

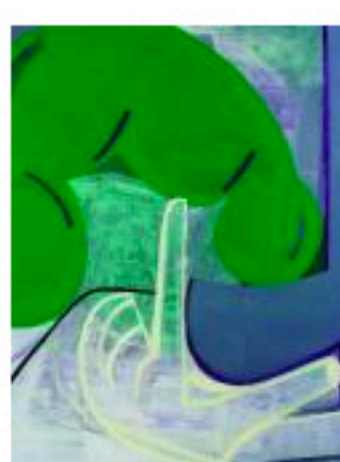


## STAGES OF LAUGHTER 2 - AMY SILLMAN

by Amy Sillman



Amy Sillman: *Fast Painting #1*, 2013-15, oil on canvas, 75 by 66 inches.



Sillman: *Nose Job*, 2014, oil on canvas, 75 by 66 inches.

ART HAS ALWAYS had a sense of humor. Scenes from Greek theatrical comedies are immortalized on classical vases. Bawdy sexual jokes are common in the art of the Dutch Golden Age. And many of the paintings favored by 18th-century French aristocrats were inspired by commedia dell'arte pageantry. The history of art can be a lens through which to examine the ever-evolving cultural forms, dramatic genres and literary conventions that fall under the heading of comedy. Whether reveling in the pleasures of everyday life or skewering the cultivated manners of the elite, art with a comedic sensibility can reflect the values of a dominant class, challenge ruling ideologies—or sometimes appear to accomplish both at the same time. Erupting from perceived incongruities in otherwise conventional situations, comedy can effect a “victorious tilting of uncontrol against control,” as anthropologist Mary Douglas has observed. Laughter, however, can also accompany a feeling of self-satisfaction—what Hobbes called “sudden glory”—that comes from witty assertions of superiority.

The essays that follow explore some intersections of contemporary art and comedy while reflecting each contributor’s singular sense of humor. The comedic forms they consume, spanning from experimental improv to late-night talk shows, are as diverse as the work they produce. Comedian Kate Berlant performs at both galleries and comedy clubs, manipulating the expectations embedded within different venue types. Self-described conceptual entrepreneur Martine Syms identifies kernels of truth within the sometimes pallid fare offered by television sitcoms and romantic comedies, even as she is drawn to the memes shared within online subcultures. While new media defines new contexts for humor, a remarkable reliance on physical comedy and the immediacy of performance remains, whether through the spontaneity and responsiveness of the improv techniques that Amy Sillman applies to her abstract paintings or the dynamics of slapstick that animate Aki Sasamoto’s performances.

—Eds.

### AMY SILLMAN

LAST SUMMER I started going to shows and workshops to learn about improv comedy. It came out of a long interest in spontaneity and process. I’ve always painted without a plan. It’s not that I don’t know what I’m doing, or that I don’t stop and make decisions. I just work by the seat of my pants.

I’d painted this way for years before I started to take a more analytical approach to spontaneity. I got into theories of improvisation, and read books and essays by George Lewis, who teaches jazz at Columbia and used to be a colleague of mine at Bard. I’d always been interested in language, but I came to realize that I was more interested in speech than written language—the way you don’t know what you’re going to say until you say it.

I love comedy, and a mutual friend introduced me to Hollis Witherspoon, an actor who teaches improv classes for artists. I took her class, and then I did some other workshops, and went to some shows. What I like about improv is how you see things happening inside people as you’re watching. I like the parts that aren’t strictly comedy—the incredible wit, the fast association. I like the parts that are uncomfortable. You can actually see people’s repression. They go to the limit of their comfort, and they either stay in that boundary or cross it. You can see someone stiffening as someone else advances. You can see their physical anxiety at the approach of the other person. You can map their comfort and discomfort on their body.

What I learned from the workshops is that improv isn’t so much a comedic form as a responsive one. That’s the connection to painting. There’s a fast response in painting. You have to know how to work with something that happens in one second, and what you have to double back and deal with. In painting you can go backward and undo—scrape a stroke down, erase it. Improv is a one-way street.

Many of the exercises in Hollis’s class were about developing empathy for your fellow performers—thinking about how they’re feeling at the moment and learning to anticipate their reactions. It’s more about social interrelations than about the individual psyche.

In painting you’re in a relationship with the object. The paint on the canvas is almost an externalized version of yourself, an alter ego. There are surprises. Things go wrong. There are ways of tricking yourself and not knowing what’s going to happen, and then you have to kind of decide when to pull back and when to keep going. And you don’t always know.

One of the things I’m most interested in is not knowing. That’s what painting is for me. Painting is certainly about thinking, but it’s extrinsic to pure cognition and analysis. It’s not cause and effect. In improv, the material is language—which supposedly is our grid for knowing how to express what we want to get across. But the movement of language in improv runs counterintuitive to the flow of ordinary conversation. It could be a desperate surprise, or a big fuck-up. But it could also take you to the best possible place. You’re half in control and half out of control, half knowing, half absolutely not knowing. There’s a liminal space of not-mind and not-body that painting activates for the painter. And painting, like improv, is about getting on the edge of language.

I’ve always said that the only thing I like is change. Even though I dread it more than anything, I have a drive toward it. And improv forces immediate and constant change. If I look at you funny, or say a sentence you’re not expecting, you have to say, “Yes, and . . .” The rule of improv is that you have to honor what I’ve just said and adapt to it. It’s like two fish swimming around each other, responding to the flow of the water and their bodies. Change is everything, isn’t it?

—As told to Brian Droitcour

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