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Taking Humor Seriously?

After being introduced to humor from my Critical Theory II Seminar, I wanted to discover more about this topic and how humor is used in art. I never realized that much of the work I enjoy can be seen and understood through the lens of humor. Through my research I wanted to gather a broad understanding of this topic. Specifically, I focused on learning about the main theories on humor and its purpose, as well as the comedic devices commonly used in art throughout the 20th century.

Humor has been theorized throughout history under four main models: the superiority theory, the release theory, the incongruity theory and the benign violation theory. These theories can account for what we find funny and why, though there has not been one theory that can fully encapsulate what we find humorous. The oldest theory is the superiority theory, which is the idea that we laugh because we feel dominance over someone (Critchley 2). In the 1800s the release theory and the incongruity theory were ideas to replace the superiority theory. Release theory stated that laughter was the relieving of nervous energies, while the incongruity theory, one of the more developed theories, states that humor occurs when there is a discrepancy between what we expect and what actually

happens (Critchley 3). A more recent model of humor is the benign violation theory in which for something to be funny it needs to be simultaneously threatening and safe (McGraw). After learning about the theories on why we find things humorous, I ventured to learn more about the ways in which humor or comedy has been implemented, specifically in terms of art.

I found David Robbins' (an artist and author) book to be a great resource on the history of humor in twentieth-century, and he gives countless examples across several artistic disciplines of how humor has been used in art. Concrete comedy is a term he coined that is interested in "non-illusionistic comedy – done for real, in real space and by real people consciously exploiting the unsentimental power of the actual" (Robbins 32). I interpreted his description of concrete comedy as comedy that utilizes physical actions or objects, such as works of art, rather than storytelling. Robbins sees Karl Valentin and Marcel Duchamp as artists who exemplify this form of comedy. Karl Valentin contributed the idea of prop-like conceptual objects (figure 1) and Marcel Duchamp reframed everyday objects in his "ready-mades" to push boundaries and draw attention to the role institutions and audience play in the art world (figure 2).

Furthering my research I identified a number of devices that have been used as forms of artistic concrete comedy, including, but not limited to: puns, slapstick, taboos, surreal/absurd, satire, abjection, irony and deadpan. The three that stood out to me included puns, satire and absurdist comedy. Puns in art are similar to verbal puns, where things may look alike but have different meanings. Roy

Lichtenstein "Reflections On Brushstroke C. 45" (figure 3) is good example of this. The image looks like an Abstract Expressionistic action painting, but the use of screen-printing to create the image, which is a calculated, mechanical, device, is in contrast to the spontaneous gestures of action painting. Satire seems to be one of the more widely used of devices in art and can have many different applications such as irony, exaggeration or ridicule. Cindy Sherman does this with her large-scale society portraits (figure 4), where she dresses herself as aging socialites. Finally, Sean Landers is an example of surreal or absurdist humor where the juxtaposition of bizarre, ridiculous and unlikely situations subverts our expectations (figure 5).

Through my studies I have gained an appreciation and understanding of humor in artwork. I was surprised to see the variety of forms that comedy can take in art, and enjoyed learning about why we as humans find things humorous. When reflecting on my own practice, I am encouraged by the reminder that there is room for humor and playfulness in fine, or "serious," art. This concept can easily be lost when agonizing over what to create and how to ensure my work is relevant and legitimate. Specifically, while I have often created drawings and small works with absurdist themes, I have considered these pieces to be studies or personal works rather than exhibition pieces. Having the opportunity to learn about the many successful artists who have used humor in their work has inspired me to not only keep a more relaxed and lighthearted attitude when creating work, but to also feel confident incorporating my more humorous projects into purposeful bodies of work. I look forward to exploring these themes and gathering feedback from my peers throughout the upcoming semesters.

Figure 1.

Karl Valentin, "Father and Son"



Figure 2.

Marcel Duchamp, "In Advance of the Broken Arm", wood and galvanized-iron snow shovel, 52" high, 1964



Figure 3.

Roy Lichtenstein, "Reflections On Brushstroke C. 45", screen print, 21.75"x 29.75", 1967



Figure 4.

Cindy Sherman, "Untitled #404 2000", print, 2008



Figure 5.

Sean Landers, "Sailor Jack and Bingo", oil on linen, 48"x 41", 2016



Work Cited

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