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# Editorial: Humour in art and activism

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## 1. Research questions and general approach to humour research

This special issue of EJHR results from the proceedings of an exploratory workshop that took place in September 2013 at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) titled “Humorous Approaches to Art and Activism in Conflict”.<sup>1</sup> While not all contributors to the workshop are part of this issue, and not all contributors to this issue were part of the workshop, the exploratory gathering of scholars, artists, and activists served as a point of departure for an ongoing research project, the initial findings of which are presented in this volume. Interestingly, none of the contributors would strictly classify themselves as “humour researchers”, and the disciplinary divergences between the essays certainly do not end there. Yet it seemed fitting to position these varying interpretations of humour in relation to art and activism, particularly in sites of conflict, in a journal dedicated to the study of a field that already boasts of several decades of research.

The issue addresses the intersection of art and activism by investigating humorous interventions in socio-political conflict situations. Most research related to the arts in conflict zones, both from a social science perspective, as well as from a community arts perspective, tends to emphasize the emancipatory, therapeutic, or reconciliatory attributes of art in conflict, paying attention to how art contributes to conflict resolution, bridges social inequalities, or serves to ease tensions between communities in conflict and overcome trauma. The contributions in this volume discuss the more neglected, “non-serious” aesthetic strategies, such as those employing ironic, grotesque, absurd, frivolous, carnivalesque, and humorous forms of cultural and artistic intervention in conflict settings.

There has been a recent burgeoning of studies of art and activism and artistic interventions in conflicts and crisis situations (Özden Firat & Kuryel 2011; Holmes 2009, Weibel 2015). The study of impact and effects are central to a large number of these undertakings. However, in this issue, contributors were specifically asked to reflect on the place of humour in artistic activism or activist art in conflicts moving beyond the question of function or impact, thus enquiring into the aesthetics, strategies, and processes.

Of special interest in this regard is the cross-pollination of memory studies and the study of cultural activism. During the last decades various approaches towards memory have been developed based on exploring artistic and cultural practices (Sundholm & Mithander & Velicu 2013; Rigney 2012; Erll 2011). However, activism vis-à-vis conflict situations not only intervenes in the present and points to the future, but also challenges different layers of memory. The issue examines how humour as an artistic strategy is likewise grounded in transgressing and provoking particular memory structures. To what extent have humorous approaches to art and activism in conflict become relevant in grasping and responding to the contemporary “global” moment, wherein conflicts can no longer be pigeonholed into regional histories and national memories alone and where scholars of culture and memory need to consider the links between art and activist practices?

The issue grapples with very *diverse conceptions of conflict*, encompassing, on the one side, questions of the use of humour by artists and activists in violent conflicts, post-conflict contexts, in latent conflict environments, or under authoritarian regimes. On the other side, it highlights questions of aesthetic strategies and structures, narration and cultural memory, wherein the conception of a conflict fundamentally affects and shapes the type of humour that emerges.

The broad range of case studies presented in the contributions refer to *different legacies and discourses of humour* (e.g. Freud, Bakhtin, Bergson, rhetorical theory) that are relevant to its artistic deployment in a specific conflict setting. These discourses vary in their appraisal of humour’s nature and function and oscillate between different layers of time, space, body, and institutional spheres, when it comes to the realms of art and activism. Regardless of whether humour is considered as a signification process, as a form of coping, cohesion, or criticism, humour theories time and again emphasize its ambivalent character. If this seemingly inherent ambivalence leads to such divergent effects like coping and criticism, unification and distinction, an important question to be raised is how artists and activists approach the “other” or “opponent” in the respective case studies. Thus, do humorous approaches lead to new identity-based alliances or do they rather stress its agonistic character that allows for undermining identity politics (Mouffe 2013)?

Humorous or ludic approaches range from such divergent phenomena as irony, ridicule, satire, play, to the grotesque, absurd, and sarcastic. The essays grasp humour not only in terms of its functions, but reflect especially on the specific aesthetic strategies as applied in the case studies. Of particular relevance in this regard is the *intersection of art and activism*, i.e. of reflecting art works within the fabric of social interaction. Notably, humour has not been widely examined in terms of its bodily and performative characteristics, although several studies have given attention to the aesthetics of humour in the last decades (Gorden 2012; Morreall 2009). Our concern, however, is, whether or not, and in what way, does humour as an artistic strategy challenge representational modes of protest, and performs instead heterogeneous aesthetic strategies that ultimately undermine the dichotomous structure often perceived as inherent to humour, based on divisions of life and death, young and old, high and low, and so on.

## 2. Introduction to essays

The issue features critical essays from the disciplines of theatre and performance, literary, film and cultural studies, art history, cultural geography, and sociology of culture. An additional, unique feature is a series of artist contributions, by means of photo-essays and poetic

interventions by artist-activists, in whose aesthetics the concept of humour occupies an important role.<sup>2</sup> The volume broadly follows three strands of investigation:

(1) What are the *differences and commonalities between art and activism in terms of intervening in social reality*? What trajectories of the past do artistic activist practices bring forth and question? How do aesthetic approaches intertwine with the “real” in narrating and representing the past? What are the premises of questioning established, “sacred” narratives of the past through humorous interventions?

From the perspective of the humanities, humour is investigated less in terms of its purposes and effects, but rather with respect to its dramaturgies and its aesthetics. The opening essay by theatre researchers Sruti Bala and Veronika Zangl (Department of Theatre Studies, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands) extends the concept of dramaturgy from theatre theory to the study of protest and activism in order to address the performative dimension of humour in artistic activism. Humour thus becomes the embodied, performed means through which the protest becomes constituted as protest. They argue that protest employing a ludic aesthetic is highly ambivalent about how it conceives the relation between activists and opponents, doing away with sociological models of opposition and simple antagonism. Furthermore, a close engagement with three cases of contemporary dramaturgies of humour in activist art reveals the pertinent historicity of humour, where artists reference the past in complex ways, and the humour becomes apparent through the lens of memories of past events and actions.

Benjamin Shepard (NYC College of Technology, City University of New York, USA) works with the concepts of play and games rather than art in his auto-ethnographic investigation of humour in contemporary anti-capitalist movements in the US. Departing from an anthropological understanding of play in the tradition of Johan Huizinga and more recent work by David Graeber, where play is essential to culture and social interaction rather than being one aspect of childhood or an indication of frivolity, Shepard provides several examples of anti-capitalist protests where play and games were the means of protest rather than a mere decorative or ancillary factor. Historical references abound in the readings of these events, particularly memories connected to the Civil Rights Movement and US popular culture. He proposes the notion of a “gamespace”, which encompasses both virtual as well as physical spaces of participatory politics, a space wherein and to which play and playfulness are core to the task of resistance.

Aldo Milohnić (University of Ljubljana, Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film and Television, Slovenia) uses the term “artivism” – a neologism he originally proposed in a 2005 essay – to refer to those actions that occupy precisely the border territory between art and activism, betraying the conventions of both and yet leveraging an autonomy of their own through their use of ideas and methods from both artistic and activist realms. Milohnić traces the history of contemporary Slovenian performative public protests to the Partisan resistance movement during the Second World War. He identifies their humorous approach as characterized by a method of re-appropriating public statements or metaphors to attack but also to recuperate a collective vision. Actions such as the appearance of “the Erased” citizens outside the parliament or the collective uprising of zombies in response to a statement by a public official in Slovenia reveal a corpographic use of the body in a physical embodiment of speech that is both humorous and poignant in its literality and risky in terms of its interventionist power.

Isabel de Sena Cortabitarte (Independent curator, Berlin) departs from the case study of bio-artist Adam Zaretsky to demonstrate how humour works as a rhetorical tool in bio-art – where art

is used to provoke debates on ethical questions in the life sciences – and is able to raise serious ethical questions without resorting to normative moralism and pedantry. The author interprets the mode of humour in Zaretsky's work as characterized by confusion, accident, and discombobulation allowing for multiple perspectives in interpreting the artwork. A discussion of the incongruity theory of humour is specifically connected to art historian W.J.T. Mitchell's notion of "tactical irresponsibility" as a way of contextualizing the activist aspects of Zaretsky's bio-art.

(2) The second strand of investigation concerns the *limits and possibilities of humorous approaches in situations of traumatic, violent conflict*. How do humorous artistic strategies, which are often defined as ambivalent and paradoxical, challenge nationalized memories? How do creative forms of activism destabilize existing patterns in understanding divergent perspectives in conflict settings? How do humorous interventions undermine fixed modes of making meaning?

Brigitte Adriaensen's (Radboud University, Nijmegen) study focuses on the contemporary Mexican drug novel, in particular on its uniquely bizarre combination of cruelty and humour in the representation of abjection and violence. Against the grain of some existing interpretations, which see humour as a form of profanation of death and real violence, Adriaensen argues that there is a link between the intensely mediated, indirect experience of violence in Mexico and their mediated, grotesque representation in the novels. Furthermore, Adriaensen sees black humour as displacing the abject and thus fulfilling a social need of coming to terms with atrocity. Although these novels are not strict examples of activism, they perform an important role in collective processes of recovery from extreme violence and abjection.

The article by Uğur Ümit Üngör and Valerie Amandine Verkerke (International and Political History, Utrecht University, Netherlands) explores the production of humour under conditions of genocide, with reference to three historical cases, namely World War II, the Serbian genocide against Bosnian Muslims during the Yugoslav civil wars and that of the Assad regime following the onset of deadly violence in Syria in 2011. Üngör and Verkerke ask what types of humorous responses to victimization can be identified and how these examples complicate or extend the debates in humour research on different functions of humour, namely the theories of criticism, coping, and cohesion. Humour as found in jokes, slogans, cabaret, stand-up comedy, and cartoons serves as a vehicle of protest, of challenging dominant narratives, but it also has a more nuanced self-critical function, whereby self-deprecation can be a means of opposing victimization. From the victims' perspective, humour provides a weapon of maintaining dignity and selfhood under extremely violent and brutal conditions.

This issue of EJHR is exceptional to us in particular because of the contributions of artist-activists. Apparent innocence and playful seriousness are the trademarks of the activist art of Israeli-Dutch artist duo Gil & Moti, whose photo-essay on their ongoing project *Available for You* takes the question of cultural reconciliation and conflict to the realm of the intimate and in turn politicizes seemingly everyday acts of shopping, cleaning, and housekeeping. The photographs document moments in the work, which consist of building relationships with Arab citizens in several European cities and offering their services to do anything that may be required of them. These highly stylized and symbolically laden images, oscillating between pathos and narcissism, show Gil & Moti's representation and documentation of their relational experiences geared for a white cube art audience. The spaces of art and activism become blurred and reorganized in the process. The photographic documentation by Gil & Moti offer a humorous

perspective by addressing large-scale social and political conflicts on a deeply personal, micro-political scale.

(3) The third strand focuses on the *diverse approaches of artists and activists to the “opponent”* in a conflict setting. What are the aesthetic strategies of entering their spaces and communicating with the “other”, ranging from ridicule and attack to mimicry and mirroring? How are the interventions brought into the public sphere? To what extent are humorous interventions capable of overcoming the victim-perpetrator dichotomy, so deeply rooted in conflict narratives, and of evoking possible future memories?

Graphic and political humour in Argentina forms the subject of the essay by Liliana Feierstein (Humboldt University Berlin, Germany and CONICET, Buenos Aires, Argentina), reflecting on the unexplored potential of comic strips as political and activist art in the era during and after Argentina’s military dictatorships. Using a psychoanalytic reading of the genre of the comic strip as connected to the collective subconscious, where jokes and dreams become the means of self-expression, Feierstein presents examples from the history of comic art in Argentina to discuss its micro-interventionist potentials in authoritarian societies. In charting the relationship of comic strips and their humour to memory studies, she argues that they present a microscopic view of history and can thus be seen as chronicles rather than annals, offering points of crystallization of collective memories and identity.

Florian Göttke (PhD Researcher, University of Amsterdam and Dutch Art Institute) examines the curious phenomenon of burning effigies of presidents and public officials as a means of protest. He identifies a thin line that separates carnivalesque protest from outrage, and observes that a grotesque celebration of a burning effigy can suddenly turn into violence. Göttke mobilizes Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival to trace how effigy burning can be understood as a humorous approach to protest, for its combination of grotesque aesthetics and a strategy of reversal and debasement. Offering a tentative genealogy and typology of protest effigies, he reflects on the uncanny potential of effigies to appear simultaneously dead and alive, resulting in theatricalized interactions with protestors, ranging from the slapstick to the melodramatic. Humour in his analysis extends far beyond the question of being funny, with the burning effigies evoking not only ridicule but also their repulsiveness marking a certain impossibility of laughter.

Hilary Ramsden (School of Drama and Performance, University of South Wales, Cardiff, UK) presents the radical recuperation of clowning and buffoonery in the direct actions of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army in the UK. By embracing clowning as a means of political activism in the anti-militarist, anti-capitalist, and social justice movements of the 1990s and 2000s, Ramsden argues how elements such as joy, pleasure, carnival, and naivety, normally seen as distinct from the political arena, are turned into potent “weapons”, inserted into interactions with police and army personnel. By embodying and starkly visualizing these qualities, and at the same time practicing clowning as a means of self-transformation and not only social or political change, Ramsden argues that rebel clowning operates in both emotional and political realms. Its humour also lies in its ability to question the binary between activist and authority, or between permission and prohibition, thus departing from most understandings of activism as opposition.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> All images in this issue have been printed with explicit permission from the relevant persons or authorities and/or belong to the public domain.

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