

# filthy dreams

For Minorities Who Don't Even Fit Into Our Own Minorities

ART

## Well Laugh, Though Your Heart Is Breaking In Two: Comedic Resistance In “Laugh Back”

*Posted on August 2, 2018 by EMILY COLUCCI*



Installation view of Laugh Back (Left to right: Natalie Baxter, Severed and Growing, 2017; Andréa Stanislav, L. O. T. R. F. M. (Last of the Real Fucking Men), 2016; Dynasty Handbag, FASCIST DICTATORSHIP MAKEUP TUTORIAL, 2016; Rachel Mason, FutureClown's Inaugural Address, 2016)(Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo by Etienne Frossard)

"The joker  
Is always laughing  
As though he's the  
Gayest guy in town  
He plays a winning part  
While memories crush his heart  
Yet he goes on laughing  
Like a clown"  
—Billy Myles, "The Joker"

Can humor be a form of resistance in our increasingly dystopian era? I certainly think so, as I've argued on Filthy Dreams previously (and repeatedly). Recently, though, comedy, mainly stand-up, is being reevaluated due to comedian Hannah Gadsby's highly emotional and now, greatly hyped special Nanette. With various publications stating that Gadsby "will change stand-up" or "upended comedy for good," Gadsby's critique of the limitations of comedy certainly provides a counterpoint to my dogged belief in harnessing the ridiculous for radical means.

"I do think I have to quit comedy," announces Gadsby, dryly admitting, "It's probably not the forum to make such an announcement, is it?" Through the special, after about a half-hour of purposefully hacky material about humorless lesbians and Tasmania's small gene pool, Gadsby dissects comedy as the build up of tension and release in the form of a punchline, which within this restrictive framework, doesn't provide space for her to express the full range of her experiences or stories. Among her main critiques is the problem of performing self-deprecating comedy as a lesbian: "I've built a career on self-deprecating humor...and I don't want to do that anymore. Do you understand what self-deprecation means from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility; it's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak. I simply won't do that anymore—not for myself or anyone who identifies with me."

I'll admit, though certainly thought provoking (I've been thinking about *Nanette* ever since I watched—if you, dearest Filthy Dreams readers have thoughts, I'd love to hear them), Gadsby's blanket criticism of comedy had me clutching my pearls. I guess I'm just not ready to give up the idea that humor could be harnessed as a way for marginalized folk to undermine dominant institutions. And in fact, I'm not sure Gadsby is either. The strongest part of Gadsby's special was when she took aim at the hypermasculine field of art history ("flesh vases for their dick flowers" will be a phrase that sticks with me) and the current shaky state of masculinity ("If you hate men so much why do you try so fucking hard to look like one?" Because you need a good role model right now, fellas"). Even though she speaks of quitting comedy in her special, it also proves that comedy can threaten power if you punch up. Like Charles Ludlam states in one of his axioms of "Manifesto: Ridiculous Theatre, Scourge of Human Folly", "The things one takes seriously are one's weakness" (157).

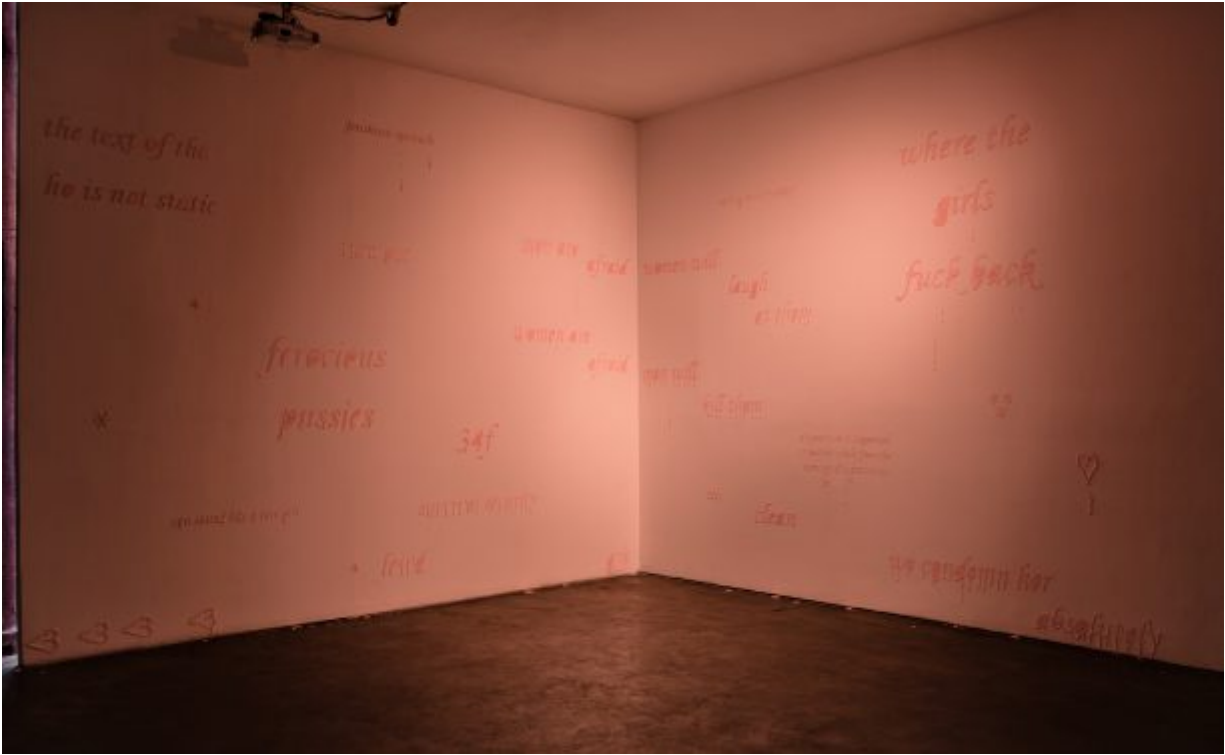


Installation view of *Laugh Back* (Left to right: Natalie Baxter, *Severed and Growing*, 2017, Andréa Stanislav, *L. O. T. R. F. M. (Last of the Real Fucking Men)*, 2016) (Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo by Etienne Frossard)

And this knowledge can be applied to rattle those in power. Want proof? Just recall the CODEPINK activist and retired children's librarian Desiree Fairouz, whose guffaw at Senator Richard Shelby's remark that Jeff Sessions had a record of "treating all Americans equally under the law" during that miniature Nazi's confirmation hearing earned her a police escort and arrest for "disorderly and disruptive" behavior. The Department of Justice eventually dropped her case in November 2017, but the disruptive effect of her laughter that ricocheted through those hallowed halls remains. There's nothing the current administration seems to hate more than to be made to look like a fool—ironic, yes, but useful when traditional forms of protest fall flat.

Fairooz's, as she described to WAMU, "involuntary laugh or more a chortle of disdain" inspired a current group exhibition *Laugh Back* at Smack Mellon. With a video of Fairouz's arrest in the show's entrance, the

exhibition, curated by Lindsay O'Connor, argues, through a multidisciplinary group of artists, that humor can be generatively threatening, especially when used to mock, satirize and destabilize various forms of power and control.



Kristina Davis, *backpage.eulogy*, 2018 (Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo by Etienne Frossard)

Like the classic comedienues that appear throughout the show like Esther Williams and Lucille Ball, all the artists in the show are women-identified, which allows *Laugh Back* to mine the specific menacing potential of women laughing. "Men are afraid women will laugh at them. Women are afraid men will kill them," reads a line in the back room of Smack Mellon, smeared on a wall in pretty-in-pink icing by artist Kristina Davis. Joining other quotes by sex workers and critical theorists, this statement by Margaret Atwood speaks specifically to the upsetting ability women's laughter has to upend fragile masculinity and throw a wrench in the stereotype of the dower, humorless feminist, as well as portray the sad but true reality that women's laughter is sometimes a fatal transgression. As Sarah Banet-Weiser recently wrote on Atwood's quote in the *L.A. Review of Books* "A woman's laughter can reveal the precarity of masculine power, the way in which this power relies upon institutional upkeep and constant validation."



Installation view of Laugh Back (Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *An Alphabetic Accumulation of Approximate Observations*, 2018) (Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo by Etienne Frossard)

While all the show's inclusions illustrate this possible feminist subversion, the works in the show explore various categories of humor. There is the clever like Kameelah Janan Rasheed's amusing alliterations in *An Alphabetic Accumulation of Approximate Observations*, bringing together phrases like "Cumulative Caskets," "Uppity Uterus," and "Gluten-free Graveyard" that turns our violent and phobic era into rhymes worthy of Dr. Seuss. Other works engage with campy materials like Natalie Baxter's flaccid, sequined and segmented American flag and Andréa Stanislav's glittering gold dedication to toxic masculinity shaming, *L.O.T.R.F.M. (Last of the Real Fucking Men)*. And yet, other artists harness the neurotic like Luis Mejico's *Too Embarrassing To Say Out Loud* series, emblazoned with anxiety-ridden phrases like "How About Now? Is This Alright?" and the nostalgic like Farah Al Qasimi's

1990s teen throwback video *How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love My Room*, which mixes the aesthetic of Riot Grrrl and Hole to rage about skin whitening cream and other ways in which white supremacy attempts to transform and control Brown bodies.

In *Ridiculous Theatre: The Scourge of Human Folly*, Charles Ludlam states, “camp is motivated by rage” (254). And so is most of the work in *Laugh Back*, which twists very palpable rage into cathartic laughter, as seen in one of the very first pieces viewers confront as they walk into Smack Mellon. Two clay busts, mimicking the old white men honored in ancient university libraries and hallowed museum halls, sit near the entrance. But, rather than pristine and precise marble faces, these clay busts have been pummeled into unrecognizability. The deep fingermarks grooved into their faces are courtesy of the artist Deborah Castillo’s performance held during the exhibition’s opening reception. By bitch-slapping these men and essentially erasing their identities, Castillo throws a punch at white masculine authority.



Installation view of *Laugh Back* (Left to right: Deborah Castillo, *Slapping Power*, 2015/2018, Luis Mejico, *I Don't Know Why! ...I Just Am*, 2017, Luis Mejico, *How About Now? Is This Alright?*, 2017) (Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo by Etienne Frossard)

Though not always literal physical violence, anger simmers throughout the show. Unsurprisingly, many of these works directly take on our maddeningly malicious, but also buffoonish current administration. For example, Rachel Mason's *FutureClown's Inaugural Address*, which was aired during Donald Trump's inauguration, portrays the artist dressed as her post-apocalyptic jester character FutureClown. In the video, FutureClown lip-synchs Trump's terrifying inaugural speech, which was so fascist, foreboding and freaky that even George W.

Bush remarked, “That was some weird shit.” For the first time, perhaps, he wasn’t wrong. Mason, as FutureClown, has previously mimicked political speeches including all 13-hours of Rand Paul’s filibuster over the Patriot Act. However, the combination of Trump’s clownishness and Mason’s literal clown seems like a match made in humorous heaven—or really, hell, as Mason makes a mockery of Trump’s authoritarian manipulation, revealing it for the goofy bullshit that it is.

Nearby, Dynasty Handbag’s FASCIST DICTATORSHIP MAKEUP similarly satirizes the Trump era. Uploaded right after Trump’s election, Handbag takes on the self-seriousness of YouTube makeup tutorials by presenting tips on how to look our best in our newfound hellscape by wildly smearing on makeup like a streamed breakdown. Some of her tips? Covering landscape-like green and blue eyeshadow with the “doom” of black eyeliner and blacking out her teeth to prepare for the lack of adequate dental care. The video ends with Handbag singing, “It’s a new look! It’s the same great taste! Maybe it’s an old look...” exposing that newly emboldened phobic behavior that the Trump era ushered in was really a part of America all along.

The manner in which both Mason and Handbag laugh at our contemporary political situation has resonances with both Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz’s understanding of queer failure. Here, the artists fail to, at least outwardly, take our politics seriously. In Cruising Utopia (<https://nyupress.org/books/9780814757284/>), Muñoz analyzes queer failure in conjunction with Dynasty Handbag’s performances, articulating that this failure “is not so much a failure to succeed as it is a failure to participate in a system of valuation that is predicated on exploitation and conformity. The queer failure of Dynasty Handbag and countless other queer performers is a failure that is more nearly a refusal or escape” (174). By failing to value or take our dire political emergency solemnly, both Mason and Handbag enact a significant and highly disruptive refusal.

This rejection of seriousness can also be seen in Katherine Simóne Reynolds's haunting videos *Structural Humor: Vaughn on the Basketball Court* and *Structural Humor: Todd Outside The Gate*. Both these videos feature Black men—Vaughn Davis Jr. and Todd Anthony Johnson—maniacally laughing at sites of structural and institutional racism throughout Saint Louis, including at a gate, which presumably sits in front of a gated community. Through their bitter laughter, Reynolds's videos portray a complete repudiation of the lack of access afforded people of color and the racism that is literally built into the landscapes of our cities, moving its tragic implications into farce.



Installation view of *Laugh Back* (Left to right: Katherine Simóne Reynolds, *Structural Humor: Vaughn on the Basketball Court*, 2016 and *Structural Humor: Todd Outside the Gate*, 2016, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *An Alphabetic Accumulation of Approximate Observations*, 2018, INNER COURSE, *The Agony Of It All*, 2018) (Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo by Etienne Frossard)

Laughter, according to Charles Ludlam, can be a means of “knowing that you are not alone in the labyrinth” (50). While Gadsby argues that both laughter and anger are perhaps not enough, *Laugh Back* certainly proves that laughter does provide, at least a momentary, relief, illustrated perfectly by INNER COURSE's interactive installation and performance *The Agony of It All*. Taking its title from Joy Davidson's 1988 book *The Agony of It All: The Drive for Drama and Excitement in Women's Lives*, INNER COURSE, a duo consisting of Rya Kleinpeter and Tora López, inhabit a small bedroom with two beds built into shelves, which house copious deliciously trashy and frequently offensive self-help books. These books are the kinds you discover at thrift stores, snatching them up to display proudly on your coffee table to the amusement and horror of guests or your super, including *Rainbow: The Stormy Life of Judy Garland*, *101 Weapons for Women*

Looking Forward To Being Attacked and perhaps my favorite Roger Welsch's Everything I Know About Women I Learned From My Tractor. They even had *Desperate Living* sex pot Liz Renay's memoir. I need their reading list!

Dressed as slinky pajama-wearing Lucy Ricardos from *I Love Lucy*, including ginger shock wigs, INNER COURSE invites viewers to sit with them, read aloud from these various texts, and digest or dismiss their hysterically misogynist content, revealing how women have been consistently analyzed, overdetermined, theorized and controlled. Now, I am anything but a willing performance participant, but I could have sat in *The Agony of It All* forever since it included one of my favorite hobbies: tasteless and tacky reading material. Who wouldn't want to learn more about reading breasts (like palm reading), including how a certain type of breast (Class 3) means you're "biddyish" and that's probably why nobody can stand you? In addition to just amusing participants, however, the performance and installation strips power and authority from this compounded syllabus of sexism. As Ludlam says, and it bears repeating, "Laugh and you are free" (50).

**Tags:** Andréa Stanislav, Camp, Charles Ludlam, Deborah Castillo, Dynasty Handbag, Farah Al Qasimi, Hannah Gadsby, INNER COURSE (Rya Kleinpeter and Tora López), Jan Mun, Jen Liu, JESSE HARROD, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Katherine Simone Reynolds, Kristina Davis, Lady Parts Justice League's Vagical Mystery Tour, Laugh Back, Lindsey O'Connor, Luis Mejico, Madhini Nirmal, Nanette, Natalie Baxter, Rachel Mason, ridiculous, Smack Mellon. Bookmark the permalink.