

## The Gravity of Levity: Humour as Conceptual Critique

Heather Diack

Volume 37, Number 1, 2012

Humour in the Visual Arts and Visual Culture: Practices, Theories, and Histories

L'humour dans les arts et la culture visuels : pratiques, théories et histoires

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066735ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066735ar>

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Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Diack, H. (2012). The Gravity of Levity: Humour as Conceptual Critique. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 37(1), 75–86.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1066735ar>

Article abstract

Parmi les nombreuses antinomies qui traversent les écrits issus de l'art conceptuel et les textes analytiques qui en traitent, l'une des plus importantes, et pourtant des moins explorées, est celle qui oppose les différentes conceptions de l'humour. Ces conceptions proviennent d'approches de l'humour que l'on pourrait qualifier soit de subversive et déstabilisante, soit d'analytique et contraignante. Bien que ces catégories ne s'excluent pas esthétiquement et philosophiquement l'une l'autre, elles ont pourtant été mises en opposition de façon systématique. Cet article examine l'histoire de cette tension afin de souligner son importance pour la compréhension de ce qu'a été l'art conceptuel. Il accorde, entre autres, une large place au débat entre l'interprétation doctrinaire de Joseph Kosuth et l'interprétation subversive de John Baldessari de l'humour duchampien. L'humour devient dès lors un catalyseur privilégié permettant d'interroger les finalités esthétiques et philosophiques de l'art conceptuel. Finalement, ce texte, à l'aide des concepts de légèreté (*levity*) et de pesanteur (*gravity*), fait la cartographie de la brèche qui passe entre un humour débridé et un humour hermétique.

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# The Gravity of Levity: Humour as Conceptual Critique

HEATHER DIACK, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

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## Résumé

Parmi les nombreuses antinomies qui traversent les écrits issus de l'art conceptuel et les textes analytiques qui en traitent, l'une des plus importantes, et pourtant des moins explorées, est celle qui oppose les différentes conceptions de l'humour. Ces conceptions proviennent d'approches de l'humour que l'on pourrait qualifier soit de subversive et déstabilisante, soit d'analytique et contraignante. Bien que ces catégories ne s'excluent pas esthétiquement et philosophiquement l'une l'autre, elles ont pourtant été mises en opposition de façon systématique. Cet article examine l'histoire de cette tension afin de souligner son importance pour la compréhension de ce qu'a été l'art conceptuel. Il accorde, entre autres, une large place au débat entre l'interprétation doctrinaire de Joseph Kosuth et l'interprétation subversive de John Baldessari de l'humour duchampien. L'humour devient dès lors un catalyseur privilégié permettant d'interroger les finalités esthétiques et philosophiques de l'art conceptuel. Finalement, ce texte, à l'aide des concepts de légèreté (*levity*) et de pesanteur (*gravity*), fait la cartographie de la brèche qui passe entre un humour débridé et un humour hermétique.

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[Humor is a] great power...a sort of savior so to speak because, before, art was such a serious thing, so pontifical that I was very happy when I discovered that I could introduce humor into it. The discovery of humor was a liberation.

Marcel Duchamp<sup>1</sup>

I enjoy humor a lot and in the art world I'm considered a great repository of jokes and funny stories, but if I were trying for humor the works would be much different. I think when there's humor it's as a result of something else, and I think when I say something else that I'm trying to get beneath the veneer of the world and trying to understand the world.

John Baldessari<sup>2</sup>

There is an intimate creative connection between thought and laughter. A number of significant intellectuals have challenged the common assumption that laughter is a *thoughtless* act, a kind of unpredictable and unruly response to the inanities of the world. Walter Benjamin, for instance, noted that “there is no better starting point for thought than laughter.”<sup>3</sup> According to this logic laughter possesses the ability to enact a radical shift that sets in motion critical deliberations. Simon Critchley has suggested that laughter can even be described as the catalyst to, and the very movement of, philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Not coincidentally, Ludwig Wittgenstein famously imagined a book of philosophy that would be composed entirely of jokes.<sup>5</sup> Whether these would be hysterically funny or simply result in a guffaw is beside the point—what is crucial here is the conceptual allegiance shared by philosophy and humorous acts (i.e., jokes, comedy, or laughter). Both Wittgenstein and Benjamin approached philosophy as a site of productive change, valuable not for the answers it might provide, but for the activity of thinking prompted by the questions it asks. Like philosophical thought and its attendant questioning, laughter offers a way to bring an intersubjective

awareness to bear on human activity. As Critchley states, humour is “practically enacted theory” in that it “invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our own lives.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite the deep correspondence between thought and laughter—or, further, between humour and philosophy—there is a surprising lack of scholarship dedicated to the mechanisms of the comedic. Perhaps one of the central problems encountered when grappling with the issue of humour is precisely its irrepressibility combined with its uncertain eruptions. Believing that humour posed a dangerous threat to both individual autonomy and rational faculties, Plato denigrated comedy in his *Republic*.<sup>7</sup> A similar logic might well underpin the overwhelming reluctance to take humour seriously as an issue of aesthetic consideration and art-historical research<sup>8</sup>—particularly given the discipline of art history's foundation in the celebration of individual genius, mastery, and connoisseurship. Humour systematically works to undo and take apart each of these dimensions. Topics considered light or ephemeral, playful or derisive, have generally been seen as aesthetically problematic in their *unseriousness* and have therefore been rejected as antithetical to the *object* of art history. Even the né-serious Ernst Gombrich<sup>9</sup> remarked on humour's absence from the intellectual radar of art historians in the 1970s, writing that “we have become intolerably earnest.... The idea of fun is even more unpopular among us than the notion of beauty.”<sup>10</sup> This tendency to avoid meaningful analyses of humour in art occludes the centrality of the comic, not only in the conceptual world, but also in terms of affective and intellectual human experience. Humour provides aesthetics with a complex subjective dimension that offers crucial new insights into the various ways artists have opened up our vision of the world and of our relationships to others. Humour shares with art an unpredictable, irrational, and potentially productive uncontainability.

As early as 1905 Sigmund Freud observed, “Jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life.”<sup>11</sup> I



Figure 1. Urs Fischer; *Noisette*, 2009. Mixed mediums, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich; Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York; and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Installation view: "Urs Fischer: Marguerite de Ponty" (Photo: Benoit Pailley. Courtesy New Museum, New York. Photo copyright Benoit Pailley).

contend that this observation is equally true of contemporary art practice and that the injunction against laughter is repeatedly put to the test by the prevalence of explicitly humorous installations, situations, and affects. Consider the existential disposition of the Swiss artist Urs Fischer, for instance. His *Noisette* (2009; fig.1) consists of a motion-activated Brobdingnagian replica of a human tongue that emerges through a black hole in the wall, taunting the sensibilities of the gallery goer. Does this straightforward gag call for a straight-faced reaction? Isn't it dismissive not to think through analogies being set up between the hole in the wall and the void, or the body of the museum and bodily taste? In the encounter with such a work, is disinterestedness still a valid aesthetic attitude? In the early 1970s the American artist Douglas Huebler dared his daughter to keep a straight face while her siblings made clownish expressions. He photographed her lack of resilience as she inevitably and touchingly failed the test by breaking out into laughter.<sup>12</sup> The photographs documenting this act and a typewritten statement describing the preset conditions of the piece combine to form the work of art. These works by Huebler and Fischer are deceptively simple, nearly banal. Yet they are disruptive. They have the potential to evoke laughter and thought conjoined. Both are preoccupied with a series of tensions, including being easily dismissed versus provoking critical thinking. I believe this is pivotal to the identity of conceptual art. In such works the meaning is open to the viewer's deliberation. The gravity of the situation becomes light, or the levity becomes grave, causing

the destabilization of traditional criteria for aesthetic judgment. Inverse rationale reigns.

The movement of thought and its connection to humour both act upon and are marked by a deadpan economy of means that characterizes much conceptual art from the late 1960s onwards. A shift occurs, by small increments, in terms of expectations. The result is not a knowing humour in the way an inside joke would be. Rather, an unknowing experimental attitude is fostered. This allows us to test the limits of the known and step outside the given strictures in order to gain a fuller picture of both the situation and the joke. In conceptual art a taunting game with and against expressionlessness, reticence, and exposure aims to circumvent the ordinary—often via the ordinary itself. The oscillation between the positions of there being little of interest to look at and yet so much to think about forms one of the central dynamics underpinning the legacy of conceptual art.

In what follows I will chart the rift between humour and its repression, two forces that are intimately related yet inimical, and that are foundational to conceptual art. The extensive use of puns in perception, visual deconstructions, and slapstick seriality makes a strong case for how conceptualism's seemingly dry, rote, or emptied-out formal qualities—which art historian Benjamin Buchloh famously named the "aesthetics of administration"<sup>13</sup>—were in many cases also used for the administration of absurdity. What Mel Bochner called "joke art"<sup>14</sup> and Robert Smithson acknowledged as a "cosmic sense of humor"<sup>15</sup> are intrinsic to the very idea of conceptual art. The artist Mike Kelley succinctly described the significance in conceptual art from the late 1960s onwards of "a poorly printed photograph or diagram, accompanied by a caption:" it typified at once a pathos-inducing parody of "dominant modes of the presentation of 'knowledge'" and a resistance to the rise of psychedelic counter-culture graphics and the fantasies championed as obtainable in commercial advertising.<sup>16</sup> Paying attention to such humour as a form of conceptual critique offers a counter-argument to the understanding of conceptual art as a mode of cerebral transcendence. This approach highlights the enigmatic quality of much conceptual art in order to draw connections between its consistent interest in impossible objects and the ways such objects are antithetical to claims of tacit knowledge or mastery. As such, the reality of human limits is brought tumbling back down to earth in a conceptual pratfall.

An acknowledgement of human and material limits is a significant and yet repressed aspect of the art-historical discourse around conceptual art. Reflecting on the role of humour raises the issue of the physicality of philosophy and the fact that, though laughter might be triggered by the mind, it is nevertheless always physical. Immanuel Kant described the muscular and breath-taking expression of laughter in the body as "die Schwingung der Organen," "the oscillation of the or-

gans.”<sup>17</sup> Anthropologists have observed how true laughter exposes a momentary loss of self-control.<sup>18</sup> Whether humour produces guttural laughter or simply a nod to a clever manoeuvre in rationale, the body is undoubtedly implicated in the life of the mind whenever laughter is concerned. I believe that most conceptual artists of the late 1960s worked in a mode that challenged materialism. At the same time they emphasized the deep interconnection between mind and body, a connection that reinforced the ultimate irrepressibility of materiality itself. This continues to be a legacy of conceptualism in art. Conceptual artists’ acute preoccupation with ideas and concepts sparked an interest in the unruly realities of experience, thereby opening up alternatives to aesthetic hermeticism, and, more generally, exposing humorous paradoxes in the world of things.

Marcel Duchamp’s readymades effectively set the stage for conceptual art by stating that art, in and of itself, was no more natural nor essential than it was rational. In fact Duchamp’s manoeuvres—including his somewhat perplexing renunciation of art in 1923 in favour of dedicating himself full-time to chess—point emphatically to an irrational basis for art. They highlight the way in which the *Idea* could and would override the necessity for an object. This opened up the possibility for conceptual practices and (to echo the opening epigraph) for the *liberation* provided by a humorous sensibility.

Duchamp’s poker-faced readymades may be productively understood as a series of strategic moves, each setting into motion a chain of epistemological checkmates that challenge the hegemony of modernist seriousness and the very possibility of rational knowledge. As the veritable poster boy of conceptual practices—a reality instantiated by his 1923 *Wanted: \$2,000 Reward* (fig. 2)—Duchamp’s prankishness and jokester persona could in effect “Hooke, Lyon and Cinquer” the way that art was thought about. Presenting himself as a suspect in an Old West style wanted poster, Duchamp confronts the viewer with a form parallel to that of the readymade and uses a clichéd figure to reveal how subjective positions can be slippery social constructions. A number of conceptual artists adopted this technique in order to usefully explore the ways in which, to quote Mary Douglas, “a joke is a play upon form that affords an opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity.”<sup>19</sup> Like Duchamp’s *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913–14) that empirically and ironically tests the limits of the metre using three consecutively dropped threads—what Duchamp dubbed “a joke about the metre”<sup>20</sup>—humour reveals the instability of known things and the contingency of measures to account for the world as it is. The form of the joke is simultaneously as nimble and as formulaic as the metre. A work such as David Robbins’s *Self-Parody* (1991; fig. 3), which features rows of publicity portraits of famous comedians such as Jerry Lewis, Lucille Ball, and Groucho Marx, similarly takes up Duchamp’s evocative appro-

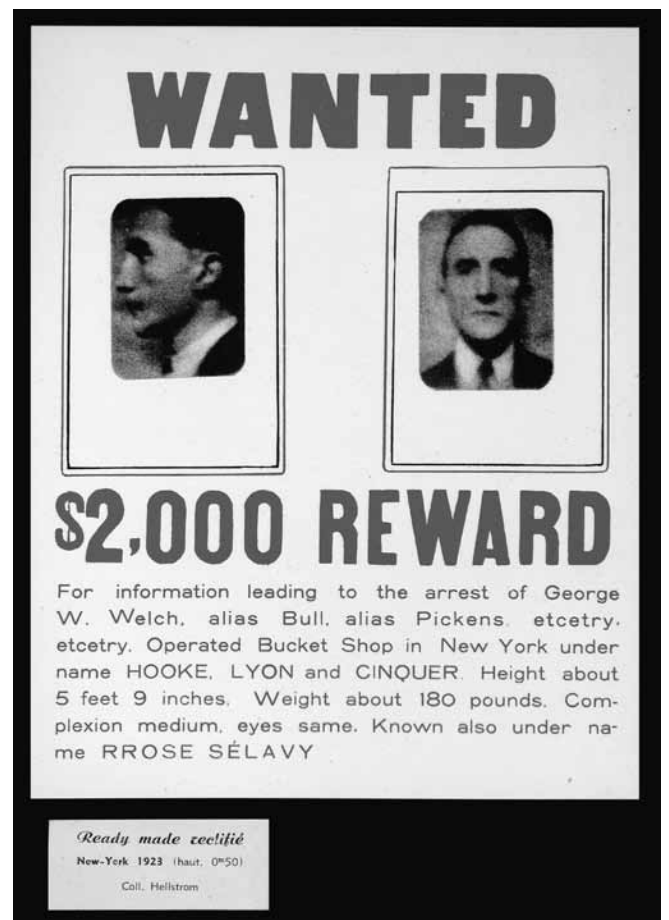


Figure 2. Marcel Duchamp, *Wanted: \$2,000 Reward*, Lithograph, 1961 (replica of 1923 original). Collection of Frances Beatty and Allen Adler (Photo: © 2012 Camerarts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp).

priation of categorical photography. It also plays on the idea of the comic persona as a kind of readymade. By highlighting the equation of gesture with jester postures, Robbins, working in the vein of Duchamp, seeks out the signs of the comic in order to create conceptual art.<sup>21</sup>

My goal here is to investigate and take *seriously* the humour in and of conceptual art in order to formulate a repressed history of conceptual art. This history, like the inevitable return of the repressed, continues to haunt the conceptualist practices that proliferate in contemporary art. Humour is a critical conceptual tool in part because it demands a disarming step away from the ordinary so as to take account of the ordinary in its absurdity, in its strictures, in its illogical suspension of disbelief. Despite the prevalence of humour in early conceptual art—albeit often couched in a deadpan sensibility—conceptualism has



Figure 3. David Robbins, *Self-Parody*, 1991. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Courtesy of the artist (Photo: David Robbins).

been historicized as one of the driest and most serious artistic movements of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

The prevalent turn to photography and language in late 1960s conceptualism coincided with a time of intense social crisis and instability, marked by the Vietnam War, struggles for Civil Rights, the emergence of the Women's movement, and widespread leftist suspicion of all official information. One need only think of Dada hijinks during the First World War to realize the ripe relevance of such disjunctive socio-political moments for humour. The comic highlights gaps in logic that are falsely sutured in order to carry on with everyday existence despite incomprehensible upheaval. Central to my argument is that humour is a means not of escaping reality, but of confronting it and of engaging with the very questions that characterized the advent of conceptual art in the first place. During the shift of the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists as seemingly different as John Baldessari and Joseph Kosuth abandoned traditional painting and sculpture. Photography and the related play with language became their central modes of artistic practice. Rather

than being seen as a new artistic object however, the photograph was largely considered a non-object. It was imagined as a means toward the de-materialization that conceptual art seemed to promise. This is ironic since it was the photograph's peculiar link to so-called objectivity that was a central facet of its non-objectness. It is also strange that many artists, including Baldessari and Kosuth, while disavowing photography as the pivot of their work at this time, were nevertheless bound up in an investigation of the real through photography. This marked a departure from earlier art and instantiated a conceptual mode of practice.

Among the many antinomies that characterize the legacies of conceptual art, one of the most significant yet least explored is the tension between the use of subversive humour and a constrained and analytical approach. Though these are not aesthetically or philosophically exclusive, they have been branded as contradictory. The striking abundance of comedic antics and subversive twists in conceptual art makes the omission of serious discussions of the subject all the more alarming.



Figure 4. Bruce Nauman, *Failing to Levitate in My Studio*, 1966. Courtesy of the artist (Photo: © 2012 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York).

The work of Edward Ruscha, Roman Signer, Bas Jan Ader, and Joseph Beuys, through to that of Andrea Fraser, Martin Kippenberger, Sarah Lucas, Gillian Wearing, David Shrigley, Olaf Westphalen, Sean Landers, and Olaf Breuning, to name a few, could all be usefully examined from this perspective. One might consider, for example, early groundbreaking works such as Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), in which a parodic cooking demonstration becomes remarkably threatening as it exposes both the dark side of domestic life and the black humour of semiotic play.

Bruce Nauman's photograph/performance *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966; fig. 4) puts levity to the test. It suggests the inescapable and fallible human body in its relation to art, as well as the interplay between studio and practice. Like so many conceptual works, the piece functions like a witty remark, both deceptively simple and rewardingly rich. As a *work* of art, it pokes fun at the importance of mental focus in relation to manual labour, and therefore problematizes the very notion of the work of art in the late twentieth century. *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* is a grainy black-and-white image that presents Nauman's attempt to defy gravity through his concentrated effort to hover above his studio floor. We see two overlaid images. In the first, the artist lies rigid, as if horizontally at attention, suspended between two folding metal chairs. The second image shows him after the chair at his feet has been pulled out from under him. His legs are splayed on the scrap-laden floor of his studio, his body limp and slumped to the ground, and his neck in what looks to be a painful collision with the edge of the

opposing seat. Like other process-oriented conceptual works of this period, this image describes its own making, not simply because the title explains the contents but because the object's status as a work of art hinges on the process itself. It literally documents a trial-and-error experiment. The title functions as a punch line that describes simultaneously what is present in the photograph and what will never be. We have a document of the attempt at a transcendent feat as well as its metaphysical and visceral failure. The comic *fallout* of the piece is connected directly to a long lineage of pratfalls. Moreover, the combination of the official delivery of information by the documentary photograph and the absurdity of the information contained produces a deadpan twist. The discontinuous image itself marks the fundamentally disruptive potential of this seemingly naive act. This piece relates to the ideas of the playwright Samuel Beckett, whose own evocation of laughter was often caught up in a loop of tragic paralysis. He insightfully wrote,

To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world.... [It] is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation.<sup>23</sup>

Such an embrace of failure seems to me to be reflective of the powerful role of practice and process in the creative act, which is indeed hard work (not exclusively manual yet always *trying*). Additionally it points to the limits of the/a *work* and of the very meaning of *working*. Though at times it may appear paradoxically straightforward, such conceptual work—because of its experimental framework—functions by means of its openness to foibles and humour, characteristics readily apparent in *Failing to Levitate*.

Akin to a self-deprecating joke (and by a conceptual twist) failure here is also the mark of success. Nauman's *work* can be read as an achievement because the photographic double exposure provides an overlap of Nauman's self—he is repeated twice in a single frame. So while he has failed to levitate, the artist has succeeded in doubling himself in space (another unlikely feat), compressed in a seemingly singular time, through the power of photography. The levitation experiment is also a metaphoric success despite its physical failure, for Nauman has veritably bridged "the abyss between inner, invisible experience and visible appearances"<sup>24</sup> and engaged the symbolic *levity* of the work of art. The futility of the goal of levitation is underscored by the will to capture the impossible—in other words, to embody the predetermined idea. Creative endeavours, from my perspective, share this investment in paying attention to the *gravity* or seriousness of practice with an openness to the *levity* or chance that comes through process. Humour and thought also func-

tion in this manner. So while the artist's concentrated attempt to levitate is hindered by the inescapable effect of gravity on his body, a slapstick turn opens up new possibilities. We are presented not with levitation exactly, but certainly with *levity*: with the humour that comes from an awareness of limits and from the concerted effort to defy them. Moreover, this emblematic conceptual piece brings Aristotle's ruminations on humour and gravity to mind: "Humor is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humor; for a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious, and a jest which will not bear serious examination is false wit."<sup>25</sup> In a broad sense conceptual artists have always been studied and critiqued in terms of the limits of the aesthetic experience communicated in their works. Addressing humour in all its guises as distinctly human and intrinsic to both artistic practice and aesthetic reception is central to the conceptual turn in art.

Duchamp and later conceptual artists altered the very discourse of art with their use of humour as strategy. This, of course, frequently overlaps with laugh lingo in its public reception: certain pieces might be dismissed as one-liners or be appreciated for being witty. There is often the discussion around such works as to whether or not the viewer gets it. The possibility of not getting it is usually followed up by yet another punch-line, namely, "Is this a joke?" A 1917 photograph of Duchamp's studio offers a further framework for what I am getting at, as it were, and another aspect of the fallout with which humour and conceptual art jointly threaten art and art history. Hanging vertically upon a wall is a chessboard, placed here as a physical object for contemplation (not intellectual contest), while on the floor, lies the readymade sculpture *The Trap* (1917). Usefulness and sense are both inverted by the reorientation, or dis-orientation, of these objects. Duchamp created *The Trap* by nailing a coat rack onto his studio floor. The word *trébuchet*, the title Duchamp gave the work, relates to a tactic in chess that incites the opponent to make a move that will lead to a positional disadvantage.<sup>26</sup> The analogy to being tripped by the pawn that is the inverted coat rack is obvious. Duchamp experienced it himself, having waited too long to mount the object to the wall after he brought it home. This example illustrates that humour, like the logic of the readymade, is indeed the routine that jars us out of the routine, trips us up, makes us think of something ordinary in a new and often inverted way. There is, so to speak, a *gravitational force* exerted by Duchamp's legacy. His thematization of the very question of an artist's seriousness as subject matter became the launchpad for innumerable works of art, conceptual and otherwise. Central to my argument is Duchamp's positioning as the perennial banana peel on which conceptual artists repeatedly, comically, and even intentionally, slip.

Debates surrounding Duchamp's slipperiness are prevalent in the historical and theoretical accounts of conceptual art. At this juncture, I would like to unpack in more depth the rivalry

between Joseph Kosuth and John Baldessari. It posits differing understandings of Duchamp's resonance for conceptual art and provides a fruitful means of assessing the "serious unseriousness"<sup>27</sup> of humour in conceptual art. Kosuth mistrusted Baldessari just as much as Plato distrusted humour—and artists in general for that matter. Both Kosuth and Baldessari relied on photography as their central medium, and because they shared a similar use of text, they were often discussed in tandem. Kosuth nevertheless distanced himself from Baldessari, describing the latter's practice as a false imitation of conceptual art, in contrast to the pure conceptualism he believed he was practising. In his renowned text published in 1969 defining the parameters of conceptual art, Kosuth dismissed Baldessari's contribution to conceptualism: "Although the amusing pop paintings of John Baldessari allude to this sort of work by being 'conceptual' cartoons of actual conceptual art, they are not really relevant to this discussion."<sup>28</sup> Kosuth's central put-down is that Baldessari's work is literally and metaphorically a joke. This reading overlooks the significant philosophical implications of fallibility and humour in Baldessari's practice and the potential power of humour for art, especially in terms of conceptual art.

Kosuth's interpretation of Baldessari's recurrent use of both deadpan disinterest and absurdist imaginings<sup>29</sup> as "conceptual cartoons" about conceptual art, as mere derogatory signs that marked nothing more than their lack of seriousness and programmatic analysis,<sup>30</sup> echoes a kind of Greenbergian critique in the vein of "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (1939). Kosuth defensively cordons off "amusing pop" as antithetical to the conceptual purity he describes as his commitment. *EVERYTHING IS PURGED FROM THIS PAINTING BUT ART, NO IDEAS HAVE ENTERED THE WORK*, asserts a text canvas by Baldessari (1967–68). This piece can be read as mocking Kosuth's fear of contamination from what he saw as false conceptualisms. Moreover, from Marie de Brugerolle's perspective, it also humorously reverses Kosuth's declaration that the purest definition of conceptual art is its investigation "into the foundations of the 'art' concept;"<sup>31</sup> in Kosuth's own words: "Being an artist now means to question the nature of art."<sup>32</sup> Kosuth could not appreciate Baldessari's "serious unseriousness," which links Baldessari to the Duchampian tradition of intellectual play. Works by other artists of the 1960s and 1970s echo Baldessari's position of exaggerated withdrawal. Rather than putting everything out there, they ostensibly remove the expected supports and allow the ground to give way. Levity occurs at the ends of gravity. Robert Morris's 1963 *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal*, a typed and notarized statement renouncing the aesthetic quality of an earlier work, is one example. Another would be N.E. Thing Co.'s mass-produced *ART* buttons, *ART* serving as an acronym for Aesthetically Rejected Things. These mocking disavowals of art's preciousness play on the artist's prerogative to

judge and on the pleasure principle. Each of these characteristics, the movement away from uniqueness and towards the ordinary, as well as the reconsideration of the significance of artistic declarations, unpins the logic of the readymade and its aesthetics of indifference. These works also demonstrate a connection to Henri Bergson's ideas regarding the dependence of laughter mechanisms on disinterested withdrawal, or what he terms a "momentary anesthesia of the heart."<sup>33</sup> Bergson ties this cardiac arrest to a withdrawal of feeling. Welchman has considered Baldessari's work in a similar light, as a kind of suspension of ordinary human functions, when he refers to the artist's "interruption of code-based practices, so that their structures and actions become over-literal and, by implication, exaggerated, off-beat, and funny."<sup>34</sup> This metaphor of the heart skipping a beat summarizes the way humour reveals its contempt for business as usual and poses in its stead the conceptual ground upon which to understand the mechanisms that organize life. Refusals such as those of Baldessari, Morris, and N.E. Thing Co. subtly reinforce, while simultaneously mocking, the idea or concept as foundational to the art itself by virtue of drawing attention to its vitality.

In *One and Three Chairs* (1965) Joseph Kosuth breaks down his own understanding of Duchamp's readymades by describing a tripartite set of relations, including the object, the linguistic sign, and the photographic reproduction. He would later refer to this act in "Art after Philosophy" (1969) to claim that "a work of art is a kind of *proposition* presented within the context of art as a comment on art."<sup>35</sup> As Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloch have argued in *Art since 1900*, Kosuth drew on "linguistic models, the laws of mathematics, and the principles of logical positivism"<sup>36</sup> to define his project, which he described as an "inquiry into the foundations of the concept 'art,' as it has come to mean."<sup>37</sup> Arguably, the tragic flaw in Kosuth's schema is its denial of the world outside of art. His adherence to hermeticism is precisely the kind of exaggerated suspension of reality that had led Duchamp to question the conception of art in the first place. By contrast, to return to the example of Nauman whose chair falls right out from under him, the gravitational force of reality is inescapable and the human thud on the floor, the endless mortal fall, sets the conceptual process in motion.

Nauman (and other artists such as Morris and N.E. Thing Co.) evoked the models upon which Kosuth so dogmatically relied in order to point out their flaws by means both humorous and sardonic. This schematic opposition has come to define in part the historicization of conceptual art. While the criteria named by Kosuth were valid for the artist's "own investigations, such a rigorously analytical approach was hardly applicable to many of the other practices emerging at the time,"<sup>38</sup> and it certainly did not constitute a definitive definition of conceptual

art. Kosuth's hermeticism is his Achilles's heel. Baldessari opposed Kosuth's interpretation of Duchamp as doctrine. Instead, he retained from Duchamp "his subversive legacies and applied them to the false orthodoxies with which Conceptualism was about to install itself as the new authoritative movement."<sup>39</sup> Baldessari's famous collaborative piece *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971) is an ironically self-fulfilling prophecy in this regard. It displays an arduous irreverence for authority and leaves one with a conceptual counter-pedagogy that strategically pushes hermetic theories of modernism to the point of absurdity through an exercise that exposes the limits of autonomy in any art practice. Against tautology we have openness. In the midst of repetitive sameness we have difference. Contradiction underpins Baldessari's oeuvre. Although he has repeatedly explained in interviews "that his address to humor is neither voluntaristic nor intentional,"<sup>40</sup> one could say that rather than purposeful comedy, Baldessari engages (much like Duchamp) in the openness of purposeless play, which lends itself to serious humour. Much of Baldessari's practice pivots on this resistance to the very idea that art can be learned by adherence to pre-established rules and programmes. As such, his humour is often directed at subverting the logic of pre-set artistic paradigms.

It is no accident that the themes of boredom and reticence are visible throughout conceptual art practices from the late 1960s to the present, as are exaggerations of explicit exposure. This mode of presentation and of subject matter is at once misleading and precise. Consider Baldessari's series *Cigar Smoke to Match Clouds That Are Different (By Sight-Side View)* (1971–72), in which the artist blows his cigar smoke onto a small mirror. Uneventful photographs of the act document the rote yet playful performance of smoke hanging in the air. Perhaps this piece may be regarded as emblematic of Baldessari's self-identification as a jokester, and as yet another game that works against its own self-evidence. We are literally shown smoke and mirrors and yet, seemingly, there is nothing much to look at. The posture brings to mind another nominal play on words. The nineteenth-century Parisian argot *fumiste* signified someone who was a joker. As Janet Whitmore explains, a *fumiste* was known for "blow[ing] smoke in the form of humor and innuendo, so that straightforward political or social critique would be obfuscated."<sup>41</sup> The oblique slant of humour associated with being a *fumiste* suited the gestures of many conceptual artists.<sup>42</sup>

Baldessari's series of photo-based projects from the early 1970s onwards emphasized the importance of pointing for his practice. By linking *pointing* explicitly to the act of *choosing*, Baldessari seemed to enact Duchamp's famous credo that "to make is to choose and always to choose."<sup>43</sup> Using nominalism—in other words, the game of the name—*Choosing (A Game for Two Players)* began. The series itself focused on the act of choosing and its connection to random impulses, and thus





Figure 5. Erwin Wurm, *Inspection*, 2002, from *Instructions on how to be politically incorrect* series. Courtesy: Gallery Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris (F), Salzburg (A) (Photo: © Eric Wurm/SODRAC (2012)).

evidenced an openness to determined indeterminacy. For example, one version of *Choosing (A Game for Two Players): Green Beans* (1971) consists of nine colour photographs arranged in three horizontal rows of three.<sup>44</sup> As an utter counterpoint to something like Edward Weston's beautiful photographs of individual vegetables, each blasé photograph by Baldessari documents three plain green beans. In a sense, this too is a statement of aesthetic withdrawal. While pushing up against the aesthetics of indifference, it points to the ways absurdity may lurk in the banal.

Baldessari's *Aligning: Balls* (1972) also begins with a set of instructions, directing yet another seemingly aimless activity. A red ball is thrown into the air and photographed in various scenes, on various streets, in front of various buildings or telephone poles, falling from an anonymous expanse of sky. In each snapshot the resolution of the image varies, as does the location

of the ball, which appears as a kind of symbolic allusion to a disembodied, floating clown nose. Overall the images appear excessively amateurish and haphazard—one might even say meaningless. Always off-centre, the ball floats further up or down the frame, more or less laterally. The completed project consists of forty-one resultant photographs arranged on the wall, but not in traditional alignment. Instead of using the typical top or bottom edges of the photographs' frames to dictate the level at which they should be exhibited, the floating ball flying through space was used as the "notational device"<sup>45</sup> by which to hang the photographs. The ball in each photograph is aligned to create its own order, generated by its fall. This becomes the most random and the most consistent aspect of these photographs. To add to this confusion, as Baldessari describes it, "each shot [can be read] alternately [as] a photograph of a ball or a photograph of a location or scene."<sup>46</sup> For Baldessari, art evidently draws from

the often humorous balancing act between order and disorder, derived in part from what Charles Desmarais has called “the nonsense our world sometimes disguises as order.”<sup>47</sup>

This exposure of the blatant capriciousness of rules functions as a critique of modernist orthodoxy. Baldessari’s examination of “photography’s cultural triumph as a kind of substitute reality”<sup>48</sup> exposes ideals such as originality and preciousness as contrivances. As the viewer attempts to fill in the blanks, or in this case connect the dots, the desire for narrative literacy often threatens to override reality itself. Ultimately, Baldessari employs the photograph as a prosaic yet multi-dimensional material; it is at once his object and his subject. Indulging it its anonymity and in its surfeit of detail, he repeatedly manifests his interest in its vulnerability and in its link to truth claims. Baldessari’s skeptical use of the photograph, like Duchamp’s many games with meaning, performs a wisecracking critique of art while taking seriously the importance of provoking doubt and debate regarding any claim to the truth, be it in images or in positivist thought. Kosuth, on the other hand, while claiming in “Art after Philosophy” to displace the formalism of Greenberg and Michael Fried, ends up actually “updat[ing] modernism’s project of self-reflexiveness.”<sup>49</sup> Works by Kosuth and Baldessari can indeed be considered ostensibly boring. Yet after reflecting upon Baldessari’s “serious unseriousness,” Kosuth’s banality also seems absurd. In this way, humour accessed through a form of serio-comic play helps to preserve and sustain a fundamentally ambivalent and critical subjectivity.

Connected to this recurrent rejection of hermetic and finite rules in conceptual art practice, comedy itself is not the acceptance of our human limitations, weaknesses, and imperfections, nor is it even a reconciliation of the absence of transcendence. Consider instead how most comedies set up a configuration in which one or several characters depart from the balanced rationality of their surroundings. Something *exceeds* ordinary expectations.<sup>50</sup> Tom Friedman’s 1996 *Untitled* is a more contemporary example of the legacy of comedic conceptualism. It shows “a comically oversized man-shaped hole in a landscape as if someone had fallen from the sky.”<sup>51</sup> As a wry “spoof on the heroics of land art,” the photographic documentation of this “classic animated cartoon moment”<sup>52</sup> at once defies gravity (read as seriousness in art) and succumbs to gravity in creating a monumental gravesite. Brought into perspective through larger-than-life lenses, such comic antics provide conceptual disorientation. Even after falling the subject somehow keeps coming back for more. The artist Peter Land, for instance, seems to never cease plummeting. In his video *Pink Space* (1995) he is dressed as an entertainer, in a bowtie and blue lamé jacket. With a drink in hand he approaches a stool in the centre of the spotlight stage. Repeatedly, he attempts to take a seat but falls to the ground.



Figure 6. Erwin Wurm, *Looking for a bomb 3*, 2003, from *Instructions on how to be politically incorrect* series. Courtesy: Gallery Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris (F), Salzburg (A) (Photo: © Eric Wurm/SODRAC (2012)).

Land’s 1998 *Staircase* follows the same principle of repetition. Such Sisyphean falls recur throughout late twentieth-century art, transforming the faithful leap of modernism into the post-modern pratfall. Yves Klein’s famed suspension of disbelief in *Leap into the Void* (1960) is revisited and reinvented by Joe Sola who, in his *Studio Visit* series of 2005, terrified and exhilarated unsuspecting curators, collectors, and critics by violently throwing himself through the paned glass window of his studio. Transcendence is no longer the aim of the game, but rather the target at which to aim one’s practice.

Challenging expectations with absurdity is one of the central means by which humour “offers a short circuit that exposes our [perpetual] discomfort” with instability.<sup>53</sup> This short circuit is directly linked to what I understand to be the critical function of art, or what Simon Critchley has called art’s ability to provide an “oblique phenomenology of ordinary life.”<sup>54</sup> Conceptual art has always been preoccupied with such a phenomenology. By invoking this idea, I am thinking of the ways that humour as critique interrupts and challenges the façade of self-sufficiency in art, or even of business as usual in the world. Looking for historical precedents, humour provokes a thinking-through of the emergence of *levity* as a social construct. The very concept of levitation appears to have been coined as the opposite of gravitation during the early seventeenth century, the precise time when humanity’s conception of the cosmos was being revolutionized by Nicolaus Copernicus and Johannes Kepler.<sup>55</sup> This was accompanied by an overwhelming loss of certainty and of the human subject’s perception as self-sufficient master of the universe. Constructs of security of all sorts are repeatedly challenged by levity and conceptual art conjoined.

Erwin Wurm's series *How to be Politically Incorrect* (2002–03) is a productive example of the use of physical humour to lampoon codes of social behavior. Two images from that series, *Inspection* and *Looking for a Bomb* (figs. 5 and 6), are blatantly suggestive of the paranoia of contemporary life and of the ways in which the invasion of individual privacy has become ordinary in the service of security. These images are presented with the plain-faced delivery seen in most conceptual art. Visually, they seem understated. The sparseness of the articulation is crucial to their levity: humorous uses of language often appear as ordinary assertions, harmless advice, or straightforward statements.<sup>56</sup> The disjunction between this appearance and the absurdity of the information contained is precisely the release switch of laughter.

Humour exposes an insecurity that is ultimately irrepressible. Humour and photography share the short-circuiting mechanism that exposes this insecurity. Such connections may account in part for the centrality of photography as a conceptual medium. On the one hand photography, like humour, allows human vision to access phenomena that would otherwise be invisible to the naked eye. On the other, it withholds the possibility of ever truly mastering the subject. One need only think of the many writers who have ostensibly *developed* the field of photo theory. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), for example, Roland Barthes laments his sense of becoming a kind of perpetually unknowable Other when he is photographed. In the exact instance of being photographed, he becomes a stranger even to himself. Robert Smithson reflects on the power of the camera eye to be everywhere, even while, like an iceberg, most of its aspects remain submerged.<sup>57</sup> Photography, like humour, exceeds ordinary expectations of both comprehension and tangibility, so that even when you have them suspended before you, levity and gravity are in contention, and you still might not entirely *get it*. Humour and photography are connected in another way: they are both fundamentally *conceptual* results of the drives of *illogical* human desire, the very desire that so often trips up our conceptual understanding of them.

Beyond the medium of photography, there is nevertheless a recurrent and productive incongruence to the realities of desire and the negotiations between drives that determines our supposedly realistic reality. As Alenka Zupančič reminds us, “the realism of comedy is the realism of this incongruence.”<sup>58</sup> This strangeness has been given the droll and resonant title of the “unheimlich” manoeuvre.<sup>59</sup> The humorous twist of conceptual art resides in this incommensurability. It is a manifestation of the utterly unreasonable insistence that is constitutive of being human. It also accounts in part for the persistent appearance of humour in contemporary art. Moreover the gravitational attraction to tragicomic acts of levity through stumbling suggests, as Aaron Schuster has said, that if “the classical ideal of art is

a kind of elevation, lifting up or spiritualization, one way of characterizing contemporary art is as an ‘art of the fall.’”<sup>60</sup> Following in the footsteps of Duchamp, numerous works of art present themselves and conceal themselves simultaneously.<sup>61</sup> A proliferation of practices competes for the space of horizontal realities as opposed to vertical feats. These range from Bas Jan Ader's *Fall* films to Rodney Graham's looped coconut knock-outs in *Vexation Island* (1997), to Francis Alys's failing flâneurs in films such as *The Last Clown* (1999–2000) and *Choques* (2005), or the creation of impossible objects and stumbling blocks such as Peter Fischli and David Weiss's experiments in the physics of propulsion in *Der Lauf der Dinge/The Way Things Go* (1987), Ceal Floyer's *Ladder* (2010) without rungs, or Richard Wentworth's sculptures as situations of suspense, for instance the library that composes his *False Ceiling* (1995).

The very appearance of banality in conceptual art needs to be reconsidered, and laughter needs to be thought through in relation to the paradoxes of the real, in a manner that considers the performance of epistemological checkmates and the ongoing game of conceptualism in contemporary art. In the end, it seems Kosuth was right to fret over purity; as it turns out, comedic conceptualism was certainly contagious. We can account for this in part by the allegiance between laughter and thought discussed at the outset of this article. Humour and aesthetic experience certainly share an emphasis on imagination and surprise. However, humour actually adds to aesthetic experience by providing a means of conceptualizing the limit of human mastery and the edge of what can be articulated. By taking seriously the role of humour in aesthetic experience, we challenge the Kantian notion that aesthetic experience is necessarily contrasted with practical or cognitive interest. Humour does more than incite interestedness. It always implies multiple subjectivities, thereby setting in motion the grave levitational act of conceptual critique.

## Notes

- 1 Interview with Marcel Duchamp on CBC, 17 July 1960 (translated by Sarah Skinner Kilborne). Marcel Duchamp observed in this interview that humour is a great power...a sort of savior so to speak because, before, art was such a serious thing, so pontifical that I was very happy when I discovered that I could introduce humor into it. The discovery of humor was a liberation... Humor is something...profound and serious and...difficult to define. It's not only about laughing. There's a humor that is black which doesn't inspire laughter and doesn't please at all. It is a thing in itself, a new feeling so to speak,

which follows from all sorts of things that we can't analyze with words.

See [http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue\\_4/interviews/md\\_guy/md\\_guy.html](http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/interviews/md_guy/md_guy.html)

- 2 John Baldessari in Jeanne Siegel, ed., "John Baldessari: Recalling Ideas," *Artwords 2: Discourse on the early 80s* (Ann Arbor, 1988), 45.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *Understanding Brecht* [ca. 1939], trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York, 1998), 101. Benjamin writes, "Let me remark, by the way, that there is no better starting point for thought than laughter; speaking more precisely, spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul."
- 4 The philosopher Simon Critchley gives an influential account of this argument in his incisive book *On Humour*. I will draw connections to his work throughout my own argument here. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (New York, 2002).
- 5 Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* [1958] (New York, 1984), 27–28.
- 6 Critchley, *On Humour*, 18.
- 7 For a discussion of Plato and Aristotle on comedy see Andrew Stott, "Comedy in the Academy," in Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York and London, 2005), 17–38.
- 8 See Jennifer Higgin's edited volume *The Artist's Joke* (London, UK, and Cambridge, MA, 2007) for an attempt to remedy this lack of scholarly attention to humour in art. Despite humour's central role in the cultural politics of movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus, Performance, and Feminism, somehow art history manages too frequently to reify the vitality of laughter out of works that would be most apparently humorous to nearly anyone on the other side of the disciplinary fence. A key counterpoint would be the prevalence of women artists working with humour as a means of challenging male power structures. Curator Jo Anna Isaak's important group show titled "The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter" (1982), featuring artists such as the Guerrilla Girls, Carolee Schneemann, Kiki Smith, and Lorna Simpson, is unique in this regard.
- 9 I thank Louis Kaplan for pointing out the built-in word play in Gombrich's name and the irony that it would be *Ernst* who alluded to the general lack of openness towards subjects in art that fell short in terms of their seriousness.
- 10 E.H. Gombrich, "Huizinga and 'Homo Ludens,'" review of *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* by Johan Huizinga, *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 October 1974.
- 11 Sigmund Freud, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" [1905], published in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, VIII (London, 1960), 9.
- 12 In his essay on Douglas Huebler, Mike Kelley writes,
 

I have an unconscious physical response—I laugh. I am confused, and this is a surprise in that, on the surface, his

work often looks so dumbly straightforward. There is an image, typically a quite mundane and recognizable one, accompanied by text which one would expect would elaborate on, or explain, the image.... You are only left with yourself, and the nervous laughter of doubt.

- Mike Kelley, "Shall We Kill Daddy? [on Douglas Huebler]," (1997), published in *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 178–93.
- 13 Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990), 105–43.
  - 14 "In Conversation: John Baldessari & Jeremy Blake," *Artforum* 42, 7 (March 2004), 160.
  - 15 Smithson quoted in "Robert Smithson: June 20, 1969," in Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegel, Smithson, and Weiner* (Berkeley, 2001), 134.
  - 16 Kelley, "Shall We Kill Daddy?," 184.
  - 17 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. John H. Bernard [c. 1914] (New York, 2007), 133. See also Critchley, *On Humour*, 9.
  - 18 See Helmuth Plessner for a discussion of the break between a person and their body during laughter. Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior* [1957], trans. J.S. Churchill and Marjorie Grene (Evanston, 1970).
  - 19 Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings. Essays in Anthropology* (London, 1975), 96.
  - 20 Quoted in the Museum of Modern Art's label text for *3 Standard Stoppages* (New York, 2006).
  - 21 Dominic Molon and Michael Rooks suggest that the title *Self-Parody* not only alludes to self-deprecation but also to an earlier work by Robbins: in *Talent* (1986) nineteen artist friends (including Jeff Koons, Ashley Bickerton, and Cindy Sherman) pose for the kind of "head shots" used by actors and actresses, thereby parodying the production of an artist's status as celebrity and/or entertainer. See Dominic Molon and Michael Rooks, "Comedy Is Not Pretty," in *Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art* (New York, 2005), 43.
  - 22 John C. Welchman discusses this aspect in both his introduction to the volume *Black Sphinx*, 19, and in his essay "'Don't Play It for Laughs': John Baldessari and Conceptual Comedy," in John C. Welchman, ed., *Black Sphinx; On the Comedic in Modern Art*, SoCCAS Symposium, IV (New York, 2010), 245–68.
  - 23 Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (New York, 1983), 7.
  - 24 Christine Hoffman, "Think-Thank," in Susan Cross and Bruce Nauman, eds., *Theaters of Experience* (New York, 1993), 57.
  - 25 Aristotle mentions Gorgias Leontini as he explains this element of humour in the *Rhetoric*, Book 3, Chapter 18. See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, ed. Jenny Bak (Mineola, NY, 2004), 157.
  - 26 For a perceptive and poignant discussion of Duchamp's view of chess in terms of reevaluating the intersection of art and the every-

- day, see David Joselit, "The Self Readymade," in *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910–1941* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 157–93.
- 27 John Baldessari in an interview with Moira Roth, 6 January 1973, cited in Robert L. Pincus, "Quality Material: Duchamp Disseminated in the Sixties and Seventies," in Bonnie Clearwater, ed., *West Coast Duchamp* (Miami Beach, 1991), 88.
- 28 Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," reprinted in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 175. Kosuth's "Art after Philosophy" was first published in three parts in *Studio International* 178, 915–917 (October, November, December 1969), 134–37, 160–61, 212–13. This quote appears in part II.
- 29 Welchman refers to this mélange of comic strategies as "a signature conjunction of deadpan withdrawal and situational absurdity," in "Don't Play It for Laughs," 247.
- 30 Rainer Fuchs, "Written Paintings and Photographed Colors," in Rainer Fuchs and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, eds., *John Baldessari: A Different Kind of Order (Arbeiten 1962–1984)* (Cologne, 2005), 15.
- 31 Marie de Brugerolle, "John Baldessari: A Twist in Reality," in Fuchs et al., eds., *John Baldessari*, 109.
- 32 Joseph Kosuth in Arthur R. Rose, "Four Interviews," *Arts Magazine* 43, 4 (February 1969), 23. Kosuth cites himself in Part I of "Art after Philosophy," reprinted in *Conceptual Art*, 163.
- 33 Henri Bergson, "The Comic in General," in *Laughter: The Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York, 1914), 5.
- 34 Welchman, "Don't Play It for Laughs," 261.
- 35 Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," Part I, reprinted in *Conceptual Art*, 165.
- 36 Hal Foster et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism, 1945 to the Present* (London, 2005), 533.
- 37 Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," Part I, reprinted in *Conceptual Art*, 171.
- 38 Foster et al., *Art since 1900*, 533.
- 39 Foster et al., *Art since 1900*, 533.
- 40 Baldessari paraphrased by Welchman in "Don't Play It for Laughs," 253.
- 41 Janet Whitmore, "Irreverent, Illicit, Incoherent: Belle Epoque Comedy," in Welchman, ed., *Black Sphinx*, 63.
- 42 For further discussion of the *fumiste* phenomenon please also see Janet Whitmore, "Absurdist Humor in Bohemia," in Gabriel P. Weisberg, ed., *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2001), 205–22.
- 43 Duchamp quoted in Thierry de Duve and Rosalind Krauss, "Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism," *October* 70 (Fall 1994), 72.
- 44 Other versions included rhubarb rather than green beans, for example. The seeming randomness of these objects/things furthers the sense of the arbitrary and even the silly in these works.
- 45 Fuchs et al., eds., *John Baldessari*, 178.
- 46 Fuchs et al., eds., *John Baldessari*, 178.
- 47 Charles Desmarais, *Proof: Los Angeles Art and the Photograph, 1960–1980* (Laguna Beach, CA, 1992), 30.
- 48 Desmarais, *Proof*, 18.
- 49 Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969," 124.
- 50 Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 49.
- 51 Molon and Rooks, "Comedy Is Not Pretty," 31.
- 52 Molon and Rooks, "Comedy Is Not Pretty," 31.
- 53 Welchman, "Introduction," *Black Sphinx*, 17.
- 54 Critchley, *On Humour*, 20.
- 55 For an in-depth discussion of the cultural associations and historical resonances of levitation, see Aaron Schuster, "The Cosmonaut of the Erotic Future," *Cabinet* 32 (Winter 2008/2009), <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/32/schuster.php> (accessed 15 August 2011).
- 56 John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, MA, 2009), 36.
- 57 Robert Smithson, "Art through the Camera's Eye," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York, 1979).
- 58 Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 218.
- 59 See Simon Critchley, "Laughing at Foreigners: A Peculiar Defense of Ethnic Humor," in Welchman, ed., *Black Sphinx*, 151.
- 60 Schuster, "The Cosmonaut of the Erotic Future." Schuster refers to Gérard Wajzman, "Desublimation: An Art of What Falls," *Lacanian Ink*, 29 (Spring 2007).
- 61 Helen Molesworth discusses this aspect of Duchamp's readymades and the relation between useful objects and uselessness at length in her "Work Avoidance: The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp's Readymades," *Art Journal* 57, 4 (Winter 1998), 50–61.