

Michael Portnoy

Objectif Exhibitions

For the Taipei Biennial in 2010, Amsterdam- and New York-based artist Michael Portnoy formed an experimental comedy club for local women in which amateurs developed their acts in workshops on humour. Portnoy based his idea in part on an ambiguously defined comedy club run by Bolivian women in the 1970s called Las Rodillas (The Knees). Like Las Rodillas's 'anything goes' attitude and stage acts, the women taking part in Portnoy's project delivered performances that were at times amusing for their easygoing deviation from a more 'professional' kind of humour. One participant took to the stage and spoke candidly about her day at work. Another tap-danced.

Though they felt close to improvisation, these performances were scripted with the artist, who has in the past explored various areas of writing and directing humour, role-play and games. For his solo exhibition in Antwerp, 'Script Opposition in Late-Model Carrot Jokes', Portnoy devised a new category of joke/non-joke – the 'Carrot Joke' – and framed it as a classification by the fictive cognitive linguists Chlopicki and Petray. Visitors found themselves faced with five photographs, each picturing a single carrot on white ground, either amputated, bisected, segmented, sliced or splitting. Each white frame contained a solicitous button that told a carrot joke when pressed. The jokes (which were pre-recorded by Portnoy) followed an illogical narrative format – wildly incongruous or intentionally impossible to understand – matching the natural irregularity of the carrots with which they were paired. In each, the punch-line is never reached, making them somewhat invincible as jokes and impervious to analysis or even judgment. Were they funny? Vaguely, yes. But powerfully performed (as photographs that speak)? Not really.

In 1998, Portnoy became somewhat infamous when he was thrown out of the Grammy Awards. He'd been hired to perform as a backing dancer for Bob Dylan and halfway through the live televised performance, he tore open his shirt to reveal the words 'SOY BOMB' written across his torso. Coupled with the absurdity of the words and the deliberate

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flamboyance of his dancing, it was Portnoy's ability to eclipse one unique performance with another that is still the crux of his work. As a performer from New York with a background in experimental comedy, theatre and dance, he is also very gifted with words and wordplay, and he is, by nature, a bit of an upstart.

The provocation and spectacle of his 'SOY BOMB' performance would be difficult to replicate, but Portnoy has continued to make absurd and slightly surreal works that amount to really good experimental theatre pieces. But it's unclear whether the levity of his previous performances, or even the carrot jokes he told during the exhibition's opening, can be matched as concrete art works. In hearing the joke for Duck-I'm-ready, duck-I'm-slipping, or duck-I've-lost-track (2011) performed live at the exhibition's opening, for example, it was the delivery of 'SCHOWLORT!' – the name of an unexplained character which, according to Portnoy's script, is 'pronounced monstrously in the back of the throat' – that conveyed all of the physical detail missing in the audio recording. Likewise, a public discussion Portnoy organized between himself and two theorists of Flemish humour did have its moments, but for this show I had hoped to see Portnoy 'the performer' perform more. The constraints of the five framed objects on the wall just seemed too limiting for the natural exuberance of Portnoy's practice.

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Frieze

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