the

character Lois in their 2002 short, *Winner*. She appeared most recently in the film *I See You Man* (2008), shown as part of Dodge and Kahn's solo exhibition at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in New York. In *Winner*, Lois, played by Kahn, is a spacey struggling artist who's just won a cruise in a radio contest. She forces the station's ambassador (Dodge as Peter the cameraman) to look at her sculptures, which she keeps in the trunk of her car: a ball jammed into a giant peach and covered with packing tape, a candle stuffed into a plastic bag. She

asks Peter what he sees. "I'm not sure what to say," he stammers. "It's OK," Lois says. "Not a lot of people know how to talk about art. It's complicated." ■



shirtless next to them to show off his "markings"—a small tattoo. In Japan he asks locals to wear yellow anime mouse masks and pose with him in the streets. "I'm like a Napoleon, but a big Napoleon," he says to the camera. "I want there to be lots of little yellow mice walking next to me."

"When people are offended by art, it's because it makes them too uncomfortable to really stand it," says Glenn Phillips, senior project specialist at the Getty Research Institute. Last spring Phillips curated the exhibition "California Video: Artists and Histories" at the Getty; the show included a video by Dodge and Kahn, and early works by the Kipper Kids and performance artist Eleanor Antin, whose characters have included a nurse, a king, and a ballerina. "Humor is all about making discomfort comfortable. Ideas that are unpopular, unfamiliar, critical, impossible to digest—humor lets you get away with it. That's why late-night television is the area where most of our political critique happens."

Polish video and performance artist Katarzyna Kozyra focuses on gender, using character and humor to upend expectations. Kozyra, who shows at Postmasters gallery in New York, suited up as a redheaded bombshell for *Cheerleader* (2006). Singing and dancing to Gwen Stefani's "What You Waiting For?" Kozyra fails to attract the attention of a locker room full of male soccer players—until she swaps her miniskirt for a fat suit, a skullcap, and a stick-on penis.

The Blue Noses Group—Siberian duo Viacheslav Mizin and Alexander Shaburov—turn their lens on consumer-based Western society. In *If I Were Harry Potter*, part of the 2003 series "25 Short Performances about Globalization," Shaburov appears on-screen in a robe and the celebrated boy warlock's

When Madonna herself (far right) entered the shot, Martin Sastre's *Latins Do It Better (Madonna Meets Sor Kitty)*, 2008, made international news wires.

