

Failure, Refusal, and Deconstruction: Humor and Women in Art

What's so funny about rape, sexism and oppression? Absolutely nothing. But the ability to laugh in the face of terrible things can be good medicine, and humor can prove to be a highly effective way to talk about serious social issues. Humor allows us to let our guards down. It can disarm our innate defense mechanisms to be repulsed or turn away from the tough stuff. It can open up opportunities to talk about things that otherwise seem like unbreachable subjects.

Women live in a world of oppression, sexism, and violence. Despite several waves of feminist movements, phallocentric hegemony prevails. Women who are bold enough to take a stand against sexist subjugation are oftentimes made laughingstocks, their words mocked, or worse, ignored. For artists making work that deals with female oppression, humor can be a back door pass to get people thinking and talking when they might otherwise pass up the squeaky wheels as being feminist killjoys.

In Judith Halberstam's book: *The Queer Art of Failure*, she offers a few methods of resistance; failure, radical passivity, refusal, and shadow feminism or unbecoming. "I am proposing a feminism that refuses the choices as offered ... in order to think about a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing" (Halberstam, p129). In the pages that follow I will examine the works of 3 women artists who I feel exemplify some of the ideas of resistance that Halberstam advocates. Each of them uses humor as a vehicle of expressing these forms of resistance. Although the works of

these three artists has been described as humorous, the works straddle the line between discomfort and humor. They tend to raise more questions than they answer, and maybe it's through the questions generated that the humor shines through. The works tend to be layered with multiple innuendoes, or "mind worms," this creates a discomfort zone, and as various insidious questions pop up through a viewer's experience of the pieces, the viewer is implicated simply by entertaining ideas.

I chose to examine some of the works of Sherrie Levine, Kara Walker, and Cindy Sherman as examples of artists entertaining methods of resistance similar to Halberstam's ideas. The work of these artists probe some of the challenges of being in the position of a subaltern while trying to operate in, and comment on the white male dominated art world. Each artist uses different comedic vehicles to expose inequalities in gender and race relations. Cindy Sherman pokes fun at feminine movie tropes as a way of exposing their substructures as well as helping the viewer develop a critical eye. Kara Walker shocks her viewers with graphic scenes of rape and brutality, delivered as cartoonish figures exaggerated with racial stereotypes. Sherrie Levine's refusal to play along with predominantly masculine ideas of originality and "the artist as genius" make use of mechanical reproduction and pastiche to question long-held notions of artistic originality and authenticity. What are the goals each artist hopes to achieve through their work? How successful are these tactics? Do they perpetuate stereotypes or expose them?

The works of Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman that I consider in this paper were created in the late 1970s and 1980s, a tumultuous time for women. As the second wave of feminism began to crest in the late 1970s, Sherman talks about her experiences in the New York art scene as being a very macho, male centric world. For both Levine and Sherman during this time period, a resistance against machismo is a key factor in their work. The third wave of

feminism starting in the 1990s focused on the problematic continuation of a male dominated world and oppression of women, often focusing on post-colonialism and anti-racism. This is the perspective Kara Walker works from. Her work Acknowledges that the past is insidiously present.

All three deal with sexism and oppression as subject matter and from certain angles, there appears to be anything but funniness to the work. Although each has been credited with using humor in their work, it's sometimes buried under layers of meaning. I'm fascinated that they seem to be able to straddle the line between comedy and tragedy and I think it's what makes their work so powerful and controversial. As I sifted through articles and show reviews, the term "bad girl" kept appearing. All three of these women artists have been labelled "bad girls." I take issue with this term. To me it implies they are "cocky" misbehavers, and that they need to channel the "power of masculinity" to make their point. Isn't it time to drop preconceived notions of how men and women are "supposed to" behave and begin to look at how these constructs of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" behavior came to be in the first place.

Man vs. Bad Girl

When I began on the journey of this research project, I started to see patterns of gender binaries in regards to humor along the lines of "who gets to be funny?" I kept asking myself, why is it that everyone is so hellbent on answering the question "are women funny?" Shouldn't we be asking why we're even asking (or trying to answer) this question in the first place? What role, if any, does gender play in the application and reception of humor? Wherever I seemed to look at art made by women that is considered to be humorous, this notion of "bad girl" art seemed to keep popping up. I'm fascinated that there seems to be a gender flip that is perceived to have occurred when a woman makes humorous art, as if women, just being "women" can't

make funny work. That they somehow need to use the power of masculinity in order to make gutsy, controversial work.

This conflict in humor is something the human brain craves, it is the difference between a good joke and a great joke. In Scott Weems's Book: Ha! he states: "Jokes that fail to make us at least a little uneasy don't succeed. It's the conflict of wanting to laugh, while not being sure we should, that makes jokes satisfying" (Weems, p31). The line can and does get crossed. Humor is a powerful tool but with great power comes great responsibility.

In July 2012, Lindy West, staff writer for Jezebel.com wrote an article in response to a comedian making a tasteless rape joke during his set. In her article she discusses issues of censorship and responsibility on the parts of comedians to consider the repercussions of their words. She argues that because people are not in equal positions of power and that it's easy to believe that nothing is sacred when the male comic's freedom is never threatened. When humor is used to poke fun of victims, it can actually generate more violence.

Indeed, in May 2013 West appeared on a talk show with male comedian Jim Norton where a heated but (mostly) civilized debate took place on freedom of speech and comedian's rights to any and all subjects. What followed was a barrage of very unhumorous rape threats on West's website. Her very points about the power of language were realized in the comments section of her site in the form of hundreds of rape threats.

Both the messenger and the context of the message matters. The fact that the artists I've chosen to research are themselves subalterns, that they live with threat of violence, matters. It informs the work, it gives power to the work and in kind it gives power to their voice.

I came across a group show entitled "Bad Girls" curated by Marcia Tucker in 1994. In the show catalog and in proceeding articles, the idea of appropriating masculinity comes up

continually. “Mimicry is an artistic strategy that can expose the visual codes that constitute the canon to ridicule. Yet it also discloses the psyche’s defensive posture in the act of doubling: the thrown off skin; thrown off to cover the frame of a shield, to protect the artist from the enfeebling effects of her gender. In this intricate rendition of display, a woman mimics a man who masquerades as a woman to prove his virility... The aim is not simply to subvert the law by proposing a different order, but to pervert it by opposing all order, entirely and everywhere” (Kelly, page 408). This show relied on a theatrical expression of wearing the power of men as a means of occupying a place of power. Is this wearing a mask of masculinity the only way women can compete in a male dominated world? Do men even own this mask in the first place? Could this just be a simple breakdown of socially constructed gender bias and expected performativity that we construe as gender flipping?

Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman is letting her slip show. Her images unravel the fibers that make up what it is to be feminine in a world saturated with images of “womanness”. Sherman began her self portrait series “Untitled Studies for Film Stills” during the summer of Sam, a time of great fear for women of New York. In nearly every film still, Sherman looks off camera, an apprehensive look in her eyes, implying a third, menacing presence. The viewer is not privy to the third party, they are only given clues that there is something amiss by the look in Sherman’s eyes.

Sherman’s works, although they use narrative tropes, can be viewed as documentary on another level. She is documenting the image of the American woman’s psyche. She is a portrait of a constructed state of being, brought on through society and media pressure. by parodying women’s false mirror, constructed and delivered through mass media, Sherman cracks the mirror.

The viewer clues in on the constructions she portrays as fictional characters. Her portraits are female stereotypes that could be easily swapped into any Hollywood film.

Mulvey talks about a baby's first experience with their own image in the mirror. They imagine their mirror image as more complete and perfect than reality. "Hence it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience" (Mulvey, p 396). The audience identifies with the characters on the screen and they see a more perfect version of themselves, of what they subconsciously strive to be. This idea is exactly what Sherman is toying with. She tackles both the false male-centric, media driven construction of the feminine as well as how the viewer sees and is influenced by the images. Craig Owens speaks more about the shattering of the false mirror in *Art After Modernism*: "For in Sherman's images, disguise functions as parody; it works to expose the identification of the self with an image as its dispossession, in a way that appears to proceed directly from Jacques Lacan's fundamental tenet that the self is an imaginary construct... By implicating the mass media as the false mirror which promotes such alienating identifications, Sherman registers this 'truth' as both ethical and political." (Owens, p 234-235)

By exposing the constructions of woman as portrayed through the media lens, Sherman also helps the viewer train their oppositional gaze (hooks,). As each of Sherman's subjects shifts their gaze off center, it shifts the male oppositional gaze away from the viewer's standpoint, opening up possibilities for a new engagement with the portraits that doesn't necessarily center around a phallogentric gaze. A critical viewing of Sherman's work can open up the viewer to seeing the rest of the world -- especially the media world with a more critical eye.

Sherman has been criticized as being too essentialist, as perpetuating stereotypes instead of breaking them apart. In her film stills, there is a definite sense of oppression in the eyes of her characters. I'm of the opinion that the exposure of female oppression through Sherman's clever use of tropes is a valuable tool and the first step in shattering attitudes that would continue the oppression. I think Butler, because Sherman is still maintaining stereotypes of femininity that are prevalent in mass media, is only perpetuating social constructs of the category of women. In relating the difference between doing political acts in the name of women, vs questioning the entire category of women, Butler discusses how continuing with the same paradigms is fundamentally limited in its ability to affect change: "Indeed, one ought to consider the futility of a political program which seeks to radically transform the social situation of women without first determining whether the category of women is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation" (Butler, *Performative Acts*, p 485 bottom).

Sherrie Levine

Sherrie Levine refuses to play along. She all together throws out notions of originality, artistic prowess, and authenticity. In the late 1970s Levine began making reproductions of reproductions of famous photographs. She targeted the works of famous photographers like Edward Weston and Walker Evans who were prevalent in the 1930s and 1940s; male artists who's subjects were often those of the poor, needy, and powerless. Levine states: "In the late 70s and 80s, the art world only wanted images of male desire. So I guess I had sort of a bad girl attitude: you want it, I'll give it to you. But of course, because I'm a woman, those images became a woman's work" (Weintraub, 252). In a similar manner to the description of the "Bad

Girls” show at New Museum, As she appropriated the imagery of male artists, she also appropriated their masculine powers.

By creating “new” artworks out of reproductions of artworks, Levine brings up questions of originality, authorship, ownership, and authenticity. She’s completely transparent in her reappropriation of these famous artworks. Her photos have titled like “After Edward Weston.” She creates a shadow archive in the work that exposes the myth of the “male genius artist”. The Weston photos she has chosen to appropriate were themselves questionable in their originality; Weston took nude photos of his son performing poses from a very well known Greek statue made by Praxiteles. Levine argues that the canon of art has been riddled with false notions male artistic genius and she focuses her lens on instances of these “luminaries of art” ripping off other artists. “She boldly reverses roles with these luminaries by claiming their work as subjects for her art. She thereby subverts male authority and establishes an example for women to be assertive, to take control” (Weintraub, 252).

Despite Postmodernist ideas that the artist is some sort of creative genius, the majority of the world still loves to conjure images of the artist working alone in his vacuum to create great, original works of art. Levin’s work is a refusal to play along with notions of the “engineer” that Derrida defines as constructing his own discourse “out of nothing.” (Derrida, Structure... p4). Levine plays on the notion that artists are bricoleurs; and products of influence that is inescapable. No one works in a bubble, the work is always informed by absorbed experiences.

In 1991 Levine took on the legacy of the art world's King of appropriation, Marcel Duchamp by creating a version of his "Fountain" which she titled "Fountain (After Duchamp)." This artwork, which was from its inception supposed to be about the falsehood of deifying works of art, has in time become the very thing it tried to shatter. Levine tackles the fountain with new vigor, improving on it by bronzing it. By turning a common urinal into a gilded wonder, she transforms the original intention into its realized form as a coveted art object. But she doesn't stop there, she makes multiples of gilded urinals, in number sequence, referencing both minimalist sculpture and the readymade as art. She fountains encapsulate the entire history of the urinal from inception through the progression of art history up until present time, creating a shadow archive. She exposes how artworks meanings can change over time and lose track of their initial concepts, all the while making innuendos towards the masculine presence of the work that has pervaded through the Fountain's history.

Kara Walker

Kara Walker is a very naughty girl. She has been running around willy nilly, poking fun at sorts of terrible taboo subjects that should never even enter the mind of a proper lady. Didn't she get the memo? Slavery was abolished, racism is a thing of the past, misogyny and violence against women, as everyone knows, is a terrible crime that only horribly sick people of society, criminals and low lifes, are the perpetrators of. Kara Walker refuses to live under a pretense that all of these issues have faded with history.

Walker, in her series "My Complement, my Enemy, my Oppressor" deals with issues of slavery, sexual violence, oppression, and misogyny by way of graphic, cartoonish silhouettes of african-american stereotypes and their white slave owners. Straddling the line between

grotesque, funny, violent and graphic, Walker uses humor to talk about some of the most gruesome acts of violence ever perpetrated on another human. Halberstam's interest in Kara Walker is in her use of collage as an exercise of radical passivity and unbeing. "The collage asks us to consider the full range of our experience of power -- both productive power, power for, but also negative power, or power to unbecome... Using art as bait and deploying the female body in particular as a site for the negative projection of racial and colonial fantasy is simply a modern technology. But using the same technology to turn racism and sexism back upon themselves like a funhouse mirror is a part of what I am calling feminist negation (Halberstam, pp 136, 137)."

Walker refuses to play nice. "Walker's sin is her humor, which she uses to tear holes in our cognitive understanding of the world. By inflating black and white stereotypes within representations of sexuality and American History, she is rejecting any notion of compassionate, polite integration and humiliation. She uses humor -- against all catechisms, against the catechisms of her community -- to undermine all expectations about her role as an African American female artist. She is the bad seed who dares to expose what hurts and terrifies a culture that shies away from both its fears and its desires. And she dares to engage with the taboo of race relations, counterintuitively giving form to very forbidden ethnic jokes" (Vergne, 24).

Ironically these "funhouse mirrors" are being snatched up by descendants of slave owners -- white folks -- make up the majority of her patrons. What does this mean? Why would white people want to be reminded of such a terrible past? Are white people with money buying the work for investment purposes? Do they see it as historically significant or do they want to hang it in their dining rooms? Has the pure visual pleasure of contrast and shape won out over cartoonish and grotesque violence of her collage imagery and turned it into pure spectacle? And if the work sells, does it matter? The fact that it exists and is circulating around the world, means

that it gets a chance to continue to speak, to become part of an ongoing conversation about women, racism, oppression, and violence that has a long history with African-American women and that is still occurring.

It takes women artists guts to question and unravel the masculine powers of the art world. It's a club whose membership demands you either have a penis or know how to use one in order to play the game. As women artists still hover around the 10% mark in museums and larger art venues, there is still an uphill battle for equal representation. Women need more ways to summon the courage to ignore rejection, and misrepresentation. Cixous offers a powerful manifesto for women to embrace the notion that they need to make trouble in order to stand up and be heard: "Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naiveté, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble" (Cixous, *Medusa*, p 876).

Ready? Let's make some trouble. Humor, when weaved by the right powers, gives women artists, and artists making work about women's issues an edge up. It's an inroad to start up serious conversations about how the art world exists with such a misogynistic regime. With artists like Sherman, Levine, and Walker leading the charge, believe change is immanent. But it's going to be a long, hard slog.

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