Noological Mudslides
Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy interviews Michael Portnoy

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Let's start with the basics, Michael. I don't consider myself to have a sense of humor, and it perplexes me—and pleases me—when I encounter people who do. You seem to have one—a strong sense of humor, in fact—and, moreover, an ability to incorporate it into your work. How did you become interested in this "sensibility," especially at a time when so-called critical art, which tends to be dead serious, has become the norm?

Well, humor and humor theory are longtime interests of mine. My sensibility is largely comedic. More generally, I'd say I've always been searching for ways to undo the world.

So rather than picturing or imagining a world, or even fixing it, you undo it. That's a hard task. Do you feel that is the work of the artist, of the artwork, or of the public who experiences art?

I'm not one to talk about the work of the artist, since I think there are so many different agendas. But for me, the process of undoing is a recombinatory act as well. The mental process involved in making a joke is very similar to that of invention. This undoing is also an activation of potentials, of possible worlds.

Much of your work has staged the act of joking, as seen in your exhibition at Objectif, Script Opposition in Late-Model Carrot Jokes (2011). *In that project you focused on a particular genre of joke—jokes that seem highly theoretical in their structure, and poetic in their language, to say the least. Can you tell me how you arrived at the idea for this project?*

I've been researching humor theory for some time, in the fields of psychology, philosophy, folkloric studies, and, most recently, cognitive linguistics. Carrot jokes are a genre of jokes invented in 1981 by two cognitive linguists to essentially make fun of computational models of humor analysis that were being developed at the time. These jokes were basically meant to bust the system.

Computational models for humor analysis? That sounds fishy … invented. Maybe even an a priori joke to the project?

Much of the language of humor analysis is completely preposterous! For example: script-switch triggers, jab lines, background incongruity, etc. Computational models of humor analysis are basically computer programs that were built to understand jokes—to assess whether they are funny or not, or to break the jokes into their parts, or even to write jokes.

I need one of those programs as an app for my phone!

The use of ambiguity in carrot jokes is very similar to that in poetry. Also, carrot jokes have a much higher degree of ambiguity than typical jokes and blunt omissions of information and all sorts of logical faults and inconsistencies. Incongruities are rarely resolved and just pile on top of each other, in the same way that characters in carrot jokes often get crowded into the situation and nothing ever becomes of them. Since the ground or "script" is always shifting, the listener keeps trying to determine whether there is an overall story that could explain what the hell is going on.

The term "carrot joke" arose since one of the features of a carrot joke is to dangle in the foreground the promise of resolution, or, more generally, the promise that any of the basic features of typical jokes (nonambiguous characters, a nonambiguous environment, an understandable plot, a focal incongruity, etc.) might be presented. This promise that a joke will occur is only partially fulfilled—or, at least, it only partially happens in the way that you expect it. The incongruities happen throughout the joke, rather than just at the punch line.

Carrot jokes tend to be quite long, but here's one of the shorter ones from the book I wrote for the exhibition:

> This is an enlarged cross-section of a looping carrot joke with six plot peaks. Like many carrot jokes, it starts with a faux-egalitarian man-man construct to empty the registers. These are men, yes, but what made them so?
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> Plot peak 1: Two men are blowing on a stick of mud.
>
> Plot peak 2: The man with the undefined anomaly in curvature and several morphological derivatives from same (MAN 605E79ST) removes the air from the other man (MAN 605W79ST).
>
> Plot peak 3: MAN 605W79ST focuses intensely on the assumed, potential, or theoretical benefit of a particular pendency to the entity having that pendency, while fainting into a punnet of drupes.
>
> Plot peak 4: MAN 605E79ST, holding the stick of mud behind his back, embraces MAN 605W79ST scapularly, as MAN 605W79ST amends a few mental doodles of the mud stick with a mixture of ferociousness, para-ferociousness, and para-volitional ferromagnetism.
>
> Plot peak 5: MAN 605W79ST (the man abaft, aboard, or above all manner of noological foxholes) readies the unblushing bubkes for his bubke cannon and fires a bale into the sweet spot of the mud stick's auratic pulsar, rousing a spate of mudslides agin the shins of MAN 605E79ST.

> Plot peak 6: MAN 605E79ST and MAN 605W79ST fix their cravats and check into a narratological halfway house near Belogorsk to begin the counteraction.

To step back from this for a second, I've been calling the kind of humor I'm after "experimental comedy," which is the injection of the sublime, the poetic, the abstract, the primal, the "operatic," the theoretical, etc. into the frame of stand-up.

This now makes me think that we can think of jokes in different ways, from social realist to abstract and conceptual to narrative-based and so on, much like we categorize and speak about art.

Yes, just as art can be anything that is framed as art, so can experimental comedy be anything that's framed as such. Both art and comedy are supposed to be enlightening, temporarily bewildering, critical, potential agents of revolution, revealing of parts of the human experience that are hidden or off-limits. The only difference is that comedy is supposed to make us laugh, while art is supposed to make us think. Experimental comedy is often unfunny, but the promise of it being funny binds us to it more than the promise of making us think, which, of course, it also does.

Interesting. The way you describe carrot jokes also makes me think about absurdity: stepping out of the productive path toward making sense.

There are some important distinctions between carrot jokes and absurd humor, which were expressed quite well by the humor theorists I invited to participate in a discussion as part of the project at Objectif. For that exhibition, in addition to the book of carrot jokes, there were five wall pieces featuring images of carrot jokes (i.e., carrots), each with a button-activated recording of me telling or discussing the joke.

Was there a performance accompanying the exhibition, as there is usually when you present your work?

There was a discussion on carrot jokes between myself and two Flemish humor theorists: Olivier Brems, whose main focus of study is the use of humor in philosophy, and Tim De Mey, who studies the mechanisms of imagination and creativity. I also presented the beginnings of some carrot jokes that were produced by some of my students.

You mentioned stand-up comedy earlier, and it reminded me of your recent project Taipei Women's Experimental Comedy Club for the Taipei Biennial in 2010. Just as you drew on an obscure history of resistance to create Script Opposition in Late-Model Carrot Jokes, in the Taipei project you also tapped the past, in that case a history of female comedians in the 1970s.

Yes, in Taipei we looked at a circle of Bolivian female comedians from the '70s; they were our direct inspiration.

Bolivian female comedians? Another joke?

Actually, no. Once you start talking about jokes, everything seems like a joke. But no, it was an informal collective called Las Rodillas. In Taipei, I gathered a group of about twenty women from diverse backgrounds, and we developed acts based on their experiences or talents: everything from a government tax official telling us exactly what she did at work, minute by minute, to one of Taiwan's leading film actresses performing a heart-wrenching, teary monologue about an umbrella that just dumped her. All of these acts were presented as stand-up.

With the projects at Objectif and the Taipei Biennial, and now that I think about it, also your project on "obdurance art"—The Complete History of Obdurance Art, from 1860 until the Present (2010), which you presented in the group exhibition Repetition Island at Centre Pompidou, Paris—you bring to the fore certain histories. What is it about history or the use of historical references that you find appealing for framing your projects?

I'm not particularly interested in history or reference per se, but rather the forms of world-making that some of these movements engaged in. I'm much more a futurologist than an archaeologist.

That's a nice way to describe a point of view. Is this activity of "world-making" the reason why you incorporate workshops into your projects?

Well, one shared preoccupation of these projects you've mentioned is a kind of conceptual horticulture, or the breeding of new genres of practice or activity.

This brings to mind Human Intwist Group (2009), presented by Kunstverein in Amsterdam. If I remember correctly, you performed the role of a producer-cum-pimp as MC, who organized us, your participatory audience, into groups in order to workshop treatments for a porn film. The participation involved feeling fun and shame all at once. When I think about humor, the conflation of those two feelings is always present, creating both personal discomfort and social awareness. It seems to me that this project—which combines performance, humor, and the model of the workshop—also crystallizes your idea of conceptual horticulture.

Yes, in Human Intwist Group, the project was to take a stale genre like porn and invent new ridiculous subgenres such as "fog porn" and "dry porn." Then there was the further constraint that all the film treatments must be for films that take place inside an airplane. Imagine if Hollywood could only make airplane films for an entire year—the genre of airplane films would diversify exponentially.

The idea is to take the seeds of stale areas of activity and, by pruning and grafting, create awkward, destabilizing chimera. I think this happens even more directly with the Improvement League, a second project that I created for the Taipei Biennial.

What was that project?

This was a think tank that I assembled for the biennial with ends to "improve" artworks in the biennial. It functioned like a roast-meets-futurological congress-meets Edward Scissorhands. The think-tank group included myself, Sina Najafi, Raimundas Malašauskas, Steven M. Johnson, Gro Sarauw, and Adriana Lara.

Can an artwork really be improved by others?

Improvement, in the way I see it—tongue deeply in cheek, of course—is not meant to be a critique but rather an inventional strategy, a combinatorial fantasia, a way to accelerate the natural process of evolution in art making.

But is any suggestion for betterment in art condemned to be an intervention rather than invention?

I'm not interested in improving an artwork on its own terms but in performing operations or heuristics upon their seeds, their variables, as a generative process. Similar to what engineers do. Although I'm not trying to "fix" something really, but to see what other types of problems are possible.

So what ultimately ensued, if anything, from the think-tank discussions of the Improvement League?

First, the curators of the Taipei Biennial, Tirdad Zolghadr, and Hongjohn Lin, gave us all the artists' proposals four months or so before the opening of the exhibition. We went through them all, and chose one artwork to improve: an installation by Olivia Plender. We dissected the forms and ideas of the work (and more generally, of the breed of practice that it represented), and then followed some of its potentialities. We took its genetic material at an early stage of development and infused it with our own, and my own, and then grew it like an errant twin, producing an installation that was exhibited alongside Olivia's artwork.

It's interesting that you chose a work by Olivia Plender, an artist who has used games as part of her practice. In a very different way, you also use games—you invent them, sculpt them, and play them in your work. I am thinking here of projects such as Fran Spafa Feda (2010), Casino Ilinx (2008), and FILZZUNGEUNGEWISS (2008). Are games, like workshops, a way to create, as you say, "new genres of practice or activity"? Or what is it that draws you to creating and using games in your work?

Often the games I create are inventional aids, world-making tools, improbability machines. They provide constraints on players, which shape their behavior and language. And fantasies. Even if these constraints are often inscrutable.

Fran Spafa Feda was an ontological game in that it dealt with the bones of knowledge, what were called the "radicals" of language in the eighteenth

century, the most irreducible concepts, and formed them into proposals, which were developed by pairs of conversants. And funny enough, these constraints seem to prompt people to envision objects or scenarios very similar to those in carrot jokes.

A pair of conversants of sorts, of performers, also appears in *The Complete History of Obdurance Art* *… interesting. Anyway, it seems that the carrot jokes also trigger a sense of improbability. Now that you mention an interest in shaping behavior, I want to ask how you came to describe yourself as a Director of Behavior?*

This title came up around 2000 when I was making dances and was more interested in sequencing behavior and emotional states than "dance-y" dance, as it were. I was also choreographing events for large groups of strangers, kind of choreographed salons—a cross between a baroque group dance and an absurdist chat room.

I need a second to imagine that.