

Humour as an Avant-Garde Strategy in Three Generations of Feminist Art: Kirsten Justesen, Hanne Nielsen & Birgit Johnsen and Maja Malou Lyse

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Abstract

Humour has been used as a feminist avant-garde strategy by generations of artists. Since the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s humorous (re)presentations of the body have been part of female artists' activism. This essay focuses on three generations of Danish women artists who in different ways have used their bodies in a critical manner, ranging from ironic representations of women's living conditions by Kirsten Justesen and understated absurdity in silently repeated actions by the artist duo Hanne Nielsen & Birgit Johnsen to loud and even grotesque stereotypical exaggeration by Maja Malou Lyse.

Recently on Instagram (March 2021) several women have shared their experiences of being blamed for laughing too much, in voices that are too high-pitched and too annoying, and in the TV documentary *Fordi du er kvinde: "Det sagde hun også i går"* (Because You Are a Woman: "That's What She Said Yesterday Too", 2020) female comedians talk about the challenges they meet (and have met since the 1970s) as women in a male-dominated business, reflected literally in lower wages and the outspoken prejudice that "women cannot be funny". Accordingly in the literary critic Lars Bukdahl's guide to Danish humorous avant-garde literature in the twentieth and twenty-first century he mentions only men, except for a short quote from Ursula Andkjær Olsen's *Lulus sange og taler* (Lulu's Songs and Speeches, 2000) in the very last column of his ten-page essay (Bukdahl 2007). In *Who's Laughing Now?* (2020) the Swedish scholars Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen investigate humour in feminist online activism. They also point to the fact that "the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed 2010) – the one who disrupts other people's sense of happiness and refuses to laugh when expected to do so – more commonly embodies feminist tactics in the cultural imaginary" than humour and laughter (Sundén and Paasonen 2020: 2). Humour, however, is a widespread feminist

tactic, according to Sundén and Paarsonen, and that is apparent in this volume too, when Gerd Karin Omdal writes on the Norwegian Karin Moe, Mette Sandbye on Greenlandic Pia Arke (both in section 7) or Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir on Icelandic feminist artists such as Icelandic Love Corporation (section 4). Since the early 1980s several publications and exhibitions have focused on humorous feminist work, acknowledging humour as a “powerful strategy when it comes to disarming and engaging” (Isaak 2013: 28). Laura Castagnini, curator of *Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art* (2013), even regards humour as “a defining trope of contemporary feminist practice”, and she sees the “light-hearted and often silly approaches taken by [...] young artists [...] in direct opposition to the continuing stereotype of feminism as earnest, authoritative and humourless” (Castagnini 2013: 9).

However, this is not just a phenomenon of contemporary art. In the historical avant-garde too humour has been used by female artists as a rebellious strategy. Meret Oppenheim’s well-known object *My Nurse* (1936) definitely has a humorous touch, as does Hannah Höch’s collage *The Sweet One* (1926), to mention just two examples. Both Oppenheim and Höch point to gender as a construction in their works, both literally by means of montage and assemblage techniques and by the semantic clashes of the chosen elements. Höch’s montage of ethnographic objects and emancipated women’s legs, eye and lipstick mouth is thus an ironic remark about the widespread association of women and “savages” that was common at the time, not least among her fellow male artists, who praised women’s “natural” irrationality and sexuality but still objectified them. Entitling the collage *The Sweet One* seems to be a bitter-sweet comment on that. Both works refer to the body, in Oppenheim’s work metonymically represented by the high-heeled shoes, bound, served and adorned like a roast turkey. Shoes, string and tray are objects from everyday life and can be seen as an expression of the feminist slogan “the personal is political” *avant la lettre*, blurring the line between the individual and the collective body of women. The work represents not Oppenheim’s nurse but women’s situation at the time in general. That is what makes it iconic.

Searching for new avant-garde positions in the Nordic countries after 1975, I look at humour as an important strategy for letting art interfere with life and be political in a playful way. Although humour may be used to ridicule and suppress and thereby maintain the status quo, it can also be used as an efficient means to challenge existing norms, disarming the fixed mindset of the audience by its ostensible innocence and its surprising displacement of the well known. Statements made in anger – especially by women, whose anger is often deemed “hysterical” and thus beyond rational discourse worth listening to – are easier to simply reject than an ambiguous humorous statement. In

this essay I focus on three generations of female artists who since the 1970s have in different ways used their bodies in a humorous and critical manner, ranging from ironic representations of women's living conditions by Kirsten Justesen (b. 1943) and understated absurdity in silently repeated actions by the artist duo Hanne Nielsen (b. 1959) and Birgit Johnsen (b. 1958) to loud and even grotesque stereotypical exaggeration by Maja Malou Lyse (b. 1993). The concept of humour in this context is to be understood broadly, encompassing humorous strategies ranging from different sorts of irony used in a humorous way (which is not always the case) to absurdity, parody, comedy, hyperbole and the carnivalesque. The three generations of artists have different ways of using humour and also different ideas of the body and of identity, reflecting changing political agendas and theoretical positions. They can be seen as exemplifying a general development of both feminism and artistic expression from 1970 up to the present day.

Kirsten Justesen

Kirsten Justesen is one of the pioneers of feminist art in Denmark. She is still active and enjoys an international career. From the 1960s onwards feminist artists have often used their own body as artistic material (see the introduction to this section), and Justesen has stated: "This is me. I use my own body. I use my body as a tool. As a surface. As an icon" (Wagner 2013). Since her youth Justesen has used her naked body in her art – young, slim, pregnant or old and wrinkled – and several of her works have a humorous touch. This is even the case in her work *Omstændigheder* (Circumstances, 1969–73), a title that covers a series of representations of her pregnant body: a series of photographs picturing Justesen naked in different situations (1973), a video documenting her making a cast of her torso and a series of casts of her pregnant torso, some made in 1969 of fibreglass-reinforced epoxy (now at the National Gallery of Denmark, SMK) and some made in 1971 in transparent PVC (now at Randers Kunstmuseum). Through the transparent or semi-transparent casts various objects are visible: in the 1971 series, for instance, babies' bottles, a cake, a ball and a grater. The titles of the casts differ slightly on Justesen's own website and on the official Danish art index¹. The title of the cast with the grater is thus *Tårer* (Tears), according to the official registration of the work but *Øjne løber i vand* (Eyes Water) according to Justesen's own website.

¹ See <https://www.kirstenjustesen.com> and <https://www.kulturarv.dk/kid/Forside.do> (both consulted 13 July 2021).

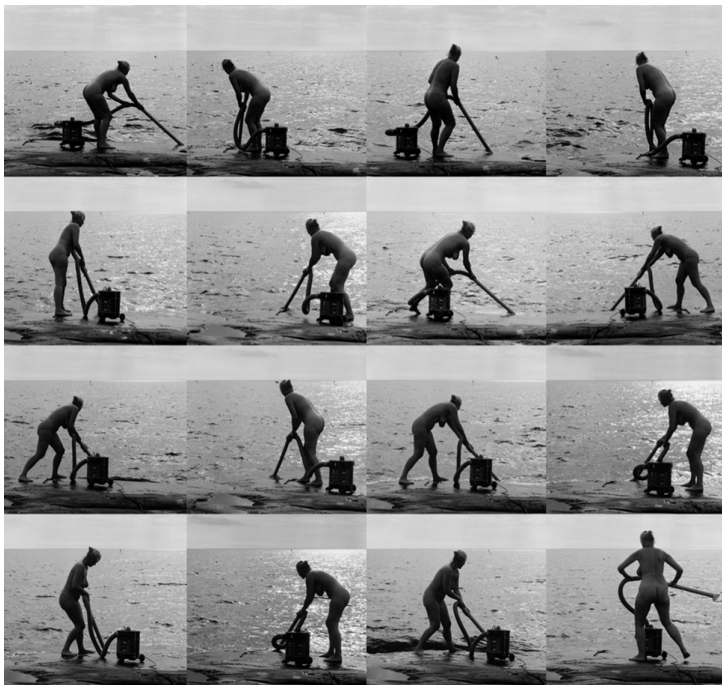
The latter refers to grating onions, while the former is more open, potentially alluding to both cutting yourself while grating, crying over onions and tears caused by the circumstance of being bound to the home and to housework as a mother. The work points to the demands and situations mothers have to engage with, and the surprising assemblage of a pregnant belly and everyday objects is funny. Pregnant women often get the feeling that they're hosting an alien, that they are being occupied from within by something strange and foreign. Here the woman is carrying not a monster but a grater or some babies' bottles – a thought so strange that it is hilarious. Assembled in the pregnant belly the objects seem alienated, but the plastic cast serves as a trustworthy display, being an indexical reference to the actual pregnant body. The implicit critique is directed towards the objects and thus at the social context in which the body is inscribed.

However, even if the body is trustworthy, Justesen does not display womanhood as a fixed identity. In the *Omstændigheder* photo series Justesen creates theatrical scenes. We see her baking, hanging clothes out to dry, standing next to a ladder, crawling or posing next to a cast of herself. She is naked but wears



Kirsten Justesen, *Omstændigheder* (Body Circumstances), 1973. From the Circumstances Series 1969–73 TORSO × 2 #5. © Kirsten Justesen.

heavy make-up, bringing Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung* to mind. In Brecht's epic theatre heavy make-up was one of many means to denaturalise the situation, to break the illusion and alienate the scene, in order to make the beholder reflect instead of just consume. By putting on extravagant make-up, Justesen makes it clear that these are not just photos of her baking or posing. They are photos of her playing a role. Posing next to a plaster cast of her own body is also a meta-comment on representation. She is both subject and object, artist and model. In 1962 Piero Manzoni wrote his signature on a woman and entitled the work *Living Sculpture*. This was, on the one hand, an avant-garde gesture challenging the concept of art, but, on the other, it was yet another example of male artists objectifying women. Justesen also uses her body as a sculpture, but in contrast to Manzoni's model, Kirsten Justesen is in charge of the presentations and representations. Here make-up plays an equally important role, shifting attention away from Justesen as a person, and signalling that this is a general issue not an autobiographical project. The heavy make-up



Kirsten Justesen *MER MAID / HAV FRUE* 1990 ... *and you have nothing to lose but your vacuum cleaner...*, 1990, 135 × 140 cm. Archival Pigment Print on Somerset Satin Enhanced. Edition of 7. From *The Baltic Sea*, Finland, summer 1990.

seems parodic, an exaggerated mimicking of the beauty standards for women. A similar use of parody is seen in several feminist actions from the early 1970s: for instance, the parade down the main shopping street, Strøget, in Copenhagen that launched the feminist movement in Denmark in 1970, when a group of about fifteen women wearing exaggerated symbols of traditional femininity – big bras filled with balloons, suspenders, wigs and big hats – walked to the town hall, where they dumped the symbols in a rubbish bin (see Anderberg 2016).

Besides parody, Justesen's work also quite often involves irony: for instance in *MER MAID ... and you have nothing to lose, but your vacuum cleaner ...* (1990), where Justesen is seen vacuuming the sea. It is a never-ending housework: like the Nordic god Thor, who was challenged to empty a drinking horn that was secretly connected to the sea, Justesen will never be able to finish, no matter how skilled a cleaner she is. It is apparently a "dramatic irony", which plays on the "discrepancies between a character's misperception of his or her situation and the audience's fuller knowledge of that character's true destiny" (Birch and Hooper 2013). Justesen is the maid doing the cleaning of the ocean and pretends to be working seriously, but we in the audience immediately realise that this is a silly and impossible task. However, in fact, Justesen knows it too, which really makes it an example of "Socratic irony", meaning "the pose of ignorance on the part of the master, who may in fact know more about the matter than he lets on" (Blackburn 2016). Finally, in the title, which is actually a quotation from the American feminist Betty Friedan, we have both a pun on the word "Mermaid" – a well-known erotic/romantic figure, here literally in the role of a maid – and an example of classical linguistic irony, saying one thing and meaning the opposite, as Justesen and the audience are surely aware that life should be more than housework, and that she therefore will lose much more than just a vacuum cleaner if she does not stop the endless task. The work thus relies on a combination of three different sorts of irony with the Socratic irony as the leading figure.

Although the scene is ironic and parodic, the body itself is not meant to be funny. The situation (the "circumstances") in which the woman has to act is ridiculous, but the body in itself is no laughing matter. It is natural and authentic. The body *per se* is something other than the culture it ridicules. This approach to the body changed with later generations of feminists, as will be seen in the next examples. Theoretically it can be seen as a shift from the position of Erving Goffman (1959), who still presupposes that there is a stable starting point, a solid reality behind the masks, to a postmodern position (e.g., Judith Butler 1990; 2011) where you are always already embedded in culture and do not have an identity, or a core, prior to this embeddedness.

Hanne Nielsen & Birgit Johnsen

Justesen collaborated with Jytte Rex on the film *Tornerose* (Sleeping Beauty, 1971) (see Paldam in section 1), but most of her works are created on her own. The video artists Hanne Nielsen & Birgit Johnsen have worked closely together for more than twenty-five years, in a collaborative relationship of solidarity. In an interview they explain how collaboration has enabled them “to get away from a set artistic role that we didn’t want to be pigeonholed in. Our collaboration brought the work away from a purely personal sphere, and we were forced to approach art in a different way” (Women down the Pub, 2004). Like former avant-garde collaborations, Nielsen and Johnsen play down the focus on artistic creation as (God-given) inspiration and shift the attention away from the individual artist. Thus in their joint online cv (Nielsen and Johnsen 2021) they do not indicate which of them is, for instance, a committee member, and they resist the myth of the inspired bohemian artist and explain how they have chosen to work in a structured manner, working a normal seven-hour day:

We also had children at around the same time, so we were quite structured around a “nine to four” work day, since we would never have been able to make things work otherwise. We tend to work in a very coordinated way, and make sure we’re always in the same balance both economically and socially, because things just don’t work out without it. (Women down the Pub, 2004)

When Nielsen and Johnsen choose to work normal working hours, it is not just an ideological choice of artistic identity but also a practical choice. Childcare in Denmark is generally good and quite affordable. Today most Danish children are in nursery or school during the day while their parents are at work. This was different in the early 1970s, when for instance Justesen had her children. In 1975, 18 per cent of children under the age of three, and 35 per cent of children aged three to six in Denmark attended nursery, compared with 50 per cent of children under three and 80 per cent of three- to six-year-olds in 1994 (Olsen, Koch, Lange et al. 1995), and in 2015 64 per cent of under-threes and 88 per cent of three- to six-year-olds attended nursery 30 hours per week or more (Jacobsen 2017). The Danish welfare system thus makes it possible to achieve a balance between art and family and to succeed at both.² This was much harder for women in the 1970s. When Justesen describes her

² However, women in Denmark still do most of the domestic work and are responsible for most of the childcare in families (Deding et al. 2006).

life as an artist and a mother, she explains that her studio was always between the kitchen and the nursery, and she had to initiate the establishment of a crèche at the art academy in order to get some time to work as an artist (Ørum 2004: 212; Lassen 1980).

In an interview on her book *Social Works* (2011), about the art-into-life discourse, well known in avant-garde studies, Shannon Jackson says:

When Life is invoked in art practice, it is often equated pretty quickly with associations like “freedom,” “spontaneity,” and “disruption,” and I thought it was worth thinking about some other elements, especially the elements of the world that make Life possible. [...] If a political art discourse becomes too enthralled with breaking down institutions, then it ignores the degree to which we are in fact dependent upon institutions. Yes, the “institution” constrains; but it also sustains. [...] I think that we all rely upon supporting systems—whether they are repairing our highways, picking up our garbage, installing our exhibits, or folding our socks—more than we realize that we do. (Linden 2011)

Access to childcare is such a supporting system that not least many women artists rely on. In her key text *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971) Linda Nochlin showed how socio-economic conditions are crucial to artistic success. Today there are as many women as men who graduate from art college. However, the museums still buy more contemporary art made by men than by women, and male artists are more likely to get a solo exhibition. This is not the place for deeper analysis of these differences, but they are important in a cultural history of the avant-garde, as they show the conditions under which artists work.

Even when women artists succeed, curators often find it necessary to reassure the public about the quality of their work as compared with male artists. Thus when Nielsen & Johnsen had a big retrospective in 2014 called “Inclusion/Exclusion” at ARoS art museum in Aarhus, Denmark, the exhibition catalogue acknowledged them as “pioneers within Danish video art” who since the 1990s have “worked with the video medium on an equally high level as some of their male colleagues from the motherland of video art, the USA” (Høyersten and Pennington 2014: 7). *sic!*

Here I will discuss just two videos from Nielsen & Johnsen’s extensive oeuvre. Their most iconic work, the video *Afrivning af løg* (Grinding Onions, 1995), shows two women grating onions for more than six minutes. They are performing an everyday action, but it seems weird and compulsory. They are squatting next to each other, dressed in neutral black clothes and “they grate onions until tears come rolling down and almost dissolve their faces” (Høyersten and Pennington 229 :2014). Grating onions is not a bizarre action in itself, but here it is



Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen, Still from *Afrivning af løg* (Grinding Onions), 1995, video 6:27 minutes.

out of context and seems without purpose as the grated onions are just falling down into their laps.

The second video, *Monkey Wrench* (1999), also shows a weird action: a woman putting bigger and bigger monkey wrenches into her mouth. It becomes more and more difficult to insert them, but her face doesn't show any pain or emotion.³

The two videos share several characteristics. They have a fixed camera position. They are both "single monitor recordings with simple subject matters, almost like a filmed performance" (Pennington 2014: 18). They are also silent and show the artists in expressionless close-up doing something bizarre. This

3 A third example by another Danish artist is Katja Bjørn's *SFW - So Fucking What* (2004), where she spends eight minutes putting matches expressionlessly in and out of her nose, using her tongue. She starts with one and ends up with four matches at a time. It is quite impressive, and it obviously demands some skill, but is as meaningless as the two videos by Nielsen & Johnsen. *SFW* seems to be a silent and defiant protest against demands of beauty, and maybe also against the demand of making didactic feminist art.

is rather funny in an absurd and understated way. The understated humour and the way the artists manipulate their bodies and make them ugly or grotesque differ from works performed by earlier generations of feminist artists. The body and the action are to be taken much less seriously in Nielsen & Johnsen's video art than in the feminist art of the 1970s, such as that of Justesen or, for instance, Marina Abramović (b. 1946). Thus, when Abramović combs her hair violently in *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (1975), it certainly entails irony, but it is no laughing matter. On the contrary, it rather implies: see how as a woman artist I am caught in these demands for beauty, so I am combing my hair compulsorily over and over again, feel my pain. Today, when I show the blurred, iconic video to students, they empathise with Abramović to the point where they find the video hard to watch.⁴ When they watch Nielsen & Johnsen, it is different. Even if the action clearly is not pleasant to perform, empathy is hardly the reaction from the audience. The reason is probably the humorous undertone, emphasised by their blank faces, the pointless and therefore silly action, the stylised setting and the doubling of performers, who in contrast to the close-up of Abramović do not call for identification in the same way. While Abramović's work could be characterised as a melodrama, Johnsen & Nielsen's work is a comedy or tragicomedy (Bentley 1964: 252, 279). According to Eric Bentley, the aim of comedy, as of tragedy, is self-insight, which in comedy is obtained by means of irony and equivocality. Even if in comedy we cannot identify with anyone on stage, we identify and sympathise with the author (Bentley 1964: 267, 274) – as we do with Nielsen & Johnsen. They show us life in its ridiculous triviality, and we recognise the suffering and respond with laughter. We laugh instead of crying, because the situation is comical in its absurdity and the characters are foolish (although recognisable). The strategy of the comedy is, according to Bentley, to blame the characters in the play. "We are liberated. They are alienated" (Bentley 1964: 231). Instead of pity, we register how ugly the crying makes them, how red and swollen their eyes become, and the grotesqueness of the distorted faces with their clownish grimaces even becomes comical in itself. The ugly is strange, and the strange is often conceived as funny, because laughter is a way of dealing with the unknown and the unexpected. Unlike Justesen's *MER MAID* you cannot just turn the irony around and create a stable decoding of the act. This is not just a serious subject wearing a smile. The destabilisation goes deeper. The work is open-ended: there is no fixed meaning behind it, which a range of different interpretations

4 When Abramović performed it in Copenhagen in 1975, together with *Whip Piece*, reactions were mixed – many doubted the political potential and regarded it as a masochistic act (Anderberg 2015: 92).

of this short, simple video also demonstrates. So you laugh and wonder why on earth they continue the pointless grinding: do they want to cry, do they enjoy crying or are they insisting on their right not to be beautiful and not to make beautiful art?

The Danish author and film-maker Lars Movin, who has worked extensively on the avant-garde, sees "*Grinding Onions* as a nod to and/or humorous comment on such artists as Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and Carolee Schneemann, who for a number of years, starting in the late sixties, created performances that with their taboo-breaking and endurance-testing exploring of limits, challenged the artists as well as the spectators" (Movin 2005). According to Movin, *Grinding Onions* differs from the art of the 1970s by operating "on a level less concerned with the act itself or the bodily challenges it presents; it belongs more on a meta-level and points to a gender-political aspect as well as the relationship between authenticity and staging". According to Movin, the gender-political aspect is related to the fact that Johnsen & Nielsen choose "an everyday activity related to cooking and thus to a traditionally female sphere. Finally there is the authenticity question, raised by the fact that the tears in the video are artificially provoked but nevertheless real" (Movin 2005). In this the tears can be said to resemble the tears of the clown. The exaggerated crying is like a mask, but it does not mean that there are no real tears underneath. Exaggeration is not a negation. The feelings are still there, and are no less true, just because they are magnified. The mechanically provoked tears turn the crying face into a clown mask and therefore something that should be funny, but at the same time we recognise the situation as an expression of everyday trivial suffering, which in this case is gendered and therefore also a form of oppression. It thus remains unclear to us, both funny and disturbing, whether the face behind the mask – the artist's face that we may sympathise with – is crying or laughing (a liberating or powerless laughter).

In *Manual til Dansk Samtidskunst* (Manual to Contemporary Art, 2006) Lisbeth Bonde and Mette Sandbye write that crying over onions is one of the only situations where it is OK to cry. Nielsen & Johnsen's video humorously points to the lack of opportunities for real emotional outbursts in public space, or it can be interpreted as a demonstration that both kitchen work and irrational emotional outbursts have traditionally been associated with the female gender (Bonde and Sandbye 2006: 216). In line with this, the art historian Sanne Kofod Olsen regards the humour in Nielsen & Johnsen's work as postmodern parody, "used as a device to undermine the expectations associated with the stereotypical". According to Olsen, it is "a humour which is not harmless but, on the contrary, teases the expectations in their ambiguity and unpredictability", and she quotes the Canadian theorist Linda Hutcheon, who writes about

the critical use of parody: "Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation" (Olsen 2000).⁵

In *Grinding Onions*, the grinding seems mandatory, but whoever is making the demand is absent, and has perhaps never been there. *Grinding Onions* shows an internalised expectation of women, and just stopping is clearly not that easy. However, the parodic video exposes the internalised expectations, and even if the performers are unable to get up and leave the onions behind, women's naturalised place in the kitchen is being questioned. Mona Hatoum is another artist who appropriates objects related to the domestic kitchen: for example, by making greatly enlarged kitchen utensils, such as a grater in *Grater Divide* (2002) measuring 204 × 3.5 cm, and an egg-slicer, *Slicer* (1999), measuring 104 × 117.5 × 93 cm. The changed scale gives the familiar objects a threatening, uncanny edge, and I have always personally related strongly especially to the slicer: when I was sixteen, the parents of my former boyfriend gave me two embroidered towels and an egg-slicer for Christmas. I still cannot see an egg-slicer without feeling trapped. By humorously appropriating objects traditionally linked to a feminine sphere, Hatoum, Justesen, Nielsen and Johnsen critically evoke the claustrophobia of gender roles, well known to most women.

Maja Malou Lyse

The body in the videos by Nielsen & Johnsen is an open body, a grotesque body.⁶ It is a body that transgresses its own borders and interacts with the world, a body that absorbs and excretes – tools, tears ... All these repeated acts of penetration and rubbing may sound erotic, but they do not appear eroticised. The women's direct gazes and otherwise blank faces are by no means flirtatious or lustful. It is mock-eroticism that never becomes arousing but

5 Kofod Olsen refers to Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989: 98), and in her definition of postmodernism she draws on Hal Foster's definition of a "postmodernism of resistance" (Foster 1983).

6 The power that humour may have to evade political and social constraints can also be seen in relation to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque: the Rabelaisian grotesque body is an open body, taking the world in and spitting it out again. Bakhtin writes about the grotesque body: "It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (Bakhtin 1984: 26).

surely destabilises conventional notions of woman's bodies. Thus when the woman investigates the phallic monkey wrenches by putting them into her mouth, she experiences that some fit more easily into the mouth than others, but her bodily investigations does not reveal their inner truth or usability. It is not a matter of an honest, or even natural, female body versus the demands and expectations of the outer world. The body is part of the world and cannot be separated from it.

Carnavalesque or grotesque traits can also be found in my final example – the young Danish feminist artist Maja Malou Lyse – but in a completely different way. Influenced by the concept of gender as construction known from queer theory, she attempts to influence that construction. She does so by denaturalising the body and by displaying it as a construction – for instance, in the work *Womanliness Can Be Assumed and Worn as a Mask* (2014), where she presents herself as a life-size cut-out doll that can be dressed in different ways and even with different facial expressions. Instead of just performing as herself – as if that was a stable entity – Lyse makes it clear that you are never just you; you are always already putting on masks, always performing your gender, and it is up to you to decide how you want to perform it. As actor, model and drag queen RuPaul Charles expresses it in his TV show *Rupaul's Drag Race*: “We're all born naked and the rest is drag.”



Maja Malou Lyse, *What Gender Construct Feels Like For A Girl* (Madonna Cover), 2014.

Another strategy of Maja Malou Lyse – related to drag – is to appropriate normative gender signifiers in order to reinterpret them. She wants to *reclaim* the colour pink – to rebel by taking power over it, by redefining it. Lyse

consciously appropriates girly culture entailing expectations of being sweet, passive and non-intimidating, just to fail to meet these expectations. This is, for instance, the case in the video *What Gender Construct Feels Like for a Girl (Madonna Cover)* (2014), where, dressed up with platinum blonde wig and a tight pink dress, she sings “Do you know what it feels like to be a girl?” The song, the setting, her outfit are all a vulgar and exaggerated cliché of girliness. Lyse is deliberately too much. She appears as hyper-feminised in an attempt to undermine and change the normative notion of femininity. “I wear the colour pink like a suit of armour. It becomes a weapon,” she says (Ullman 2015: 15).

Lyse describes her art as being somewhere between “aggressively girly” and “feminine grotesque” (Weinstock 2015). She turns the conventional meanings upside down in a carnivalesque *détournement*. Bakhtin writes about the medieval, subversive carnival:

We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the “inside out” (*à l'envers*), of the “turnabout”, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. (Bakhtin 1984: 11)

Lyse's work can be seen as a critical appropriation of conventional gender signifiers by means of carnivalesque humour, making use of exaggeration, vulgarity and a transgressive body. In her videos tampons, dildos and sanitary towels often float around in the picture as props referring to the absorption and excretion of the open body, and her dresses are usually so tight that they display every roll of fat. Lyse deliberately plays on and displays bodily grotesqueness, as in the hilarious photo *HANG IN THERE, BABY!* (2015). One breast is lifted and shaped by a bra, making the free, sagging breast look really long. Lyse's face is blank, but the title indicates that it is OK to laugh, that she is aware of the comical visual contrast between the “disciplined” breast and the “natural” free one (in contrast to Justesen's breasts, which are always just “natural”, no laughing matter). Lyse's work thus points at the correction of the body most women today perform daily in order to meet a certain normative body ideal, and the title, which is a familiar catchphrase, seems to be a loving and encouraging remark to the free breast. Lyse is thus not dismissing the use of bras, but insisting on self-acceptance and body positivity.

Lyse works on many different platforms. She has made collaborative performances (e.g., *Selfie Stick Aerobics* (2015), with the Swedish artist Arvida Byström at Tate Modern in London), video, sculptures and many different activities on the internet, especially on Instagram, where she has more than 45,000 followers (as at 21 April 2021). Here she also posts self-ironic pictures,



Maja Malou Lyse, *HANG IN THERE, BABY!*, 2015.

where, for instance, she uses her quite large breasts as bags in an ironic reversal of the “pencil test”, showing the practicality of being able to hold both mobile phone and books. The majority of her posts are accompanied by a longer text, where she discusses consent as mandatory or the #MeToo campaign in a way that is rather nuanced and yet easy to understand, reflects on her own role when she promotes sex toys, speaks for the right not to be constantly interested in sex, calls for self-examination or recommends theoretical literature on sexuality or feminism. In line with the old avant-garde tradition she has also agreed with Jane Ward’s *A Queer Feminist Pig’s Manifesta* (2013), stating, among other things, that:

I do not take my “self” as a viewer too seriously. I do not feel I need to conform to any expectation – on the part of the marketers, my communities, or myself – about what “people like me,” or with my body parts, should desire. (Lyse 2016)

Lyse insists on the right to be who she is, well aware that this identity is as firm and stable as a breast without a bra. This is both something to laugh about and an important matter of self-acceptance, as Freud writes on humour:

Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstance. (Freud 1928: 163)

Conclusion

I have tried to show some changes in the way feminist artists have used humour and their body over recent generations. Most of the examples contain an element of failure: failure to perform properly, failure to accomplish the cleaning project, failure to sing in tune and meet the expectations of the “right” body, failure to behave rationally and “hold yourself together”. In *The Queer Art of Failure* Judith Halberstam writes:

What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods.

[...]

Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production. (Halberstam 2011: 3, 6)

The use of humour is a step away from accepted, rational discourse, away from discipline and normalisation. Exactly because the artists dare to fail, dare not to be (taken) serious(ly), they may paradoxically succeed in proposing change. All of these examples show how the artists investigate the concept of gender while challenging the quest for uniform female beauty and/or behaviour. However, they do that in quite different ways: from Justesen's parody and Socratic irony, through Nielsen & Johnsen's postmodern, underplayed absurdity to Lyse's deliberate carnivalesque construction.

Furthermore the works by Nielsen, Johnsen and Lyse also explore and question the idea of the individual body as a “naked truth” known from earlier generations of feminist artists, such as Justesen. They all do this by means of the grotesque body as a liberating laughing matter. However, they approach grotesqueness from different angles: Nielsen & Johnsen challenge the norm by doing something absurd, whereas Lyse overdoes the conventional. These are different ways of challenging the borders between art and life, ways that both inherit much from former avant-garde practices and bring them a humorous renewal.

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