

Amy Sillman

Why Amelie von Wulffen Is Funny

The individual does actually carry on a double existence: one designed to serve his own purposes and another as a link in a chain.

– Sigmund Freud

A joke is a double-dealing rascal.

– Sigmund Freud

AvW's comic drawings are really funny. I mean, how can you *not* laugh at a sausage smoking a cigarette, or a screw singing Schubert? But that's not exactly what's *funny* about them. What's funny is how vW invites the comic into the room with painting, and how the very presence of the comic skews the usual relations between paintings and their context, and vice versa. She enacts what Freud calls the 'joke-work' partly by a consistent sense of doubling – pairing, mirroring, transposing and displacing. Added to this is her keen instinct for narrative, for turning stories into pictures and back again. This Möbius strip of dual relations, which could also be called a comic strip, is vW's own expanded field in painting.

I was struck by this state of affairs when I saw her two, simultaneous gallery shows in New York City in 2011. At Greene Naftali downtown was a show consisting of oil paintings and pencil-drawn pages from the ego comic (as she calls them) *November*. Uptown, at Alex Zachary, were aquarelles from the series *This is how it happened*, depicting anthropomorphized fruits, vegetables and tools. The very presence of flat-out humour in the domain of painting brought with it a conundrum: it walked and talked like art – the ego comics at Greene Naftali were hung alongside paintings, and the aquarelles at Alex Zachary were nicely framed and hung in a proper manner – but was it a joke? And if it was a joke, who was it a joke *on*? The comics proposed a state of fight or flight, an *otherness* from painting. What if something from a desk drawer, like a diary, or from another room, maybe the bedroom, staggers into the gallery? Can painting survive the crack-up of *the personal*?

'Ordinary painting', oil on canvas, involves a form of stately compression: its layers, its decisions and the time that went into the painting are all packed underneath the top layer. vW's drawings and some of her aquarelles, by contrast, are mobile, horizontal; they slide out sideways from painting, they go high and low. Their motility is psychic as well as physical. She installs them all over the

room, even on furniture or architectural structures built especially for shows, sometimes using drawings as ladders, descending *downward* from painting to baser narratives below, other times using them as bridges, extending *outward* from painting to pages, comic strips, storyboards, animations and slideshows. By referencing various literary formats, from the intimacy of a girl's diary to the broad social satire of *la comédie humaine*, vW gets at matters that a painting often just doesn't touch. The narrative itself can be funny, obscene, confessional and sometimes brutal or aggressive, a little too personal, too anecdotal and too entertaining. In her 2015 show at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, the installation included a built-in architectural structure painted girly-pink, complete with its own doorway and light fixture, further convoluting a fixed sense of interior/exterior or formal/informal. vW thus created a visual *situation*, rather than a painting *show*, in which the viewer was surrounded by a condition of narrativity – both *depiction* and *description* – a situation of looking at and reading the entire room. This is clearly a move that doubles painting's usual square footage.

Even the title of the show at Alex Zachary, *This is how it happened*, proposed a type of doubling, not only letting the viewer know *what* happened, but *how* it happened. Many of vW's viewers recognise (or will find themselves in) the scenarios depicted in her work, literally or figuratively. They mirror our lives, including both our mediated lives (John Travolta, as in some of her earlier works) and our personal lives, revealing the gossipy *how* to the paintings' *what*, disclosing, dishing, divulging who was there, what they said, what they wore, what they daydreamed, how much things cost, what they did in the bathroom, etc. The comic strip is a slice of life – a form generally more cinematic or literary than painterly. Or maybe if not 'literary', just textual: I am reminded of how comic strips come in the newspaper – if so, what 'news' does vW's work bring? I believe it brings us news of a painter's life, and that this is the prerogative of fiction, that it can be built upon a detailed description of an individual's life. This is not usually the wager of painting. To take it on means that vW has risked a new condition for painting. She pries painting open, letting some of its contents spill out from the back, flipping the back and the front, the high and the low. And once you've been behind the scenes, the front of the painting will never be the same again.

AvW's aquarelles from the series *This is how it happened* work on a different front, flipping subjects into objects, and objects into subjects. Our little human dramas are being played by *things*: it is a pear getting a blowjob, a paintbrush that pauses in a moment of pre-exhibition anxiety, a pretzel and a *Weißwurst* in the middle of a breakup, and a tomato experiencing *Schadenfreude*. These narratives, illustrated with a kind of relentless cheerfulness, punt away the straight face we could maintain with painting. Anything that might have been called art's 'autonomy' is flooded by the contamination of the joke. vW implies that this surplus is a necessary condition of looking at the art, part of its materiality, and that just as comics come with the newspaper, that it must be part of the show. The pages from the ego comic *November* pinned to the wall at Greene Naftali opposite large-scale paintings created a kind of circulation, not just around the room but inside and around the paintings themselves, generating irresolvable Möbius relations between serious/funny, high/low, comic/abstract, staged in the deceptively simple form of a comic strip or a children's book illustration. Walter Benjamin noted that children's books are 'not without an ironic-satanic streak. The craftsmanship in these books [is] fully committed to the everyday life of the petty bourgeoisie'.¹ And vW's too include a lampoon of all our failings – shame, pride, *Schadenfreude*, irritation, boredom and other *petit bourgeois* emotions and feelings that constitute the inescapably embarrassing *how* of being alive.

Pointing to the issue of narrative in vW's work in a 2005 essay, Josef Strau wrote that her mechanism is the 'invocation of a story linked in the imagination of the viewer with the object portrayed'.² Indeed, vW's comic portrayals begin with our familiars, whether they are animal, vegetable or mineral. In *November*, the enervated main character is shown making her way through a wearying succession of art events, openings, dinners and studio visits, and spending an inordinate amount of time in bed or in the bathroom. Drawn with both an impatient scrum of pencil marks and an eye for detailed grey tones, the narrator's

attention moves fluidly from the petty to the tragic and back again. Meanwhile the main character, the artist's alter ego, is struggling to get her work shown and then lying in bed, thinking of the terrifying gates of Auschwitz and its slogan '*Arbeit macht frei*'. The main character encounters similarly changeable psychic swings in a later ego comic, called *Am kühlen Tisch* (*At the cool table*), which vW also showed alongside paintings, notably at her exhibition of the same name at Portikus in 2013.³ *At the cool table* is a psychoanalyst's field day, chronicling a veritable minefield of anxieties ranging from death to taxes, and along the way such gendered details as the fatness of one's ass or what it's like to be co-dependent with Goya.

The aquarelles shown uptown back in 2011 were like moments from a little Woody Allen movie, set somewhere between Charlottenburg in Berlin and the Upper West Side, but with fruits, vegetables and tools as the main characters who are enduring the same tedium, tribulations and occasional triumphs that we do – smoking, jogging, exercising, moping, applying for jobs, performing, worrying, fucking, breaking up and attending meetings. The aquarelles are captionless, but we still feel the characters' pain – these objects are at key moments of yearning, ridicule or annoyance. If AvW's work links image to narrative, it is wed not to a saga or an epic, but to a cheap novella. And to a critique of bourgeois subjectivity, these cartoons would answer: "*What else is there?*" Aren't all the days of our lives built of the parade of minor details that populate such subjectivity? (Even Kant left a note in his drawer, found after his death, reminding himself to forget about Lampe, the old servant with whom he had a falling out before he died. If even he had a secret personal problem in his top desk drawer, you know it's universal.) You just have to laugh at this manoeuvre of vW's, not only to stretch painting and drawing out horizontally, but to send it down the rabbit hole of the everyday.

As I've been trying to argue here, vW employs a consistent form of linkage or doubling in her work. But we might view this situation another way: does the presence of *linkage* also indicate the possibility of *breakage*, or of something that is essentially *split*? Might one then ask, in addition to how vW doubles things, how she *splits* them, how

1 Walter Benjamin, 'A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books', in: *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 2008, p. 233.

2 Josef Strau, 'The Invocation', in: *Amelie von Wulffen*, exh. cat., Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2005, p. 156.

3 Amelie von Wulffen, *At the cool table*, exh. cat., Koenig Books, London, 2014.

breakage – or breakdown – figures into her work? In painting, she hobbles linearity with collage, overlay, interruption, fragmentation, glitch and omission or just by letting the picture fade away. She cuts up architectures, people and places, and reconstructs memories into a series of collisions. Within this painterly fracture, drawing appears as if it were glue, a form of recuperation, a way to hold things together. Skeins and thickets of line extend across the cuts in her paintings, rebuilding connections with repetitious strokes, lines, hatch marks, tones, patterns, curlicues and various natural and decorative motifs. vW seems to relish the arrested time of a carefully re-drawn or re-painted photograph from an art history book or a family album, or the slowed-down response time of answering a story with a picture, or vice versa. Time itself is recuperative, not just reviving the image, but reinstating sentiment itself to its original function. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, sentimentality can be restored to health.⁴ The process of drawing is what gives rise to affect in vW's work, whether it's sorrow or satire.

In fact, I think all the modern 'funny' painters are drawers at heart – think of Picabia, Guston, Stettheimer, Polke, Kippenberger, Eisenman. Part of what makes them funny is how they factor themselves as personae in a painterly drama. Guston, the tragi-comic hero of painting, always lying in bed balefully, smoking and doubting, with a plate of French fries on his belly; Kippenberger, in his white underpants, ridiculously inserted as an anti-hero onto the very platform of Romantic expression, the raft of the Medusa. (Ad Reinhardt's funniness is kept more like a secret: cordoned off and consigned to the other room.) A friend once asked me if new paintings could have new feelings? I said I thought that irony *was* the new feeling. vW's work seems to propose that to find new feelings, we have to seek them in new places, or come at them from a different angle: from underneath, from outside – in the desk drawer, in confessionals, novellas or magazines.

Where *have* we seen these kinds of walking and talking fruits and vegetables before, anyway? Either in children's books, comics or advertisements. AvW's work is neither juvenilia, nor comedy, nor

Pop, though it *does* share mass media's sense of humour and its formats: graphics, periodicals, television and spaces made familiar in these media. The aquarelles *This is how it happened* resemble *The New Yorker* magazine covers; her ego comics read like an HBO series about an artist. In fact, vW's comics are set in the same site-specific places as are TV shows, or comedy in general: the office, the beach, the stage, the doctor's office, the therapist's couch, the bedroom, the art gallery, the smoking lounge, etc. Even to draw attention to such banal places is funny, and allows us to laugh about the suppressed anxiety that they carry. In fact, this is also the standard opening for stand-up comedy. Think of Seinfeld grabbing the mic and asking, 'So what's the deal with X?' Transposition is a classic comic technique in both art and comedy, like in Robert Smithson's essay 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic', which is fundamentally funny because it supplants the architecture of classical antiquity with infrastructural buildings in New Jersey. Or Preston Sturges's classic screwball comedy *Sullivan's Travels* (itself a twist on a satire by Jonathan Swift), funny because it tells the story of a rich guy who lives life as a hobo. These are textbook examples of what Freud calls 'the technical methods of the joke-work'⁵ – to allay anxiety with jokes about things being in the wrong place, mix-ups and switches that highlight boundaries, what is 'here' versus what lies beyond; in other words, pointing to the off-site, the off-limits, the off-stage, the off-modern, the off-colour.

And vW's cartoons and comics *are* off-colour. Not only are there blowjobs, coke parties and S/M dungeons, but also all the dismaying feelings that go along with them: regret, anxiety, boredom, excruciation, embarrassment, dismay ... the high lows and the low highs. Isn't it rather embarrassing anyway, somewhat forbidden, to say what you're *really* thinking in the art world, that country club of manners? To rephrase something T. J. Clark wrote about Abstract Expressionism, AvW's comics blurt out the vulgar secrets that paintings usually conspire to keep.⁶ Not really so secret,

5 See the chapter 'The Technique of Jokes', in: Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious', in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 8, Vintage (The Hogarth Press), London, 1960 [1905], pp. 14–105.

6 T. J. Clark, 'In Defense of Abstract Expressionism', in: *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999, p. 397.

4 Walter Benjamin, 'These Surfaces for Rent', in: *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 2008, p. 173.

actually: it is the struggle between art and everyday life. AvW has aggressively found form in the connections between painting and its affects, that material usually X'ed out of the picture: not only the minutiae of daily life, its gripes and moods, but an actual depiction of how the so-called 'network' works. She uncloaks material from the 'wrong' place or the 'wrong' time, inserts notebooks, financial ledgers, family albums and illustration in general into painting and reveals the social and economic conditions that churn endlessly in its background, as well as the ordinarily unexamined conditions that go with these social conditions: self-hatred, hatred of others, jealousy, embarrassment, anxiety, competition. In doing so, vW's ego comics and her aquarelle series *This is how it happened* deliver another duality, the possibility that they are both funny and not at all funny. As Alex Zachary wrote in the catalogue to her 2011 show: 'Von Wulffen's series is an illustrated compendium of our worst nightmares.'⁷ This is the pleasure/discomfort metric of her work, which is also the metric of the comic – and this is partly what makes AvW's work essentially very funny, and yet not a joke at all.

⁷ Alex Zachary, 'Dreams Errors Symptoms Jokes', in: *This is how it happened*, Distanz Verlag, Berlin, 2011, p. 5.