



CLANDESTINE TALKS

HUMOR

THINKING HEAD

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□ Okay. Should we go?

Hello, dear listeners. We're here in the bunker by invitation of Lara Favaretto, the Turin-based Italian artist who's part of this year's Biennial in 2019. Lara invited first me. My name is Jörg Heiser. I'm a critic, a writer, curator, and teacher from Berlin.

I guess I once worked with Lara some years ago on a text about comedy and the downward spiral, and when she asked me to contribute to this project, I chose the word humour with a slight drift towards two other words that were on offer, which were power and off-the-grid.

Another part of this invitation was that I had the privilege and pleasure to invite a number of esteemed colleagues who I'm very happy are here today in this bunker with me. They will introduce themselves by name, giving a short introduction of themselves now. So to my left here is-

○ Yes, my name is Vid Simoniti. I am a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Liverpool where I also run an MA in art, aesthetics and cultural institutions. Yeah, my interests are in satire and other inter-linkages between art and contemporary politics.

) My name is Sarah Khan. I'm a writer from Berlin, German language. Yeah, I was thinking about humour in abstract terms, but also, I have humour as a tone as part of my writing as well.

* Hello, my name is Cristina Ricupero. I'm a curator and art critic based in Paris. Many of my art exhibitions take up relevant and provocative topics such as populism, fundamentalisms of the new order, secret societies, et cetera. So in a way, they combine or they bring together the art world and humanities.

/ My name is Timotheus Vermeulen. I'm a professor in media culture and society at the University of Oslo, where I'm also director of the PhD program in media studies. I also occasionally write as a critic, and I write about humour and think about humor, I guess, in the context of post-post or meta-modernism and contemporary culture. I further have a great love of gross-out comedies that I'm sure that I will talk today.

□ So we're going to talk for maybe around two hours, and I should also give you a short impression where we are. We are in a secret bunker somewhere in the vicinity of Venice, Italy, and secret bunkers of course bring up the idea of war rooms and secret services conspiring, or rich billionaires gathering in secret bunkers to make world conspiracies.

And that of course plays to our subject of humour to some extent, and at the same time, we take this premise very serious because we're here not to talk, just blah, blah. We're here to really think through what is the importance of humour in today's world?

Jörg Heiser □
Timotheus /
Vermeulen
Cristina Ricupero *
Vid Simoniti ○
Sarah Khan)

But to understand what it is in today's world, which is a crazy world in many respects, we also obviously have to look at examples of historical predecessors of what's happening today, and the ultimate idea of any kind of a secret gathering in bunkers is to act like a think tank. Now we have secret agents drilling away in the background, but just ignore that sound.

Anyway, we decided we want to really take this premise serious, that we're trying to think ultimately about the future of humour as well, and we're not going to talk about humour only in regard to contemporary art. We will certainly talk about that as well, but we want to look at it against the broader background of society. Of course humour plays a large role in film and literature and television and so on.

Now we'll talk each for a couple of minutes to give you a first idea where we individually come from or what our approach to this is, but the general structure we will try to stick to is to first talk about the present state of things before we talk about historical examples, and towards the end, we'll talk about the future.

So let me maybe just start quickly with a short idea I came across by another admired friend and writer, the British novelist and writer Rajeev Balasubramanyam, who in April, 2016 published a piece in *New Statesman*, the British paper, and the headline was straight out of Wodehouse. "Could Boris Johnson be a Roderick Spode disguised as a Bertie Wooster?" So PG Wodehouse, the famous British satirical writer from the early 20th century. And the sub-headline read, "Which is more terrifying in a potential prime minister Boris Johnson, a posh airhead with no ambition, or a secretly well-read Machiavellian who disguises his aims behind buffoonery?"

So just reading out the first couple of paragraphs from this piece, "Boris Johnson is often described as Wodehouseian. He's usually paired with Bertie Wooster, though recently there've been some anxious comparisons with the Euro-skeptic Roderick Spode, who's a character in the satirical writings by Wodehouse heading a proto-Nazi party called Saviors of Britain, but he also secretly has made a fortune on designing female lingerie. Only Max Hastings, former editor of the *Telegraph*, has associated Boris Johnson with Gussie Fink-Nottle, and no one so far as I know has compared to him to Jeeves."

This is Rajeev Balasubramanyam writing. I continue quoting him. "On the surface, Johnson appears to have most in common with Wooster. Both attended Eton and Oxford, and have a gift for witty repartee and simile. Wooster describes Roderick Spode as having 'the sort of eye that can open an oyster at 60 paces', while Johnson claims to have as much chance of becoming prime minister 'as being reincarnated as an olive'. Both two are products and defenders of their class – contrary to popular belief, Wooster's objection to Spode is not political but *aesthetic* – and have taken advantage of their entitlement to indulge in antisocial drunkenness and so on."

So there's many similarities between Boris Johnson and Wooster from the Jeeves and Wooster series. But ultimately, Rajeev is arguing, he's a Roderick Spode carrying the mask of a Wooster. So he is a dictator in disguise, pretending to be a buffoon.

This brings up a discussion that has come up very recently about many of the current state leaders, which has brought up the catch phrase “killer clowns” – people in power that work with buffoonery and with madness as a way to divert attention from the politics they’re actually following or guiding through. So this is the first sort of idea or point we might want to touch on, but then again we also don’t want to get stuck with talking about the dire state of politics today.

Well, so much for that. I hand over again to Vid and Sarah and Christina and Tim to each give a first short introduction to their approach.

○ Yeah, so this is Vid speaking now. I will pick up on that same theme that Jörg has just introduced. I agree we don’t necessarily want to get stuck in the mire of today’s politics, but nevertheless, I think there is a set of phenomena out there, which is curious, namely that a kind of humor, or buffoonery, has been captured by the elements, which are distinctly illiberal, populist, and reactive.

Normally, we would think of that, vaguely speaking, Neofascist politics as associating itself with grandeur, with order, with positive self-image. But here we have humor, ribald humor, transgression, unsavoury jokes, offending of public tastes, both in online materials from the alt-right, if we think about Pepe cartoons and all of that—what many people, like Angela Nagle, for example, have written about—and the killer clown Jörg mentioned.

Since we’re in Italy, perhaps one example of that might be a joke that Beppe Grillo, the leader of the Five Star movement in Italy, made in 2016, when he talked about the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, and Sadiq Khan’s Muslim background. Grillo said, “Here is an example of somebody who has, in spite of their immigrant background, achieved so much. Now he is the mayor of London. All I’m waiting for is for him to blow himself up in front of Westminster.” Grillo made a distinct, very offensive connection between Sadiq Khan’s Muslim identity and terrorism.

This happened in 2016, and people said, “Ooh, he’s really transgressed here. Now the public opinion is going to turn against him,” but of course the Five Star movement is now in power. So what do we make of that phenomenon, where the populists and the liberals, try to become funny? I will just offer just a two-minute idea on that. First, we have to of course think about humour in relation to power.

One older book but influential book that I found useful in thinking about this is James Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Scott introduces the idea of humour as occurring at the intersection of a public transcript, the transcript that’s publicly acceptable, everything that’s polite in society, and the hidden transcript, which is what different groups of people use when they speak among themselves. You can think of a classical upstairs, downstairs situation in British society, for example.

Now in that work, and I think in the way that that work has been taken up in art theory especially, the hidden transcript is the transcript that we associate with the oppressed. For example, slaves during the racist slavery era in the United States, or women under patriarchy, or sexual minorities. Humour is that liberating *jouissance* moment where that transgression punctures into open space.

So songs that black descendants of slaves would be singing about the sinking of the Titanic, about white millionaires sinking, in the early 20th century, is one of the examples that Scott discusses. Or you might think of someone like Claire Waldorf in Weimar Germany singing these funny queer songs, where humour allows you to transgress the public discourse.

But what I'd add is just that in order for the hidden transcript to exist, you don't need actual domination. You need just the perception of being dominated. So for example, you could be a teenage boy who is very privileged in many ways, but you feel yourself oppressed by your peers because maybe you're a bit geekier and play computer games. This has, especially with the internet, created all kinds of hidden transcripts that exist: the hidden transcript of incels and computer gamers, hidden transcript of people sharing racist jokes, which they would normally maybe only share down in the bar.

I think it's that moment of transgressing from the hidden, from the racist joke in the bar into the public discourse that gives these populous liberal leaders an impression of being transgressive. It also gives an impression of speaking to a group that *feels itself* to be oppressed, and that's a very powerful thing.

I think it's interesting to ask, well, if that little mini-theory is true, but also, what is the correct response to that? Is it censorship? Is it outrage? Is it saying, "these kind of jokes have no room in democracies."

I think that can sometimes actually be quite effective. I would be quite in favor of that sometimes, being truly outraged, and saying, "That's not okay." But on the other hand, there's only so far that this will get you. Perhaps it's time not just to shut down regressive humour, but for the progressive elements to re-appropriate humour in some way too.

□ Thank you, Vid. So I'm picking up a question from that that we should later discuss, which is the question that you said in the end. How do we react to this?

There was an example of what you described just this morning on the news, then, because there was a tweet by Bolsonaro, the president of Brazil, where he was re-tweeting another tweet that mocked the wife of Macron and comparing her to the wife of Bolsonaro, who's much younger. Then Macron reacted with statesmanship, saying, "This is unacceptable. This is against any terms of civility." That's the traditional reaction, to say, "This is unacceptable. This kind of joke is not fair."

But you are asking also, are there other ways to react or more effective ways to react to this speaking secretly, so to speak, to a group that feels suppressed by way of these kinds of jokes?

But let's go on to Sarah Khan.

) Okay. I'm sorry, but I think I can't add anything to what Vid said at the moment, so I would like to tell something about a memory of humour as it used to be when I was younger. I am now 48 years old. When I was a student, I think there was still this guilt thing with humour in Germany around coming from Adorno's Fun its ein Stahlbad.

□ Maybe let's just explain what that means in English.

) Yeah, nobody knows what Stahlbad des Fun [literally steel-bath of fun] means. Even by the time, when the sentence was very important, nobody knew what a Stahlbad is. Stahlbad is a very specific medical term. It's a treatment in psychiatry.

□ With electric shocks.

) You are in the tap with cold water, and you get electric shocks. I think it's an expression that later was important for Adorno, for example, but it means that you can't have fun in Germany because you have too much weight on your shoulders.

And on the other hand, there was television, and the Muppet Show. I grew up with all these light Sesame Street, Muppet Show humor, which I loved. It was diverse. It was funny. It was trans-human. It was sexy. So I always thought that humor, it's all about distinction, that I'm different. I don't have to share my difference with the whole bunch of people. I find my little funny places and culture. I don't have to think about the rest. So humour is a language that I don't share with everybody. It's all about distinction, and irony was a big topic by then, which is also about being different.

So sometimes I teach, and a couple of years ago, I taught political history. When it came to unification and Helmut Kohl, I always showed my students pictures of Helmut Kohl jokes because they are all gone. Nobody knows anymore. But in my memory, the whole era of Helmut Kohl was all about making jokes of him, which has totally disappeared even by his former enemies.

So let it be that by now. Okay.

□ Okay. I pick up an important question there. I think what you described about this idea that humour could also be something about being post trans-human in a very specific sense, if you think of funny animals from comics and Muppet Show, how that could play into today's understanding of humor, given the importance of these kinds of cultures on the web, for example. So let's pick up that question for later, the question of a "trans-human" place for fun and humor. Cristina?

* Yes. I'm a bit different from my colleagues here. As a response to this invitation by Lara and Jörg. I took down some notes from different sources, texts that do deal with art and jokes and humor. So I thought some of these definitions can maybe help us as tools during our talk. We can pick up on them later, so I'm just going to read them out a bit.

Humour has been employed to activate repressed impulses, embody alienation or displacement, disrupt convention, and to explore power relation in terms of gender, sexuality, class, taste, or racial and cultural identities. Humour including jokes, slapstick, satire, irony, parody, caricature, has contributed to transforming the practice and experience of art from early 20th century until today. Freud has looked at it as a joke, as a playful judgment, which can be interesting for us.

Humour can paradoxically be a way of coping with the most tragic circumstances, and this can bring us to the current situation now, the role of the individual in relationship to authority, politics, and the everyday. Humour has this particular role, and it is a way of getting under the skin of emotionally and socially difficult subject matters. It allows art to be bad, silly, frivolous and liberating.

Humour can simultaneously reflect upon the human condition and challenge consumerism and authority. It externalises doubts and fears of the human condition. Laughter is synonymous with hope and artistic freedom. Laughter is the most beautiful form of boundary transgression. Humour brings self-doubt. It is entertaining, sloppy, emotional, human, and funny.

Henri Bergson, who wrote *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* has said that you would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. So laughter appears to stand in the need of an echo. However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, like a secret society, like where we are here now, or even complicity with other laughters, real or imaginary.

Many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another because they refer to customs, ideas of a particular social group. I think this is really important to say and to think about even in Europe that comic laughter changes from country to country and sometimes one cannot really understand a joke from another culture.

So to understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society. Above all, we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. So laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must be a social signification.

I also just wanted to add ... not to be too long now ... another keyword, which was not proposed. It's idiocy. This refers to a French writer and art critic called Jean-Yves Jouannais who wrote extensively on the topic. He has a book called *Idiocy*. I'm just going to sum up his theoretical thoughts in one phrase here, and then we can continue.

Idiocy has been able to go very far and very low. It is the one who knows he does not know, who is there by chance, whose only alibi is accident or passion. In that spirit, idiocy was very daring and was never afraid of embarrassing itself because idiocy has been liberated from the weight of experience. It is forced into experimentation and becomes somewhat of a hoaxer, deliberately immature and utterly stubborn.

Idiocy invents the humour of catastrophe, of bad taste, of fiasco, of shame. Idiocy gives importance to immediate experience. In other words, it is passionate about experimentation and provokes an active undogmatic communication between the work and the viewer, a philosophy that tickles the intellectual mind but opposes formalist intellectualism. In that sense, as an aesthetical practice, idiocy implies a conscious risk taking form of intuition. That's it.

□ Thank you, Cristina. I take away from that the question of idiocy, like thinking of the buffoons in power that we've already touched on. How has maybe this role of idiocy suddenly gained power in a slightly unexpected way?

But Tim, it's your turn.

/ Yeah. Thanks, everyone. I think I have two points, or questions, really, and I'll just try and talk through them. The first one pertains to the function of comedy, and the second pertains to comedy as genre. With regards to the first one, I think I'll reflect on what Vid has started to talk about, and in the second, I want to follow up on what Sarah and Cristina have spoken about.

So here's the first point: in thinking about comedy in terms of function, I think we should distinguish between comedy as general or generalisable sensibility and comedy as a very specific kind of tool – or I guess what Noel Carroll has described as art as a mood and art as an emotion.

Carroll writes that a mood is a general disposition. So if I get up and I'm in a foul mood, you can be as friendly to me as you wish, I might well still be in a foul mood. It is not related to any distinct externality at that moment. An emotion, however, is context specific. I am angered by something, or someone. My wellbeing is ruptured from the outside at that moment. An emotion is punctured and short-lived.

I think we should, in that same sense, distinguish between comedy as a general sensibility and comedy as emotion. I think in a way we live in comedic times. I think comedy as a sensibility is something that is actively sought after, not just in the fact that we have an enormous wealth of terrible stand-ups littering our Netflix accounts and our HBO things – it sells, clearly; people are willing, are very keen to find humour – but also in that movie stars are advised now in talk shows to make fun about themselves, to make jokes that will make them seem vulnerable and sympathetic and human, which is a very different kinds of communicative mode, I would imagine, from the one employed by movie stars in the 70s or especially the movie stars, perhaps, in the 40s. Those are very different registers.

So comedy, particularly self-deprecating comedy, makes them sympathetic, relatable by today's standards. Or indeed, as Vid had spoken about, politicians that use the comedic as a sensibility to reach out to particular kinds of audiences.

We should really distinguish this from comedy as a particular kind of tool or a particular kind of emotional mechanism, which is not to say that these two do not overlap. If I'm in a foul mood, I can also still be more angry if someone makes me angry emotionally. So they can easily overlap, but I do think they are different.

So in terms of comedy as an emotion, say, as a specific tool, I think we've already mentioned in passing a number of different genres – in the same way emotions vary, generically, as it were, can be happy or sad or depressed or whatever. For one, we have emotion as idiocy. So we laugh at the Motley Crue book. I'm guessing I'm not the only one who's read that book, or maybe I am, but we laugh at the Motley Crue book for all the stupid things that you would ... or the Ramones, and we laugh at someone hitting a vase over their heads. We laugh at just the pure idiocy, the unthoughtfulness.

Another genre of comedy as emotion, which I'm guessing is also what some of those politicians on the right might be engaged in, is to speak about the things that are taboo in a way, that we all know exist or that we all know those prejudices exist, but it's comedy of closing down.

So I'm also thinking here of talk show hosts. So Steven Colbert or Seth Meyers will go eventually to a place where Donald Trump eats a hamburger, and we all laugh because in a way, it's a 'taboo' that we all know Donald Trump loves hamburgers. Or I was just watching this Bill Clinton documentary. All the talk show hosts made jokes about Monica Lewinsky eventually sucking a dick. So you go to the place that everyone already knows is in the realm, but you aren't supposed to be visiting for whatever reason (decency, misogyny, etc) ... But by doing so, you close down debate: you chart a territory already part of the map.

Those are two, I think, very powerful genres of comedy today. There's also other genres. So I was thinking here a lot about this genre: Stewart Lee, the British comedian who I'm a very big fan of, explains comedy at one point to the Guardian. He writes that he's not feeling well, and eventually, it gets worse and worse. As the story progresses he ends up sitting naked, covered in ox blood, flies all around him, masturbating. And then the final line of the joke is, "And then I got off the bus."

So you create a scene, and then you open up, but you also close down because the bus is a very distinct sort of locale. It's a distinct milieu. So it's a joke of relocation, of displacement, which is how humour often functions, but you also close down – you designate a distinct place, after all.

I'm also thinking here of *Arrested Development* or *South Park*. They often make it seem someone has a very intimate conversation, for example about family affairs, and then the camera pans out or turns, and you see that there's a hundred other people in the room – so you laugh.

It's as if we were here in the bunker and I was telling intimate sex stories only to turn around and see that the entire Venice biannual is sitting there. So those are also unexpected jokes, jokes of displacement, and yet you still give it a firm boundary.

Then there is a fourth model of joke, a joke that I think can be very successful and is often the joke people talk about when they talk about jokes as subversive, a joke as having the power to disrupt. This is the joke that changes register. So Groucho Marx has this very famous line, and I'm a big fan of Groucho Marx. He has this very famous line where he says, "Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana," which is a good joke because it completely changes the term of debate.

You can, in fact, I think, read that second line in two ways still. You imagine both the fruit flying like a banana, and of course we're talking about fruit flies and their fondness for bananas. So it allows an ambiguity and an openness. It's a good joke, isn't it? And-

□ I'm still laughing.

/ Similarly, there is a joke we used to tell each other as kids in Holland, where I am from. I've told this joke often to many people, and no one ever laughs. So I'm a bit hesitant to share it, It involves Belgians. Because of course, in Holland, we make jokes about the Belgians and they make jokes about us. There's two Belgians - so sorry, I apologize to all the Belgian listeners, I don't want to be 'canceled' because of my 'Belgium affliction' now-

) It's only a quote.

/ Yeah, I'm quoting someone else! There's two Belgian dudes standing in front of a traffic light and one says, "It's green," and the other says "Frog." Thanks for the laughter.

It's the same thing. You open the debate, right? We're in one scene, which is the scene of the traffic lights. One says "It's green" by which of course this person means the traffic light is green. The other says "A frog" because he is imagining they're playing a game where you say to each other "It's yellow," and then you say "Oh I see the sun" or something. Right? So again, you open it up, you change.

) Or they're evoking the French.

/ Foucault calls this judo, right? You take the energy of something that's already in play and you turn it around in completely different directions. So here I think we have a joke that opens up – towards an elsewhere. So we have comedy as sensibility and we have comedy as tool, or I would say comedy as mood and comedy as emotion.

The latter can be differentiated along the lines of genre, of which I have mentioned four possible examples: comedy as idiocy, comedy as pertaining to the taboo (both of which I think close down), comedy as a particular relocation within the terms already stated and then comedy as a complete change of registers. So they're different 'things' and I think they do different 'stuff', and I think it might be interesting to see *who* uses *which* particular tropes. So, that was it.

□ Thank you Tim. What about taking away from that, the question of how the joke technique of changing register might play an important role today? Not least as something used by powerful people. What could be a way to react? Yes?

/ Yes. Because this is also a trigger in a way, right? I started talking about the comedy of sensibility and tool because I was listening to you talking about killer clowns and also I since I read Will Self's piece in the guardian about these figures.

I was thinking about what you said, that comedy is used as a diversion, which I'm guessing is something that we might argue. But that's why I think it is important to talk about comedy and sensibility as well as comedy and emotion because I also would imagine that when Trump is making those terrible jokes, he might be diverting from one thing, but he's also, simultaneously speaking directly to the people that matter to him. So it is not just diversion. It is also a sharing of sensibility, right, yes?

□ Well I think one occasion that was very recent where a lot of commentators said this was a pinnacle of madness even for Trump, was shortly after he proposed to buy Greenland, there was a so-called chopper talk. He was standing next to a helicopter and he was going on a 40 minute rant where he described himself as the chosen one and talked about the King of Israel and was calling certain Jewish voter-bases of the Democrats disloyal or something like that. And pretty much everyone who commented on this rant was saying that it was completely going all over the place.

But of course we all know at the same time this, and now I'm sounding a little like the conspiracy theorist, but you all know the term probably, wag the dog, which is to say that once you have an interior politics problem, you start a war somewhere else to divert attention, right? That's called wag the dog. So you could say, nowadays we have "wag the dog" every single fucking day. So from morning to evening we have wag the dog, wag the dog, wag the dog, and whatever you wag the dog with, it can be anything from buying Greenland to burning the Amazon, it can be so many things that there's a diffusion, I would go away from diversion to diffusion. If you think of the old saying, "divide and conquer". Now we have diffuse and conquer, so to speak.

) But maybe this is a *Stahlbad* that we have, fun as a *Stahlbad* or maybe it's just that.

○ Exactly.

) You could get shocked, shocked, shocked, and your brain is getting enormous damage.

* I think this is exactly what we talk about in Brazil with Bolsonaro, how he is constantly wagging the dog. Every day he says something so absurd, so surreal that the whole attention is taken out from real serious problems like huge unemployment, et cetera. So I totally agree with this political strategy the so called "Populist Politicians" have that seem to be playing the idiots, but down to the core, they're not such idiots and they use this disruptive mechanisms in a very clever way.

○ I think it might be interesting to think about that through the lens of changing registers, which they mentioned, which is that they also make use of that change of register, right? Where you would expect somebody to be in a suit, to be talking seriously and constructively about politics, you suddenly make a move and you do things that are inappropriate in that register. This also connects back to what I was interested in, the two transcripts in Scott, the one in private, and the one of the public.

/ Bolsonaro or Trump or Boris Johnson or in Holland we have Thierry Baudet. The Norwegians luckily I don't think have had one of these *men* yet, but I'm sure that this *man* will come soon. Diffusion... I like that term. Because that I think is indeed what's happening, but let's not forget in all the things that Bolsonaro or Trump says, however outrageous these things may sound to us, we also know that there are people sitting in particular towns who, at different moments in that half an hour long rant, will say "Yeah, yeah!". They will appreciate the joke because they've been making the same joke privately before.

So it is a rant that is really clever and diffused, but at the same time, it's also very blunt and very direct. It is precisely the joke that draws particular crowds in, and we shouldn't forget that because if there are jokes that people would not agree with, we likely wouldn't find ourselves here right now.

I don't know if it is a change of register in the sense that we open up in the sense Groucho Marx's pun does though. Because we are still within the same realm in a sense. We're not suddenly talking about fruit flies. We're still in the realm, I guess, off the taboo, perhaps more than anything else. In terms of genre: are they really changing register or are they expanding the parameters of a particular register that they are so that can it can accommodate their point at that very moment.

□ Well, I mean you're certainly right that they don't use humoristic techniques that are really funny. I mean, it's not like they make a joke and you laugh, you know, it's more about this sort of, in Germany we have this term "Schenkel klopfen" - it means that you kind of you go like "ha ha ha"...

/ Slap your thighs.

□ Slap your thighs but it's not really funny, it's more like, "I agree, he said the right thing". Right, but I think this is exactly the point, like you say, that the whole question of diffusion and diversion that they play is I think a very conscious play for attention that they all learned through media. I mean, as is well known, Trump was doing 13 seasons of the Apprentice, and the new president of the Ukraine was playing a president on a comedy show. Of course, Berlusconi ran a media empire and so on. So we have these people who have learned how attention economy works from television in general and stand-up comedy in particular because what a stand-up comedian has to do is keep attention of the audience at all time, right, Sarah?

) So you make a difference between the light, sophisticated, good mannered humour that we know from TV shows and then this kind of humor, which has a function of a kind of cultural revenge. It says that the humour is like a weapon for the poor and under represented people in the media. But the same time we have a new technology, and this is what is interesting, for example about Trump, that he's old, very old guy, and he is the King of Twitter and, and he's the first Twitter president in an enormous way. So I think that we have the first wave with this kind of technology, new media, social media was pornography. So we had a debate on pornography for about 10 15 years and now it's over. Nobody talks about pornography anymore because pornography was kind of a role model for this whole private economy.

You sell yourself, you sell your living room, you sell your apartment, your car, your body, and you just needed a camera and your mobile phone and the access to the internet. So it became a model for precarious working and it was not, so there's nothing sexy about it. And now we have the next fuel for this technology, for the social media, is now the killer clown or this kind of constant shocking and revenge humor. And I think it's very much a child of our time and of the technology and the circumstance that there is no regulation is by now.

○ I agree that there is this interesting connection between transgressing taboos, humor, Twitter and the illiberal populist elements, right? These four things go together. But then thinking back to different genres and the different forms of humour than both Christina and Tim, you mentioned, maybe one way to respond to these phenomena is to ask what other types of humour there are. If the populist leaders are using this kind of taboo humor, then maybe there are other forms of humour which more progressive elements can utilise. And so one option that's occurred to me is something that Christina said, which is that humour works like a coping strategy, where maybe you are showing the absurdity of the situation. And that's what's funny.

Historically, I'm thinking here of Eastern European humor; someone like Gogol with his Government Inspector, who made make fun of the impossible bureaucracy of Tsarist Russia. That seemed impossible to overcome, at that point, so the only thing you could do is make fun of it.

And perhaps today the series “Years and Years” on the BBC is like that, which has just come out, which imagines a future between 10 and 30 years in the future, where everything that we fear happens. Bolsonaro, Trump, Beppe Grillo, all these people happen, but to the power of ten. Marine Le Pen, all of that happens. And then the task of the humorous is to show the absurdity of it and to kind of laugh and maybe cope because otherwise people are just getting very angry and very depressed.

* There's no other choice, right? Humour as a way to overcome the most drastic situations.

□ There was a quip that I recently came across which is going around the internet, which was, “Which wine goes best with living in a post apocalyptic nightmare?”. And this completely summed up the moment for me, what's the wine that best goes with this, and a coping strategy. So I think maybe that points us to, there is a kind of a self preserve of humour in the sense of admitting one's vulnerability, but also somehow saving your sanity in a way like black humor, like you mentioned Christina, of coping with disaster, black humour mostly, right? This is kind of if you think of a community of people who are, for example, in dissent with the ruling power, you know, this is one way, especially if you think of autocracies, but the question that comes up for me is that something seems to have changed because when, for example, Putin, when he came into power in Russia, one of the first things he did in I think 2000 was he forbid this show called “The Spitting Image Show” that they had in Russia as well and he basically made sure it lost his license and was kicked out because there was, they make fun of him with a puppet, you know-

○ A political satire puppet show.

□ Exactly. A political satire puppet show was canceled because he couldn't stand allowing that on Russian TV. And nowadays it seems, of course Trump's sometimes, of course US is a different scenario, you can't just, the president can't just cancel a show, but still it seems that nowadays they just absorb that or take that as a fight where they can come on to us as winners so to speak. But I guess this brings us to the question that we wanted to address in general terms, which is historic, the roles of humour because one of the glaring things that I think we sometimes also see very much still in the present as in that example of, or if you think if anyone makes a joke about the King of Saudi Arabia, they might be a head shorter if they're in Saudi Arabia, right?

So we know there is places in the world where people get killed for making a joke. And also historically we know that meaning no sense of humour at all. So we have to, I guess, keep that in mind, especially looking at history. But Sarah, you wanted to say something?

) I really like what you said about this kind of subcultural strategies that a right wing culture goes. This is something that really reminds me of the 80s when punk culture and so on needed you to be the bourgeois society needed to be the enemy.

So the killer clowns now need you to make jokes about them so say they can be embarrassed, they can say you just started the war. So this is interesting that they have adapted these anti-establishment strategies. I was thinking that maybe, what do we know about these kind of strategies? How that's a very like ancient strategy from the Bible when Jesus said "If somebody slaps your cheek, let them slap the other cheek too". So I don't know if this could work, I don't know.

* I think one thing we have to keep in mind is the definition per se of populist movements is that they should not be in power. And what we're living today is the opposite. Most of these populist leaders are in power. They, their role mainly, before Trump and before all these other leaders came to power, was to be in the opposition. So this is very important. So what you were saying about being subversive is something that is part of their main characteristic. When they came all along, because their role was not to be in power. It was almost impossible to imagine how they could be in power. By the way, it still is. When you think of the situation in Brazil now with Bolsonaro it's almost like science fiction, but nevertheless they are in power.

□ Indeed, the political science for a long time asserted that populist movements thrive on opposition. That's always their thing, and they argue that once they get into power, they will sort of lose all their magic. This was also the talk in the early two thousands in Austria when Haider came into power everyone said, "Yeah, yeah, he will lose his magic". To some extent it happened on the first level, but look at Austria now. They're still playing around, they were in government again, and it's become even more absurd there too. I don't know if you saw this video, the Ibiza video of Mr. Strache who again it was really like an episode from a comedy show, like a idiocy, crappy humour comedy show where these two guys are standing there and they're talking to a Russian, a supposed oligarch daughter, and one of the two says, well we have Mr. Glock producer of the weapon as a supporter.

And then the other makes a gesture to explain to her what it means to hold a weapon like a Glock and it was really like a super stupid joke from one of the current comedy series. So, and then in fact Austrian television then you had all the parodies of that very same video doing the exact same thing. So parody is maybe another point that I wanted to come to now because parody seems to be broken because parody is all about exaggerating. Think of Chaplin on Hitler, right? The classic example, the great dictator that exaggeration is of course that it would take the world globe and kick it around with his feet and that you would give a speech and only gobbledygook syllables would come out. But still all the other gestures are in place. But what is it today when Alec Baldwin makes a parody of Trump?

/ Yeah, that's a fair point. Because of course we know that historically, populism will find different ways to get where it wants to be? That's its power, it keeps developing. I don't want to be a broken record - I mean I am a broken record in many ways, but I don't want to be a broken record necessarily about this - but populism's current route is a comedic sensibility, in which everything is drawn into the realm of the joke.

In this sense, Chaplin can make a joke about Hitler, a man who takes himself very seriously and whose entire public persona is one of utter seriousness but if Chaplin would make a joke of Trump - how do you make a joke about someone who already expresses the sensibility of the not-to-be-taken-seriously.

I mean, Trump of course takes himself completely seriously. But the frequency, the generality, of mistakes makes that his baseline. Which would mean to say you might have to choose a different register to engage with these people, right? If Trump constantly already, accidentally, or quasi accidentally, makes those terrible mistakes, pointing them out is pointless, because you are just pointing out precisely who he is - which is what everyone already sees.

) Isn't it a strategy?

/ So this is always what everyone, at least in the arts community, seems to be talking about, right? A strategy. Yes, probably. And maybe also not. Or both. Maybe Trump and the others are just stupid people. I don't know. In any case, it's hard to find out; and even harder to undermine. Trump and Boris Johnson, they're not perhaps reflective themselves but their personas, the entire performance and the machinery around them has already co-opted, has already eaten up this notion of self reflexivity, if that makes sense. Does it, I mean-

) I think you mean it annihilates its own self by being super comical in spite of himself. This is what you're saying. I'm not so sure though, there is still comic or space, I think there's still space for humour there - remember those videos that came out right when he won elections "Make Switzerland the greatest", for example, using his voice over. I think they were hilarious. I don't know if you remember.

/ Yeah, they came from Holland and they achieved nothing. So-

) I'm not so sure about-

O I will just follow on what you're invited us to do, which is that we should change track and talk about the past. I think there is this trap, which we talked about yesterday, when we were having drinks, that we can always talk about Trump. So maybe I would like to think about the examples for the past, you mentioned Dada yesterday, Christina, and other examples of humour in the past that we can perhaps learn from.

□ Absolutely and we could even make a rule now, if anyone mentions any of the names we've just used a lot again, they will have to pay one Euro into our drinks for tonight. Sarah-

) I just want to share one thing that me, as a female being, is experiencing all the time the moment I'm telling a joke, especially men, pick it up and tell it again. I just said it totally seriously, without, you know, over emphasis on the signal "This is a joke".

So this is something that women I think, in general, experience a lot that if they're telling jokes and then the every day context it's not understood as a joke. So this is another way you can say this is a tragedy, this is so sad. But in a way there must be some interesting structure and I think this is one of our drifts in this tarp is power.

If you're not powerful, you can't be the one that is inviting to laugh. And so a friend of mine who was starting a professional life very early and told me that everybody in the company is laughing about the very, very bad jokes of the boss. And she experienced it as a shocking experience because she said it's all about power. You can be the best joke performer, but if you don't have the power, nobody is laughing. If your boss is doing a joke, then people are already joking before the joke is finished. So there has to be a funny atmosphere in the room so people can stand the differences, the hierarchy between people and so being in as long as it's the power, not there, you can't frighten people or make them laugh.

And that's for sure, I totally agree with you and it's history, even art history shows how most of these, let's say artists using humour were mostly male until recently or let's say the sixties or seventies where women took power into their hands.

□ And we found out that actually history was almost rewritten to make it appear like that, which is exactly what Sarah says in terms of someone, a woman makes a joke and the man tells the joke again. And then pretends they have authored the joke and sadly we have to say that about Marcel Duchamp, who was the close friend of Baroness Freytag von Loringhoven who was a woman from Rostock, Germany, who was possibly the greatest eccentric of the 20th century, and that's not an exaggeration, who went to New York and walked around almost naked on Broadway wearing car lights on her ass and a cake on her head and who, according to recent research, apparently came up with the idea of the fountain and send it to Duchamp, and Duchamp mentioned to her that he was considering putting it in an exhibition, whether she was fine with that and something like that.

It's a, it's fairly recent knowledge and there's is only one incident in a letter where this is mentioned, but it's also known that she indeed made ready-mades herself, two of which are in the collection of the Philadelphia museum who also has a lot of Duchamp pieces. It was known in a small group of people around her and Duchamp that she was closely working with him on this idea of these crazy objects and of course the term ready-made was only assigned later and the whole art historical concepts only came in later. And we see that again and again and it's embarrassing for the entire scholarly field of art history I think that we see this again and again, same story by the way with the Russian constructivists and Malevich and so on where people are literally written out of history because someone somewhere in the world in art history has a certain ideological agenda whether consciously or not, where this just doesn't fit the picture and we see this again and again happening especially in regard also to the question of humour and art.

* Okay, let me just bring up a topic we discussed during these last days when we were together before this meeting. The difference, I think you mentioned this, between humour in art and humor, let's say, in film or in a novel. I mean it doesn't provoke the same type of laughter. Maybe I think we could talk a little bit about this difference, which could be interesting.

□ Yeah, absolutely. Speaking as a German, the first name that comes to mind is Martin Kippenberger because he was arguably the first who really- I mean he has predecessors like Sigmar Polke and in fact Duchamp or Picabia, artists who were happy to make quite crass or sort of a bad joke in the realm of art and of serious art, you know, like writing a stupid slogan onto a painting. But Kippenberger took it to new pinnacles in a way because he was partly literally reading the German tabloid Bildzeitung and picking up lines from there over to pickup lines from friends at late in the bar and really turn them into an artwork like the famous one "For the life of me I can't see the Swastika in this", which is this constructivist painting with lots of beams in it and stuff.

So it was all about these punchlines and you are actually, the word kind of is like a good joke. It has a punchline that is sort of creating this pop relief, this moment where you look at the painting and then you look at the label on a museum wall and you see the title and then you laugh. But as Tim, you know, it was probably asking himself why is it that this kind of laughter is never the kind of hysterical after you might have watching a comedy. You have a theory why?

/ No, I mean we spoke about it and Cristina also said it's narrative and I do agree that time-based media like novels and film, they will engage because of the possibility of narrative. They will allow a different type of laughter than an installation or a piece or a photograph that you see in a gallery space, right? So this is definitely true. I'm guessing there is more, my gut feeling and I don't know if that's ever a good thing to go with, but my gut feeling is that it also has to do with context, right? I mean, what a number of the comedians are saying is that the reason it's so tough now for comedians to make jokes is that they're so often ripped out of context.

And so they might make a joke that they've carefully set up in particular room or in a stand-up, and then someone tweets that single joke and it suddenly seems like a really awful, nasty joke because you're lacking the context. And so I'm guessing context has a lot to do with it, right? Take what is perhaps the crassest type of humor, a sort of humour that I love personally, which is humour that involves bodily functions. I am thinking of genres gross-out comedy, crap comedy.

So, if you look at someone sitting on the toilet taking a shit that's not necessarily funny. Right? But if you see that one side of the cubicle is glass and there is a class with school kids watching from the other sides, I personally would probably laugh at that image. Right? But you need that context. Right? You need to have always the opening up. ... I'm clearly the only one who thinks those things are funny.

□ We all look very grossed out.

/ In any case, context is key and I'm guessing that this is one of the reason we might laugh differently at films or books from how we laugh in museums. I mean, certainly we all know artists that are hilarious, personally, but again, I'm guessing that none of us indeed has laughed uproariously at a piece of art or at least not as hard as you might've laughed at a film or TV show or whilst reading a book where you laugh so uncontrollably that you don't know where to stop really. And so I think narrative plays a part, yes, context more generally. I further wonder whether art can have the function predominantly to be funny and if so, in what context should that be?

Because isn't art also supposed to be political, or subversive, or whatever, alongside it? Most of the humour in art seems that someone wants to make a point about the previous artists or a social situation. So isn't pure comedy invisible and maybe impossible in a museum?

* Are you in a way mentioning the high and the low here you would say?

/ I hope not.

* Yeah, well I kind of get the impression that comedy, let's say in film or in standup comedians is more like grassroots, whereas in the art field it has to go through filters?

○ Yeah, I would add to that, that it seems to me that one form that biennial based art from the 1960s onwards has really specialised is transgression of the high low boundary. So what's funny is that you put some low object in a gallery, as a reiteration of Duchamp, or that you break some taboo, Chapman brothers style.

Right? And so the kind of humor—if there is humor—is one of, 'oh I can't believe they did that'. Right? That is something that contemporary art really specialises in I think. But what we see less of is a kind of self ironising that can depend on narrative, where you offer something and then you say, "Oh no, I didn't really mean that." That kind of irony.

Though, I would say that perhaps with video we see some return to that. I mean for example Hito Steyerl 'fucking didactic video', whatever the full title is, where she presents herself as making a piece of political art about surveillance. And of course it is a political piece of art about surveillance, but there's also a lot of kind of irony, unexpected turns and twists in it that that can happen with video. And I think maybe that is the kind of humour that I would quite like to see more of.

□ I can think of a lot of contemporary female artists who have a great sense of humor. Frances Stark, Nicole Eisenman and so on, but it's usually not laugh out loud, funny humor. It is more cringe humour or something more ironic or something more subtle. But that's, I guess because also like you mentioned, it's a question of the context.

By that I don't necessarily mean the white cube and the history of the museum as a temple of sort of a admiration where you're not supposed to laugh but where you're supposed to contemplate, but more how this kind of more sort of subtle or subdued or deadpan humour also plays against the background of a shrill art world. Shrill in many respects, shrill in terms of the divisions between very rich people buying work and some very precarious-living artists who are sitting down for dinner with them and basically maybe pretend even to their friends that they're doing really well, but in fact they can't pay next month's rent and all these kinds of absurdities and blind spots.

And within that, very smart artists don't feel like they want to be the comedians entertaining this group. They want to give, like you described earlier, secret messages to their fan base saying, I know what shit I'm involved in here, but I tell you a joke anyway, by the way, ha ha ha. You know? So there is this sort of double standards or these kind of several layered realities in the art world that I think play into the complicated role of humour in art. And it also points to why, and that's another question we should discuss, there's very few examples of successful art world satire. But Sarah-

) Yeah, I mean this is the complicated job about being funny is that if you have power structure, a-

□ Hierarchy.

) Hierarchy, then it's even a sign of your power if you can laugh about the clown who's mocking you. So it's a Hofnarr in Germany.

□ Jester, court jester.

) And art is often, if it tries to be funny or if it tries to make fun of the powerful people, it's a part of the system. For example, Cindy Sherman and her portraits of old wealthy women, I like them, but they don't work in a way as a critique of the system between collectors, artists, whatever, they are funny in a way of the description of a contemporary plastic surgery style or something. Fashion statements or so on. So they are light in a way and not too heavy in their expression.

* But that depends of the moment, Cindy Sherman's earlier works maybe worked much better than what you're referring to.

) I don't know.

* I would say so.

○ But there's something about those works that I think is interesting in a sense that they really attempt to satirize a part of society, which is the kind of thing that one would associate with, I don't know, earlier artists like Hogarth or that kind of comedic, satirical print.

And I think it's interesting that at least I don't really recognise that much of that in the contemporary art world. There's either really transgressive moments or things that really pillory, big populous leaders, but there isn't so much of this kind of satire of the manners on the ways that we live now. I mean perhaps, in film or other genres this happens... but maybe people disagree.

□ No, I actually agree. And the Cindy Sherman work showing more sort of elderly collector ladies and you can imagine scenarios where they actually walk into that very room for the opening of the show and have this confrontation. So it is a, I think a different work from the earlier work of Cindy Sherman in this regard. Whether it's more successful as an artwork or not, is for me a different question, but I think that we do see very little of this idea of caricature that you referenced with Hogarth or Daumier and many others in terms of really creating a language for caricature in the contemporary mode. Yes, Tim?

/ That is interesting. Because I actually think that a film that does do that, and we spoke about this before, is *The Square*. Which is funnily enough about the art world itself. And I think this is actually a study-

* But it's not made by the art world.

/ No, and this is I think quite important - although I think it's advised by people from the art; right? Who was this Swedish museum dude?

* The film director has done other films, but he is not from the art world.

He interviewed people, but he is not from the art world. So it's from outside.

/ But who is it? Daniel Birnbaum, who advised him?

□ No. Well actually I asked Daniel Birnbaum, the former director of Moderna Museet or the current still director of Moderna Museet in Stockholm. And because the rumor was going around that he advised Ruben Östlund who also lives in Stockholm a lot on the film, but it turned out Daniel said, "No, I just met him once for lunch." And he did make this research a, I did an interview with Ruben Östlund and he ironically has himself made artwork, public artwork, and the Square has been realised in a provincial town in Sweden and it's actually been used by the community to make like the local fireman make an announcement or a little demonstration and so on. Tim.

/ Yeah, but it's, I mean, because it's interesting you instantly bring it up, because that to me would seem like a defence mechanism. Right? I don't think a politician would say to an artist or a filmmaker or a writer, "Oh, you're making fun of me. You're not even a politician." Right? To me, it seems, and this is interesting what you mentioned with very rich and the very poor in the art world and the sort of great-

* I didn't say that.

/ I think what is so interesting with this film, which I watched with people from film studies is that we all laughed tremendously.

I thought this was a hilarious film. It might not have been a completely successful film. I am sure it doesn't do justice to the particularities or the nuances of the art world, but to me as a casual sort of interloper in art worlds debates, this seemed to me completely accurate. This is how I would have experienced a number of the mannerisms and situations and talks about class and masculinity that I think are very, very present.

But it's interesting that this film that universally was well received within the arts community itself wasn't generally received that well at all. Most of the people I know, artists or curators would say, "Oh, that film is so inaccurate." And I just wonder if people working in film or in literature, I could say is often being joked, joked at in difference of circumstances, if they would make those same remark, and I wonder if it has something to do with this sort of self victimisation at the art world, which is powerful. I mean let's... At least because of all those crazy wealthy people that are keeping it up.

I mean, is the arts community constantly putting itself there in a position of the oppressed so they can make the jokes but not have jokes made about them? And I'm trying to push the envelope maybe a bit here, right?

But for me it did seem very odd for a field that feels entitled to make jokes. Maybe not successful ones, but make jokes about anyone and everyone not to have made a really good joke about it's [crosstalk 00:12:33]-

* I agree with you on your comments, obviously. I was just trying to be precise in reference to Jörg's comment that the art world has very little satire, so I'm just saying this is not a film made by people from the art world, it's as simple as that. But one interesting point and I think the most hilarious one, is the press release. Remember Jörg, we discussed this, there was a moment in the beginning of the film where the journalists questions-

I actually made some research on that.

* So I wanted you to talk about this. I think this press release is fantastic.

The press release actually vanished from the internet afterwards.

* The funniest part of the film is almost a press release, so.

Can you just clarify what the press release is in this context?

□ We're talking about *The Square*, the movie and there is a scene in the beginning where the American journalist interviews the museum director-

* Curator, not director.

□ [crosstalk 01:19:33] no, he's the-

* He's a chief curator.

□ No, he's the museum director-

○ It doesn't matter.

□ Whatever. He's the director of the museum and she asks him about a press release and quotes from it and it includes something like the "exhibition as non-exhibition" and so on and so on and it turned out, I actually googled the phrase and found that it was a press release by OCA from Oslo in Norway for an event at the Venice Biennial, I think the architectural biennial in 2014 or something like that, it later vanished from the internet because of course they were too embarrassed to keep it there, I presume. And that's what he did. He told me in an interview. Yeah, I just found this and just used it, verbatim for the scene with two famous actors reading out an actual press release and making that part of the satire. And I mean that's a classic Karl Kraus said that in the early twenties the best or and Kurt Tucholsky too in a different way. They both said the best way to do satire is just to quote, you just have to quote nothing else. You just quote.

* And what a shame we don't have the press release here to read it out.

□ Yeah.

* Absolutely, it just goes on and on and on. It's like a labyrinth of the non art and non object the non-exhibition [crosstalk 01:21:06]-

□ And it's actually gibberish, the gibberish is this kind of old gobbledygook. It's a kind of rephrasing of known conventional terms in the art world. I mean there was... This was playing on Robert Smithson's term site and non-site, so we should have "exhibition, non-exhibition", but then kind of forgot about the whole Robert Smithson and it's like a loss of memory, like art dementia taking place in press releases.

And I think we are in dire need of people just attacking that and not letting it just pass without any comment. And I think that's what I mean when I said we are in dire need of good art satire. There was a very good mockumentary based on the Marina Abramovic, documentary after her moment show with a famous-

/ Cate Blanchett.

□ Cate Blanchett as Marina Abramovic, I highly recommend that. Google that. It's really funny.

○ So that's on YouTube actually.

□ But that's the only two examples that I could say, there was a Netflix art satire with Jake Gyllenhaal that was so-so, but-

○ But I think it's very telling that all of these satires right, come from actors, even come from Hollywood, with Cate Blanchett. Right? And both the art world but also the world at large are full of all of these characters that are really worth satirising.

I mean if we just think about the characters that are satirised in The Square, there's the gobbledygook press release. There's the journalist, who is also kind of a type, there's of course the embattled masculinity director. There are all these kind of want-to-be-woke, but kind-of-failing sort of people who are [crosstalk 01:22:58] ...there are two amazing press release people who are-

□ Actual, in real life PR people too.

○ Really? Well, they're amazing because I think they do a great job of showing just the kind of total stupidity and idiocy, they're the real idiots—to go back to the idiocy thing and the art world. Right now I think we can say there's a crisis of satire in the art world, because there are all these characters completely worth satirising and we don't see them satirised anywhere. Right? We don't see them in the videos, in photographs and installations.

People like Ryan Trecartin and those people who kind of in some sense are anthropologists of the present day, and they show the rave kids and the hipster kids, but they don't necessarily satirize them. Right? And I would really like to see more of that.

★ It is a shame as there is so much raw material.

□ Sarah.

) But in all of your examples, it shows that satire or humour has a function as a part of a quality management of the system. So it's really important to make satire. Not just to destroy the field, then to develop it as more resistant to bullshit ideas.

★ Absolutely.

) So, if there was a convention in art that people would talk nonsense in a way and sell it as something that is totally, and this is why your parents paid your studies or something. And then artists, then humour has a function to say, no, this is not, you can't be an intelligent human being and talk in different words. It's also a part of distinctions of doing better, of competition. So everything is about competition.

And even that takes me back to Kippenberger, which humour is, which I really like because it has these underdog thing that talks to me a lot. And he's so, yeah, still to me it's kind of fresh in the German context of art and painting and being ambitious. It's so much about him being ambitious and destroying the bullshit factor in German art or attacking it. So these texts are still very needy and needful and yeah, it's just a regulation, which makes it so important. And I think everybody knows that.

/ Yeah, I really agree.

□ I think we shouldn't forget that in historical terms, satire about art was usually about how modern art was a prank. When Duchamp's "Nude Descending the Staircase" was shown in New York, there was a caricature in the New York Times, I think, which called it "explosion in the shingle factory."

You know? It was all about "this is supposed to be art", like the entire, or already 19th century is full of satirical caricatures about questioning the status of art. So I think art has a certain defensiveness towards satire based on that almost ingrained, and sort of hardwired into its system.

That's maybe explaining why it's so hard for the art world to allow satire to happen, even. It's almost like the old kind of dictator we talked about. They're not able yet to deal with jokes in a sense, even if they pretend to by having a court jester making fluffy jokes.

But the actually subversive satires are easily dismissed as being, oh, they didn't get the accuracies of contemporary art, et cetera. And that's a defensive gesture, you know? A classic defensive gesture. And that's what makes it hard because some of those Netflix producers, Hollywood producers, they hang out with galleries and artists. So, oh, I'm thinking of doing this art satire. Oh, it's very difficult. I'll tell you, keep your hands off it. It will be very difficult to get this right. Right?

○ I will just add that another reason is also that the art world is so insular and self-involved. And, as we said before, it's all about questioning your artistic parents and being the next style or institutional critique, right? It's kind of about the shortcomings of ourselves as this insular thing. But what I would really want to see is the satire also of the broader world in a sense. Hogarth with Gin Lane or what have you.

Or, different types that exist. And that's what I thought was so interesting about the Hito Steyerl piece is because in a sense she's sort of satirising. No, no. You know, people who are engaging with the internet in some way or the art world needs to take on the challenge is also really just in very simple terms showing up the mirror to the broader society in some way. And that's what I'd like to see more of.

/ Don't we all agree? And I wonder if it's the right way of phrasing that you're only allowed to make jokes about someone else if you can first make them about yourself right?

○ But that of course.

/ That should be a grounds. Yeah.

○ Yeah.

/ Otherwise you have no position.

○ Sure. Yeah, I agree.

* Absolutely.

□ I mean there is an element in “The Square” where it builds on this old “can this be art?” affect of the general audience. Like, oh this is a joke. They’re making a line on the floor and that’s supposed to be art. Ha ha. There is an element that “The Square” takes up-

* Condescending.

□ Where it’s kind of playing to that prejudice and that affect in a general audience, but then it becomes more sophisticated. It takes you there and it takes you somewhere else afterwards. And I think the art world was stuck with that first moment.

There is a joke about heaps of trash on the floor. Ha ha ha. You think that’s art cetera, to some extent. I agree with that. That’s not enough. But then something else happens in the film, which is much more accurate. I mean for me, one of the best scenes is when the cook describes the dinner and then people start already shuffling to the buffet and then he starts to scream. That for me was almost the best joke in the whole film.

○ Where it was, I think, also really good. Is that where the satire started to overlap with other parts of life? So, I mean when they have that scene where they’re tussling over the condom, where he sort of is worried that the journalist might steal the condom and conceive with him. And she’s worried that that’s what he thinks about her.

And I think that was funny because parts of the things that are weird about the art world, the insecurities about gender, insecurities around reproduction, and insecurities about political efficiency: these kinds of things are the insecurities of whole, bigger, social group of people. So that was a great. Sarah did you?

□ One of the, I mean we shouldn’t talk about The Square only-

) I haven’t seen it.

But there's one aspect of the film that I really admired was that it takes 90 minutes into the film until you learn in passing that the main character has two kids. Before, he's presented as this kind of typical art world bachelor curator who's getting laid, who's kind of charming and stuff. And the film lets you believe that until 90 minutes into it.

Sorry for the spoiler, for anyone who hasn't seen it yet. And I thought that was also, we shouldn't forget it is also a satire about Swedish society and Swedish upper middle class about a certain phoniness or a certain sort of double standard idea of being the good guy and so on, but it's also part of the art world too. Like we have these characters, we have these people who never tell you that they have kids because they considered that it's not de rigueur in the art world because it might compromise their career.

* Not very professional.

It's not professional. Or it's not cool or all these kinds of weird blind spots the art world has in its social makeup.

Yeah, and we are those characters. We are not exempt from that. We know these people as well.

Yes, of course. I mean I do tell people that I have kids but I'm sure there's other things that I should be telling them that I don't because I think its [crosstalk 01:33:16]-

You only tell them 90 minutes into the conversation.

Exactly.

If we're done with the Square, I like to return to a point that Sarah made in your speech in the beginning about the Muppets Show and these, which you then Jörg interpreted as the kind of post-human, kind of trans human forms of humor. I thought that was really interesting also, because maybe that's the kind of humour that we see more of in the art world in some way.

Like maybe someone like Pipilotti Rist... or you know these kinds of slightly queer forums or strange things, or maybe Sarah Lucas can be an example of that. And I was just wondering what people think about that as a form of humour that is perhaps specific to objects, or perhaps specific to weirdness, like transgressing the expectations of what's to be seen and that perhaps is something that belongs to the installation, to the video, to the figurative as we find them in the art world.

Well, I mean role play to the extent that you turn into something that doesn't appear to be human in a way or alien is something of a venerable tradition in the art world, I mean just popping into my head would be someone like Leigh Bowery who transformed his queer body into something that looked unearthly, in a most amazing way, or think of an artist like Ming Wong who makes all these sort of impersonations of Fassbinder movies and so on, takes on these roles, absorbs them, transforms them into something else.

And there's many other artists that work with this kind of strategy. And of course in film and comedy they do it all the time as well. But I think what you were really thinking about, Sarah, I mean we have all these subcultures on the web and elsewhere where people... basically their biggest dream is to live in a furry animal costume their entire life and actually make that their actual social life.

Not something they once in a while do, but that's their life. Or you know, reenactment fans who reenact Game of Thrones or Lord of the Rings, et cetera. You have role playing, live action role play, for example, all these subcultures that often have a very particular sense of humour too, but have at least something strange at times, funny, about it.

And, and we wonder how that could be an answer maybe to current problems towards the future. Or maybe it could also be at the same time if you chose the dystopic path pointing towards a future in which everything becomes a complete real fiction to the extent that we just ignore reality completely.

* Yeah, simulation.

□ A kind of simulation that allowed, I mean, we have the dystopic science fiction movies for that, of course, from – not a great movie – “Idiocracy” of 1997, or think of the Matrix, it's one of those dystopic movies about a fake reality, which actually hides the real apocalypse, right? No? So now the future. While we think about the future, let's listen to a song. No. Huh? Wait a minute. I'm still struggling with the technology here. Just a moment. [*Plays “Rock Around The Bunker” by Serge Gainsbourg*]

Okay. That gave us a moment to think about the future. Now we gather all our powers and we will tell you what humorous role in 30 years time will be.

○ Christina.

□ There's still moments of contemplation in the room. Sarah.

) In pop culture, maybe there was some kind of oracle already there and maybe it's Star Trek and Sesame Street so we have two narrations or sagas, which deal with a multicultural, multiethnic and multi- not even global but galactic society with one earth, with a TV show. We're just already thinking about mobile phones and different kind of transportation on a microbiological way. So I think a lot of science show that the society, even if there are backlashes, is constantly moving towards this kind of projection. But I'm sure the moment this kind of projection becomes reality is the humour or the projection, the fantasy about living together would be a different one because the energy is always a form of having a mind, a human society. You get killed if you're making too much fun of somebody who was in power. But in Star Trek, there was no humour in it. I can't think about it. Maybe they mocked each other a little bit.

□ There were these kind of male dad jokes between Scotty and you know like “haha.” But they were not really laugh out funny at all. It was more this kind of jovial gestures amongst the crew members.

) Because the whole tensions between different colours and ethnics are already overcome. You already have one world, “Terra.” So there is no continents. No democratic republics. There’s no politics.

○ There are no racist jokes in Star Trek, right?

) Everything that is bad on earth is a different planet. There’s a Nazi planet. There are all these groups who are still not part of the whole earth concept and they go there and then they make peace there or they fight it or it just becomes a hologram or something. So, there’s an inside and an outside in Star Trek and I don’t want to go too deep down in this projection or fantasy of a better world. But I think that the other model is the Sesame Street where you have living together on one street with trans-human creation and black people, white people, young, old. And everybody’s singing. It’s this projection of being part of a musical, of an American songbook or something. This is, I think, two different projections of the same. One is with humour and the other is without. So if I could choose, I would like to live in the Sesame Street and not in the Star Trek.

□ Are you also thinking about the Muppet shows, Pigs in Space, episodes?

) Yeah.

□ Yeah.

* Without projecting myself into the future, which is a little bit difficult I must say, but in view of our situation today, which is climate change, and I mean I just came back from Brazil and I went through this horrible day where the whole city became pitch black. All of a sudden the city of Sao Paulo became pitch black at 3:00 PM so, it’s a kind of post-apocalyptic situation. And we also asked ourselves these days, where is the space for humour here? Within such tragic kind of perspectives. I just wanted to talk briefly about two films, which are kind of retro-futuristic, but they were made in the 70s and are B movies. So in a way, hilarious already by the form or their clumsiness. So here we talk again about failure in a way. One of them is called Logan’s Run and the other one is Zardoz.

We talked a lot about these films, about the way they create this opposed apocalyptic era where the earth has been destroyed in a way. And people live in this kind of bubble which is almost like a secret society. They are ruled by an invisible master or invisible forces that are repressive, authoritarian. So these two films are in a way, at the same time humoristic and critical. Yes. I just wanted to mention these films and how they can be greatly visionary also in our present moment.

□ Yeah. I mean we turn to science fiction movies or science fiction literature for answers to these questions about the future because we've found examples from Stanislaw Lem to Philip K. Dick and Ursula Le Guin and others who have rightly predicted certain elements of the future. You know, like for example, there is elements in Stanislaw Lem that basically predicted the iPad and Philip K. Dick many times predicted certain forms of surveillance for example, to actually, which are now become sort of every day. You know, we're sort of prefigured in his novels. But if you think about the role of humour in the future, then you could think of these kind of, for example, The Hunger Games. There is these glaring television shows, which are actually just an exaggeration of what we already have today. Right? So often you think it's just an exaggeration, or like the show you mentioned earlier, Years and Years, just an exaggeration of the current present into the future.

But I think there are other elements where we are thinking about the future in terms and that's always the question of AI and robotics. And the assumption is of course always that the hardest thing to teach to AI is humour because the question of context is so complicated for humour that AI often gets it wrong so they can maybe regurgitate humour that is human in terms of just emulating it because it's programmed into it. But to actually come up with humour is apparently still impossible for AI. And the question is, if it came up with humor, would it be for us? Would we even recognise it as humor? Would like AI make a joke to AI and we wouldn't even realise, I mean one example that comes to mind is a scene from this film Elysium with Matt Damon, which is also built on the same kind of science fiction trope.

There is a rich society living up in the sky and all the poor people are left on earth. And he plays this one guy who needs to go up there to save someone else's little daughter and himself, because they have all the cure up there. And it's basically, it's just an exaggeration of the truth between Mexico and the U.S in the current state of things, you know, in terms of health care and immigrants coming to the U.S who can't afford healthcare and so on. Anyway, but there's, the actual joke is, I mean it's not really funny if I tell it, but it's kind of funny in the situation. So he's in this trek of migrants and there are these robocops checking on them and, and one robocop goes up to him and says, what did you do here? And, I mean, his head is shaved, he's bald.

And he says, I bought a can of hairspray and obviously he makes a joke, but the robocop thinks he's lying. So he breaks his arm. So that's the kind of brutal slapstick coming from that kind of joke in the film. And there's numerous other scenes where he's interacting with an AI who's too stupid to understand his ironies and it's part of his heroic character that we think like Harrison Ford in Star Wars he's the guy who was cracking a joke amidst catastrophe and having to do with five battleship attacks. Right? So, we seem to tend to project into the future that we somehow will still be superior to AI courtesy of our humor. And I'm wondering whether that's going to be true.

/ Maybe that's already a sign of us being oppressed. If humour is the last resort of those oppressed and we feel that that's the remaining bargaining tool we could have in relation to AI, maybe that's already a sign that we've lost.

You mentioned the context and this is also why it will be so difficult to discuss comedy in this sense because you know if we reach, as per Kant, some kind of kingdom of all ends which is completely peaceful and everyone is happy, we'll have a particular set of registers of comedy that might be different from what an apocalyptic time brings forth. So I guess each particular context will have particular modalities of comedy, each particular scene or sense of mannerisms of how we deal with each other. We'll have a particular set of comedies because we, you know, comedy relies on, on that sort of mutual understanding like AI already does, right?

Irony, which as a tonal register relies entirely on someone understanding you well, for instance appreciates the intonation of your voice or knows your political disposition, might be difficult for AI; but also I'm guessing I could make an ironical comment here and because you don't know how I think about A or B, you might think I'm completely serious. So we're talking a range of relationalities here, all of which pertain to power, first among them gender. As you said, Sarah, the male dudes take the joke and then repackage it in their own vernacular.

I think what would be lovely right now is if you would have - and I've called it unoriginally a Groucho Marxism somewhere - a kind of a dialectic that occasionally slips over a banana peel. Which to me seems very useful if Engels says we need to put Hegel on his feet, I think we might want to occasionally put Marx on his ass. If you have with Groucho Marxism, you say, I'm going here and our society's going here and we're together, or in groups, however big those groups are deciding we're going to A or to B did you not keep going there regardless, but that you fall on your ass and you have to reorient yourself.

That is to say I think it will be quite useful to develop more perhaps politically a comedy of reorientation where you constantly need to reconfigure and we look, okay, where were we going? Was there really a good direction for us to have or should we stand up and go somewhere else? Where you keep having those sort of checks and balances. I know it's now become this dirty word, but I do think that would be a very useful modality for comedy right now, especially on the left where you say, we're going there, but then you slip over banana peel a, you get up, you think, fuck, where were we going? And then you reconsider. You might go the same direction but you might not, so that will be my 2 cents.

□ I mean in a, in a utopian world, I would imagine that after the killer clowns we have now and being an optimist and looking at kids these days, who are living this moment and are smart enough to understand that something's terribly wrong there. And are well-informed enough to know climate change is going to affect them in ways we can't even fully imagine yet, that they develop this kind of sense of humour too and maybe I'm wrong or this is too optimistic, but in my ideal scenario, we would have future heads of states or different forms of political organisation that have a sense of deprecating humour built in so to speak, because they know, unless they, if they don't have it, they will end up like that generation that put them in shit in the first place. Because what we've talked about is the humour of those killer clowns, but that humour is buffoonery.

It's all kinds of humor, but it's certainly not self-deprecating humour in the strict sense of humour where you pull the rug from under your own feet, you know, and where you really say, "Oh, I'm just a normal human. Like all of you are" in the sense that yes, I can make mistakes but at the same time I can be a reflective about it. Of course this can also be a mask. I know this is not a path towards a better politics, but if this could be somehow built-in that we have people who are able to do that, that are actually making decisions. Yes?

○ So my two thoughts during our little break with the music would, I think build onto that. So if we project ourselves into the future, obviously we have to think about what kind of political situation we wouldn't want to be in. And I think that political situation would be characterized by two things. One is disaster, which is what Christina talked about. And the other one would be the rise of the kind of a politician that we've talked about, the rise of the killer clown.

I would say the response to disaster in terms of humor, for me, is one of absurdity. If we think about, I think I mentioned Gogol before, but I think if we think about these kinds of Russian writers, and the absurdity in history, that's the humour that allows you to cope because it shows the absurdity of the situation. And for many, I think that is perhaps one route in which the kind of humour of the future might go. Years and Years is one example, and the other one is what Jörg you've just mentioned, which is the kind of humour that is totally lacking on the populist side, the humour capable of preserving self-deprecation. But why is that important?

Because what self-deprecation indicates is the ability to preserve a critical position. As such, you're able to critique not just the enemy. Of course, it's always easy to critique the enemy, but you're able to just simply preserve the critical position. And I think that is really something that is also missing on the left. I mean it is a kind of a stereotype to say that left has become a bit humourless, but I think it has become humourless. Humour is what I think we need to award and that we need to look out for. You know what, the left needn't be afraid, or the progressive forces needn't be afraid of satirising themselves as perhaps a film like 'The Square' does. Right? And we needn't be afraid of that in the art world of just simply living in the culture of cancellation and cancelling each other. We might just perhaps, you know, a better response to that is to sort of satirize ourselves. So I would like to see these two things developed in the future.

* There's something I thought about during these days which is related to Lara's invitation and her own work, by the way. How did you all experience Lara's fog? I think Lara's fog could be an interesting example of a post-apocalyptic kind of humour for me, which is what I experienced when I came during the opening days and there was this fog. Nobody really knew what it was. It was quite disturbing. It was making people cold. Yes very disturbing. At the same time it did make you think about this kind of disaster and post-apocalyptic situation we are in with climate change...

□ Well that's the problem, always, if you come not for the opening but later, because then you've already read about it everywhere. It's like spoilers that Lara Favaretto made a piece on the top of the international pavilion in the Giardini that there is some fog. So in some way I lost that experience that you just described, going there and thinking, is the roof on fire or what's going wrong? Some problems with the air conditioning system, which brings up all kinds of weird feelings. Right? But I think that this points to the fact that we think about the future in terms of the information we have. We don't really know obviously because we're not seers of the future or able to make premonitions, but at the same time we're trying to use indications of what's already there to make informed guesses.

Right? So if I, if I take up all these examples, I think that what we're looking for in a progressive leftist perspective is an overcoming of this supposed contradiction between the kind of transgressive, brutal self-considered funny far right, and a left that is left with the rather unsexy role of the one who's the, the moral policeman, you know, so you can't do this, you can do that. And I think we have to get out of this puppet theatre of these two roles and really come back, like you say, I think some of the so-called cancel campaigns that have taken place have already tried to take that on board and go at it with a more light, soft appearance and not this kind of a moral or even biblical tone of calling out towards something that is a bit more sort of playful.

I think that in itself is something people still have to learn in a way. For example, there recently was an incident in Berlin – and it's funny to even actually describe it, it's a real satire – that a curator made a show referencing Afrofuturism, it was called “Milchstraßenverkehrsordnung (Space is the Place)”. [*Space is the Place is a reference to Sun Ra*]. Anyway, the show had 18 white male artists, three female artists and one artist from Singapore in it and no single person, otherwise no single person of colour, or African-American, or whatever. And a group called Soap du Jour – soap as a reference to art washing – responded, and I think rightly so, with a long letter. And basically the tone of the letter was very sardonic, let's say.

It was trying to be humorous, but it just turned into kind of sardonic calling out of the curator, which was almost shooting yourself in the foot in a way because it made the writers of the letters look sort of like pouncing on someone's mistake and putting the finger in the wound again and again and again, again where you think like this is starting to get a bit brutal in terms of the humour of it, you know?

So I felt like it's not so easy to strike that right tone of humour to get it right in terms of not then turning into this kind of bitter tone. Right. And that's something that's only just starting I think in this discussion, how can we discuss these very urgent and important issues and it is an important issue to call out a curator in Berlin doing a show in 2019 and just ignoring that, and then coming up with the usual defensive arguments, “Oh, many of these works by people of colour have already been shown.”

“It’s actually a boys theme, space”. That’s what he said. He also said something along the lines of “Oh, someone is trying to inflict on my curatorial freedom”. And he also called out the group for staying anonymous, even though the Guerrilla Girls, for example, never made their identity known because they know they would be retaliated against obviously. And the art world has retaliated against people who have dared to speak out. I mean, there’s many historic examples. So the art world, apart from needing satire, I guess also needs a new language for calling out in a humoristic way that hits the target but doesn’t overdo that gesture. Maybe, I don’t know, Sarah?

) I think are these moral wars are more or less in the question of what’s coming in the future? More or less only a foreplay for all the problems we will have morally in the future. Because now natural science is experiencing that. Plants communicate that plants even may have eyes. Even if they are not designed, like we used to know how eyes look like and that, you know, every life, *Lebewesen*.

□ Any living being.

) Any living being that communicates has a right to live and under circumstances that even need the terminus of living. So I think, and, not only to enter Anthropomorphisierung. Yeah.

□ Anthropomorphising. Turn everything into a sort of mirror of human behaviour.

) You have a fly there.

□ Okay.

) And so I think that this is the, the maybe the, one of the functions of humour is to become a part of this, experiencing different ways of living beings. Not only to be a human in a way and try to find out if these new communicators do have a humour if I think, you know, it’s very hard to experience life beings who are not humorous I think even animals have a humour and that is something that in a everyday basis is always experienced. But, yeah, I think it’s these kind of a moral questions in the art world are totally free of humour and of any joy of being different or people have having a different.. yeah...

○ What do you mean by that? I don’t quite understand why you think it’s devoid of joy of difference.

) Yeah. I mean that’s one level to make, make fun off dirty white, old men and then. So this, of course I’m also a good child of our time and I can turn totally bitter about certain circumstances, but I think this is only the beginning of something that could be really even dangerous if everything is in a very, everything is discussed in a moral perspective.

○ Well, perhaps one way. I mean we've been taking ourselves quite seriously. I suppose in terms of, I mean, sorry, I'll just backtrack. I was struck by what you said, Christina, about Lara Favaretto's piece and what is the meaning of it. You know, why are we in this bunker? And it seems that, on the one hand, the bunker idea seems very serious. Again, it doesn't seem like a humorous piece. There's a disaster outside. There's this fog, which seems like the Amazon burning perhaps, and here is this bunker with some people thinking about issues. But on the other hand, perhaps we can also see it in a self-deprecating way, or as a humorous thing, because it's almost a projection into the future. The apocalypse happens and what do so-called intellectuals do? Well, they run into the bunker and discuss 50 different words, in very high-theoretical terms, and they'll put it on the internet.

* What a great way to conclude our discussion! I think you're absolutely right. Again, the fog does bring us into this atmosphere. Yeah, conspiracy secret societies, etc.. I'm trying to survive in spite of everything.

□ Nothing left to say, I guess. Thank you all very much. Thank you all listeners. We tried our best and any jokes left?

/ I've tried to tell like seven and I, I don't think I got any, any response of laughter, so I'll keep them for myself.

□ Yes, we keep the jokes for ourselves. Thank you very much, everyone. Thank you, Lara Favaretto. Thank you Biennale. Thank you, listeners. Bye bye.

/ Bye.